

## **Report on Friends United Meeting From the NYYM Representatives to FUM, April 2007**

### **A Historic Event: February 2007**

In FUM's continuing effort to dismantle the patriarchal missionary model, it was agreed that for the first time ever in its history a general board meeting would be held in Kenya in February 2007 so that the board members from the 16 African yearly meetings could have full voice with their North American colleagues, and so that North American board members could have a better understanding of constituent yearly meetings many of them knew only by name—and so that they would also have a better sense of the expense and effort it takes to be an international participant in Friends United Meeting.

This board meeting and the strategic planning sessions that took place immediately preceding them (part of a strategic planning process that had begun in 2006) were difficult and painful. Much of what transpired in Kenya has been discussed on blog sites and via e-mail. In brief, those Friends who wished to reconsider the personnel policy experienced first-hand the full-throated opposition of Kenyan Quakers to any such discussion. And Friends who saw the way forward as a reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration had their hopes fulfilled.

We will go into significant detail about those proceedings later. We will also comment on the work of FUM. But at the outset of this report—despite reservations about some aspects of that work and despite grave concerns, shared by most of our membership, over policies and attitudes toward GLBT Friends—we strongly recommend that New York Yearly Meeting remain in association with FUM and continue to support its work.

### **Friends United Meeting's Work in East Africa**

East Africa is beset by desperate needs. Medical care, drinkable water, education, infrastructure repair, and jobs are all in scant supply. AIDS is ravaging the country, with huge numbers of adults who are HIV-positive, and growing throngs of children orphaned by the epidemic.

FUM has projects addressing many of these needs. It is in the process of taking back control of the Kaimosi hospital (where Walter and Hazel Haines served in the 1960s), control that had been relinquished prematurely in a well-meaning but misguided attempt to step back from patriarchal patronage. FUM also supports a hospital in Lugulu. Both of these hospitals play critical roles in providing health care in their regions, and both are in need of substantial help to repair their physical plants. FUM is also seeking to create a clinic at Samburu, one of its mission sites, where there is currently no health care available for lethal insect and snake bites.

FUM has drilled wells in a variety of locations, and is seeking to do more to provide drinkable water where there is none, such as at its Turkana mission, and

at the small village of Lutolo, Uganda, where residents currently haul water six miles each day. These are just two among many potential sites.

East Africans treasure their children. When you talk with them, the future of their children always comes up. They also deeply value education, which until the last year or so, could only be had for a fee that exceeded the means of most Kenyans. Kenyan Friends have been running affordable schools for years, schools that have an extremely good reputation. There are hundreds of Friends primary schools in Kenya, with a growing number in Uganda, and a goodly number, though not enough, of secondary schools. Secondary schooling is not offered by the government, and the need here is great.

Kenyans and Ugandans have taken most of the initiative in creating these schools, with money from FUM frequently funding capital improvements beyond the reach of the East Africans. One such school, the Lindi School, is in the middle of the Kibera slum, the largest slum in the world, with an estimated population of 1.5 million. Kenyan Friends have created a school out of nothing, in the middle of one of the poorest, most hopeless environments on the planet, serving the poorest of the poor. They hope to one day provide a secondary school as well. Without a secondary education, most of the graduates of the primary school will have few options for survival beyond crime and prostitution.

FUM Friends, most notable those from New England Yearly Meeting and USFWI (United Society of Friends Women International), have created an orphanage at Kakamega for children who have lost their parents to AIDS. The founders of the orphanage provide the children a place to live and funds for their education, until they are ready to live on their own.

These are but some examples of FUM's work in East Africa, work that it has been doing for over one hundred years. Until recently, this work has had a colonial missionary emphasis. The driving ethos behind this work does not distinguish between evangelization and doing good works. Both are understood as spreading the "good news" of the gospel, whether by building a church or drilling a well.

Particularly since 2002, FUM has been assertively moving toward a true global partnership, whereby African Quakers are full and not junior partners—not only in doing the work in East Africa but also in setting FUM's priorities worldwide. While somewhat less colonial, the work in East Africa is still structured around economic disparities that promote patterns of dependency. FUM has made a lot of progress in this area, but old patterns die very hard. Impoverished Kenyans and Ugandans expect all help to come from outside, in the form of U.S. dollars. There is very little sense of empowerment or recognition of the need or ability to build upon the assets already existing in East Africa. Patterns of dependency are still deeply intertwined in the good intentions of North Americans, who instinctively use money to fix desperate needs, and in the desires of Africans to have outsiders provide the solutions.

