

A Quaker Congo partnership

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I was born and brought up a Quaker, in Edinburgh and Cambridge, and transferred my membership to Mount Street meeting when I moved to Manchester in 1995. Although I have seldom attended meeting since my teenage years in the early 1980s, I didn't want to let my membership lapse, so I am grateful to have been accepted by the meeting as a non-attender all these years.

What finally prompted me to show my face among Friends again was my recent trip to visit Quakers in Eastern Congo (DRC) in February, on behalf of Cambridgeshire Area Meeting. My mother Janet Gilbraith is active in their "Congo Group", through which the meeting has been supporting the work of Congo Yearly Meeting (CEEACO, the Community of Evangelical Churches of Friends in the Congo) for several years.

On the strength of my many years of experience working in international development, including some experience of Africa, and in spite of my rather limited recent involvement with Friends, I was regarded as a suitable companion to Hazel Shellens of Huntingdon Local Meeting for a one week visit. Our aims were to demonstrate to Congo Friends that Friends here are alongside them, and to assess how best we might be able to help them in the future, both financially and otherwise.

Manchester Friends may remember Mkoko Boseka of CEEACO from his several weeks in Manchester last summer, after attending the Friends World Triennial in Dublin. He had spent time with Cambridge Friends on the same visit. After learning that Manchester Friends also had a connection with Mkoko and CEEACO, and a wider interest in the Congo as well, I made myself known and invited Manchester Friends to also take advantage of the trip to develop their links with CEEACO as well.

I shall not describe our trip here in any detail, or what we saw and learned of CEEACO. Some of you may have attended the slide show I presented at Mount Street in March, and whether you did or not, you can view it



Mkoko Boseka accepts a laptop computer on behalf of the Friends Peace Centre, donated by Manchester Area meeting.

yourself online - 89 photos with captions, plus links to video clips and other sites. To do so, point your browser at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/24338406@N05> or go to www.flickr.com and search for "CEEACO2008" (in "People"). A few of the photos are reprinted here, and I would be happy to deliver the slideshow in person again for other groups - please get in touch to let me know.

Also, I shall not explain here in any detail what I have learned about the country and the region - except that it has suffered as many as 5.4 million deaths in the recent wars since 1996, although these barely registered in the media or public consciousness in the West; and an unparalleled history of brutal exploitation of its people and its wealth of natural resources by outside forces, both during and since Colonial times. Since I first began to read, feeling quite ignorant of the country and the region, to help me decide whether to take up the opportunity of visiting the Congo, I became quite obsessed and read over a dozen books in a few months - not to mention a number of reports and other publications on the invaluable online resource www.reliefweb.net. For those who are interested in finding out more, I have listed the books that I found helpful.

I shall say here, however, that we were very well looked after, the trip went smoothly, and it served our aims well - and I returned inspired by the people I had met and by what I

had seen and learned, and enthused to encourage Manchester and other Friends to join with Cambridge Area Meeting in expanding and extending their support to CEEACO. I was happy to be able to deliver greetings, as well as a laptop computer for use at the Friends Peace Centre in Uvira, from Manchester Area Meeting – and also to deliver greetings and thanks from CEEACO to Manchester AM in return.

Based on what we saw and learned, and on the clear requests and priorities of Congo Friends, Hazel and I have recommended to Cambridge AM the outline of a 3-year partnership agreement with CEEACO for ongoing support for their work in Abeka - in particular the community hospital, the Trauma Clinic Peace Garden project, and a women's revolving loan fund. This would entail a commitment to substantially increased financial support to CEEACO, while still sufficiently modest to be within their and our capacity to manage it effectively. We have included in our recommendation that we take advantage of the opportunity for experienced local support and monitoring by CAPI, a Kenya-based international NGO with long experience of working with CEEACO on behalf of Quaker Service Norway.

We hope that Cambridge AM will decide to commit to financing at least part of the budget from existing funds, but additional contributions from Manchester and/or other meetings, and additional fundraising, will certainly be needed.

The intent is to provide a framework within which British Friends may commit their support collectively, in such a way that CEEACO can plan ahead and develop an



CEEACO's Trauma Clinic and Peace Garden is to be built on the lake shore at Abeka - there is already a sign at the main road



Hazel with members of the Women's Yearly meeting, in front of the Abeka field cultivated by widows as an income generating activity

effective and focused single working partnership, rather than dealing with a variety of disparate small-scale contributions. However we have already heard from Friends as far afield as New Zealand that they may wish to contribute their support as well, so we hope we may make room for all!

CEEACO are also keen to host volunteers with appropriate skills and experience, to support them there in practical ways, so we will also be looking at ways that we can support that.

Manchester AM has since nominated Margaret Gregory, Elizabeth Coleman, Chris Green, Jaques Kanda and myself to form a Manchester "Congo Group". We will be meeting in June for the first time, to consider how we might best support Manchester Friends in acting on their concern for the Congo – and, in particular, to respond to the invitation from Cambridge Friends to join them in their proposed partnership with CEEACO.

If you are interested in finding out more, or getting involved, **please do get in touch** with me, or with any of us. Please also **make a regular donation** toward Manchester AM's new Congo fund, by means of the annual schedule, or by contacting the Treasurer. Please also come along to **the annual garden party at Sale Local Meeting on Saturday June 21st**, where I and others of the new Congo group will be there to bring a Congo theme to the event, and to provide opportunities for Friends to find out more and lend their support!