Transforming Impasse

The way through conflict with Quaker listening processes

The Quaker Council for European Affairs

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Contents

Acknowledgments

List of Acronyms

These are the main acronyms used in this report:

EU   European Union

GHG   Greenhouse gas(es)

IPCC   Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

MEP   Member of European Parliament

OECD   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

QCEA   Quaker Council for European Affairs

QPSW   Quaker Peace and Social Witness

UCA   Uniting Church of Australia

WCC   World Council of Churches

Summary

Unless humanity reduces its global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by 85% or more over the next 40 years, we risk catastrophic impacts on ecosystems and human life. European Union emissions should be cut by more than this since our current levels are double the world average. However, current EU and Member State policies are clearly inadequate to bring about the necessary changes.

People have difficulty in engaging with climate change for many reasons, including its scale and its scientific and human complexity. Governments tend to look for simple solutions that avoid engaging the public in decision-making or changing the way people live. They have a strong preference for policies based on technology and markets, and justify these with simplistic social theories that treat people as rational, autonomous, individual consumers.

Recent world shortages have led to a new policy focus on food and energy security. However, the concern is mainly to ensure supplies – in the case of oil and gas, often from vulnerable or politically volatile world regions. Little attention is being paid to reducing unsustainable consumption.

If society is to respond effectively to climate change and the emerging resource crises, we will need to

1. develop a shared understanding of our complex situation

2. engage people emotionally – with compassion for those who will suffer even if they are far away, belong to other cultures, or are not yet born

3. develop a collective will for change, especially in consumption.

Policy analysts have recently begun to talk about the need for a 'war effort' to address climate change. Having a tangible common enemy can help to build social solidarity and collective effort, but for most people climate change is not sufficiently tangible.

It is in offering a different social model, of solidarity without an enemy, that Quakers may have most to offer. The essential message of this paper is that Quaker decision-making processes are particularly well-suited to dealing with the complexity and diversity of interests in the current world situation. They are also suited to addressing conflicts, building community and developing a collective will.

Quakers make collective decisions using a standard process known as the Quaker business method. Some aspects – e.g. not voting – are shared by the consensus methods that are becoming increasingly widely used among a range of activist movements, and also in other bodies including the World Council of Churches. Other aspects – e.g. agreeing minutes verbatim within the meeting – are shared with processes used in many intergovernmental bodies, including some committees of the United Nations.

However, the Quaker business method differs from what is commonly understood as consensus in that it is not about participants agreeing intellectually with each other; nor is it a process of negotiation between positions. It involves a spiritual process of self-forgetting, letting go of personal positions, listening deeply to each other and the Spirit (although participants may have different understandings of this), and sincerely seeking unity in recognising the right way forward for the group. When the discipline is followed, the method offers many benefits:

- It is a way of engaging with complexity, seeing the many facets and ambiguities of a situation

- It offers deeper engagement and exploration of issues than is possible in normal discussion

- It enables people with differing viewpoints, priorities and needs to find understanding and compassion for each other

- It allows groups to find a way forward and collective will, moving beyond entrenched positions, despite personal differences

- It ensures that everyone involved has ownership of the decision.

Other Quaker practices can be valuable in developing understanding and compassion, e.g. worship sharing, similar to creative listening, where participants listen to each other in silence but there is no decision or minute.

Quakers should be offering to share their practices with others. The processes and discipline are probably best transmitted through experience – they are easier to learn than to teach. Some of the best experiences have come from Friends making quiet suggestions about process in the non-Quaker groups in which they participate – perhaps to have a moment of quiet to prepare for the meeting, or to have someone draft minutes in the meeting and make sure everyone agrees the wording, or to have ground rules about not interrupting and building on what has been said, rather than debating.

There are many opportunities for Friends to engage with mainstream approaches to sustainable energy security:

1. Organising events locally or nationally, perhaps introduced by a speaker, where participants are invited to explore issues within a creative listening or worship sharing session

2. Offering such listening opportunities, e.g. at meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or within European Union processes, working with MEPs or the European Commission

3. Getting involved in local initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 and Transition Towns, and helping to develop a listening culture, often by making simple suggestions at meetings, or offering workshops exploring issues through creative listening or worship sharing

4. Offering informal listening spaces to the parties in conflicts related to energy sources.

In order to be able to offer support to others, Quakers need to have their own regular experience of practising our listening disciplines. We also need to develop our own corporate responses to climate change and energy security. So it is in practising and applying our own discipline that we may most effectively offer a witness in the world.

1. Sustainable energy security: the challenge

This section introduces the challenge posed by energy and climate crises to conventional models of politics, public engagement and decision-making; the need for new forms of solidarity; the risk of reassertion of top-down control.

Climate change is happening. It is caused by human activity, in particular the burning of fossil fuels. It is likely to lead to extreme shortages of food and water in vulnerable parts of the world by 2020. If humanity does not take action to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by 85% or more over the next 40 years, we risk catastrophic impacts on ecosystems and human life. These messages are clear in the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)[1]. The IPCC represents probably the most thorough and careful process there has ever been to establish the state of scientific knowledge about an issue and has tended to understate the threat of climate change.

Our society will have to undergo a transformation in the next 40 years. If we do not change the way we live voluntarily to cut GHG, we will probably be forced to change by a crisis in energy supply and by climate change impacts. There is general agreement on the need to reduce consumption of fossil fuels and the European Council has said that industrialised countries should cut greenhouse gas emissions by 80-95% by 2050, consistent with the IPCC report. Yet somehow life seems to continue as usual. Government policies are clearly inadequate to bring about the necessary change. Effective action in the EU is inhibited partly by the 'climate sceptic' voices that remain in the European Parliament, Member State governments, and in the European Commission. Public surveys find that most people think they are 'doing their bit' for the planet by recycling their waste, which actually makes little contribution to GHG emissions. Few can imagine that they or others will curtail the activities most responsible – energy use in homes, car and air travel, and eating meat and dairy products. It may be easier to imagine change forced by climate disaster, Peak Oil or world war. Despite living in a culture that cherishes free will and personal choice, somehow we experience ourselves as having none.

There are several reasons for the difficulty people have in engaging with climate change:

- It is hard to understand, partly because it is complex in its scientific and social dimensions, and in the many uncertainties and competing narratives about it

- The public debate is often framed in terms of expert, technical decisions where most individuals have no competence

- The impacts are too far away in space and time

- The problem is too big and the truth is too unpalatable to absorb. There seems to be no realistic solution. So we either pretend that the problem is not real, or we simply carry on regardless. Climate change activists talk about 'denial' and 'despair'.

- The global atmosphere is what economists call a 'common good', shared by all life on earth, and is subject to the 'tragedy of the commons'. There is insufficient incentive (in terms of material self-interest) for any individual to look after it, yet ways must be found to achieve collective action to prevent climate change.

