

Sixty Years With The UN In New York

A HISTORY OF THE QUAKER UN OFFICE

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Quaker United Nations Office

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This publication will mark sixty years of Friends representation at the United Nations in New York, from the opening of a Quaker “centre” on East 52nd Street in 1947 by Philip and Lois Jessup. Though UN headquarters on the East River would only be completed in stages through 1951 and '52 (while UN activities were carried on in temporary quarters at Lake Success on Long Island), the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) placed the Jessups there within reach of the offices of the UN missions of member states as they were being established in the city, and this apartment (on loan from a wealthy AFSC donor) quickly became a locus for discussion of the formation and future of the world body for the many diplomats and new international civil servants who were acquainted with Quakers.

Friends had laid a foundation on which their presence as a trusted and informed player at the new United Nations was immediately validated: 1947 was also the year that AFSC and its counterpart in Britain and Ireland, Friends Service Council, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for Quaker relief programs through both the great wars of the century and for the care and feeding of destitute populations in war’s aftermath.

In 1948, the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) was among the first non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to be granted “consultative status” with the Economic and Social Council of the UN (an accreditation given to over 2,700 non-governmental organizations at this writing). Official NGO status derives from article 71 of the UN Charter, referred to at the time as Eleanor Roosevelt’s article for her leadership in formalizing a UN role for representatives of civil society.

Many items on the agenda of the fledgling United Nations were of interest to Friends, as they had been at the League of Nations, where Quaker representatives had been posted from the mid-1920s until its demise in WWII. The objectives for this work were to help bring important issues to the fore for international consideration and debate, and to give support to the process of consensus-building for political action. The Quaker approach of attentive, open questioning, enabling delegates to look for mutually useful ways forward, has gained recognition and respect through generations in the ranks of diplomats of UN member States and UN staff, and has distinguished the Quakers’ role from other non-governmental representation, a role to which we will return.

In 1953, the program benefited from the gift of a three-storey townhouse on East 48th Street, funded by a small group of donors that included the

Rockefellers who had also granted the land for UN headquarters just four blocks away. This Quaker House is part of Turtle Bay Gardens; two rows of late 19th century brownstones on parallel streets (48th and 49th) with a garden in common at their back, planted, with fountains and statuary, and with a brick walkway running between the low garden walls up the middle. Quaker House was renovated by opening it up through the middle on the second floor, providing a deep room with sunlight from both the street side and the rear, where large windows and a porch look over the gardens. This view, and the atmosphere of this shady green haven, come first as a surprise and then as a welcome refuge to the UN diplomats and officials who are invited to examine and test their issues in this private neutral space.

The activities of the Quaker UN Office (QUNO) in its first decade in New York already drew the major lines of what would come to distinguish the program up to the present: the hosting of meetings at Quaker House, and, for longer meetings, in residential setting outside of town; publications on the UN system and the critical issues rising on its agenda; lobbying on questions where Friends have particular insight, experience and concern; supporting the new and weaker members of the UN in tackling their most relevant issues; and bringing the voices of the victims, the witnesses, and those committed to justice to the UN dialogue.

Meetings for Diplomats

Quaker House

The frequent meetings –both large and small- hosted at Quaker House provide singular opportunities for diplomats to talk over critical issues away from the microphones, and often in groups that would not otherwise be found together. Typically, a Quaker House luncheon is organised to help prepare an issue for negotiations coming up in the formal meetings at the UN –whether for the General Assembly or one of its many subsidiary bodies: on human rights, disarmament, development, peace-keeping, and so forth. Staff at the Quaker UN Office would know which countries were giving leadership on an issue for their regional groups: everything at the UN is passed by member countries through their regional groups (Africa, Latin America, Asia, WEO or “Western Europe and Other”) to achieve a regional position which can then be negotiated against other regional positions. Some countries, of course, as so large and powerful as to stand on their own, like the USA, Russia or China. The target for a meeting hosted by Quakers would be to include diplomats giving leadership for each of the regional groups, plus the major powers, plus any with “special interest” in the topic (e.g. if the subject is Burma, as many of the neighbouring countries as possible would be useful),

and one or two Secretariat officials with responsibility for preparing documents and reports on this subject. The timing of the meeting would be critical, setting it close enough ahead of when the topic is to appear on the UN's agenda that diplomats will want to turn their attention in that direction, with enough time ahead so the meeting can have an impact on the preparation and negotiation of each government's position. This illustrates the sense in which QUNO operates as though diplomats are direct channels to foreign ministries and capitals, in the belief that informed and energetic debate in New York can influence the direction of governments' positions.

Besides the larger luncheon format –with a buffet at one o'clock, the topic launched over coffee by one forty-five, and closing at ten-to-three to get participants back for the afternoon sessions at the UN- breakfasts, teas and suppers are all used to bring smaller, diverse groups together for off-the-record discussion. In regard to UN action on Burma during the 1990s, for example, diplomats from some of the most important nations –like China and the ASEAN countries that are Myanmar's neighbours- would only see representatives of the National League for Democracy (Aung San Su Kyi's party) at Quaker House alone, and so were scheduled in from early to late through those weeks each year when the NLD came to New York to present its case through the good offices of the Quakers. Malaysia's ambassador, Ismail Razali, who later became the Secretary General's Special Representative on Myanmar, was one of those who came for these private meetings, accompanied only by an aide or two.

