



A Friendly Letter

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Dear Friend,

This month's article, about East Africa Yearly Meeting (EAYM), is a "scoop," a story which has not appeared in print before. Reporters are normally gratified, as I am, to publish scoops; we take them as a sign that we are doing our job, digging out the news.

There is one odd thing about this particular story, though: it really *shouldn't* be a scoop, and the reason why is worth a brief comment.

This story shouldn't be a scoop because while it is "news," it isn't new. In fact much of it goes back at least six years, and has been well-known to a few American Friends for as long.

Yet there have been only a few very brief, vague references to this developing story in major Quaker publications, in particular the Friends United Meeting (FUM) magazine, *Quaker Life*, under whose umbrella it all has been taking place. Why has it not been covered there? The lack of coverage is largely due to the fact that the subject is *controversial*; and the Friends United Press board, which oversees *Quaker Life*, has a policy that its publications will not get involved with "controversies."

This policy has not only kept reports about East Africa's problems out of *Quaker Life*'s pages; it has also prevented the magazine from being a forum for practically any of the other issues of faith and practice over which American Friends have differing views. This taboo has tended to result in bland and often irrelevant reportage, and kept the magazine's fine staff from making *Quaker Life* as good as it could be.

Fortunately, the Friends United Press board has been recently reconstituted, following the FUM Triennial. I very much hope the new board will reconsider and revise this policy. My suggestion for a revised standard would be something like this: *In dealing with topics controversial among Friends, Quaker Life should seek out coverage that is accurate, fair to all sides and friendly in presentation, and which promotes understanding and love among the FUM constituency.*

Such a policy would make *Quaker Life* a much more interesting and challenging publication. (It would thereby also make it tougher competition for this newsletter; but I believe competition is good for journalists, even me.)

Yours in the Light

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

PS. If you like *A Friendly Letter*, please share it with others. And if you are a new reader, I hope you will consider subscribing. The rates for a year (12 issues) are \$12 for an individual and \$15 for groups.

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EAST AFRICA YEARLY MEETING: QUAKERS IN CRISIS

East Africa Yearly Meeting (EAYM) in Kenya, the largest single body of Friends in the world, is being torn apart by internal strife so serious it could pose a threat to the success of the world conference of Friends scheduled to be held in Kenya under its auspices next summer.

These internal struggles have already resulted in one formal schism in EAYM, and threaten another. They have also been marked by numerous incidents of physical confrontation between contending factions, some of which have involved fisticuffs, the police, Kenyan courts, and extensive unflattering coverage in the secular Kenyan press. (The publicity has been so bad that one veteran Quaker worker who recently returned from Africa told *A Friendly Letter* that a Quaker affiliation in Kenya is currently a distinct handicap to one's reputation.) Teams of mediators from Friends United Meeting (FUM) and the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) have been sent to help find ways to reconcile the conflicts, but to no avail. The most recent reports indicate that the situation continues to deteriorate.

Causes: Numerous, complex, and tough to deal with

EAYM was created out of the work of Quaker missionaries sponsored by FUM over a period of several decades. It was set off as an independent Yearly Meeting in 1964. Former FUM staff members like Harold Smuck, who worked in Kenya during the transition period, take justifiable pride in the fact that Friends moved farther and faster to turn their African missions over to indigenous leadership than any other denomination.

The causes of the present divisions, according to knowledgeable observers, are complex and of long-standing. They include geography, language and cultural differences, tensions between established and aspiring leaders, even political considerations--just about everything except, surprisingly enough, theological differences.

Already one major segment of the Yearly Meeting, in northern Kenya, has formally seceded and reorganized itself as the Elgon Yearly Meeting of Friends. Elgon is, however, something of an orphan body; it is not listed in FWCC directories; it has no relationship with EAYM; and its applications for recognition by FWCC and FUM have been laid on the table, reportedly to avoid offending EAYM officials.

Competing Delegations Meet at FUM Triennial

A substantial constituency of Friends from southern Kenya apparently also wishes to form its own separate Yearly Meeting, but has been unable to do so. Besides opposition from the EAYM leadership, the group faces an additional obstacle in the form of the Kenyan government, which must approve any such changes. Spokesmen from both the EAYM leadership and the dissident southern group attended the FUM Triennial at Earlham College earlier this month, to plead their case to FUM officials and delegates. The FUM staff managed to get the Kenyans to sit down together in private meetings (reportedly the first time they had met in many months). Sources said little progress was made in the sessions.

The FWCC staff and executive committee has long been aware of the problems in Kenya. Concern over the disturbances apparently had much to do with FWCC's initial decision at its last Triennial in Gwatt, Switzerland in 1979 *not* to plan a World Conference of Friends for 1982, although the last such conference was in Greensboro North Carolina at Guilford College in 1965, and 15 years has been the traditional interval between such gatherings. EAYM had extended an invitation to FWCC to hold its next world gathering in Kenya. Since world conferences had already been held in all the other major centers of Quakerism, Kenya was logically "next in line." But the divisive atmosphere was reportedly a cause of much concern. It was agreed to hold

the 1982 Triennial there, but to defer action on any larger gathering.