People often look for simple explanations of the climate challenge and tend to displace responsibility onto others. Some of the main axes of the debate include:

- Whether climate change is really happening, and hence whether the priority should be placed on emission reductions as opposed to energy supply security

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[1] IPCC, *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*, accessed 24 June 2009, available at http://www.ipcc.ch/

- Whether the policy emphasis should be on trying to reduce climate change (usually called 'mitigation') or on adaptation to its impacts

- Where the priorities lie in energy supply – and especially whether to adopt or expand controversial technologies including nuclear power and carbon capture and storage

- The role of technology versus that of behaviour change

- The contributions of different sectors. Should some economically important sectors (e.g. the car industry) be protected?

- The allocation of responsibility for action among government, business, the general public and other groupings

- The choice of government policies to encourage change – are 'economic instruments' or regulations more effective? And if economic instruments are preferred, do we prefer carbon taxes or emission trading systems?

On the whole, governments would prefer to achieve sustainable energy security by 1) finding new energy sources to meet demand and 2) encouraging the use of more energy-efficient technology to reduce energy demand while continuing to provide the same or better final products and services to consumers. This may be partly because of the ideology that equates consumer spending with well-being and with successful government. It may also be to do with a mentality in policy circles that sees the public as consumers and voters, rather than 'people like us' – people who ought to be involved directly and personally in the collective discernment of our response to global crisis.

Conventional policy-making works on relatively simple theories of society. It assumes unrealistically that consumers make rational choices with perfect information to maximise their utility or well-being. In such circumstances, markets would be the most efficient means of maximising aggregate consumer welfare and the theory has been used to advocate liberal economic policies. Neo-classical economics has been especially influential in post-World War II Europe, partly as a result of the Marshall Plan and the efforts of the OECD. It has been particularly embraced by policy advisors in some northern European countries (notably Britain, the Netherlands and Norway) but has been a matter of tension within the EU.

In most western democracies there is little or vague conceptualisation of social structures between the individual and the state. Local and intermediate government structures are important – e.g. the commune in France and the Länder in Germany – but they are not a primary part of EU strategy except as they relate to the implementation of EU policies. Government (local, national and international) is the only legitimate power-holder, as a result of its election by the aggregate of individual citizens. In this mindset the most important non-governmental institution is the market, regulated by the state. Clearly there are important structures which vary from country to country, including the church, trade unions, corporations and co-operatives. In some European countries they play an important role in influencing government, often through formal consultation structures, but in free market ideology they play a secondary role. They are seen mainly as producers or consumers whose power must be kept under control through laws on competition, employment, and standards for products and trading.

In this mindset, problems may be viewed as either largely technical or largely economic. Technical problems are expected to be soluble by a government decision leading to development and implementation of a new technology, regulation or planning law. Economic problems are expected to be soluble through measures such as:

a) information provision to enable markets to work better – for example through clear energy efficiency labelling for appliances

b) easing barriers to market entry to improve competition – for example by regulations requiring all suppliers to be given access to national energy networks

c) internalising external costs – introducing charges to reflect the environmental and social impacts of consumer and producer choices, for example in airport landing fees, or

d) creating new kinds of market such as greenhouse gas emission trading systems or regulations requiring insurance against liability for environmental damage.

These approaches rest on the experience of several hundred years of "progress" in Europe, in which innovation in technology and market institutions has led to an ongoing increase in monetary wealth and the physical standard of living. This progress is seen as the primary purpose and "good" in society.

In the market mindset, the role of firms is both economic and technological. Firms buy, produce and sell goods and services and generate profits. They also train and employ workers, borrow and invest in capital, and they develop, employ and sell technology. In practice, firms have considerable power in the political system but this occurs mainly through informal contacts with politicians and civil servants and through lobbying, and is not part of the formal power structure.

The role of the consumer/citizen is to buy goods and services, and to vote for governments. Governments influence consumer/citizens most directly through the tax system and through public information.

This social/political model is now facing many challenges in addition to those posed by climate change and Peak Oil. Some of the problems are internal. The current recession has led to a new questioning of the values and practices of the market. It is becoming apparent that, once basic needs are met, increasing wealth does not *per se* make people any happier or resolve social tensions and conflict[2]. Other problems are external, as Western societies seek to maintain their access to resources in other, poorer parts of the world. These internal and external tensions are coming together in fundamentalist religious groups, reacting against what they see as an immoral or amoral culture. And Western governments are responding both to their violence and to protestors against the system with the 'war on terror' and constraints on civil liberties.

The current challenges are characterised by huge complexity and unpredictability. We are working with multiple interconnected systems (at a most general level, the atmosphere-ocean system, the biosphere, human society). Each of these is inherently unpredictable because of its complexity and nonlinear dynamics[3]. The result is an impasse in decision-making because of:

- An incapacity (on the part of policy-makers, the public and even the 'experts') to grasp what is happening.

- The effects of our possible responses being fundamentally unpredictable (it is not just that we do not have enough information; it would be impossible to obtain enough information to predict the responses of a complex system such as this)

- Competing theories, interests and ideologies offering incompatible ways forward.

- Huge ambiguities in the location of moral responsibility for causing and resolving problems.

If society is to respond effectively to climate change and the emerging resource crises, we will need to

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[2] Jackson, Tim, *Prosperity without Growth?-The transition to a sustainable economy*, (London: Sustainable Development Commission, 2009)
[3] A system is "non-linear" if the effect of a stimulus or intervention depends on the history of the system, rather than just its current state, or on the presence of other stimuli and interventions

1. develop a shared understanding of our complex situation

2. engage people emotionally – with compassion for those who will suffer even if they are far away, belong to other cultures, or are not yet born

3. develop a collective will for change.

Policy analysts have recently begun to talk about the need for a 'war effort' to address climate change. Wars in the past have sometimes contributed to a sense of social solidarity[4]. The attraction for politicians of declaring a 'war on terror' no doubt rests partly in the hope that it will build a sense of national unity, with a shared understanding of values to be defended, shared feelings of fear of 'the enemy', and a shared will for self protection.

It is in offering a different social model, of solidarity without an enemy, that Quakers may – along with others – have most to offer. The essential message of this paper is that Quaker listening processes, exemplified in the Quaker business method, are particularly well-suited to dealing with the complexity and diversity of interests in the current world situation. They are also suited to addressing conflicts and to developing a collective will.

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[4] Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)

2. Emerging solidarities

This section reviews some of the developments that have emerged in recent years suggesting openness to new forms of engagement and decision-making (e.g. stakeholder processes, consultation culture, consensus decision-making in activist movements & Transition Towns, etc.).