These patterns of dependency are compounded by endemic corruption, with Kenya deemed the second most corrupt country in Africa, and Uganda only somewhat better, which makes getting intended resources to desired recipients very difficult. Every single effort of North Americans who are attempting to do useful work in East Africa has to take this systemic corruption into account, or risk being very wasteful of resources. FUM's opening its office in Kisumu and hiring John Muhanji as its director, with Eden and James Grace doing fieldwork there, has been a crucial step in circumventing the endemic corruption.

### **The Strategic Planning Sessions and Board Meetings**

The Kakamega strategic planning meetings were the first opportunity for the North American General Board to meet with the African General Board. Of the 35 North American board members, 20 were able to attend, joined by about 65 Africans. Our aim was to take the goals and objectives named in four days of seeking in the Spirit during the preceding June and October meetings of the General Board in Richmond and to bring the African board members up to speed on the issues involved, incorporating their input, and editing the existing draft plan that had been created in October, rather than rewriting it from scratch. We had one day to accomplish this.

We were asked by the facilitator to use North American Quaker process for our work together, because the process used by East African Friends differs substantially. Each of four focus groups that had been identified in June 2006 as crucial to FUM's future and functioning (Identity, Administration, Communication, and Evangelism) had two facilitators, one North American and one African. Because of their greater familiarity with North American Quaker process, the North American was asked to function as the lead facilitator in each group.

Christopher Sammond was asked to facilitate the Identity group, which had been working since June 2006 to sort through differences in theology, Christology, source of spiritual authority, understanding of our history, and how to resolve our division over the sexual ethics portion of the FUM personnel policy. Of the 20 to 25 Friends laboring on these issues, about 2/3 were Africans, with the North Americans evenly split between dually affiliated and FUM-only yearly meetings.

Our laboring together was very difficult. The Africans wanted to resolve issues of theology, Christology, and source of spiritual authority by codifying a faith statement. Several had brought statements used in their yearly meetings. The North American FUM-only Friends were advocating for the Richmond Declaration, which is also the core of the *East Africa Faith and Practice* used by the 16 African yearly meetings. Friends from the dually affiliated yearly meetings explained their aversion to anything approaching a creedal statement, preferring surrender to the continual leadings of the Holy Spirit. Dually affiliated yearly meeting Friends also pointed to the likelihood of their respective bodies having grave difficulties with some of the content of the Richmond Declaration.

Long after the other three groups were done with their work, the Identity group was still laboring. Eventually, Christopher Sammond was clear to name the sense of the meeting: to ask the General Board to affirm the Richmond Declaration as the faith basis of FUM. He, and all the other board members from dually affiliated yearly meetings, stood aside from this sense of the meeting. It was a painful, and at times tearful, process.

We were not able to come to agreement about how to structure a conversation about our different understandings of GLBT personhood and ministry. We had some tentative beginnings that might have eventually borne fruit, but it was almost 11 P.M., we were exhausted, and the security dogs were about to be released into the compound, making it unsafe to return to our rooms.

The following morning, after a lengthy sermon by the clerk of Uganda Yearly Meeting on Romans 1:18–32, proclaiming repeatedly that even those who condone homosexuality are worthy of death, we began the General Board session. We approved the strategic plan, including the recommendation that the General Board consider the Richmond Declaration as the basis of faith for FUM. Deana Chase of New England Yearly Meeting proposed an addition to the minute that affirmed the continued membership of yearly meetings that did not see clear to affirm the Richmond Declaration. Many Friends spoke to this minute. Several African Friends spoke at considerable length against homosexuality, though not mentioning the matter at hand, that of the Richmond Declaration. Every representative from a dually affiliated yearly meeting spoke against the measure. Christopher Sammond spoke the following: “Of FUM’s thirty-one affiliated yearly meetings, five are standing aside on this issue. If this were a monthly meeting of thirty-one members, with five standing aside, the clerk would lay the matter over. I would suggest we do so at this time.” Despite this request to lay the matter over, which had joined similar requests from other North Americans and one Kenyan, the clerk named affirming the Richmond Declaration of Faith as the faith basis for FUM as the sense of the meeting.

### **Tensions over the Recognition and Honoring of the Spiritual Gifts of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Friends**

Many Friends in NYYM know little more about FUM than that they disagree with the sexual ethics portion of its personnel policy.

FUM comprises 30 yearly meetings: 14 in North America, which include Jamaica and Cuba Yearly Meetings, and 16 in East Africa, plus one preparative yearly meeting in Africa. Of the North American yearly meetings, 5 have historical roots in both Orthodox and Hicksite Quakerism and are affiliated with both FUM and FGC. NYYM is one of these 5 reunited yearly meetings, along with Baltimore, New England, Canadian, and Southeastern Yearly Meetings.

