

Quid Est QUNO?

What is Quaker United Nations Office?

BY PHILIPPA FLETCHER



Quakers are fond of abbreviations. So is the UN (United Nations). They have UNDP, UNESCO, UNCTAD, UNICEF, UNISFA, and many, many more. We are progressing well with FWCC, AWPS, WEST, YFs, JYFs, QUNC etc. QUNO (pronounced Q-No), the Quaker body which operates with the UN at the UN, overlaps both groups. Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) is our representative in Geneva and in New York providing us with a potent voice, an extraordinary opportunity, and a daunting responsibility.

We Friends stand on the shoulders of our brave and committed Quaker forebears. After being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 'for their pioneering work in the international peace movement and compassionate effort to relieve human suffering, thereby promoting the fraternity between nations', Quakers wanted representation at the United Nations for their global peace and justice concerns, and for the voices of local communities. In 1948, they received accreditation and have been there ever since. Friends today have the mandate to directly participate in the meetings and activities of the United Nations.

The New York office has close ties to Quakers in the Americas; the office in Geneva has close ties to us. We support them in their work on Human Impacts of Climate Change; Human Rights & Refugees; Peace & Disarmament, and Sustainable & Just Economic Systems. So, when Aotearoa NZ Quakers are talking about QUNO, we normally mean Geneva.

We have a strong relationship. Younger Friends from Aotearoa NZ take part in QUNO's internship programme; Human Impacts of Climate Change staffer Lindsey Fielder Cook frequently patiently explains just what is going on in those international global climate change negotiations to us when she should be having a New Year break; Kiwi Lucy Richardson is QUNO's new Human Rights & Refugees representative.



Philippa Fletcher presenting QUNO session at YM

We also have many reasons to support QUNO Geneva. Small states like ours depend on a multi-lateral environment which works. Those inter-state agreements which make that multi-lateral environment work depend on people, and how people work together or do not work together, depends on relationships between them. 'Making people comfortable enough to have uncomfortable conversations' is a crucial role for QUNO explains Laurel Townhead, Director of the Geneva office.

It is why Friends at QUNO Geneva provide a beautiful place where diplomats from around the world can eat together, try to understand one another's points of view, and engage with each other as human beings rather than merely spokespeople for the governments they represent. This is QUNO's mandate, its ministry, and a powerful manifestation of our Quaker testimony.

I suspect we are all growing increasingly dependent on their work. Power alliances are shifting and there is a void with the USA pulling away from the rules-based international order (<https://quakers.nz/community/presentation-lindsey-fielder-cook-quaker-united-nations-office>).

Lindsey Fielder Cook has said 'The gaps mean we are in a tender place. Around the world, the multilateral environment is under threat as the US, in particular, defunds and reduces its financial contribution to international bodies, and other countries (including Aotearoa NZ) pursue more self-interested agendas. She described a situation which includes increased military budgets, failures in multilateralism, reduced budgets for UN organisations, and the Security Council failing to maintain peace and security (and that was before either Venezuela or Iran).'

In case this sounds all too remote, our own government, while focusing more on increased militarisation and moving away from aid, still agrees that climate change is the number one security threat faced by the Pacific. At home, we have communities facing relocation brought on by repeated damaging weather. Tairāwhiti, Te Tai Tokerau, and the Bay of Plenty are some of the worst affected places and where, embarrassingly, Māori are over-represented while still managing to provide generous lifelines to others.

All the geopolitical change means more pressure on QUNO, and more stress at the international meetings where agreements can be made to move away from fossil fuel, where just solutions can be found, and where countries badly affected can make their voices heard about the problems they face.

Change can happen and is happening. As I write, around 60 nations are gathering in Colombia in the effort to phase out fossil fuels. QUNO will be there, as will Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and many others apart from Aotearoa NZ.

While the rest of us learn, first via covid, and now by geopolitical tensions, scary weather, and supply chain fears, we are all inter-dependent. QUNO sees the pain, disconnection, frustration, and fear up close. But they also see the results of what 'letting us try what love can do'.

For QUNO to be able to carry the best of Quaker faith and action to the wider world, and bring people together, they need us providing dependable support from their fellow Friends, their friends in Aotearoa NZ.

I pray we can both hold them in the Light, support them with care, and provide them with firmer regular financial support via their QPSANZ (Quaker Peace and Service Aotearoa New Zealand) grant, and via an annual appeal to Meetings and individual Friends. Thank you for any help anyone can provide.