



QUNO
Quaker United Nations Office

Quaker Model UN Conference Opening Ceremony Keynote Intervention

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Delivered by: Megan Schmidt, Quaker UN Representative

Good evening Secretaries-General, Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen. All protocols observed.

My name is Megan Schmidt, and I lead the Peacebuilding program for the Quaker United Nations Office – or QUNO – in New York.

Let me first express my appreciation for the invitation to join you this evening as you begin the important work set out before you during the 2020 Quaker Model UN Conference.

You are coming together at a time of global uncertainty and turmoil, a time where dedication to peaceful solutions is needed more than ever, a time where the Quaker testimonies and working methods seem to resonate so greatly.

But uncertainty, turmoil and the prospects for peace are what led to the establishment of the United Nations. As you know, your excellencies, the UN was founded with bold ambitions out of the devastation of the Second World War, with a hope and aspiration for global community and peace. And that hope and aspiration remains important and within our reach still today.

I would like to use my time with you this evening to speak on four key areas that I hope will be interesting and impactful as you set out in your work these coming days. Firstly, I'd like to reflect on why we, as a Quaker organization, see the United Nations as central to fostering peace. Second is to share more on the history of the Quaker UN Office, and how we have served as a Quaker presence for over 70 years. I'd then like to reflect on our work, and how we strive to be a Quaker witness. And in closing, I will share some thoughts and insights as you head into your conference and beyond.

So, to start, Why the United Nations?

The words of the Preamble of the UN Charter - *Determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war; (...) to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small; (...) to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom*" - these words set out the ambitious goals of this organization. At the heart of the Charter and of the work of the UN is the intention and purpose of building peace for all. Peace, as you know, is at the heart of Quaker witness. For us at the Quaker UN Office, the UN then represents an important secular expression of our shared hopes for a better world and all of its peoples. For Friends, the UN continues to offer opportunity to affect change on a global scale.

Through its work the UN is then a direct agent for peace around the world. It helps oversee, coordinate, or directly lead programming in regions and countries affected by violent conflict in areas such as

development, humanitarian aid, and peace and security. It's also the global stage where peace and justice issues are discussed, debated and developed. It's where standards are set that then affect the world.

Foreseeing the potential of the UN to foster peace, Quakers then took the farsighted step of creating offices at the United Nations in New York and Geneva, joining the diplomats and officials who were just arriving over 70 years ago to take up the challenge of how to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

In two short years our office in New York will celebrate 75 years of serving as a Quaker presence at the UN, working with generations of diplomats, UN officials and civil society representatives to prioritize peace and prevent war. I'd like to now share more on how we root our presence in Quaker faith and practice as we strive to represent the concerns of Friends.

QUNO's approach is rooted in Friends' insights and experience and is enriched by the long history Quakers have going back centuries to create a more peaceful and just world. The notion of the inner light is the inspiration for the Quakers' long history of social action on pacifism, tolerance, emancipation, opposition to the death penalty, and prison reform. Listening to that of God in everyone encourages dialogue and creates the possibility for trust and transformation. It creates the possibility to be open to others, and to find opportunities for peaceful solutions. For Quakers, peace is an everyday phenomenon that takes place at an individual level in how we interact with one another to foster unity and community, and in how on a larger scale we seek to find alternatives to violence and challenge destructive systems. And so, it is that call to reach out across divides and to uphold ourselves peacefully and with integrity that provides the foundation of all of our work at QUNO as we seek to uphold the Quaker testimonies through our programming and our conduct.

The way that QUNO staff members go about our work and our interactions with diplomats, UN officials and others is just as important for upholding our Quaker values as the program choices we make and the activities we do. As a Quaker office, we believe that peace and justice work requires us to act peacefully and justly.

Our work also builds on the Quaker spiritual discipline of discernment. We seek to create spaces that invite colleagues working in the UN environment to access deeper wisdom and insight. In our off the record safe spaces, we try to create an atmosphere for transformative thinking, where colleagues can open themselves to new possibilities for understanding, to listen to new ideas or insights, and find ways forward for action. We talk to all stakeholders because we have seen time and again that connection can overcome conflict. It is through our Quaker working methods that we find there is the opportunity to build relationships and to find solutions where we may not have thought possible or expected.

