Family Empowerment Ministries Kenya: Training Kenyans in Self-Sustainability and Spiritual Development

By Simon Thiongo, ESR M.Div. 2015
Family Empowerment Ministries Kenya

Kenya is a largely Christian country with many churches. While these churches strive to meet the spiritual needs of people, they often fail to seriously address the physical and survival needs of congregants and community members. In rural Kenya, where most of the country’s population lives, the poverty rate is close to a staggering fifty percent. With holistic empowerment lacking from the churches—material as well as spiritual—many people struggle to provide adequate nourishment for themselves and their families. When stomachs are empty, and opportunities to work for a livable wage are out of reach, the Gospel becomes irrelevant, and its transformative potential in the lives of men and women falls short. One crucial area that the churches routinely neglect to address is with finding ways to help the poor develop the skills that could assist them to escape dire poverty and be self-sustaining.

As a Kenyan pastor with firsthand experience of this dilemma, I felt led with my family to create a unique farming community, which addresses both the material and spiritual needs in my community. Our vision is to provide local men and women with hands-on training to develop new farming skills as we also share the Word of God in teaching, discipleship, and fellowship. In contrast to many Kenyan churches, we firmly believe that spiritual...
development and economic empowerment must go hand-in-hand, as people are nourished spiritually, psychologically, and physically. Thus, they will be better equipped not only to take care of their needs long term but to live lives of Godly service to their neighbors and communities.

It is unfortunate that churches have become so heavenly-minded that they offer no earthly good. Some pastors are opting to preach other topics and avoid addressing the issue of poverty. Some seem convinced that we are only here on earth temporarily since Jesus went to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-4). Since there will be many “mansions,” they did not see the need of addressing the human needs. George Kinoti, a Kenyan professor, is convinced that the Church has omitted a very crucial aspect: spiritual. It should be ministry which can touch them at their greatest point of need since “nothing opens people’s hearts more than a loving ministry to their physical and emotional needs” (O’Donovan, Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa, p. 63).

“Real ministry is the one which will not omit any aspect of one’s life.”

However, they are slowly embracing the idea especially when they realize that I went to school in America. They have never seen an American-educated man raising rabbits.

Lord willing we want to build a training center where we shall teach our self-sustaining community projects. Our plan is to keep more than a thousand rabbits both for local consumption but also for international market. We believe that we are called to holistic ministry. I will be one of the speakers at ESR Leadership Conference. So please join us and learn how we are using Rabbits to share the Gospel! I am indebted for what I learned in ESR. May God bless you and expand your territories!

“We (the Church) failed to apply the gospel to the whole of life, limiting it to spiritual life only.”

To fulfill the Great Commission, we started The Rabbit Project which is thriving so well. As I write, we have over 150 rabbits. Despite the cultural norm that rabbits are for young boys, we thank God for the high number that has shown interest. Since we started September 2016, we have trained over 70 people. We hope some of them will start keeping rabbits!

Why rabbits? Although we keep large rabbit breeds, it is easy to start since one can start with as little as two rabbits. A rabbit gives birth to an average of 8-13 bunnies, and therefore it is easy to have many rabbits within a short time.

It is unfortunate that Kenyans claim that there is unemployment. As an ambitious Kenyan, I refute the myth. Many Kenyans are lazy and have a wrong perception about work. Farming and rabbit keeping are not jobs according to many Kenyans. In fact, farming is perceived as an odd job which is meant for illiterate, old, or less fortunate people. Rabbit keeping is a new adventure in Kenya which has not been embraced by many people.

Rev. Fr. Simon Kingori Thiongo is a graduate of Moffat Bible College (Kenya), Dip. Th.; Kuyper College (USA) B.Sc.; Earlham School of Religion (USA) M.Div.; and is a D.Min. candidate at Asbury Theological Seminary.

Simon has served as a Deacon, Rector, adjunct lecturer, and HIV/AIDS facilitator in different forums. A passionate preacher and motivational speaker both in Kenya and the USA, he has spoken in many conferences as the keynote speaker and written many articles on various topics about life and discipline. He has also published his memoir An Amazing Journey of Survival, which has impacted many lives!

