

## Quakers & Ecospirituality: Spiritual Grounding for Climate Action

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In this time of climate crisis, what can Friends offer, and what would be helpful for Friends to learn in order to contribute to a more just and sustainable present and future? This article explores how the rhythm of contemplation and social justice action in Quaker worship and practise can be used to catalyse climate action. It also discusses the definition of ecospirituality and ways Friends could incorporate ecological aspects into their social action to more holistically address climate change. Potential ecospiritual actions are suggested.

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A quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, the impacts of the human-caused climate and ecological crises are felt regularly and with harmful impacts due to extreme weather events, with record-breaking temperature anomalies, storms, droughts, glacial melts, increased wildfires, and other previously unprecedented occurrences happening with astonishing regularity.<sup>1</sup> Climate change and interrelated ecological crises such as extinction, habitat fragmentation, and ecological degradation are the social justice issues of our time. Impacts of the climate and environmental crises are experienced disproportionately by those with least power—and often those who did the least to cause climate change—particularly people of colour, Indigenous groups, low-income people, and those from the Global South, as well as species other than *homo Sapiens*.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the climate and ecological crises are caused by and cause conflicts over ‘natural resources’ and land. For example, conflicts have existed for decades over fossil fuel regions, which has caused the climate crisis through greenhouse gas emissions, and due to the climate crisis, there are now conflicts over rights to unpolluted water sources.<sup>3</sup> Making this an even greater social justice issue, the climate and ecological crises not only impact those who are currently living, but also all other people and creatures who could potentially live in the future. This is not a problem in the distant future, but needs to be addressed immediately. In ‘Global warming in the pipeline’, Hansen, et al. point out that if the current situation is left unchecked, the planet may warm by 10°C (approximately 18°F) with the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (GHGs) that have already been emitted, since it takes many years for the impacts of GHGs to cycle through Earth systems. Under that scenario, though people may be able to find parts of the planet that are liveable, these temperatures would not be liveable

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the cited paper describes the human and economic impacts of Europe’s 2025 summer of extreme heat and projects modelling to show what will occur in the near future without changing our emissions trajectory: Usman, S., Fernández, G. G., and Parker, M., ‘Going NUTS: The regional impact of extreme climate events over the medium term,’ *European Economic Review* 178 (2025), 105081, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2025.105081>. The following paper shows an additional 41,380 annual deaths in the United States of America from 2011–2020 due to wildfire smoke, with projections of 26,500–30,040 excess annual deaths by 2050; in addition to the harm to human life, the paper calculates the economic damage at \$608 billion annually by 2050: Qiu, M., Li, J., Gould, C. F., Jing, R., Kelp, M., Childs, M. L., Wen, J., Xie, Y., Lin, M., Kiang, M. V., Heft-Neal, S., Diffenbaugh, N. S., and Burke, M., ‘Wildfire smoke exposure and mortality burden in the US under climate change,’ *Nature* (2025), <https://doi-org.uportland.idm.oclc.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09611-w>.

<sup>2</sup> Lee, H. and Romero, J. (eds.), *Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report, Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Geneva, Switzerland: IPCC, 2023, pp. 35–115, at 48–51, doi: [10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647](https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647).

<sup>3</sup> Swain, A., ‘Transboundary Water Security in a Warming World: Conflict Risks, Cooperation Pathways, and Policy Imperatives,’ *Trends Research and Advisory*, 03 September 2025, <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/transboundary-water-security-in-a-warming-world-conflict-risks-cooperation-pathways-and-policy-imperatives/>.

for most current species, would decimate ecosystems, and would move the planet's climate into an entirely different system that could not be reversed after certain tipping points are reached. Hansen, et al. state that mitigations can still be enacted to ensure the GHGs are recaptured before having these effects, but the window to do so before we hit global tipping points is likely to close in the 2020s.<sup>4</sup>

As the human population continues to use more resources than we need, as we emit greenhouse gases and disrupt the climate systems that make this planet comfortable for human and other current life, we make it less possible for people and other species in the future to live comfortably and for the planet to continue to sustain current species. As a denomination that has participated in movements for social justice and liberation over the last few centuries, will the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) take meaningful action to reverse climate and ecological damage, and to work toward healing our planetary community?

Friends have a strong history of involvement in movements for social change, although there are also valid and important critiques that can hopefully lead future Friends toward more equitable action. The Quaker emphasis on listening together to the Spirit and acting on what they hear can serve as a pattern for Friends today in relation to the climate crisis: Friends can listen to the Spirit's invitation to mitigate the climate crisis and to transform their individual and collective behaviours. Although Quaker spirituality and practise in the past has tended to emphasise equality of all people, Friends would do well to learn about and practise ecospirituality, incorporating awareness of the community of all life, and intentionally developing a sense of interconnectedness and belonging within that broader community.

This article will explore ways in which the spirituality practised by Friends can serve as grounding for social action to mitigate the climate and ecological crises, and how Quaker traditions and practises need to expand and grow to address the challenges of environmental and climate justice. The paper develops a conceptual framework bringing together the fields of Quaker spirituality and ecospirituality to show how the two fields can inform and enhance one another: for Friends, bringing interpretive meaning to care for the earth as an interconnected practise alongside other social justice action, and for those practising ecospirituality, a broader community of allies and a deeper integration of social justice.