We also strive to ground this work in the lived reality of those affected by conflict around the world, and in the experiences of peacebuilders. We draw on the knowledge of Quaker communities and our fellow Quaker organizations, and research and advocacy carried out by Friends around the world.

The work we do is what we call "quiet diplomacy" – actively creating impartial spaces that are off the record and behind the scenes, where all can be heard and together we find ways to bring new insights and actions forward for peace.

Now, if this is how Quaker testimonies, experience and practice ground our work, then what does it actually look like? It's here that I'd love to share a PowerPoint that includes some photos to introduce you to my colleagues and show you our work in action.

[Powerpoint presentation begins and informs the following sections of the intervention]

This is our office in New York! We unfortunately do not have a full staff photo for this year because we've been working remotely since March, so our individual pictures will have to do. As you see, we're a small office with a big impact. Our staff includes our Director, Andrew; the Prevention team which includes my colleagues Rachel and Molly; our Peacebuilding program which includes me and my colleague Hannah; and our office coordinator, Drew.

Our work is then overseen by our Committee, whom we meet with multiple times a year to support our program development and our finance and administrative work.

I also want to take a moment to bring attention to the central role of our Programme Assistants. Here you'll see some photos of our present and past PAs. Our Programme Assistants are vital to the work of our office. They join us for 13 months, from August to August, and support one of the program areas as well as our office coordinator. We see the PA position as one where we can support young professionals who are interested in international relations and the UN to develop their skills and prepare them for what could be a career in this field. Please keep QUNO in mind in a few years as you're finishing college and thinking about what's next. Perhaps we'll meet again!

Our office has two core program areas, prevention – which my colleague, Rachel, leads, and peacebuilding which is the program I oversee. Through our work, Rachel and I engage with different parts of the UN system and with Member States to strengthen the UN's prevention efforts and to support building peace. For example, through her prevention work, Rachel leads what's called The Civil Society – UN Prevention Platform. This platform brings the UN and civil society organizations together to have timely and strategic discussions on core prevention issues. Just this year Rachel led a discussion series that focused on 5 different themes, including climate, and the role of young people in prevention. Through the series, UN and Member State colleagues learned from civil society organizations from throughout the world on the issue in focus, and reflected on how to move the prevention agenda forward. This photo on the left is from the annual discussion Rachel convenes between civil society organizations and the Assistant-Secretary-General on Prevention, where we can hear more on her priorities and colleagues can share insights from their work.

For my program I think a great recent example is the work I've been doing for over two years now on what's called the UN's Community Engagement Guidelines. The photo on the right is of the cover of these Guidelines. This is a document that is about to be released to UN offices throughout the world to help them develop strategies for how they can work with communities to build and sustain peace. My work has included being part of a working group that includes UN colleagues and a few other organizations like QUNO. We've worked together to develop these guidelines, which has included having a survey to hear from communities throughout the world, holding an online discussion about how the UN and communities work together, and drafting and editing the document many times. The guidelines are now complete and we're working with our UN colleagues to properly launch them soon.

Now I'd like to welcome you to Quaker House, a brownstone building located just a few blocks away from the United Nations. Prior to the pandemic, Quaker House was our central location for QUNO's programmatic work. In these photos you are taken to our garden out back where staff can welcome colleagues when the weather is nice or find a little respite themselves. The middle picture is of a drawing of the front of Quaker House.

It is in the living room you see before you that we work to use our quiet diplomacy approach I mentioned earlier. It is here where we bring together UN and Member State colleagues for small, off the record

discussions on key peace issues. We find that Quaker House can be a quiet oasis for our colleagues as they navigate the hectic and political UN environment. Just down the street from the UN, colleagues can join us at Quaker House for coffee or lunch meetings, relax on the couch, and engage in an open and safe space to reflect and brainstorm on key topics facing peacebuilding at the UN. We find that this simple change of scenery combined with our working methods can provide unique opportunities to develop new ideas and insights on how to strengthen the UN's peace work. These photos capture our work just at the start of the year. On the left you'll see a photo of a discussion I facilitated between UN colleagues and civil society organizations from throughout the world on UN funding for peacebuilding work. On the right is another image from the discussion Rachel led with the Assistant-Secretary-General on Prevention.

