

Among Friends

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Dear Friends,

Greetings from a very wintry Cambridge. It is tempting to feel gloomy, in the depth of winter, with news of economic recession, of demonstrations on the streets of many countries in Europe, which sometimes descend into violence. We are still reeling from the shocking events in Gaza. Our Friends in Quaker Service Norway have given us news of the Palestinian Early Childhood Education Programme they support, which runs 13 kindergartens in Gaza for 1,700 five-years olds. We learned that one kindergarten, in Beith Hanoun was destroyed, and one in Jabalia was damaged. Work has started to prepare a comprehensive report about the effect of the war on the children, their families and homes. We know that some children have lost close family members, and that they all have been affected in some way or other, not least psychologically. Also some of children homes are completely destroyed while other partially demolished. Thankfully all kindergarten personnel are safe.

Throughout this time Friends have kept in touch with each other, sharing information and feelings. One of the people I corresponded most frequently with was Linda Whittaker, an American scientist who has lived and worked in Israel for a long time. She writes about the kind of peacework that sometimes happens in unexpected places, of small bridges built away from the glare of publicity. In such small steps hope can be found.

During my recent visit to Friends in Brummana Monthly

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*Peace Tree in Gori - built out of shells from the recent war
(photo by Micahel Eccles)*

Meeting in Lebanon I visited the Shatila Palestinian refugee camp, which saw one of the massacres of the Lebanese civil war. It was profoundly sad to see the conditions people are living in, 61 years after fleeing to the country, with no civic rights and severe restrictions on their work opportunities. The children make Palestinian flags and draw pictures of their homelands. Refugees are also facing the winter in difficult conditions in Georgia. Michael Eccles writes in this issue about his and fellow visitor Marjory Farquharson's experience of the visit. Michael sent a picture of a "Tree of Life", which he saw in Gori, one of the Georgian towns affected by the fighting. The tree is made of shells, the debris of the recent war. A shaft of Light to penetrate the sea of darkness – a witness to survival, creativity, and the strength of the Spirit.

Marisa Johnson, Executive Secretary

News from Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

Criminal Justice Work

QCEA has been working (alongside and together with QUNO Geneva and QPSW (Britain YM)) for some years on issues relating to criminal justice and more specifically on women in prison. In November, Liz Scurfield, Representative at QCEA, travelled to Kiev where she had been invited to present some of our findings on the situation of women prisoners from a perspective of health and health care at a conference of the World Health Organisation – Europe.

A picture of Liz and Nick McGeorge, a former Representative at QCEA and currently one of the FWCC Representatives to the UN Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, enjoying the sunshine outside St. Vladimir's Cathedral in Kiev before the start of the conference.

The fact that the WHO – Europe had arranged a conference on this subject – a main focus for their work in 2008 – was at least in part due to the work done by Nick, QUNO, QCEA and others in bringing this issue to the political agenda over the last 5 years.

QCEA Conference 2008: Not privation but appropriate living

Just over 100 Friends and Attenders gathered in Brussels over the St. Nicklaus weekend (5 to 7 December 2008) to reflect on the interconnected issues of energy security, climate change and conflict. Most of the conference took place in workshops with some of them using art and music as a vehicle to explore these issues at a deep level.

The conference concluded with a Statement of Hope and Call for Action:

This conference calls upon Yearly Meetings across Europe and the world, and the wider Quaker Community, to develop well-thought through visions of ways of living that are:

- Rooted in our testimonies;
- Sustainable;
- Supportive of community and well-being;
- Close to the earth and supportive of its capacity for renewal;
- That we can act out ourselves, project to others and use to develop partnership with others.



Conference participants working with clay

The work on these issues is a major focus for QCEA; a Project Advisory Group to guide the project has been formed and will have its first meeting in March 2009. We will be starting to publish fact sheets on some of the dilemmas we all face in making decisions about sustainable living. We hope to have some concrete advocacy messages that can be taken up with politicians and other decision-makers in the near future.

