Quaker Earthcare Witness, An In-Depth Analysis


Friends Committee on Unity with Nature had its humble beginnings in 1987 at the Friends General Conference (FGC) on the campus of Oberlin College. A workshop group was formed to discuss and contemplate the importance of a testimony of living in harmony with the earth and all of god's creations. The workshop was lead by Alice and Bill Howenstine, with much of the discussion coming from Marshall Massey, a conservative Friend from Nebraska. For a decade and a half, the organization was referred to as Friends Committee on Unity with Nature. Many of its branches still contain "Unity with Nature" in their names, but the central organization officially changed its name to Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) in 2003. A few other structural changes accompanied this name change: a new mission statement, and a new fiscal year.1

Growing out of the Friends General Conference annual gatherings, QEW had many participants from various states spanning the country. The diversity of FGC is reflected in the membership of the group. When it started there were several representatives to different regions of the United States: Midwest, Southwest, Pacific, Pacific NW, Canada and Mid-Atlantic. Today there are branches of the organization in many of the yearly meetings and monthly meetings around the country.2 The movement started out relatively small. By 1990 the membership had reached roughly 300 people. Maintaining this number until the mid 1990s, QEW began to grow again, reaching 1400 members by 2005. Currently, it is governed through the operations of eight committees: executive, continuing counsel, outreach, nominating, finance and development, publications, spiritual guidance and personnel.3 Since its inception, there have been 12 people who have held the title of clerk or co-clerk. 4

QEW has also prospered financially. It has grown from a measly budget of $767 covering the first full year of operation, to a 2006 budget of $87,310. The program's expenditures jumped in 1994 when it hired its first paid position. Ruah Swennerfelt became the general secretary of QEW. In 2000, Ruah's husband, Louis Cox, was hired part time as the publications coordinator. Aside from these two positions, all work for the organization has been accomplished through volunteers. 5

After starting as a concerned group of Friends gathering at an annual session of FGC, QEW has stepped out as an independent organization operating autonomously. Currently, annual gatherings of QEW are held in early to mid-October.6 These meetings are both a time for the greater membership to assemble, and a time in which the steering committee holds one of its semiannual meetings.7 Though it started at an FGC gathering, the organization does not profess a strict adherence to any branch of Quakerism, but does give a listing of yearly meetings that feature a group associated with QEW. This list of meetings includes the yearly meetings of, Baltimore, Illinois, Lake Erie, New England, Northern, Ohio Valley, Pacific, Philadelphia and Southern Appalachian, nearly all of which are affiliated with FGC.8 Although FGC is a liberal Friends gathering, the spark behind the movement came from a conservative source.9 Marshall Massey associates with the conservative branch of Quakerism and currently attends Iowa Yearly Meeting.10

Though QEW has few ties to the Quaker world outside of liberal Friends, few organizations have these ties. Many that claim to have such a universal message, that all friends stand behind them, do not in fact have the support of the entire community. This is due to the variety of beliefs and lack of active communication that exists within the umbrella of Quakerism, and is not necessarily an indication of the partiality of the message. That this message has spanned the entirety of the United States, is an indication of the universality of the message QEW seeks to deliver. The mission statement, "to our testimony of conscientious objection to war, let us add... conscientious protection of our planet," has resonated with many Friends, and it is easily seen how it follows from other Quaker testimonies.11

This witness of care for the Earth is a consequence of generalizing the traditional testimonies of integrity, equality, peace and simplicity, to encompass more than just human society. So much of the witness that Quakers have historically effused is concerned with the just and unjust practices of
humans relating to other humans. QEW seeks to inspire the Quaker world to apply these concerns to the environment in which they and their fellow humans live. It is their belief that if we truly are to treat others equally, we must respect the environment in which they live.12

In An Apology for Perfection, Cecil Hinshaw argues that the testimony of integrity is essential to Quakerism. He claims that the foundation of the Quaker faith is the quest for ethical perfection. For it is the attempt to achieve integrity in all of life that is basic to the Quaker approach. Not merely honesty in our relations with other people, but honesty with ourselves and honesty with God in all of life, is the meaning of integrity in this deeper sense.13

The significance of "honesty with God in all of life," is quite relevant to the discussion at hand. If there is truly "that of God" in not just everyone, but everything, then the witness that stems from Quaker testimonies must consider all living things.

Louis Cox argues that the testimony of integrity is the most basic testimony, that all others have sprung from this quest for Hinshaw's "moral perfection." Cox claims that, "our commitments to peace, equality, justice, and Earthcare are understood as different facets of the same spiritual concern," that of integrity.14 From these arguments it follows that all testimonies drawn from this most fundamental tenant of Quakerism must also consider that of God in all life.

