

## Friends in Asia-West Pacific: Present and Future Challenges <sup>1</sup>

*The unity of [Friends] never did nor ever will or can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion,  
but in Christian love only.*

- Thomas Story, 1737.

FRIENDS IN THE Asia West Pacific Section of the Friends World Committee for Consultation (AWPS-FWCC) live in a geographically vast region with a challenging yet rich diversity of history, language, culture, religion and politics. Some groups are small and all are geographically isolated which makes on-going interaction between them difficult. A 'tyranny of distance' frames a picture of vulnerability. And yet, behind this picture, there is a wider canvas of courage and a determination to 'make it work'.

This paper acts partially as a report while offering a commentary on the current state of Friends in our far-flung Section. After a general overview, I briefly address its life country by country before specifying a number of key projects which demand involvement by Quakers of differing traditions. In conclusion, some proposals are suggested.

### **Overview**

An AWPS was first officially mooted at the 10<sup>th</sup> Triennial in Greensboro (Nth. Carolina, US) in 1967 but several pre-inauguration AWPS Meetings took place in the early 1950s. It was not until 1978 that an inaugural international Friends' gathering proper took place in Asia-West Pacific in Hong Kong. The first Business Meeting occurred in Tokyo in the same year. The 16<sup>th</sup> Triennial in 1985, again at Greensboro, agreed to an AWPS. Today, there are 17 broad groupings in the Section; their worship style, number and status are shown in the Appendix.

In some countries Quaker numbers are rising; in others a fall is recorded. Growing and active Friends churches are found in Indonesia, Nepal, Philippines and Taiwan. Quakers in Cambodia and recently in several Indian states are also steadily increasing. These Friends tend to emphasise Christianity over their membership of the Society. The Philippines Evangelical Friends Church (PEFC) and Mahoba Yearly Meeting (India) are the latest affiliations to FWCC, joining formally in 2008 but Friends in Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal and Taiwan remain unaffiliated.

Numbers are slightly declining in Australia (949) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (536). Friends in Australasia, it seems, are generally less attractive to busy young families and, as elsewhere among the unprogrammed (or liberal) tradition, theological diversity causes confusion among many enquirers.

Suspicion and/or a lack of knowledge of the pastoral (or evangelical) tradition are characteristic of many liberal Friends in the Section as indeed elsewhere among unprogrammed Quakers: as the late Richard Meredith wrote in his Australia Yearly Meeting Backhouse Lecture (1997),

Many Friends of the unprogrammed tradition . . . can be downright hostile and rejecting of that 'other lot' without exploring their history and current faithful witnessing to the Gospel message.<sup>3</sup>

However, the situation is not one way. Evangelical Friends, too, express wariness of liberal Quakers. That said, it is hoped any such tensions may at least ease as more Friends in the Section interact with each other either through field projects, a greater use of computer generated communications as well or inter-visitation, the latter being vital to the life of Quakerism and the activities to which it gives birth.

Despite the fact that AWPS Friends constitute only four percent of world Quakerism<sup>4</sup>, the Section has produced three General Secretaries of FWCC, Ranjit Chetsingh (GCFI, 1954-55), Richard

Meredith (Australia YM, 1981-85) and Elizabeth Duke (YM of Aotearoa, 1998-2004); two Associate Secretaries, Tayeko Yamanouchi (Japan YM, 1971-76) and Elizabeth Duke (1997-98) and two Clerks, Yoon-Gu Lee (Korea, 1986-91) and David Purnell (Australia YM, 1998-2004)and. The Section has also hosted three Triennials—Sydney (1973), Tokyo (1988) and Auckland (2004). Today, it issues a quarterly newsletter (now translated into Hindi), possesses an interactive website (<<http://fwccawps.org>>) and successfully holds well-attended tri-annual Gatherings. The last, in November 2008 in Bhopal (India), was attended by 150 people of whom about half were Indian Friends. Some years ago the Section decided to hold alternate Gatherings in India. The next will take place in the Philippines in 2011.

