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Friends' Economic Witness & Sustainable Commerce

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Sustainability, in most basic terms, is the recognition of the material limits of Creation, and the conscious adjustment of our claims on resources, both present and future, to a level that can continue over time. Sustainable commerce, then, would consist of economic structures that acknowledge the limitations of the physical world and are conducted in a manner that supports the viability of Creation in the long term.

What should be clear is that prevailing economic systems—the ways in which we conduct “business”—are overwhelmingly unsustainable. Far from considering coming generations, our notions of success are extremely narrow and short-sighted, defined primarily by profit generated for investors and overall growth in economic activity, whether productive or destructive. Meanwhile, the structures that govern trade have become increasingly obscure and undemocratic. Rather than spreading wealth and control, they concentrate it on both local and global levels, while depleting the natural resources upon which all wealth—and life—depends. The results of this path are made visible in poverty, social conflict, environmental degradation, and mass extinction of species.

What would models for sustainable commerce look like? In general terms, they would measure success not simply in terms of growth or profit, but by a broad range of goals and indicators that contribute to overall sustainability. They would

- distribute wealth rather than concentrate it,
- serve the interest of the wider community, rather than a privileged group,
- be participatory, not exclusionary,
- represent the true costs of a product or service—social and environmental—rather than obscuring costs, and
- be regenerative instead of exploitative.

Such models would necessarily abandon the concept of *growth* as the primary mechanism for satisfying human needs, focusing instead on the manner in which resources and power are distributed among all stakeholders, including producers, workers, investors, communities and the earth.

Most importantly, models of sustainable commerce will be real and imperfect, rather than theoretical and infallible. They will come about through community pressure, worker activism, intentional investment, government incentive and, most importantly, entrepreneurial creativity. And they will push the boundaries of conventional trade by offering living alternatives that lead us toward a right sharing of resources and power not just in theory but in our lives today.

Friends' Historic Economic Witness

From its first days, the Religious Society of Friends has asserted that living faithfully cannot be confined to places of worship but rather must encompass every aspect of our lives. To the extent that our *economic* relationships constitute our most tangible interaction with one another and the world around us, Friends have long wrestled with how to bring our commercial activities in line with our spiritual witness. Early Quakers were not just vocal critics of conventional modes of commerce; they were also businesspeople and active creators of alternatives.

George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement, spoke plainly to the connections between a faithful life and integrity in business dealings: “In fairs also, and in markets, I was made to declare against their deceitful merchandise and cheating and cozening, warning all to deal justly, to speak the truth, to let their ‘yea’ be ‘yea,’ and their ‘nay’ be ‘nay’; and to do unto others as they would have others do unto them.”¹ Early Friends gained a reputation for honesty and integrity in business, and many became successful. At the same time, Quaker traditions of simplicity and plain living reduced expenses, freeing resources for other purposes in the community.

In response to growing economic success, some Friends consciously limited their commercial engagements. Others came to recognize the links between trade and oppression, and refused to produce materials for war or purchase the products of slavery, and appealed to members of the Society and others to disengage from such enterprises. John Bellers (1654-1725) recognized the primary role of labor in creating wealth and advocated the creation of working peoples’ associations. Later, influential leaders such as William Allen (1770-1843), John Bright (1811-1889) and George Cadbury (1839-1922) represented a Quaker ethic of philanthropy that included community service, employee welfare and human development.

In the early Twentieth Century, the issue of commerce remained important to the Society, and the *Faith and Practice* of many Yearly Meetings included a section on “Trade”. The 1930 edition of New England Yearly Meeting’s (NEYM) *Faith and Practice* identifies concerns with “control of industry,” proposing that employees and employers consider themselves “co-operators sharing in their common purpose to serve their community.”² The concept of formal representation for workers and consumers in relationship to business owners and “wise experimentation looking toward answers to these questions” is proposed. It is further asserted that wealth should be regarded as a means and not an end, its responsibilities “assumed

For a longer version of this article and a list of resources on participatory, sustainable and community-based enterprise, please contact the author at <erbin@earthlink.net> or write to Erbin Crowell, 1245 Reynolds Rd., Chepachet, RI 02814 USA.

¹ *George Fox: Journal*, ed. J.L. Nichalls, 1952, pp. 37-38

² *Faith & Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends: A Book of Christian Discipline*, 1930, pp. 46-52.

Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB) is published bi-monthly as an insert in *Be-Friending Creation* by Quaker Eco-Witness–National Legislation (QNL), a project of Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN).

QNL promotes government and corporate policies to help restore and protect Earth's biological integrity. It works within and through the Religious Society of Friends for policies that enable human communities to relate in mutually enhancing ways to the ecosystems of which they are a part. This witness seeks to be guided by the Spirit and grounded in reverence for God's creation.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on government and corporate policy as it relates to the ecosystems that sustain us. Each issue is an article about timely legislative or corporate policy issues affecting our society's relationship to the earth.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Provide background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Describe the positions of other faith-based and secular environmental groups on the issue.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide sources for additional information.

