

Economic Justice and Sustainable Global Society Conference 4th – 6th November, 2011

The weekend began with a period of silent worship where we were reminded of the imperative to ask the question 'What does love require of us?'. Minute 23 from BYM 2011 was read out.

Philip Austin, Northern Friends Peace Board, asked us to examine the centrality of economic systems to both Quaker concerns and to broader social issues; citing the August riots, the Occupy movement, and the troubles in Greece as examples. He reminded us of the issues arising from the September conference: the devastating impact of food speculation, the threat to public services by privatisation, John Woolman's vision of challenging property and privilege, and of the need to work collaboratively. He posed the difficult question of whether mere reform will be sufficient or if a deeper systemic change needs to occur. Our greatest challenge is to 'seek to know God's will'. A humbling undertaking.

On the Saturday, Jonathan Dale expanded on his original talk from September. He sees this time as an opportunity to 'cut through the apparent success of a system bound in luxury'. He talked of this as a long process, but also of the urgency of the situation. Asking us to work in different time scales as we hold ecological and economic transformation in connection with each other. We need, he says, a mixture of reform and revolution. The system needs a fundamental change, and we need to discern which reforms will lead to more dramatic transformation. Minute 23 on economic justice from BYM 2011 asks if the system is broken and we need to discern if this is so. Our testimonies are a mark of what all human beings need in order to flourish. This seems fundamentally at odds with our current economic priorities. Capitalism, he asserts, replaces God with something 'other'; this, he says, is essentially 'demonic'.

Friends' commitment to a low carbon, sustainable community is a bigger challenge than any we have faced in the history of the Quaker faith; even that of slavery. For it is a process in which we will need to decide whether it is faith that governs our lives, or whether we follow the 'conventions of the modern consumerist society'. This is a deep challenge, but will also be joyful and liberating. Joy comes, he says, when you 'work with the grain of God'.

The morning ended with a time of reflection from Friends. We were asked to challenge the dominant narratives of the news media, to stop seeing people as 'productive, economic units, but to step outside and envision a different world. We should say loudly, 'I am my brother's keeper' and be mindful of the needs of the poor. Are we a faith community where faith really is at the centre? What we are called to do should be done regardless of whether it is successful or not as our testimonies should lead us to live lives that reflect where God would have us be.

Next, the Northern Friends Peace Board led a workshop on power. We were asked to reflect on what power was, how it presented a barrier to change, and how it could be utilised for greater good. 'God in the other', network building, shared knowledge and co-operation were all cited as example of positive power. We acknowledge that the building of God's kingdom is a process with many entry points for Quakers, including: our history of non-conformism, our enquiring minds, our courage to speak truth to power, our affinity with other groups seeking social justice and our willingness to 'go within'. A number of next steps were suggested: travelling in the ministry, letter writing groups, community building projects.

Debt and Positive Money were the subject of the next workshop. Debt fuels 97% of our economy, and loans create money that didn't previously exist. Only 3% of money is now hard currency, in 1946 it was 46%. Most loans are those made against secured assets (i.e. mortgages) with less than 22% going into the productive economy. This has led to an economy driven by an unsustainable

asset bubble.

Although banks can't print hard currency, the digitization of money has led to a loophole. This has led to an erosion of Fractal Reserve Banking; a mechanism that ensured banks had enough money to pay off their loans, and so providing a limit to debt creation. This challenges the myth that the current economic crisis was caused by our addiction to spending or by rampant consumerism and greed, and that, therefore, austerity measures are the only solution.

Our economic system is built on debt. The problem is not debt in itself, but rather that there is no democratic control of debt creation and the money supply. The banks knew that they were creating an unsustainable amount of debt, but they also knew that the state would bail them out through quantitative easing measures. There is no correlation between the amount of quantitative easing and the building of a more productive economy. Many Friends sensed that democratic control of the money supply is the fundamental pre-requisite for any programme of economic or ecological sustainability.

On Sunday, Friends shared the worries of their Local and Area Meetings. Many felt overwhelmed by feelings of impotence, or felt the issue too complex. Others worried that the issues were too political for Friends, whilst some felt led by other concerns or wanted to focus on local issues. Alistair Fuller, Outreach Officer, asked us to find ways of grappling with these issues in ways that are empowering. We need to have these difficult discussions, meeting as equals, however de-skilled we might feel. Simon Best, Woodbrooke tutor, reminded us of William Penn's sword and of George Fox's challenge to 'wear it as long as thou canst.' Our faith and the actions of our lives are linked. We must allow each other to express our difficulties and to engage with these issues as individuals, but we also need to open ourselves to the spirit and be reminded of the corporate discipline of discernment.

In small groups, we were asked to write a Faith and Practice style query. My group wrote the following:

Our Quaker faith is focussed on us achieving right relationship with other humans and with creation. This needs to be the measure of every action we take as individuals and in communities. How aware are you of the impact of your actions and lives on the hungers of the poorest? Take time to establish what your fair earth share would be and find the strength and courage to apply it.

The weekend ended with Meeting for Worship

Martin Layton