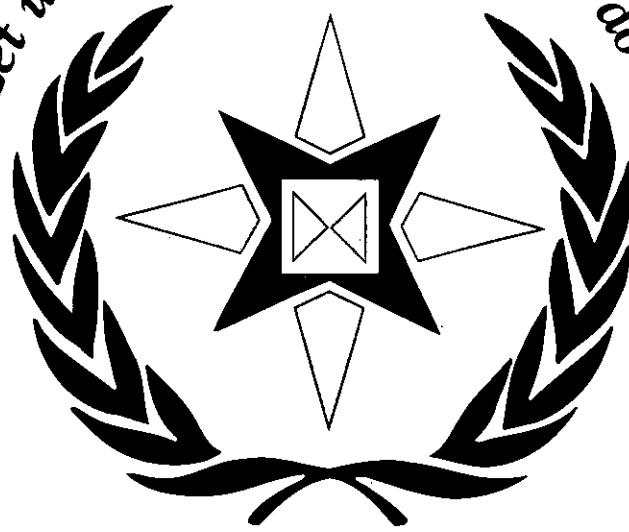


Let us then try what love can do...



at the UN?

Gordon Browne

1995

was a year of 50th anniversaries—of the discovery of the horrors of the Holocaust in Europe, of the beginning of the nuclear age with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, of the end of World War II in both Europe and Asia, and, finally, with fervent aspirations for future peace among nations, of the founding of the United Nations. To Quakers, for whom the peace message of Jesus has been central to their experience, that last event was both fulfillment and promise. More than two hundred years earlier, William Penn had envisioned a united Europe in which cooperation would replace conflict. Throughout their history, Friends had tried to live out their 1661 statement to King Charles II of England, “We do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight any war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.” After World War I, they had maintained observers at the League of Nations in Geneva to support its efforts for peace. Overwhelmingly, then, Friends rejoiced in the possibilities of the new organization, the United Nations. It appeared that the world had indeed come to a time, in the words of William Penn, “to try what love can do.”

Quakers were present at the early discussions that led to the new organization. And there was widespread Quaker concern, when the UN came into being, to support its efforts

for world peace, justice, and prosperity. Just how to offer support was not initially clear, but one of the first actions was touchingly practical, human, and Quakerly. When the UN headquarters moved from Flushing Meadows to Turtle Bay in New York, a Friend made an apartment overlooking the East River available for hospitality to delegates, to homesick diplomats intimidated by the life of the great city and the tasks that lay before them. Though the preamble to the UN Charter begins, “We, the people of the United Nations...,” the UN is an organization of governments. From the beginning, however, Quakers knew it was about persons, human beings, individuals and groups, and it had to have a human face. So they welcomed the unknown diplomat into their home and built on the ties of their common humanity. Quaker House, a key component of the Quaker work at the UN in both New York and Geneva, has never lost that initial impulse, and there are diplomats all over the world who speak of the friendliness and comfort and openness to all views that they experienced and valued at Quaker House and in the Diplomats’ Conferences Friends organized on other sites. One British Ambassador to the UN used to appear for breakfast frequently at Quaker House, New York, without invitation. He said the visits helped to put the bureaucratic, political strains and stresses of the day ahead in a context that made them bearable and worthwhile.

At a weekend diplomats’ conference on disarmament that the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)-New York had arranged at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, NY, the invited delegates were encouraged to bring their families to enjoy the scenery and the recreation facilities at Mohonk. A Libyan delegate arrived with his wife and two children. In

proper formal Muslim style he entered first, his young, teenaged son a few paces behind him, his wife and early-teens daughter some further paces behind the boy. Barry and Kay Hollister, the QUNO and Quaker House Directors and hosts for the event, greeted the Libyan delegate together, welcoming him warmly. But Kay quickly said, "Oh, this must be your son!" and drew the delegate back with her to introduce the boy, which he did with great pride. And then, "And is this your wife and daughter?" And he was drawn back again to introduce them, and Barry and Kay were welcoming the family group and including them all in their greeting, just as if they were old friends. For years after that conference, though for political reasons Western diplomats were rarely invited and would not attend social events at the Libyan Mission, Friends from QUNO were always invited and attended. And the delegate from Mohonk always went out of his way to make them welcome.

