



Friends World Committee
for Consultation

WORLD OFFICE

How does God call us to act: An Online Conference with Friends Worldwide

22.02.2020

During the conference, a group of Elders were listening to the spoken ministry. After the conference they wrote reflective statement. This cannot be an epistle for the conference, because those gathered will do not have the chance to approve it. However, it can act as a sense of where Friends are today, and it can help prepare us for our next gathering at the World Plenary in 2023.

It is our hope that it will lead to continuing dialogue and engagement with sustainability concerns.
Elders: Peter Eccles, Ruth Homer, Marisa Johnson, and Kristin Skærshælt.

The context

One hundred years after Friends from all traditions first came together to discover what Quakers could say with one voice to the world about peace, Friends gathered together from all corners of our precious earth to ask: “What is God calling us to be, say and do in response to the one overwhelming challenge of the age?” We are confronted by the seemingly unstoppable degradation of the sacred earth that sustains us and all life. Accelerating climate breakdown results from and is creating unjust, violent and discriminatory human societies. Can we hold up to the world a vision of a different way of living, inspired by our Quaker traditions and with God as our guide? Can we dare to dream of a future where we can rejoice as much in the survival of our neighbour and fellow creatures as we do in our own (Mark 12:31)? Can we witness to this vision in the way we live, as individuals and as a community, leaving behind the safety of worldly ways to embrace risk and the unknown, armed only by our faith in our Inward Teacher, and our hope?

The conference

Our gathering on this occasion was a virtual one so it required little travel for most of us. It did require access to sophisticated modern technology, and we are not unaware that this too has a cost. But FWCC hopes that the usefulness of the experiment may set us on the way of finding new ways of being and building community in an age where long-distance travel has to become exceptional, and not routine. Friends joined from their own homes or gathered together in their Meeting Houses to take part. Some even joined us whilst travelling on public transport!

More than 300 Friends were brought into communication in three sessions over 11 hours, with time-slots chosen to fit with time zones over the whole world – some Friends in Aotearoa/New Zealand went to bed at the end of the first session, and others joined the third session in the early hours of their following morning, closing a circle of prayerful ministry that inspired, encouraged and challenged us to surrender our will and listen carefully for God’s call for each one of us, and for our communities.

We began each session with recorded ministries given by Friends living in different parts of the world, and offering particular gifts and experience relevant to the topic under consideration.

After a brief introduction by FWCC General Secretary Gretchen Castle, we heard from Lindsey Fielder Cook, member of German Yearly Meeting, who works for the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva. QUNO, through FWCC, is the only faith group with observer status at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and as such, brings an entirely different perspective and way of working. Lindsey shared some of her own journey to awareness and her struggles with contradictions in seeking a sustainable lifestyle. She found guidance for her work and her life in a deeper understanding of Quaker testimonies, and in the way the interdependence among them weaves them into a coherent whole - the one “testimony” that living in right relationship with God is manifested by ways of behaving that make for equality, peace, integrity, justice and simplicity.

Cherice Bock, from Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting in Oregon, teaches in the Creation Care Program at Portland Seminary of George Fox University and works as the Creation Justice Advocate for Ecumenical Ministries in Oregon. She described movingly the moment the realisation dawned on her that she herself was the inheritor of privilege obtained by her colonising ancestors at the expense of indigenous people, and how her work for justice and peace needed to be located in her own country and situation, and not only in troubled parts of the world. Her profound Christian faith and understanding of theology help her to articulate the biblical and Quaker teachings that underpin her present work.

Crisanto de la Cruz, a pastor in the Philippines, serves as National Director of Philippines Evangelical Friends International Ministries. His message centred on the inherent sanctity of God’s creation. As people of faith we have responsibility in exercising stewardship, which has been entrusted to us. This means planning our actions to benefit God’s creation *and* the vulnerable in our societies, like planting trees that bear fruit which can be picked by those who need it.

Esther Mombo, Director of International Partnerships and Alumni Relations at St. Paul’s University in Kenya and member of Highland Yearly Meeting, highlighted the context in which we are trying to address the issue of sustainability - a context in which the destruction of the soil, forests, water and air is a reality and a political choice; a context in which the language of racism, sexism and tribalism is a reality for many; a world in which family and community are under stress and often break down; a context of corruption and scandal in the public sphere, a growing gap in the wealth of few and the poverty of many, escalating violence, militarism and war.

Anya Nanning Ramamurthy of Britain Yearly Meeting is a Young Friend brought up in the Quaker tradition and a member of the UK Student Climate Network (a branch of *Fridays for Future* youth strike movement). Anya experiences how important it is to be supported by the Quaker community and to have been given opportunities to develop leadership and facilitation skills through service. System change is needed to make the necessary drastic changes, alongside personal choices to embrace a simpler lifestyle, to be patterns and examples.

