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Sixth World Conference of Friends

April 17-25, 2012, Nakuru, Kenya

by Jonathan Vogel-Borne

One thousand Quakers from all over the world will gather at Kabarak University, near Nakuru, Kenya this spring to worship, to celebrate, and to listen together for God's call upon our lives and upon the life of the worldwide Religious Society of Friends/Friends Church.

For most of my life, I have sought to understand and to articulate more of what might be God's calling for Friends. I envision all of us together, from all parts of the Quaker spectrum, being one of God's precious earthen vessels. We have a powerful and humble, experience-based, listening spirituality, that leads us to faith-filled acts of healing. As our world is torn apart by violence, increasingly polarized politics, and environmental degradation, the message of Friends is vitally relevant today. In spite of all the forces that are pulling us apart, we are inevitably drawn together, finding deeper unity in the direct experience of the Holy Spirit. As Francis Howgill described the 1652 Quaker Pentecost at Firbank Fell, "the kingdom of God did gather us and catch us all as in a net and His heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land."



Welcoming procession at Novokholo Friends Church, Western Province, Kenya. Photo by Jonathan Vogel-Borne.

As I engage with the Conference theme, "Being Salt and Light: Living the Kingdom in a Broken World," I see our world in the midst of a great turning. People everywhere are rising up to confront the injustices and oppressions of our age. The Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party and the movement to save the earth from environmental collapse are evidence of this turning. I also see a growing and powerful Quaker movement positioned to provide critical

spiritual grounding and vision for the challenges of the coming days. As Friends gather in Kenya this spring, I am hopeful that we will be given that clear vision and that we will be strengthened by learning how Friends in all parts of the world are being used to bring about God's peaceable world.

A worldwide gathering of Friends is not only a life-changing event for the individuals who attend, but also for our entire religious society:

- The first World Conference of Friends, held in 1920 at Devon House, London, was a call from London Yearly Meeting for a "Peace Conference of All Friends After the War." Quakers from every branch had joined together during World War I to carry out service and relief work in war-torn Europe. The 1920 Conference was the first time that Friends from across all of our divisions had formally met together since the schisms of the prior century.
- Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), the sponsor of subsequent World Conferences, was birthed out of the 1937 gathering held at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. The "International Justice Section" of the conference sent a message to all yearly meetings: "We know better, but we do worse." It called attention "to the grievous denial of our Quaker principles involved in our failure to extend to all God's children full recognition of that relationship on account of race."
- The 1952 Conference in Oxford, England, the 300th anniversary of George Fox's preaching at Firbank Fell, was instrumental in sustaining the movement that eventually brought about the reunification of several American yearly meetings.
- U Thant, General Secretary of the United Nations, spoke at the 1967 Conference at Guildford College in North Carolina, challenging Friends with the reality that the affluent peoples of the world are living in a manner that is unsustainable for the planet. The Right Sharing of the World's Resources program emerged from the Conference and continues to empower low-income entrepreneurs in developing nations through micro finance.
- Many of the young adults who attended the 1985 (Greensboro, North Carolina USA) and 2005 (Lancaster, UK) World Gatherings of Young Adult Friends are now in the leadership of several yearly meetings and Friends organizations.
- And finally the 1991 World Conference, held in three consecutive venues—Netherlands, Kenya, and Honduras—was the first World Conference to be sited outside the United States or Britain, recognizing the fact over the past 100 years and more, the Quaker movement has found renewed momentum through sharing the good news of our faith and practice in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

My prayer for the Sixth World Conference of Friends is that as we lay our hearts open to God, we will be given a fresh, radical vision of a world transformed by love, leading us to ever more powerful acts to mend this broken and beautiful world.

Interested in attending the World Conference? Open places are still available.
Application information is on the Conference website at <http://saltandlight2012.org>



Jonathan Vogel-Borne is the Yearly Meeting Secretary for New England Yearly Meeting of Friends and a Board member of GOOD NEWS *Associates*. Jonathan serves as the Sixth World Conference Treasurer and is on the International Planning Committee. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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