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Reflections on the 6th World Conference of Friends

part one of two

To picture the 6th World Conference, imagine 850 Friends from 112 yearly meetings in 51 countries. Spanish and French were the primary languages along with English, although there were probably at least as many Swahili speakers present as those whose first language was English. At first glance the venue could have been a college campus in the U.S., but one which served ugali with most meals and had very few books in the library. Like the campus, the familiarity of being with Friends was flavored with a multitude of distinctions in each specific encounter.



Photos courtesy of Noah Baker Merrill.

At the conference, I spent time asking the question “Who among Friends would you say has a prophetic ministry?” The contrasting responses were sometimes startling. For instance, one Kenyan responded “Not many. I don’t see around, no, not many. In our church, we discourage members who try to have this prophetic way of worship. They always discourage this prophetic worship.” I then asked, “What do you mean by prophet-

ic?” The response was “They will foretell, saying: Oh I dreamed. Or I was doing works. Such funny stories. I dreamt I was dancing, I dreamt I was preaching. They always discourage such things in the church.”

Another Kenyan woman, when asked the same question responded without hesitation, “My narrow area of social justice has been to raise the voices of women and to challenge the structures that would deny them to participate fully in the ministry. Those systems that have denied them have been largely cultural, they have been interpretations of Scripture, and they have been economic and political.

“The way I have seen that I have to challenge that for women . . . is to open doors for them to receive an education, especially theological education; so, since I can’t do everything, that is the path I have chosen – to speak about injustices, particularly gender related injustices. To critique and challenge against cultural practices that are used to exploit, that are used to marginalize, that are used to justify injustice. There I have spoken boldly.

“Where I have spoken boldly about it is at the Yearly Meetings. I’m surprised I have not been kicked out of speaking at Yearly Meetings.”

This is just one reminder I hold that we cannot simply say “Kenyans are like this, or believe that,” much less extend generalizations to all Friends. Seeing the whole of us together, listening to one another respectfully, and worshipping in the manner of other Friends is something I wish more of us

could experience. Then each of us might gain some greater sense of those many ways in which we are each unique even as we share a common heritage.



Margery Post Abbott has been released by Multnomah Monthly Meeting for a ministry of teaching and writing about Friends. She has published several books, most recently *To Be Broken and Tender: A Quaker Theology for Today* (Western Friend, 2010) and a revised and expanded second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* in fall 2011 (Scarecrow Press, 2003).

Gazing out over Kabarak University’s crowded dining hall, seeing us gathered in the large assembly room, and joining with the throngs of Friends at our morning and afternoon tea, I was amazed and blessed to see the face of our worldwide Quaker movement. More Friends now live in the global south, with the highest concentration of Friends living in Western Province, Kenya, near Lake Victoria.

Everywhere there were constant reminders of Africa’s beauty, including one night when thousands upon thousands of flying termites swarmed into the dining hall during supper. Battered and deep-fried, termites are considered an African delicacy. Some adventurous Friends from the global north grabbed a nearby termite out of the air, pulled off its wings and popped it into their mouths—very sweet I was told.

During the conference I had a sure sense that Friends gathered in Kenya—and indeed Friends everywhere—are deeply held in the heart of God. As we heard of Friends taking on the challenges of our world and as we grappled with divisive issues such as homosexuality and our right relationship to the nation state, we were constantly undergirded with prayer and a deep sense of unity. Each morning, Friends from different regions of the world led us and grounded us in worship—much of which included joyous celebration in song and dance.

One morning I had arrived late to worship as a Burundian chorus was singing a beautiful, sad song. Even though I couldn’t understand the words, sung in a Burundian dialect, I was moved to tears. I later found out that this song was a prayer for healing written shortly after the 1990s genocide. The work now being done by east African Friends groups in trauma healing and reconciliation, and the alternatives to violence project, is unmistakable evidence that the peace testimony is very much alive and well. In fact all groups of Friends represented at the conference showed a clear commitment to living on Spirit-led sustained witness to peace and justice.

As we engaged more deeply with one another over the course of the conference, in worship and in small home groups, I found myself still hoping we would somehow be showered with a new Quaker baptism—tongues of fire resting upon each head. On one of our last days, over a very short breakfast conversation, though, I was given a special grace—the grace to let go of my urge for results. I was released from the blindness of “always hoping for more” to a vision of how God is working among us, right now—bringing Friends together from all parts of the world, providing winged manna, opening hearts to deep healing, gathering us at Jesus’ feet, and sending us forth in love and in power!



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

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