The three sessions were held in a spirit of worship with time for reflection between Friends' responses. The first was in English, the second in English and French, and the third in English and Spanish. There was a real sense of coming together as a worldwide community of Friends. Friends shared their stories of the effects of climate change and their responses to them, working with Quaker groups and with others. Some spoke of their sense of isolation in addressing these issues and how they look to the wider Quaker community for support. We heard of uncomfortable conversations with people of a different view and how important it is to have these, following in the tradition of John Woolman's challenge to slaveholders when slavery was seen as essential to society and the economic system. We were challenged to recognize that this is our moment to follow Jesus' call to build a new world and some spoke of their gratitude to find themselves in the generation facing up to this challenge.

Our reflections

It is tempting in a time of crisis to build an ark and survive. But this will not do this time: we all survive, or we all perish. Together we inhabit our precious "spaceship earth" (from Kenneth Boulding's *The Economics of the coming Spaceship Earth*.)

When the first disciples answered Jesus' invitation to "Follow me", they abandoned their boats and nets, and any security or plans they had for the future. Are we capable of such trust and faithfulness? Can we respond with joy to such an invitation, or, like the rich young man, go away sad because we cannot leave behind our status and privilege? (Luke 19: 22)

This is a time for humility and a hopeful approach, not self-righteousness, judgement and accusations.

We need to heed both the science that teaches us the truth of our situation, and our Christian faith, that gives us the guidance to respond in a life-affirming and loving way. We must be aware that everything we touch, eat, use, wear has a history and can impact on the depletion of resources we cause.

We heard examples of the spiritual and practical guidance of indigenous people and cultures, the wisdom of "taking only what we need" and living in greater harmony with other life forms. There is also solidarity between generations, with young Friends leading new movements and older Friends supporting younger Friends in their more daring forms of protest and witness. Different life experiences are now a gift to creating new visions and to remembering the wisdom of the past.

Friends exchanged news of many small, medium and large initiatives that made a real difference in their communities, from harvesting rainwater in South Africa to planting trees in the Philippines and Kenya, to engage in advocacy on the world stage through QUNO.

Community is the only way to address the challenge to transform our world. Worldwide and locally, let our Quaker community be a place to hold each other through the dramatic changes ahead. We help open each other's eyes to nature being one of God's sacred communions with us, and we tell each other stories that help us connect deeper with the vision of our future restored to one-ness.

Resources were exchanged, and invitations to participate in projects (many referenced at the end). Small acts of creativity can heal us and inspire us to bolder action.

We are rediscovering how all Quaker Testimonies as we express them today are but aspects of one witness – that we long for a healing and healed one-ness, a restored relationship to ourselves, to each other, to all forms of life, and ultimately to God.

What next?

So how does FWCC build on this experience? Although this was not a formal consultation, but an open invitation that Friends responded to, it is clear that the concern regarding sustainability and climate change is shared by Friends of all traditions and throughout the world. FWCC provides a channel through which Friends can share experience. This Conference provides a model for how this might be done, engaging in a sustainable way with many more members of the Quaker community. We can build on this by continuing to make a space available for more regular exchange and for sharing experiences, tools, skills and resources.

We have much to learn from this experiment. FWCC shall reflect on the experience and the feedback we receive. We already know that many more people from the more affluent countries than from the global “South” participated. That is, sadly, in line with the experience of the first World Conference in 1920, although this time at least in terms of gender and age we had a much better balance. This is a reminder to always be aware of the issues of privilege and colonial legacies. We need to continue to address this and find ways of atoning for our own lack of true equality and social justice. We are nevertheless encouraged that our ministry in connecting Friends and articulating the Quaker message for ourselves and the wider world remains as relevant today as it was 100 years ago, and that we can develop ways of working that will bring connection and community to our 21st century.

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you. (George Fox, 1656)

Projects of Friends:

- Loving the Earth <https://lovingearth-project.uk>

Resources referenced during the conference that have inspired Friends:

- Biologist Oscar Gonzale’ publications - <http://plaza.ufl.edu/pajarologo/publications.html>
- Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Kimmerer (<https://www.amazon.com/Braiding-Sweetgrass-Indigenous-Scientific-Knowledge/dp/1571313567>)
- Tool kit for how to talk to Government officials <https://quakersandclimatechange.com/category/general-resources/>
- Cap and Share report from Ireland http://www.feasta.org/documents/energy/Comhar_Cap_and_Share_Report.pdf
- Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute - www.safcei.org
- Tool kit for how to talk to Government officials from Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva <https://quakersandclimatechange.com/category/general-resources/>

- Quakers, Creation care and sustainability, - <https://www.amazon.com/Quakers-Creation-Care-Sustainability-Disciplines/dp/1733615210>
- Quaker United Nations Office – sustainability work– <https://quno.org/areas-of-work/sustainable-just-economic-systems>

Websites of Quaker networks:

- Quaker Earthcare witness <https://www.quakerearthcare.org/>
- Quakers and Climate change worldwide <https://quakersandclimatechange.com/>