

Research Note

Africa Quaker Archives: A Short Report for *Quaker Studies*

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Abstract

The Africa Quaker Archives at Friends Theological College in Kaimosi, Kenya, was founded in partnership with the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC) in 2020 as a centre for all of African Quakerism. It began with the explicit hope that collection, preservation and study of materials about the earlier years of African Quakerism could enrich work in religious education and improve recordkeeping practices for Quaker meetings for business. It is already achieving both objectives and inspiring the world family of Friends with its grassroots Oral Histories of Quaker Faith project.

Keywords

Quaker Religious Education Collaborative, Friends Theological College, oral histories of faith, Quaker missionaries, East Africa Yearly Meeting, Faith & Play, Friends United Meeting, Vermont Folklife Center, Africa Quaker Archives

The Africa Quaker Archives was founded in January 2020. The leading, or divine inspiration, for the Archives rose in January 2019 through a dynamic and surprising partnership between the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative (QREC) and Dr Robert Wafula, principal of Friends Theological College (FTC), Kaimosi, Kenya (robertw@fum.org). Located in East Africa, just south of Ethiopia, Kenya holds the distinction of having the greatest number of Quakers in the world. QREC is an international, cross-branch, grassroots network of Friends sharing a sense of stewardship for lifelong Quaker faith formation through religious education. We number more than 700 and span six continents. The Archives' collaborative origin set the stage for an active interplay between the past

and the present of African Quakerism. The Archives are the hub of a community of practice which brings together religious educators, Quaker leaders in local churches and yearly meetings, as well as historians and scholars. The Africa Quaker Archives, even in its early years, is having a worldwide impact as Friends take up its fresh inspiration for grassroots collections of oral histories of faith.

African Friends have a vital and compelling story to tell, both now and in the years since the three Quaker missionaries came to Africa in 1902. Willis Hotchkiss, Arthur Chilson and Edgar T. Hole arrived in Kaimosi, in western Kenya, answering the call to 'establish a native self-supporting and self-propagating church'.¹ Along with a Gospel ministry, they envisioned economic development for the people as well as medical care. The first mission at Kaimosi was located near a waterfall to run a lumber and grist mill. The story of this Christian, cross-cultural endeavour is recounted in *The Hill of Vision: The Story of the Quaker Movement in East Africa 1902–1965* by Levinus K. Painter. Edgar Hole in a 1904 report noted their deep conviction that the subsequent spreading of the Christian Quaker message would depend on Africans taking up that work.² Quakerism did indeed take root and thrive! The exposure to the Friends' lived faith as they worked and studied together was a potent factor in the convincements, or adoption of the Quaker faith.³ Friends Bible Institute (later Friends Theological College) was founded in 1942 and the East Africa yearly meeting in 1946. One yearly meeting covering the whole area served until 1972, when dissensions rose and a series of splits occurred as Friends formed new yearly meetings. Today, there are over 20 yearly meetings in the area originally covered by the East Africa yearly meeting. FTC faculty member, Oscar Lugusa, speaks of the emergence of an African Quaker voice. African Friends are beginning to recount their own versions of the three American Quaker missionaries coming among them. Zablon Malenge has written from the Maragoli tribe perspective and Moses Musonga from that of the Tiriki tribe. Both are yet unpublished.

African Friends also have a compelling contemporary story to share. The world family of Friends is inspired by and learns from their bold contemporary peace witness in response to civil strife and genocide. We celebrate the vibrant and expanding role for women in ministry and in their work to empower other women, especially around countering domestic violence and efforts to keep girls in school through supplying hygiene products. Over the last several decades, Quaker luminaries like Priscilla Makhino, Miriam Were and Gladys Kang'ahi have been faithful to their calls to Gospel ministry, public health work on Ebola and AIDS, and as head of the Friends World Committee for Consultation–Africa Section and leader of United Society of Friends Women (USFW) respectively.

1 Painter, L. K., *The Hill of Vision: The Story of the Quaker Movement in East Africa 1902–1965*, Nairobi: English Press, 1966, p. 1.

