



## Starting a sustainability group in your Quaker meeting

Since 2002 Living Witness has supported the developing Quaker witness to sustainable living. By early 2008 about 60 local meetings around Britain were involved. Activities have included environmental audits, study groups, workshops and events on sustainability, community and political engagement and practical projects like tree planting. Roughly one third of the meetings have established ongoing activities, processes or groups. This leaflet aims to share a little of our experience of what works.

**Practical steps** We don't have a standard formula for Friends to engage their meetings in sustainability witness, but some practical steps can help:

- Talk to others in your meeting about your concern and find others who share it.
- Join LWP; attend one of our gatherings to get ideas from other Friends. If possible, come with another Friend from your meeting.
- See whether Friends in your meeting would like us to run a short workshop after a meeting for worship, or a day event – e.g. to explore their concerns, develop an understanding of the emerging Quaker witness, and identify any action they might feel led to take.
- Try an informal shared meal and discussion or worship sharing session in your meeting.
- Invite some Friends to look at your greenhouse footprint together, using the self-evaluation guide on our website.
- See if a few Friends would like to try out *Be the Change*, the LWP booklet of study group sessions (PDF from our website).
- Perhaps bring the concern to your local business meeting – the timing and usefulness depends on your meeting and your relationship with it.

# What works in developing a Quaker witness?

## 1. Get to know the people you are trying to engage

Engaging others in sustainability issues can feel difficult. Quakers are mostly independently minded and don't like being told what to think. They are often busy enough with social and political action, and already wrestling with tensions in seeking to live ethically. Sustainability may seem to be just one more moral and practical challenge.

**The key is to know and be known by Friends in your meeting.** This probably means listening more than talking and taking time to participate in the spiritual, social and business life of the meeting.

Quakers may take time to see that they have something positive to offer, rather than responding out of guilt. That contribution may lie, for example, in linking sustainability, peace and other issues, in the commitment most Friends to living their values, and in Quaker approaches to discernment and community. Finding pathways to sustainability requires us to work with diverse worldviews and develop a collective will for change. Quaker values and practices have a special contribution to make.

Most Friends *are* concerned about social and environmental sustainability and in particular about climate change. On the whole they live greener than average lives. Quaker groups participating in the Global Action Plan<sup>1</sup> *EcoTeams* programme generated about a fifth of the UK average level of non-recycled waste.

Quakers' understanding of environmental issues, especially climate change, is based primarily on the broadcast and print media. Their responses are similar to those of other concerned people.

Most do not feel they have a full grasp of the science, of the significance of their own lifestyles and actions, or of the options for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. They are unsure what to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Global Action Plan is an international network of national organisations (GAP-UK in Britain) that use Eco-Teams and other approaches to encourage sustainable lifestyles. They provide a workbook and facilitator training for small groups to work together, monitoring and reducing their household waste and use of energy, gas and water. See [www.globalactionplan.org.uk](http://www.globalactionplan.org.uk). A lower cost and more adaptable alternative is EcoCell, developed for Christian Ecology Link by Pete Redwood, a Scarborough Friend. See [www.christian-ecology.org.uk](http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk)

- Their emotional responses include guilt, frustration, fear and apathy and can act as barriers to action.
- Some are enthusiastic about particular solutions, e.g. technologies or actions that they believe government should take.
- A few are preoccupied with the “climate sceptic” narrative, perhaps wanting to believe that it isn’t really happening.

## **2. Groups thrive on diversity, inclusivity and a listening culture**

There is no single best approach to developing a sustainability group. People and meetings have diverse gifts, cultures and personalities. They usually need to find their own way. Quaker groups tend to focus initially on practical action, e.g. to green their meeting houses. Some move on to engage in the deeper and more complex human dimensions of sustainability. Features of some of the most successful groups are:

- shared leadership (two or three well-motivated people to animate the group and keep things going)
- an inclusive, listening culture, valuing diversity in approaches and priorities, responsive to the interests of the group
- a mixture of activities – spiritual practice, discussion, learning, practical projects etc.
- working on multiple levels – Friends’ own lives, the meeting, the local community etc.
- regular meetings to sustain continuity
- shared food, often on LOAF principles (local, organic, animal friendly, Fairtrade)

It works particularly well to have regular social/shared meal events setting up and hearing reports from smaller, short-term action groups (e.g. of 3 or 4 people).

## **3. It doesn’t work to try and get everyone do the same thing**

Individuals in a group are likely to follow different paths. Some may start by focusing on their own lifestyle. Others may need practical projects such as tree-planting or in policy campaigns. It may not work to try and get everyone do the same thing. Often those who start with one focus

gradually broaden their approach (moving towards congruence of lives, words and actions).

#### **4. Be patient and do ask for help!**

Once we are identified as “Green Friends”, it can take considerable time and consistent, gentle, non-judgmental communication before others feel safe with us. Some will always see us as “loonies” even though they respect what we’re doing.

Groups benefit considerably from the reassurance, support, stimulation and resources available in a wider network. LWP offers workshops in your local, area or regional meeting to help find a way forward. We also have lots of resources that you can download from [www.livingwitness.org.uk](http://www.livingwitness.org.uk).

Our Link Group gatherings, summer camps and summer schools are opportunities to share ideas and experience with other Friends wrestling with similar issues. It helps to know that we are part of a wider process.

Some groups are represented at LWP events for a year or two before finding their feet and blossoming into action. Patience is crucial.

#### **5. Change is possible, and it can be a joyful experience**

Many members of our groups have made substantial changes in their lives – e.g. giving up flying or driving, taking on an allotment, changing their diets or washing habits. Some have installed micro-generation equipment or very high levels of home insulation. A few have developed very low impact lifestyles, generating less than 5% of the UK average waste per person (after recycling and composting), and producing less than 20% of UK average greenhouse gas emissions.

We have found that lifestyle change is possible; that it is much easier with the support of an ongoing group; and that it can be a fascinating and joyful experience bringing our lives into harmony with our values.

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**Would you like a Living Witness talk or workshop in your meeting?  
To discuss your needs or for more information please see  
[www.livingwitness.org.uk](http://www.livingwitness.org.uk) or contact Laurie Michaelis at  
[laurie@livingwitness.org.uk](mailto:laurie@livingwitness.org.uk), on 01433 659329 or at  
Living Witness, Quaker Community, Water Lane, Bamford, Hope  
Valley, S33 0DA.**