Three New Programme Assistants

In early January, we were joined by three new Programme Assistants: Anya Whiteside, Faye Morten, and Steve Hynd. They will be working on a range of projects including Alternatives to Custody (Faye), the European Parliament elections and QCEA's advocacy messages (Anya), and supporting the work on Sustainable Energy Security (Steve).



New publications forthcoming

Sara Erlandsson, Programme Assistant during 2008, completed a report on 'Mainstreaming Conflict Prevention - A Study of EU Development Cooperation with ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) Countries'; this is the second study in this series and focuses on budget support and infrastructure development and their linkages with conflict. This will go to the printers in January and be available shortly thereafter.

Calum Shaw, Programme Assistant during 2008, completed his report on 'The EU and the Western

Balkans - Grassroots Peacebuilding and Enlargement'; this report, which will also be published in early 2009, comes just in time for a seminar on 'Dealing with the Future' arranged by peacebuilders in the Western Balkans and QPSW to which QCEA will contribute.

Both reports have a long list of recommendations to the EU and its Institutions to improve the work that is being done in both these areas; both recognise the importance of the work the EU is doing and highlight how much more could be done more effectively.

QVA in Europe

Jasmine Piercy writes about plans for the coming year.

After a busy year facilitating events mainly in Britain, I was delighted to attend the EMES Peace and Service Consultation for a glorious autumnal Brussels weekend. This body brings together representatives from Quaker organisations across Europe and several worthwhile connections were forged leading to QVA Working Retreats being proposed and planned across Europe for 2009 and beyond.

This growing international aspect of our work echoes back to QVA's evolution from the workcamp movement QISP, whilst responding to tomorrow's call to put our faith into action in the global arena. Our theme for the 2009 Working Retreats is peace. On the programme we have two specific 'encounter' events, one Palestinian-Israeli, the other Yoga. Through learning and listening, loving and laughing together we can break down barriers and nurture trust and understanding.

We have already begun to see European Friends demonstrating a real enthusiasm for QVA Working Retreats and hope that others will also be inspired to get involved. The potential benefits and opportunities that such an event can bring to often isolated or dispersed Quaker communities and individuals can be hugely valuable.

QVA Working Retreats combine meaningful practical projects with time for spiritual engagement and reflection. They are open to people of all ages and abilities and are extremely reasonably priced.



Planting trees at Swarthmoor

For further details or to book a place for one of the 2009 events contact:

Quaker Voluntary Action

Email: jasmine@qva.org.uk

Tel: 00 44 (0) 7910 434941

QVA Programme 2009

Taunton, Somerset UK

Feb 27 – March 1

Interior decorating

Swarthmoor, Cumbria UK

March 22 – 27

Outdoor tasks

Laren, Holland

April 27 – May 4

Gardening & light carpentry

Sale, Cheshire UK

June 12 – 15

Outdoor work improving a unique burial ground

First Middle Eastern Biodiversity Congress (MEBC)

Linda Whittaker, a US citizen living and working in Jerusalem, writes about a scientific event in Aqaba, Jordan 20-23 October 2008 with significance beyond its stated purpose.

Nothing like this had ever been done before, as far as we knew. About 300 biologists from different Middle Eastern countries (many officially still at war with us) and about 50 Israeli biologists gathered together in Aqaba for a scientific congress organized by the Senckenberg Research Institute and Natural History Museum in Germany. Until this point, for several years, the Senckenberg had focused on Arab countries and Iran in a Middle Eastern Biodiversity Research, Training, and Conservation Network. Now they invited Israelis as well.

I sometimes wonder if the Germans knew they were breaking new ground when they opened this conference to Israelis. Most of us never had the chance to sit with our colleagues from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Yemen and other regional states except for international conferences held outside our region, where both they and we were just a handful. In this conference, most of us were people of the Middle East. It was a “normal” regional conference, which was exactly what was so weird about it.

The anxiety turned out to be needless. The Jordanians, gracious hosts as always, treated us all equally. We ate together, shared the same hotels, strolled the streets of this seaside town, exchanged business cards, talked over each other's lectures and poster presentations. The only oddity was that our name tags did not have our countries printed on them. This was brilliant; it gave us a chance to know each other before the reflexes kicked in. We made friends with each other, gravitating to others in our specialties and finding common interests and professional concerns.

