

QUAKER WORK AT THE UNITED NATIONS



QUNO
Quaker United Nations Office
Geneva · New York



Introduction

On Saturday I was in Burford for Levellers day, an annual event, arranged by the Workers Educational Association, to commemorate the Levellers, executed in Burford Churchyard in 1649, and to celebrate the ongoing tradition in this country of action for equality, justice and peace.

The Levellers, like the Quakers, emerged in the seventeenth century at a time of enormous social and political ferment. People were debating how society should be governed and questioning the

established order of church and state. They were looking at authority in both the political and the religious sphere and at questions of equality and economic justice.

On Saturday Tony Benn, took us on a journey through history looking at the tradition of dissent, of those who had a vision of a more just and equal society. It is a history of ideas that live on when practical action fails. He took us back to John Ball and the Peasants' Revolt in the 14th century, and up to events in his own lifetime, remembering the establishment of the United Nations when he was a young man. He quoted from the preamble to the UN charter ¹:



PREAMBLE

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

- *to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and*
- *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, and*
- *to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and*
- *to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,*

AND FOR THESE ENDS

- *to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and*
- *to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and*
- *to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and*
- *to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,*

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations

¹ www.un.org/aboutun/charter

What a stirring declaration it is, and 60 years on how far away we are from reaching those ideals. But, as Benn said on Saturday, we must keep hope alive and keep on keeping on. Perhaps that is the key challenge for us today and one that Quakers understand.

In their declaration to Charles II in 1660 Quakers said: *Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all.*² This was the foundation of an ongoing commitment to faith and action for peace. We have kept on keeping on.

Quakers have accompanied the UN since its foundation. We are in there for the long haul. In this talk I shall look largely at the formal bodies set up by Quakers to relate to the UN, that is the Quaker UN Offices in New York and Geneva. Many Quakers over many years have worked in different ways with the UN and I cannot do justice here to their efforts, except to say that working internationally has been from the start an aspect of Quaker work and witness.

I am no expert. My background is in international development, and I have worked largely for international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like Christian Aid and Oxfam. But for the past two years I have been a member of the Committee which has oversight of the work of the Quaker UN office in Geneva. So I come to this meeting wearing that particular Quaker bonnet.

**An early vision of an international institution for peace :
William Penn and the *Future Peace of Europe***

Let us step back again for a moment to the seventeenth century and to William Penn. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was founded on principles which have been said to provide inspiration for the constitution of the United States of America. I would like to look, for a moment, at his proposal for, in effect, a United States of Europe. I refer to the essay published in 1693 entitled *Essay towards the Present and Future Peace of Europe by the Establishment of an European Dyet, Parliament or Estates*. In this essay he sets out an argument for a *European League or Confederacy*³ which he sees as a formal institution to promote peace. He spells out the advantages of peace in comparison with both the human and economic costs of war, and then goes on to talk about how peace is to be procured through justice. He looks at matters such as membership, appropriate representation, voting (he advises the Venetian ballot system using coloured balls to preserve anonymity and avoid corruption), and suggests that the languages employed be Latin and or French to be accessible across national borders. He foresees objections such as loss of national sovereignty, unemployment and the weakening of young men because they are not subjected to the rigours of military training, and he has answers for these. In his last section summing up the real benefits that flow from this proposal about peace I was very struck by the following observation:

There is another manifest benefit which redounds to Christendom by this peaceable expedient, the reputation of Christianity will in some degree be recovered in the sight of infidels; which by the many bloody and unjust wars of Christians, not only with them, but one with another, hath been greatly

² Quaker Faith and Practice 24.04

³ From the Online Library of Liberty <http://oll.libertyfund.org> accessed 17/05/09

*impaired*⁴. The use of the word ‘infidel’ jars on our ears in 21st century, but the basic argument here is as relevant as ever: that our faith and our action need to be congruent and seen to be so .

I mention Penn’s essay in some detail for three reasons: he spells out the commitment to peace as the primary purpose , he looks at how peace can be brought about internationally in a way that transcends national borders and interests , and he sets out in detail a formal institutional model.

Quaker international work

Quakers have always worked internationally. George Fox bids early Friends *be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone*⁵. To acknowledge that of God in everyone is to acknowledge the differences and to transcend the divisions that are frequently created by gender, wealth, age, sexual orientation, class, religion, power and nationality. And, in our efforts to build peace we see that every war is a civil war.