From the 1970s a new, pluralist mindset has emerged to challenge the market/individualist culture. Some of the origins of this mindset probably lie in the academic and artistic post-modern movement of the early to mid 20th century with its attitude of questioning convention and assumptions. This attitude fed the pluralism of the civil rights, social change and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Those movements drew heavily on the nonviolent approach of Gandhi[5]. Quakers also played a strong role in their development, notably through *A Quaker Action Group,* set up in Philadelphia in 1966 to organise non-violent direct action on the Vietnam War[6]. In 1971 the organisation developed into the *Movement for a New Society* which was active until 1988[7] and developed tools and guidance for activism for nonviolent social change.

In the 1980s stakeholder processes began to be used in the corporate sector to address conflicts and tensions in complex situations[8]. At the same time inclusivity came to be an important focus in the provision of education and other social services. The new approaches were taken up by European governments in the 1990s, with a growing use of public consultations and stakeholder dialogues[9]. The UN-led process on sustainable development played an important role in developing this new culture. Following the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, Local Agenda 21 groups around the world began bringing diverse groups together to find local approaches to sustainability. Results varied considerably from country to country depending on the constitutional arrangements, funding, prior initiatives and much more[10]. Meanwhile the UN Commission on Sustainable Development pioneered the introduction of stakeholder dialogues at the international level.

In *Risk Society* Ulrich Beck[11] describes aspects of this cultural shift as 'reflexive modernisation'. Industrial society is increasingly reflexive in that its external impacts rebound upon it. As the environmental impacts of industry become more evident, resources are devoted to managing 'bads' rather than producing goods. European society places growing emphasis on risk management, in areas ranging from environmental regulation to personal insurance. The risk focus leads to a proliferation of interest groups criticising powerful institutions. So *reflexivity* leads to increasing *reflection* on the policies, decisions and assumptions that shape organisations and society as a whole.

Anthony Giddens[12] further develops the idea of post-traditional institutions, where goals, values and practices are explicitly negotiated instead of following traditional, handed-down practices. This trend is evident in the growing use of stakeholder processes to develop corporate mission statements, visions, policies, strategies and structures.

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[5]Gandhi, Mohandas, *An Autobiography: or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1984)
[6]Swarthmore college website accessed 25 June 2009, available at
 http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/peace/DG051-099/dg074AQAG.htm
[7]Swarthmore college website accessed 25 June 2009, available at
 http://swarthmore.edu/library/peace/DG151-175/DG154mns.htm
[8] Freeman, R. Edward, *Strategic Management: A stakeholder approach,* (Boston: Pitman, 1984)
[9] Hemmati, Minu, *Multi-stakeholder Processes for Governance and Sustainability,* (London: Earthscan, 2002)
[10] Lafferty, William (ed.), *Sustainable Communities in Europe,* (London: Earthscan, 2001)
[11] Beck, Ulrich, *Risk Society*: *Towards a New Modernity,* translated by M. Ritter (London: Sage, 1992)
[12] Giddens, Anthony. 'Reflexive institutions' in Beck, Ulrich *et al.*, *Reflexive Modernisation,* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1994), pp. 56-109

However, to a large extent, corporations and governments are adopting inclusive practices in superficial ways. Consultations are often more public-relations exercises than integral parts of the corporate direction-finding process. While leaders and managers claim to be stakeholder-focused, their actions reveal that they continue to function within more traditional management and control-based culture. The result can be 'consultation fatigue', with increasing public disengagement from politics.

Inclusive, pluralistic and consensus-based practices have continued to be developed and used by community and campaigning organisations and have also been adopted by many Green activist and community movements. Training in their use is provided to the wider community in Britain by the QPSW *Turning the Tide* programme[13] and by *Seeds for Change*[14].

The Permaculture Movement started in Australia in the 1970s as an approach to land management and growing. It is now an international movement with practitioners in most EU countries – although most in Britain. Its scope has extended to become a way of life and of social practice. Permaculture seeks to develop social structures modelled in analogy to ecosystems. In particular, working with already-existing social groups and structures; it values diversity; it seeks to develop multi-dimensional connections among people; and it seeks to encourage beneficial relationships among different groups and aspects of the social system.

Permaculture philosophy underpins the Transition Town movement, which began in Totnes, UK, in 2006[15]. There are now nearly 160 official Transition initiatives, mostly in Britain but several elsewhere in Europe and around the world. Many groups and individuals around Europe are working on new initiatives that are not yet recognised as "official" by the Transition Towns organisation. Transition initiatives emphasise the use of self-organising approaches to group working, such as 'open space', where the agenda for a meeting is defined by participants during the meeting. They also use consensus processes for decision-making, largely based on experience in the peace, environmental and anti-globalisation activist movements.

At about the same time as the Transition movement was beginning in Britain, the first Camp for Climate Action was organised with a gathering and a day of 'mass action' at a major coal-fired power station. In 2007 the camp was held at Heathrow Airport to protest against proposals to construct a new runway, and in 2008 at the site of a planned new coal-fired power station. According to the Climate Camp website 'Every Camp for Climate Action event weaves four key themes: education, direct action, sustainable living, and building a movement to effectively tackle climate change both resisting climate crimes and developing sustainable solutions'[16]. Climate Camp works with consensus-based approaches with trainings from organisations such as Turning the Tide and Seeds for Change.

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[13] http://www.turning-the-tide.org/
[14] http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/
[15] http://transitiontowns.org/
[16] http://climatecamp.org.uk/

3. Perspectives on social change

This section introduces some of different narratives that underpin approaches to social and organisational transformation.

Section 1 outlined some of the characteristics of the challenge of sustainable energy security, including the inherent complexity and unpredictability of the system, and the 'tragedy of the commons'. The emerging pluralism and reflexivity mentioned in Section 2 may offer the basis for a healthy response. However, there is a human tendency to seek simple explanations of any situation – explanations that are resonant with aspects of past experience and that ascribe responsibility to particular people or groups.

Organisations and movements for social change generally have some kind of central story that provides meaning in their approach, structure and actions. Some of the stories now being told about the energy security challenge – even by those most engaged in activism for positive social change – may be part of the problem. This section will ask whether we can offer a coherent and attractive story that will provide a guide for action.

Some of the more resonant stories are:

- The engineer's story: that we face a practical, scientific and technological challenge – to sustain western standards of living while relieving our dependence on fossil fuels and cutting our greenhouse gas emissions. This is one of the stories preferred by government and industry and it leads to action focused on developing new technology.

- The economist's story: that we face a challenge to do with the design of markets and institutions that will support reductions in fossil fuel use and greenhouse gas emissions. This story, also preferred by government, leads to action focused on market creation and pricing. EU Member States are particularly dependent in their climate policies on the European carbon emission trading scheme.