### A. Country by Country

**Aotearoa/NZ Friends** are active in peace and social justice work. Each year the Loxley Award helps New Zealanders, Quakers or non-Quakers, to undertake a study program (or a project of their choosing) in A/NZ or abroad which promotes an understanding of peace, justice and environmental issues. Small Local Peace Grants are issued for work within A/NZ. The peace statement of A/NZ Friends (1987) remains a Quaker classic. Work is done with Maori, the Indigenous peoples of the country, and there is also involvement with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). And Friends are rightly proud of the Friends' Settlement in Whanganui (Nth. Island). Although Quakers arrived in NZ in the 1830s like Australia, the YM celebrates its centenary this year. 'Aotearoa' is Maori for 'land of the long white cloud'.<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.quaker.org.nz>>  
<[http://www.quaker.org/minnfm/peace/new\\_zealand\\_statement\\_on\\_peace.htm](http://www.quaker.org/minnfm/peace/new_zealand_statement_on_peace.htm)>

**Australian Friends** are separated by large distances. In this respect they bear similarity to Canadian Friends. While numbers are experiencing a slight decline, attendance at Yearly Meetings appears to be increasing. Australian Friends have instituted a new teaching and retreat facility known as the Australian Quaker Centre which will begin courses in September-October 2009 at a temporary site near the federal capital, Canberra. A Friends' Committee also in Canberra examines and comments on new legislation. Quaker Service Australia (QSA), which grew out of Concern for the victims of the war in Vietnam, celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May 2009 with the launch of a book, *Friends in Deed* by Heather Saville, a former Convenor of QSA. The agency has projects in Cambodia, India, Uganda and Indigenous Australia. For over 70 years A/NZ and Australia YMs have exchanged representatives, a program that now includes others from elsewhere in the Section.  
<<http://www.quakers.org.au>>  
<<http://www.qsa.org.au/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=kPk371r2nVo%3D&tabid=77>>

**Hong Kong MM** meets regularly on the grounds of St. John's Anglican Cathedral. It is a small but lively group of approximately 15 Members and 14 regular Attenders. Evangelical Friends International through OFM and PEFC has an outreach to Filipinos working in Hong Kong. They have one nondenominational worshipping groups with about 50 in attendance led by a Filipino Friends' pastor. <<http://www.geocities.com/quakerhongkong>>

**Indonesia Friends** are likewise of mixed traditions. A very small number of unprogrammed Quakers are scattered across the archipelago. These are usually expatriates as in **Sri Lanka** and **Thailand** and tend to be temporary residents. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has an office in Jogjakarta (south-west Java) and services East and West Timor and various parts of Indonesia including war-torn Aceh in northern Sumatra. Most Friends, however, are evangelical. Southwest Yearly Meeting's (US) mission started work in Indonesia in 1987 and already has an estimated 35 churches with a membership of about 1,800. <<http://quakers.davidcoffee.com/?q=taxonomy/term/44>>

**Indian Friends** comprise over 1,000 Members. Christians form 2.3% of the Indian population (only 1% in Madhya Pradesh where the Yearly Meetings are situated) and live in a sea of other faiths and thus cannot be oblivious of the beliefs and practices of others. Many Christians are aware of the tolerant and all-embracing Hinduism of most Indians which can find a place for Christ and perhaps over time win back or absorb some Christians. But they have also experienced the hostility, including physical violence, by a minority of Hindus who are distinctly anti-Christian. Reasons for this hostility are many but they include the Christian conversions of tribals, Dalit and others. 'Conversion' is a dirty word in India and several States have passed legislation to ensure that anyone wanting to change his/her religion does so out of genuine religious conviction. Christianity is still identified with the foreign rulers, particularly the British, and there is deep suspicion of highly motivated evangelical churches.

Owing much similarity to other Protestant denominations in India, the two Yearly Meetings of Bundelkhand and Mahoba (the latest YM) have pastors and follow the pattern of evangelical Ohio Friends. Bhopal and Mid-India Yearly Meetings also follow programmed worship but elders deliver the message or sermon although others can deliver a message if felt led. Marble Rocks (Jabalpur) has recently been admitted as a MM by the International Membership Committee (IMC); about 50 people follow programmed worship.