Many Friends in many places have worked and continue to work for peace and justice at home and also internationally. And this has included a commitment to building and working with the institutions of peace . Friends had a strong interest in the League of Nations following the 1914 – 1918 war, and had a formal presence in a number of capitals, set up to help ensure peace in Europe. When the United Nations Organisation was founded after the 1939 – 45 war Friends shared the high hopes and aspirations which we have heard expressed in the charter.



Homes to Quaker UN work



Quaker House, Geneva



Quaker House, NY

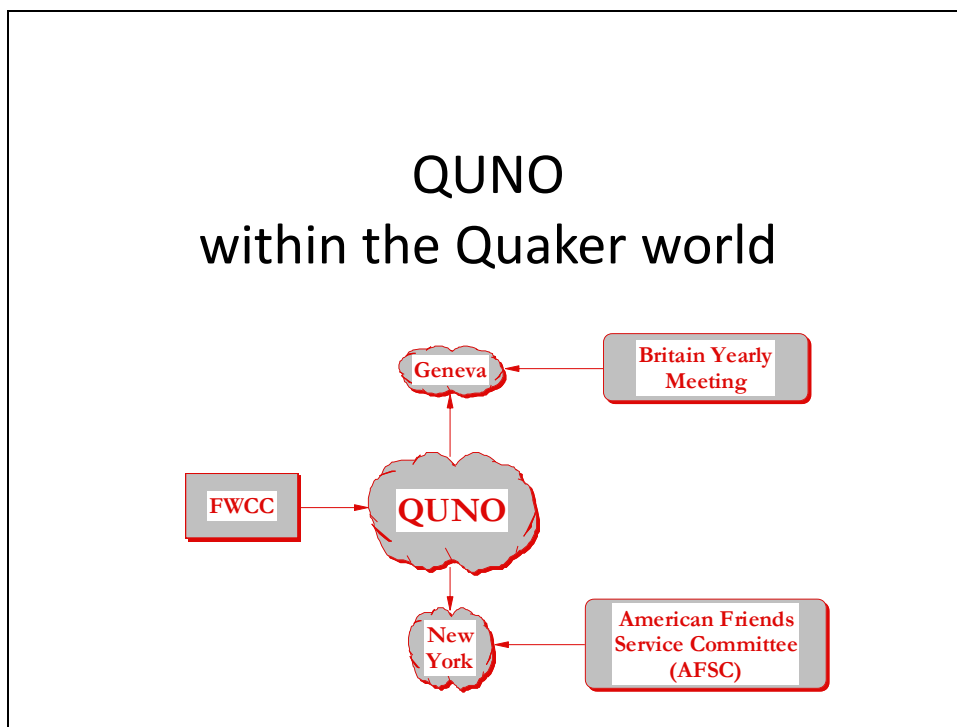
Friends were involved with the UN from the start. The two major centres of the UN are New York and Geneva, and Quaker offices were established in these centres around the same time as the UN

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Quaker Faith and Practice, Chap. 1 Advices and Queries

in 1947/48. Alongside this there was a major programme of international conferences for diplomats. This continued into the 1970s. Of course the UN has changed since those early days – there are now over 190 members and the UN family comprises a complex system of institutions. Quaker work has continued alongside the UN and I will talk a little later about some of the changes and challenges that this brings.

Quaker UN offices (QUNO) – their link to Friends worldwide



The Quaker UN connections and linkages are not so complex as the UN, but probably still need some clarification. First of all I should explain that QUNO, (the Quaker United Nations Office) is to be thought of as a single entity, present in two geographical locations – New York and Geneva. The Friends World Committee on Consultation (FWCC) is the global Quaker body which has consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council. FWCC applied for and was given consultative status early on in the history of the UN. This status is based on the broad range of work that Friends do which can be seen as supportive of the basic principles of the UN. It is through FWCC and its consultative status that QUNO is able to operate at the UN. In 2002 the FWCC was granted *general* status, the highest form of consultative status, shared by some 1500 organisations around the world - a comparatively small number!

