

British Yearly Meeting Sustainability Gathering
Swanwick, 18-20 March 2016

I'm an Attender of just over 2 years and a volunteer divestment campaigner with Sheffield Climate Alliance so welcomed the opportunity to attend the Gathering in March to hear how Quakers approach this subject and sustainability in general. I'd not really engaged with Quakers in this area before.

Liz Burch started our weekend with reflections on the recognition of same sex marriage in 2009 and the 2011 Canterbury Commitment. The former, once Quakers had discerned this was the right approach, was relatively easy to implement in that a limited number of people needed to influence MPs. A limited number of people would be impacted by the change, in a deep way, whilst the whole of society would also be changed in a more limited way. Climate change is entirely different with everyone being impacted at a deep level and virtually everyone needing to commit to change. And we need to defeat the powerful lobbyists of fossil fuel companies.

On Saturday morning Siobhán Grimes, a direct action/ civil disobedience activist, explained that we need to be loud in our concerns about the urgency of change because otherwise they won't be heard. Gregory Norminton (who some of you may know) told of the importance of stories and the need to engage people emotionally for the message to be heard by the many. And Rachel Howell, an academic researcher, told of the importance of social norms. If each of us make a change and in some (non-proselytising) way draw this to the attention of our friends and neighbours we can make an enormous impact in changing people's behaviour.

After lunch we had a wide choice of workshops. I attended one on climate finance given by Sunniva Taylor of British Yearly Meeting. I particularly liked the idea of fossil fuel companies being propped up by a number of pillars, such as political power, social licence, our pensions and lobbying. In that way we can look at each pillar in turn and work out how to dismantle them. For example, BP has had its social licence taken away by the creative actions of Liberate Tate which highlighted the damage of fossil fuels. BP has announced that it will no longer sponsor the Tate Gallery.

The second workshop I attended was run by Rachel Berger who used to work for Practical Action and Lindsey Cook, the latter on Skype from southern Germany. Lindsey works at the Quaker UN Offices in Geneva and is their Representative for Climate Change. Both were able to give us information on climate negotiations and how we as individuals can be most effective in the political process as both had attended several. Some of us were baffled that some MPs did not seem to see the urgency of climate change. Rachel and Lindsey suggested talking about humanity rather than human rights and making climate change a moral issue e.g. what will you say to your children when they ask what you did when you knew about climate change?

We were reminded that each of us has our own special gifts and that we should use these to help create our zero carbon world. Focussing on using these gifts means we are doing the best we can.

At the Gathering I met other Quakers from Yorkshire and we are hope to run a short session at the Quakers in Yorkshire Meeting this October, as well as having a longer session at a Meeting next year.

I believe that there are things we can do at our AM level too, which would be fun and creative and make a difference. I'm offering to convene a meeting to bring together other Quakers who might be interested in creating a Sustainability Group. If AM discerns this to be a good way to proceed please get in touch via janet.paske@gmail.com or 07740 457 528.