

PATHS TO CHANGE: ECONOMIC SYSTEMS, JUSTICE AND THE PLANET

Stuart Wallis, Director of the New Economics Foundation, and Symon Hill, who introduced himself as Associate Director of Ecclesia, a Christian and a Quaker journalist, were the main speakers at the Gathering at Exeter Meeting House on Saturday 13 October.

Despite limited publicity the Meeting House was full, with 85 to 90 attending including non-Quakers. The subject is of major concern to many.

Stuart described our current market system, based on usury, as morally bankrupt. It is unsustainable, unfair, unstable, and does not provide well-being for most people on the planet. Up to 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: 50 million new jobs are needed. In the USA 400 Americans have more wealth than the poorest 150 million put together. In the UK the top 1% own more property wealth than the other 99% in total. 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. Like Danny Dorling in the Salter lecture at YM 2012, who pointed out that the income level of many Quakers puts them in the 9% band immediately below the top 1%; that they are opinion formers and vote, Stuart said that it only takes 10% of a population to effect change. 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 Dr 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 Tory 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, and don't cleaners work hard too? Quakers didn't escape unscathed: we are apt to get too focussed 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 which could be provided to 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 co-operative movement; with building alliances; and with forming local well-being 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 Ray-Jones, 15 October 2012