- The politician's and activist's story: that we face a problem of power. The wrong people are in power, the power structure is wrong, or people are misusing power to serve vested interests (e.g. 'corporate greed'). Activism is then focused on changing the political party in power, corporate boycotts, confronting injustice and/or restoring 'power to the people'.

- The ecologist's story: that we face a challenge rooted in the failure of the human relationship with natural systems. Our society treats them as resources and waste depositories rather than recognising their intrinsic value. In causing irreversible damage to ecosystems humanity is undermining the basis for its own survival. We must learn to live within the Earth's carrying capacity and develop an economy based on closed material cycles and renewable energy.

- The community-building story: that we face a deeper problem associated with the values and institutions of the capitalist/consumer society, and requiring an abandonment of the commitment to economic growth, 'relocalisation' of production and consumption, rebuilding local community, and 'reskilling' so that communities can be self-reliant. This is the Transition Towns and Permaculture story.

- The awakening story: that we face a problem of compassion and consciousness – that people do not care enough, or that they are in denial or despair – about those vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in other parts of the world, about the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity, about future generations. This is the story of the *Work that Reconnects*, an approach developed by American Buddhist activist,

Joanna Macy[17]. It is also important within the Transition Towns movement. It leads to a focus on enabling people to engage with their own feelings and on building a relationship with nature as a spiritual focus.

Underlying each of these stories is a set of fundamental assumptions – about human psychology, the nature of society, our relationship with the natural or non-human world. Each has some idea of the 'good life'. For instance, the activist's story tends to view the public as victims of the powerful, needing empowerment. This story may incorporate concern about climate change as an issue of justice. The engineer's story views people as consumers whose well-being derives from material consumption and physical comfort. It tends to see the natural world as a resource base for providing goods and services. And the community-building story sees local community, embedded in the local ecosystem, as the main source of human well-being.

The awakening story is the most resonant for many Quakers. However, it can lead to an approach that centres on changing our experience rather than on the work needed in the world. According to Ken Wilber: *'The ecological crisis...is not pollution... or any such. Gaia's main problem is that not enough human beings have developed to the...worldcentric, global levels of consciousness, wherein they will automatically be moved to care for the global commons'*. But in fact pollution (and over-exploitation of resources and ecosystems) is precisely the ecological crisis. We might hope that enough human beings will develop global consciousness to achieve radical and rapid social change. Meanwhile we need strategies to respond to the crisis while we are still in the process of awakening.

In fact, all of these stories are valid perspectives, and have important contributions to make to society's response to climate change. But they are mostly adopted by people along with packages of ideas and practices associated with membership of particular social groups. Advocates of each story (members of different social groups) tend to see theirs as the only valid one, or at least the most valid. Unfortunately, no one approach will be enough; all are needed. Over the next 40 years, GHG emissions need to be reduced globally by 6% a year; more in the industrialised countries. Technological and market measures alone can achieve at most perhaps half of this[18]. There will also have to be a deep shift in human behaviour and personal choice, which is unlikely without a shift in values, institutions, politics and consciousness.

The pluralist/postmodern mindset described in Section 2 has its own set of stories, which tend to downplay certainty on any issue including climate change, and so to inhibit concerted action. However, in the last twenty years there has been considerable development in thinking that is sometimes described as 'post-postmodern'. This stance moves beyond the absolute relativism of the postmodern movement. It allows that objective truth, or a best way forward, may exist but that it is often complex and needs illumination from multiple perspectives.

There is increasing recognition of the value for management responses to uncertainty and complexity in being able to embrace multiple viewpoints and find creative ways forward informed by all of them. Analysis and experience in this area has come in particular from the Santa Fe Institute[19], which studies the science and mathematics of non-linear and complex systems. David Lane and Robert Maxfield find value in 'generative relationships' – bringing together people with different experience and worldviews but with some shared interest in outcomes[20]. There has also been growing use of the discipline of action learning – an approach to management, strategy and change that employs a cycle of action, observation of the results, reflection and planning. Practitioners of action learning (also called 'action research' and

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[17] Macy, Joanna and Young Brown, Molly, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, (Gabriola Island, B.C., Canada: New Society Publishers, 1998)

[18] Michaelis, L., 'Economic and technological development in climate scenarios', *Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies for Global Change* (1998) Vol. 3, Nos 2-4, pp 231-261

[19] http://www.santafe.edu/

[20] Lane, David, and Maxfield, Robert, *Foresight, Complexity and Strategy.* (New Mexico: Santa Fe Institute, 1995)

'action inquiry') emphasise the importance of being able to incorporate multiple viewpoints and of silent observation and listening[21].

The Action Learning Cycle

Observe

Reflect

Act

Plan
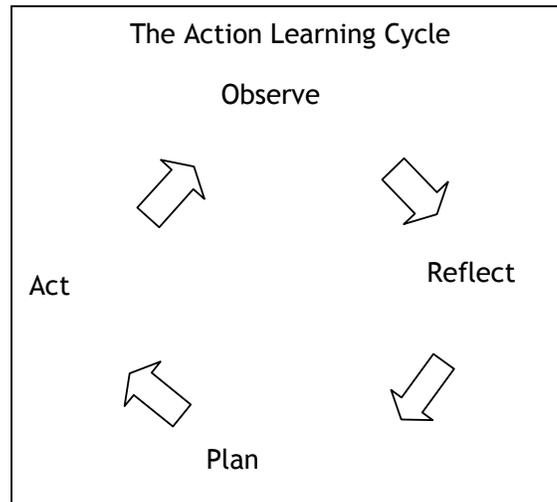
Action learning represents an approach to individual and collective change that is in some ways analogous both to the scientific method and to Quaker faith and practice. In particular it is empirical and process-based, learning from experience and evidence rather than ideologically driven. It has origins in the work of Greg Bateson[22], developed in management theory particularly by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon[23] and by Peter Senge[24].

These recent developments mesh with Quaker experience – including the recognition that we do not necessarily need a common theology or belief system in order to agree on collective action. We do need a shared process. Quaker practice emphasises listening to different people's viewpoints for the truth they may contain for us; letting go of our own assumptions and positions; and looking for ways forward that can unite us creatively. Quakers also stress the interplay of spiritual practice, which includes individual and collective reflection, and action in the world.

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[21] Torbert, Bill *et al.*, *Personal and Organisational Transformations Through Action Research* (Boston, MA: Edge/Work Press, 2001)

[22] Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to An Ecology of Mind*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972)

[23] Argyris, Chris and Schon, Donald, *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*, (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1996)

[24] Senge, Peter, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*, (London: Random House, 1990)

4. Quaker business method and other practices

Quaker practices are underpinned by a number of essential experiences and insights but at the centre lies a listening spirituality. The listening is both inward:

> 'Take heed...to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts'

and outward:

> 'Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it...'