Simon and his wife, Julia, are blessed with two beautiful daughters, Mercy and Faith. Rev. Simon is the founder of Family Empowerment Ministries Kenya, which is registered (in USA) as a not-for profit organization.
When Way opens, it often comes as a surprise.

So it has been since my husband, Dan, and I have become ESR M.Div. students. Days after our arrival to Richmond, Indiana, I found myself called to serve in a local food security project and compete for the Earlham Prize, an ESR/Earlham College Social Entrepreneurship competition. Before I had time to unpack, Way had opened into the heart of ESR, Earlham College, and the small city around us.

The journey quickly became more complicated. Through a series of seemingly unrelated events, I found myself at a meeting of the Wayne County Food Council. Although I was there on behalf of Amigos, a Wayne County non-profit focused on Latino residents, the Food Council wanted to develop a larger food security system for the area. Out of these shared interests, our collaborative project called Know Hunger, Know More, was born. Local pastors, food banks, non-profits, neighbors, and students from ESR and Earlham College have joined the effort.

The need is deep. In our community, 12,000 people – nearly one-quarter of the population – are in danger of going hungry each day. Our venture intends to eradicate hunger by developing a system that connects different projects: composting, community gardens, healthy cooking instruction, and farmers markets.

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It’s complicated, but our starting place is simple: good food, gone bad.

Bad food takes up space, and food pantries can’t accept new donations of fresh food if there’s no place to put it. At the same time, pantries are reluctant just to throw food away and the cost of waste removal is expensive. We are solving that problem by providing a service to remove organic waste cheaply – and direct it to composting. It may seem like a small thing, but this service results in a 30% increase in fresh food for our neighbors. With each dollar saved in green waste removal the food banks can take that one dollar and turn it into $40 of food distributed to people. Eventually this project will scale up to operations across Indiana.

From this beginning, we’re working toward a more comprehensive and systemic solution. After completing the next step – getting a compost...
system up and running – we will develop local community gardens and programs to train people in cooking and preserving healthy food. We know there are already individuals across the county who want to become local food producers, to bring their food to market, and to use their work as an avenue for self-sufficiency. Helping them, we believe, would create more resilient communities nationwide.

While every week seems to present its own insurmountable problems, our meetings carry a keen awareness of positive energy, community spirit, and the near presence of God. Solutions emerge and become reality. Partners arrive just in time with the resources needed to take the next step.

All that is asked of us, we believe, is to take one more step – each day just one more step. The wellspring is always there for us. We simply need to seek the source.

Douglas Steere has said this;

“...It is in the principle that we have fellowship with the mystical body of Christ, here is the vine of which we are the branches. Here is the Spring which has no commencement giving itself to all the rivers, never exhausted by what they take. Here is the new order, the new community. Here is the center out of which comes the enduring concern for cutting away those barriers to equality which warp the lives of God’s loved ones, our brothers in the world. Here and not in some sociological or political doctrine is to be found the basis of any social reforms that Friends have ever undertaken. Here is a source of renewal in reverence for life and in fellowship with every man and every creature that never rests in one who yields to the principle. Here is a source that lets no natural barrier like tradition or custom or numbers or the supposed incorrigibility of human nature move it” (Steere, The Open Life).

This Source has harnessed my skills to a ministry that serves the community and births new ventures. It has also refined my sense of my own emerging ministry, which includes being a spiritual companion to those called to serve. In ESR courses and in support from our faculty and staff, I have found the Gospel order foundation for my social justice and organizational design work. Way opened wide. It was not what I expected, and my heart has been opened to the amazing fruits of the Spirit.
**SPIRITUALITY GATHERING OFFERED**

**LANGUAGE AND THE INWARD LANDSCAPE**

“For it has long seemed to me that too many of us, upon reaching some plateau in our spiritual lives, turn quickly to resources outside Quakerism — Julian of Norwich, Thich Nhat Hanh, Carl Jung, the Mages of Quantum Theory, or what have you, for nourishment,” began Brian Drayton during his first lecture of this year’s Spirituality Gathering. He went on to say that we “never take the time to see what there may be within Quakerism which might help, and in the use serve both to encourage fresh growth, and to enrich our experienced understanding of Quakerism as a spiritual path.”

