

SECTION 5: SHARING WITH OTHERS

This section:

- * reflects on how we share our testimony
- * explores how Friends can and have worked with community groups
- * provides some tips for political engagement
- * suggests how you might get involved in campaigning and activism

5. SHARING WITH OTHERS

Reflection: Sharing our testimony

As we begin to awaken, individually and as a group, we come to know new aspects of the truth. We may feel called to share our truth with others, offering them the awakening we have experienced. This sharing can be the basis of deep social change. We need to work on all levels available to us, using all of our imagination and communication skills in a prophetic witness. Acts of prophecy can include speaking out to name what is wrong with the current system, setting out a poetic vision of the way things could be, or symbolic acts to draw attention to the change that is needed.

Engaging beyond our local meeting is a vital part of staying healthy and continuing to grow as worshipping communities. As we become involved with others in our neighbourhood, we can both receive enrichment and find that we have something to offer them. We may even find out more about our own path and identity.

In Britain Yearly Meeting we are still finding our corporate response. There are sometimes doubts that there is a distinctive Quaker contribution to sustainability. Others in the interfaith and green movements have a stronger sense of a Quaker role – not least because Friends are often key organisers and voices in these movements. Quakers are seen as people who are committed, keep coming to the gatherings, and try to live out their values in their own lives.

Perhaps one of the striking differences between Quakers and others is in the approach to campaigning. Climate change campaigners have tended to paint their agenda in terms of good and bad, friends and enemies. The ‘perpetrators’ of climate change may be government, big business, ‘the rich’, ourselves. But the call to answer that of God in everyone implies that we treat ourselves and others with love, trust and respect. This connects to the essential feature of Quaker practice – silent listening. Quaker spirituality is a listening spirituality. It involves listening to the Inward Light available to each one of us, to its expression in others’ words, and to the Spirit moving in the gathered meeting.

There is an increasingly clear role for Friends in taking Quaker practices to other groups. Quaker decision processes are particularly suited to dealing with the current world situation, with its complexity and diversity of interests. They are also suited to addressing conflict, building community and developing a collective will.

“Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak...”

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Engaging beyond our local meeting is a vital part of staying healthy and continuing to grow as worshipping communities



Photo: Jasmine Piercy

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There may also be insights to share from experience with Quaker processes and structures. For instance, they work best when we have sufficient time and commitment to listen to each other and to reflect deeply, both individually and together.

Quaker processes and discipline are best transmitted through experience. They are easier to learn than to teach. Some of the best experiences have come from Friends making quiet suggestions in non-Quaker groups they are involved in. Some have introduced a moment of quiet to prepare for the meeting. Others have appointed someone to draft minutes in the meeting and make sure everyone agrees the wording. Or they have adopted ground rules about not interrupting, and building on what has been said rather than debating.

To be able to offer support to others, we need regular experience of practising our listening disciplines. We also need to develop our corporate responses to issues such as climate change and energy security. So it is in practising and applying our own discipline that we may most effectively offer a witness in the world.

Some questions you might explore, perhaps with others in your meeting in a worship-sharing or discussion session:

- * What other groups are you involved in, in your community, workplace or elsewhere, which could benefit from Quaker experience?
- * In what ways could you share Quaker insights and practices with others?

Acting with others

Many Friends have found their way into sustainability through involvement in non-Quaker groups. Some meetings have found that they can offer support to the activities of community groups, perhaps through the free loan of their building or by upholding the groups' activities.

Quakers have been particularly involved with the Transition movement. A Transition initiative is a community-led response to the pressures of climate change, fossil fuel depletion and economic contraction. Visit www.transitionnetwork.org to find out about them and to locate your nearest one. See also www.quaker.org.uk/sustainability for information on events and connections Quakers have been making with the Transition movement.



Multi-faith campaigning in Copenhagen, 2010.

Photo: Sunniva Taylor

“ ... So all our testimonies, all our Quaker work, all our Quaker lives are part of one process, of striving towards a flourishing, just and peaceful Creation – the Kingdom of God.”

