



Friends World Committee
for Consultation

WORLD OFFICE

How does God call us to act?

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A Transcript from Speaker Two – Cherice Brock

Hello, Friends! My name is Cherice Bock, and I am a recorded Quaker minister from Oregon in the United States of America. I teach at Portland Seminary of George Fox University in the Creation Care Program, and I also recently began working as the Creation Justice Advocate for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. As a Christian Quaker, care for creation has risen to the surface for me as the number one social justice issue I believe Friends need to be working on in our time, and this prophetic call only increases in urgency and clarity with each passing day. We've recently seen fires engulfing much of Australia and the Amazon, a record temperature of 65 degrees in Antarctica, melting glaciers and increasingly severe storms, and unprecedented heat waves. In the eastern part of my state of Oregon right now, the part of the state that is usually very dry, there are major floods. We can each see and feel the changes to our home regions.

I'll share with you a little bit about my own story and how I came to this conclusion, that care for creation is the most important thing for Friends to be focusing on right now. Then I will share a little bit about how I see Friends history and testimonies helping us connect care for creation with our denominational sense of truth. Finally, I will conclude by encouraging us as a worldwide community of Friends to ground ourselves in our deep connection to the Spirit through recognizing that of God in every one, and using that spiritual groundedness to compel ourselves into action to shift toward a more sustainable future.

"What is the social justice issue of our time?" I pondered this question for many years. Growing up a birthright Quaker in Oregon, I became a convinced Friend during my high school years as I learned the stories of historic Friends who stood up against injustice and actively worked toward peace in loving and courageous ways. And yet, I wondered which social justice issue to focus on now; there are many from which to choose.

I continued laboring with this question until one night in 2008, standing on a rooftop in the West Bank of the Palestinian Territories, I sensed the beginnings of an answer. I was a member of a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation, learning about their important work of peacemaking through accompaniment and nonviolent direct action. Our group listened to stories about the conflict in Israel/Palestine and its history, visited and learned about the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and heard about the unequal laws regarding water access, planting and harvesting olives and other crops, and permits to build and renovate Palestinian homes. We journeyed through West Bank checkpoints and roadblocks, our CPT hats and

American or European passports allowing us relatively easy access to places Palestinians could not travel. It was easy to point righteous fingers at the Israeli government and its people for enforcing unjust policies, to see the settlers taking land that was not legally theirs, to condemn the soldiers who shoot holes in Palestinians' illegal water catch systems for fun.

But that summer night, standing on a roof in Dheisheh refugee "camp" near Bethlehem, overlooking the illegal Israeli settlement Har Homa, I realized there is very little difference between Israeli settlers and me, except a couple hundred years of settlement expansion and creation of laws. I, too, live on land systematically taken from its original owners through war and broken treaties; I, too, live in the midst of a culture that strategically hordes natural resources, enjoying flush toilets and water enough for lawns while others do not have enough potable water to drink. I felt overwhelmed and complicit in the injustice experienced by Palestinians. I also felt a leading that night to work on the many injustices in my own culture.

Continuing to discern about my particular calling, I became increasingly aware of environmental concerns and their impact on human and interspecies conflict in the present day, and in the future we are creating. As the context within which all other social justice issues take place, it became clear to me that caring for the planet is the social justice issue of our time. Resource competition, pollution, and climate change exacerbate all other interpersonal and international conflicts, and my understanding of social justice expanded as I recognized the Quaker call to peacemaking may also include reducing human conflict with other species and with future generations. Add to that habitat fragmentation and human population expansion, which make it difficult for other species to thrive, and I can imagine a peace testimony that attends to not only interpersonal conflict, but also to equitable treatment of other species throughout God's creation.

My Quaker background falls firmly in the Christ-centered branches of Quakerism, and so I will speak as a Christian Quaker in this video, and I hope that what I say will be of use to all Friends. For one thing, Christian Quakers are not always the ones best known for strongly standing for care for the Earth, and so I think we have the most work to do, particularly those of us in the so-called "developed" world. The areas with strong agreement across Friends traditions include personal experience of the Divine, corporate discernment, testimonies centering around the idea of "that of God in every one," and the calling to direct action in this time and place to participate in the reconciling work of the Spirit in our time.

Friends have consistently felt called to enact testimonies, which have often been referred to using the acronym SPICE(S): simplicity, peace, integrity, community, and equality or equity; some update the acronym to include a second S for stewardship (which includes stewardship of the planet) or sustainability. Although these do not necessarily encompass all our beliefs, they do help us name ways we have been called in the past, and areas of focus to which many Friends continue to feel led.

