Sustainable Development as a Quaker Testimony? A Challenge to all Friends (approved 1997)

In 1988 Netherlands Yearly Meeting agreed on a minute in which our representative to the 1988 Triennial was asked to request the Triennial in Japan: as a matter of urgency, that the theme of the ecumenical Conciliar Process—Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation—will be given priority in the activities of FWCC in the next few years.

At our 1997 Yearly Meeting we reconfirmed this minute and elaborated on it. Of the theme—Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation—two elements, social justice and peace, have been Friends Testimonies throughout Quaker history.

Although individual Friends and Friends Meetings, past and present, have been concerned about our need to care for creation on such a way that we preserve this God-given web of life, as well as about the ecological issues involved and the way in which we use or abuse natural resources, we believe that now is the time that Friends everywhere should speak out on this issue and consider it a testimony on an equal footing with the testimony on peace and social justice.

Given the scale and possible even the irreversibility of the changes that humankind is inflicting upon creation (depletion of non-renewable resources, pollution, climate change, rapid extinction of endangered species) “there is not time but this present.”

At our Yearly Meeting we were reminded that our Friend John Woolman “looked upon the works of God in this visible creation” and learned that “as the mind was moved on an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible being, on the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world; that as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensitive creatures, to say we love God as unseen and at the same time exercise cruelty towards the least creature moving by his life, or by life derived from him, was a contradiction in itself.” (Journal)

In this, Woolman’s testimony, we may recognize one of the Psalms: “To the Lord belongs the earth and everything in it, the world and all its inhabitants…” (Psalm 24) An indeed, throughout Friends history we were reminded not only of the “Words of God” but also of the “Works of God.” Both may inspire us and fill us with awe and respect.

Who are we to put these works of God at serious risk? They do not belong to us! Rather, we belong to them, we are part of this God-given web of life we call Creation. We are called to sound stewardship on order to care for its integrity!

We live in a society where political and economical choices are more often dictated by greed than by need. What choices do we make as individual Friends? If the dominant life-style, if the dominant economic model, is causing the above-mentioned detrimental effects, even the extinction of many of God’s creatures, should Friends not question it? How do we let our lives speak in answer to the love of God? We asked ourselves these questions at our Yearly Meeting. The keyword for a solution seems to be sustainability. If we live by our traditional testimonies as a God and truth-loving people, seeking justice, peace and simple life-styles, “living simply, so that others may simply live,” adopting sustainable development as an additional testimony seems to be the necessary next step. Isn’t it a living tradition we take part in?

If we consider sustainability a testimony, we must confess, however, that we very often fail to live up to it. But we have committed ourselves to come back to these questions and explore ways to let our lives speak more effectively in this respect.

We know about the work that is done to promote sustainable development by environmental
movements as well as by the (world-wide) ecumenical movement, such as the work on climate change by the World Council of Churches. Some of our members are involved in these activities, using silent diplomacy much like e.g., Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) representatives do in the fields of social justice and peace.

We therefore hope and pray that Friends gathered at the Triennial will unite with the concern of Netherlands Yearly Meeting that it is our responsibility to help preserve the Integrity of God’s Creation by adopting sustainability as a testimony to live by.

We hope that this will be expressed at international, national, and local levels. FWCC with the QUNO’s as our international instrument, should make it one of its priorities for the twenty-first century.