The five reunited yearly meetings have varying degrees of unity on issues of same sex marriage (marriage equality) and support for GLBT Friends serving in a ministerial capacity. The majority of Friends in these yearly meetings support

both. The other 25 yearly meetings in FUM also have some diversity as to how Friends understand these issues, but have a majority of Friends not in favor of either. For many years, these issues have been a point of serious controversy in the constituent North American yearly meetings of FUM, demanding a great deal of energy and focus, and they have polarized Friends to disheartening degrees. Tensions in Western Yearly Meeting and Indiana Yearly Meeting have been reflected in declining contributions to FUM as resources were directed to more immediate internal needs.

These issues are the flash point for a variety of other issues. In North America, there are elements of class, education, culture, and geographical bias, theology, epistemology, and pronouncedly different capacities to live in ambiguity, to wrestle openly with emotionally charged issues, and in understandings of the value of diversity intertwined with concerns over issues around ministry provided by Friends from sexual minorities.

We imagine that the emotional baggage loaded onto this issue is equally complex in East Africa. Statements that Christopher heard about homosexuality while in Africa were:

“We don’t have any homosexuals in Africa. We don’t have that problem here.”

“The suicide rate for gay Friends in Africa is very, very high.”

“In the forty-six languages spoken in Kenya, there is no word for *homosexual*.”

“In the younger generation of African Friends, homosexuality is not such a big issue.”

“God made Adam. When he was lonely, God made Eve out of him. God told them to be fruitful and multiply. How are two men to do this? The Bible makes it very clear that marriage is between a man and a woman. I do not understand why we are having this discussion.”

Given the extreme homophobia, which is deeply ingrained in African culture and reinforced by East African Christian theology, and given FUM’s commitment to be a genuine global partnership of all of its constituent yearly meetings, we do not foresee significant change in the personnel policy of FUM for at least another generation. Like our sisters and brothers in the Anglican church, we are yoked with Africans whose traditions, culture, understandings, and experience of the world differs from ours. Do we mean it when we say we seek true partnership?

We would also note that in the past twenty years, Friends from dually affiliated yearly meetings have carried this concern on behalf of the FUM organization as a whole, and been burdened with doing so. Representatives from more conservative yearly meetings have approached us and thanked us for carrying the concern, saying that they have not dared to speak out, not feeling safe to do so themselves.

We must recognize a mix of light and shadow in the way Friends have advocated for this issue. We have seen some Friends share the pain of their hearts in this

matter, and express concern for the organization. We have seen others unleash their anger, judgment, and moral indignation in ways that were destructive and polarizing. We are clear that we do not have the level of relationship, we do not have the bonds of deep trust in one another's grounding in the Spirit, to have the kind of conversations we have been insisting this organization have. If we were a monthly meeting at such an impasse, our practice as Friends would dictate our laying the issue aside until such time as we can approach each other in love to labor together anew.

### **Our Continued Affiliation**

Given the likelihood of little movement in changing the personnel policy, many may question whether we should continue our affiliation with FUM. This is certainly a valid question at this time, and worthy of our careful consideration. Some may say that the reaffirmation of the Richmond Declaration means that we should withdraw. In order to be clear about the place of the Richmond Declaration, we quote from FUM's press release about the Kenya meetings (available in full at [www.fum.org](http://www.fum.org)): "Affirming the Richmond Declaration is not set as a requirement for membership and the freedom to remain in FUM without such affirmation still exists." Let us repeat that in our own words. It has not been necessary in the past to affirm the Richmond Declaration to be a constituent yearly meeting of FUM and it is not necessary now. As your representatives to the General Board of Friends United Meeting, we have weighed these questions about our membership carefully and prayerfully, and we recommend that New York Yearly Meeting continue its affiliation with Friends United Meeting, for the following reasons:

FUM is us. FUM is not some alien entity with no direct relationship to meetings and members of NYYM. NYYM (Orthodox) has been deeply involved in FUM since its inception as Five Years Meeting, and there are still many meetings in NYYM, both pastoral and unprogrammed, that identify with different strains of Orthodox Quaker theology. In monthly meetings that do not corporately identify with Orthodox Quaker theology, there can be found many Friends who do so themselves as individuals. We, as a reunited yearly meeting, are a blended society and FUM has the potential to nourish that part of us which resonates with the liberal and centrist elements of FUM. If we, and the other reunited yearly meetings, sever ties with FUM, the organization will shift markedly to a fundamentalist right, leaving most of our centrist Orthodox Friends without a spiritual home in either FUM or FGC.