Quaker Business Method

Quakers make collective decisions using a standard process known as the Quaker business method. Many aspects are similar to practices used in the consensus methods that are becoming increasingly widely used among a range of activist movements. However, the Quaker business method involves an interior discipline that distinguishes it.

The traditional understanding is that the business method is the way Quakers find God's will for them. However, many Friends now would not see God as a person with a will, and are more comfortable with the idea that the purpose is to discern the 'leadings of the Spirit' or the 'sense of the meeting'.

The procedure in the Quaker business method is led by a 'clerk', often with an assistant or co-clerk. Normally the responsibilities of the clerk include

- Preparing for the meeting: planning the timing and items to be considered in the business meeting; preparing a draft agenda and ensuring participants have received it well in advance of the meeting, along with any supporting information

- Facilitating the proceedings: introducing the draft agenda and making any changes on the day, introducing items for consideration or asking others to do so, inviting contributions and calling participants to speak during the consideration of each item, encouraging participants to maintain their focus on the item in hand, and time-keeping

- Drafting minutes and agreeing them with the meeting.

The clerk is understood as the servant of the meeting and is expected to be unattached to the outcome, refraining from introducing personal bias into

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Quaker business method: the essentials

Purpose is to discern 'leadings of the Spirit' or 'sense of the meeting'; no voting but not consensus as normally understood

Set in context of Quaker Meeting for Worship, based in silence

Minutes are agreed verbatim in the meeting

The clerk

- designs the agenda and leads the meeting through it

- chooses among Friends who wish to speak

- drafts minutes seeking to reflect the sense of the meeting and invites comments

- works on minutes until they are accepted by the Meeting

Participants

- should be well-prepared, both spiritually and in the substance of the agenda

- all involved: no 'observers'

- anyone may speak – indicate they wish to speak and wait to be called by clerk

- follow the discipline for participating in a business meeting (see main body of text)

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the consideration.

The process is set in the context of a Quaker Meeting for Worship, starting and finishing with a period of silence. As in a normal Meeting for Worship, Friends may stand and speak during these periods. After the opening silence, the clerk opens proceedings by inviting the meeting to accept the agenda, and then introduces agenda items or asks others to provide introductions.

Once an item has been introduced, there may be a further period of silence before the clerk opens it up for consideration by the Meeting. When participants wish to speak, they normally stand and wait to be called by the clerk. When one participant has been called to speak, everyone else sits down.

It is the task of the clerk to listen to the contributions and draft a minute that captures the 'sense of the meeting' – a position with which the Meeting can unite. Sometimes such a position is offered by one of the Friends present, but usually the minute draws on many of the contributions. Sometimes the clerk can find a new and creative perspective in the process of preparing a draft minute. The minute is normally agreed by the Meeting at the time, although sometimes the clerk may work on it during a break and bring it back to a later session. Once a minute is agreed it is not altered. Quaker meetings do not vote. If an individual has a serious doubt about the minute, there is usually an opportunity to express it, but Friends are expected be careful of attachment to personal positions and accept the sense of the Meeting. The minute may record that one or more Friends were uncomfortable with the decision, if those Friends have indicated that they do respect the sense of the Meeting and stand back. If even one Friend indicates that he or she cannot possibly agree to the minute, the decision should not normally be taken and the Meeting should minute that it has been unable to reach a decision.

There are several aspects to the discipline of participating in a Quaker business meeting. Participants should:

- come well-prepared, having given consideration to the items on the agenda and perhaps having discussed them with others

- come with an open mind, ready change their own point of view and to hear and unite with the 'sense of the Meeting'

- speak only out of silence – not interrupting or responding directly to others' contributions, nor holding side-conversations; as in a normal Meeting for Worship, the understanding is that spoken contributions should come from the Spirit rather than the individual ego

- refrain, on the whole, from making prepared contributions

- stand to speak only if they have a substantive addition to make to what has gone before. As far as possible, contributions should be constructive, seeking to build on previous contributions or offer a different view rather than enter into debate

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Strengths and weaknesses of the Quaker business method

The benefits of the Quaker business method include:

- Very careful discernment of right path forward
- Building personal relationships and a sense of community through careful listening
- Hearing and incorporating diverse views
- Enabling 'out of the box' ideas to be heard and acted on
- Giving participants time to reflect on their own positions and let go of them
- Developing shared ownership of and responsibility for decisions.

But:

- It can feel slow
- The quality of the process depends on the personal discipline of those involved, and on the capabilities of the clerk.

- not normally speak more than once on any given agenda item – although this may not apply in meetings with twenty or fewer participants.

In large meetings such as Britain Yearly Meeting in session, which can have over 1000 participants, the formal discipline is essential and is usually carefully followed. There is a well-rehearsed choreography in these situations. Friends will not normally stand to speak unless the clerk is looking up for contributions; if the clerk is looking down, working on a minute, or standing holding the minute book, everyone else should be seated. Many Friends may stand at once, and often some will not be called.

In a large Meeting the process of Friends standing, the clerk selecting one to speak, and a microphone being brought to that person, ensures that there is a substantial space between contributions. Smaller business meetings tend to be relatively informal and sometimes participants may speak without being called. In these circumstances the Meeting can degenerate into back-and-forth discussion. At these points it is often helpful for the clerk or another participant to suggest a short period of silence.

Much of the discipline of Quaker business meetings is quite subtle and it is best conveyed through experience rather than in writing. Barry Morley comments that the business method cannot be taught but it can be learned[25]. For example, contributions are normally considered and offered without strong emotion, making space for alternative points of view. However, sometimes a passionate contribution based in personal experience can be valuable, enabling participants to grasp some new significance or perspective in their deliberation.

Wiltshire Quarterly Meeting in 1678 set down advice on the conduct of Quaker business meetings:

> 'For the preservation of love, concord and a good decorum in this meeting, 'tis earnestly desired that all business that comes before it be managed with gravity and moderation, in much love and Amity, without reflections or retorting, which is but reasonable as well as comely, since we have no other obligation upon each other but love, which is the very bond of our society: and therein to serve the Truth and one another; having an eye single to it, ready to sacrifice every private interest to that of Truth, and the good of the whole community.

> 'Wherefore let whatsoever is offered, be mildly proposed, and so left with some pause, that the meeting may have opportunity to weigh the matter, and have a right sense of it, that there may be a unanimity and joint concurrence of the whole. And if anything be controverted that it be in coolness of Spirit calmly debated, each offering their reasons and sense, their assent, or dissent, and so leave it without striving. And also that but one speak at once, and the rest hear. And that private debates and discourses be avoided, and all attend the present business of the Meeting. So will things be carried on sweetly as becomes us, to our comfort: and love and unity be increased: and we better serve Truth and our Society.'[26]

Other Quaker listening and discernment practices

In addition to the business method, a variety of Quaker practices have developed to support individual and collective decision-making. Perhaps the most widely used are worship sharing, threshing meetings, and clearness groups.