Hospitality and the conferences that built a network of diplomats who knew Quakers and trusted them are worth emphasizing because Quaker work at the UN is, indeed, an effort to "try what love can do." All the programmatic impulses behind it have that motivating quality. The UN Charter provides for the participation of international, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in UN work through their having official consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. Many other UN agencies and councils also now provide such status for NGOs. Quakers early were granted consultative status through Friends World Committee for Consultation. In Geneva, where many specialized agencies have their headquarters, the QUNO program is administered by Quaker Peace and Service of Britain Yearly

Meeting. In New York, where the General Assembly, the Security Council, and such agencies as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have their headquarters, QUNO is administered by the American Friends Service Committee. In both places, however, Quaker representatives speak in the name of Friends World Committee for Consultation and represent all Quakers all over the world.

Representatives from the two QUNO offices meet together annually to decide what issues of importance to Friends they will focus on that year. Some are perennials: disarmament, human rights, and issues of economic justice and development. Others, varying from year to year, are regional or specific questions related to the major categories. For example, the Pinochet regime in Chile at one time was known as one of the most ruthless and brutal military dictatorships in the world. The UN appointed a special "rapporteur" to keep track of human rights in Chile and to report regularly to the Third Committee of the General Assembly, the Committee which deals with issues of human rights, and to suggest UN actions if any seemed appropriate and feasible. Though many Latin American nations despised the brutality of the Pinochet government, there was a strong sense that Latin America was being picked on for human rights violations while gross transgressions in the Soviet Union, China, and other powerful nations went uncommented on. As a result, at the end of the first year of the work of the special rapporteur, a movement to discontinue his appointment was initiated by Latin American delegates. QUNO felt that it was essential to continue the rapporteur's factual reporting of the terror in Chile. Governments do not like to have their cruelties publicized and sometimes moderate their behavior when they are.

A small committee within the Third Committee was to consider and to recommend whether the rapporteur should be continued. QUNO invited the members of that committee to a Quaker House luncheon. Present, too, were the widows of three Chilean "disappeareds." After lunch, the three women, one a campesino woman, one the wife of a labor leader, the third the wife of a community organizer, told their stories in turn. They told of armed men in unmarked cars snatching their husbands off the public streets, in one case leaving the five-year-old daughter he was walking to kindergarten screaming in terror in the street. They told of government denials, police denials, military denials of any knowledge of their husbands. And they told of the whispered reports from released prisoners of meeting their husbands in notorious torture centers. Then they told of utter silence, of no further word of the men, of no hope for their survival, of having no loved body to bury. The women answered questions from the committee members. When the meeting ended, the chairman of the committee said to his Quaker host, "We see piles of paper, all the reports and documents, all the official statements, all the statistics. But you have given them a human face. Thank you." The committee recommended the continuation of the work of the rapporteur.

What are some of the principles on which QUNO works? First is the fundamental belief in the Seed, the Inward Christ, the Light—the potential in all persons, no matter how different their backgrounds, to know God directly in their own lives. In that belief, "Let us try what love can do," and keep clear that all the world's people are of concern to Friends. Second is the belief that it is worthwhile to work for even small steps toward peace and justice. This is not just

pragmatism nor an invitation to give up big dreams. It is confidence that with human faithfulness, in God's time, another way than war will be found. Third, if Friends are to be heard and heeded, they must be at least as well informed as the delegates.

Sophisticated, often specialized knowledge of the issues, infused with human caring, is what QUNO has to offer the UN. Friends speak Truth most clearly when it arises from their own knowledge and experience, not just from theory. Friends at the UN try to be faithful to that principle. For example, Indonesian oppression in East Timor is an issue that has been hard to keep on the UN agenda because it is so troublesome to the structures of big power politics. QUNO-New York was once invited by the Secretariat to testify on the subject and refused. It was not an issue the office had been following closely. But QUNO staff knew Australian Friends had been following it and recommended that they be invited to testify. They subsequently were and did. Fourth, personal relationships build trust, which, in turn, builds influence. Quaker House provides a place and an atmosphere where delegates can withdraw from their official government positions to talk about important issues just as persons. Quaker House meetings are off-the-record unless otherwise specified. Friends and delegates can speak there together with an openness and depth that diplomatic niceties may not permit. Such opportunities are rare for delegates and much valued.

