

F.U.M. GENERAL BOARD MEETINGS AND MISSION VISITS TO AFRICA
FEBRUARY 2 THROUGH FEBRUARY 14, 2007

PART I - THE TRIP TO KENYA AND UGANDA:

Kenya is twice the size of Italy and Uganda not quite the size of England. We spent two days in Uganda and the rest of the time in Kenya. They are beautiful countries filled with beautiful people, who are usually rather soft spoken, friendly, eager for cross-cultural communication, very resourceful, slow to become frustrated and somewhat naïve about histories and events outside Africa. Kenyans shake hands when they are introduced and often afterward when they greet one another during the day. We used a lot of Purell surreptitiously, ever on guard against unfamiliar germs. The people we met, especially the men, have the ability to introduce humor into almost every situation and laugh a lot. They do have good newspapers and, when they have access to a TV, can see an international version of CNN. The Kenyans are very proud of Barak Obama and watch carefully any news about him.

The Kenyan Shilling is improving. To round things out we figured \$1.50 for every Ksh100. Leather sandals cost \$8.00, 4 yards of fabric \$4.00 or \$5.00 and the seamstress charged us \$12.00 to make a dress to order. As the Ksh improves, the value of foreign aid dollars decreases so a grant that may be worth Ksh10,000.00 when it is written is often worth less by the time it is processed and arrives in Kenya.

Most of the country is in an agrarian age, pre-industrial revolution, without running water, electricity or machinery and, in many places, without schools or medical care within walking distance. If they are lucky, there is a bore hole (well) that has not run dry that they can use.

The roads are mostly packed red clay and the main asphalt roads across the country are called "tarmac". People walk, walk, walk all over the countryside, the women often carrying large bundles of firewood, groceries, jugs, etc on their heads. Paint is at a premium so the whole country looks old and worn and covered in red dust. If Kenyans are not walking they are catching a ride on an overcrowded mini-bus or ride a bicycle. There are thousands of bicycles all over the place and all the same style man's bike made in China. In the towns men decorate the passenger seat on the back and give rides; the taxi bike is then called a boda-boda.

Here were 27 of us from North America. We rode mostly in a school bus and sometimes a mini-van. The drivers were unflappable and drove us over hill and dale, far into the bush, chopping trees when they were in the way and turning around in impossibly small places. Everywhere we went men, women and children all stared open mouthed and many waved, like we were celebrities. Some of the roadside businesses we saw most often were fruit and vegetable stands, brick making, charcoal making and bicycle repair.

The people we had contact with in the Western provinces of Kenya were mostly from the Luhya tribe but also Luo, Kikuyu, Samburu and Turkana. The Quakers in Kenya number approximately 134,000, in Uganda 3500, in USA 119,000, in Britain 16,000, Canada 1155, and Guatemala 20,000. The number of orphans number in the millions. In our travels we noticed untold numbers of "Friends Schools" signs, some of which I do not think are even affiliated with any particular Quaker organization, although FUM is doing its best to bring them under their umbrella. Kenya has 15 Yearly Meetings and the Friends schools make up 40% of all the schools in Kenya.

The buildings of the “schools” and so-called “hospitals” were usually rectangular or square brick buildings with openings for doors and windows. The schools we visited were barren and lacked furniture and supplies that we take for granted. It is every child’s wish to go to school but, even though the education is “free” parents must pay for the school fees and for uniforms. Many children can never afford to go to school. At the schools we visited, they greeted us with much ceremony and music which was lovely. The children shrieked with excitement and some even trembled, they were so beside themselves with emotion. When I asked why were they so excited to see us I was told, “Because they think you will make their life better”. At one school the little girls curtsied every time they shook our hands. It felt like a royal visit in the colonial days.

The two “hospitals” (Lugulu and Kaimosi) recently taken under the care of FUM were built in the colonial era and have not been maintained since independence. Everything portable was stolen. Patients wait on the grass or on a bench, sanitation appears almost non-existent, the window openings not only have no glass but no screens. They lack equipment to do proper diagnostics and lack funds to pay for adequate staff. Their employees are “underutilized” because they do not have the wherewithal to do what they are trained for. At one hospital patients need to walk or be carried because it has no ambulance. All the buildings leak so computers etc need to be covered with a tarp. Patients need family to stay and care for them because they lack adequate nursing staff. Although the patients were very gracious about allowing us through, it was more than I could handle. My imagination had billions of exotic germs swirling about me and my sensibilities about staring at them like they were on exhibit was bothersome.

