

Responding to Ecological Crisis

Quaker Spiritual Insights



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Britain Yearly Meeting. *Quaker faith & practice*. Fifth edition. London: Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2013.

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Introduction

What is the purpose of these study materials?

The purpose of these study materials is to help Friends to reflect on, and discern, their responses to the developing ecological crisis, by drawing on the insights offered by Quaker spirituality. The urgent need for action is clear, but this action should be properly discerned and Spirit-led. The materials do not recommend specific solutions or actions. Instead, they seek to encourage Friends to reflect deeply on this issue, and discern what Spirit-led actions are required at this time. There is lots of flexibility in the way the materials can be used.

How can they be used?

These materials can be used for both individual reflection, and for study groups within your Quaker meeting.

Individuals: you might like to take one theme per week or fortnight, and spend time each day reflecting on the material and the responses it prompts in you. Keeping a journal is a good way of recording your feelings and leadings as they arise.

Meetings: you might like to hold a study group session either weekly or fortnightly, so that Friends can come together to share their responses and explore what these might mean for the whole community. A number of study group options are described at the end of this document.

Timescales are flexible, so choose an approach that suits your particular needs and circumstances.

Are there any other options?

In addition to using the materials in printed form, two other options will be made available:

An Online Course: the resources will be available as an online course, using a mixture of audio-visual and written resources, along with a discussion forum.

A Podcast: the resources will be made available as a podcast that can be downloaded to a phone or MP3 player.

Openings

The promptings of love and truth



“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.”

Advices & Queries 1

Quakers have found that there is a source of guidance and transformation within all people that, if we pay attention to it, can make us aware of our flaws and limitations, and bring us into a new life of peace and justice. This Inward Teacher can show us the order, beauty and harmony of creation, and our place within the complex web of life. It can also reveal the influence of a false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destruction that leads to injustice and disrupts the order, beauty and harmony of creation.

Ecological Reflection

The spiritual experiences and insights of the earliest Friends convinced them that they were being brought back into a harmonious relationship with the whole of creation. They felt that its true beauty and order were being revealed to them, and that it was possible to live in right relationship with the rest of the natural world. We affirm that, when we are willing to pay attention to the guidance of the Spirit, such insights and wisdom remain available to us today.

Query

Are you willing to be truly open to the guidance of your Inward Teacher, even when this disturbs and discomferts you by revealing your flaws and limitations, and your dependence on a false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destruction? Where are the promptings of love and truth in your heart leading you in this time?

Convincement

Imperfect but loved



“Be honest with yourself. What unpalatable truths might you be evading? When you recognise your shortcomings, do not let that discourage you. In worship together we can find the assurance of God’s love and the strength to go on with renewed courage.”

Advices & Queries 11

Convincement is an experience of being made aware of our flaws and limitations, and then being consoled by the Spirit of love and truth. We must face up to the influence of a false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destruction in our lives that wreaks havoc in the world. However, we can also be comforted by an experience of love and forgiveness. Everyone has flaws and limitations, and we are all caught up in the exploitation of the natural world that causes suffering to our fellow creatures. At the same time, we are not helpless. Positive change is possible, and we are all worthy of love, and have a valuable part to play.

Ecological Reflection

We are all born into a world that is organised in a way that makes it easier to go along with what is destructive and unjust, than to do what is right. This does not imply that we are evil, but it does mean that we are implicated in systems and practices that oppress other people, cause suffering to animals, and destroy the ecological systems that support life itself. Quaker spirituality teaches us that, if we are willing to face up to the truth, and accept our part in it, the healing power of the Spirit will comfort us, and guide us to a more healthy and harmonious way.

Query

Are you willing to accept your flaws and limitations, while at the same time, embracing the possibility of positive change? Can you feel the Spirit of love and truth upholding and guiding you? Where is this Spirit leading you at this time?

Acceptance

Telling it like it is



“Speaking the unspeakable, admitting the shameful, to someone who can be trusted and who will accept you in love as you are, is enormously helpful.”

Quaker faith & practice 12.01

The value of plain and honest speaking is well-established within Quaker spirituality. Integrity demands truthfulness and consistency. When the Spirit reveals our flaws and limitations, it is important for us to admit outwardly what we have found to be true inwardly. A willingness to accept our complicity with systems of violence, injustice, cruelty and destruction, helps us to face up to what has gone wrong, and join with others in discerning a better way. Knowing that we are loved and forgiven can also help us show gratitude and joy in all we do.

Ecological Reflection

Affluent people in Western societies have benefited greatly from the exploitation of other humans, animals and the natural world. These privileges are embedded in our daily lives, for example, in the things we buy, and what we eat and drink. A willingness to accept our involvement in these forms of injustice represents a form of confession. It can help us to begin to break out of destructive patterns of behaviour, and seek new ways of living, that are in right relationship with the rest of creation.