FWCC also oversees work which doesn't happen at QUNO, for example the work on criminal justice with the International Commission on Crime Control and Criminal Justice and related bodies, mainly in Vienna. The work on women in prison and their children has been a collaboration between Friends concerned with the Crime Commission, QUNO and the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA). FWCC also has oversight of representation of Friends at international conferences where there is a strong Quaker interest but QUNO as such is not directly engaged.

The FWCC/QUNO relationship is key in terms of the connection of QUNO (NY/Geneva) to Friends around the world. You will see from the diagram, however, that there are other Quaker bodies with

an important relationship to QUNO. In the United States the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) takes responsibility for funding, staffing, premises etc of QUNO NY. In the case of QUNO Geneva, Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) has this role, although the Geneva office currently is responsible for a large part of its funding and operates in a more autonomous way than New York. The relation with the *home office* is vital in each case.

A brief word about governance. Each office has a committee which has oversight of the work. In the case of QUNO Geneva the committee comprises representatives from Britain Yearly Meeting and, through FWCC from Friends around the world. Currently our co-clerk for the Quaker UN Committee in Geneva is Emily Mnisi from South African Friends. We meet twice yearly, in Geneva and in London, and maintain connections in between through reference groups for the focus areas.

The shape of the two offices



QUNO
Quaker United Nations Office
Geneva • New York

The NY and Geneva Teams

New York:

Director: Andrew Tomlinson

Representatives: Francesca Riddy and Sarah Clarke

Programme Assistants: Eleanor Andrews/ Emily Higgs

Office Manager: Inga

Geneva:

Director and Peace and Disarmament: David Atwood

Human Rights and Refugees: Rachel Brett

Global Economic Issues: Caroline Dommen

Programme Assistants: Adam Drury and Jenny Rosenberg

Office Manager: Helen McEvoy

QUNO's staff complement is very small. The New York office has a Director, two principal programme staff, two programme assistants and an office manager. In Geneva there are three principal programme staff, one of whom also has the role of Director, there are two programme assistants, an office manager and a part time finance officer. QUNO engages consultants from time to time to enhance work as appropriate. Both offices keep one another informed and work together where this brings added value.

The programme assistants are vital members of the staff teams. Recruited annually they not only support the representatives in their work but provide an opportunity for young Friends to learn about the UN and Quaker work there. In this way Friends aim to grow and nurture concern for an involvement with the work of the international institutions. Programme assistants write Journal letters which are circulated widely among Friends and often give a more human and immediate perspective on issues which can sometimes seem dauntingly legal and technical. The Geneva office

organises a Summer School each year which provides another entry point for young Friends to learn about the workings of the UN and the Quaker offices .

THE UN AND ITS WORK

The UN has two major centres: Geneva and New York)

New York: Security Council,
General Assembly meetings



Geneva: Conference on Disarmament,
UNHCR, UNHCHR, Human Rights
Council, UNCTAD.

Other relevant institutions in Geneva:
World Trade Organisation (**WTO**)
International Labour Organisation (**ILO**)
-International Committee of the Red Cross (**ICRC**)



How does QUNO work?

QUNO's work is shaped by its context. The UN Security Council is based in New York and therefore the QUNO NY office follows the agenda of the Security Council and General Assembly and works on related issues. The main human rights bodies are in Geneva, together with institutions related to disarmament so the Geneva QUNO takes a lead on these.

There are always many actors and many possibilities. The QUNO offices, as we have seen, are small in size. It is therefore important for QUNO to identify where it can most effectively make a difference. The style of working is integral to this.

The Quaker Houses in both New York and Geneva offer a valuable , and if necessary confidential – and comfortable- space in which people can meet, discuss, and test out ideas. In the words of Rufus Jones , Friends offer *small circles and quiet processes* which may be in stark contrast to the massed ranks and sometimes heated exchanges in the public domain of the UN. QUNO offers a safe space . Food – the Quaker working lunch, but also the breakfast, tea or dinner – has played an important role over the years. In the picture you see one of the programme assistants preparing such a lunch. Every picture tells a story and this quietly challenges stereotypes about who works in the kitchen and wears the apron.



How we work

*‘Small circles
and quiet
processes’
(Rufus Jones)*



Who comes to the lunches ? An example - last October QUNO Geneva hosted a cross-regional group of government delegates to see how to take forward the issue of children of prisoners. This year the Canadian government was due to report to the Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Review process . QUNO provided support and assistance to Canadian Quakers following the process. A member of the Canadian Quaker Aboriginal Affairs Committee came over to Geneva before the session to lobby governments. QUNO organised a dinner where she was able to meet indigenous representatives and governments to talk more generally about indigenous issues, and also co-sponsored a side event.