2 Ibid., p. 25.

3 Ibid., p. 29.

Miriam Were was recently nominated by American Friends Service Committee for the Nobel Peace Prize. And there are faithful lives of Friends from even earlier decades, like Herman Otioko and Enoses Okoto. As young adults at Friends Bible Institute they had a call to take the Quaker message to Turkana in northern Kenya, establishing a mission there. There is a wholeness in the worldwide family of Friends. We are all lifted up by coming to know more fully the history and vitality of Quakerism in Africa. There is urgency as well as importance for this work. It is critical to gather information about the earliest chapters of Quakerism in Africa while some of the Elder Friends with memories and materials about those times are still alive. The COVID pandemic has made the work even more pressing.

The Archives' mission, to serve as a repository and study centre for all of African Quakerism, is ambitious but commensurate with the task. Currently, it is housed in a small room in the library at FTC in Kaimosi, Kenya. While there was a clear leading, or sense of divine imperative, to begin with this space, there was an equally clear recognition that a larger home would be needed fairly quickly. A site survey has been conducted, architectural plans for a three-story building have been created, and the first price quote has been calculated (Fig. 1). A member of the faculty at FTC is drafting a case statement as the next step toward fundraising for this half million-dollar (USD) project. The Archives will be adjacent to the main library and will provide conference and seminar space as well as room for the collection and research areas. Materials and documents are coming in, but progress has been slow due to the COVID pandemic. The Friends United Meeting Triennial will be held in Kenya in July 2023. This may be an occasion for Friends from around the world who have documents, pictures, journals, travel minutes, etc. related to African Quakerism in their possession to bring them to the Archives. We will not be collecting clothing or other personal items unless they bear directly on Quakerism. Digital files may be sent to the FTC archivist, Linet Mmbone.

Equally exciting are the social and spiritual underpinnings of the Archives. The leading to found the Africa Quaker Archives began just one year before its founding, in January 2019. It is a case study in God opening the way. African Friends who teach Sunday School requested a workshop on methods and resources to support their teaching. Marian Baker, who for 50 years has travelled in the ministry in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, in coordination with Agneta Injairu, pulled together a list of the 24 most active Sunday School teachers in East Africa. Marian Baker recruited two members of the QREC, myself and Melinda Wenner Bradley, to offer training for them at FTC. Melinda and I made plans to introduce the Godly Play® method of open-ended Bible storytelling and Faith & Play™, the companion stories of Quaker faith and witness. The stories are told by heart using small figures on a felt underlay. The narrative is distilled to a very sparse text. Each story ends with wondering together in rich theological reflection. We had the inspiration to illustrate the storytelling method by creating a story of an

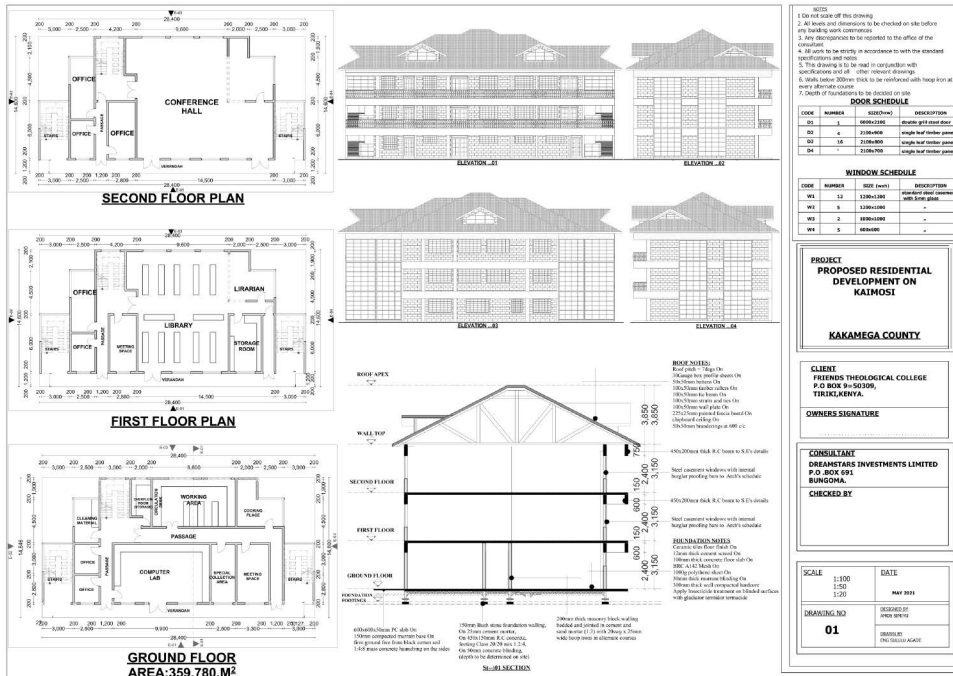


Fig. 1. Architectural plans and renderings for the Africa Quaker Archives building.

