

# A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Thirty-Two

ISSN #0739-5418

Eleventh Month, 1983

Dear Friend:

The controversy over discussion of homosexuality at the Friends United Meeting 1984 Triennial, which we have been following(see issues #30 and #23), may have been resolved. Meeting on 10/28 in Richmond, Indiana, the FUM General Board adopted two minutes relating to this concern, which had been raised by three Yearly Meetings in response to the insistence of the host group, California YM, that no discussion of the topic be allowed at the Triennial sessions.

One of the minutes, #83-GB-15, affirmed as a matter of policy FUM's commitment to the traditional Quaker belief in continuing revelation, something which can affect all aspects of our life together, and from which difficult issues are not exempt. It also affirmed the appropriateness of seeking such new light in any and all FUM gatherings. The other minute, #83-GB-14, more specifically declared that at the 1984 Triennial, provision will be made for informal interest groups which Friends in attendance may wish to organize, following the good order established by the Triennial steering committee. Reports from the meeting indicate that the California YM delegates present joined in the support for these minutes, thus acceding to the concerns about their previous stand raised by other groups.

These minutes, if adhered to, would remove any arbitrary bar to discussion of homosexuality or other difficult issues at the Triennial. They would make possible the kind of quiet, offstage explorations which now take place routinely at many yearly meetings without fanfare. If the General Board's minutes result in such unhindered threshing sessions becoming a similar fixture of the Triennial routine, FUM's role as the broadest of American Quaker umbrella groups can only be strengthened. I for one am grateful that the General Board faced up to this matter, and I appreciate the good grace with which the California representatives joined in the clear sense of the meeting.

It will be a relief if the General Board's minutes mean that this issue, which has dogged FUM for over a year, can be laid to rest. It will be a relief not least because delegates to the Triennial will have plenty of other weighty matters to consider. One such matter, which could become sticky, is action on membership for two YMs in Kenya, which have divided off from the original East Africa Yearly Meeting. We have followed this story extensively(see issues #4,9,16,18 & 20), and take another look in this issue.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager



## A GLIMPSE OF THE "INVISIBLE" YEARLY MEETING

In the last year, the Elgon Religious Society of Friends in Kenya has begun to be welcomed into the world family of Friends, after almost a decade of obscurity amounting to exile. This process should be formally completed next summer, when the Friends United Meeting Triennial acts on a recommendation from its General Board to accept Elgon as a full member Yearly Meeting. This recommendation could become sticky, however, because the leaders of Elgon's parent body, East Africa Yearly Meeting Central, as it is now called, have steadfastly refused to recognize Elgon's existence, or that of a third Kenya Yearly Meeting, known as Southern, which was formed two years ago. The Central YM leaders' attitude spilled over into FUM's proceedings last month during the sessions of its Wider Ministries Commission. Delegations from all three of the Kenya groups were present and were asked to introduce themselves. The Central YM spokesmen rose and strongly denounced the other two as illegitimate, usurpers who had no rightful place in FUM's ranks.

The Wider Ministries Commission did not act on these complaints, because further action the membership applications of the two new groups is up to the Triennial. There, however, the Central YM is presently the only one fully accredited, and its objections would have to be heard. Thus the bitter split among Kenya Friends, which is now a decade old, could well become a major claimant on the delegates' attention. While such a confrontation could be unpleasant, it would in a sense be long overdue. Elgon YM left the Central group back in 1973; yet for most of the intervening years FUM and Friends World Committee for Consultation staff held news of this split within a very small circle, and kept their organizations aligned with the Central YM leadership. The partisan role of FUM and FWCC in these early years has, by all accounts, worked to prolong and deepen the fractures among East African Friends. It is a sorry chapter in both organizations' histories.

