



Etando Mukoko Wa Mwabi astride a pile of bricks, fabricated by the local community for the construction of the Trauma Clinic

Two British Friends have seen first-hand the efforts Congolese Quakers are making to build peace in their war-torn country.

Friends in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which emerged five years ago from a war that claimed an estimated three million lives, have set up a hospital and a tree nursery and are currently building peace and trauma centres to care for their fellow citizens.

Hazel Shellens, Cambridgeshire AM, and Martin Gilbraith, Manchester AM, travelled to DRC as the first step in a possible twinning arrangement between Cambridge and Manchester Friends and Congolese Quakers.

‘Cambridgeshire AM has, for the last three years, been sending some financial support to Congo Yearly Meeting towards the building of a Friends Peace Centre’, said Hazel. She added that Congolese Friends were looking to develop the relationship, but that Cambridgeshire Quakers wanted ‘a better idea of what was going on on the ground’, before making any further commitment. From this came the decision that Hazel and Martin should travel to the country.

Upon arrival in the eastern Congolese town of Uvira, Martin and Hazel were shown the Friends Peace Centre that Quakers were building. ‘We found a three-quarters finished building’, said Hazel, adding that it included a large seminar room for training, offices being let out to a peacebuilding group and a women’s sewing workshop. ‘There is, as

yet, no plumbing, so there are no toilet or washing facilities’, she said, explaining that much of the labour comes from volunteers who donate their time when they are able.

Congo YM is also responsible for numerous projects, including the running of a hospital, in the village of Abeka, two and a half hours from Uvira. Martin explained that ‘it’s the only place for forty-five kilometres in either direction which has properly trained medical staff’. Hazel added that despite the ‘terrible conditions’ that they work in (the hospital’s generator doesn’t work, among other things), the staff perform brilliantly. ‘In fact they did a Caesarean section with a hurricane lamp while we were there’, she added.

One project grew from a simple donation. While in Dublin last summer for the Friends World Committee for Consultation Triennial, Congo YM’s legal representative Mkoko Boseka was given a gift of twenty euros, which he used to buy plastic sheeting for 1,200 tree seedlings. During the war, many trees were burned down by anti-government rebel forces, meaning that women collecting firewood had to travel far from their villages and were at greater risk of sexual assault. The new seedlings will provide both fuel and safety.

Other projects include setting up a trauma clinic and peace garden, as well as a theological college and guest house. In Abeka, most building materials are plentiful: rocks and sand are lying around and they make their own bricks: the only financial outlays are for things like doors and windows. ‘Sometimes you wonder whether they’ve bitten off more than they can chew’, said Hazel, ‘but then you see what they

have already achieved and you think “maybe they can do it”’.

Both Martin and Hazel agreed that there was a strong Quaker ethos running through the work. ‘As Quakers they think of peace work and peacebuilding as very important. They see the trauma counselling as very important because they see you can’t talk peace to someone when their head is full of hate’, said Hazel. ‘The other thing that marks them out is that they won’t work just with Quakers. They work with the whole community, whoever they are.’

Oliver Robertson

Martin and Hazel are happy to share more of their experiences with Friends. Contact them by email: hazel@shellens.wanadoo.co.uk or martin@ica-uk.org.uk Photos can be viewed at www.flickr.com/photos/24338406@N05/

Quaker Life network launched

Quaker Life is changing how it involves Friends around the country, moving from a committee-based structure to a more flexible series of networks.

The networks, launched this weekend, will allow Quakers to volunteer their services and commit as much or as little time as they wish, rather than have to go through a formal nominations process. There will initially be four network ‘nodes’: pastoral care, children and young people, Meeting house staff and outreach; these will later be joined by one on diversity and equality.

See pages 10-11.