QUNO works with UN diplomats, with international agency personnel and with other non-governmental organisations. There are many informal interactions building and developing community. QUNO also organises formal seminars and conferences. It brings in expertise, makes presentation at UN bodies, undertakes analysis and publishes relevant research. There are other organisations with similar programmes – is there anything that makes Quaker work distinctive? Before she left us Nava , who had helped QUNO with the global economic issues work said that it was our approach which distinguished us from others. We were trusted, regarded as having integrity and not pushing or imposing an agenda. That’s a precious but also a fragile inheritance.

What have we learned from doing this kind of work over the years? The words of Sydney Bailey may help us here. Peace is personal, relational, political and a process that requires continuous active engagement over time.



Quaker UN Office

*“Peace begins within ourselves.
It is to be implemented within the family,
in our meetings, in our work and leisure,
in our own localities, and internationally.
The task will never be done. Peace is a
process to engage in, not a goal to be
reached.”*

Sydney Bailey, 1993



Quaker work at the UN requires patience and tenacity. Seeing immediate results may be difficult and real outcomes may be realised long after our involvement has ceased. Involving others is integral to the way we work and achievements, when they come, are often the results of sustained co-operative efforts. We seek to get issues on the agenda, and to support processes which may lead to new or improved practice. As I said earlier this is long haul work, which may be in contradiction to current trends to find quick fixes and discernible impacts within a short time span. We need to recognise that a decision to make a commitment is a decision which will extend over time. We need to ask ourselves do we have the capacity for the future as well as the present. It may be hard to take on a long term commitment. It is also the case that at the other end of the process, a long standing commitment is also often much harder to lay down!

Peace, we have said, is a process and there must be consistency between means and ends. David Atwood, who is responsible for Quaker work on disarmament and peace at QUNO Geneva, has said that there may appear to be inconsistencies. He gives the example of work he has done in supporting the creation of an Arms Transfer Treaty, to set in place international regulation of responsible arms transfers. Friends would surely be opposed to transfers overall. But he sees this as work leading in the right direction and quotes Val Ferguson, a former Secretary of FWCC, who said that *QUNO faces the challenge of working for improvement while not losing sight of perfection*. David goes on to say that *our methods must be consistent with our vision and we must constantly test each piece of work against the larger vision, in settings where the art of the possible is often reduced to the acceptance of the minimal*⁶.

Over the past year the QUNO New York office has been working on a new strategic plan. Under the strategies there is a clear description of QUNO ways of working. These are not new, but often tend to be implicit rather than explicitly stated. Here is a brief summary:

⁶ Atwood, David (2008) Presentation to FWCC gathering in Bhopal

- Focus on UN structures, processes and norms
- Bridgebuilding – seeking to reach out across divides
- Bringing Quaker experience to bear: QUNO will endeavour to draw from Quaker service experience in the field, Friends' research and advocacy and also, more broadly from Quaker insights and areas of interest.
- Collaborative learning – continuing to learn ourselves and facilitating the learning of others.

QUNO focus: how do we choose what to do?

Friends around the world have many concerns, and many of these are relevant at the UN. QUNO has to make choices. Here are some of the questions to be asked in guiding programme choice –

- Does the work fill a need and is there room to make a difference?
- Does it relate to QUNO's mission and goals?
- Is it a concern of Friends?
- Can QUNO bring something specific and different from the contribution of others?
- Does our way of working add value?
- Is there a 'space' in the setting in which we work?
- Do we have or can we access specific skills/expertise that are needed?
- Can we deliver on what we promise?
- Do we have or can we get the resources to take this on?

Some words of William Penn provide a neat summary:

If not prudent, though just, a thing may not be advisable.

This can relieve us from the burden of feeling that every just cause requires our attention .