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<sup>4</sup> Hansen, J. E., Sato, M., Simons, L., Nazarenko, L. S., Sangha, I., Kharecha, P., Zachos, J. C., von Schuckmann, K., Loeb, N. G., Osman, M. B., Jin, Q., Tselioudis, G., Jeong, E., Laci, A., Ruedy, R., Russell, R., Cao, J., Li, J., 'Global warming in the pipeline', *Oxford Open Climate Change* 3/1 (2023), kgad008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfclm/kgad008>.

First, I will describe spirituality and ecospirituality. Then I will discuss what Quakers have to offer and to learn from and about ecospirituality. Finally, I will close with ideas and suggestions of what it might look like for Quaker individuals and meetings to enact ecospirituality as participants among human communities and the community of all life.

## I. Quaker Spirituality and Ecospirituality

Quakers have an inherited spirituality received from Western cultures as well as themes drawn from Judaism and Christianity, and also an approach to spirituality that is unique to the tradition. Though some Friends are already incorporating ecospiritual understandings and practices, it is not yet a widespread or clearly defined aspect of Quakerism. Therefore, this section of the paper will offer descriptions of Quaker spirituality and ecospirituality, some of the background of these fields, and the ways these ideas can be enhanced when brought into conversation through a conceptual framework to develop a Quaker ecospirituality.

In order to consider what ecospirituality is, it is first necessary to define spirituality and what is particular about it among Friends. Spirituality relates to direct experiences of and encounters with the Divine, or with something broader than oneself. It is often characterised by feelings of unity, belonging, and belovedness.<sup>5</sup> For Friends, direct experience of the Divine catalysed the movement that became the Religious Society of Friends when George Fox experienced ‘one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to [his] condition’, and when he felt this, his ‘heart did leap for joy’.<sup>6</sup> The truth that each person has access to direct spiritual experience is foundational for the Quaker tradition. For many Friends, this direct experience of the Divine leads to outward actions in support of social and economic justice, peace, and equality.

Ecospirituality involves a recognition that spiritual experiences happen in a body and a context, in connection with the material world. Rather than a person’s soul or spirit transcending a bodily cage to escape into the spiritual world, ecospirituality claims that spiritual experiences put us in relationship: in relationship with God, with oneself, with other people, and with the whole of creation, with all other species and with the land. The root ‘eco’ comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means house or household.<sup>7</sup> Ecospirituality recognises human interconnectedness with the whole

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<sup>5</sup> Billet, M. I., Baimel, A., Sahakari, S. S., Schaller, M., Norenzayan, A., ‘Ecospirituality: The psychology of moral concern for nature’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 87 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102001>.

<sup>6</sup> Fox, G., ‘Journal’, in Nickalls, J. L. (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1997 [1694], p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Wheeler, R., *Ecospirituality: An Introduction*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022, pp. 1–2.

household of the planetary community. As one becomes more ecospiritually aware, one can find and inhabit more fully a place of belonging within the community of all life.

Additionally, the understanding of the 'spirit' comes down to the Quaker tradition through the Christian and Jewish recorded experiences of the Spirit in the Bible, written in Hebrew and Greek. In those languages, the word 'spirit' has to do with life and breath, as it does in English in words such as 'respiration': drawing breath is to re-spirit oneself, to be filled again with the life of the Spirit, as God is shown breathing into the first human being, sculpted out of soil, in Gen. 2. Individuals share this life-breath with other species and other people by breathing in and out. This brings ethical relationships and the responsibility of acting justly into the work of ecospirituality: one can imagine oneself 'conspiring' with others for a just and sustainable world. As Friend and ecotheologian Laurel Kearns puts it, the act of 'con-spiring' is *breathing with the Spirit* and all creation in the most intimate, mutual, and vital act of living.<sup>8</sup>

Ecospirituality, then, makes clear that spiritual experience relates to embodiedness. Human beings necessarily experience the Divine in and through the natural world as people with bodies. While this has always been the case, the connection between the spiritual and material aspects of human lives has often been downplayed in Western cultures, so the insight that humans are related and interconnected with our planetary community must be relearned and recognised for those raised in such traditions. The hierarchical dualism inherited from Western traditions, where the spiritual and rational worlds are placed over and above material and embodied experiences, has led to a place in which humanity has attempted to control the natural world, seeing it as something to be conquered and dominated. This has resulted in the climate and ecological crises today, due to human actions to exploit people and land, extracting and using up resources faster than they can be replenished, and destroying ecosystems through habitat destruction and species extermination. This instrumental view of other human beings, species, and ecological systems contrasts with an ecospiritual worldview, which understands human relatedness with other species and earth systems, and that human health and flourishing is bound up with that of other human and ecological communities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kearns, L., 'Con-Spiring Together: Breathing for Justice', in Hobgood, L. and Bauman, W. (eds.), *Bloomsbury Handbook on Religion and Nature: The Elements*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 117–130.

