

Quiet Processes and Small Circles

By Anne-Marie Zilliacus

In 1937, just before the World Conference of Friends that established the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Rufus Jones wrote:

In regard to the World Conference, I sincerely hope for good results, but I have become a good deal disillusioned over 'big' conferences and large gatherings. I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place.

– *Quaker Faith and Practice 24.56*

It is these quiet processes and small circles that lie at the heart of the work that grew out of that World Conference, and in the years following the war, the Quaker United Nations Offices (QUNO) were begun in Geneva and New York. QUNO offices provide settings for informal, off-the-record meetings. Now, this same kind of Quaker work is happening in Canada. The Quaker International Affairs Program (QIAP) was formed after a seminar in Ottawa that brought Friends together to envision a way to join in the kind of work done by the QUNO offices, but on a national Canadian level. QIAP is a committee of the Canadian Friends Service Committee. It uses the QUNO facilitative, non-partisan methodology to bring information and various perspectives to decision-makers, along with opportunities for an off-the-record meeting place where they can come together to discuss difficult, controversial or sensitive issues.

Tasmin Rajotte, the Program Assistant for QIAP, has spent the last year building a network of key people in the Canadian Government, and the diplomatic and non-governmental organisations (NGO) communities. The issue Tasmin presently works on is Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), with the concern that higher levels of intellectual property rights (IPRs) protection in an increasingly global regime could adversely affect public interests in developing countries in agriculture, education, food, security, public health, technology transfer, and biodiversity management, among others.

This year Tasmin has managed to secure funding from

the Canadian International Development Agency and ensure that the work can go on full-time for the next two years. CIDA was very interested in the Quaker approach, which can broaden people's perspectives, influence policy positions and transform conflict into productive, equitable collaboration. The first off-the-record dialogue was held by QIAP in Ottawa in the spring of this year.

The Ottawa office has also commissioned a series of briefing papers to be published, the first of which, "*Regional and bilateral agreements and a TRIPS-plus world: the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)*," is available now. The paper is a useful tool for developing country negotiators in Geneva, as well as the government officials and NGOs that Tasmin works with here in Canada.

Before finding CFSC's ad for the job during a late-night job search on the web, Tasmin had known little of Quakers. After a night spent reading everything she could find about Quakers, she decided to apply for the position, thinking that even if she didn't get the job, she would try to do some volunteer work with Friends.

The first year has been intense — setting up the office, building relationships with NGOs, diplomats and government officials, travelling to Geneva to work with QUNO, and finding funding for the work. For Tasmin it has been both a learning experience and a spiritual opening. She often attends meeting for worship in Ottawa and has had those moments in which someone's ministry has spoken her very thought. "It's very moving," Tasmin finds, "to realise how connected we are at the spiritual level, how delicate the spirit is. It's a real art to focus on the spirit. The meeting for worship gives a grounding for the work, and for being in touch with the spirit in a newer and richer way than ever before." It is the same spirit, after all, that lies at the heart of "the quiet processes and small circles, in which vital and transforming events take place," and which makes the work, to which Tasmin has been drawn, possible. ✨

Anne-Marie Zilliacus is a member of Ottawa Monthly Meeting.