Unleashing Holy Energy, Witnessing for God's Green Kingdom

OVER THE YEARS, Quaker Earthcare Witness has projected its work as drawing from the very taproots of Quakerism.

- The testimony of peace: living less violently in the midst of God's creation.
- The testimony of simplicity: reducing material demands upon the planet's resources, carving a path to right livelihoods.
- The testimony of social justice: witnessing for the vast oppressed and impoverished throngs of the earth who have a minuscule proportion of its material wealth; knowing that without social justice there can be no environmental justice; right sharing.
- The testimony of integrity: a commitment to truth, honesty, authenticity, and wholeness, which implies a life more fully integrated into the workings of Creation—that of God in every living thing.

1. We are a Quaker movement, and it seems right to have the force of Quaker history behind us. It has been eminently wise to build our work on these testimonies. They [provide] spiritual grounding that make sense to us. From these we have tried to make the following case:
2. Since we are sure that God would not possibly approve of war, violence, oppression, injustice, inequality, and dishonesty, it also seems likely that it is not God's will that Creation be trashed and that the earth's intricate and beautiful components and interrelationships be exterminated before their time.
3. And God would not approve of overconsumption, inefficiency, and waste, causing less fortunate people to live in a barren world.
4. And if we cannot be honest and "come 'round right" in the way we ourselves live, we are
unlikely to convince anyone else to change.

These are connections we have tried to make in our writings, workshops, activities, and personal lives. We have also tried to inform ourselves of other traditions and to be inspired by their wisdom. I am thinking of the practices of indigenous peoples, deep ecology and creation spirituality, and other faith traditions within and beyond Christianity.

To my mind, [Quaker Earthcare Witness] member Lisa Gould best contextualized [our situation] in a flyer which recalled the response of Quakers to human slavery two centuries ago. She challenged Quakers today to be inspired by their example to witness and work toward righting the relationship between humans and this despoiled planet. But Lisa wondered whether we have as much courage to prevent enslavement, or worse, obliteration of Creation. She mused: "Two hundred years from how, will Friends be... proud of Quaker initiatives in caring for the Earth?" That seems to me a central question, and the time available to work on it may be much less.

Regrettably, the radical witness which aroused abolitionist Quakers is not yet out there today. When I speak to Quakers, I don't feel a sense of urgency. I don't sense that most Yearly Meetings or Monthly Meetings are "quaking" over the state of the earth. Beyond the small cadre of [Quaker Earthcare Witness] folk and those in our wider circle, there is not much evidence that we are leading Quakers to an understanding of the precarious future of the earth they inhabit and abuse.

MARSHALL MASSEY, whose vision helped spark the formation of [Quaker Earthcare Witness], blames this on denial and being trapped in an immensely complex set of forces-the way the modern world works. He says we have a hard time admitting our complicity or admitting that our own ways of thinking and behaving immobilize us. He argues that we must come to grips with this denial before we can break through to the possibilities of an open-hearted and more harmonious relationship with God's green kingdom.

Asking the Religious Society of Friends to reexamine and deepen its spiritual relationship to the earth has been difficult. Some Quakers claim an environmental concern and tell stories of recycling and energy audits at Meeting Houses, of environmental workshops and First Day School curricula, and of Monthly and Yearly Meeting queries. Some seek insights from the "deep ecology" movement-at the risk of being called "pantheists." But most of us, myself included, have not arrived at a deeper level; we have not sufficiently opened our hearts to God's green kingdom and changed how we live.

Vermont professor Daniel Noel thinks that the vision of a cataclysmic ending that has haunted the human imagination for 3,000 years is now a literal menace and a source of present dread. Do Quakers understand this? Are Quakers capable of responding to the urgency of this situation?

William Durland believes the way Quakers worship may be part of the problem: In a Pendle Hill pamphlet he writes that in Meeting for Worship we float serenely in pools of silence while outside the Meeting House a flood of problems inundates the world. Our worship form, he thinks, is anesthetizing. Our light is a mere flicker.

HOW TO REDISCOVER THE BLAZING INWARD LIGHT that Quakers once emitted, how to tap the energizing center behind that Light, how to unleash the holy energy that moved the "Valiant Sixty" during the early Quaker movement-these are the challenges still before us. If we could learn how to do these things, we would release an apocalyptic witness, perhaps sufficient to respond to the magnitude of the need. What does this call us to do as activists and witnesses?. If we wait patiently and if we are open, we will be clear about where to go next. Letting go is hard, but when it happens, it will open new possibilities. We will do less but we will do it better. We will not feel sorry or guilty for that which we cannot do. We will find new directed energy for our activism and witness. We will collaborate more effectively with each other and with other Quaker and non-Quaker organization. And we will be able to take our vision effectively to the wider Religious Society of Friends.

...In sum, [Quaker Earthcare Witness] can model a dynamic, 21st century spirit-led organization that practices what it preaches; that is impressively effective for its uncomplicated structure and modest resources; that understands that God and all Creation are sacred and therefore lives as lightly as possible; that uses fast and efficient means of getting its crystal-clear message out; that is the
cutting edge of a mass movement of great force and fortitude, whole and inclusive and possessed of hold energy—an organization that seeks not only to heal the earth but to heal itself.

At the onset of Decade II for [Quaker Earthcare Witness], I hope that a new energy, an energy that Isaiah foresaw in the coming kingdom in these comforting words:

They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall grow wings as a dove; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.

Illustrative activity

DIVIDE INTO FIVE GROUPS: Peace, Simplicity, Equality, Truth-telling, and Integrity. Find out what your Faith and Practice says about these testimonies. Ask each group to list environmental issues that relate to that testimony and decide whether Earthcare should be included in their testimony. They could be asked to design a poster for their testimony with earthcare included in it, or make another type of presentation of their conclusions. Then compare—even argue the cases. Then the leader asks if a case can be made for a separate Earthcare testimony.

Source: From the keynote address by Ted Bernard at the 1997 Quaker Earthcare Witness retreat

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Ted Bernard
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