African Quaker luminary. We chose Priscilla Makhino, sometimes called ‘The Margaret Fell of Africa’. Norma Silliman, a US Friend travelling in the ministry in Africa between 1988 and 1990, challenged African Friends to raise up from among themselves a new generation of Quaker luminaries. Who among you, she asked, will be the ‘Margaret Fell of today’? Priscilla was led to fill that role. Priscilla travelled widely in Africa and to Britain and the United States testifying to her experience of God’s love and lessons for living. The participants loved the story of divine encounter, travel in the ministry and finally of her service as an elder, hosting and encouraging many younger ministers from Africa and beyond. To our surprise and their dismay, many of the workshop participants had never heard of Priscilla Makhino! A strong sense of imperative rose in the group to find out more about their own history as African Friends so they could use those stories in their Sunday School lessons.

The team of facilitators, Melinda, Marian and I, could feel a unity forming in the group and asked the participants if they felt inspired to write an epistle. Staying up late into the night, four representatives of the group called for a major effort to gather stories of the early years of Quakerism in Africa.

As we learned about the Faith & Play stories, we realized the sad fact that Quaker history in Africa is not properly documented. We want to collaborate with the FTC Kaimosi, Marian Baker, and the Earlham College Archives to document the

histories of Quakers in Africa so that we can write the stories of important African Quakers, to share with our children and the rest of the world. (From their Epistle, 16–19 January 2019)

Dr Robert Wafula as well as many other Friends had long hoped for an archive. He recognised the grace and possibility of the moment. When God opens the way, sometimes things happen quickly. We experienced people with just the right skills, capacities, and a strong sense of call making connections and fitting together seamlessly. The FTC board and leadership in the Friends United meeting approved the idea. As co-founder, the QREC Steering Circle approved our partnership. The Friends Historical Association of America joined with our excitement and offered to send a visiting archivist to Kenya to help set up the archives and train the staff. Mary Crauderueff, curator of Quaker Collections at Haverford College, joined our team. Haverford College released her to do this work for one month. The Thomas H. and Mary Williams Shoemaker Fund, via a grant to QREC, supplied the few first pieces of equipment for the archival storage.

We turned to the Vermont Folk Life Center in the US for guidance on designing and implementing a grassroots initiative to gather stories about the early years of Quakerism. We hoped to create a window in on historical events. Even more importantly, we wanted to know how the Quaker faith was kindled in new hearts and what difference it made at turning points in their lives. To keep the technology simple and inexpensive, Andy Kolovos, associate director and archivist of the Vermont Folklife Center, recommended using smartphones, lapel microphones and tripods for the phones. A grant from the Shoemaker Fund purchased three smartphones and the microphones and tripods as well as a desktop computer on which to hold and work with the stories. We developed a simple sheet of 'how-to' instructions for the technology, COVID-safe practices and suggestions for interview questions. The grassroots partnership was invaluable. Friends in local churches knew where to look for the stories. If a Friend who had played a critical role was now deceased, they knew how to locate one of his/her children for recollections, journals and other materials. The goal is to transcribe each interview and translate into English, if needed. The audio file and transcription would be held by both the Africa-QREC office in Nairobi and FTC.

Twelve interviews of Kenyan Friends have been conducted. These focused on Friends living in western Kenya in the region where Quakerism first took hold. Interviewers reached out to Quakers who had active roles in early African Quakerism like Charles Wakhisi, the last living member of the original East Africa Yearly Meeting staff or Dinah Lumwachi, the last living child of the first convinced Friend in Lirhanda, one of the original mission stations. Yohanna Lumwachi played a key role as a mentor to many (Fig. 2). Two sets of training for interviewers have been offered and the hope is that the larger number of interviewers will galvanise the story collection effort. The interview of Gladys Kang'ahi (1 November



Fig. 2. Interview of Dinah Lumwachi by Agneta Injairu (12 February 2020).

