

Paths to change

Alan Ray-Jones describes a recent meeting in Exeter about economic systems, justice and the planet

In the UK the top one per cent own more property wealth than the other ninety-nine per cent in total. This was just one of the startling facts discussed at a recent gathering at Exeter Meeting House on 13 October focused on economics, justice and the planet.

Stewart Wallis, executive director of the New Economics Foundation, and Symon Hill, associate director of Ekklesia, a Christian and Quaker journalist, were the main speakers.

Despite limited publicity, the Meeting house was full, with eighty-five to ninety attending, including non-Quakers.

Stewart described our current market system, based on usury, as morally bankrupt. It is unsustainable, unfair and unstable and does not provide wellbeing for most people on the planet. Up until forty years ago the planet could sustain its population, but no longer. Soon we'll need three planets. Essential resources like topsoil, fish and minerals are dwindling rapidly.

Climate change is now, not in the future – Arctic sea ice is a quarter of what it was in 1980 and may vanish within five years, with unknown consequences. In India land distribution is grossly unfair for millions. In the Middle East joblessness is a huge problem: fifty million new jobs are needed. In the USA four hundred Americans have more wealth than the poorest one hundred and fifty million put together. Some countries have massive surpluses, others massive deficits. The banking system is as unstable as it was in 2007. Increasing efficiency is pointless if systems are inherently unsafe. More income doesn't lead to increased happiness above a certain amount.

In short, we have a values crisis. But change is possible: unfortunately many politicians still think that markets are the answer to everything. We need a 'Great Transition'. Stewart said that it only takes ten per cent of a population to effect change. Danny Dorling, in the Salter lecture at Yearly Meeting 2012, pointed out that the income level of many Quakers puts them in the nine per cent band immediately below the top one per cent; they are opinion formers and voters. We can't sit on our hands, Friends!

Symon Hill was equally forthright. He pointed out that Christianity has a very mixed history, with many colluding with power and the status quo, but always with a radical element, too (remember Occupy, St Paul's and Giles Fraser). Adults teach children to share their toys with others, but when he was six he noticed that adults didn't share with their neighbours. He went to the Conservative Party conference and asked questions – he was told that some millionaires work hard to earn their money, but is that a virtue for an arms dealer? Don't cleaners work hard too?

Quakers didn't escape unscathed; we are apt to get too focused on our personal virtue. We don't like taking sides, but, if an elephant is standing on the tail of a mouse, it is the elephant who will thank us for our neutrality.

Many Devon and Cornwall Quakers stayed on in the afternoon. We divided into groups. Mine was concerned with political lobbying. We discussed the possibility of getting together to write well-researched 'standard letters' to politicians that could be shared with other Friends to adapt and send to their MPs if they felt unable to start with a blank sheet. Other groups were concerned with building a new economy; with credit unions and the regeneration of the cooperative movement; with building alliances; and with forming local wellbeing services.

We thank the speakers; also Raymond Thomson, Gill Westcott, Gerald Conyngham and others who helped from Exeter Meeting; and Vernon White and the Devon and Cornwall arrangements committee, who sponsored the day.

Alan is a member of Devon Area Meeting (Tavistock).