A 'worship sharing' session is essentially a meeting for worship focused on a question or theme, with more encouragement to speak than usual. If the group is small enough, all members may speak and the session may even be organised as a go-round. Silence is left between the spoken

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[25] Morley, Barry. *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307, (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993)
[26] Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, *Quaker Faith and Practice* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995) 19.57

contributions, which are treated as in a normal meeting for worship. There is no discussion following contributions. Worship sharing is particularly useful for opening up an issue, enabling feelings and thoughts to be shared without the expectation of a particular outcome or decision.

Threshing is a practice used especially when a controversial decision has to be made. A threshing meeting may include worship sharing, discussion, or question-and-answer format. However, once again it does not have the capacity to make decisions. The point is to enable participants to hear each other's point of view, explore arguments, test out their own thinking on each other, and deepen their understanding of the issues. Threshing would normally precede a formal business meeting where a decision is to be taken. In large meetings threshing may take place in small groups to enable everyone to have their voices heard and questions answered, and to explore their thoughts and feelings in dialogue. Sometimes, when an item before a business meeting turns out to be controversial, a threshing session may be arranged to allow for detailed discussion and exploration. The item is then brought back to a later business meeting and the decision is often much easier.

Clearness groups are normally used to support individual rather than corporate discernment. A small group of Friends meets with the person seeking to make a decision to support them in reaching clearness. The intention is not for the group to make the decision and participants are discouraged from giving advice. The process usually starts with the focus person explaining the decision being considered. Participants may be given an opportunity to express any personal bias in order to lay it aside. The group then functions mainly by asking questions of the focus person to encourage them to look at different dimensions of the decision. The questions do not necessarily need to be answered in the group, and the focus person may not make the decision until later. Sometimes a clearness group meets several times.

5. From listening spirituality to social solidarity

From Section 2 it should be clear that Quakers are not alone in having inclusive, participatory and egalitarian approaches to community and decision-making. At their best, Quaker practices exemplify the leading edge in some of the emergent social forms and in approaches to organisational and social change discussed in Section 3. Experience with Quaker business method (described in Section 4) may be particularly helpful for others partly because of its long and well-documented history. There is extensive experience of its use by different people, in different circumstances, and a strong body of discipline, both formal and informal, has developed to support it.

Quaker practices are relevant to the sustainability challenge for several reasons. Above all, they nurture a culture of listening, enabling participants to achieve a shared understanding of a complex situation and of other people's positions and perspectives on it. Quaker business method in particular is a unique process that can develop solidarity around a collective way forward. Other Quaker processes can be very useful – for example worship sharing can be helpful in building understanding and compassion. It involves participants listening in silence to each other as in 'creative listening' but without aiming to reach a decision or minute. Meetings for Clearness can be helpful for an individual seeking to discern a way forward in their personal life, work or relationships, through careful listening and questioning in a small group.

Quaker business method establishes (and rely on) a balance between the creativity and 'leadings' of individuals and the normative, 'testing' role of the community. Because Quaker practice moves beyond individualism rather than seeking to suppress it, it is particularly relevant to the need for a new kind of community in our individualised society. Friends have developed, practised and adapted their decision-making methods over several hundred years. Through this long experience, they have a thoroughly articulated understanding of the personal disciplines involved in playing the various roles in successful participatory processes. Quaker processes are readily transferrable to secular groups because they do not depend on participants adhering to any particular belief system or ideology.

Where Quaker practice comes from

The central feature of Quaker practice – and the feature that makes it countercultural in western society – is silent listening. Quaker worship and Quaker decision-making (which is based in worship) involves listening inwardly 'to the promptings of love and truth in your heart', and outwardly, for the truth others' words may contain.

If there is a central Quaker idea, it is the call to answer that of God in everyone. However, Quakers interpret this phrase in many different ways, especially the word 'God'. Whereas some European Friends are committed to an essentially traditional understanding of God, to a few, answering that of God in every one', simply means responding to the good in them and recognising them as having the same essential nature as themselves. In any case, the implication is that we are called treat other people with compassion, trust and respect even when we are confused, distressed, disgusted or angered by their words and actions. It also implies acknowledging that their words may contain truth.

The business method has its origins in the early years of the Quaker movement. The spirituality of the first Friends was focused on the 'inward light' – which was to be trusted as revealing the will of God. But the Quaker community was shaken by a number of incidents in which Friends made decisions or spoke out in ways that endangered the community. A way needed to be found to reconcile conflicts in the leadings that the inward light offered to different Friends. As a result, a system was established by a group of ministers and elders whereby individual leadings must be tested in a gathered meeting[27]. George Fox, often viewed as the founder of Quakerism, travelled around Britain establishing a system of monthly local meetings, quarterly regional meetings, and an annual ('yearly') national meeting. The governance and decision making system of Quakers in Britain is still recognisably based on that set up in the 1660s, although some of the nomenclature has changed in recent years.

Quakerism has its roots firmly in the Christian tradition but there are some modern Friends who are uncomfortable with traditional Christian terminology. In spite of these considerable differences in personal theology and beliefs, Quakers would agree that business meetings have a spiritual basis. In practical terms the business method is based on the principle and experience that, by spending time in stillness together, listening carefully, seeking to let go of assumptions and fixed positions, a meeting can usually find unity in a way forward. It is perhaps this experience that lies at the heart of the contribution that Quaker experience can make to the challenges faced by others dealing with complex and controversial situations. The politics of energy and climate change have been dominated by strong and competing ideologies, with plenty of rhetoric but little action. At a local, national and international level, people are going to have to learn to listen to each other and develop a collective will for change, probably without agreeing on their basic assumptions and values.

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[27] Sheeran, Michael, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends,* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting,1996)

Core Quaker values

European Quakers do not have a written creed or set theology. The closest they get to clear common statements of values is in the "advices and queries" adopted by some yearly meetings. The following are drawn from those of Britain Yearly Meeting.

