



Congolese Quaker partnership

Hannah Morrow describes this Africa-Britain joint venture

When Martin Gilbraith and Hazel Shellens visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo almost a year ago, they had little idea how the link between their two Area Meetings and Evangelical Quakers there would develop. A Congolese Quaker, Mkocho Boseka, had first asked British Quakers for help during a UK visit in August 2007 and they had responded with small amounts of money for a peace centre. Now was the time to visit and see things at first-hand.

Our Congolese Friends live in South Kivu, just south of the recent fierce fighting around Goma in North Kivu. There are no direct flights to South Kivu: instead you fly to Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, queue for a time at the border crossing, then drive alongside Lake Tanganyika to the regional capital Uvira, where the peace centre has been established. Abeka, where several more Quaker projects are based, is another twenty-five miles south along the lakeside on dirt roads.

This area was subsumed by civil war in the late 1990s. Many people fled. Seven hundred women and children were massacred in 1998 in the village of Makabola. Elsewhere individuals were raped and killed; houses were looted and destroyed.

Now this is a relatively densely populated rural area, highly impoverished, where all levels of government and utilities remain lacking. The desperate need for outside development assistance is everywhere apparent. Local Quakers are buzzing with ideas for

potential projects and, in the past twelve months, have prioritised three: the thirty-two-bed hospital, a Trauma Centre Peace Garden and a loan scheme to help women launch small businesses.

The work of the hospital is focused on midwifery for women with complications in pregnancy, plus general surgery and health care. There is no electricity – there are higher priorities. The money they are requesting will fund minimal, low-paid staffing, medicines and equipment. The Trauma Centre Peace Garden is still under construction, but when built it will initially train ten counsellors to work with 120 adults in different villages annually, while supporting twenty-five traumatised children to stay in school. The loan scheme will offer £35 loans to ten women every six months.

After twelve months of email contact, the aims and objectives of each of the three projects are now outlined in a three-year Quaker Congo Partnership Agreement. This has just been finalised by Quakers in Cambridgeshire and Manchester & Warrington Area Meetings and the Community of Evangelical Churches of Friends in Congo (CEEACO). The aim is to demonstrate in a practical way our mutual support for each other as Quakers and to put our shared Quaker faith into action.

The first tranche of agreed funding from British and other

Friends has just been forwarded and others should follow at six-monthly intervals, up to a total of £27,000 over three years.

Several people have provided vital expertise in drawing up the partnership agreement. Martin Gilbraith from Manchester & Warrington AM holds a master's degree in development administration and management and has worked on the ground in development in India and Egypt. He and Hazel Shellens of Cambridgeshire AM, who has undertaken development work in Africa and elsewhere, travelled to Nairobi to meet Bridget Butt, a development consultant with development group Change Agents for Peace International, which is supported by Norwegian Quakers. Bridget works with other projects in eastern Congo and has been contracted to monitor progress on our behalf. Our shared intent is to support CEEACO to develop its own capacity and to sustain itself and its programmes effectively beyond 2011.

The many-faceted partnership embodies much of the 'working together' ethos of the framework for action. It also illustrates how Friends can work creatively together across continents to support Quakers who are spiritually rich but economically impoverished and, in the process, learn much from one another.

See www.quakercongo.org.uk the website of the Quaker Congo Partnership for more information.

Harvesting palm nuts. Photo: Quaker Congo Partnership.