The focus was on biodiversity, not regional politics. The vegetation people got together; the fish people went collecting down at the harbor together, birders got up at dawn and went looking for birds together.



Linda (sitting by the tree on right) with fellow biologists in Aqaba

As a conservation biologist concerned with wetland restoration, I quickly hooked up with a gallant band of Iraqi conservationists reflooding the marshlands around Basra.

It was a normal conference and we were excited about it. Would anything come out of it beyond this one meeting? Well of course, there were the exchanged email addresses. Even if we couldn't visit each other, we could write, exchange reprints. One decision reached before the end of this conference is that we all wanted to meet again, perhaps in Turkey (one of the few other countries in the area that could host us all). There would be publications of the papers submitted to the conference. And then, who knows?

The Middle East is one of the most species-rich areas in the world, a heterogenous landscape with strong rainfall gradients, and the only place on earth where three continents meet, with flora and fauna from all of them. It experienced the longest human impact of any place on earth. It is mostly an arid zone, facing severe threats to biodiversity as a result of rising human populations, urbanization, declining water resources and global climatic change. These are all regional concerns. It is logical that we pool our considerable ability to solving them. Our common concerns were obvious to us. Now our governments have to catch up.

Tulkarem

Anna Seifert of Surrey and Hampshire Area Meeting writes about her experience of being an Ecumenical Accompanier in the West Bank during the attack on Gaza.

‘Let us plant dates even though those who plant them may never eat them....’ these words are the beginning of one of the mediations on ‘Peacemaking’ which ease me into the day. I have returned a second time as an Ecumenical Accompanier to serve on the World Council of Churches EAPPI programme in Palestine and Israel. Our team of four is based in Tulkarem, a regional town northwest of Nablus and close to the border with Israel. Our weekly activities include protection by presence and accompaniment at checkpoints and agricultural gates, in villages close to settlements, during English conversations with women in a refuge camp and at weekly vigils with families of political prisoners.

‘In every home there is a story about the occupation’ was the comment a neighbour made when she recalled the incursion by an Israeli soldier into the family home. I met with Beesan in the town’s Education department where she holds a responsible position. One of her childhood memories dates from 1967 when the Israeli army arrived in her area and demanded that people leave their homes and town. Beesan’s mother pleaded with a soldier to allow them to stay pointing to her two young children who were sound asleep. ‘If not’, Beesan added ‘we would today be in a refugee camp in Jordan’.

Twice a week we go to an agricultural gate which farmers have to use to go and work on their land. That is ordinary enough, what is different is that to reach their land, farmers have to wait until soldiers open the gate in the morning for an hour, then give permission to approach a second gate and for the farmer to walk through a turnstile and show his ID, e.g. identity card and permission to pass a specific gate. Each farmer knows he then has to take off his jacket and belt before entering the cabin equipped with metal detectors then come out to collect his ID and at times his tractor or donkey. This procedure is lengthy, unpredictable,

humiliating and unjust. At the gates we monitor opening times and human rights abuses, our logs and reports go to the ICRC and a UN agency.

Palestinian students face checkpoints between their home and university: waiting times can be long and arbitrary, they may also have to submit to temporary and administrative detention, checkpoint closures and harassment from the soldiers. Last month students from Bethlehem, Nablus and Biszeit-Ramallah universities gave a presentation at Friends International Centre Ramallah on their joint campaign for the ‘Right to Education’ to highlight regular human rights abuses at checkpoints. Recently Beit Iba checkpoint was closed for over an hour with long queues and delays for students on their way home. We learned from Machsom Watch Women (MWW, an Israeli NGO which monitors checkpoints and assists Palestinians in case of problems) that the reason for the closure were a group of settlers who that afternoon had planned to throw stones and rocks at passing minibuses used by students and workers. The army was called to intervene and stop the settlers from attacking Palestinians, the backlash resulted in checkpoint closure. Yes, the army had intervened and protected the students from an attack by settlers, MWW were not too impressed and commented that the army treated the settlers with ‘kid gloves’.