The orphanage we visited cares for 42 children who have no belongings at all and wash their own clothes “when they feel it is time”. They do get three meals a day and go to school so, compared to the conditions from which they came, this is a pleasure. Hard to fathom . . . This orphanage is supported by FWCC and New England YM.

The one place that was lovely, well kept and well supplied was Friends Theological College where they held the dedication of their brand new beautiful chapel / meetinghouse to coincide with our trip. FTC is a seminary that has educated and trained dozens of pastors to evangelize throughout their country, set up churches and increase membership. FTC is a lovely place with a new chapel, several buildings in good condition including a library and an active and viable board of directors. So many of those present at the General Board meetings were graduates of this school. FTC is not a liberal arts college in the traditional American sense.

I went with two people not on the Board to a woman’s conference for women who are being empowered to take control of their own lives by using micro-grants (\$5000.00 or less) from Right Sharing of World Resources. One person who came with me was Nancy Irving, head of FWCC and we were met by Roland Kreager, director of Right Sharing. Many of the women there were widows or abused wives or women caring for orphans and they described their successful projects like buying some goats or chickens or a cow or a sewing machine and they liked that they were taught how to keep good records and pay off loans. I would like to give money to Right Sharing.

Away from the few main towns and cities, people live in round thatched huts called kisibi (pl) or kasubi (sing). The thatched roofs are made from spear grass and the walls from hand made red clay bricks on a twig frame. Families live in small compounds with anywhere from one to five huts, depending on the size of the family and the ability to make them. They usually keep a few goats, maybe chickens or cows and grow a garden with cassava, potatoes, greens, bananas and

papaya. The two tools they use for almost everything is a machete and a wide blade with wooden handle for tilling (actually chopping into the earth). The latter looks like a cross between a pick axe and a hoe. The women do most all of the work. The men, if they are lucky, tend the cows or have a job; otherwise they “protect the family”. Actually, we did see several men tilling plots of soil too.

I noticed philanthropies all over the country, many of them foreign NGOs (non-govt. organizations). They come from all over Europe and Asia as well as North America and include many religious organizations as well as non-sectarian groups. We met in our travels Doctors Without Borders going to Somalia, people from a New England community helping to paint a little building for offices and looking for other possible projects. We took them with us to a hospital and an orphanage.

I loved every minute of this fascinating and informative trip (other than the business meeting) and would return in a heartbeat to work in a school or orphanage were it not so expensive to get to. Because FUM used some “connections” and contributed monies, the trip only cost us each \$2400.00 plus nearly \$300.00 for vaccinations and pills but for an individual the cost would be significantly higher.

PART II - FUM GENERAL BOARD MEETINGS:

Only two days were devoted to meetings of the General Board. They were attended by about 20 North American General Board members, approximately 50 African General Board members, 5 FUM staff members and maybe 5 or 6 others. The African part of the General Board was created only two years ago and it seemed to me that their membership is still superficial, since almost all activity is orchestrated from Richmond Hill in Indiana. The work that was done on the Strategic Plan in Richmond last year was presented to the Kenyans and Ugandans only on the day of the meeting. The charts were sometimes difficult for us to follow so I know they had difficulty understanding what was taking place.

In the committee in which I participated (Identity of FUM) the clerk tried to create a worshipful atmosphere but that technique seemed lost on the Africans. They lectured and preached at us well into the late hours, citing the Bible chapter and verse and it very nearly became a debate. Our committee was never able to complete the task before us, although all the other three committees (Leadership, Evangelism, Communications) did finish early. There was no sense of being committed to working this out nor attempting to find a comfort zone in which we might reach unity. It was a power struggle in which the prevailing opinion was that this is what FUM is, has always been and should continue to be.

There were four of us from dually affiliated YMs (NY, New England, Baltimore and SEYM) and 15 from FUM programmed YMs. The programmed meetings in North America and Africa see FUM as the titular head of their church and are comfortable deferring to the FUM Faith and Practice (which I have never seen). They do not understand how or why we ever came into membership since our own F&P is so in conflict with theirs. They made it very clear that Scripture is their source of authority and never was any mention made of recognizing that some Friends look to the Inward Light for leading. It felt exactly like the same struggle that took place in the splits of 1827 and 1845 between those who “emphasized the outward scriptures and those who emphasized inward mystical experience” (Brinton). One Friend opined that without an outward authority there would be chaos. The majority of those persons there believed that the right thing to do to settle the question was to affirm the Richmond Declaration.

Anyway, at close to 10:00 that night, after we had been laboring with the sexual ethics portion of the personnel policy of FUM since early morning, a soft-spoken Kenyan said, **“My people are perishing while you squabble”**. His people were perishing while we pressed our individual agendas! A light in my mind struck me with such an impact that I was moved to tears. I saw in my mind that we were preventing FUM from moving forward and asked myself could this possibly be God’s will? If not, it was painfully clear to me that this was the sense of the meeting and clear to the clerk as well. So, as much he was opposed to it, he needed to agree to bring it to the business meeting the next day.

That night I went over what I could have said or should have said and asked again long into the night if this might in some way be God’s will. Since I don’t know the whole picture, don’t know all of what happened in the past and cannot know what is in the future, I cannot know how this might fit into the grand scheme of things. Only God knows.

The business meeting of the entire General Board the next day went as expected. It was not a meeting for worship with a concern for business. The Kenyans and one Ugandan spoke passionately about all the directives in the Bible which they interpret to ban homosexuality and one even went so far as to say that homosexuals and their supporters should be killed. Nobody in the FUM leadership said one thing against his remarks and not one person remarked that what was occurring was not in the manner of Friends. I think we were all too stunned and it happened so fast and, because I was so distraught, I don’t remember everything that was said. I think that my naiveté stemmed in part from the Oct meetings when we liberal Friends left our comfort zone by agreeing to affirm the pamphlet, “The Christian Faith of Friends” by Ben Richmond, believing that the others in return were willing to attempt unity. This felt like we had been lulled by a technique used to buy time.

After having listened for two days I said to the entire assembly, with tears flowing, something like this. “We have preached and lectured at one another for two days and not one person has moved off square one. Because I believe so strongly in Quaker process and am always asking Friends to let go of any pre-conceived notion about what the outcome should be, I cannot in all good conscience stand in the way when it does not go my way. When a Friend said that his people are perishing while we squabble, my heart was moved. Perhaps in His wisdom, this is what God wants for the greatest good for the greatest number of people. I don’t know”. I was so distraught that I could hardly finish. Finally the minute was approved, although it felt more like a motion had been carried according to Robert’s Rules of Order.

When the session ended, a Kenyan man sat next to me and held me in his arms with a long comforting hug. Another Kenyan asked me what had actually happened and a Kenyan woman came to each of us with kisses on both cheeks asking God to bless and comfort us. Then I spent some time speaking with a Kenyan man who sat next to me and said that this should never have happened. He went on to say that we should have talked and prayed about this, even if it took 20 years, “because to God 20 years is nothing”. After speaking with several delightful loving Kenyans, I realized that they thirst for information and I agreed to send them some books about Quakersim as we know it. We ended our little talk agreeing that maybe the Kenyans would end up being the peacemakers. I could not help loving them.

That evening, before they let the watch-dogs loose and we had to be in our rooms, five of us had Meeting for Worship With a Concern for Healing. I needed it badly to help me move out of a

place of hurt and anger and back to a place of inner peace. I felt such gratitude for the love among us - Friends from Baltimore, New York and New England.

PART III - COMMENTS AND MY OPINIONS:

From the discussion that took place when we had that small meeting for worship, we came to believe that the entire scenario had been pre-planned and well orchestrated. One specific incident that convinced me was when, in the last business meeting, a long-time FUM leader from our committee suggested that we affirm the Richmond Declaration he was not specific about when this should happen. A few minutes later, while other hands were still up and his was not, the clerk went back to him and asked him if he meant that it should happen “right now”. Of course the crowd called for it to happen right then and there and so it did. We concluded that the clerk had known that it was supposed to take place while in Africa when the more conservative YMs had an overwhelming majority. We also felt that the Africans had been “used” to push for approval of something they did not all understand fully.