<sup>9</sup> Beringer, A., 'On Ecospirituality: True, Indigenous, Western', *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* 15/3 (1999), pp. 17–22; Billet, M. I., Baimel, A., Sahakari, S. S., Schaller, M., Norenzayan, A., 'Ecospirituality: The psychology of moral concern for nature', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 87 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2023.102001>; Coates, J., 'Ecospiritual Approaches: A Path to Decolonizing Social Work', in Gray, M., Coates, J., Yellow Bird, M., Hetherington, T. (eds.), *Decolonizing Social Work*, London: Routledge, 2016, pp. 63–86.

The separation between body and spirit, or material and spiritual, is a contrived dichotomy. This dichotomy is largely imported from cultures other than the Jewish and Christian worldviews: in the Bible, God considers creation 'good' (Gen. 1), and the covenant God created with God's people includes caring for the land. The idea of a dualistic hierarchy where the material world is evil came in from surrounding cultures (including Greek philosophy) and was considered heretical by early followers of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, these ideas have cropped up throughout Western Christianity, with the effect of disconnecting religious belief from one's embedded context. In this way, a form of Christianity was able to become the religion of empire, supporting a hierarchy that legitimises conquering people and controlling other parts of the natural world, privileging humanity over 'nature' so the latter can be exploited for the sake of the former.<sup>11</sup> This version of Christianity was communicated through the Roman Empire and the empires of Europe, and now through the Christian nationalism present in the United States of America, even though it is not the idea significantly supported by the Bible. When Quakerism formed in seventeenth century England, Quakers were pushing back on this imperialist understanding of Christianity in many ways, although they did not express conscious awareness of the implications of this dualistic hierarchy between the spiritual and material for their relationship to the land and other species.<sup>12</sup>

Though many individuals and cultures have understood the interconnectedness of humanity with other species and the ecological and climate systems in which they live, this is something that is having to be relearned within the cultures and epistemologies of those descending from Western worldviews. It is arguably simply part of spirituality that human beings experience the Divine in and through lived experiences in bodies, and that a body is necessarily connected to and sustained by the interconnected community in which it is embedded. Since spirituality and embodiedness have been thought of separately and antithetically for so many centuries, however, it is necessary to draw attention to the 'eco' part of spirituality at this point in history, to consciously work to recover awareness of humanity's spiritual connectedness to and through the rest of the natural world.

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<sup>10</sup> Groups such as the Docetists, Manichaeans, and Gnostics were deemed heretical and had a variety of beliefs, with a central tenet being that God could not have interacted with the material world because it would taint God.

<sup>11</sup> This dualistic hierarchy is not only limited to spiritual vs. material and humanity vs. nature, but also men vs. women, white people vs. people of colour, and other dichotomies that are viewed within this way of thinking as binaries and as legitimation for dominant groups to oppress those seen as lower on this hierarchy. Eaton, H. and Lorentzen, L. A. (eds.), *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Bock, C., 'Quakers & Creation Care: Potentials and Pitfalls for an Ecotheology of Friends' in Bock, C. and Pothoff, S. (eds.), *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends Association for Higher Education, pp. 69–95.

As people have been articulating this recovery of an ecospiritual awareness, studies have defined and described ecospirituality in a variety of ways. Lincoln states, ‘Ecospirituality incorporates an intuitive and embodied awareness of all life and engages a relational view of person to planet, inner to outer landscape, and soul to soil’.<sup>13</sup> The following themes or essences of ecospirituality have been suggested:

- Tending, dwelling, reverence, connectedness, and sentience<sup>14</sup>
- Entering a New Time Zone, Environmental Reawakening, Finding a New Rhythm, and Becoming a Healing Environment<sup>15</sup>
- ‘Nature (in the sense of the natural world), the land, landscape, environments and/or the Earth are of ultimate importance and a source of meaning in one’s life; ... “God” (the sacred, holy, divine, Spirit) is in nature (immanent in the world), yet of an “otherworldly” (transcendent) dimension.... Commitment to the Earth is reflected in moral conduct which respects the interdependence of all life.... [T]he universe is believed to be or experienced as a living cosmos of which the physical-material world can be considered to be the “least Real”’.<sup>16</sup>
- Creativity, care, wildness, growth, all the things that cannot be contained and controlled and that lead toward a profusion of life<sup>17</sup>

Each of these different descriptions gets to the idea of a relational connection to something larger than oneself, that includes but is not limited to the natural world. Rather than an instrumental or transactional view of the natural world and religious faith, ecospirituality includes care and love in ways that tend toward healing/reconciliation, justice, and equity.

Finally, ecospirituality is integrally connected to the place or context in which one finds oneself. A place includes the whole social-ecological system, as well as parts of the human community such as psychological states, political and economic systems, and cultures, including faith communities. A space becomes a place due to the historical meanings connected to and attributed to that place, based on human experiences, knowledge of the land, and so forth.<sup>18</sup> Ecospirituality is not something that

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<sup>13</sup> Lincoln, V., ‘Ecospirituality: a pattern that connects’, *Journal of Holistic Nursing* 18/3 (2000), pp. 227–244, at 227.

<sup>14</sup> Lincoln, ‘Ecospirituality: a pattern that connects’, p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney, C. and Barrere, C., ‘Ecospirituality: The Experience of Environmental Meditation in Patients with Cardiovascular Disease’, *Holistic Nursing Practice* (Nov/Dec 2009), pp. 361–369, at 361.

<sup>16</sup> Beringer, ‘On Ecospirituality’, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, P. A., ‘Green Lap, Brown Embrace, Blue Body: The Ecospirituality of Alice Walker’, *Cross Currents* (Winter 1998/99), pp. 471–487.

<sup>18</sup> Bock, C., ‘Developing a Quaker Theology of Place: Community Flourishing in an Era of Climate Change’, *Quaker Religious Thought* 140 (Spring 2023), pp. 5–14.

disconnects one from a place in some sort of universal, generic spirituality happening somewhere in the disembodied ether, but something that happens in a particular place in relation to the community of life and the land.

To connect to the Friends' tradition, George Fox shared about a spiritual experience he had where he felt like he went back into the Garden of Eden through the flaming sword of the angel set there to guard it (Gen. 3:24). After this vision, he reported his senses were heightened and changed.<sup>19</sup> It was not simply a spiritual experience, it was an embodied experience that influenced the way he related to the rest of creation through his bodily senses.

Essentially, ecospirituality is about human beings experiencing the Divine and in so doing, feeling an interconnected sense of belonging in the community of all life. This opens up awareness to collaborating or 'con-spiring' in solidarity with other people and species to build the new creation, which might also be termed a Beloved Community or a just and sustainable future.

In this time of climate crisis, recovering this perspective is existentially important. The climate crisis and other ecological degradations are becoming increasingly evident. Each reader can probably think of recent climate emergencies nearby, or weather anomalies that have impacted one's region. Extreme temperatures, droughts, and floods in many parts of the world will soon impact our global food system. Melting ice is leading toward tipping points that would change the cycling of the ocean, which impacts storms, makes it challenging for aquatic ecosystems to thrive, and could cross thresholds into climate systems vastly different from those humanity has yet experienced.<sup>20</sup> And yet, it is likely that most of those reading this article are still using fossil fuels in their vehicles, to heat homes, and to take aeroplane trips. Many people continue to eat food shipped from distant lands that requires destroyed habitats, and in the case of cows, food that emits massive amounts of greenhouse gases itself.

It is likely that many of those reading this article know most of this, and probably feel guilty about it, but it is challenging to know what to do about it. Since the human community has delayed taking action to ameliorate climate change for so long, it is now going to take radical and swift action in this decade in order to ensure that humans and other current species can continue to live on this planet.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Fox, *Journal*, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Rahmstorf, S., 'Is the Atlantic Overturning Circulation Approaching a Tipping Point?', *Oceanography* 37/3 (2024), pp. 16–29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27333920>.

<sup>21</sup> For a helpful explanation of climate tipping points, see: Igini, M., 'The Tipping Points of Climate Change: How Will Our World Change?', *Earth.org*, January 11, 2024, <https://earth.org/tipping-points-of-climate-change/>.

## II. What Friends Can Offer and Learn Regarding Ecospirituality

Western empires (and expressions of Christianity) have emphasised domination, exploitation, and extraction and have set in motion the destruction of climate and ecological systems now being experienced. Shifting to an ecospiritual view can remind people of human interconnectedness and interdependence with other species and with the cycling of air, water, and soil that make current life possible on Earth. An awareness of humanity's relationship to other creatures and earth systems clarifies the importance of taking care of one another and of living in ways that the planetary community can sustain into the foreseeable future. This shift in perspective is sorely needed in order to have a chance of staying within planetary limits that are conducive to human life. Therefore, it is of urgent importance to consider: What do Friends have to offer in the way of ecospirituality, and what do Friends need to learn from an ecospiritual perspective?

Ecospirituality is a concept but does not have a set of practices or a specific community to practise it with. It also can be experienced as a set of feelings that connect one to other parts of the natural world, but as a concept, it does not necessarily have the ability to invite those who have had ecospiritual experiences to take action to care for the earth or to bring about a more just and equitable society in addressing climate and environmental impacts.

### *a) Combining Contemplation and Action*

Therefore, Quaker spirituality can offer a rhythm of contemplation and action. Friends from a variety of traditions have connected spirituality and action: they practise corporate contemplation during worship and this often leads to action in their everyday lives. Ideally, Friends listen together for leadings from the Spirit, in dialogue with the particular concerns and needs of their time periods, and this spurs action. The rhythm of contemplation and action helps action stay rooted in spiritual leading: what Friends hear in times of individual and communal contemplation leads to action, and spiritual reflection does not withdraw Friends from the world but leads to relationship with it.

### *b) Commitment to Social Justice*

As Friends have practised this contemplation and action cycle, they have been led to involvement in social concerns, at times in the form of civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action. For example, people in seventeenth century England refused to give 'hat honour' to indicate people were of a higher social class. By refusing to give hat honour and instead treating everyone equally, Friends ended up in jail, and they also ended up in jail for a variety of other reasons for resisting laws they found unjust.