This spring’s gathering was a mix of our annual Willson Lectures and Spirituality Gathering, which made for a slightly different schedule, including two keynote lectures and one workshop session for attendees. Our keynote speaker Brian Drayton, an author, recorded Quaker minister, and plant ecologist, shared his thoughts on **Words and Realities: Language and the Inward Landscape** through his lectures and workshop offering. He explored aspects of traditional Quaker spirituality through key words and phrases from Friends’ writings of the past, and considered how dialogue with traditional Quaker language helps us discover our own spiritual identity.

ESR students and alumni/ae offered opportunities to learn about a variety of topics in the workshop sessions including cultivating our relationship with the Light, spiritual assessment, sacred space, and exploring the landscape of our body through yoga. We had a wonderful group participate in the day and contribute to a great deal of inspired learning. Thanks to all who joined us!

**EARLHAM SCHOOL OF RELIGION**

**The Religious Society of Friends**

**REAFFIRMATION OF ESR’S ACCREDITATION: ITS STRENGTHS AND ITS AREAS FOR GROWTH AND IMPROVEMENT**

In 2016 ESR completed its accreditation self-study report and met with the review committee in the fall. In February 2017 the Board of Commissioners of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) reviewed the comprehensive evaluation report of the committee and reaffirmed ESR’s accreditation for the next ten years.

The Board encouraged ESR to “maintain and enhance” its commitment to institutional integrity, the collaborative relationships with Bethany and Earlham College, the “visionary, collegial, and entrepreneurial leadership of the Dean” and the academic leadership, and the “dedicated and hardworking staff.” Areas of growth were noted as the relationship with the College, institutional planning and evaluation with partners, and continuing to work on “the excellent progress that is being made in assessment.” The Board is requiring ESR to report in 2018 on a plan to “develop racial/ethnic diversity” in all areas of the institution and to make a follow-up report in 2019 giving evidence of the implementation of that plan.

We are delighted in the outcome of the accreditation review. We welcome your continuing support and your engagement with us in the work ahead.

The reports are available online: esr.earlham.edu/about-esr/accreditation
Lonnie Valentine will accompany ESR students again this year to the Conflict Resolution Education conference and the Friends Committee on National Legislation Spring Lobby day. As in the past, this year one of our students, Tom Decker, will present a workshop at the CRE conference. Tom has also been serving on the CRE conference planning committee, making good connections for us with students in other schools. Lonnie was asked to submit articles to the forthcoming *Opposition to War: An Encyclopedia of U. S. Peace and Anti-War Movements*. Several of these articles were about Quakers, such as Paul Comly French, Milton Mayer, and Willard Uphaus. Lonnie highly recommends finding Milton Mayer’s essays to read; they are timely and he writes so well.

Michael Birkel recently published an article entitled “Friendship, Time, and the Power of Memory in Augustine’s *Confessions* and in the Revived *Doctor Who*,” in the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (Volume 28, Number 2-3, Fall 2016, pp. 93-106) and a review of Brian Drayton and William Taber’s book, *A Language for the Inner Landscape*, in *Quaker Religious Thought* (#126, 2016, pp. 45-49). Last fall he was a guest at First Friends of Indianapolis and the Indiana Friends Committee on Legislation, where he offered a talk on interfaith dialogue. Michael presented a paper entitled “Quaker-Buddhist Blendings” for the Quaker Theological Discussion Group panel, “Hybridity and Multi-Religious Belonging among Quakers,” at the American Academy of Religion last November.