Our three months period is coming to a close, I will be sad to say good bye to the people whose hospitality I have cherished and whose dignity I value and respect. Leaving now is especially hard when our friends and neighbours mourn the many people killed and injured in Gaza and ask us when the UK and the world community will impose a halt to the fighting. Last week I met with Joyce Aljouny at Friends School Ramallah, the day before she had been to the Junior School and was touched to see the drawing of a 6 year old boy whose picture showed a person close to drowning in blood adding ‘our children are preoccupied by Gaza’. People here ask how much longer they have to wait for peace, for peace based on justice and equality and on international law.

Visiting Friends in the Baltic Region

Julia Ryberg, *EMES Ministry and Outreach*

Co-ordinator, reflects on a visit to Friends in Countries around the Baltic which she undertook with Marisa Johnson at the end of last summer.

In late August/early September Marisa and I travelled together by ferry from Sweden to Finland. We set off very early in the morning, on a beautiful summer day. The sea was calm and we sailed gently along the coast and across the sea, till we landed in Turku, where we visited Friends there for a couple of days, and then went on to Helsinki by train. From there another ferry took us to Tallin in Estonia, where we found hospitality with Steve and Myra Ford, and met Anna-Lena Vierumäki. From Tallin we visited Friends in three cities in Latvia – Liepaja, Riga and Daugavpils. The last stop was Kaunas in Lithuania, where we stayed with Aušrina Aleknaviciute. Aušrina spoke Russian and Esperanto as well as Lithuania. Between us we have English, Swedish, Italian and German, yet communication was possible – and not only in the silent Meetings for Worship! What follows are some reflections on travelling in the ministry.

My father, an anthropologist and travel-study tour organiser, once told me that people often have deeply spiritual experiences when travelling—regardless of whether they are pilgrims with clear intention toward God or whether they are simply on holiday. There is something about being vulnerable, about being a guest in other cultures, about being away from the familiar



Turku group

and open to new ways of doing things, new sounds and new sights. Sunday the 7th of July 2008 found Marisa and me in Riga, worshipping with Agita Zake and a few attenders in a small flat where a friend of Agita's has her cosmetology business. We had been on the road a week, being welcomed and hosted by Friends in Finland, Estonia and Latvia. During worship, I remembered reading about the many women travelling ministers who travelled westward, under concern and with deep-felt calling, to the American colonies from Britain during the 18th century. I reflected on how Marisa and I might be connected to these women, many of whom are not remembered in history. More than two centuries separate us, as well as the direction of our travel. We had travelled eastward to visit Friends groups and isolated Friends. We felt quite sure that we would return home safely, compared to the travelers in colonial times, who often left their families not knowing if they would ever return—dangers of sea and land travel were more acute than they are today. We were in daily contact via e-mail and Skype with our families, could keep up other aspects of our work and be in contact with our hosts at the next stop. Our travels covered nearly two weeks compared to the months—and perhaps even years—that our sisters were away from home. Our travels did not include long hours on horseback or on foot.

Despite the great differences, I felt a connection with these early Friends, who travelled to support, nurture,



Kaunas group



Liepaja group

teach and learn. They embodied a Quaker presence and carried a Quaker message. They went prepared to learn about what it is to be a Friend in other places. They went prepared to be cared for in various ways by their hosts. They went to worship together and share experiences of Spirit, to learn how it is to be a faithful Friend in other parts of the world. They were open to the opportunities of Spirit that present themselves when travelling—as I was. It happened, namely, that Friend Agita offered me a Reiki healing session after worship. I was weary and heavy-laden after the recent death of dear Friend Marika Johansson. Agita's hands sensed that pain, and she suggested that I invite into our session anyone I wanted. I opened myself to the memory of Marika, who also had healing hands. It was both an enlightening and healing session for me. What I did not know was that my dear Friend Pia

Hellrup had died that day, unexpectedly, while visiting her son in China. A few hours later, while on the train to Daugavpils and the home of Elena Belajeva, my husband called my cell phone with the shocking news. What a blessing and comfort it was to find that Pia had been known by the Friends in Daugavpils—and indeed in Kaunas, the final destination of our travels! We were able to include Pia in our worship in these places. I felt deeply thankful for the connectedness that modern transportation and technology—despite many of its limitations—makes possible among Friends, but also thankful for the invisible threads of Spirit that connect us. I am also thankful for the precious experience of being welcomed, hosted and cared for while also serving others.