QUNO is not a political lobby in the familiar sense, just as the UN is not a legislative body. Rather, QUNO's role is to be a Quaker presence at the UN, keeping Quaker values and ideals before the organization as it addresses its complex

work. It was at the suggestion of Friends, for example, that, from the beginning, a small room in the General Assembly building was set aside for delegates' prayer and meditation. Frequently, through an NGO committee, QUNO cooperates with other religious NGOs on issues of importance to all people of faith. Only rarely do specific Quaker program issues provide initiatives for UN action. That does happen, however. The Convention on Rights of all Migrant Workers and their Families, adopted by the UN in 1990, arose from a specifically Quaker concern carried forward by QUNO. QUNO has helped to found a global committee of NGOs promoting respect for the rights of migrant workers and their families and encouraging enough governments to ratify the Convention to bring it into force as a set of international standards for countries both sending and receiving such workers. The issues of children in the military and the status of conscientious objectors to military service are two other items on the UN agenda as a result of Quaker initiatives.

One more, important word about trust: Quaker history is full of Spirit-led service, performed by individual Friends or groups, to strengthen peace and justice or to heal the wounds of conflict and injustice. From William Penn's vision of a united Europe through Friends' work against slavery to Quaker service to victims of both sides of the First World War and the endless conflicts since, Quakers have been identified as servants of the ideal, common good. All the work Friends do at the UN now is done, then, standing on the shoulders of the Friends who have gone before. And the faithfulness to Quaker ideals of all Friends everywhere now, in whatever area they work, will make possible future work and future trust of Friends.

To illustrate, even at the height of the Cold War, diplomats from the Eastern Bloc countries routinely attended QUNO meetings and conferences and were consulted by QUNO staff on issues of mutual concern. On one occasion, a QUNO staff person particularly needed to speak with an East German delegate he did not know. The delegate was in a committee meeting. The routine in such instances was to send in a business card. Usually, if the delegate were willing to talk with the staff person, he would write on the card, "Meet me in the Delegate's Lounge at such and such a time." In this instance, however, the East German came out immediately into the corridor where the Friend waited. He greeted him warmly and shook his hand. Looking at the card, he said, "Quakers! You fed me after the war!" And, within the constraints of his government's official position, he was ready to offer help.

Opportunities for clear witness on issues of importance to Friends arise in the course of the UN's work. At the First Special Session of the General Assembly on Disarmament in 1978, efforts by QUNO and several other NGOs led to the inclusion of an NGO day, a day when 25 NGOs would be permitted to address the General Assembly on the subject of disarmament. QUNO was to be one of those speakers. QUNO gathered an international Quaker team, including Friends from Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, to augment its usual staff during the Session. It wrote to every Quaker agency and yearly meeting in the world, saying, "If you had twelve minutes [which was the time allotted to each NGO] to make a Quaker statement on disarmament, what would you say?" A fascinating collection of answers came in from all over the world. The staff and team analyzed them

and gathered the points that the Quaker speech should make. A staff member drafted it, then the whole group reviewed it and recommended changes. This process was followed many times. Finally, a draft was approved. A member of the international team, Salome Nolega David from Kenya, was asked and agreed to deliver the speech. She was a big woman with a deep, strong voice and a commanding presence. On the day she was to speak, she appeared in a brilliantly colorful African dress and headpiece. And with dignity and power, she told the world what Friends worldwide thought about disarmament. When she finished, the Nigerian ambassador rushed forward to embrace her. A swarm of delegates surrounded her and escorted her back to her seat. It is important to understand the full Quaker witness of that occasion. Salome spoke of the Quaker concern for disarmament. But she was also the only woman to speak that day who did not represent a women's organization but spoke for an organization that was not gender-defined. And she was the only African to speak that day for an organization that was not just African but was global. Her speaking for Friends gave powerful witness to the Quaker testimony on equality of all people before God, without regard to race, nationality, gender, age, or official position.

New challenges and new opportunities face QUNO today. The UN's work on human rights, for example, has led in recent years to a concern to strengthen the rights and development opportunities of indigenous peoples. The UN has declared the years from 1993 to 2003 the International Decade for Indigenous People, and a Working Group on Indigenous Populations has sought to develop international standards for their rights in a Draft Declaration on Indige-

nous Populations. NGOs, including QUNO, and indigenous peoples from all parts of the world have contributed to the development of the Draft Declaration. Preparation of such a Declaration is inevitably a slow process if it is to serve the aspirations of greatly varied populations and to win acceptance of the governments who must live up to its terms. Some groups, particularly a South American Indian group, feel too many compromises of their hopes have been made already. Several indigenous groups, especially those from Russia, fear the Decade has been unpublicized and is likely, therefore, to be less productive than it should. A report from QUNO-Geneva, however, reminds of the important goals that make this difficult, time-consuming effort worthwhile: "to strengthen relations between Indigenous peoples, protect their intellectual property, environmental and economic rights, improve standards of education and health, safeguard land and vital resources, preserve ancestral sites and traditional cultures." These are goals about people, not politics.

