



Friends Initiatives for Peace in the Great Lakes Region of Africa

by Stephen Collett

During the second half of the 1990s, the Great Lakes region of Africa has become a rich laboratory for Quaker peace work and an instructive example of collaboration between capable and committed Friends churches in the countries of the Great Lakes and their partners in the international community of Friends service agencies. At present, British, German, Swiss, Swedish, Norwegian, Australian, Canadian, and U.S. Quaker service bodies are all contributing staff and/or financial resources to peace work in this region of Central/East Africa.

Friends churches (meetings is not a term much used here) in the Great Lakes region count close to 150,000 members. These Quakers are located in a broad arc from Western Tanzania through Kenya and Uganda around the northern shores of Lake Victoria, and then southwest across Rwanda, Burundi, and the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). The Great Lakes Friends are related in two clusters. The East Africa group, with their center of gravity in Western Province of Kenya, grew out of contacts with Friends United Meeting missionaries in the close of the 1800s and spread from there to Tanzania and Uganda. The second branch stems from the ministry and assistance that Evangelical

Friends from the United States brought to Burundi in the early 1930s, growing from there to Rwanda and Congo. These western and eastern communities of Quakers in Central Africa have traditionally had little contact, divided as they are across the water but more importantly by language and their different church traditions. Besides their numerous local languages, the western countries of the Lakes speak French (from their Belgian colonial period) and variations of the Bantu family of languages, while the eastern side uses Swahili and English. It is common among Africans I know to speak three or four quite distinct tongues. Also, to some degree, the gulf derives from the lack of communication between their different Quaker traditions, both in the home offices in the United States and in the field. One of the dividends of the awakening of Friends in this region to their common commitment to peace is the expanding interaction across these divides.

The Africa Section of Friends World Committee for Consultation has both benefited from and contributed to this bridging. Many of the peace initiatives now under way were first envisioned at FWCC's Mission and Service Conference held in Uganda in 1996. This was a critical moment following the upheavals that had torn through Rwanda and Burundi, the imminent war in Congo, and the continuing constitutional crisis in Kenya, and leaders from those countries

moved the wider family of Friends both with their stories of the crises and with the strength and commitment they had found through them. The message pointed to the potential and the need for more interactive Quaker peace work in the region. Both the previous executive secretary of the FWCC Africa Section, Malesi Kinero, and the current, Joseph Andugu, who came to the post in 1998 after a substantial career with the Kenya Council of Churches as an instructor and trainer in local peace matters, have closely identified with and supported the movement to unite Friends in peace work.

Other elements of the integration across the region include the temporary settlement of Quaker refugees from Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi in Nairobi, Kenya, beginning in 1994 and up to the present, and the hospitality that they have received in the community of Friends there. A number of these refugees live in housing close to the Friends churches and receive some financial support contributed by Quakers around the world and dealt out through committees of Kenyan Friends. On Sundays and at other times in some of the Nairobi Friends churches, there is a cadence of services following each other in the Rwandan/Burundian languages and in Swahili and English, just one of the many musical and music-like qualities of African worship. Divisions of language and religious practice have melted through association across these years, so that when these refugees now return, as they have

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begun to do, they bring with them a new regional perspective and relationship.

The refugees were typically young adults, those who were being hunted and who had the energy and nerve to strike out beyond the choice of hiding in the woods. Many will return with advanced education, also a gift of support from Friends in Kenya and beyond. And many carry with them a new vision of and preparedness for peace work.

Yet another element is the expanded engagement of Quaker international service agencies in support of peace building in the Great Lakes region. While there has been a continuing, though somewhat fluctuating, stream of development support from Friends to the region, and British Quaker Peace and Service has had a presence here over several decades supporting a variety of small peace initiatives, only in the latter half of the 1990s have others become seriously involved in peace efforts. Beginning in 1996, Swedish and Burundi Friends joined efforts in starting Magarama Peace School in Gitega, the old highlands Burundian capital. The school, with some 300 primary and 100 preschool students, has been such a success in this strife-torn community that Friends are being begged to follow on with a secondary level "peace" school. When I attended graduation ceremonies

there in March 1999, parents from across the ethnic and other divides of the town watched fascinated as their children instructed them through song, poetry, and drama in the choices and obligations of peace. The audience alternated between tears and cheers.