We are called to unity, not division. This is a matter of discernment, rather than reasoned argument. We decry the various divisions in the Religious Society of Friends and believe that we are called to work with our commonalities rather than divide over our differences. We would consider it a substantial loss to both the reunited yearly meetings and FUM if liberal Quakers left the organization. We believe that our commonalities far outweigh our differences, and that to separate will do more harm than good to FUM as an organization and to the Religious Society of Friends as a whole.

If we are to be peacemakers, this is a good place to start. Most of the Friends in NYYM are deeply committed to being a force for peace in the world. We believe that continuing to walk with FUM both embodies that vision and will teach us what it really means to live it out. Doing so will most likely be painful for a long time.

If FUM did not exist, we would probably need to create something like it. In the past year and a half, NYYM Friends have explored the need to meet with Friends from NEYM, BYM, and PYM who are engaged in ministry in East Africa. Explorations for this initiative have included FUM staff and the possibility of FUM staff support for organizing such a conference.

Our World Ministries Committee has taken the organization of such a conference under its care, recognizing the need for Friends to share with one another what they are doing, consider coordination of the work together, exchange information about best practices, as well as the pitfalls to be aware of in this work.

Similarly, our Christ-centered Friends here in NYYM have expressed a strong need for gathering with like-minded Friends from other yearly meetings.

Both initiatives could happen with or without our being affiliated with FUM, but both point to the need for an organization like it.

We can learn from one another's strengths. Some examples of these strengths would be the grounding in scripture enjoyed by programmed Friends, and the skills in clerking and business practice in the reunited yearly meetings. Friends from yearly meetings affiliated only with FUM are imbued with a spirit of giving and service that is magnitudes greater than what is common in most dually and FGC-only affiliated meetings. The reunited yearly meetings are further along in the process of reclaiming the roles of elders in our Society, a process that some FUM-only meetings are very interested in exploring. We have much to learn from one another.

FUM is a good partner for our commitment to Meeting the Minimum Needs of All (MMNA). FUM is doing the work we say we are committed to doing. We, through FUM, are providing medical care, drinkable water, and education to those who have none. FUM is not the only possible partner in this effort; there are others, to be sure. Friends should be well aware that FUM projects are mission projects, with no distinction between spreading conservative Gurneyite Orthodox Quaker theology and providing critical services where they are desperately needed. This theology will make some of our members uncomfortable, and we should give this careful consideration. There has also been a history of FUM's projects fostering dependence in a way that leaves us very uncomfortable. And while there is a shift away from this style of helping, it is still more prevalent than we would like.

Despite these caveats, we believe that FUM would be a useful partner, particularly in East Africa, in our commitment to effect change in MMNA. Corruption is endemic in East Africa, and most Friends trying to work there have personal experience of westerners' money being ill-used, severely lessening the impact of those dollars. FUM now has reliable contacts "on the ground" that are invaluable. While it is true that we do not need to be an associated yearly meeting of FUM to contribute to its projects, and thus to benefit these people, if we wish to have a say in how projects are prioritized, we do.

### **A Concluding Paradox**

The potentially tragic paradox is that for many years now FUM has been stepping out in faith attempting to confront its lingering racist, colonial, patriarchal assumptions, only to end up on the verge of divesting itself of the very yearly meetings who could—given their commitment to social justice—be upholding FUM most steadily in its amazingly radical commitment to dismantling its vestigial colonialism from within while it invents utterly new models of service through faith.

*Dick Goodman, Carol Holmes, Christopher Sammond*

### **Queries:**

1. What does it really mean to be in partnership with Africans? How do we balance the needs for water, healthcare, AIDS ministry, and education with the homophobia and fundamentalism present among many African Friends.
2. How can we walk with Friends with whom we have much in common and also with whom we differ on some items that are very important to us? What are we called to do when faced with one another's pain and different ways of understanding faithfulness?
3. While the Richmond Declaration is the historic foundation of FUM and is as precious to many as the writings of John Woolman to NYYM Friends, it is probably not a document that most of us are familiar with let alone something that most of us can affirm. Are we clear that our attitudes toward the Richmond Declaration are not a barrier to our affiliation with FUM?
4. In FUM, as in much of the Quaker world including our own yearly meeting, the Orthodox/Hicksite split has never been truly resolved. What does this lack of resolution mean to us at this time? What work might it call us to?
5. How do we as NYYM understand our own differences in theology that undergird our different understandings of gender?
6. Based on what we saw in Africa, the personnel policy of FUM will not be changing in the near future. Given that reality, how do we as a YM minister to the



needs of Friends, both within and without our YM, who find FUM's policy painful and unacceptable?