Generally, knowledge of Quaker belief and history is sketchy except among some older Friends. All YMs, including the tiny unprogrammed General Conference of Friends in India (GCFI), worry about Quakerism's future. However, this has encouraged Bundelkhand and Bhopal YMs to hold short teaching programs for Young Friends. There is an overall need for study programs with suitable supporting materials.

The YMs participate in occasional interfaith dialogue. And while there is some involvement in social issues, more effort goes into supporting and running the Friends' schools in Itarsi, Sohagpur (girls) and Chhatarpur as well as the Friends Rural Centre (Rasulia).

Quaker business procedure is not always followed by YMs while Quaker groups can be weakened when members marry into other denominations in particular or into non-Christian families, or find employment elsewhere. <[http://fwccawps.org/news/2007\\_IndiaVisit.php](http://fwccawps.org/news/2007_IndiaVisit.php)>

**Japan:** Gender and age issues, and little communication with non-Friends appear to discourage young people from attending Meeting for Worship and place the long-term survival of Japanese Quakerism into the Light. However, the Friends School in Tokyo (est.1887), a junior/senior high with approximately 800 girls, continues to foster a Quaker spirit. <<http://www.friends.ac.jp/english/english01.html>>; <<http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers>>.

**Korea:** At the Section Gathering in Seoul (2005), Friends learned about Minjung theology which the late Ham Sok-hon (1901-89) espoused as a lively spiritual discourse and a template for Quakers in Korea. Ham Sok-hon was a national figure in his own right and revered among Friends and many non-Friends as the 'Gandhi of Korea'. He was imprisoned by the Japanese occupiers and then by various Korean régimes. South Korean Quakers are small in number but nevertheless deeply involved with AVP. Seoul MM, Canberra Regional Meeting (Australia) and Kapiti Meeting (A/NZ) have 'sister Meeting' relationships. <[http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/korea\\_quakers.htm](http://www2.gol.com/users/quakers/korea_quakers.htm)> <[http://seoulman.smugmug.com/gallery/977215\\_5fupx/1/45185199\\_FzfnA#45185199\\_FzfnA](http://seoulman.smugmug.com/gallery/977215_5fupx/1/45185199_FzfnA#45185199_FzfnA)>

**Nepal:** There are now over 22 congregations and worshipping groups with over 1,100 worshippers in the Kathmandu area and in villages in the south. Nepal has several full-time workers and has formed its own Yearly Meeting. <[http://www.warwickquakers.org.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=65&Itemid=1](http://www.warwickquakers.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=65&Itemid=1)>

**Philippines:** The society at large is open to the evangelical Christian message that the PEFC preaches. There is less attention paid to working for social justice, however, than preaching the Word of God through the Bible. A small unprogrammed Friends Meeting is being re-established in Manila. <<http://pefc.fotopages.com>>

**Taiwan:** Taiwan Friends have shown some reluctance towards communicating with FWCC affiliated Meetings but there are signs of co-operation between their YM and mainland Chinese and Nepali Quakers. The 3,200 Friends became a Yearly Meeting in 1977 and worship in over 177 churches. They send missionaries and leaders on short-term mission trips to train leaders in Nepal, India, the Philippines and other outreach points with links to Evangelical Friends International. <<http://www.wfn.org/2004/04/msg00265.html>>

## **B. Four Significant Projects**

There are many aid and development projects in the region (and beyond) supported by Quakers. The four projects below reflect the timbre of the tasks undertaken and provide a glimpse into the spirituality underlying them.