John Woolman from the eighteenth century in what is now called the United States of America was prophetic regarding the intersecting injustices of slavery and a materialistic society that overused resources and exploited people and land. Due partially to his leading from the Spirit, many Friends eventually collectively refused to purchase products made by enslaved people. Some engaged in overt civil disobedience and others worked behind the scenes to host people escaping enslavement via the Underground Railroad.<sup>22</sup> The Friends history of connecting contemplative discernment with collective action on social justice issues could be really helpful in enacting ecospirituality. Additionally, Woolman was already aware of the connections between exploitation of people and land with violence and injustice: ‘May we look upon our treasures, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions’.<sup>23</sup>

### ***c) Spiritual Sustenance for Counter-Cultural Practises***

When the Friends community has been at its best, Friends have acted as a community, discerning together and taking action together, although many times the Quakers now considered exemplary were ones that were not particularly appreciated at the time.<sup>24</sup> They often had to act as lone prophetic voices in their meetings, or among a small group. A Quaker community, however, is a likely place to find a group to practise spiritual listening and to take action with.

Potentially, the Friends habit of spending time in spiritual contemplation can guide towards a more just and sustainable way. Listening to the Spirit together can prepare individuals with spiritual sustenance as well as personal and corporate discernment. For many who have become used to living in a society that is far from just or sustainable, it requires courage and willingness to be profoundly counter-cultural. Though it may be relatively clear what would need to happen to shift toward a more just and sustainable community, having the spiritual fortitude and the bond of a true community are difficult to come by. Listening to the Spirit in the midst of radical community committed to act on what is heard may be a space where enough spiritual strength and depth of community might develop.

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<sup>22</sup> Though Friends did eventually do more for abolition of slavery than many other denominations, they were by no means perfect. Julye and McDaniel point out in their important work, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*, that white Friends worked toward abolition but did not immediately integrate Quaker meetings or treat formerly enslaved people as equal. McDaniel, D. and Julye, V., *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship: Quakers, African Americans, and the Myth of Racial Justice*, Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Woolman, J., ‘A Plea for the Poor’, in Whittier, J. G. (ed.), *The Journal of John Woolman and ‘A Plea for the Poor’*, repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1998 [1871, 1774], p. 241.

<sup>24</sup> McDaniel and Julye, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*.

#### ***d) Courageous Communities for Advocacy and Activism***

Friends also have a history of speaking truth to power. Quaker communities could build off this history as they move toward a more ecospiritual approach to life in their meetings and society. While some other ‘peace churches’<sup>25</sup> chose to enact their sense of calling to build a peaceable kingdom by withdrawing from regular society and instead created alternative communities as a ‘city built on a hill’ (Mt. 5:14), Friends chose to operate within society, using political, economic, and other leverage points to try to shift the laws and practices of their communities towards greater equity. Though Friends are not perfect, they at least have a history and cultural understanding as a faith community that part of their calling as a Society of Friends is to refuse to cooperate with unjust laws, and instead to change them. During this inflection point in human history where the global infrastructure, transportation networks, economic assumptions, manufacturing practices, and the ways we collectively produce and distribute food must be overhauled in order to continue to have a comfortable climate on this planet, the focused attention and courageous action of Friends is sorely needed. This is not to say that Friends are necessarily always the ones to be leading these actions, and it is likely that Friends need to learn from others who are already engaging in such tactics, following their lead and the leading of the Spirit. The history of Friends’ engagement in political advocacy and nonviolent direct action, grounded in the Spirit, can ideally offer a basis for taking collective action to shift laws and economic structures.

#### ***e) Tools for Corporate Decision Making***

Though other groups work on care for the earth in a variety of important ways, perhaps what Friends can offer is spiritual grounding and adapting tools Friends communities have developed for corporate decision making. Since Friends do not have particular activities that are considered spiritual disciplines or required spiritual practices (believing that every moment holds potential for sacred encounter), anything Friends feel led by the Spirit to do can be spiritual practises. This offers more flexibility than some other faith traditions (although there are other faith groups that consider, for example, the call to ‘act justly’ in Mic. 6:8 as a call to actions that bring about justice as a spiritual practise). Tools within Quaker traditions such as listening to the Spirit to guide corporate decisions, anchor committees, and meetings for clearness/clearness committees could be very useful in helping individuals and groups discern which actions to take and how to support one another in those actions. These tools help

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<sup>25</sup> I use the term ‘peace church’ because it is the term used of denominations that take Jesus seriously when he said to love our neighbours and our enemies. My grandfather, Ralph K. Beebe, liked to point out that the rest of the denominations should be called ‘historic war churches’, since they are the ones acting contrary to Jesus’ instructions.

Friends engage in spiritual practices together and on their own, honing and helping them focus their sense of the Spirit's leadings, and offering contemplative rituals that can lead people to courageous action.

***f) Learning Connection with the Land and Sense of Place***

By incorporating ecospirituality into Quakerism, Friends can encourage one another to practise spiritual connection to one another, the land, and the Spirit. This can ideally help people be able to engage in activism and in shifting cultural values for a longer period of time without experiencing burnout. Friends could develop a sense of spiritual meaning connected to actions that care for the land, from personal choices such as refusing to use single-use plastic, to actions for system change such as getting in the way of fossil fuel infrastructure.

