

Malesi Kinaro's Brief Auto-Biography

I am the 9th child in a family of 17. My mother, Zipporah Vunoro, and my father Joel Khamadi had 11 children--3 boys and 8 girls, but one girl died before I was born. When I was 11 years old, my mother died of throat cancer. Two years later my father married Yones Ingati who already had a son and together they had 6 children--2 girls and 4 boys. Joel Khamadi died in 1983 aged 90. I turned 57 in May.

My father and mother were among the first Quaker converts in Kenya. The whole village of Lugala was converted into Quakerism through their efforts. I therefore grew up in a Quaker village. This gives me very tender moments of community love and concern. When our mother died, we were adopted by the whole village and were given emotional support by the women of the village. As a village child you were everybody's concern and any village member could discipline you.

My Spiritual Journey

My father has had a very profound influence on me, having been the dominant figure in my awareness years. Our home was an open house that welcomed all people. It was a home where Christ was worshipped and trusted. The power and fear of witchcraft was still very prominent when I grew up, yet we grew up with no fear of the dark world since Baba so gently and confidently told us over and over that the power of Christ was greater than any other power in the world. When I think about God, I think of Baba who combined strict discipline and love. Baba formed my theology with his reverence, borne of a deep conviction in an alert and questioning mind. He believed that all children were a blessing whether girls or boys and so he strove to give us all a good education. Both Mama Vunoro and Baba put a fighting spirit in all of us children.

My secondary education was taken at Butere Girls High School, and the Highlands School, both Anglican Church sponsored schools. We used to have very powerful evangelical preachers who exposed me to a different type of Christianity. It looked to me to be an excluding type where if you were saved you were in and if not you had no place with them. This led me to a long spiritual search. While at the University of Nairobi I started attending the unprogrammed meeting of Friends at the Friends International Center. It had some very interesting people. I was here for all my 3 years at University and this group gave me a deep insight in a different type of worship. They too were Christo centric.

I found clarity in what I really believed in my 9th year as a high school teacher when I was made the youth leader of the Kakamega Friends Church. I felt strongly that to lead I had to have a conviction in what I believed in. I gave my life to the lordship of Jesus and made a deliberate effort to follow the guidance of Biblical teachings and the teaching of the Holy Spirit. I have got to understand what made Baba tick and I love it.

My Career and Marriage

I graduated with a BSC in Biology, Chemistry and Education in 1973 from the University of Nairobi and immediately got married to John Ongaga Kinaro with who I had been in love for 3 years. John is from the Seventh Day Adventist Church and through his family I have got to see yet another form of worship and doctrine. We are from two different tribes, another challenge in my life. The greatest challenge to me is the culture of the circumcision of girls among the Kisii. I was always puzzled when Ongaga would not allow me to go home during December holidays. I later got to realize that December is the circumcision month. I am grateful than John's parents understood our decision not to circumcise our daughters.

God had blessed Ongaga and I with five children--Riziki, Lina, Steve, Winnie and Khamadi and one grand child so far, Lisa.

John was the principal of two of the boys schools where we both taught. We began in Lugulu Girls High School then Musingu Boys High School, two very large Quaker schools and then Kakamega Boys high school where I ended my teaching career. I was the choir director, hockey and athletics coach and I loved teaching. We have proud to have taught many great leaders in Kenya whether in the academic, social or political arena. One of our students is a cabinet minister while many hold PhDs

After teaching for nearly 20 years I felt led to move on. I applied for the job of Executive Secretary of the Friends World Committee for Consultation (Africa Section) and was taken. I worked here for two and a half years and then came to start Uzima Foundation where I have worked from 1996 to date.

In 1996 I enrolled as a part time student at the Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST) where I graduated with an MA in Biblical Counseling in 2001.

My peace Making Journey

Some landmarks to my peace work stand above other and these I will briefly recount:

1. I had just finished university and was teaching in a Quaker school, Lugulu, when the great breakup in the Friends church in Kenya started. I was deeply pained by the acrimony and intensity of conflicts. My heart used to plead for understanding among the leaders. All efforts just seemed to fall on deaf ears.
2. Ongaga and I bought a farm in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya. In 1991 we experienced very serious ethnic cleansing in parts of Kenya. We lost our home and all we had worked for. For the first time in my life I knew hate in my intense pain as we were chased like dogs from a property we had worked so hard to get. Later I felt led to forgive and start peace efforts. We formed peace committees that helped to resettle many displaced people. We were able to bring together people from different conflicting tribes to start carrying out community projects together.

3. While at the FWCC there was an attempted coup in Burundi in which many people lost their lives. In my capacity as Executive Secretary, I made many journeys in and out of Burundi at a very dangerous time. Later I was to do the same during the Rwanda crisis. In both countries I went to comfort, to give relief aid and to help set up crisis or peace committees.
4. In 2003 the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) invited me to go to their Peace and Justice tours where I talked to many different audiences in many different states especially universities. I have also had the privilege to be on the planning committee of the Quaker Violent Conflict Prevention Network where we have planned two very successful international consultative meetings, one in Rwanda and one in Kenya.

Formation of Friends in Peace and Community Development (FPCD)

The conflict within the Friends church in Kenya had convinced me that it is not possible to solve an intense conflict from within. Experiences I had at the FWCC confirmed this conviction. When people are in the core of a conflict it is better to get somebody with an objective outlook to be involved. People hold evil in their hearts and enjoy maligning others for their selfish gains. To me it appeared as if this was fine tuned among some churches in Kenya. I saw the need for an organization that would seek to genuinely reach out to those in conflict, to those made vulnerable by conflict, the hurting, the traumatized in communities, churches and everywhere. Those who formed the FPCD were people who had been personally affected by the ethnic cleansing in Kenya. The core of the membership was Quakers but others from other churches who had been involved in relief work, peace building, etc. were included. This is why the name of the organization changed from the more exclusive Quakers in Peace and Community Development to the more general Friends in Peace and Community Development. As refugees flooded Nairobi from Rwanda and Burundi, they joined FPCD.

FPCD has been involved in training church leaders and other members in lay counseling and conflict resolution skills, evangelism and disciple building skills as well as project management. Currently FPCD is involved in organizing AVP workshops in the western part of Kenya.

Conclusion

I thank God that I have been enabled to touch the lives of many people even as they have touched mine. The Quaker family has come together to hold the hands of those hurting in a way that has touched me deeply. Quakers do not always recognize their potential. When they will do it, the impact will be even greater than it is now. The support of the QPS (Britain), AFSC and EFM (America) during the Rwanda and Burundi crisis of 1993-1994 had such a therapeutic impact that only those who were involved can appreciate its immensity. The on going support by the Central Mennonite Committee, the African Great Lakes Initiative, the American Friends Service Committee, Quaker Peace Service, Norway is helping to change the thinking of people at the grassroots level. We are

involved in the Popular Education that I believe will be the answer to reducing conflicts in Africa.

In my work at Uzima Foundation I have become even more convinced that targeting youths as change agents will have a much greater impact on the continent of Africa. This is why I get excited by movements like the AYINET, sponsored by the AFSC and the Generation 21, sponsored by the Youth for Christ movement.