Certain, as was the psalmist, that "The Earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein" (Psalm 24:1), QUNO was deeply engaged in the preparations leading up to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and has monitored implementation of the Rio agreements since, particularly focusing on cooperation for sustainable and environmentally sound development. Desertification, that is, the severe degradation of the world's drylands, is being addressed in an international treaty, the Convention to Combat Desertification, which may provide a framework for cooperation for local communities in dry regions to win governmental and international support for long-term, community-led development strategies. QUNO has encouraged and contributed to

the development of this Convention and continues to give it close attention and support.

Even as this is being written, the Fourth UN World Conference on Women is taking place in Beijing, China. QUNO is publishing a *Guide to Women-Specific Programs and Policies in the UN System*, which it distributes free of charge to NGOs in developing countries. QUNO hopes this work, written originally in English, will soon be translated and published in Spanish also. In addition, in preparation for the Conference, QUNO has hosted a series of off-the-record negotiating sessions between governments, focusing on strengthening both the preparations for and the followup to the Conference.

One more illustration of the kinds of work that QUNO does in the name of Friends: crime, terrorism, and some one hundred violent conflicts in the world are being fed by the production, proliferation, and trade in conventional small arms. QUNO is seeking support for a program to promote controls on production and trade of these weapons and to include their collection and destruction as a regular feature of UN peacekeeping operations. The UN Secretary-General himself has cited Nicaragua as an example of what can be achieved in a country emerging from a long civil war when such collection and destruction is part of the peacebuilding effort.

Stephen Collett is the Quaker Representative at QUNO-New York. Speaking of another new development in UN work, the increased emphasis on the International Court of Justice and the decision of the Security Council to establish war crimes tribunals relating to the wars in the former

Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, Steve wrote in a recent issue of *The Friend of Britain Yearly Meeting*:

We might, for example, ask of tribunals how well individual guilt can be separated from group guilt. How can restorative justice, with the need to bring victims into contact with perpetrators of crimes, be effected?... While our starting position is one of general support for these mechanisms of justice, we need to remain aware that without active measures to support reconciliation, justice can turn to vendetta.... The peace process in South Africa recognizes the need for admission of guilt before reconciliation can take place; both parties surrender certain rights to the process, the guilty surrendering their impunity while the victims give up the right to vengeance. In Burundi and Rwanda local Quakers have in many cases both endured personal tragedy in the violence and played a direct part in efforts towards peacebuilding with reconciliation. Some of those most closely involved know the people responsible for the murder of their friends and relatives but still see reconciliation to be the primary need.... We know too little about the healing processes which need to follow conflict.... Internationally supervised courts and tribunals are likely to provide the surest forms of justice at national levels in some cases.... However,...the establishment of such formal mechanisms for justice need not preclude continuing efforts for reconciliation. At QUNO, we return to the affirmation that reconciliation is not different or opposed, but central to true justice.

Such is the complicated, critically important work done by Friends at the United Nations. The faithfulness with which it has been done and is being done led a delegate to say to a Quaker staff member in Geneva, "I like having you around. It makes me think that some day people will look

back at our militarized and war-torn world and think what a barbaric age we lived in."

An editorial from *The Friend*, written by Deborah Padfield, the editor, comments:

I certainly find the Quaker presence at the UN exciting—strengthening—confirming something very central. The fact of Quaker offices in New York and Geneva helped draw me to Friends.

Their work is rooted deeply in the Quaker heritage. Back through our League of Nations work to William Penn's blueprints for a united Europe, Quakers have tried to realise their dreams of peace and justice. They have carried their hopes wherever it was necessary—to Ottoman court, Victorian prison and grey-suited huddles in Geneva and New York.

The roots spread wide, across the family of Friends.... The QUNOs represent all Friends. That's real—it matters.

This thought is humbling, setting my visions and priorities, our visions in our local Meetings, vital as they are, into a wider frame. If I mean my words on "peace" and "justice," then I needs must listen to my Friends in India, Peru, Burundi and Korea. They know about peace and war—as Irish Friends do—in a way that I do not. Am I part of their family?

The roots of QUNO spread both deep and wide. And they are watered, nourished, by...those deep aquifers of faith, love and open-heartedness which, over the years, have nourished Quaker international work from within our Meetings' worship. This is the strength which makes the QUNOs live.

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