A listening spirituality

At its heart, Quaker spirituality is a listening spirituality. It involves listening to the Inward light, which Friends believe is available to each one of us:

> 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. *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #1*

and to its expression in others' ministry:

> Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others. *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #12*

More generally, Quaker spirituality calls us to be open to inspiration wherever it may come from, whether from other people:

> Do you respect that of god in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern? ... When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to sense where they come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you. *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #17*

or the wider world:

> There is inspiration to be found all around us, in the natural world, in the sciences and arts, in our work and friendships, in our sorrows as well as in our joys. Are you open to new light, from whatever source it may come? Do you approach new ideas with discernment? *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #7*

A learning community

There is a central commitment in Quakerism to learning from experience. It is an experimental path, and could be understood as a kind of action inquiry. This means continual questioning:

> Take time to learn about other people's experiences of the Light. ... Appreciate that doubt and questioning can also lead to spiritual growth and to a greater awareness of the Light that is in us all. *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #5*

> Do you consider difficult questions with an informed mind as well as a generous and loving spirit? *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #15*

and a willingness to take risks

> Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak. *Britain Yearly Meeting Advices & Queries #27*

Strengths and weaknesses of Quaker practice

The strengths of the business method include enabling minority or marginalised voices to be heard; allowing 'out of the box' ideas to be taken seriously; enabling thorough exploration of perspectives and issues; and ensuring real buy-in by all involved. The method usually produces careful decisions that endure. There is no minority vote which has been overridden and so feels

disgruntled and not inclined to support the decision. Everyone has contributed to the final decision and so is more likely to support it.

Whereas mainstream consensus processes are very difficult to use in large groups, Quaker business method is often at its best in very large gatherings. Some of the best run Quaker meetings in Britain are those at national level – in particular Meeting for Sufferings (with about 190 members) and the Yearly Meeting (sometimes over a thousand). However, these can also run into difficulties.

The method works best when most of those present understand it, and are willing and able to maintain a personal discipline of listening. Friends have always been called upon to be open to the possibility that their position is not necessarily the right one.The main constraint is often the lack of time especially in large gatherings where controversial agenda items are being discussed. In such circumstances it may not be possible for everyone to be heard and a decision may not be able to wait until the next business meeting. Sometimes this can result in a meeting making a decision that has not been considered sufficiently because those who might have had misgivings did not speak, or because the quality of listening in the group was not good enough.

While the method is good at empowering participants and ensuring shared ownership of decisions, situations still arise where some Friends are in positions of authority or particular influence. Sometimes individuals or groups in the meeting can block a decision that seems right to the vast majority. This can mean that change on fundamental issues can be slow in Quaker meetings – although once the change occurs it has been very thoroughly considered and is usually embraced fully by the meeting.

Perhaps the most important message emerging from experience with the business method is that, to work well, participants must have sufficient time and sufficient commitment to listen to each other and to reflect deeply, both individually and together. This does not have to happen in the business session itself. Until the 19th century Friends lived in tight-knit Quaker communities and questions coming to business meetings would have been talked over in considerable detail beforehand. Most Quakers in local meetings now only see each other once a week at the most. There is no real substitute for frequent personal contact and conversation in building the mutual understanding that provides the foundation for unity in spiritual discernment.

6. Quaker process in non-Quaker groups

Quaker processes have been widely used in organisations started by Friends but including non-Quakers. In Britain, examples include Quaker businesses with mostly non-Quaker workers (e.g. *Investing Ethically*, a firm of ethical financial advisors, and *Growing with Grace*, an organic growing co-operative). The Quaker Community in Bamford has a substantial proportion of non-Quakers, however the one Quaker feature of the community in which all members engage is the weekly house meetings which use the business method.

In some of these instances the business method operates better than in many local Quaker meetings. Participants who know each other well and work or live together have many opportunities for discussion of issues coming to the business meeting. The quality of the use of the business method can also be helped by consistent participation and frequent meetings.

Quaker processes have also found widespread application in non-Quaker settings. Most instances involve limited aspects of Quaker practice, perhaps suggested by a Quaker involved in the group or organisation. We start with Scott Peck's approach to community building because it is perhaps one of the most generic and widely applicable interpretations of Quaker practice for non-Quakers.

Scott Peck Community Building Method

Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Travelled*, developed a method for community building and set up an organisation, the *Foundation for Community Encouragement*, to promote it. An international network of facilitators continues to work with his approach. In his book *The Different Drum*, Scott Peck[28] (1987) describes four stages in building a real community:

1.   Pseudocommunity. People with different worldviews are able to coexist by refraining from expressing anything controversial. Such a society is not able to achieve much. Its assumptions are implicit and unexpressed. It is an unconscious community.

2.   Chaos. Conflicting views, opinions, needs and judgements are expressed but not heard. Participants attempt to heal or convert each other. This phase is very painful and usually results in retreat to pseudocommunity.

3.   Emptiness. Participants let go of their own preconceptions. This is a phase of silent listening.

4.   Community. Differing views are expressed, listened to and valued. Conflict occurs but a collective effort is made to find creative ways through. The sense of community is expressed through a shared story or "myth".

Although not a Quaker, Peck attended a Quaker school and acknowledges this as one of the influences that enabled him to appreciate the nature of a truly supportive community. His 'emptiness' stage is the key to developing community. It corresponds to the Quaker spiritual discipline of putting aside thoughts and positions and judgements and listening for 'the promptings of love and truth' in our hearts, or the truth and insight that others' words may contain for us. This is a discipline that is needed for any group decision-making process to work well.

Patricia Loring[29] has suggested that Quakers should be able to skip the chaos phase of community building because they are practised in 'emptiness'. In practice Quaker meetings often find themselves in both pseudo-community and chaos.

For Peck, the key features of a true community are:

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[28] Peck, Scott, *The Different Drum*, (London: Random House, 1987)
[29] Loring, Patricia, *Listening Spirituality, Vol II: Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends,* (Washington Grove, MD: Openings Press, 1999)

- Inclusivity, mutual commitment and consensus-based decision-making;

- Realism: decisions made by a community are more realistic than those made by an individual as differing viewpoints modulate each other. Humility is an essential feature of this;

- Contemplation: a community is self-aware; it examines itself and knows itself – and so do its individual members;

- A safe place: a true community is a place where people feel safe to be vulnerable and reveal themselves;

- A laboratory for personal disarmament: a true community is a place where people can experiment with compassionate relationship – experientially discovering the rules for peace-making;

- A group that can fight gracefully: community is a place where conflict can be addressed without violence and with wisdom and grace;

- A group of all leaders: a true community is a place where leadership is fluid. Compulsive leaders are able to step back, and shy individuals sometimes take the lead;

- A spirit: true community has a palpable atmosphere of love and peace.

All of this is recognisable as part of the Quaker approach to community and to decision making.

Group support for discernment

The Quaker practice of clearness meetings – small groups meeting in worship to support an individual in discerning some path or choice – has been taken up by others both in the activist community[30] and among Christians[31]. In fact the approach has probably been used more by other groups than among Quakers, where it has mostly been restricted to testing clearness for marriage, and for membership of the Society of Friends.

