

# A Friendly Letter

Seventh Month, 1985

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Dear Friend,

This issue is late, but not by accident. I delayed writing it until after the World Gathering of Young Friends, held 7/19-26 at Guilford College, which I attended as a reporter and Young Friend emeritus. The fruits of that labor are found in the following pages. Here let me mention a few other items of current importance:

The first is the resignation of Lloyd Lee Wilson as Executive Secretary of Friends General Conference. When Lloyd Lee took up this post three years ago, FGC was sliding over the brink of financial disaster; it didn't even have enough money to properly close up shop. During his tenure FGC has been pulled up from the brink and at least a few crucial paces back therefrom. By that lifesaving operation, and an associated improvement in the equipment and operations of its' offices, Lloyd Lee has made lasting contributions to FGC's life. In the past year, however, staff and committee tensions increased to the point where Lloyd Lee was encouraged and glad to take another job offer when it appeared. It is difficult to sort out how much of this tension sprang from his personal style and strongly-voiced Christian convictions, and how much was the predictable burnout effect commonly encountered by those foolhardy enough to go to work for Friends' bodies. In any case, Lloyd Lee can take pride in his record there, and will no doubt have numerous other opportunities to serve among Friends as way opens.

More melancholy is the report that this summer has been marked by the first two recorded deaths among Friends from AIDS. One was from Beacon Hill Meeting in Boston, Howard Seager; the other, Henry Weitzer, of Morningside Meeting in New York, and a subscriber to this journal. Father, may they rest in peace, and may this plague soon be swept from among us.

Also in a disconcerting vein is the report of yet another split among Kenyan Quakers, this time in the original body, formerly called simply East Africa YM. Its longtime General Secretary, Thomas L'Ungaho, has reportedly led most of the officers and churches out of it into a new group, EAYM-Central, which may well receive the necessary official government approval soon. Details of this new fracture are sketchy; we shall be following up on it as more information becomes available.

Finally, it is now three months and counting since the president by law was to nominate the first board of Directors of the U.S. Peace Institute, and there is still no sign of the list. We continue to keep a vigil over it as well.

Yours in the Light,

*Chuck Fager*

Chuck Fager



## THE WORLD GATHERING OF YOUNG FRIENDS: A SHORTAGE OF MIRACLES?

Of five major speakers at the World Gathering of Young Friends (WGYF) held at Guilford College in North Carolina this month, one addressed the delegates' condition and another identified their task. In the end, though, the effects of the former overshadowed work on the latter.

Jan Wood, from Northwest Yearly Meeting, spoke to their condition with eloquence: Quakers today, she asserted, are not only hopelessly divided over doctrine and practice, we are also very good at finding ways of lying to each other about that reality. It is especially easy to substitute a superficial goodfellowship for the plain and difficult speaking of the truth that is the necessary precondition for laying our broken condition before God, who is the only One capable of lifting us through the pain it produces to something beyond it.

Jonathon Fryer, a widely-travelled British journalist who came to Friends after attending a meeting in Saigon which continued in silent worship through a rocket attack, spoke of the task: Friends in the mid-1980s, he believes, are completing a process of self-understanding which has been underway for some years. But, he added, we must not spend too long thus inwardly-focussed, because this new self-understanding needs to be applied to the increasingly critical problems of the world, in a skillful and even professional Quaker way.

### *A PROMISING PRELUDE, OR A FALSE START?*

For a week, the 300 delegates from all over the world attempted, as their final Epistle said, "to envisage the future of the Religious Society of Friends, and to see how our lives should speak within that vision." The rest of the Epistle, however, dealt primarily with the differences obscuring this vision: "We have been challenged, shaken up, at times even enraged, intimidated, and offended by these differences in each other," it declared. "Our differences are our richness, but also our problem." They said they had learned that they must, as Jan Wood had urged, lay their differences before God for forgiveness and transformation into instruments of healing. "This priority is not merely an abstract idea," they concluded, "but something we have experienced powerfully at work among us this week."

So far, so good; in fact, in terms of candor, far better than the mealy-mouthed evasions which have so often been emitted by many bodies of their elders. And yet, this is talk of their condition; what of their task? What of the Future of Friends they were gathered to envision? Here, alas, the epistle is vague and brief. It acknowledges that there are many crises in the world today, that testimonies for peace and justice ought to be borne even at great risk, and insists that "It is our desire to work cooperatively on unifying these points." But that is all there is; no specifics, no proposals, no vision. The only concrete statement came as an afterthought: they agreed, at the behest of the African delegation, to include a denunciation of racism, and especially apartheid, in a summary conference document.

### *SOUND AND FURY SIGNIFYING--WHAT?*

The lack of progress in formulating a vision of the Quaker future was troubling to many participants as the gathering closed. Yet the Epistle spoke faithfully of what had transpired during the week. What had happened to the vision process along the way? There seem to be two main possible answers: One is that the focus on differences, and the attempt to understand and look beyond them was inescapable, and fully sufficient to take up a week of intensive labor. This makes much sense; after all, some adult groups of American Friends have wrangled over similar issues for decades with fewer results and less understanding to show for it. From this perspective, the gathering ought to be seen primarily as the opening chapter in a continuing series of similar international young Friends gatherings, the next of which could build on this foundation of understanding and produce more concrete ideas.

But the other, less optimistic view of what happened sees in the gathering a major, missed opportunity. It begins by questioning whether theological and worship diversity is in fact the dominant issue among Friends around the world today. Or is it, as a growing number began to suspect by the week's end, primarily a preoccupation, almost a major sport, of Quakers from affluent First World countries? This impression was strengthened for some by a



conversation late in the week between several Americans and a leader of the large Kenyan delegation. Was grappling with doctrinal divergence at the top of the Kenyans' list of priorities and hopes for the gathering, he was asked? Gently, he made it plain that it was not. Questions of common work and witness around the survival and development needs of people in a poor nation were much more important to them. For that matter, the record of Kenyan Quakerism bears this out: its three YMs have had their full share of problems and divisions, involving power struggles, personality differences, tribal and cultural problems--almost everything one can name, in fact, except theology.