1947–2 March 2021) was the first to be transcribed. For a US Friend, this was a cross-cultural adventure. Reading the interview, it seemed to go around in circles. After the initial consternation cleared for me, it became apparent that instead of a smooth narrative arc as I had expected from my vantage point in US culture, which is heavily influenced by individualism, here was a story of life in community. The shape of Gladys Kang'ahi's story was a spiral. Successive iterations of gifts named, opportunities opened and successful completion of tasks demonstrate how she developed as a Friend, all the while held in faithful community. There is a rich record of untold stories of African Quaker women. They often form a counterpoint to male leaders entangled in power struggles. Lifting up the lives of Friendly women is an area ripe for study. Our hope is that this project will raise awareness of other women's lives and so complete a fuller picture of how Quakerism grew and spread in Africa. Stories from Friends in their young adult years are also under-represented and hold much treasure. We will enfold even critical voices and not shy away from the complicated overlay of colonialism.

As we do this work, we look for African Friends with expertise to bring to the initiative. Jane Matasio, a professional archivist at the National Archives in Nairobi and a Quaker, wrote her 2017 master's thesis on 'Records Management in Friends Church (Quakers) in Kenya'. She says:

The findings of this study revealed that although the Friends Church in Kenya is known for embracing good records management practices, the current practices leaves much to be desired. This is due to inefficient records keeping systems, inadequate funding towards records management activities, unskilled personnel managing church records, reluctance in release and sharing of information from members, inadequate storage infrastructure, and lack of awareness and knowledge by the Church and members about the importance of good records keeping.⁴

4 Matasio, J. F., 'Records Management in Friends Church (Quakers) in Kenya' (unpublished master's thesis, University of South Africa). August 2017, p. 80.



Fig. 3. Africa Quaker archives workshop at FTC November 2022. It featured trainings for oral history interviewers and practical guidance for clerks and recorders from local and yearly meetings.

Jane Matasio has been instrumental, not only in assessing the current state of Quaker business practices in Friends churches, but also in offering workshops to improve their recording and the maintenance of local collections (Fig. 3). She demonstrated best practices by designing release forms for gifts of documents given to the Archives. The international community of Quaker archivists continues to encourage these efforts and build our capacity to do the work. The Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania has graciously invited FTC librarian and archivist, Linet Mmbone, to travel to the US in summer 2023 for an intensive practicum on archival management.

As is the way in the most fruitful collaborations, mutual sharing flows back and forth between partners, enlivening all. Even at only three years old, the Africa Quaker Archives is illuminating the path for US Friends in our QREC network. The founding hopes of the Sunday School teachers for materials about the history of African Quakerism are already being realised. Edigar Injairu, a professor in the Art Department at the University of Malawi, is collaborating with QREC to create for children colouring pages which capture vignettes from African Quakerism. This sketch features Gladys Kang'ahi organising women from yearly meetings whose leaders were in conflict to come together and make a traditional African dinner for international visiting Friends. These colouring pages will be pilot tested in the US in the weeks ahead. We are grateful for the generous support of Obadiah Brown's Benevolent Fund which underwrote the development of the drawings (Fig. 4).

The QREC is led to initiate a similar grassroots oral history project in the US to celebrate and preserve stories of Quaker faith. The Friends Collection at Earlham College will house the collection of audio files. Rufus Jones said, 'Persons are set on fire by someone who is already aflame'.⁵ A repository of testimonies to the

5 Jones, R., 'What Will Get Us Ready?', *Friends Journal*, 3 January 2012. Originally presented as Baltimore Young Friends Yearly Meeting Lecture for 1944.

Peacemaking through Shared Work

Gladys Kang'ahi enlisted women of several different yearly meetings to cook for a large international Quaker gathering. The leaders of their yearly meetings were in conflict, but the women found peace by working together to accomplish a shared goal!



What do you think changed while they worked together?

Fig. 4. Children's colouring page of Gladys Kang'ahi by Edigar Injairu.

power of Quaker faith to guide life choices at key turning points and to inspire work and witness in the world may help us to re-ignite Quaker faith in the US, so that it burns even more brightly in the future. We are grateful to African Friends for their inspiration and faithfulness in seeking out the roots of their own history.

Author Details

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