### *The Surprising Growth in "Our" Yearly Meeting*

In the case of Elgon, FUM and FWCC staff reportedly felt that the schismatic group would soon wither away and leave its adherents with no real option but to return to the parent body. Yet just the opposite has occurred. Recent figures from Elgon indicate that in 1973, when it was officially recognized by the Kenya government (a necessary legal step there), it included about 2000 members in but seven monthly meetings. But this year the membership is listed as 15,000 in 53 monthly meetings. According to Elisha Wakube, Elgon's former General Secretary and now its Presiding Clerk, up to four times as many people take part in weekly worship meetings. The meetings are programmed and pastoral.

In a recent interview during a visit to the United States for the FUM board meetings, Elisha Wakube gave an intriguing glimpse of Elgon and its brand of Quakerism. In the first place, the impulses which led to its separate emergence were complex, but appear to have centered around a strong sense of regional-cultural identity: Elgon draws its members from an area to the north of that under the Central group's jurisdiction, and one reason for its rapid growth is that people in this region think of it as "our" YM as opposed to "their" Central YM. (The same thing appears to be true of the new Southern YM as well.)

Wakube said that Kenyan Friends conduct their business meetings without voting, though there is a provision for voting in Elgon's constitution. Women do not show up in YM offices, but Wakube pointed out that separate women's meetings exist at all levels, with their own officers and budgets, as was once the case throughout Quakerdom. He added that Kenyan Quakers have also been pioneers in the education of women in their culture.

### *The Problem of Peace and Other Testimonies*

As to other historic testimonies, Wakube reports a mixed record. The missionaries taught him, as a youth, above all to avoid smoking, drinking and dancing; and, Wakube affirmed, he has eschewed these things all his life. But numerous other Elgon Friends have taken jobs in cigarette factories and breweries, Quaker shopkeepers have sold these items, and a few Kenyan Friends have even become proprietors of taverns. They defend this backsliding, Wakube said, as a result of the condition of widespread unemployment, a rationale not unknown in the developed world as well.





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The peace testimony is also something, he said, which needed careful study among Elgon Friends. They are drawn from a peace-loving people, who have avoided the conspiracies and intrigues which surrounded Kenya's struggle for independence, and which have occasionally threatened its government since. But, Wakube said, Kenyan Friends were also conscripted by the British in both world wars for such units as the King's African Rifles. Others now serve in the Kenyan military and police forces. To the extent that any feel a need to defend such connections, Wakube said, their plea again is the need for, and scarcity of, jobs.

There is one issue, however, on which Wakube insists Elgon Friends have taken a firm stand: polygamy. To be a member of the Elgon Religious Society of Friends, a convert must forswear it. Polygamy is, of course, traditional and widely-accepted in Kenyan culture; Wakube's father had seven wives and over twoscore children. There are many such people, moreover, who accept much of the Quaker and Christian message; they even attend church, join the Bible study, fervent singing and prayers that mark the services. Their presence is permitted, Wakube said, because the Church is an open place. Further, not a few of the polygamists argue plausibly that, inasmuch as they lead otherwise upright lives, and feel close to God, they are prepared to leave the judgment of this infraction (which, after all, was tolerated in much of the Bible) to the divine sifting. Wakube spoke respectfully of such people, but repeated that church members must forego the practice.

### *Kenyan Quakerism: Growth and Growing Pains*

Despite this challenge to such a traditional African practice as polygamy, Wakube expressed confidence in Elgon's prospects for continued growth. As it grows, he foresaw the YM continuing to develop a more fully indigenous, African form of Quaker Christianity. He is also hopeful that recent moves, at the Kenyan government's behest, to form a council of the three Yearly Meetings, somewhat along the lines of FUM, will ease the intra-Quaker tensions of recent years. It is reported that the president of Kenya himself, Daniel arap Moi, has taken a personal interest in resolving the division, which has apparently at times taken on the character of a major public scandal. Last sixth month, at the provincial commissioner's direction, a Council was formed, and it is supposed to receive official legal sanction soon. Just how successful this council will be, however, remains to be seen, because the Central YM officials have thus far refused to take any part in its formation. One reason for their boycott is undoubtedly that joining it would involve recognition of the other two groups. And as the outburst at the FUM session last month showed, the Central leadership has not only refused such recognition at home, but has fought to prevent it being granted by outside groups.

The Central leaders made their case to FUM in an open session once before, at the 1982 General Board meeting which was considering applications for Elgon and the Southern YM. After listening, the Board still felt clear to recommend acceptance. It seems likely that, in the absence of any startling new developments, the Triennial delegates will be inclined to accept that recommendation next summer, over the objections of the Central group if necessary.

### *Toward A Right Relationship in the New Friends Family*

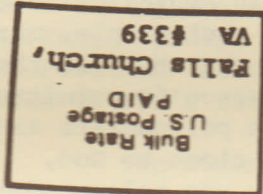
Such acceptance, though, will carry numerous implications for FUM relations with African Friends. Among these, four questions come immediately to mind, namely:

1. Money: Will FUM's financial contributions, which have formerly gone only to the Central YM, now be shared proportionally with the other two groups?
2. Staff Resources: Will FUM volunteer teachers and other workers now be recruited for service in all three areas?
3. Reporting: Can we now expect to receive regular and candid reports about Quakerism in Africa, and in each of the YMs, especially in the pages of *Quaker Life*?
4. FUM-supported institutions: Will FUM see to it that any Kenyan Quaker institution it helps support is effectively open to Friends from all three groups? Most such institutions are in the Central YM's territory, and there are some reports of exclusion of Elgon Friends from them. FUM staff, however, dispute such reports.

Clearly, the Kenyan YMs are in control of their own destiny. But the development of a right relationship between them and Western Quakers is going to be a challenging task.



INSIDE: A GLIMPSE OF THE  
"INVISIBLE" YEARLY MEETING



From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter  
P.O. Box 1361  
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### THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

This month, coincidentally, is also rich with significance for African Friends: it was 81 years ago this month, in 1902, that the first Friends Mission Station was officially established in the western province of Kenya where the three YMs are now located. And it was 37 years ago, on 11/17/1946, that East Africa Yearly Meeting was officially formed.

Another landmark in this month was recently observed in Philadelphia, not at a Friends Meeting, but in a Catholic church, Old St. Joseph's in Willing's Alley. Quakers were on hand, though, invited by Cardinal John Krol; because the event marked the 250th anniversary of the first Catholic worship celebrated there, in 11/1733. This was, the speakers at the anniversary mass noted, the first place where Catholic services were held openly in the British colonies; they had been, up til then, proscribed by English law, under penalty of life in prison. But William Penn's Holy Experiment was founded on the notion of religious freedom, even for such an outlaw group as the Roman Catholics; and when the Proprietor's Council was challenged for defying the law and letting the Catholics meet openly, they refused to stop it. According to Tom Fox, editor of the *National Catholic Reporter*, the ceremony earlier this month "voiced a long overdue expression of gratitude to the Society of Friends for making religious freedom in America something other than a vacant abstraction."

One last item: in this month 1967, the great Quaker columnist Drew Pearson dictated a memo summarizing the stories he had published which had "molded history." Among them was a seamy Sacramento scandal involving some staffers of then-California governor Ronald Reagan. His disclosures, Pearson wrote confidently, had "pretty well knocked Reagan out of the box as a Republican candidate for President...."

### QUAKER CHUCKLE

#### *Speaking Peace to Power*

An FCNL staff memorandum, headed "Holiday Hypocrisy," has appeared in my files. It reads, in part: "Ever since a Friend...pointed out the inconsistency of our frequent use of 'militarist' language, I have been increasingly aware of the extent to which violent and un-Quakerly feelings are often reflected in our daily speech and behavior. I was disturbed, then, to walk in this morning and find the office festooned with *missile-toe*. Is this really an appropriate Christmas symbol? Is not our attempt to express affection for our fellow humans undercut by a plant whose name is an anathema to all that we stand for?...In light of the above, I propose that the staff consider re-naming the bellicose branch, "peace-toe."

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