

Transforming Ourselves: Transforming the System



Creating the transition to a Low-Carbon, Sustainable Society – how do we do it?

Gathering at Hayes Conference Centre,
Swanwick, Derbyshire

7th – 9th March 2014

Notes by Adam Howard



Introduction

This being the first large Quaker gathering I had attended, I was intrigued to see how it might work. As we gathered for dinner on the first evening, there was a murmur of polite conversation. Seven of us sat down together – all strangers to one another. Politeness continued through the soup course. Then, as we tucked into vegetable kievies, the topic of recent documentaries on the First World War arose. One of my companions maintained strongly that Max Hastings' view was essentially correct – Britain did the right thing in entering the war, there was no real choice. Needless to say, not everyone agreed – and the conversation gained an “edge” to it. “Ah, good,” I thought – controversy! That’s what we’re going to need this weekend.

So how do we create a transition to a low-carbon, sustainable society? Finding answers to this question is at the heart of the Canterbury Commitment, made at the 2011 Britain Yearly Meeting in Canterbury. What’s been happening since then? Where are we now? Where are we going next? These were the questions posed by Lis Burch, Clerk to the Gathering, before we retired for our cocoa on Friday night. I had the distinct sense that Lis would keep us – over 100 of us - firmly on track over the next two days.

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The Landscape of Change

Saturday morning opened with an introduction to “*Godly Play*” by Sunniva Taylor, who works for Quaker Peace and Social Witness. She showed how with some very simple props, the way the planet is now calling strongly for our help can be communicated to people of all ages. This led into a lively presentation by Tim Gee, a young man clearly very dedicated to the cause.

Tim had put heart and soul into campaigning work in the lead-up to the Copenhagen Climate Conference in 2009, which could have been a global turning point. Instead, the outcome of the Conference was a cop-out – nothing really changed. Exhausted, Tim stepped back and took stock – and asked himself the question, “how do we change things?” He began to research successful social change movements. The outcome, 2 years later, was a book – *Counterpower: making change happen*, and a 50-date speaking tour.

Tim proposes there are patterns and stages to how change occurs. Ruling elites hold three key forms of power – Idea power, Economic power and Physical power. All three forms need to be challenged. No-one can do this alone – or we simply burn out. There are three stages - we have to find the power **Within** ourselves, power

Between ourselves, and grow power from **Below**. He quoted Martin Luther King: “*Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice*”. He went on to talk about the Society of Friends as a vine on which the fruits of change can grow. The Society itself needs transforming, he proposed, as the Conference title implies. Friends bring to this an understanding of the Light – a unique strength of the Society. As Tim put it, Friends may not be agreed on what God *is* – but there is a unity of understanding about what God *is not*.

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Exploring the Landscape of Change

Following coffee, I attended the follow-up discussion with Tim Gee and Sunniva Taylor. What emerged here was – to my mind – the beginning of what could be a very important conversation. A conversation which recognises the depth and breadth of the challenge we face, and which can – if we develop it skilfully and carefully – contribute something unique from the insights of the Society of Friends. Here are some of the themes.

Quakers have been good at starting movements, that go on to grow into organisations with global significance – Oxfam, Greenpeace, the campaign to abolish slavery. There is a very high concentration of knowledge amongst Friends – especially older Friends - about how to get arrested!

We have been learning and developing a model of change, and we need to continue this journey. There is an approach to addressing Climate Change which is informed by the traditional Christian model – “we must repent our carbon sins” – and persuade others to repent theirs. Essentially guilt-based. There is a different approach, which involves coming together to listen to one another’s concerns, to build strength and support at a community level – essentially, in Tim’s model, “Power from Below”. The word “Repent” actually comes from the Greek – *meta-noya* – meaning change of mind.

The Canterbury Commitment is “Minute 36” of the 2011 Yearly Meeting. Closely connected with Minute 23 from this meeting – about Economic Justice. This speaks of “using rage to change things”. Here, Tim warmed to his theme. When Jesus overturned the tables of the money-lenders in the temple, had he “lost it”? No, Tim argued, this was a consciously-woven scourge. His Father’s house had been turned into a market. Today – the planet has been turned into a market – but it is only home. We should use rage wisely – it is time, Tim said, to “be a bloody nuisance”. He proposed Friends stop being Prison Visitors and start being Prison Inmates again. We need, he said, to build a whole movement, a Coalition for Economic Justice.

How do we do this? Tim’s model has 3 stages:

1. Build awareness of The Problem
2. Build a Movement
3. Mass Non-Cooperation with “the System”

Building a Movement is an engaged process where we create new ways of doing things which are resilient – Energy Co-ops, Food Growing projects, community currencies and the like. We get to know our neighbours, and create strong messages through practical action. “The propaganda of the deed.” This, Tim proposed, is necessary before we “not co-operate” with the system.

If we build community projects without really being aware of the challenges and injustices we face, and fully engaging with them, we are in danger of just creating “nice communities”. But nothing really changes.

What is happening with Climate Change has a striking link with what happened in terms of meeting deep human needs in relationships. Prof Alan Shaw had done pioneering research into attachment and relationships. Twenty years ago, he found 10% of American children were “insecurely attached”. Now – the figure is 30%. There is a

parallel with Climate Change – what’s needed is known. What’s actually happening is taking us in the opposite direction.

How aware are we? In terms simply of Climate Change itself, a recent survey suggests:

- 35% believe climate change is happening now and is human-caused;
- 44% are unsure;
- 10% are complete deniers.

One speaker suggested this means we must present good, robust evidence to support the case for action on climate change. However – much recent research by the Climate Outreach Information Network (COIN) and others suggests that the heart of the problem is not about quality of evidence. However robust it may be – we simply avoid, deny or otherwise bypass information that contradicts the views and world-model we hold. The challenge, therefore, is more complex than simply finding new ways to present the evidence.

Many more people spoke. There had been a request at the start to keep contributions brief. However, it had to be said that up to this point there had been no such thing as a short contribution! A man to my left had clearly been bursting to speak for some time – finally, with a minute left, he had his chance. His case, by necessity, was made succinctly. I paraphrase:

“We are linking this challenge to previous campaigns – but it is very different. We have to change behaviour right across society. ‘Mass-non-co-operation’ won’t work in this case. Comparison with the campaign to end the slave trade is over-simplistic – we are ALL carbon consumers. The analysis earlier presents the case for “overturning the tables” of the people in power – this paints a black and white picture of the situation. In reality there is a great deal of work being done on climate change, in politics and business. Just saying “we’re against the system” is again over-simplistic – and busying ourselves going to prison is a waste of time.”

Once again, then, a breath of healthy controversy! The bell went at this point, before we could explore this further. Tim simply reminded us of the purpose of the Gathering – Transforming Ourselves, Transforming the System. The question we were left with concerns how this transformation comes about. A good question to take forward.

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Other groups had met to respond to the morning’s presentation in very different ways. One group worked with Play-dough – and spoke of the sense of connection and community that came from building something together. “We can all create things; we all have the ability to make a difference...” The Worship-Sharing group spoke of finding themselves in a place of deep concern, but feeling confused, disempowered, perhaps almost in despair. Whilst the “Non-Violence and Social Change” group spoke of the need to understand Social Psychology. Social change is not just about lecturing people – it’s a much more complex process. Calling on us to develop shared knowledge and understanding, compassion, trust and cooperation – both with people who’s positions are similar and also those who hold different views. This includes engaging with people in positions of influence in government, industry and finance – can we build positive relations based on things that are eternal?

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After lunch, the next session was entitled “*We have a dream... Making our dreams real*”. We began to look at **visions** of a transformed system – and **stories** of transformation. How can we **get** to a low-carbon, sustainable society?

Zero-Carbon Britain – Re-thinking the Future

Dani Pafford of the Centre for Alternative Technology presented key findings from the latest version of this report, produced in July 2013. It maps a path to net zero carbon emissions by 2030. There are 2 key areas of change – Supply and Demand. Key points:

Supply – a big increase in renewables; wind and biomass figure very strongly.

Demand – reduce by 60%:

- Buildings – high standards on insulation and energy efficiency.
- Transport – changing both power source and mode (e.g. car → bus, train, bike).
- Diet – a “Zero Carbon Britain Diet” which contains **much** less meat – especially beef.

A Sustainable Economy for a Finite Planet

Gill Westcott here introduced what many of us, myself included, feel is a central and vital topic in our search for answers. Our economy, based as it is on growth, is driving unsustainable practices. It is an area with great need, and enormous potential, for transformative change. I shall return to this later.

Transforming Ourselves – what does this mean, what does this take?

Laurie Michaelis of Living Witness spoke of how we need to find stories of transformation. And to share these stories, explore them, discover what they tell us about how change happens. Laurie spoke of 3 metaphors for change – a Machine; an Ecosystem; a Community. In increasing order of complexity. Quakers, Laurie proposed, have some experience in “a spirituality of community”. Working with both the Light **and** the Darkness which is all part of human community.

What are Quakers actually doing? Laurie and his colleagues recently surveyed Yorkshire Meetings to find how they are responding to the Canterbury Commitment. They found a wide range of activities taking place, with the majority of meetings engaging in a number of ways. Overall it seemed Friends found practical action the easiest to develop. More challenging are the questions of promoting systemic change; and building community around values for sustainability.

Creating Community – a Co-Housing Model

Next we heard from the Lancaster Co-Housing Project, Forgebank. This is a community of 41 eco-homes, together with a regenerated mill housing small community businesses, and an on-site Community Hydro scheme. How does it work?

- i) Each home is a private house – it’s community living, but not communal living.
- ii) There are many shared facilities – 2 washing machines serve 40 adults, and remarkably there are no queues. One of the biggest learnings has been about how to share.
- iii) Streets are pedestrianised, and partly covered, creating plenty of space to meet and interact.
- iv) Houses are up to “PassivHaus” standard – 10% of normal energy consumption.
- v) All 41 homes are heated from a big biomass boiler, as is the Mill as well.
- vi) Many features at Forgebank could be “retrofitted” in existing communities.
- vii) There are all generations at Forgebank, and most people wouldn’t have identified themselves as “green”, before becoming involved here.
- viii) The most sensitive issues – Transport and Food. Many cars are shared, and there is shared cooking. This has been one of the biggest transformations.

- ix) Decision-making has been another area of learning. Developing Collaborative, Consensual, Creative decision-making processes.
- x) These processes work – Forgebank is an £8.5m project which came in on time, and on budget.
- xi) This calls for a transformational shift: from *“This is my position”* to *“What’s best for the community?”*
- xii) It also calls for a commitment of **time** – needing to recognise, this is *a way of life*.

Sustainable Food Growing

Huw Evans of Sheffield Organic Growers gave us an overview of this inspiring project, growing organic fruit and veg on 12 acres of land on the outskirts of Sheffield. This project has been developing over the last 4 years, and is now producing substantial harvests. Now looking for a second site, to expand activities. A key thing, Huw said, is knowing who the local producers are. Creating a network, and supporting local food growing.

Fossil Fuel Divestment

Sunniva Taylor spoke of how Quakers have led the way here - Britain Yearly Meeting taking the first initiative of any institution in the UK to disinvest in fossil fuel extraction companies. The recommendation came from at a Meeting for Sufferings – and the decision was taken by the Trustees. It gives a powerful message – to MPs, to the market, to everyone we work with. It gives integrity to lobbying and campaigning work.

Many organisations and initiatives are developing – such as Operation Noah, campaigning for all churches to disinvest. A “Fossil Free UK Tour” ran in late 2013, organised by 350.org, People and Planet and Operation Noah. The disinvestment message was promoted, and each gathering celebrated news of Quakers’ disinvestment.

For those of us with investments, here are ways of finding out more:

- Personal and institutional finances – www.yourfaithyourfinance.org
- Pensions – www.shareaction.org.uk – and find the Green Light Campaign

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Action Forum

In this session, Friends were invited to make 2-minute contributions about what their own meetings, or they themselves, were doing. The range is truly remarkable. Sunniva has compiled an Action Forum document (which will be available with this report) that runs to 22 pages! Here is just a tiny selection of initiatives.

-  Group buying of renewable energy – 37 Meetings have joined.
(Here is the link - [REGBI](#) - Renewable Energy Group Buying Initiative)
-  Weekend course run on Building Resilience.
-  Car Club. Bulk Food Buying Club.
-  Festival of Green Ideas.
-  Meeting House emissions cut by 2/3.
-  Meeting Oliver Letwin once a month.
-  Public visits to Green Homes.

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Five workshops were now offered to explore themes in more depth – I chose the one about a Sustainable Economy.

Workshop – A Sustainable Economy fit for a Finite Planet – what could it look like?

Gill Westcott started us off on this quest. She clearly had a deep and detailed understanding of many of the issues. She’s a member of Exeter meeting, and the QPSW Economics, Sustainability and Peace sub-committee.

There is a raft of recent work addressing aspects of this challenge. Tim Jackson’s pioneering report and book, *Prosperity without Growth*, has done much to set the scene. In *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have tipped up lots of tables in the temple by demonstrating how more equal societies fare better in pretty much every way, compared to those – like the UK and the USA – with very high levels of inequality. Not surprisingly, their work has been vigorously attacked. Still more recently, Rob Dietz and Dan O’Neill have explored in more detail how a sustainable economy might actually work, to deliver human well-being on a planetary scale, in *Enough is Enough*. A great little summary of their work, Gill said, is available on U-Tube – it’s 18 minutes well-spent.