Audrey Urry, 1994,
Quaker faith & practice 25.04

Sustainability story

Developing the links between existing community groups

Since October 2009, three members of Leyburn LOM have been involved in setting up a transition group, Transition Richmond Yorkshire (TRY). The primary focus has been awareness-raising. We think it is important to value and develop the links between existing local community groups, rather than seeming to evangelise with an exclusive message about climate change, e.g. local environmental protection, fair trade, shop local initiatives, etc. We started with a very successful film showing in the local cinema (charging normal prices) and we have held several talks during the year. Our main awareness-raising activity has been a thought-provoking and continually changing window display, by courtesy of a sympathetic local grocer. Topics have included keeping warm in winter; composting tips; bicycle use; school students looking to the future; foraging and jam-making; fair trade linked with shop local (being aware of labelling and where things come from), plastics and recycling.



From left to right: TRY window – Fairtrade and Shop Local; TRY window – ‘Keeping warm in winter’; TRY window – ‘Composting’.
Photos: Transition Richmond Yorkshire

A very active ‘Growing Food Together’ sub-group has evolved, which is identifying and bringing into use waste-, council-owned and other land. (It’s quite a challenge to convince and then work with the local authorities to get this going.) Pruning and care of local fruit trees and demonstrating apple pressing and juicing in the market place have been other activities. We recognise the value of being involved with the local council and related organisations. Some of us attend the meetings of the council’s Green Living Task Group, so that we can feed in ideas and make links e.g. we are contributing to the planning of an eco week, involving local businesses and schools; it will also see the launch of an arts group involving local musicians and artists.

Contributed by Janet Quilley, Leyburn Quaker Meeting

Sustainability story

Gaining a voice in the community

Challenged by a talk on global warming by the co-chair of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, in 2001 a Friend and I were moved to bring the concern to our Meeting and subsequently founded a community group to raise awareness about climate change, encourage energy saving and promote renewable energy in our small market town.

Llanidloes Energy Solutions (LLES) is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year and we now have about 150 members. Though few are very active it gives us a voice in the community to promote sustainability issues and we have the support of the mayor and town council. We are now part of the Low Carbon Communities Network, and have held regular films, talks and market stalls on different topics, so have quite a high profile in the town. Many people know we have strong links with the Quaker Meeting and we have four Quakers on the trustee board. We pioneered Open Eco-House days and have held three very successful Green Fairs which have attracted visitors from near and far and involved local schools, churches and other community groups. We have done household Energy Surveys to encourage cutting carbon, loan out Energy Monitors to track electricity use, and recently have had the loan of an infra-red camera.

Last year we launched the 10:10 Campaign in the town and organised an eco-renovation of the town's community centre, which included installing solar PV panels on the roof to generate electricity. We have also installed solar panels on the public toilets to provide hot water.

LLES has had many successes but also many failures and disappointments over the years as projects have failed to come to fruition. I think my main role has been faithfully to hold things together through difficult times and uphold the project in prayer, which I feel has been crucial. I think the Quaker ethos has also promoted harmony in the group.

A recent high was being given a Wales Green Hero award for my work with LLES.

Contributed by Gwen Prince, Llanidloes Quaker Meeting



Llanidloes Energy Solutions, who have four Quakers on the trustee board, hold regular stalls.

Photo: Gwen Prince

5. SHARING WITH OTHERS

Political action

Political activity begins in deriving policies from our testimonies and concerns. It may require going beyond our comfort zone in narrowing down options for action and political change. Some Friends may see it as divisive. Such activity may start with meeting your local Member of Parliament (MP), Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) or Member of the Welsh Assembly.

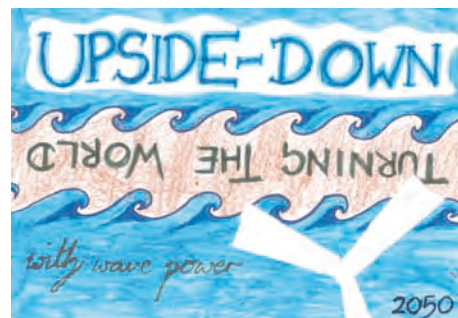
If our worshipping communities are essential vehicles for our discernment they may be no less relevant to our political activity. Part of our witness is about how we do politics as much as what we say to whom. One starting point might be to invite your MP to visit your meeting and to share worship with you before having an informal conversation with him or her over lunch. By doing so you may draw your representative into your worship as much as extending your witness into political activity. Meeting an MP in your place of worship may be more inclusive and sustainable than travelling to a Westminster office. It also illustrates a collaborative way of working as it is likely to be easier to explore problems together in this context. You can then follow up with more direct questions.