### **1. *The Work of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)***

In co-operation with local partners, AFSC (Indonesia) has established a ‘Youth for Peace Program’ which, *inter alia*, identifies future leaders among young people in the wider community. It also engages in capacity building in West Timor and conducts a recovery program in Aceh which was badly hit by war and the 2004 tsunami. The West Timor program is a little over one year old. There are still many tensions between the two Timors, particularly between the resettled refugees and the local communities with whom AFSC works through the agency of local organizations. AFSC also works in the main city of Kupang by building community capacity for settling disputes. Elsewhere it organizes learning opportunities such as courses in trauma healing for women working with victims of domestic violence.<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.afsc.org/indonesia>>

### **2. *Women’s Association and Empowerment in Vaigai (Tamil Nadu, India)***

Established by women seeking self-sufficiency, the Vaigai Women’s Association began operation in 2000. It was, as now, a confederation of 140 women’s self-help groups. With support from QSA, an office has been built in addition to a warehouse, toilet block and kitchen. Although local farmers grew enough crops to sustain their families, they were often forced to sell their goods cheaply. In response, the warehouse stores their produce which is now sold at a fair price according to the market rather than the season, a positive step towards sustainable economic development for the organisation and the community it serves. <<http://www.qsa.org.au/Wherewework/India/tabid/74/Default.aspx>>

### **3. *Working with Indonesian Police***

Robert Howell, an A/NZ Friend and an organisational and strategy consultant, has worked with the Indonesian police force since 1997 introducing non-violent conflict training. Work with the University of Gadjah Mada (UGM) in Jogjakarta has attracted funding from NZAID for 15 scholarships enabling police to undertake an 18-month Master in Conflict Resolution. Five students each year have attended (2005-8). This work is now a Concern of the YM of A/NZ. <[www.quaker.org.nz/groups/qpsanz](http://www.quaker.org.nz/groups/qpsanz)>

### **4. *Historic Peace Churches Conference***

In December 2007, Solo City (Java) hosted 120 people from 10 countries (Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and Quaker) at the Third International Historic Peace Churches (HPC) Conference. Solo is where the Bali bombings (2002) were planned. Quakers made a significant contribution to the colloquium which discussed critical theological issues related to militarisation and warfare, technology, health, the environment and climate, and exploitation and oppression. A lively mix of theological reflection came with diverse forms of worship, different analyses of situations and events as well as experiences and challenges in the field. We listened to heart-wrenching personal stories of oppression and injustice, and formulated an epistle to the churches worldwide. A message was sent to the UN environment conference being held at the same time in Bali.

<[http://fwccawps.org/news/2007\\_hpcic.pdf](http://fwccawps.org/news/2007_hpcic.pdf)>

<[http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/events/071201-HPC\\_Conference.pdf](http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/events/071201-HPC_Conference.pdf)>

### ***C. Conclusion and Proposals***

The Section's vastness and diversity are always challenging. And yet, the Quaker presence continues to manifest itself in a variety of creative ways as Friends of differing traditions display their giftedness on a number of levels. And we remember past Friends who showed courage not only in surviving hostile physical and social environments but also violence and warfare.

While Quakerism remains a living faith in the region, our Buddhist neighbours remind us that life is always in flux; our Quaker ways, therefore, need periodic renewal. Such a time may be opening up before us. The Asia-Pacific is, after all, changing rapidly. New military and economic Powers are on the rise, climate change beckons an uncertain future and increasingly ferocious violence and arbitrary detention remain the preferred options of some régimes. A nuclear arms race is under way in the region while environmental degradation continues its relentless march through such countries as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Meanwhile, Indigenous peoples still suffer greatly on many fronts.

These factors inform a re-think of Quaker strategy. New ways of dialogue must be sought between unprogrammed and pastoral Friends as well as between Friends and other religions 'to see if haply we might learn of them', as John Woolman once said, and for 'them' to learn from 'us'. In this vein, applications are being received for an essay which explores ways in which Quakers may learn from the mysticism of other faiths in the Asian region. AUD\$2,000 has been offered to assist this work.

Yet more urgent matters demand Section-wide consideration and initiatives. There may be possibilities, for instance, for Quakers and other HPCs in the region to offer mediation between disputing and perhaps warring parties. There is precedent within our own Religious Society for such projects. Indeed, a surprising number of Section Friends and others in the HPC network are skilled practitioners in the art of dispute resolution.<sup>7</sup>

The common language of the Kingdom of God, sound knowledge of the early Quaker impulse and of the Bible, joint aid projects, a greater use of communications such as Skype, and the careful introduction of a teaching ministry and evangelism (both local and international), all of these are possible and may be of immense benefit to Friends. Joint study programs between evangelical and non-pastoral Quakers will be important for the growth and development of a healthy Section. A greater degree of inter-visitation is also needed; it is a vital, ancient and sacred Quaker practice and needs jealous guarding lest it becomes a secular activity. Programs for visiting Friends, therefore, such as that already under way in Australia and A/NZ, will need expanding. Further, there is a need for quicker and reliable translations of Quaker literature as well as for more effective fundraising.