Helsinki group

EMEYF Spring Gathering
10 – 17 April 2009
Damascus, Syria

How has your faith been formed and informed by the faith of others?

How do your beliefs interact with 'the other'?

An exciting program for young Friends (18 years and up) has been designed to strike a balance between: experiencing and learning about the socio-political, cultural and religious history of the area; and attending to our spiritual growth.

More information and applications available at:
www.emeyf.quaker.eu.org

Notes from a visit to India

Marit Kromberg, Clerk of EMES, writes:

In the years between Plenary Sessions of the FWCC, the Central Executive Committee (CEC) will continue to meet annually, and to meet alongside sessions in the various Sections to share their experiences of current concerns and opportunities, and to share in worship and celebration of the many different expressions of Quaker spirituality today. In November last year the CEC met in Bhopal in India to join the Asia West Pacific Section for their 2008 Gathering. Immediately following the Section Gathering, the CEC meeting, a Young Friends Event and a Junior Young Friends Event also took place in the same venue.

The venue was the Pastoral Centre in Bhopal which is part of a large complex belonging to the Catholic Church, with Primary and Secondary schools as well as a Theological Seminary and the Pastoral Centre where our meetings were held. Both the Clerk and the Secretary of each Section are ex officio members of the CEC. Unfortunately Marisa Johnson was unable to travel in November, and I travelled alone from EMES.

The most impressive aspect of landing in New Delhi was the dense smog which burned our eyes and throats. Indian newspapers carried articles about this phenomenon which has become an ever more impressive feature over northern India in winter months in recent years. As the sun came up and did her work, visibility improved. There was a smell as of the smoke from millions of small open fires, and maybe that is what it was, considering that people often have to light fires to get warm and have their morning tea.

Bhopal lies much further south, and the air was clearer there, but many people still struggled with coughs. The train to Bhopal had a large group of Friends on board. The train ride was extremely comfortable and with plenty of very good food.

On arrival in Bhopal, we were met by a welcoming committee from Bhopal YM. Bhopal YM were the technical hosts of these gatherings. Visitors came from an impressive number of Asian countries as well as from Africa, the Americas and Europe. One day we went on an excursion to Sanchi, a Buddhist cultural heritage centre with stupas and monastic ruins

originating three centuries BCE. Over the centuries, and before the Indian state placed the Sanchi complex under protection, the ruins and the art work have been attacked from both Hinduism and Islam.

The social programme impressed us with a lot of folk dancing and music from a variety of Indian traditions performed by young people from Indian Quaker schools. We heard guest speakers who spoke convincingly about fellowship and solidarity between people of different faiths and cultures, and we heard P.V. Rajagopol, of Ekta Parishad, a nonviolent protest group, told us of the 340 km march by 25,000 landless people to Delhi to protest against unfair land distribution. Still, there are serious religious tensions in India between Christians, Hindus and Moslems and attacks on Christians are a reality. We were warned not to go into town in large groups of "foreigners", but preferably in smaller groups and in the company of local Friends. Our time in India coincided with the elections in the USA, and many participants expressed hope and joy when it was known that Barrach Obama will be the next president of the USA, hoping that he will reverse the fierce anti-Americanism in their countries and that this may make it easier for Christians to be accepted in their local communities.

Our meetings for worship during the week were held according to several traditions and in several languages. We tried to arrange opportunities for all participants to have a flavour of all traditions, from the quiet, unprogrammed to the more charismatic meetings with enthusiastic singing and long sermons.