But more practical priorities like these were rarely surfaced and not formally addressed in any substantial way by the gathering, though toward the end of the week there were several ad hoc initiatives under discussion in various corners of the campus. The agenda, the format and the proceedings were dominated, no matter how unintentionally, by articulate, First World Friends and their theologically-centered concerns, to the neglect of more concrete issues which many, especially some from the developing countries, were equally concerned about. Furthermore, there is no assurance that any future gathering will be held, or if it were that the same group of people would be present to build on what happened at Guilford. In any case, despite the heartfelt and candid tone of the Epistle, it is a sad truth that few things dissipate more quickly than noble sentiments of solidarity voiced at the conclusion of such events. And the opportunity to develop more practical ways of embodying the witness that everyone seemed to agree was called for was, without question, allowed to slip past.

#### *NO BLAME, BUT SOME DEFECTIVE VIRTUES*

This interpretation is not intended to point a finger of blame at anyone. Most native English-speaking attenders, including this one, arrived convinced that diversity should be item number one on the agenda. Is a week such a long time to begin to discover our parochialism? After all, it is remarkable enough that the gathering even took place; and by collecting sufficient funds to assure attendance by a large number of African, Asian and Latin American Quakers, the organizers achieved what was probably the first truly representative assembly of the worldwide Society of Friends as it actually exists today. That they did this, moreover, on their own initiative, through unofficial planning committees which worked for three years and raised on their own a \$150,000 budget is a testimony to their audacity, talent and vitality, of all of which we could use more among Friends.

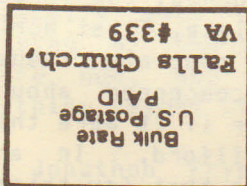
Yet in other ways as well, the planners suffered the vices of their virtues. One particularly grating problem was the determination by some officious planning committee members to control attendance at the gathering no matter what, presumably in pursuit of the worthwhile goal of maintaining its representative character against a feared invasion of hordes of Yankee interlopers. As a result, however, when a handful of young Friends who arrived without certified credentials, they were in effect told to get lost, though one had come from Chile and another from the West Coast. Even more disturbing was the shameful treatment of an older North Carolina Friend who sought to offer much-needed volunteer support, and for his efforts was made a pariah and an outcast in as disgraceful, insulting and unnecessary a series of episodes as this writer has ever observed at a Quaker gathering.

#### *LEST A SEED FALL TO THE EARTH...*

To be sure, whatever its shortcomings, many good things are bound to come out of such a gathering as this. Contacts are made, relationships begun, and ideas planted, the results of which can hardly be foreseen at such close range. After all, the whole process which led to the gathering began, as best as I have been able to trace it, in a chance conversation in 1979 between a midwestern American Friend and a British staffer of the Friends World Committee for Consultation: The midwesterner remarked that he wished there could be another Friends World Conference; the 1952 gathering in England, he affirmed, had changed his life. The FWCC staffer responded that alas, there was not enough support among Friends groups surveyed by FWCC to make such a major gathering possible. This Friend then added, "But the young Friends could do it." And this thought, shared further, crystallized at the 1982 FWCC conference in Kenya in the hearts of those who then labored so long to make it happen. Given this mysteriously leavening history, one can only hope that despite its shortcomings, the World Gathering of Young Friends will ultimately prove worth the effort in the cause of Truth as Friends bear witness to it in the future that we all must face, with or without a vision.



INSIDE: THE WORLD GATHERING OF YOUNG FRIENDS--  
OPEN DOOR, OR LOST OPPORTUNITY?



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#### THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

It was in Eighth Month, 1857 that John Bright, the British Quaker statesman, was returned to Parliament following his defeat in Third Month of the same year, after serving almost fourteen years. Bright's defeat was due to his lonely but steadfast opposition to British involvement in the disastrous and unnecessary Crimean War. He had formerly represented Manchester, but he was reelected without opposition and with the backing of prominent merchants and Friends in Birmingham, who were more in line with his views. He served from then until 1889, eloquent and noted for his integrity to the end.

One of Bright's other major achievements was helping keep England from openly supporting the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War. During an earlier Eighth Month, however, that of 1814, British troops marched into and burned the new American capital of Washington. During this siege, a quick-witted birthright Friend from the West Indies named William Thornton, who was Superintendent of the U.S. Patent Office, managed to save his building and its records from the flames by engaging the British commander in a highly learned discussion, during which he persuaded the invader that he was really the curator of the American Fine Arts collection, destruction of which would be a needless blow to Western culture.

#### QUAKER CHUCKLE

The clerk of a major yearly meeting died just a few days after a long and difficult annual session, and soon found herself at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter, however, said he could find no record of her or her major yearly meeting. The clerk insisted that there must be some mistake and demanded to take the matter up directly with the Godhead. So she was presented to God the Father; but He also shook His head and said he knew nothing of her and her major yearly meeting. She asked to see the Son, and Jesus appeared, but with the same result.

Exasperated but still persistent, the clerk called for the Holy Spirit. And when She arrived, the clerk again explained who she was and why she was there. At this the Holy Spirit grew pensive: "A major yearly meeting...a major yearly meeting...." Suddenly a snap of the divine fingers and a shocked glance of recognition: "Oh yes!" cried the Spirit. "So that's where I was supposed to be last week!"