We have been reminded by 18<sup>th</sup> century Friend Thomas Story that the call for unity never ceases, that the hound of the Kingdom is relentless and that only love and mutual co-operation as its outcome will gather Friends into the eternal space.

**Gerard Guiton**

Australia YM  
June 22<sup>nd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup>, 2009

## <sup>1</sup>Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Story quoted in R. Meredith, *Learning of One Another* (Backhouse Lecture. Hobart: Religious Society of Friends, 1997), 4. Meredith's lecture which brims with practical ideas. It is available at: (<<http://www.quakers.org.au/associations/7464/files/LearningOfOneAnother01s.pdf>>). Also recommended are the Backhouse Lectures of O. van der Sprenkel, *Friends and Other Faiths* (1973) (<[http://www.quakers.org.au/associations/7464/files/Friends\\_\\_Other\\_Faiths\\_1973.pdf](http://www.quakers.org.au/associations/7464/files/Friends__Other_Faiths_1973.pdf)>) and D. Anderton & B. Baker Bird, *Emerging Currents in the Asia-Pacific* (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Meredith, *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Africa (43%), North America (30%), Caribbean and Latin America (17%), Europe and Middle East (6%).

<sup>5</sup> A 'General Conference of New Zealand Friends' met between 10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> May, 1909 for their first 'Annual General Meeting' at Wellington under the care of London (now Britain) YM. Sixty people attended together with four Friends from LYM. The first NZ YM occurred in 1967.

<sup>6</sup> AFSC Indonesia report dated for 1<sup>st</sup> April-30<sup>th</sup> Sept., 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See my *The Growth and Development of Quaker Testimony* (Lewiston, NY.: Mellen, Dec. 2005), 130-1, 379 (23<sup>n</sup>, 24<sup>n</sup>, 25<sup>n</sup>) for the Australia-New Zealand Quaker mission in 1965 to mediate the Indonesia-Malaysia war. In the book I analyse and discuss Quaker mediation at length.

## Appendix

### Country Number of Members\* Worship Style Status IMs/ IFs

<sup>^</sup>Aotearoa/NZ 536 Unprogrammed YM Australia 949 Unprogrammed YM ♦ Cambodia 2,500 Programmed\* Hong Kong 15  
50 Unprogrammed  
Programmed MM

Non-denom WG **India:**

Bhopal  
Bundelkhand  
Delhi  
GCFI  
Mahoba  
Marble Rocks  
Mid-India  
Kerala + 6 others 1,000  
Programmed  
Programmed  
Unprogrammed  
Unprogrammed  
Programmed  
Programmed  
Programmed  
Programmed  
YM  
YM  
WG  
MM  
YM  
MM  
YM  
YM

\*

◆ **Indonesia** 1,800

12? Programmed

Unprogrammed YM

WG\* **Japan** 110 Unprogrammed YM **Korea** 12 Unprogrammed Seoul

MM ◆ **Nepal** 1,100 Programmed YM\* **Papua New Guinea**? WG\* **Philippines** 3,000+ Programmed YM\* **Sri**

**Lanka** 8-12? Unprogrammed Colombo WG\* ◆ **Taiwan** 3,200

6-8 Programmed

Unprogrammed YM

WG **Thailand**? \* **TOTAL 14, 298** <sup>▲</sup> **Unp. = 11.6% (approx. 1,660)**

▲ IMs = Members recorded by the International Membership Committee (IMC) of FWCC. IFs = Friends who are isolated though not necessarily Members recorded by the IMC.

◆ = unaffiliated to FWCC

▲ = Including regular Attenders the number of people attending all Meetings and worshipping groups may exceed 16,000.

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