The theme of the Gathering was Gathering in clear light and fresh hope and this was explored in depth in Home groups and Interest groups as well as running as a thread through all business sessions.

A good deal of the time of the business sessions dealt with reports from member Meetings, applications for affiliation from the Philippines Evangelical Friends Church and Mahoba True Friends (India) as well as the interest expressed from Nepal Friends Church, Friends Church of Indonesia, and Friends Quakers Marble Rock Society. The Section sees the need for learning materials in several local languages, and is very interested in the EMES Ministry and Outreach project.

A main item under consideration was to explore how Friends the world over may cooperate to influence the effects of Global Change. Environmental concerns are no theoretical issue for the AWP Section. Many island states in the Western Pacific Ocean have experienced increasing sea levels and more extreme tidal conditions. Large areas of Australia are hard hit by drought. The ground water level is falling, and when it rains, the rain creates destruction rather than relief. The minutes

on Global Change and on Call for Action on Global Change encourages action at every level of Friends, and asks the FWCC to consider holding a Consultation. The Central Executive Committee set up a Strategic Planning Group to work on how all Friends can join this important work. The CEC was very clear that any response must come from a place of love, not fear or anxiety.

Finland All-age Yearly Meeting 2008

By Jane Rose, Member of Finland Yearly Meeting

In June this year rather than trying to manage a separate Children's program, Friends in Finland experimented with including the children of the Meeting in all the activities of the Yearly Meeting.

The motivation for this change arose from the two seeds. The first being the challenging and often frustrating task of trying to arrange a program for a few children in a small YM, while at the same time trying to free the parents to participate in the sessions. The second seed was the experience in 2007 of a particularly tender introduction to our YM in which almost by chance all of our YM worshipping community participated.

This led to the idea that with due thought it may be possible to have all-age sessions for most of the YM, and therefore come to an experience of inclusion and whole community, and at the same time solve the challenge of 'what to do with the children and young people'.

Meeting our needs

As a YM we decided to go forward with this experiment, and to this end we invited John and Diana Lampen to help us learn how this may be done. We were a little nervous as we had no idea how many young people would want to come, and how we adults would respond to having young people at every session (except the two business meetings).

The theme for the gathering was 'Deepening the spiritual life of our meetings'. The sessions we had together were: introductions and activities for getting to know each other, living the testimonies, discernment and deepening our worship. We also met for worship together each day at least once. John and Diana were

kindly available to spend time with the young people during the business sessions. We also had quite a lot of flexible unprogrammed time for Friends to fill with their own activities such as sauna, music, discussion, walks etc.

Although the main sessions may not at first glance have seemed directly 'young people accessible', the way they were implemented meant everyone could participate. As a small example, in the session on deepening our worship one of the things we did was to draw a representation of 'me and my meeting'.

Response

We learned that it is possible to include young people in our adult Friend program and that this experience can be giving to all of us. Many of us felt really enriched by the presence of two lovely young people in a way that would have been very different had they 'disappeared' into their own program. They did not reject what we were doing as 'boring' and one of them actively asked to join our sessions and was curious to see what would happen in them. This is the beginning of our learning how to become a whole community, and our experience this year will certainly deeply affect how we go about planning future yearly meeting gatherings.

We recognise that what we did may not have suited the young people who didn't come this time, and another format may have to be considered when younger children are expected, but we are certainly thinking positively about continuing this experiment in future years.

For a fuller report, please contact Jane at:
jane.rose139@gmail.com

News from Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre

*An update from **Julia Ryberg** on the Quaker in Europe on-line project, which is jointly sponsored by Woodbrooke and EMES...*

The 10-week course called *Introduction to the Quaker Way* will soon be running in various languages. The course is now available in Czech and Norwegian and will be run in those languages as soon as there is a group of participants ready to go. Finishing touches are being done on translations in other languages, and the course will then be created in these within the next weeks and months. Those Friends who will be facilitating the course are undertaking a two-week on-line facilitation training. If you are interested in getting involved in the project, or if you know others (Friends or attenders) who might, please contact Julia Ryberg at julia.ryberg@woodbrooke.org.uk.