QUNO's effectiveness is based on several factors:

- The perception of the integrity of our work
- The ability to offer a special, space for dialogue/encounter
- A reputation for professionalism and the independent (not necessarily neutral) element which we can add and in which trust can be built. If we say something is off the record, we can be trusted and individuals who may be risk averse are willing to take part

Current Programme Priorities

QUNO New York has recently reviewed and refocused its programmes. *Building sustainable peace* builds on and broadens the work that QUNO has done on the Peace Building Commission. QUNO will work particularly on what it calls a *whole of society* approach. This means that everyone has a contribution to make to a country's peacebuilding strategy – not just government at national and local level but also civil society and the private sector. QUNO New York has been working with the AFSC's Africa regional office to make these linkages. A meeting in Bujumbura, Burundi in 2007 brought together local religious and peace groups with visiting UN officials. The hope is that in this way local groups can be more involved and influence the work of the peace building commission and UN officials are more aware of local communities and their concerns.

The *Political engagement for Peacebuilding* programme will aim to bolster UN efforts to lead/support political processes needed to build sustainable peace and prevent the outbreak of future violent conflict.

Responsibility to Protect will support the UN community to make use of tools for prevention, and options for de-escalation and collective nonviolent response rather than coercive military intervention, in the case of the four crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

In Geneva QUNO divides its work into three distinct programme areas: disarmament and peace, human rights and refugees, and global economic issues.



Disarmament and Peace: Disarmament



- Small Arms
- Geneva Forum
- Armed Violence and Development

Geneva is home to the conference on disarmament and many other disarmament issues are dealt with there. QUNO's disarmament and peace programme has done ongoing work on small arms and light weapons. Nearly 100 countries are now signatories to The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development ; QUNO has been the interface with civil society organisations. The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform aims to link a wide range of organisations concerned with peacebuilding and in turn connect up with the Peacebuilding Commission . The two QUNO offices work closely together on this



Human Rights & Refugees

- Women in prison
- Child Soldiers
- Conscientious Objection to military service
- Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons
- Indigenous peoples



I have mentioned the major piece of work on issues of women in prison and the children of women in prison. Those of us who have a concern about asylum seekers and refugees in our own countries have been keen to see the inclusion of women and their children who are in detention or immigration removal centres. Rachel Brett, who takes this work forward in Geneva, has used the metaphor of a badger about QUNO. We have badgered Rachel about this.

I would like to talk briefly about the work on child soldiers. When I worked for QPS I remember attending a meeting in Geneva where Dorothea Wood spoke passionately about child soldiers. Her concern as an individual Friend was accepted by Geneva monthly meeting and then by Switzerland Yearly Meeting and was adopted in 1979 as a world wide concern by FWCC who asked QUNO to find a way of taking this forward. The opening emerged in a behind the scenes meeting with the Polish delegation, who wanted to progress work on the rights of the child. SCF and UNICEF came in at a later stage. We now have a convention of the rights of the child which includes an article on child soldiers. The time span for this work has been more than 20 years.

The work on conscientious objection to military service is historic and continuing. As I speak Rachel Brett is at a meeting in Cyprus. QUNO has also been monitoring the work of the Human Rights Council since it was established and has published two reports tracking progress.

Another anecdote – this time on the topic of refugees. In 1987 the World Council of Churches in Geneva hosted a conference on refugee women. Beth Ferris, an American Friend, was working in the WCC's Refugee Service at the time and played a leading role. We had met when I had a temporary contract with the WCC in 1986. I subsequently joined QPS and attended the conference the following year. Jean Zaru, a Friend from Ramallah was one of the key speakers. Following this conference the Canadian government funded a post at UNHCR and Ann Brazeau worked on guidelines working with refugee women to be used by the UN and humanitarian agencies. I saw this as part of a range of activities following up recommendations from the UN Women's Conference

in Nairobi in 1985. I did not know that QUNO had also played a behind the scenes role in getting this initiative underway.



Global Economic Issues

- Levelling the playing field work with developing countries
- Trade & Intellectual Property: access to medicines
- Movement of labour



In recent years the global economic issues work has focused on the World Trade Organisation. QUNO has worked with developing countries to strengthen their voice, particularly around intellectual property rights. Support in the form of research and capacity building has been provided to the Africa group of countries at the WTO and with the LDC group.

What results can we show?



Some results

Landmines: Behind the scenes work enabled the Ottawa Agreement.

Child Soldiers: First to put the issue on the global agenda; first to recognize special needs of girl soldiers.

Access to medicine: Facilitated stand alone agreement on access to affordable AIDS medicine at WTO ministerial in Doha.