From the relations of the equality, peace and simplicity witnesses to this consideration of all life, we can finally arrive at the testimony for environmental preservation and care. Cox gives several examples of how each of these traditional thoughts is inextricably entwined with the "conscientious protection of our planet."

Inequality, (racial, gender, ethnic, sexual orientation) deprives people of basic needs as well as rights, which makes it difficult for them to be mindful of the needs and rights of other species and future generations.15

This quote makes clear the connection between the testimony of equality as it relates to fellow humans, and the same testimony as it relates to our surrounding world. Equality preserves the ability of a society to function in a way that enables the care of all living species involved.

The testimony of peace also strongly affects the care of an environment. In addition to the direct impacts of war on the surrounding environment, such as the destruction that bombs and chemicals like Agent Orange can cause, war can have indirect impacts on the earth. Cox states that, "War disrupts communities, which are typically most knowledgeable about local environments and best equipped to practice stewardship."16 It is true that it is easier to care about the land considered home, than a newly acquired land.

Finally, the testimony of simplicity may be the easiest to connect with environmental concerns. The emphasis on living simply fits well with minimizing the negative impact imparted on the surrounding world. Living simply entails curtailing one's dependence upon material goods, in turn decreasing waste and lessening the burden thrust upon the earth. The more simply one lives, the less time Mother Nature spends recovering from your presence in her caress.

That this testimony of environmental preservation is in tune with the tenants of traditional Quakerism does not make it apparent that it necessitates immediate concern. What does make this apparent are the alarming statements that are coming from those who have conducted credible research in the area human impact on the environment. The most publicized topic related to this is that of global warming. Popular culture is slowly awakening to the idea that perhaps the current way of life is not one that can be sustained indefinitely. A prominent former presidential candidate, Al Gore, has traveled throughout the United States attempting to educate those who will listen. Haverford's own Bruce Partridge has presented a similar talk many times. The figures used in presentations such as these, are alarming. One of the first scientists to publicly discuss the issue of global warming and the current head of a NASA institute on climatology, James Hansen, warned, in a CBS interview, that if the world proceeded as is, in ten years a tipping point would be reached. Once this point is reached, global warming will progress to a runaway effect, with melting ice sheets...
decreasing the amount of light reflected by the earth, the earth will warm and therefore melt a greater amount of ice.17

This concern for the environment is not limited to global warming. Through our obsession with consumer goods, the United States has amassed a great deal of non-biodegradable waste. Sitting in the overstuffed landfills, this now-unwanted material takes tens to hundreds of years to decompose. Some materials, such as Styrofoam, essentially never decompose. Other effects exist as well. The self-generated pollution that ravages our largest cities is potent enough to change the local weather patterns. Many species vital to the nourishment of the earth are slowly disappearing from the planet.

To tackle these concerns QEW has created a number of subsidiary groups. These groups fall into three categories. Those concerned with raising awareness via literature, those who witness through political action and those who witness through service projects.

There are many publications generated by QEW. Befriending Creation is an online newsletter published once every two months, and is one of two periodic publications overseen by QEW. Its purpose is to report and acknowledge the activities of Friends meetings and organizations with like concerns. The other periodic literature is published as an insert to Befriending Creation, Quaker Eco-Bulletin is a smaller pamphlet dedicated to a specific issue of particular concern each issue. The current issue details an organization which emphasizes the productive disposal of waste.

In addition to these regularly released newsletters, the organization is responsible for the creation of many single issue pieces of literature. The New England Friends in Unity with Nature created a sourcebook on sustainability for Quaker monthly meetings to print from the internet and post at the meetinghouse. This booklet is hosted on the QEW web site. Several books are currently circulating, with titles such as: Earthcare for Friends, A Study Guide for Individuals and Faith Communities and Earthcare for Children, a First Day School Curriculum. Many booklets and pamphlets have been released as well. A few are: Natural Awareness as a Spiritual Practice, Spirituality and Sustainability: a Study Guide for Friends and Others, and Be Ye Perfect: The Quaker Call to Wholeness.

A second method by which QEW operates is that of political lobbying. There are two groups affiliated with QEW that are dedicated to effecting political action. The first such group is Quaker Earthcare Witness for National Legislation. This group is dependent on its parent organization for funding and so falls under the designation of interest group. Formed in 2000 as Quaker Eco-Witness by five members of Friends Committee on Unity with Nature, the group soon expanded, changing its name concurrently with the larger organization. Today it is a member organization of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, which has itself, added “an earth restored” to its legislative concerns. The latter group with a political emphasis is Friends Testimony on Economics. It is officially a joint project between QEW and the Earthcare Working Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Friends Testimony on Economics, while overlapping in message and personnel with QEW, is somewhat independent in that it generates outside funding.

