

Economic Justice and Sustainable Global Society

*Conference at Friends' House (24th Sept 2011) and
Seminar for Area Meeting reps at Woodbrooke (4th - 6th November 2011)*

A report by Angela Walker, representative for Leicester Area Meeting

together with

QUESTIONS FOR OUR LOCAL MEETINGS

Although it was not planned as such, the timing of the conference and subsequent Woodbrooke weekend seminar coincided with extraordinary events in the UK and in the wider global context. This was the backdrop that concentrated our attention and fueled our deliberations.

- *The August riots and looting* – which we can argue at least in part could be put down to the frustrations of those at the bottom of the economic ladder.
- *The crisis in the Eurozone* as Greece and now Italy finds itself unable to cope with its indebtedness.
- *The Cannes Summit* emphasizing competition for economic growth at all costs.
- *A huge rise in unemployment*, especially amongst young people throughout the Western economy, coupled by cuts in social services and serious difficulties in access to higher education and training.
- *Growing public concerns about our carbon emissions* as government cuts bite into the development and utilization of green technology.
- *The extraordinary events at St Paul's* that has united people of faith and others in the Occupy movement, questioning the current economic system which fosters carbon emissions and unsustainable development, and provides huge gains in wealth for the very few and poverty throughout the World.

Quakers made a commitment at Yearly Meeting 2011 to act upon its concerns for economic justice and sustainability. It could be one of the most far-reaching commitments we have made since the abolition of slavery. It also has the potential to renew our Quaker community in Britain by reconnecting with our roots and proclaiming a message that the world needs to hear. We were reminded that 'we must move out of our comfort zone' and work both as individuals and as meetings. We may feel called upon to work in a larger scale. As Quakers we must open ourselves to the leadings of the spirit and be guided by our testimonies of peace, truth, simplicity, equality and care of the environment.

During the conference in London we heard from speakers about the influence and constraints of the economic system. We heard about the devastating impact of speculation in the financial markets on food commodities on the poorest people in our societies. The World Development Movement's campaign on food sovereignty aims to build peace at the heart of our food system, and one of their leaflets explains it like this:

“ Banks are earning huge profits from betting on food prices in unregulated financial markets. This creates instability and pushes up global food prices, making poor families around the world go hungry and forcing millions into deeper poverty. It is time to stop bankers from gambling on hunger.”

WDM campaign on food sovereignty

We heard from David Hall that privatization of basic commodities such as water supplies, electricity and healthcare has not considered ‘the public good’ and is not necessarily a cheaper or more efficient option – yet it is an option that makes a great deal of profit for its shareholders. Research shows that there is a positive link between public spending and positive economic growth. A fairer taxation system is essential for providing resources to tackle social inadequacies, climate change healthcare etc.

Jonathan Dale showed us that although Quakers helped to develop capitalism, by the early C20th they started to question the human impacts of the system. He asked us the soul-searching question ‘what right do we have to our privileged share of the Earth’s resources’.

The weekend seminar was for area representatives to work further on issues of sustainability and economic justice, sharing ideas and knowledge and supporting and encouraging each other. Such was the importance of the issues to meetings that almost all the 70 Area Meetings has sent a representative.

I went to the conference with only a very basic understanding of how the world of finance works and even less on how our monetary system impacts upon people and the planet. It was educating and stimulating to hear explanations and lively debate about the current economic system and the crisis that it is now in; about the reliance of the free market economy on unbridled debt and its consequences of inequality, dire poverty and unsustainability. One workshop was entitled Debt and Positive Money where I understood better about the inherent flaws in our financial system, which thrives on the creation by private banks of massive amounts of unpayable debt created by virtual money with no relation to real money controlled by the Bank of England. The website ‘Positive Money’ helped me to understand this better.

We considered ways in which we can act, individually and collectively to redress the balance. One big idea from Bristol Meeting for Quakers to fund a Quaker Chair in Sustainable Economics perhaps in parallel with Bradford University’s Peace Studies course. Other Friends suggested ideas from their Meetings which we be done in the here and now such as connecting with local Transition Groups to work on sustainability projects, or writing to MPs asking them to support a “Robin Hood’ tax on banking transactions which would be spent on sustainable energy development and projects to alleviate poverty. Other Meetings were greening their meeting houses and many individuals were taking steps in their own homes. We are all encouraged to find out as much as we can and meetings are invited to formulate our own ideas, knowing that we can be supported by Friends throughout Britain and by the resources and personnel at QPSW, as well as many other like-minded organizations. We know that the tasks ahead are daunting but a long journey starts with a single step.

ADVICE AND QUERY

We were asked to write this in small groups of delegates from different areas of Britain. We found it a very useful exercise to revisit what we had learned and help us think about the tasks ahead. Our East of England group wrote as follows:

The world is neither fair nor just. Access to the Earth and our resources is inequitably shared. We are degrading the earth's living systems. The ways in which we live generate conflict. Issues of social justice and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked. The way in which the world's financial systems are arranged is making the situation worse.

Do you empower yourself by acquiring more knowledge of current economic issues? Do you take steps to inform others in your Area Meeting of your concerns? Do you hold public meetings to consider the struggles and issue we all face?

Tread carefully and remember that there is that of God in everyone. Deep active listening and reflection should be our approach. Hear those with technical expertise and seek clarity where necessary. Be conscious that the human cost of inequality and un-sustainability urges us to action sooner rather than later. Work collaboratively as this is not the time for isolated individual action alone. Seek strength in your community.

RESOURCES

I have made a list of books, essays, films, video links that I heard about over the weekend where we can gain further knowledge (It will follow later on this website)

The Quakernomics blog www.quakerweb.org.uk/blog/ contains a wealth of information about the topic and we can add our own thoughts and comments to the blog quite easily.

QUESTIONS FOR US IN LEICESTER AREA MEETING

In our Yearly Minute 23 Friends are asked **to work together in their Meetings at Area and Local level to inform ourselves of the issues and to discern paths of action** that we can take individually, within our meetings, and by the Society of Friends. To start us off we have been given a set of questions that we are invited to consider – perhaps in the form of conversations.

I invite each Local Meeting to consider one or two of the questions overleaf. You can of course consider more than one if you wish, but I shall be particularly pleased to receive a short written response to the questions I have highlighted for your local meeting.

I will put any responses you send me together as a Leicester AM response on the Quakernomic blog – as other Area Meetings will do.

QUESTIONS FOR US IN LEICESTER AREA MEETING

- What do you see as the relationship between economics (production, consumption, marketing, financial institutions) and faith?
- What helps and what hinders you in making these connections and acting faithfully in relation to the economic system?

(RUGBY MEETING)

- How do you feel influenced and constrained by the economic system? Do you think that our current economic system is broken?
- If so, how might it be 'fixed'? Or, what can/should we put in its place?

(LEICESTER MEETING)

- How do we face our responsibility as one of the nations which has benefited at another's expense, to redress our inequalities? Yearly Meeting has asked us to move out of our comfort zone. How do you define your comfort zone and what might moving out of it mean for you?
- How might we support one another as a Quaker community to engage more powerfully and faithfully with our economic system?

(LOUGHBOROUGH)

- Yearly Meeting encouraged us to 'practice speaking truth to power at local level' – what will that mean in practice? What truth will you be speaking?
- Can you see opportunities or merely obstacles?

(OAKHAM MEETING)