I think some of the Kenyans were bothered by what had happened. However, I do not look for them to rock the boat, as much as they understand our plight, because they are in dire need of whatever assistance FUM can bring to their people and they cannot afford to alienate anyone right now.

I craved some silent worship and time for discernment after hearing so many sermons, lectures and vocal prayer. I have a sense that most of those present have had little exposure to some of the basic principles that we take for granted – that God is directly accessible to all persons, there is that of God in everyone, our final leadings come from direct experiences of God, that Scriptures are understood on that backdrop and the concept of continuing revelation. When I was chatting with the young man who was our mini-bus driver, we spoke about some of the different strands of Quakerism. He said, “Oh. You’re a George Fox Quaker!”.

The Friends churches in Africa seem to be more closely related to Protestant churches than to Quakerism as we know it. (Coincidentally, I was told that when Kenyan Quakers immigrate to the US, they usually join a Baptist church.)

It appears that FUM puts the major portion of their resources into their mission: “. . . energize and equip Friends through the power of the Holy Spirit to gather people into fellowship where Jesus Christ is known, loved and obeyed as Teacher and Lord.” (Evangelism) The organization uses their magazine and book press (Communications), the theological college (Leadership Training) and the Africa Ministries Office (Global Partnerships) to accomplish this primary mission. FUM employees are missionaries.

I think the majority of the FUM Board would be glad if we would just go away and let them do their work. I think they were pleased that they had been successful in having the Richmond Declaration re-affirmed, even though it ignores over 100 years of social, scientific and intellectual progress. When I asked what would happen if the five dually affiliated YMs disaffiliated, I was told, “Don’t worry. We’ll take up the slack”. Baltimore has been withholding funds so FUM has learned to live without those. Our contribution doesn’t amount to much .

It feels hypocritical to take into membership and accept monies from gay and lesbian and etc Friends while still believing that these Friends are less than equal and, in many cases, evil sinners. They still believe that homosexuality is something that someone does, not was a person is.

Before we all parted ways, the Presiding Clerk spoke to me and expressed his wish that I would return because my contribution was valuable. I expressed to him that I was not at all certain what the future holds but that I wanted him to know that, by not speaking out against the ministry of violence against gays and lesbians, FUM was an enabler that was enabling violence against those people. I likened it to a wife who covers up her husband's alcoholism and thus enables it to continue.

I would also like to contribute to an effort that sends Quaker literature to Kenyan and Ugandan Friends – books like “Barclay’s Apology”, Brinton’s “Friends for 350 Years”, our own Faith and Practice or perhaps the one from Philadelphia or Britain, etc.

I mentioned to a Baltimore YM Friend that I was uncomfortable with all the ritual, the bowing and curtsying. I said it felt colonial, like I was the queen coming to view her subjects. He agreed that he had some of those same feelings.

If we remain affiliated, I believe we should commit the monies to do so authentically by sending the same person or persons to attend all the meetings over a period of time. The FUM General Board is a decision making body that affects policy and procedure and sporadic attendance is more of a hindrance that it is helpful. The General Board meets three times a year in Richmond Indiana. The cost of room, board and transportation for each trip from West Palm Beach is \$700.00.

Finally, the most astounding thing happened in the last minutes before we all parted ways. For the past year I have been painfully aware of an outspoken conservative Friend who seemed angry and appeared not committed to harmony. She was the one who told me at my very first meeting last June that SEYM and other liberal YMs were sabotaging FUM efforts to raise sufficient funds to stay afloat by our constantly diverting attention to a discussion about homosexuality. At breakfast in Kenya one day she said that she would rather be shot in the head than allow any change in the FUM personnel policy. Therefore it is not surprising that I was left speechless when she said to me, with tears in her eyes, “I want to tell you how much I admire you. You have something I wish I had. I just needed to say that.” And then she left.

I hope I have been able to present the facts without planting a suggestion about what is our leading. I don't know if we are supposed to commit the funds to hang in and witness to our truth for probably the next 20 years or if we would accomplish more in the long run by disaffiliating.

Lisa Stewart,
Palm Beach Monthly Meeting
February 20, 2007