Friends could learn from ecospirituality about being part of a larger story connected to a place and the community of life; this can help sustain people through challenges. The Quaker understanding of spirituality has often drawn from the dualistic hierarchy described earlier in this paper, a dualism which places value on the spirit over and against the body, so that attempts at spiritual connection are often practised as attempts to disconnect from or ignore the body. In Greek philosophy and Neoplatonism, the dualistic hierarchy of the spiritual and rational is considered good while the material is evil, rather than the belief in the goodness of creation and the embodied presence of God in the Jewish and Christian traditions out of which Quakerism developed.<sup>26</sup>

Ecospirituality encourages a different kind of spirituality than this dualistic rejection of the material: it is a spirituality that connects us to our bodies and reminds us of our connections to creation and the Spirit who breathes life into us all. Friends may sit in silent worship attempting to ignore the distractions from their bodily experience or from the world around them. Friends need to learn to bring together spirituality and embodiedness. Ecospirituality's focus on connection to the land and the community of all life is a connection of belonging in a place and with an entire ecosystem, and this understanding would bring a new level of depth to Quaker spirituality.

***g) Learning to be Sacramental***

Friends can learn from other faith traditions and cultures that practise rituals, liturgical acts, and formal spiritual disciplines to connect them to the land and the seasons. For example, Christian traditions that practise water baptism in a local river help draw

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<sup>26</sup> For more on this dualistic hierarchy and the challenge it poses for Friends, see: Bock,, 'Quakers & Creation Care', pp. 76-77.

people's awareness to the health and cleanliness of their local river. Communion with bread and grape juice or wine made from local grain and fruit connects people to the land, reminding them that when they eat the body and blood of Christ and join together as one spiritual body, they are also literally building their bodies based on sustenance from the land right around them. Indigenous groups with a long-term connection to a particular place hold rituals that connect them to the land and the rhythms of life in that particular place and that inform them about how to care for all their relatives into the seventh generation in the future. Friends have historically rejected physical expressions of sacraments, opting for spiritual meaning rather than empty ritual, but in this way, Friends may miss out on ways of materially connecting their bodies to their locations. This is not to say that Friends should necessarily practise specific physical sacraments, but that Friends might consider how else they might encourage sacramental and communal moments that connect themselves to God, one another, and the land.

#### ***h) Healing from Colonialism and Imperialism***

Additionally, Friends had a large gap in their understanding of peace and equality when it comes to settler colonialism. Friends have not collectively resisted or rejected imperialism on Turtle Island<sup>27</sup> or in other colonised places around the world. European and now American empires create ongoing situations of violence against people, extraction and overuse of resources, and exploitation of people's labour. Friends across history have generally asked oppressed people not to respond with violence, but have not enacted solidarity with them non-violently to keep an empire from destroying their cultures and lands.<sup>28</sup>

To fully live out ecospirituality, this needs to change, since the exploitation of people, land, and other parts of the natural world required by empire is not compatible with a just and sustainable community based in listening to the Spirit. By practicing an ecospirituality that reminds Friends of their connectedness to and reliance on all the other species and parts of the land that make up their local and global community, Friends can work on healing the harm done by thinking of the natural world as resources here solely for human consumption.

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<sup>27</sup> A term used by some Indigenous groups to refer to the continent often called North America.

<sup>28</sup> kunesh, t., 'Decolonizing Quaker Moves to Innocence: What Would It Take to Decolonize the "Quaker Peace Testimony"?', *Quaker Religious Thought* 139 (2022), pp. 33-43; Montiel, C. J., 'Decolonizing the Quaker Peace Testimony in the Global South', *Quaker Religious Thought* 139 (2022), pp. 18-26; Bock, C., 'Peace for Whom? Reconsidering the Peace Testimony in Light of Indigenous Land Theft, Racism, and Imperialism: A Case Study from Oregon', in Valentine, L. and Randazzo, C. (eds.), *Quakers and the Future of Peacemaking*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2024, pp. 182-213.

### III. Suggestions on Living Out Ecospirituality

Having offered some information about what ecospirituality is and why it is needed, ways that Friends are situated well to practise ecospirituality, and ways Friends could learn and grow in order to more fully practise ecospirituality, I now turn to considering ways that Quaker communities could live out ecospirituality. There are many ways that individuals can take personal action to reduce their environmental and climate impact, and it is likely that many Friends have made personal lifestyle changes with the intention of earth care. Individual actions are necessary for bringing about a more just and sustainable world, but they are not sufficient: we need collective action. Luckily, research shows social change can happen if 3.5% of the population is mobilised to demand that change.<sup>29</sup> There can be a tipping point where suddenly, a majority of the population can imagine and get on board with a societal shift. That is good news, but social movements can take a long time and can experience backlash as public interest wanes or as people are swayed by propaganda and disinformation. Movements for social change can take a long time, particularly if movement leaders become exhausted, so it is important to act together: not only as Friends, but with a larger movement for collective action. This can take many forms and will look different in each context. I will suggest four ways that Friends might engage in ecospirituality with their meetings and broader communities: 1) discerning together which earth care actions to take, 2) engaging in or supporting nonviolent direct action to disrupt fossil fuel use, 3) advocacy for better climate and environmental justice policies, and 4) participating in building neighbourhood climate resilience.