The Friends World Committee: Caught in the Middle

Over the next year, however, the FWCC Executive Committee came to feel that a larger international Quaker conference *could* be held successfully in Kenya, and EAYM's invitation was belatedly accepted.

The continuing division and disruption there, however, has since made many FWCC Friends wonder whether their decision was a wise one. A team was sent to Kenya last winter to examine the situation and report back. Its recommendation was that conference planning should go forward; the team felt Kenyan Friends could put aside their differences at least momentarily to ensure success for an event which would bring them considerable prestige and international publicity.

One FWCC staff member, however, told *A Friendly Letter* earlier this month that the situation had worsened since then. This reporter's interviews with the Kenyan Friends representing the contending factions at the FUM Triennial similarly produced little that was encouraging. Several other Friends there who are close to the situation expressed the belief that the FWCC should consider delaying or moving the conference.

Editorial Commentary: A Very Risky Proposition

We share the feeling that FWCC ought to be making plans for an alternate location for its 1982 conference. The reports of repeated disruptions and altercations among Kenyan Friends are deeply disturbing, and sound fully as disastrous to "the Reputation of Truth" as the worst episodes associated with the tragic separations among American Friends in the 1820s. (See *This Season in Quaker History*, next page.) Indeed, given EAYM's size, the turmoil it is undergoing is probably the most serious among Friends since then. Moreover, there is no indication yet that these problems will be closer to resolution by the time of the conference; the evidence, unfortunately, points in the opposite direction. The vulnerability of an international gathering, with the attendant press attention, to some untoward, unQuakerly incident is too great, in our judgment, to be ignored.

To be sure, it is not the business of Friends elsewhere to tell EAYM how to settle its internal difficulties. But neither is FWCC obliged to subject a world-wide gathering to the seething and unpredictable atmosphere that now exists there.

If the various parties in EAYM cannot make substantial progress toward a mutually agreeable resolution of their differences, in a Friendly manner in the very near future, FWCC should not hesitate to delay or shift the location of the 1982 conference.

Also Needed: Full Reporting of Developments

Furthermore, as these events unfold, knowledgeable Friends owe it to the rest of us to prepare, and distribute widely, detailed reports of conference plans and EAYM's progress, or lack thereof, toward reconciliation. It is unfortunate, in our view, that this brief sketch is the first open broaching of this matter among Friends at large. This is particularly regrettable in that the problems have been covered widely in secular media in Kenya. It is unseemly for non-Friends to better informed about such a matter than other Friends.

Before several hundred of us expend the great effort and expense involved in making a trip to a world conference there next summer, we and the Friends we will report back to ought to know as much as possible about what we are getting into.

INSIDE: CRISIS IN THE WORLD'S
LARGEST YEARLY MEETING

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
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THIS SEASON IN QUAKER HISTORY

Summer was the time for separations among American Friends in 1827 and 1828. How bad did it get then? Looking back over 65 years of bitterness between the antagonists, Thomas Speakman, a Philadelphia Hicksite, sadly concluded:

"It was once said, 'See the Quakers, how they love one another;' it may rather now be said, 'See the Quakers, how they hate one another.'"

Speakman described, for instance, the lawsuits in New York and New Jersey, over Meeting properties. These featured the tawdry spectacle of Quakers abandoning their ancient testimony of settling their disputes without appealing to "worldly" law, dragging each other through the courts, squabbling over Meeting houses and graveyards. (In New Jersey it finally took an act of the Legislature to sort out the mess.)

But that wasn't the worst of it. In Philadelphia, the quarreling over access to a Friends burial ground escalated to the point where one group of Quakers had another group arrested; the jailed Quakers refused to make bail, insisting they had done no wrong.

The real low point, though, was probably Ohio Yearly Meeting in 1828, which turned into what can only be called a riot, with gangs of Quakers pummeling each other trying to gain control of the clerk's table(which was destroyed in the process), smashing windows, doors, ribs and so forth--all for the greater glory of God, or if not, at least to the greater amusement of a large crowd of onlookers come to watch the "Quaker fight."

EVEN SO, A QUAKER CHUCKLE (OF SORTS)

Once early in this century, a visitor to a small Pennsylvania town, seeing two competing and languishing Quaker meetinghouses, asked a local resident to explain what the fuss had been about.

"Nothing much," came the reply. "The Quakers started squabbling over doctrine, and forgot how to be Friends. So they split up. One side kept the theology and the other took the religion--and both got what they deserved."

Then there was the divinity student at the University of Chicago who, told of the Orthodox-Hicksite separation, expressed amazement: "I didn't know you Quakers had enough theology to split over."