Here are a few recognisable changes, which we hope are promoting greater peace and justice. Many actors were involved in the work which led to the Ottawa agreement on landmines . QUNO played a role behind the scenes. In regard to child soldiers I have talked of how QUNO first put the issue on the agenda . QUNO has recognised that girls are soldiers too and have special needs. QUNO's work at the WTO has been distinctive in enabling developing countries to access the expertise they required in negotiating with the richer countries, which are attended by phalanxes of experts and lobbyists.

The agreement on affordable AIDS medicine was the culmination of several things. I am told that the persistence of a Ugandan member of the Quaker UN Committee put HIV and the need for affordable medicine on the agenda. An entrypoint was not easy to find. Then a group of African ambassadors to the UN had a meeting with QUNO. They had heard that QUNO had developed a particular niche enabling the poorer countries of the south to access expertise for negotiations. They asked if QUNO could help them to break the monopoly of the pharmaceutical companies and gain access to affordable generic drugs. The opening that was needed had appeared.

What now?

I have detailed the work of Quakers in relation to the UN, the historic engagement , the specific contribution that we believe we can make and the achievements over time. What are the challenges? Funding of course – this work has never 'ticked the boxes' of many major funders and the resources of Friends in Britain to support the Geneva work have been seriously affected by the weakness of the pound. This is a continuing challenge but Friends remain committed: we cannot afford not to go on with this work.

At the start of this talk I mentioned the demanding long term nature of this work. What does it take to encourage us to keep on keeping on? How do we predict where the focus should be. There has been discussion in Geneva about the issue of climate change. This is clearly an important and pressing issue. We asked if there was something different that Friends could bring to this , whether we had or could access the expertise needed, and whether there was the 'space' for Quaker work on this at the UN. There are many actors now engaged in work on climate change. To take this up in a substantial way might mean losing a current area of QUNO focus . Was this the right way to go? Then we noted that climate change is leading to potential displacement and the creation of 'environmental refugees'. This aspect can be tracked through the human rights and refugee work. Climate change is also a potential driver of conflict. We need to look at how QUNO can bring this on board over time.

Another challenge is to demonstrate the value of QUNOs work in terms of measurable and quantifiable impacts in the short term. However, it is important to know if we are making a difference and if so what that difference is. QUNO NY has been working on measures to track change and effectiveness.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is one that was posed when I spoke to a group of peace activists from the Post Yugoslav countries at a meeting earlier this year. Their experience of the UN has not been a positive one. How can that change? Is it possible to reform the UN system? You talk, they said, of small circles and quiet processes. This has been a valuable approach in the past but is it really appropriate for the complex and interconnected world of today?

I had no answer to that question then and I do not have one now. It is easy to point to the failures of the UN system. But there has also been growth in the understanding of the requirements for peace to prevail. The establishment of the Human Rights Council and the Peacebuilding Commission are an institutional response to the need for greater coherence. QUNO understands the arcane nature of the institutions and also makes an essentially human response. Friends have been pursuing paths to peace for more than 300 years and as Sydney Bailey reminds us, this is not a task with an end point. When the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Friends Service Council and AFSC in 1947 the Chairman of the Nobel Committee said *It is through the silent assistance from the nameless to the nameless that they have worked to promote the fraternity between nations cited in the will of Alfred Nobel.*⁷ This is a continuing task. Val Ferguson said to me *My life has always been about a few words in a UN document that might make a difference somewhere down the line.*⁸ So we press on, with hope and faith

I will end as I began, in the seventeenth century, with the words of Edward Burrough, one of the valiant sixty Quakers who went out to minister. He said *Our principles you can never extinguish, but they will live for ever, and enter into other bodies to live and speak and act.*

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This paper draws substantially on a presentation made by David Atwood of QUNO Geneva to a gathering of FWCC in Bhopal in November 2008. Many of the slides in the presentation were taken from material prepared over the years by QUNO. I am grateful to Val Ferguson, former General Secretary of FWCC, for reading this paper and sharing her passion and stories. The errors are all my own.

Bridget Walker May 2009

⁷ Quoted in Tomlinson, Andrew (2008) *Doing that which tends to the peace of all*. Unpublished paper. QUNO NY

⁸ Personal conversation 20th May 2009