Most often, the specific result of a Quaker House meeting is undetermined; participants are invited in their personal capacities, meeting unofficially with peers of similar rank and assignment, representing important partners in the "multilateral" challenge of finding consensus. Although QUNO is rigorous in keeping its own notes for internal reports on luncheons and other meetings, "off-the-record" means that no minutes of the meetings are circulated, aside from exceptional circumstances when the participants unite in requesting a report. The meeting is arranged to give a thorough, structured discussion to topics of mutual concern, the results of which are for internalizing, to inform the individual perspectives of participants and assist them in their own work and policy environments upon return to their duties. But of course there are many stories of the break-through encounters, of the sudden appearance of a really creative solution, or of a revelation in the comprehension of a problem. In 1967, Arvid Pardo, ambassador of Malta, first introduced the idea of a Law of the Sea Treaty at a Quaker House dinner for Mediterranean countries (the Mediterranean Sea was one of the most polluted bodies of water on the globe at that time). Guatemalan activist Rigoberto Menchu –later to receive the Nobel peace prize- first told her story of abuses of human rights in Guatemala

at a Quaker House luncheon when the subject was to come before the General Assembly in the mid-1980s. At the close of a luncheon preparing for the Third Special Session on Disarmament in 1988, the representatives of Italy and Colombia stood up, crossed the room towards each other and said, for everyone to hear, that they would collaborate to launch a United Nations registry on the international trade in conventional weapons (SSDIII approved this proposal –with the exception of the USA- and the register has since come into use).

Residential Weekend Colloquia

For larger topics, QUNO has arranged weekend colloquia, to bring diplomats off-base and provide them with a more thorough examination of an issue, such as the planning of a major UN conference, or a path to progress on an international treaty, or the reform and revitalisation of the United Nations. The location most used for weekend meetings is Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York, about ninety miles north of the city. This distance is just far enough to make it impractical for participants to return to “check in” at the office. Moreover, the Mohonk facility was built and operated by the Smiley family, Quakers, who have a tradition of inviting decision-makers there for informal negotiations, beginning in the 19th century when they were influential in finding a more just means of dealing with Native Americans and with the establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (which was an improvement at that time).

The “Mohonk” meeting has become a familiar term around UN Headquarters. The Quaker Office is regularly approached by diplomats and UN Secretariat officials with suggestions of topics and participants which they feel might benefit from a “Mohonk”. Through the years, Mohonk colloquia have often been provided as a series, with several sessions over the years from when topics arise on the agenda until they are worked through to a conclusion. On the theme of UN reform, both overall organizational reform and on the specific question of updating the structure and rules of the Security Council, QUNO hosted colloquia from the mid- to late-nineties for an agreed “ambassadors only” level of participants. The issues were seen to be so sensitive that they could only be dealt with at the highest political level, and ambassadors would only speak candidly among peers.

And there have been a number of cases when the results were specific enough to be referred to around the UN as the “Mohonk solution”. An example is related by Gordon Browne, who had worked at QUNO in the early 1970s and was called back to help with a Mohonk weekend preparing negotiators for the First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978. This Mohonk conference was addressed and led in discussion by, among others,

Charlie Clemens, the Vietnam War pilot turned pacifist MD, along with Swedish and Canadian colonels, both of whom had led UN peace-keeping forces. There was also a “splendid and provocative” address by Kenneth Boulding, respected economist and Quaker peace activist. Plenary sessions had been broken with small group discussions from which critical points had been brought back to help the group distil the debate. In the final plenary session on Sunday at Mohonk, a report on the group’s proposals and positions on disarmament was presented, edited, and approved in a spirit of accomplishment and purpose. Later, while Gordon was observing the closing session of the SSDI where the final document was being adopted, a participant from the Mohonk conference left the floor of the General Assembly chamber to bring the draft document up to Gordon in the visitors’ gallery. “You see that paragraph,” he told Gordon, “that comes straight from Mohonk!”

QUNO filled a similar role in helping UN delegates and Secretariat to prepare for the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing. There was a time close to the Women’s Conference when the final chapter of the Beijing agreement -the chapter on implementation measures- was referred to within the inner circle of diplomats negotiating these documents as the “Mohonk chapter”. And following the Beijing Conference, QUNO was asked to hold a follow-up meeting at Mohonk to help work out mechanisms for implementation of the conference agreements.

Though QUNO’s ambitions are modest, the importance of this type of meeting is not often lost even on the “big powers”. In 1971, QUNO hosted a Mohonk conference on the topic: “Representation of China in International Institutions.” Barry Hollister told an anecdote from this effort when he was the QUNO New York director. On Monday after the weekend Mohonk meeting on China, Barry was called in on the carpet by the US ambassador, George H. W. Bush, and asked to answer “...why no one was invited from the USA to Mohonk?” Barry had to explain that in discussions with US representatives there and abroad, Quakers had only heard that Chinese representation was not an issue they wished to discuss informally and would prefer that others did not either. QUNO had been led to conclude that they couldn’t find a useful participant from the USA for the Mohonk meeting. “Drat”, said Ambassador Bush, “we are so out of touch and without instructions on how we can engage others on this issue, we are going to get trimmed in this General Assembly vote.” And right he was.