#### *a. Collective discernment for climate action*

First, I can imagine Friends listening together in waiting worship and in meetings for worship for business to discern what God is leading them to do together. Part of the most challenging work in relation to climate change (at least for those in ‘developed’ nations) is the internal work of breaking what is basically an addiction to fossil fuel and to all the ‘stuff’ considered essential to lead a ‘normal’ middle class or higher lifestyle. It takes discernment and courage to go against the social norms and assumptions that Friends may not have previously examined. It is especially challenging to do this work alone, and really challenging to do all at once, but together with a community and a step at a time, Friends can begin to break some of their dysfunctional and non-sustainable practices and build up more positive ways of living and engaging as a society.

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<sup>29</sup> Chenoweth, E., *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021.

For example, at first, a meeting or green team could listen in waiting worship together and decide to focus on one topic, such as food. Maybe each person takes steps to eat more sustainably, such as eating less or no meat, or sourcing as much food as possible from local farms. Perhaps this leads the group to learn and build relationships with farmers in their area, or community organisers and legislators who are working on policies about factory farms, or working with neighbours to grow and distribute organic food nearby. As they begin to take personal action together, they grow into ways they can take more collective action. This action could extend beyond the green team to the meeting or yearly meeting, or to the surrounding community. Perhaps the Quaker meeting coordinates with other faith communities in the town or region to offer education and to coordinate access to local food for more people in the neighbourhood.

#### ***b. Civil disobedience and nonviolent direct action***

The second opportunity to engage in ecospirituality is that one person or a small group of Friends may feel led to engage in civil disobedience or nonviolent direct action. As shared above, Friends have participated in civil disobedience since the early years of the Quaker movement, refusing to obey unjust laws and being taken to court; many were imprisoned. They did so publicly in order to draw attention to the injustice and to impact public opinion and, in so doing, cultural norms and assumptions. Friends who participated in the Underground Railroad practised civil disobedience, but this was not in public, because they needed to maintain the safety of those escaping slavery. Nonviolent direct action can take a range of forms that may or may not be illegal, such as boycotts, marches, picketing, sit-ins or teach-ins, and creative disruptions of events or meetings.<sup>30</sup> Not many social transformations towards more just and equitable societies have occurred without some form of nonviolent (or violent) resistance. Women were finally able to vote in the United States in 1920 due to decades of direct action by suffragettes engaging in marches, pickets, hunger strikes, and other tactics, in combination with political advocacy, and the Civil Rights Movement used boycotts, sit-ins, and civil disobedience while also working within the system to manoeuvre the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding climate change and environmental justice, nonviolent direct-action tactics could include disrupting meetings of fossil fuel shareholders or politicians who rely on funding from oil and gas companies, taking action to stop a pipeline's

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<sup>30</sup> Gene Sharp identifies 198 methods of nonviolent direct action and discusses movements that have used these tactics to at least partially achieve their goals without major bloodshed. Sharp, G. and Paulson, J., *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th century practice and 21st century potential*, Boston, MA: Extending Horizons Books, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Friends were often involved in these movements. Also note another example in the Sanctuary Movement, discussed in Rady Roldan-Figueroa's article in this issue of *Quaker Studies*.

construction or continued function, getting in the way of an oil train or tanker, doing a sit-in at a bank that funds fossil fuels, or other similar actions. People can also participate in economic actions such as divesting personal retirement savings or a meeting's investments from fossil fuels, refusing to fly in a fossil fuel emitting aeroplane, or boycotting a restaurant until they discontinue single use plastics. Public demonstrations outside polluting facilities can draw public awareness. Different nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience tactics have different goals and can be used to induce change from a variety of angles, including pressuring the economic viability of a company or drawing on the conscience of sympathetic members of the public.

Not everyone in a Friends meeting must be called to be an activist, but a meeting or an anchor committee can come around Friends who are called to this type of work and help support them so they can take action. The meeting can release them to take courageous action through meeting their particular needs: maybe they need childcare, or they need food brought while they are locked down to a pipeline. Maybe they need an income so they do not have to worry about employment while they coordinate and participate in nonviolent direct action. Maybe they need a lawyer or jail support if they are risking arrest. Even if not all Friends in a meeting feel led to engage in arrestable action, the meeting can make it possible for the ones who feel led to do so.

Consider the Valiant Sixty in the early years of the Friends' movement. When they went out on their journeys to share about Quakerism, they had to have a community at home taking care of their children, farms, or businesses for months at a time as they travelled.<sup>32</sup> Not everyone was called to travel in ministry, but the community of Friends working together made it possible for the Valiant Sixty to follow their sense of leading.

Similarly today, a meeting or anchor committee could serve as spiritual accompaniers alongside the Friends taking nonviolent direct action, helping them stay spiritually grounded and feel connected to and supported by a community. Taking this kind of action alone can be frightening and lonely. It would mean a lot to have a community discerning and supporting alongside, holding one in prayer, and taking care of practicalities for the one who is more engaged in direct action.

### ***c. Political advocacy for climate and environmental justice***

Arguably, one of the largest impacts individuals and small groups can make to ameliorate the climate crisis is through passing policies and legislation that is more

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<sup>32</sup> A Friend in my meeting calls this the 'Valiant Sixty and the Boring Six Hundred': many more people stayed home and did the mundane everyday work that made it possible for the Valiant Sixty to follow the Spirit's leading.

sustainable and just.<sup>33</sup> This can be at the level of one's city, county, state, or national and international levels, or even within organisations or companies.