What can your MP do for you?

Raise a concern with a minister

Any good MP should be willing to raise a concern brought by a constituent with the appropriate minister. Whether you are concerned about the impact of a coal burning power station on the environment, the impact of an additional runway at the airport, the cost of a carbon tax or environmental impact assessment, your MP should write to the Minister raising the concern and inviting their response. It is always better to write to your MP asking them to raise your concerns with the Minister than to write to the Minister directly. A letter that you write directly to the Minister will have little influence. It is unlikely to be seen by him/her and will probably be answered by a junior civil servant. A letter from your MP, however, will be responded to by the Minister personally and be read at a more senior level within the civil service.

If the MP supports your concern they may add in their covering letter points of their own. Your concern will then be strengthened. One technique you may use is both to ask your MP to raise your concern with the Minister and to ask them for their personal view. This requires them to put their position on the record. If it is added to the letter covering yours to the Minister it will strengthen it.



Drawing by a young Friend, YMG 2011.

*Political activity begins
in deriving policies from our
testimonies and concerns*



Simon Bond of Maidenhead Quakers and Laura Bigoni from CAFOD meet Home Secretary Theresa May to discuss the UK's role in dealing with climate change, November 2010.

Photo: taken on Laura Bigoni's camera by one of Theresa May's staff

5. SHARING WITH OTHERS

When raising concerns with your MP you should seek to be concise, factual and accurate. Letters are best kept to two sides of A4. If you need greater space it may be better to submit a report, a statement of concern, or a memorandum and to make your approach to the MP a covering letter. Be very clear about what the outcome is that you hope for, what you are going to ask for, questions that you need clarifying and any follow-up that you're asking for.

Written questions

Any good MP should be willing to table appropriate questions on your behalf. These should be factual and not involve disguised opinion or innuendo. They should be neutral in tone avoiding irony or satire. Written questions are submitted by the MP to the table office and should be answered within a working week of their being tabled. Answers are put on the record by being printed in Hansard and on the Parliamentary website.

Oral questions

Question Time takes place for an hour from Monday to Thursday after prayers. Each major government department is responsible for answering questions every five weeks according to a rota called the Order of Oral Questions. The questions asked must relate directly to the responsibilities of the government department concerned. Prime Minister's Questions take place every Wednesday from 12 noon to 12:30 after the department that is being questioned on that day. Oral questions are more newsworthy and effective in raising issues with government. An MP will generally choose carefully those questions that he or she seeks to ask orally and will often be wary about putting a minister of his or her own political party in a difficult position. Oral Prime Minister's Questions also allow for an MP to raise a supplementary question that relates to the subject matter of the original question.

Practical points

- * Research your MP's background carefully before contacting them. Find out their political opinions and interests and wherever possible think about how the issue will look from their point of view.
- * Be courteous and positive and avoid being aggressive or unduly deferential. Remember that they are busy but that it is part of their job to represent you. Wherever possible seek to make common cause and appeal to common interests.
- * If offering criticism always try to be positive about initiatives where you feel they have helped.



Quakers join 'Moving Planet Day' on 26 September 2011, calling on the world to move beyond fossil fuels.

Photo: Sunniva Taylor

“Politics cannot be relegated to some outer place, but must be recognised as one side of life, which is as much the concern of religious people and of a religious body as any other part of life...”

Lucy F Morland, 1919,
Quaker faith & practice 23.06

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- * Wherever possible write on behalf of a group or organisation rather than as an individual.
- * Ask your MP's advice about how they feel you might advance your cause.
- * Follow up meetings with a courteous letter thanking the MP for their time, summarising the issues that you have raised and being clear about any expectations that you have regarding what you hope them to do and what you have agreed.

“Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national, and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand.”