Finally, Friends emphasize the importance of living out the good news of Jesus in the present day. Jesus described his mission as proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed free, and proclaiming the year of

Jubilee (Lk 4:18–19). He talked about the Kingdom of God being “among you” (Lk 17:21). It is not only something we experience after we die, but it is something we participate in as a community in this life. Early Friends talked about the Lamb’s War (Rev 14:1–5), which was the nonviolent struggle to enact the Kingdom of God in their collective lives in ways that impact the social and political world of their day. Friends have taken this to mean that we live out the Kingdom of God in our time and place, meeting the needs of the folks with whom we share the planet.

In the present moment, it is becoming increasingly clear that not only do we need to live out the Kingdom of God with and for the sake of the human community, but also alongside the rest of creation. Rereading the covenants between God and the Israelites, we become aware that many of the covenants included right treatment of the land, and the health of the land was used as an indicator of how well the people were living up to their side of the covenant. Romans 8:19–23 states in part: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now,” reminding us that it is not only humanity involved in the story of salvation history, but the entire creation is participating with us in the birthing of the new creation. If we take the Bible seriously as Friends, we can attune ourselves to the Spirit speaking through these ancient texts to our current condition, inviting us to participate in that same story, and to recognize that reconciliation extends to God, ourselves, other people, and all of creation.

The testimonies of equality and peacemaking form what I believe to be the clearest connection between Friends tradition and environmental concerns. In light of the environmental situation, these testimonies can offer a unifying Quaker witness toward creation care. Four potential areas of crossover between the Friends traditions of peace and justice with environmental issues are worth mentioning specifically.

First, the ability to take away the occasion of wars, and increasing conflicts over natural resources. As we use up the planet’s resources faster than they can be replaced, and as we pollute our soil, air, and water, we create a situation in which people have to fight over the remaining usable natural resources. By caring for creation, we take away the occasion for wars over natural resource scarcity.

Second, the conviction about the equality of all people relates directly to the problem of environmental injustice. Studies repeatedly show that those who experience the most impact from climate change and pollution are people of color and those who are most vulnerable in each society, both where I’m from in the United States and in the global community.

Third, our belief that we can find that of God in every one can extend to recognizing that of God in every being in creation. Augustine and other early church theologians referred to creation as the first book of created nature, by which we could know God before and without use of the Bible. This is still true today—we can learn about God and connect with God through the rest of creation.

And fourth, the nonviolent direct action and peacemaking tactics and networks already familiar to Friends, which we have been developing for centuries, can be utilized in the work of addressing environmental concerns. We can offer these tactics and networks to the rest of the

movement to care for the Earth, grounded in deep spiritual centeredness on the Light of Christ, who we connect to individually and corporately through our tradition of waiting worship.

If we wish to make this transition to a Friends theology and practice that meets the environmental challenges of our time, we must find our anchor in the true Light which gives light to everyone (Jn 1:9), the One who became flesh and dwelled among us (Jn 1:14), the same One who spoke to George Fox's condition, and can speak to ours.

Although we have much to offer in terms of our testimonies and our history of peacemaking, Friends in the global north also have much work to do. We need to do the work of repentance, which means turning around: particularly Friends of European descent have benefited from the overuse of natural resources, acquiring land and resources in ways that have harmed indigenous communities and Africans, who were enslaved and whose land was colonized, and we have become too comfortable with living in ways that far exceed our needs. Repentance means turning around, and allowing ourselves to be transformed into the Living Body of Christ. This is not easy work, and it will require those of us with European heritage to be humble, to learn from others, and to not assume we are the ones to lead the way. While Friends have much to offer, what we mainly have to offer is our willingness to listen deeply and well to what the Spirit is saying in our time, and to have the humility and the courage to do what we hear. This is a spiritual work of transformation that will require us to be transformed into communities of shalom, the holistic peace that supports all members. We see the early Christians living this way in the early chapters of Acts.

I leave us with a query: are we, as Quakers of European descent, willing to do this hard work? Or will we go away sad, unwilling to give up our wealth, like the rich man in Matthew 19? This is our moment to follow Christ's call by working toward loving God and others through caring for creation. It is hard and challenging work that will transform us to the core, but it is the beautiful and powerful work of God in our generation. May Friends find the strength and joy to answer this call.