Jim Higginbotham was nominated to attend the Association for Theological Schools Roundtable Seminar for Mid-Career Faculty in Orlando, Florida in March, where there will be workshops on various aspects of seminary education and leadership. Jim will be co-leading a two-week cross-cultural trip to China with Wesley Theological Seminary (Washington, DC) in late May and early June. Five ESR students will be traveling with four students and a professor from Wesley to several cities in China, visiting churches, seminaries and cultural sites in order understand how the context of being a Christian in China affects theology and practice. Jim designed and led a workshop on the *Discernment and Care of an Activist* for his Indianapolis Disciples of Christ church. This workshop about knowing how to be sustainably prophetically active in this contentious political age is available through ESR’s Traveling Ministries.


In March 2017, Kim was the C.O. and Eliza Greene Endowed Lecturer on Pastoral Ministry at Gardner-Webb University School of Divinity. She gave 2 lectures based on her book, *Embracing the Other* (Eerdmans, 2015) and preached at their weekly chapel. She was also an invited preacher and lecturer at North Park University in Chicago.

In April, Kim participated on a panel at a conference, “Gathered in My Name” at DePaul University in Chicago. She was also the Plenary Speaker at the Academy of Parish Clergy, Detroit. She also spoke at the Presbyterian/Reformed House of Studies gathering at Duke Divinity School and participated in the Stake Holder’s Meeting at Duke.
Kim was a guest on the “Keep Hope Alive” radio show with Rev. Jesse Jackson speaking about Dr. King and the Women’s March. She attended the AAR Program Committee Meeting and an AAR Board of Director’s Meeting, both held in Atlanta. She also served as a Postdoctoral Cohort Leader at the Louisville Institute.

Grace Ji-Sun Kim was a Plenary Speaker at the Summer Institute at Duke Divinity School. She continues to write for the Huffington Post and wrote a new piece, “Green Reformation” for Sojourners’ Magazine. Most Sundays, Kim preaches and speaks at various churches in the Lehigh Valley and surrounding areas.

Director of Supervised Ministry Stephanie Crumley-Effinger has been traveling for site visits to this year’s Supervised Ministry interns near and far. She began in January in Minnesota with Jean Olson, who is writing poetry and collecting and editing poems she had previously written. Next on the agenda was visiting Travis Eting, in southwestern Colorado providing spiritual nurture and accompaniment at Durango Friends Meeting and supporting the Meeting’s ecumenical community engagement. Spring Break in late March provided the opportunity for a trinity of East Coast site visits, first was Amy Todd Kelly, in Princeton, NJ, who is assisting the chaplain of an organization supporting those affected by domestic violence. Then in upstate NY near Albany came a visit with Christie Walkuski, who is writing poetry as she accompanies and provides care for a family member in poor health. The third and final East Coast visit was with Jon Berry, who is sojourning with various religious groups in New York City, particularly a mosque, and writing and speaking about his experiences as a spiritual guest.

After returning to Indiana, the month of April finds Stephanie spending time with students closer to Richmond: Deb Geiger, who is assisting chaplains at Westville Correctional Facility, a men’s prison in northwestern Indiana; and Samantha Hasty-Zander, assisting the pastoral team at LifeJourney Church in Indianapolis with small group leadership and other forms of congregational ministry. With all of these diverse forms of ministry experiences, you can imagine how lively and engaging Stephanie and her class find their Tuesday night classes via Zoom (videoconference)!

Stephanie Crumley-Effinger

Stephen Angell visited Southeastern Yearly Meeting annual sessions in Leesburg, Florida, in April 2017. Steve contributed a review of H. Larry Ingle’s Nixon’s First Cover-Up: The Religious Life of a Quaker President to the journal Quaker Studies as part of a panel of historians commenting on Ingle’s work. The review was published in the December 2016 issue of Quaker Studies (vol. 21, no. 2). He will present a paper on “Yearly Meeting reunifications and FUM” to a Quaker History Roundtable on twentieth-century American Quakerism, to take place at ESR from June 8-11. The public is invited to the presentations that he and other scholars are giving. Kimo Press is planning subsequent publication of these essays. The book Quakers, Business, and Industry (published in a series by FAHE), which Steve co-edited with Ben Pink Dandelion, will be available in June. Steve’s written contribution is the chapter “Colonizer William Penn and Engineer Herbert Hoover: How their Businesses Affected their Philanthropy and Statesmanship.”