Equipping for Ministry is a two-year course for anyone who longs for a deeper experience and understanding of what it means to be a Quaker and for support in witnessing as a Friend in their everyday life. The course includes courses at Woodbrooke and personal projects of your own choice which you can do at home. The next induction weekend is in January 2010. You also attend a week-long residential in each year, and a range of other courses from our programme. A personal tutor accompanies you throughout, through face-to-face meetings, e-mail and phone. Friends from Germany and Russia have recently completed the course and Woodbrooke hopes to welcome more European Friends in 2010. For more information, contact Judith Jenner at judith.jenner@woodbrooke.org.uk

Wherever you are in Europe we want to work with you!

Whether you're on the West coast of Ireland or the far eastern side of Russia, as far south as Syria and all the way North to Finland, Woodbrooke-on-the-Road has something to support you and your meeting or worshipping group. Over the last few years, funded by the Catchpool trust, Woodbrooke has been able to offer events for regional gatherings, Yearly Meetings, and smaller worshipping groups around continental Europe and Ireland. What does your group need in

2009/2010? We can work with those holding roles; we can work with the whole group on themes relating to Quaker faith such as worship or sustainable, peaceful living; we can help the group envision and plan for its future development. All of our Woodbrooke tutors are experienced facilitators and will work with you to design an event that meets your needs locally. For more information and details contact Lizz Roe, Off-site coordinator at Woodbrooke lizz.roe@woodbrooke.org.uk

This summer, Woodbrooke is running a range of courses encouraging Friends to get creative.

Upcoming courses that may interest Friends from around Europe include *Spinning Yarns: a summer craft week* (22 – 26 June), *Back to Basics: drawing and painting* (10 – 12 July), and *The Word, the Image and the Space Between: experiments in creativity* (17 – 20 August). Please visit our website for more details.

Stay with Friends when you come to the UK

Did you know that you can visit Woodbrooke as a residential guest without attending a course? Bed & breakfast, half board and full board are offered. Use the Centre as a base for a visit to the Midlands, or as a tranquil space in which to take time out for a personal retreat. Woodbrooke is easily accessed by air, road and rail. Please visit www.woodbrooke.org.uk for more information on staying with us.

Looking ahead:

- 17 Friends from 10 countries will attend the European Clerks Gathering 12-15 February. Look for a report in the next issue of *Among Friends!*

- Thinking of attending a course this year? Woodbrooke's 2009 course brochure is now available and can be requested by calling +44 (0)121 472 5171 or visiting www.woodbrooke.org.uk

Contact Julia Ryberg, European Project Co-ordinator, for information on the Catchpool Fund at julia.ryberg@woodbrooke.org.uk or +46 (0) 175-715 30. See www.woodbrooke.org.uk for general information and to request a course brochure.

5 Days with Georgian Friends

Michael Eccles of Britain Yearly Meetings writes about a visit to Georgia

As part of EMES's Visiting Friends programme Marjorie Farquharson of Central Edinburgh meeting, and Michael Eccles from Cotteridge meeting in Birmingham recently visited Friends in Tbilisi. It was a real privilege to be asked to travel in this way, as a pair, in the way that Friends did in the early days.

We hadn't met before, although we're both from Britain Yearly Meeting, so spent much of the flight from London to Tbilisi getting to know each other and thinking about what we might be doing for the next 5 days.

Misha Elizbarashvili, the clerk of Tbilisi Worship Group, met us at the airport in the early hours of Orthodox Christmas Day, the 7th January 2009. We went straight to our hotel to catch up on some much needed sleep. Later in the day we met Misha and visited Mtskheta, the old capital of Georgia, and the site of a beautiful old Georgian Orthodox Church sat in a valley surrounded in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains. This gave us a chance to get to know Misha better and to discuss the plans for our visit. That evening we went for a tasty dinner at the home of two Attenders.