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Campaigning and activism

Many Friends are called to speak ‘truth to power’ and to protest and resist practices and actions contrary to building a sustainable and peaceful society. This may take the form of joining campaigns or taking nonviolent direct action.

QPSW is a member of the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition, the UK's largest group of people dedicated to action on climate change and limiting its impact on the world's poorest communities.

We are also a member of a number of other organisations and campaigns with whom Friends can take action to build a non-violent sustainable community.

See www.quaker.org.uk/sustainability for current opportunities to speak out.



Quakers at 'The Wave' march, December 2009.

Photo: Liam Geary Baulch

Sustainability story

Becoming an active environmentalist

Thanks to my parents I have always been environmentally conscious on a personal level. I was brought up as a vegetarian recycling-fanatic, and as they've never had a car went everywhere by bike or train. However I started to take ownership of my response to issues of sustainability after attending Junior Yearly Meeting about five years ago: generally inspired, I looked to make a change and decided to return to being vegetarian after some years of rebellion.

Yet it was only really when I began university two years ago that I became a more active environmentalist. Through People and Planet I did numerous campaigns on diverse green issues, and attended loads of protests including Climate Camp at the G20. In December 2009 I helped organise the Quaker contingent at The Wave march in London, before cycling part of the way to Copenhagen with two university friends to protest and document the UN Climate Conference from the outside.

Protecting the environment and striving towards a truly sustainable world is our shared responsibility. Certainly the Quaker testimony to Simplicity has been important to me in encouraging my actions, but fundamentally I think I'm driven by a desire for justice: for people in the developing world who are suffering the most from our unsustainable mistreatment of the planet, but also for all plant and animal species whose existence we jeopardise.

I would urge all Friends to be moved to action by the many aspects of Quakerism that lead back to the great importance of sustainability, but also to remember that sometimes it is important to take a break from campaigning now and then (as I am doing at the moment!) because otherwise you can risk 'burnout'.

Contributed by Owen Everett, Watford Quaker Meeting



Owen Everett, Watford Quaker Meeting, cycled to Copenhagen in 2010 to protest outside the UN Climate Conference.

Photo: Jesse Meadows

Sustainability story

Creating strong resilient communities

How can we respond to the enormous challenges the world is facing, including peak oil, climate change and increasing inequality? Quaker Testimonies to Simplicity and to Equality show me the need to change the way I live and to think about people in developing countries who are already suffering the effects of climate change. This involves working at every level: individual, community and national. As a Quaker I bring recognition of the need for change based on a conviction that the way our society is organised is fundamentally flawed, and that we need to move towards one in which right relationships at every level are considered more important than economic growth. The Transition concept attracted me because of its emphasis on the positive, i.e. creating strong resilient communities. There is no blueprint but many ideas, and the focus is on playing to people's strengths and interests; and a recognition that priorities will vary in different areas.

Crediton is a market town in Devon with a wide range of community organisations. We were one of the early Transition Towns and now have over 300 members and active subgroups looking at food, energy, transport and waste. I have been chair for the past three years.

Our successes include:

- * A campaign to get rid of plastic bags (partially achieved).
- * Open weekends promoting renewable energy, e.g. solar panels, PV cells and ground heat pumps.
- * Organising 'swishing events' at which people can exchange clothes and learn how to repair and reuse what they own.
- * Getting local organisations to support the Copenhagen Conference and make pledges about how they would cut their emissions (part of the 350 campaign to reduce emissions to 350 parts per million).
- * Setting up a website to promote local food production.

The hardest part is reaching out to the wider community and encouraging more people to become active. We struggle to find the best way of communicating – a way which recognises that major changes are needed in our lifestyles but that this can be seen as life enhancing, rather than something negative. We are working closely with local schools since engaging young people is crucial if we are to have a lasting impact.

Overall I feel pleased with what we have achieved and we are now seen as a vital part of the local community and recently won the Devon Small Green Steps Award.

My advice to other Quakers is to start with whatever seems important locally, to build alliances and networks, and to develop a vision that can be shared by all members of the community.

Contributed by Gerald Conyngham, Exeter Quakers



A cycle rally in Crediton in 2008 to reclaim Crediton for cycling.

Photo: Gerald Conyngham