The New Economics Foundation has produced a series of “Mythbusters”. For example, contrasting how much the banking industry contributes to the UK economy – and comparing it to the cost of the financial crisis. Ann Pettifor is working to enlighten people to the true nature of money, and to build a call for the proper regulation of credit; a case for “*Just Economics*”. QPSW produce Earth and Economy, with news of developments in this field. This is a free publication, produced 3 times a year. www.quaker.org.uk/earth-economy-signup

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Open Space - On Sunday morning, people grouped around topics of interest in “Open Space” sessions. A flavour of these sessions is given in the flip-chart write-ups, available in a follow-up message to this report.

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And So....

I feel the need to say something here about what I personally brought home from this conference, and how it links with my sense of the challenges we face.

Climate Change is difficult to talk about. This is being recognised now, and surveys are providing the evidence. Conversations over a pint or a cup of tea soon move onto other less difficult topics. The Climate Outreach Information Network, COIN, are identifying this as “Climate Silence” – affecting government, civil society and the public. COIN are looking at what lies behind it – and how it can be broken. For this kind of silence is the most deadly kind – it is not a generative silence.

We need, then, to find the ground on which we can connect. In Sheffield, there are signs that people in influential positions in the local authority and in local business are beginning to recognise the potential advantages of facing up to this challenge. There is the beginnings of work on a low-carbon path forwards. Local activists have played a role in opening people’s eyes to the need, and to the positive case for action. Not just because we “ought to” – but because it actually *makes sense* to figure out how we can do this together.

This, above all, is what I bring from this conference. The need to find routes into conversations – in ways that connect with what matters to people. However different our perspectives may be - a new, low-carbon vision is beginning to emerge. The transformation required is – arguably – the biggest we will ever make as a global society. The conference showed how – through talking together, and working together – we can make a start.

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Resources

A follow-up message to this report contains attachments mentioned here.

Presentations

Most of the presentations and power-points have now been uploaded to the BYM website. You can view them here: <http://www.quaker.org.uk/canterbury-commitment>

Action Forum

An attached document compiles the contributions to the Action Forum. The contributions are listed in alphabetical order by local meeting.

Here is the web link to information about [REGBI](#) (Renewable Energy Group Buying Initiative) mentioned by Chayley Collis. Your meeting can join to group buy Good Energy electricity.

Open space

The open space write-ups that were gathered after the session are attached.

Ongoing networks

1. Quaker network on social, psychological and spiritual aspects of climate change

One of the groups in the Open Space session on the Sunday morning agreed to set up a network on social, psychological and spiritual aspects of climate change. It would share ideas, experiences and resources for use in our lives, Meetings and local communities. We wanted to do this through:

- 1) an e-mail group
- 2) a special interest meeting at Yearly Meeting Gathering in Bath
- 3) a day or weekend event later in the year.

The transcript of the flipcharts from the group is attached as part of the Open Space write up.

If you'd like to be included in the e-mail group please write to Laurie Michaelis at laurie@livingwitness.org.uk.

2. Sustainable property

Some participants at the weekend would like the opportunity to continue to share expertise and knowledge about building and retrofitting green buildings (meeting houses, or other buildings) – whether that be draft exclusion, insulation, boilers, renewable energy generation, passivhaus design, cob building etc.

If you would be interested in being part of such a network please email Sunniva Taylor on sunnivat@quaker.org.uk outlining your interest in this. It would be intended as a means for Friends with knowledge, and Friends who would like to ask questions of others, to connect and share ideas, queries and expertise.

Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network:

Some Friends expressed interest in QUARN, especially how the network is organised and maintained. There may be things we can learn from this as to how we facilitate and maintain our own networks. Sheila Mosley has kindly typed up a page to explain this, which is also attached.

Earth & Economy

The latest edition of [Earth & Economy](#), QPSW's sustainability and economic justice newsletter, has just been published. You can read it [here](#), or attached.

If you would like to be on the list, then you can sign up here: <http://www.quaker.org.uk/earth-economy-signup>

You will receive a newsletter about three times a year, and regular e-updates sharing relevant events, campaigns and news we think you may be interested in.

Some up and coming events and workshops

- [Your Faith, Your Finance](#) workshops: QPSW is offering to run two hour workshops on 'your faith your finance' with Meetings between April and December 2014. Find out more [here](#).

Finally, more resources will be available soon from the organisers, including;

- A resource sheet containing references to some of the many resources mentioned at the weekend
- Write ups of the 'what we are already doing' and 'ideas, books, websites' flip charts
- Contact list for all those who have said they are prepared to share their details
- Canterbury Commitment Strategy document

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