Publications

Beginning in the 1950s, QUNO has published a variety of materials for its two primary constituencies: on the one hand, the international community around the United Nations; and on the other, in its FWCC function, the world of Friends and those who follow Friends' policy work for peace and justice. The publications have ranged from booklets to pamphlets, information sheets and newsletters, according to the needs of this varied audience. In the fifties, booklets were produced for the informed but inquiring community at the UN on topics such as "*The Peaceful Settlement of Disputes*" and "*The Future Development of the United Nations*", and "*Towards Security through Disarmament*". Booklets have continued to be published in this vein: to bring newcomers up-to-date on the status of some area of negotiations, such as the Agenda for Development in the 1980s; or to review the capacities and needs of the UN system in a particular field, such as the promotion of women's rights and development in the 1990s. Shorter pieces -briefing papers- are written from time to time for the activists and students in schools, colleges and Friends meetings.

The regular (sometimes irregular) newsletter has been known as *In and Around the UN* through a number of different formats (and now electronic). From two to six pages, covering current UN affairs of interest to Friends in short articles, *In and Around* has to walk the careful line of accepted behaviour in the UN community –to avoid being publicly disparaging of particular people or nations- while painting an honest, informed, critical and inquiring representation of the issue. An exercise in being open, truthful and diplomatic, a combination that is required for many of QUNO's tasks. The newsletter goes to the UN mission of each member country, to many UN Secretariat offices, and to the wider community of QUNO's contacts in non-governmental organisations, institutes, foundations and schools, as well as the global list of Friends and colleagues.

Bringing the Wider World to the UN

Another important function of the Quaker UN Office has been to bring the outside world –a voice from the field- to bear on discussions in the UN community. Opportunities arise when a specialist, a witness, or a victim can infuse a relevancy and immediacy into the conversation that can change the diplomats' perspective on and handling of a question. We have mentioned Rigoberto Menchu, from Guatemala, and that role has been played many times, when someone with personal experience and direct knowledge of a situation has spoken truth to diplomats in Quaker House and changed the terms of the debate. These resource people are usually found through the network of Friends' service agencies and their international projects, or

Quaker International Affairs Representatives (QIARs) in troubled regions around the globe, or our far-flung Friends yearly meetings, or experts allied in Friends' campaigns -like controlling the arms trade, or protecting the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities.

Let one example suffice. In 1994, when the genocide in Rwanda and Burundi had left the world stunned and stupefied, the General Secretary of Burundi Yearly Meeting, David Niyonzima, was brought to New York as part of a visit to Friends in the United States (he was by then a refugee in Kenya with his family). David addressed a luncheon meeting at Quaker House where the question before the group was whether, and if so how, the UN had a responsibility to intervene. When David had finished describing the scenes of terror, the sense of vulnerability of citizens of rogue governments, and how until then the UN had failed to meet even the most modest expectations, the diplomats sat stony-faced until the Tanzanian ambassador broke the silence: "It is well that sometimes we can hear the truth spoken as it is!" This was the start of the formulation of a new mandate for UN action. (The long-term consequence, the UN peacekeeping force for Burundi –ONUB- helped to organise and monitor the first successful democratic elections in Burundi in 2005.)

Ministry for Peace

There was a role for Quakers at the UN envisioned by Clarence Pickett, executive secretary of AFSC from 1929-1952, that has never been fully validated and would be difficult and perhaps dangerous to claim: a purpose to strengthen and preserve the moral and spiritual values of UN delegates and officials (from his autobiography, *For More than Bread*, pp. 405-415). In its first years, QUNO helped to establish the meditation room in the new UN headquarters building, and has sought out and supported Friends (and friends-of-Friends) working in the UN system, for example, with regular lunchtime meetings for eating-and-worship at Quaker House. But this author still blushes at the memory of approaching the Sudanese ambassador (who was an enthusiastic participant in Quaker program activities) in around 1989, when Khartoum was crippled by the militant Islamist overthrow of the government. "Ambassador," I said, as he left a UN meeting, "I just want to say how very worried I am about your country." Looking this American upstart right in the eye, he replied, "And I am very worried about yours."

We must be modest of the few gifts we bring to international affairs, and today there are many more players on the field than when Friends first started offering diplomats an unofficial forum. Still, the distinctive features of the Quaker UN program still largely reflect the original strengths, and there are few in the field with this package of qualities: off-the-record; scripted as a

collaborative arrangement and the culmination of consultation (and often smaller meetings) over time; in-depth familiarity with the subject matter and its challenges; related to a vision, commitment and wider integrated approach in international affairs; and addressing the needs of the participants rather than an outside agenda. The Quaker presence at the UN is as relevant in the 21st century as it proved sixty years ago, a flexible and durable tool for building understanding and consensus for peace and justice.