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in a broad spirit of Christian service and brotherhood." Such values found expression in the development of models for more socially responsible business, ethical investment and the growing food cooperative movement which laid the groundwork for modern natural and organic foods industries and movements for local food systems.³

The following edition of NEYM's *Faith and Practice*, published in 1950, states that "the development of a sensitive conscience concerning the existing maladjustments, unfair practices, and positive evils of our economic system should be a vital concern to all Friends," asserting that "the problem of distribution in the world's economic order should be a matter of profound Christian concern." During the same decade, British Quaker and industrialist Ernest Bader (1890-1982) began experimenting with worker-ownership, eventually turning his company over to his employees. Today, the Scott-Bader Commonwealth is a worker-owned and controlled company operating on an international level.⁵ While other "Quaker" businesses have been converted into investor-driven institutions indistinguishable from conventional firms, the Commonwealth remains true to the values established by the founders who had the courage to give up its control to their employees.

In the 1990s, Britain Yearly Meeting engaged in a process of "Rediscovering Our Social Testimonies," exploring traditional Quaker testimonies and their meaning in the modern world. Included in the resulting book, *Faith in Action: Quaker Social Testimony*, was a section on Economic Values. "The testimony to economic values is not a traditional Quaker testimony," writes the Editorial Committee, "but it is traditionally an area on which Friends have spoken over the years. It therefore seemed only right that it should be included in this examination of our Quaker social testimonies."⁶ Included in the dialogue are critiques of conventional economics as well as mention of alternatives such as simple living, ethical investment, sustainable development, socialism, Fair Trade, and cooperative business.

John Woolman and Contemporary Economic Concerns

For many contemporary Friends, John Woolman (1720-1772) has been a vital source for reflection and inspiration as we consider economic concerns. Recognizing the links between trade and human suffering, Woolman appealed to Quakers of his day to consider their consumer habits as integral to their witness to the world. "May we look upon our treasures," he wrote, "and try whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions."⁷ In his writings, he wrestled with the basic requirements of profit and economic growth, and the manner in which they led not just to the exploitation of labor, but to broader social conflict, ecological degradation, and the abuse of animals.

Woolman presents Friends with a radical notion: The things we buy and sell every day are much more than their material substance or the service provided. Rather, they are inseparable from the economic, social, and environmental relationships necessary for their production. To extend this idea, when we purchase an item or service, cash our paycheck, invest in a company, or receive a dividend, we become entwined in a web of events and interactions that should be subject to our spiritual leadings.

This vision directly challenged the prevailing understandings of Woolman's day, and largely continues to do so in our own. Economic globalization, while it is not a new phenomenon, has become accelerated and more comprehensive in its impact on the world. What's worse, the modern emphasis on marketing serves more often to obscure the processes underlying the products we buy, rather than communicating actual value. Lost in the exchange of money for products—or the image ascribed to them—are the economic impacts on workers, communities and the environment.

For many, Woolman's witness has strengthened our modern critique of unjust or unsustainable economic systems. Recognizing our own role in supporting these systems, we can avoid products, services and businesses that rely on relationships that run counter

³ Bruyn, Severyn; p.15.

⁴ *Faith & Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends: A Book of Christian Discipline*, 1950, p. 87.

⁵ www.scottbader.com

⁶ Dale, Jonathan; p. 221.

⁷ Woolman, John; p.26.

What Is Fair Trade?

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of marginalized producers and workers... Fair Trade organizations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, raising awareness and campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade. Fair Trade organizations have a clear commitment to Fair Trade as the principal core of their mission.

Key Principles of Fair Trade:

- **Creating Opportunities for Economically Disadvantaged Producers.** Fair Trade is a strategy for poverty alleviation and sustainable development...
- **Transparency and Accountability.** Fair Trade involves transparent management and commercial relations to deal fairly and respectfully with trading partners.
- **Capacity Building.** Fair Trade is a means to develop producers' independence...
- **Payment of a Fair Price.** A fair price in the regional or local context is one that has been agreed through dialogue and participation. It covers not only the costs of production but enables production which is socially just and environmentally sound...
- **Gender Equity.** Fair Trade means that women's work is properly valued and rewarded. Women are always paid for their contribution to the production process and are empowered in their organizations.
- **Working Conditions.** Fair Trade means a safe and healthy working environment for producers...
- **The Environment.** Fair Trade actively encourages better environmental practices and the application of responsible methods of production.

From the International Fair Trade Association, a network of businesses committed to these principles <www.ifat.org>

to our understanding of just and sustainable economics. Organized examples include divestment and boycott campaigns, and investment in "screen" funds that do not invest in particularly pernicious enterprises such as the production of weapons and tobacco. Such approaches can dramatically influence the values and conduct of economic institutions.

But disengagement can take us only so far in realizing more sustainable models of commerce. We may reduce our own role in unjust relationships, but risk absolving ourselves of other ways in which we benefit from the broader economic structures that remain in place. The critique of prevailing economic systems can also devolve into a negative attitude toward business in general, discouraging Friends' participation and reducing the potential impact we may have in bringing our witness to bear on trade and commerce.