Query

In responding to the promptings of love and truth in your heart, are you willing to publicly acknowledge your complicity with systems of violence, injustice, cruelty and destruction, and join with others in discerning a healthier and more just way of living? What might be preventing you from doing this?

New Life

Choosing a different path



“Yield yourself and all your outward concerns to God’s guidance, so that you may find ‘the evil weakening in you and the good raised up’.”

Advices & Queries 9

Being brought to a new life is about a change of mind, and a change of direction. When the Spirit reveals our flaws, we experience a change of mind, and a new perception. When we respond to this by following the guidance of our Inward Teacher, this leads to a change in direction, as we begin to live and act differently. We can turn away from the false spirit of greed, selfishness, cruelty, violence and destruction, and follow the way of love and truth instead. Our own efforts alone are not enough. We need both the empowerment of the Spirit, and the support and challenge of a community of discernment and mutual accountability.

Ecological Reflection

In all sorts of ways, humans are not in right relationship with the rest of creation. We tend to be a disruptive and destructive presence within this complex system of interconnections and interdependence. Therefore, there is an urgent need for people to experience a change of mind, and to take a different path. The wisdom of Quaker spirituality suggests that this happens when we turn to the Spirit within us and attend to its guidance. There are no quick fixes, because the path of right relationship requires patience, persistence and humility. We need to turn away from the spirit of greed, violence and coercive power, and attend instead to the Spirit of love, peace, and truth. With this new perception and in this new way, we can see that all the other parts of creation are our neighbours, and we should love them as we love ourselves.

Query

Are you willing to submit yourself to the guidance of your Inward Teacher? Are you truly open to the possibility of a change of heart and mind? Will you join with others in discerning the path of love, peace and truth which leads to justice and right relationship? Where is this discernment leading you at this time?

Transformation

Liberation and wholeness



“The truth is that we are all hurt and need healing. There is a spiritual poverty among both rich and poor... If we are to be whole, we can no longer ignore the divisions created by idolising wealth, success and power.”

Quaker faith & practice 29.13

The Quaker way has tended to see transformation more in terms of building heaven on earth, than the hope of a spiritual dwelling place after death. This is about being liberated from the negative consequences of our ignorance and self-centredness. It is about being saved from our mistakes as a species. What are the key dimensions of this?

Bondage: we find ourselves dependent on social, economic and political systems and ideologies that lead us into a destructive relationship with each other, with other animals, and with the rest of the natural world.

Liberation: we need to break free of this dependence. The Spirit, acting as our Inward Teacher, can break these bonds, and release us from the powers of injustice and destruction. This is an experience of liberation.

Ecological Reflection

What does transformation and liberation mean in the context of ecological crisis? If this vision is understood primarily in terms of right relationship, then individual liberation cannot be meaningfully separated from the well-being of the whole creation, understood as a complex system of interconnected and interdependent parts. If humanity is currently a disruptive and destructive presence within creation, then salvation involves our liberation from systems, ideologies and motivations that lead to violence, hatred, cruelty, injustice, oppression and destruction. These ideologies and systems make life hell on earth for so many humans, and other creatures, and destroy the very ecosystems that support life on this planet.



Query

Are you aware of the impact of your way of living on the well-being of other humans, other animals and the rest of the natural world? Are you willing to join with others in attending to the Spirit, which has the power to liberate us from our dependence on systems of violence, injustice and destruction? What do you and your community feel led to do at this time?

Testimony

Doing the truth



“The choice of the word ‘testimony’ is instructive. The testimonies are ways of behaving but are not ethical rules. They are matters of practice but imply doctrines. They refer to human society but are about God. Though often talked about they lack an authoritative formulation...”

Quaker faith & practice 20.18

Quaker testimony is our faithful response to the inward guidance we have received. This guidance prompts us to live in new ways within the world. When we are faithful, our actions match our words (we ‘walk the talk’). In her book *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics*, Rachel Muers describes two essential features of this. Quaker testimony is:



An act of refusal and interruption: we refuse to go along with some aspect of the world that is unjust or destructive. This disrupts assumptions, and interrupts ‘business as usual’.

An experiment in new possibilities: if we interrupt and refuse to go along with something, we have to offer alternatives. These alternatives are ‘holy experiments’ that test out new possibilities.

Ecological Reflection

From an ecological perspective, there are many false assumptions that need to be questioned. For example, that humans can own the rest of the creation, that we are somehow separate from it and in control of it, and that there are no limits to our use of it. By attending to the guidance of our Inward Teacher, we can discern how best to challenge and disrupt these false assumptions. We need to try out ‘holy experiments’ that bring us into a more just and healthy relationship with the rest of creation. These experiments can help inspire and give hope to others too.