Tbilisi Friends have recently registered an organisation called *Friends House Georgia* (FHG). The registration was started last year and it was timely that approval from the authorities came through just as the violence between Georgia and the Russian Federation flared up. This meant they could legally receive money, and open bank accounts, in order to distribute humanitarian aid to people who had fled the conflict. Over the past few months Tbilisi Friends have worked hard in their spare time delivering food parcels and hygiene packs to hundreds, if not thousands, of refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Thankfully the violence is now over and a significant amount of repair and reconstruction has been done by the Georgian authorities; but there is much more that needs doing.

During the visit we went to several collective centres, mostly in Tbilisi but one was in Gori (Stalin's home town!) which we visited one day to distribute some

hygiene packs. I was very impressed at the way Misha managed the distribution – everything was logged with the centre co-ordinator and she had to sign to say exactly how many items she had received.

The centres are mostly located in schools and kindergartens and in one case a disused hospital wing with a collapsed ceiling. Whole families often have to live in one room and to share toilets with other families. In one centre we visited an old woman who had fled from South Ossetia. She told us that she had hidden in a garage when the Russian troops entered South Ossetia, but what was interesting was that she said that a Russian soldier had helped her get water and she – and others – commented that they felt the Ossetian troops treated them worse than the Russians. We visited another collective centre based in a kindergarten where the manager of the centre had done everything she could to make the refugees living there comfortable. She was appreciative of the support that FHG had given her.

It was a very brief visit but I welcomed the opportunity to get to know Tbilisi Friends. They are extremely grateful for the support that Friends internationally have given FHG since the war. They are developing into a grounded Worship Group and I felt just as at home in meeting for worship in Tbilisi as I do in my home meeting.



Tea and snacks after meeting in Misha's flat

Diary Dates 2009

We are short of space for full postal addresses and phone numbers. Please contact the EMES Office if you need this information.

6-8 March 2009: Grentztreffen CH-D-F, Im Schwarzwald, Lindenberg

Info: K. Mangels zeitschrift@quaeker.org

9-12 April 2009 EMES Annual Meeting, Moyallon, Co. Armagh, No. Ireland

10-17 April 2009: EMEYF Spring Gathering, Damascus. More information and applications available on www.emeyf.quaker.eu.org

18-26 April 2009 QCEA Study Tour information
<http://www.quaker.org/qcea/studytour/index.html>

22-24 May 2009: Netherlands Yearly Meeting, Information from secretariaat@dequakers.nl

29 May – 1 June 2009: Central European Gathering, Don Bosco House, Vienna Information from Jalka: jalka@konfliktkultur.at www.donboscohaus.at/

25-28 June 2009: Nordic Yearly Meeting. Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish Friends are holding their Yearly Meetings in the same place and at the same time at Nordiska Folkögskolan, Kungälv (near Gothenburg, Sweden). Contact: kveker@kveker.org
More dates for 2009 available on the website:

www.fwccemes.org

Please send items for inclusion in the diary to Marisa Johnson at emes@fwcc.quaker.org

Paint, write and reflect at Assisi in 2009

From Oct 8th to 15th 2009 there is an opportunity to join with Friends for a week's retreat at Assisi - organised by Pax Travel at a guesthouse in the old town of Assisi, and led by two members of the Quaker Retreat Group: Peter Varney and Frances Crampton.

The retreat offers time alone and apart from other concerns and responsibilities, & time with others to reflect & share discoveries during the week, with opportunities for one to one accompaniment on our different spiritual journeys. The week will include daily Meeting for Worship, times of meditation & guided visualisation, an introduction to Franciscan spirituality and visits to the places

important in the story of Francis. We end the day with a short epilogue and keep the Greater Silence until breakfast.

Local guides will lead a walking tour of Assisi and a tour of the Basilica, and we include an excursion to Lake Trasimeno, where Francis lived for a time.

Cost, including flights from UK, transfers and half-board: £719 (reduction if flights not needed); single room supplement £56 (limited availability). A Pax Travel Italian speaking tour escort will also accompany the group. For further information and a Pax Travel booking form please contact Peter Varney: 1 Thomas Wyatt Close, Norwich, NR2 2TB, UK or email: QuakerRetreats@waitrose.com

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