Another project started under QEW that has since become independent is Finca La Bella (the beautiful farm). This project is the first of QEW's efforts to act upon the testimony it effuses. Situated in Costa Rica, near the top of a mountain, this organization works to provide education, literacy, nutrition, health care and a healthy environment. One hundred and twenty two acres were purchased in the 1980s for the purpose of developing sustainable agriculture and human services integrated with a nature preservation. Since the founding, twenty four families who previously held no land have been given leases to develop two to four acres apiece. Other facilities created on the farm include, a kindergarten serving fifteen to twenty children each year, a two-room health clinic, an agricultural exchange, a tree nursery and programs to educate local farmers on topics such as organic agriculture, accounting, organizational dynamics and tourism.

Sustainability: Faith & Action is the last of the projects under the QEW blanket. This group is the recent combination of two smaller groups which found their visions overlapping. The Sustainability Committee and the Population Concerns Committee had formerly been engaged in educating Friends in the area of sustainability of the earth. When it was discovered that the goals of both committees had largely been accomplished, and that, independently, both were turning towards putting their
words into action, the groups merged to form Sustainability: Faith and Action. This project is quite young, and is currently involved in discussion of goals and plans of action. 25

While projects such as Finca La Bella give me hope that QEW will continue to have an impact, there are a few issues that give me concern. The effort to produce written material is an important element in most movements and is especially relevant here due to the target audience. Those who are most easily swayed by the arguments presented in literature are those who already have some sympathies to the message, but are lacking tethers that might prevent them from acting upon their leadings. As quoted earlier from Cecil Hinshaw, for those who are impoverished or underprivileged, it is often harder to take the concerns of others into account. The struggle for personal survival is paramount; affairs related to this will trump any issues lacking immediacy. People who have the time to read and engage such written material are more likely to be able and willing to give time or money to a cause with few personal implications.

The message of environmental preservation is one with global relevance. It is probable that those alive today will get through their lifetimes without experiencing the large negative impacts that have been predicted by many scientists. Our destruction of the environment is a slow process that lacks many abruptly appearing issues to give pause to those at fault. The target audience for messages of change must be one that is capable of looking past their immediate condition to the future and to other's conditions. It is fortunate, then, that QEW has found an audience ripe with people willing to sacrifice their own conveniences for the survival of others. "Live simply so that others may simply live" is a commonly repeated phrase within the Quaker community.

Concentrating their witness within this population is both a blessing and a curse for QEW. Those who are reached by this message are likely to sympathize, but the size of this group is somewhat small. It is quite possible for those who seek out this organization to find it; indeed, these people are welcomed with open arms and given many opportunities to enact change. The detriment in confining resources in this fashion is that the number of such people is small. To expand this sphere of influence, QEW must bring their message to a larger community. Befriending Creation and Quaker Eco-Bulletin are currently available through monthly and yearly meetings, and on the web. These publications are accomplishing their goals of bringing this witness to the larger Quaker community, but this community is not large enough to have a significant impact on the environment while unassisted. Engaging a larger community will increase the magnitude of positive influence that QEW possesses.

That QEW is developing a presence in the political sphere is a promising step. Friends Committee on National Legislation has done a very good job of expressing Quaker ideals to our nation's capitol. Involving itself in this established infrastructure for change is a wise endeavor. Also, projects such as Finca La Bella are a source of hope for the realization of this witness. To have a visible impact towards preserving the earth, it is important to do more than simply talk about what should be done.

Quakers have a tendency to let ideas "season" for extended periods of time. This organization is no exception to this stereotype. While it is important to avoid a misstep, it is essential that action is taken at some point. Most of the presence that QEW has in this world is in the form of newsletters and prose. Member groups, like Sustainability: Faith and Action, are beginning to address this challenge. It can only be hoped that other groups will appear with similarly redefined goals. What started as a group of impassioned Friends near the end of the 20th century has emerged in the 21st century as a thriving community dedicated to environmental change and is poised to be influential in the movement for preservation of human society and the earth that sustains it.

Bibliography

[NOTE: The QEW website references below are from a version of the website that was replaced in January 2010. Much of the same material is available in the current version of the website, but in different folders and under different file names.]

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**QEW Beginnings** [1]

**Tweet** [2]