Query

What potential refusals and interruptions are being prompted in you at this time? Are you willing to challenge unjust, unhealthy and destructive ways of living, and join with others in developing ‘holy experiments’ that try out new ways of living, offering inspiration and hope to those around you?

Discernment

A guided people



“As we enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other’s lives, ready to give help and to receive it, our meeting can be a channel for God’s love and forgiveness.”

Advices & Queries 18

Quaker communities are communities of discernment that attend to the guidance of the Spirit, and seek to be faithful to where this leads us. We have a long-standing conviction that it is possible to build heaven on earth. As a guided people, the life of the community should reveal, in microcosm, our hopes for the whole creation. Some dimensions of Quaker community life include being:

A community of revelation and healing: where the Spirit shows us our flaws and limitations, brings healing and inspires new ways of living.

A community of diverse gifts: where all contributions are valued. This enables us to achieve things together that we could never do alone.

A community of experimentation: where we try out new ways of living and working together, that move us towards wholeness and right relationship.

Ecological Reflection

The experience of living within a dynamic and evolving community can help us to appreciate interconnection and interdependence. We can recognise the value of each individual member, the contributions they bring, and the way the whole community is something more than just the sum of its parts. This represents a valuable ecological principle. Although communities sometimes define themselves in ways that judge and exclude others, at their best, they can offer a practical vision of right relationship in action. This is counter-cultural within a society dominated by individualism.

Query

In what ways does your Quaker community model an ecological vision of right relationship, based on diversity, cooperation and interdependence? How can we expand our conception of community so that it includes all living things?

Faithfulness

A costly way



“Are you following Jesus’ example of love in action? Are you learning from his life the reality and cost of obedience to God?”

Advices & Queries 4

“Our responsibilities to God and our neighbour may involve us in taking unpopular stands.”

Advices & Queries 38

Following the guidance of the Spirit can have costly consequences when it leads us to refuse and interrupt the 'normal' ways of the world. When we are freed of our dependence on dominant powers, systems and ideologies, and offer a different vision, we may be perceived as a threat. If we stand firm in our witness, like Jesus, we may make ourselves unpopular, and end up being threatened and attacked. This is the costly way of the cross. The earliest Quakers knew it only too well. Suffering may sometimes be the inevitable consequence of doing what is right. What are we prepared to endure for interrupting and refusing to go along with war, injustice and ecological destruction?

Ecological Reflection

There is a great deal of suffering within the natural world. Much of it seems unavoidable, but some of it is the direct result of human violence and greed. There is therefore no avoiding suffering from an ecological perspective. Following the guidance of the Spirit, may lead us, through a strong sense of compassion, to suffer for the sake of ecological healing and restoration. The process of being brought into a healthy and harmonious relationship with the rest of creation is likely to be a difficult and painful one. This does not mean that suffering is inherently a good thing in itself. However, costly witness, as a testimony to love, truth and justice, can bring great joy, and a deep sense of Spiritual accompaniment.



Query

Do you depend upon the guidance of the Spirit, and the upholding of your community, 'to find a spiritual wholeness which encompasses suffering as well as thankfulness and joy' (Advices & Queries 10)? How can we encourage and support one another, so that the challenges of costly witness are faced with steadfastness and courage?

New Creation

The peaceable kingdom



“Friends, we are called into wholeness and into community, women and men alike, sharing the responsibilities God has given us, and assuming the leadership we are called to. We begin where we are, in our homes and meetings or churches, our work and communities, celebrating the realisation of the New Creation.”

Quaker faith & practice 23.40

Across history, Quakers have been inspired by a vision of heaven on earth. Bit by bit, this can become a reality, as we are liberated from the spirit of hatred and injustice. When greed, violence and destructiveness are rooted out of the human heart, these motivations begin to lose their power, and the Spirit of love, truth and justice can take their place. We are not in control of this process, but we can play our part. Like physical exercise, we have to start where we are, and build up our stamina. Seeking to live in right relationship with the rest of creation is a dynamic, on-going process.

Ecological Reflection

The vision of the peaceable kingdom is an ecological vision. It is a state of harmony and right relationship based on diversity and interdependence. If everything is interconnected, then every action rooted in compassion, healing and justice, however small, will have a positive impact. In the peaceable kingdom we take our place within this web of life; not above it, or in control of it, but as an essential part of it.



Query

Do you keep the vision of heaven on earth and the peaceable kingdom in your thoughts, even though they seem so distant from the way the world currently is? Can you discern the seeds of the new creation in your daily life and interactions? What can you do, in a practical way, to make this hope visible in the world?

Patterns and Examples

Taking the next steps



“We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Work to ensure that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly, with reverence for life. Rejoice in the splendour of God’s continuing creation.”

