Let the Living Water Flow!

By Shelley Tanenbaum, QEW General Secretary
WHAT DOES FOOT-WASHING have to do with climate chaos? Leave it to worldwide Friends to give me the answer.

I had the opportunity in March to attend a section of the Americas consultation sponsored by Friends World Committee for Consultation, in Sacramento, CA (http://www.fwccamericas.org/). During one afternoon session, we were asked to pair up and wash each other’s feet, harkening back to Jesus’ act of washing his disciples’ feet. During the same afternoon as part of the same program, we watched Jon Watt’s video reading of the Kabarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIs5SYbk1ul), calling on all of Quakerdom to radically change our personal lifestyles and to work toward radical changes in society in response to environmental concerns.

The link between foot-washing and the Kabarak Call is “service leadership.” On the one hand, we are literally serving hand to foot, taking care of people in greater need. On the other, we are asking Friends, and ultimately all of humanity, to change the way we are living on the planet in order to create a more peaceful and sustainable world.
By the end of the afternoon, clarity emerged to link these areas of service through humility, connection, and empathy. It takes a tremendous amount of humility to kneel and wash someone’s feet. Similarly, we humans need to humble ourselves and live as though we are one of many peoples, one of many species; all of creation is valuable. Further, foot-washing is such a personal act that we lose our sense of separation—there is no “us” and “them” when engaged in foot-washing.

We need to lose our sense of “us” and “them” to change our society locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally if we are going to live in peace and harmony with creation. Finally, both foot-washing and the Kabarak Call require empathy and caring. Why do we serve—whether for an individual or for all life on the planet? Because we care.

Participants were treated to a sermon Sunday morning by Kelly Kellum, Pastoral Minister from High Point Friends Meeting in North Carolina, on the theme for the consultation, “Let the Living Waters Flow.” Kellum described a whitewater river trip on which he was told that if he fell into the raging river, he should relax, pick up his feet, trust his life-vest, and let the current take him to a safe place. This advice is just as applicable in how we face the raging river of climate chaos, species extinctions, and other environmental stresses.

Kelly related the Bible story from Genesis that depicts a mighty river of God flowing out of Eden, which pours out to nourish all of creation. He described how, in Revelation, the river is seen to flow past the tree of life whose leaves heal nations. Kelly told us that we are the “citizens of Eden hear and now” and he encouraged us to “open your soul to the living waters.” The river cannot be contained; it flows out of Eden to the rest of the world.

I found inspiration in Kelly’s use of the environmental metaphor of wading out and picking up our feet to let the living waters flow over us. The environmental challenges we are now facing are enormous and daunting. We need to allow ourselves to open to spirit for guidance as we face these challenges together. Kelly said, “The world is broken; it is hungry for what we have to offer. Relax, pick up your feet, and let the living waters carry you.”

I am still singing one of the songs we sang together during the weekend: Somos el Barco, Somos el Mar. We sang, “The stream sings it to the river, the river sings it to the sea The sea sings it to the boat that carries you and me” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ9zQoSj3Mk).