

The changing concept of “sustainable development” (selected descriptions)

The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development suggested in 1987 that sustainable development means, “...to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (*Brundtland Report*, 1987).

Herman Daly in 1991 said that a sustainable society must be based on using renewable resources at rates that do not exceed their capacity to renew themselves; using non-renewable resources at rates that do not exceed our capacity to substitute for them; and using no resources at rates that exceed the capacity of the natural world to assimilate or process the wastes associated with their use (*Steady State Economics*, 1991).

Lester Brown et al. said that a sustainable society requires a population in balance with its natural support systems, an energy system that does not raise the level of greenhouse gases, and a level of material demand that neither exceeds the sustainable yield of forests, grasslands or fisheries, nor systematically destroys other species (*Saving the Planet*, 1992).

The United Nations Development Programme in 1995 described “sustainable human development” as “development that generates growth, but also equitably distributes the fruit of that growth.... In short, sustainable human development is pro-poor, pro-jobs, pro-women, and pro-environment” (See Wixom et al. for references and fuller discussion).

Ecological sustainability as a QEW witness

Friends have long-standing testimonies on Peace, Simplicity, Equality, Community, and Integrity. These testimonies have been proclaimed not in words but by the way Friends have lived out the details of their lives: in plain speech and plain dress; in refusal to do hat honor, swear oaths, or gamble; in the avoidance of violence as a means of dealing with conflict; and in prison ministry and myriad other ways.

In this century, rapid growth in population, technology, and industry have been accompanied by resource depletion and environmental pollution. These societal changes lead us, members of QEW, to express our deep concern for Ecological Sustainability, or sustainable living, as an emerging testimony, and to seek the Light as to how to carry it out in the details of daily life.

There is overlap in the meanings and practices of our Quaker testimonies. QEW believes that Sustainability is a concept that relates to all our Testimonies, relates each of them to the future, and helps to weave them together in our lives. Peace without Equality...or Community without Sustainability...or Sustainability without Simplicity, tend to become meaningless; each enriches the others in a prophetic way that challenges our work in society and our care for the Earth.

On a spiritual level there is abundance to sustain us: abundance of compassion and love, abundance of giving, healing, and thanksgiving. On a physical level, we can start moving toward a recognition of this by working toward Sustainability.

Sustainability as a concept has recently acquired new spiritual depth of meaning to

include a resolve to live in harmony with biological and physical systems, and to work to create social systems that can enable us to do that. It includes a sense of connectedness and an understanding of the utter dependence of human society within the intricate web of life; a passion for environmental justice and ecological ethics; an understanding of dynamic natural balances and processes; and a recognition of the limits to growth due to finite resources.

Our concern for Sustainability recognizes our responsibility to future generations, to care for the Earth as our own home and the home of all that dwell herein. We seek a relationship between human being and the Earth that is mutually enhancing.

Let us ask the Spirit for the clarity to recognize the ways we may be nourishing the seeds of ecological destruction, and for the strength to make the choices that will nourish seeds of change, so that Sustainability and the Integrity of Creation will be a *visible* aspect of Friends’ testimony everywhere. We encourage Friends to proceed with Divine guidance, with love, and with a commitment for action on the above principles in our daily lives. Let us be called to take meaningful steps to respond to the disproportionate distribution of the Earth’s resources; to minimize the effects of cultures of affluence and over-consumption; and to strive for ecologically and economically regenerative communities with a creative simplicity: to be a Peace in this sacred place, our Earth. With humility, we invite Friends and their Meetings to join in this transformation. “Let our lives speak...”

—Approved at QEW Annual Meeting, October 1998



Religious faiths and sustainability (selected descriptions)

In 1979 the World Council of Churches said, “The twin issues around which the world’s future revolves are justice and ecology. Justice points to the necessity of correcting maldistribution of the products of the Earth and of bridging the gap between rich and poor countries. Ecology points to humanity’s dependence upon the Earth. Society must be so organized as to sustain the Earth so that a sufficient quality of material and cultural life for humanity may be sustained indefinitely. A sustainable society which is unjust can hardly be worth sustaining. Humanity now has the responsibility to make a deliberate transition to a just and sustainable society...”

Keith Helmuth wrote for Britain Yearly Meeting in 1990, “We are building towards the climax of crisis. The spiritual crisis is folding into the ecological crisis, and the ecological crisis is folding into the economic crisis. ...Challenging market economics with a biblical sense of the goodness of God in Creation is to join a spiritual struggle. Faith in God, solidarity with the suffering poor and all other forms of life demands that we take a stand and say, This destruction must stop. We must be perfectly clear about the implications of undertaking this responsibility. It is more than just setting up household recycling bins, growing organic vegetables, or riding a bike to work. It is more than a talking job. It is a renovation which will change everything: the way we do business, the way we eat, the way we travel, the houses we build, the products and services we can expect and the prices we pay for them, the way we feel about trees, and the way we worship God.”

Some Advices to consider as individuals and as Friends

- ❖ Consider our testimonies of peace and simplicity as we address the ecological crisis
- ❖ How can I live simply that others may simply live?
- ❖ Are my purchases really necessary? Could I buy locally and support my local economy?
- ❖ How can I support sustainable practices in food production and energy consumption?
- ❖ Should we in North America not be seeking ways to cut down our consumption as we ask people in poor countries to cut down on the size of their families?
- ❖ Should we not engage in dialogue with our political and business leaders on how to change laws, policies and taxes to foster sustainable resources management and to stop supporting unsustainable practices?
- ❖ How do we develop and support an ecological witness on national policy?

QEW vision and witness:

- ❖ We are called to live in right relationship with all Creation, recognizing that the entire world is interconnected and is a manifestation of God.
- ❖ We work to integrate into the beliefs and practices of the Religious Society of Friends the Truth that God's creation is to be respected, protected, and held in reverence in its own right, and the Truth that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the earth's ecological integrity.
- ❖ We promote these Truths by being patterns and examples, by communicating our message, and by providing spiritual and material support to those engaged in the compelling task of transforming our relationship with the earth.

What can you do?

The word "sustain" comes from the Latin "sub," from under, and "tenere," to hold—in other words, to support. We have a responsibility to support a just transition to a more sustainable way of life, as individuals, as members of our Meeting, as a Society and as members of the wider world.

This means that we in North America need radically change the way we live. We need to cut down on our consumption by every means at our disposal. We need to challenge our political and corporate leaders to change the paradigm from economic growth to sustainability.

- ❖ Find ways to use cars less or do without a car.
- ❖ Work towards practical and efficient public transportation systems where you live.
- ❖ Limit the number of children you have to two.
- ❖ Support family planning programs that are sensitive to women's rights and education.
- ❖ Buy local, organically grown food with minimal packaging, or grow your own.
- ❖ Purchase clothing, furniture, building materials, tools, etc., used or if new, from reliable sources who have produced the items sustainably.
- ❖ Reduce our need for newly manufactured items.
- ❖ Recycle all that we can and purchase items made from recycled products.
- ❖ Invest savings in socially responsible funds or with socially responsible companies or live without excess funds.
- ❖ Support "green businesses."
- ❖ Work in your community with others on issues of sustainability and pollution prevention.
- ❖ Form a study circle to find out about the economic disparities of globalization—and its impact on the environment.

Selected Resources

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Quaker Earthcare Witness

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Practicing Sustainability



What does it mean for Friends?

Caterpillars can transform themselves into butterflies; tadpoles into frogs. Can we transform our culture and our individual lives from ones which destroy the environment and natural resources to ones which will sustain these resources for the sake of future generations?

This is the challenge of our times...