Advices & Queries 42

“Let your life and the things you say and do, communicate the way of the Spirit to others. Be visible examples and a source of inspiration to all people across the world. Rise above and overcome the negative ways of the world, and help people turn to the Spirit that dwells within them.”

George Fox, 1656 (Modern English Paraphrase)

Take some time to reflect on the experience of working through these nine themes:

- 1. Openings:** the promptings of love and truth
- 2. Convincement:** imperfect but loved
- 3. Acceptance:** telling it like it is
- 4. New Life:** choosing a different path
- 5. Transformation:** liberation and wholeness
- 6. Testimony:** doing the truth
- 7. Discernment:** a guided people
- 8. Faithfulness:** a costly way
- 9. New Creation:** the peaceable kingdom

Questions to consider

- What do I feel led to do as an individual?
- What do we feel led to do as a community?
- How might we reach out and work with other people of faith?
- How might we reach out and work with other groups in our community?
- What does love require of us at this time?

Appendix

Study Group Options

All the study group options set out below are based on a one-hour session. Groups may want to meet for longer. Ideally, individuals should prepare for each session by reading and reflecting on the materials in advance.

Option One: Worship Sharing

The group will sit in a circle.

- Gathering worship during which the facilitator reads the session material to the group (15 minutes).
- Individuals reflect on the material in worship (10 minutes).
- A period of worship sharing (30 minutes).
- An 'afterword' opportunity for final thoughts (5 minutes).

Option Two: Threshing Session

The group will sit in a circle.

- Introductions – the facilitator reads the material to the group (10 minutes).
- Reflections and responses - speaking in turn, moving round the group, with the option to 'pass' if you have nothing to say (30 minutes).
- The facilitator keeps notes and summarises key points at the end (10 minutes).
- Closing worship (10 minutes).

Option Three: Discussion Group

The group will sit in a circle.

- Gathering worship during which the facilitator reads the session material to the group (15 minutes).
- A facilitated discussion in which everyone has the opportunity to speak and to respond to the contributions of others (30 minutes)
- The facilitator keeps notes and summarises key points at the end (5 minutes).
- Closing worship (10 minutes).

Option Four: Individual Arts Response

In this option, art materials and a large table will need to be made available before the session. The group will sit around the table.

- Gathering worship during which the facilitator reads the session material to the group (15 minutes).
- Individuals reflect on the material in worship (5 minutes).
- Individuals Respond with an art activity such as drawing, painting, collage or journaling (30 minutes).
- Individuals describe and share what they have done (10 minutes)

Option Five: Group Arts Response

In this option, arts materials and a large table will need to be made available before the session. The group will sit around the table.

- Gathering worship during which the facilitator reads the session material to the group (15 minutes).
- Individuals reflect on the material in worship (5 minutes).
- The group respond with a shared art activity such as a large drawing, painting, or collage. (30 minutes).
- The group looks at what it has done and shares reflections (10 minutes).

A Glossary of Terms

Convincement

Becoming aware of and accepting our human limitations, flaws, and mistakes. In the 17th century, to be convinced meant to be convicted of sin.

Corporate

What we do together as a whole community (as opposed to what we do as individuals).

Creatures

Created material things (all humans, other animals, and the rest of the natural world).

Discernment

The practice of assessing, testing, and evaluating spiritual experiences and, in particular, the guidance or leadings we feel we have received.

Ecology

The study of the complex relationships of interconnection and interdependence between the various parts of the natural world (e.g. animals, plants etc...).

Ecosystem

A biological community of interconnected and interdependent organisms, interacting within their physical environment

Faithfulness

Being honest and consistent in trying to do what we believe is right and true (especially in relation to spiritual guidance and leadings).

Ideology

A system of ideas and beliefs that are held by groups of people, or that shape the characteristics of a society. These ideas and beliefs might be political, cultural or economic in nature.

Inward Teacher

The source of spiritual guidance that is to be found within all people (Quakers have traditionally understood this to be the Holy Spirit, or Jesus Christ).

New Creation

The anticipated renewal of the whole creation as a “new heaven and new earth” (see, Revelation 21:1, Romans 8:18-21).

Peaceable Kingdom

State of harmony among all creatures, linked to the establishment of the new creation (see, Isaiah 11:6-9).

Repentance

A fundamental change of mind, direction, and lifestyle. This comes from the Greek word ‘metanoia’.

Revelation

The revealing of something that was previously unknown. It is used here to describe the experience of receiving inward spiritual insights and guidance.

Testimony

Testimony is behaviour which is led by and consistent with the truth, as it has been revealed to us. It is the fruit of spiritual guidance becoming visible in our lives.

Witness

Being a witness is about offering a testimony, in what we say or do, to the truth as it has been revealed to us. It is the fruit of spiritual guidance becoming visible in our lives.



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