The World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has recently adopted a consensus decision-making drawing originally on Quaker business method[32]. In 2000, a committee of the WCC looked at consensus decision-making as a means of addressing the concerns of the Orthodox Churches that, as a minority in an organisation taking decisions by majority vote, their voice was not being heard. The committee received evidence from the Uniting Church of Australia (UCA), which had adopted a consensus process based on Quaker business method in the 1970s[33], and also from Quakers themselves[34].

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[30] Green, Tova *et al*, *Insight and Action: How to discover and support a life of integrity and commitment to change*, (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1994)

[31] Farnham, Suzanne *et al.*, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991)

[32] Wiltschek, W., *Consensus: A Better Way of Reflecting the Nature of the Church*, World Council of Churches Central Committee News Release, available at http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ WCC [World Council of Churches], *Manual for Conduct of Meetings of the World Council of Churches*, accessed 27 June 2009, available at http://www.oikoumene.org/ 2005

[33] Wood, D., *On Consensus Decision Procedures*, Background paper for World Council of Churches Special Commission on Participation of the Orthodox Churches, Subcommittee 1, The Organization of the WCC, accessed 27 June 2009, available at http://www.oikoumene.org/ 2000

[34] Grace, E., *An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice*, Background paper for World Council of Churches Special Commission on Participation of the Orthodox Churches, Subcommittee 1,

22

Although WCC describes its procedure as 'consensus', it speaks of seeking to know 'the mind of the meeting' or 'the mind of Christ'. In fact the theology of the process and the advice given to participants on personal discipline are almost identical with those in Quaker business method[35]. However the process is very different, including for example the extensive use of blue and orange cards for participants to indicate whether they feel cold or warm towards a proposal or intervention. There is much less emphasis on personal discipline in practice, with participants using laptops and other communication equipment during meetings.

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland has not adopted Quaker or consensus processes explicitly, and has a relatively conventional constitution. However its first president, for two and a half years, was a Friend with extensive experience as a clerk, and she did make use of aspects of Quaker process. In particular she started the first meeting she chaired by reading a passage from *Quaker faith and practice* on discipline in business meetings, and she brought the meeting to decisions without voting. She did not formally make use of silence but did have 'pauses' to check whether anything else needed to be said on an issue. The process appears to have worked well and was helped by the Council being a worshipping group. If an issue was contentious or difficult, it was always possible to say 'let's take that into our worship'.

Scottish Legal Aid Board

The same Friend chaired the Scottish Legal Aid Board for seven years. This was a different experience because the Board was not a worshipping group. However, she made sure everyone was heard in meetings by using go-rounds, then she asked whether the group wanted to reach full agreement or adopt a majority position. Usually they chose to try and reach agreement, and minutes were adopted in sessions.

The UK Green Party

The Green Party in the United Kingdom is perhaps the political party with the highest proportion of Quaker members and candidates. Friends were closely involved in developing its practices. Its plenary sessions start with a short period of silence ('attunement') and decisions are taken by consensus as far as possible. Just as Friends have found that business meetings work better when preceded by threshing, often in small groups, the Green Party uses workshops to explore issues before bringing them to plenary.

Seeds of Hope

Following the destruction of the World Trade Centre, a group of about twelve Oxford academics met several times over a few months to explore positive visions for a sustainable world. In academic culture, discussion usually means debate and criticism. This group adopted a different pattern. The convenor, a Quaker, suggested that the group adopt "creative listening" as an approach. In each session they took turns to speak, leaving silence between contributions, and without discussion or debate following each contribution. Everyone spoke at least once and sometimes there was an opportunity to speak more than once. The contributions were passionate, deeply personal and often spiritual. Participants found the experience novel and enriching –a refreshing change from the academic norm that revealed common interests and passions underlying their different disciplines, positions and approaches.

Village Forest

In 2002 a diverse group of people, including some Quakers, met at Braziers Park in Oxfordshire for the first step on the journey towards establishing a new eco-village. The group met several times over the following months, exploring their hopes for the eco-village, developing ideas for the practical aspects, recruiting new members and searching for an appropriate site.

The Organization of the WCC, accessed 27 June 2009, available at http://www.oikoumene.org/ 2000

[35] WCC, 2005

Tensions rapidly became apparent in the group and in some cases they led to rifts. By mid-2003 it became apparent that there were deep divisions on the direction of the group. Eventually one of the Quaker participants offered a process modelled on Quaker business method. The group gathered for a weekend workshop and spent part of the first day exploring their visions for the community, as a whole group and in threes. This was a structured version of what Quakers call "threshing" – talking about an issue, hearing each other, considering alternatives, but not trying to reach a conclusion. The following morning the group gathered for a session using Quaker business method to develop a minute expressing their vision. Two members of the group (one non-Quaker) acted as co-clerks. The process was explained in fairly simple, practical terms. During the session all members of the group shared their sense of the vision for the community. A strong "sense of the meeting" emerged and the group joyfully accepted the clerks' minute. However, it was a vision that could not be accepted by all members, and the group broke up following the meeting.

Letting go is perhaps the most important discipline in Quaker process – letting go of our personal positions, letting go of a desired outcome even when most of those involved believe it is what they want. The process works when participants are ready to accept the truth of the best way forward for them as a group. Sometimes the truth may be that the hoped-for outcome is not the right way to go, or even that the group should not continue.

7. Conclusions

The essence of Quaker process is clearly applicable – and is widely applied – in non-Quaker groups. The core discipline in Quaker business method, Quaker worship, and other aspects of Quaker community is one of silent listening, both for the promptings of love and truth within, and for the love and truth in others' words. Quaker listening practice can enable people with widely differing worldviews to find unity in a course of action.

One of the lessons from the many different applications of Quaker process, among Friends and others, is that the personal discipline of the participants is often more important than the formal process.

This listening discipline could be usefully applied in many domains:

1. in all kinds of ethical and political discussion on our response to climate change

2. among government delegations negotiating international approaches to climate change

3. in local communities seeking to develop their own resilience in the face of climate change and Peak Oil

4. addressing tension and conflict at local, national and international level over access to energy resources, responses to climate change, and other related issues such as human rights implications, environmental impacts of resource extraction, and safety implications of nuclear power.

There are opportunities for Friends to engage in all of these:

- Organising events locally or nationally, perhaps introduced by a speaker, where participants are invited to explore issues within a creative listening or worship sharing session

- Offering such listening opportunities, e.g. at meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, or within European Union processes, working with MEPs or the European Commission

- Getting involved in local initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 and Transition Towns, and helping to develop a listening culture, often by making simple suggestions at meetings, or offering workshops exploring issues through creative listening or worship sharing

- Offering informal listening spaces to the parties in conflicts related to energy sources.

In order to be able to offer support to others, Quakers need to have their own regular experience of practising our listening disciplines. We also need to develop our own corporate responses to climate change and energy security. So it is in practising and applying our own discipline that we may most effectively offer a witness in the world.

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