This brings us to an aspect of Woolman's testimony that is cited less often. To the extent that we are influenced by God's love, Woolman believed, Friends should be moved to "take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distress of the afflicted and increase the

⁸ Woolman, John; p. 9.

happiness of creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable," he continued, "that to turn all of the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives..."⁸ For Woolman and many early Quakers, our economic lives were not just a necessity, but a positive *opportunity* to fulfill God's vision for a more just world. In this idea we can discern a call not to simply turn away from the world of commerce, but to engage with it faithfully, joyfully and courageously, and actively steer it in directions that serve God, Creation and community.

Lifting Up Economic Alternatives

Friends have been active throughout our history not just in the theoretical analysis of economic structures, but in the development of alternatives that more closely reflect our faith and perception of God's will in the world. In the search for a more sustainable economics, it will be valuable to lift up this history: from our early commitment to honesty and integrity in business, to models of ethical investment; from simplicity and conscious consumption, to modern consumer cooperatives; from concern for God's Creation, to organic farming, community-supported agriculture and land trusts; and from attention to employee welfare, to more radical models such as worker cooperatives and Fair Trade. Looking forward, we may ask ourselves what our faith, which may be described as radically participatory—both individualistic and communal—can contribute to the search for an economics based in justice, liberation, and sustainability.

For the past ten years I have had the opportunity to work with a company and community that has tested many of these questions. While not a "Quaker" business, we have attempted to make real many values that speak to Friends' concerns. While we have experienced healthy growth over the course of our history, what is more important is how the fruits of our business are distributed among stakeholders. As a Fair Trade Organization, our core mission is economic partnership with the small farmers who grow our raw materials, paying them a fair price, sharing risk, and help-

What Is a Cooperative?

Definition: A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

Values: Cooperatives are based on the values of selfhelp, selfresponsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others.

Principles: The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice.

1. Voluntary and Open Membership.
2. Democratic Member Control.
3. Member Economic Participation.
4. Autonomy and Independence.
5. Education, Training and Information.
6. Cooperation among Cooperatives.
7. Concern for Community.

Adopted by the 1995 Congress & General Assembly of the International Cooperative Alliance, Manchester, England <www.ica.coop>

Equal Exchange Mission

Equal Exchange's mission is to build long-term trade partnerships that are economically just and environmentally sound, to foster mutually beneficial relations between farmers and consumers, and to demonstrate, through our success, the viability of worker cooperatives and fair trade.

Guiding Principles

- Trade directly with democratically organized small farmer cooperatives;
- Provide producers with advance credit for crop production;
- Pay producers a guaranteed minimum price that provides a stable source of income as well as improved social services;
- Provide high quality food products;
- Support sustainable farming practices;
- Build a democratically-run cooperative workplace;
- Develop more environmentally sound business practices.

Equal Exchange is a worker cooperative and Fair Trade Organization trading with small coffee, tea, cocoa and sugar farmers <www.equalexchange.com>.

ing them access markets. In trading with cooperatively organized farmers, most of whom grow organically on small-scale, diversified farms, we support them in their efforts to sustain their families and communities. As a worker cooperative, we are committed to the democratic participation and engagement of employees in our work, and limit our own compensation to a ratio of 3:1 from the highest paid employee to the lowest. As a business, we offer our customers quality products at reasonable prices and outside investors a reasonable but limited return. In essence, we have put capital and profit to the service of our mission rather than the other way around. As part of a broader movement of alternative enterprises, we encourage change in the world of conventional business.

At the same time, we are not perfect. In order to accomplish our mission, we must work with the parameters of the marketplace and the needs of running a successful company. We have to balance our ideals with offering products that consumers will purchase. We have our personal struggles and do not always agree. But what is important is that every day we wrestle with the broader allocation of resources, power and participation not just among ourselves, but also among producers, investors, consumers and the environment, and it is we ourselves who are accountable for answering these questions.

A Call for Active Engagement

The challenge of economic sustainability requires the radical re-engagement of Friends in business and commerce, joining the faithful critique of existing systems with the active development of alternatives. As we seek to bear witness in our daily lives, to make our spiritual ideals real in the world, there may be no more important place to bring our efforts to bear than in influencing the economic systems through which we most profoundly impact all of Creation. While our modern predicament may seem more broad and urgent than that of early Friends, our history and testimonies have much to offer to the task. To the extent we are moved by the Spirit, we will be led to bring our economic relationships into a more just and sustainable balance.

What Friends Can Do

How can we as Friends engage more deeply in the search for a more sustainable model of commerce?

- We can actively discern God's will for economic justice and sustainability in the world through worship and dialogue together and with the wider community.
- We can learn from our history and experience, and encourage new leadings to more sustainable models of business, trade and economic relationships.
- We can seek out the most promising and effective places to create such models, and use our spiritual, financial and human resources to support them where they already exist.

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