While political advocacy by religious groups should be undertaken carefully because it is sometimes done in ways that increase power imbalances and inequity, it is still a valuable and important action to consider. Since Quakers have a history of speaking truth to power, it is hoped that Friends could listen together about what policies to support. Quakers can bring a prophetic voice to the political sphere that is not always present in such settings. Friends from groups that hold a majority or are in a position of social power (white Friends, Friends with advantages in economic status or education, and so forth) should take care to listen to and support policies advocated by those who have historically been marginalised or disenfranchised, or who are actively being harmed by a polluting facility or other environmental injustice or climate disruption.

Policy advocacy can be ecospirituality when it is done out of authentic listening to the Spirit and when speaking prophetically about justice (or when supporting another who is speaking prophetically). Bringing a moral voice into conversations around climate and environmental policy is sorely needed. Additionally, many voices are needed in order to pass beneficial climate and environmental legislation, since advocates are often competing with wealthy corporations for legislator attention.

There are many groups helping to organise the public to advocate for positive climate and environmental policies, some of them specifically geared toward people of faith, or even Quakers. While Friends may not have all the expertise or time to track all upcoming legislation, partnering with trusted groups on topics of importance to one's meeting can be meaningful and effective.<sup>34</sup>

#### ***d. Neighbourhood climate resilience***

The fourth suggestion for how Friends could engage in ecospirituality is to build up neighbourhood climate resilience. This has at least two purposes: to help prepare for and respond to disasters, and to mitigate climate change.

As we unfortunately experience more of the impacts of climate change each year, there are more frequent occasions where people rely on one another for help in climate emergencies. Meetings with building and land can prepare for disasters so that people

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<sup>33</sup> Amel, E., Manning, C., Scott, B., and Koger, S., 'Beyond the Roots of Human Inaction: Fostering Collective Effort toward Ecosystem Conservation', *Science* 356/6335 (2017): pp. 275–279, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aal1931>.

<sup>34</sup> Greenfaith is a worldwide organisation encouraging advocacy and nonviolent direct action: <http://greenfaith.org>. In the United States of America, there is a national advocacy group called Interfaith Power and Light, with chapters in many states: <http://interfaithpowerandlight.org>. Friends can organise together through Quaker Earthcare Witness: <http://quakerearthcare.org>, or Earth Quaker Action Team: <http://eqat.org>.

in the neighbourhood have a safe place to go. For example, a meetinghouse could have solar panels with a backup battery so it can generate power even if the electrical grid goes down. Meetings could have nonperishable food, water, and even cots available to host people who are displaced by a wildfire or flood.

Friends can coordinate with others in the neighbourhood to learn about community needs and to participate in helping meet those needs. This can build up trust and help develop relationships so that in a moment of crisis, people know who to contact in order to rapidly and collectively respond. The best predictor of a community's ability to bounce back after a disaster is the strength of the network of community relationships that existed prior to the disaster.<sup>35</sup>

Climate resilience in one's neighbourhood does not only relate to disaster response and recovery, however: meetings can contribute to climate resilience on an everyday basis. For example, meetings with land can plant native plants, plant trees that will keep the neighbourhood cool in summer and help cycle water, and do other projects on the meetinghouse land to contribute to ecosystem health. Meetinghouses can encourage local food systems through hosting community gardens or farmers markets. To the extent possible, meetinghouses can become integrated into the communities in which they are found if members of the meeting live nearby and participate in community groups. Meetings can also become more integrated with the neighbourhood around them by following community organising tactics such as asset mapping, house meetings, and listening sessions to find out what the community needs, and working in partnership to ensure the needs of the neighbourhood are met.

For some Friends, this requires a different approach than what they have previously practised. If the meeting members are part of the majority group, it is important to remember that climate resilience projects require sharing, collaborating, listening, and participating with others, rather than offering handouts where the meeting controls all the resources. In this way, the meetinghouse becomes a community resource and a place where the community is welcome. The meeting can build trust with the community and both the meeting and the surrounding community can feel more connected to one another and to the geographical location.<sup>36</sup> This connection to place and to the particular, embodied needs of the meeting members and broader community requires ecospirituality.

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<sup>35</sup> Bakic, H. and Ajdukovic, D., 'Resilience after natural disasters: the process of harnessing resources in communities differentially exposed to a flood', *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 12/1 (2021).

<sup>36</sup> Bock, C, 'Faith Communities as Hubs for Climate Resilience', in Bears, R. (ed.), *The Encyclopedia for Urban & Regional Futures*, Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2022, pp. 529–536, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87745-3\\_247](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-87745-3_247).

In this paper, I have offered a conceptual framework that places the fields of Quaker spirituality and ecospirituality in conversation. I have described these two fields and the ways they complement each other. Friends can enhance their spiritual practise by incorporating ecospirituality, which brings a sense of relational connection to the land and other species in the planetary community. Those discussing and practising ecospirituality can learn from and likely find allies among Friends communities, drawing on the long history of social justice action among Friends. As Friends consider incorporating ecospirituality into their corporate practise, they can apply Friends discernment tools to decide what to work on, and support those feeling called to radical action. In this time of climate crisis, developing spiritual grounding to do the work of care for our planet is of existential importance.

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### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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