Funds from Swiss and Norway Yearly Meetings have gone to support women's "Peace Workshops" (*Ateliers pour la Paix*) in Congo, run by Congolese Quaker women. The workshops serve as centers where women from communities displaced by the war, our Quaker sisters among them, can be gathered and given some gainful activity sewing children's clothes and other items for home use or sale, while they are taught and trained in topics such as the protection of women's and children's rights, conflict management across communities, and the basics of local cohesion and good governance. Friends Peace Teams Project, a program supported by many meetings in the United States and Canada, has developed a special Great Lakes Initiative from which teams offering training in conflict management, post-trauma counseling, and Alternatives to Violence have visited Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo in 1998 and 1999 and are preparing to place staff on a longer-term basis to continue this work.

In July 1999, American Friends Service Committee began an exploration of themes and partners for a new Central/East African QIAR (Quaker International Affairs Representative). Ahmed Shariff, a Tanzanian strong in the languages and political knowledge of the region and a Muslim sympathetic to Friends, has been appointed to this post and will carry on the traditional QIAR work of circulating to understand and support those in fulcrum positions for lifting up peace. AFSC has sensed a new groundswell of interest and concern regarding Africa among its constituencies and staff and is drafting the outline of an organization-wide program they are calling the Africa Initiative. This would combine education and political action in the United States concerning peace and justice issues for Africa and extended support for related causes in Africa. AFSC has called upon the advice and



Cover: During a workcamp, Friends from Burundi Yearly Meeting and the African Great Lakes Initiative rebuild a church guest house.

Above: A Burundian and a U.S. Friend at the workcamp.

Left: Friends gather after worship at the "rice church," built by Burundian Quaker women with proceeds from their common rice plots.





Courtesy of Stephen Collett

Quaker women from Burundi and Congo plan a presentation to their workshop, "Strengthening the role of women in peace building."

participation of African Friends in both aspects of the initiative.

I work for Quaker Service Norway, or *Kvekerhjelp*, in the Change Agent Peace Programme, which gives support to community training in the peace-building skills of human rights, conflict management, good governance, and democracy through the Friends churches across the six countries of the region. Our initial funding came from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. Thirty projects have taken root under this program since 1998, from cross-ethnic reconciliation teams working in zones of conflict in eastern Congo to workshops in good governance for local civic and governmental representatives in Burundi and Uganda.

The FWCC Triennial gathering held at Geneva Point, New Hampshire, in July 2000, was powerfully moved by the energy of this growing peace witness in Africa. With many of the African leaders in this work present, and representatives from Friends' agencies able to meet directly with them and each other, new bridges were built. The assembly gave extended discussion time and worshipful support to this mobilization of spirit and resources for peace.

The true heroines and heroes of this Quaker tale are those Friends living in these countries who face the challenges and disappointments of building peace each day. The numbers are too large and their contributions too diverse to capture in this short review, although we need to know more about them and their work and to find ways to reach out and support them. For example, I am thinking of Immaculée Mukunkaka, the leader of the women's program in Goma, North Kivu,

Congo. Uprooted from the interior region of Masisi in 1997, Immaculée and her husband Christoph hid in the woods with their four children for almost four months as they made their way east to Goma. There they have built themselves a small plank house on the black volcanic tuff of the city's outskirts. In this village of the displaced, Immaculée directs, on a voluntary basis, the Women's Peace Workshop, involving neighborhood sisters across ethnic lines. Her fifth baby, born in Goma, is called Mahoro Consulata, or "peace consolation."

I met another Quaker woman in Congo in October 1999 who called her baby Nobel. When I asked her why, she said that she thought it was time that Congo got its own Nobel peace prize, her boy.

I have met such peace heroes and heroines from Tanzania to Congo. The critical political situation in Kenya, the emergence from decades of misrule in Uganda, the struggle against traditional prejudices and modern corruption in Tanzania, and the ethnic rifts in Rwanda and Burundi have all been identified by Friends in these countries as crucial issues they need to address to build their peace. In each case, this commitment takes a level of courage that few of us Northerners in our comfortable lives are called to muster.

We don't bring the idea of peace to these Friends in Africa. They know it intimately, hold it close, and live in its light. The growing capacity and focus of Quaker peace work in the Great Lakes region over the past five years is an example and an encouragement for all of us: a slow but steady amalgamation of strengths and concerns, a movement out of tragedy and despair towards the promise of peace and the city of light. □

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