As you know, we are based in New York, which has been hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, like many of the towns and cities that you are all joining from. As a result, QUNO staff, like many of our colleagues working in the UN environment, have been working from home since March, making the challenging shift to a virtual office. While this transition was unexpected and difficult at the start, staff have settled into our new way of working and have adjusted our approach to carry out our activities from home.

At first, staff worried about if we would still be able to foster the human connection that is so central to our work and Quaker approach now that we're only interacting with people through screens. But what we have found over these past months is that through our open and warm approach, and our active listening to the concerns of colleagues, we are still able to find human connection and build relationships during this time.

The photos I have here give a glimpse into what some of this work has looked like. On the right I have a picture from the discussion series I mentioned before that my colleague, Rachel, has convened over 2020. These various meetings have brought UN, Member State and civil society colleagues from across the world together to discuss a range of topics connected to the UN's prevention agenda. Rachel has found a strength in working online in that she's been able to have experts from throughout the world – whether it be West Africa, Brazil, or Yemen – participate in these convenings. This has not only enriched our work but has also helped foster community amongst colleagues working on prevention issues at a time when we feel so disconnected.

On the left is a photo from our virtual Meeting for Worship. Prior to the pandemic, we held Meeting for Worship throughout the year at Quaker House. This brought together Friends from throughout the tri-state areas to gather and hear about QUNO's work, and to settle into worship together. While we have lost the joy that comes with worshipping together at Quaker Houses, we have found that we can still foster spiritual connection with Friends virtually. Also, we can now welcome Friends from throughout the world, connecting across the globe to find peace and community together at a time when this is so greatly needed.

This last slide includes two more examples from our virtual world. On the left you'll see a meeting I convened just at the start of the pandemic. This meeting was an opportunity to bring UN and civil society colleagues together to discuss the impact so far of COVID on peace and to consider ways to adapt. On the right is a photo from Rachel's discussion series. This meeting brought together people in the UN environment to reflect on different models and examples of prevention.

[Powerpoint presentation ends.]

Now as I close, I wanted to share some messages with you that I hope are impactful as you head into your work this weekend and beyond.

The state of the world around us these days often times feels bleak. There is the rise of authoritarianism, more and more countries are turning inward as they face the impact of COVID-19; while movements advocating for social justice are on the rise, so too are militarized responses to the calls for change; and we continue to see threats to multilateralism and the very institution you represent, Secretaries-General, and you seek to uphold, Ambassadors. We see the cracks and fissures in our global community.

What we can also see if we allow ourselves the space for hope and opportunity is that the Quaker testimonies are so crucially relevant now in how we all individually live our lives and how we seek to support others to build community and find ways forward for peaceful solutions.

The themes of unity and community – which are so timely and critical – will flow throughout your work this weekend. I hope, though, that you will continue to carry the importance of fostering community and working towards unity as you move ahead in the months and years to come. We are part of a global community. The existence of the UN itself is a testament to that. And the impact of COVID-19 has further shown that we need to overcome divisiveness to have global solutions to our shared global problems. We need to see ourselves as interconnected, as united with our fellow human beings across the world; that when others struggle it is our struggle, and that when others live peacefully, we too can find peace.

The world right now can feel overwhelming and there are days when you are tired, frustrated or just emotionally drained. But I must say that being a part of your conference, looking around our virtual room together and seeing the faces of so many young people dedicated to peace – this fills me with hope and joy. So please, after your conference ends, please continue to carry the importance of the themes of community and unity in your hearts and strive to find ways – big or small – to foster this in the world around you. You are the next generation working for peace, and the world needs you now more than ever.

I thank you, Secretaries-General, Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen.