

The History of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Minutes on Climate Change

by the EcoJustice Working Group of PYM

Since 1997, when the climate concern first came to the fore through the involvement of the Earthcare Working Group's involvement with the National Council of Churches, there have been ebbs and flows of energy directed toward it, both in the body of the Yearly Meeting and in its infrastructure. Over the following decade and a half, the Yearly Meeting as a body has approved six separate minutes which indicate our commitment to the care of the earth and environment as an expression of our faith. While some actions have come out of these minutes in some corners of the Yearly Meeting, there's not been a sense of continuity or corporate attention to them. The sense of the EcoJustice Working Group is that as a community we have a way of moving forward and carrying through on minutes that we approve. We share below a review of the six minutes as a way to help us remember what we have committed to and to find our way forward. The actual minutes are at the end of the story.

A review of PYM minutes on climate change

The first minute was approved at Interim Meeting in January of 1998. It stemmed from a number of monthly meeting minutes which prompted extensive intervisitation. It lent support, spiritual and financial, to the involvement of the (then) Environmental Working Group (EWG) with the inter-faith climate campaigns of the National Council of Churches and Pennsylvania Council of Churches to develop faith-based support for US ratification of the Kyoto climate treaty. It also lent support to EWG's efforts among Friends in the US for FCNL to include lobbying on energy and environment as one of its priorities.

In June of 2000, Interim Meeting approved a minute on the need to address global climate change. It supported the interfaith climate campaigns more specifically, as well as EWG's project to promote the purchase of renewable electricity by monthly meetings and households when market competition in retail electricity was established. Friends Center Corp was one of the earliest regional institutions to switch to renewable electricity, and a number of monthly meetings followed suit. The 2003 Minute was intended to further this project. EWG's efforts to track monthly meetings had limited success, while the idea to systematically find out how many Friends' households switched - we knew many did but far from most - gained little traction.

The US withdrawal from international climate negotiations in 2001 and the War on Terror deflated the interfaith climate campaigns but helped establish FCNL's program on energy and environment. Our YM's climate activities shifted from inter-faith involvement to supporting FCNL's program in our YM and through Quaker Earthcare Witness.

In the fall of 2004, climate scientists of the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reported that rising GHG emissions were having more rapid effects on atmospheric and oceanic temperatures and regional ecosystems, especially at higher latitudes and elevations, than anticipated in the 1997 IPCC Assessment. They said global average temperature might increase by more than 10 degrees F, with devastating effects on civilization and biodiversity, if the economy continued with Business As Usual. This led the Peace and Concerns Standing Committee to propose a Called Session on Climate Change, which then united on the 2005 Minute.

Planning the Called Session included a framework for EWG to ask that monthly meetings discern a response to the 2005 Minute. About 40 monthly meetings approved their own minutes. These were posted at the 2006 Annual Sessions as a backdrop for considering a proposed 2006 minute intended to more fully integrate the concern for climate change in the work of our YM.

This minute was substantially approved as proposed, except that the actions were recorded in a passive voice, so the responsibility to implement them was unspecified. It fell to the Peace and Concerns Standing Committee to ask other standing committees for responses to the 2006 Minute. There were never reports by the other standing committees to Interim Meeting as the proposed minute had called for, and the proposal to create alternate queries was folded into a Faith and Practice Revision process that is still under way.

The 2009 Minute was proposed spontaneously from the body at Annual Sessions. In effect, it seemed to support the FCNL Network's project that asked Friends to communicate with senators about energy legislation and international negotiations to reduce GHG emissions. However, the Minute made no reference to the information packets that the Network had prepared for every monthly meeting it wanted to be picked up by someone at Session.

Our Observations

These minutes contain several types of explicit or implicit actions:

1. To support the external efforts of a Yearly Meeting Working Group about a concern with which most but not all, Friends are in unity (though with varying degrees of urgency).
2. To ask monthly meetings and households to take some kind of action, such as buying renewable electricity or communicating with senators.
3. To ask our YM through its committees to review our YM's activities and programs under their purview and presumably recommend changes in view of a particular concern.
4. To hold ourselves lovingly accountable with regard to the climate issue.

Our follow-through on the first type has been consistent and at times persistent. In the case of the second type our follow through has been somewhat spotty and indeterminate though not without effect. For the third and fourth types our follow through might be viewed as missing but needed.

The Minutes

On transforming our society's relationship with the earth

approved at the January 1998 Interim Meeting Session

The world is God's creation. How we treat the earth and all its creatures is basic to our relationship with God, and of fundamental religious concern to the Society of Friends. What we are learning about the destructive effects of affluence and technology in our society gives new urgency to Friends historic testimonies on peace, simplicity, equality and stewardship. Reducing negative human impacts on the earth's air, water and soils, and right sharing within the human family and with all God's creatures, have become ecological necessities.

We unite in urging individual Friends and monthly meetings to seek Divine Guidance in considering the limitations and actions this concern requires of us. We encourage the Environmental Working Group to pursue, with other Friends' organizations and other faith communities, ways of bearing witness to the ecological and spiritual imperative that our society transform its relationship with the earth.

On the need to address global climate change

approved at the June 2000 Interim Meeting Session

Protecting God's Earth and its fullness of life is of fundamental religious concern to the Religious Society of Friends. The links between human activity, the dramatic rise in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations, and the rise of average global temperature are now of sufficient concern to lead us to action. Climate change is apt to affect everyone and everything: food, water, air quality, sustainability, social and economic justice, and international diplomacy.

Because the United States use much more energy per capita than any other nation, our policies to curtail greenhouse gas emissions will be crucial. We must consider not only the kind of fuels used directly but also the energy embodied in all material goods we use. Our nation has long set a standard for others with its high levels of consumption; we must now provide an example by taking responsibility for the consequences for past and current behavior.

Involvement by religious communities in education and advocacy will be needed if policies to address global warming are to succeed in politics or in practice in the U.S. We unite in urging individual Friends, monthly meetings, and other Friends' organizations to seek Divine Guidance in understanding how to:

- Reduce our own use of energy and material resources;
- Support strong international agreements for reducing greenhouse gas emissions
- Participate in a transition to less damaging technologies in our industries, agriculture, buildings and transportation.

These are essential steps to protect life on Earth as God creates and sustains it.

On energy stewardship in Meeting facilities and households:

approved at the January 2003 Interim Meeting Session

We affirm that protecting God's earth and its fullness of life is of fundamental spiritual importance to the Society of Friends. Scientists are increasingly clear about prospects for calamitous future effects on climate unless greenhouse emissions are curtailed. Our nation's irresponsible uses of energy are unjust, contribute to anger and violence, and if not changed will result in great violence. At present, our nations' political process seems incapable of adopting policies appropriate to these realities. It is therefore incumbent upon us, as individuals and as meetings, to do whatever we reasonably can to reduce greenhouse emissions and promote conservation through our actions as consumers of energy, goods, and services.

An important way of doing this is to buy renewable electricity. Anyone, including those who live in an apartment, retirement community or other facility that provides electricity for its residents, can now do this by purchasing certificates. Most of the energy industry is resisting change, and governments are only requiring the industry to change very gradually. This means consumer demand is essential if investments in new generating capacity are to be directed toward less polluting, renewable sources. Every purchase of renewable electricity provides both an incentive for companies to invest in renewable energy and added support for more sustainable energy policies.

An equally important way of reducing greenhouse emissions is to revisit and strengthen our commitment to energy conservation in our buildings. In many cases, reducing energy just by investing in greater efficiency provides a net economic benefit. But we must also recognize that the best available technologies to produce and use energy will not be sufficient to restore the earth's ecological integrity. We must also adopt less energy intensive lifestyles. Other industrialized nations have already demonstrated that this is possible.

We therefore ask Friends to prayerfully consider what we, as individuals and as a faith community, can reasonably do:

- To pay more for electricity that is produced from less polluting renewable sources
- To consider ways of reducing energy use by replacing less efficient equipment with more efficient equipment for lighting, heating and cooling, refrigeration, and other purposes;
- And to use only the electricity and fuel we truly need.

On incorporating the concern about climate change into the body of our Yearly Meeting's work in the world

approved at a 2005 Called Session

Friends at this session unite behind the desire that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting incorporate this concern about the rise of global climate temperatures and its dangerous implications for life on our earth into the body of its work in the world. We feel ready with divine assistance, to assume the challenges of being prophetic witnesses to protect our earth.

We call upon the Yearly Meeting, in all its manifestations, to seek ways to hold our members lovingly accountable to live in God's world in a more environmentally sustainable fashion and to join other like-minded groups and organizations in supporting this concern.

On incorporating the concern about climate change into the life of our Yearly Meeting

approved at the 2006 Annual Session

We charge ourselves to examine all of our facilities and programs so as to continually ask, as a religious community, how we can live in God's world in a more environmentally sustainable fashion. Toward fulfilling our commitment to the earth we call for:

- The appointment of an ad hoc working group to review the General Queries and the Monthly Meeting Checklist in Faith and Practice and propose a set of Alternate Queries and an Alternate Checklist that incorporate climate change and energy concerns more explicitly and centrally.
- A charge to all Standing Committees and the working groups under their care to explore the implications of climate change and energy concerns for their work.
- Support of a renovated Friends Center to become a living witness to our stewardship of energy and the environment.
- Urging Monthly Meetings to encourage and support all members and attenders in seeking other ways to "let our lives speak" to the challenges of climate change, increased energy prices, prevention of deadly conflicts, promotion of social and economic justice, and protection of the earth.

On the need for bold action to curb global warming

approved at the 2009 Annual Session

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Friends have been convicted of our responsibility for the ecological deterioration of our planet and the urgent need for bold action to ensure the survival of the community of life on Earth. The United States faces a decisive opportunity to lead in the work to curb global warming, as an energy bill is being considered in the Senate at this very moment. As we feel called to change our own lives, we feel called also to reach out to our leaders, so that we can bring the healing the planet desperately needs.

We urge all PYM Friends to actively engage our Senators in the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, to convey to them our deep concern for the integrity of creation and the urgent need to pass an energy bill that will authentically protect it. Let us share with our Senators our deeply felt desire for a bill that will set our country in a clear direction to abandon our dependency on fossil fuels, particularly coal and oil, and expand the availability of alternative, safe and sustainable energy sources.

We also invite Friends in our sister yearly meetings throughout the United States to diligently reach out to their respective senators in their home states with the same message. The effects of energy bill currently under consideration will be felt for the next several decades and beyond. As we discharge the responsibility placed on us, let's do our work prayerfully. Let's answer to that of God in our leaders with compassion for all, knowing that, as we act faithfully now, we will be given strength to continue in the path of a just and caring relationship with the whole of creation and with each other.