Jesse Palidofsky (87) is celebrating the release of his recent CD of original compositions on Azalea City Recordings, Dancing Toward the Light. Many of the songs were written during a sabbatical from hospice chaplaincy that was financed by a grant from the Louisville Institute. His autobiographical – and topical – song “I Am An Immigrant” was the #1 song on the International Folk Radio DJ charts in November of 2015, including airplay in New York, California, Berlin, Germany, Tel Aviv and New Zealand. Dancing Toward the Light was the #5 album in December of 2015. Jesse has received numerous songwriting awards. He has been performing full-time for the last three years – from Hugh’s Room, the premier folk club in Toronto, to the Washington Folk Festival, to social justice gatherings, worship services, retirement homes and spiritual retreats. A few highlights include: getting to share the stage with one of his heroes, Pete Seeger, on the sloop Clearwater, and receiving a standing ovation when Jesse provided the opening night plenary in story and song for the Association of Professional Chaplains conference in Orlando. www.jessepal.net; Jesse is also a Board Certified Chaplain, and prior to pursuing his musical calling he ministered for 27 years in hospice and pediatric oncology. Jesse resides in Washington, D.C.

Katherine Murray (08) is now serving Noblesville First Friends as pastor, in addition to her role as hospice chaplain and bereavement coordinator at Hancock Regional Hospice. She says, “Life is full and fun, and God is good!”

Victoria Burke (00) is still working part time as the Outreach Minister for St. Agnes Outreach Ministry. They minister to the residents of group homes on the northwest side of Dayton, Ohio. She plans to stop working late in June this year to spend more time with her nine month old grandson who lives in Philadelphia.

Deborah Suess (91) celebrated and concluded her 12 year sojourn as pastoral minister at First Friends Greensboro on March 26. After a few months of sabbath rest and adventure, she looks forward to seeing what may be next.

Stephen Beals (12) has been serving as pastor of the West Fayette Presbyterian Church, a small rural church near Geneva NY since March of 2008. He has written several songs for worship since the church has no choir or organist, and is most grateful for the Songwriting class taught by Carrie Newcomer at ESR.
“Seminaries are being required to take more responsibility for preparing students not only in their educational and spiritual formation but in how graduates will be able to find meaningful and productive forms of ministry and service.”

ACTING DEAN’S WORD

By Tim Seid

Earlham School of Religion was born out of a response to the needs of changing times. When I came to the school in 2001, it was because ESR was again responding to the needs of people called to ministry but unable to move to a residential campus. Technology had developed to the point that seminaries could provide online courses as a major part of degree programs. It was said of us that our ESR Access program was on the cutting edge of that movement. We may have been early adopters, but ESR was adapting to the opportunity to respond to the needs of ministry in line with its mission. In the last few years we have found that enhanced videoconference technologies, the ever-increasing availability of reliable high-speed internet access, and the wide-spread use of video communication by people in everyday life has enabled us to offer residential classes to off-campus students through videoconference in what we call blended classes.

ESR is continuing to respond to the needs of changing times in other ways. Seminaries are being required to take more responsibility for preparing students not only in their educational and spiritual formation but in how graduates will be able to find meaningful and productive forms of ministry and service. On the one hand, this need grows out of a response to the problem of student debt. That’s a reality that ESR takes very seriously and has developed ways to work with students on financing their education. ESR is also, on the other hand, acutely aware of the changing nature of religious and spiritual practices in our society. We have been participating in a research project over the past few years (see esr.earlham.edu/research/ECFFM). New programs are being developed, and we are seeking funding for new initiatives.

The articles in this issue reflect how these new efforts are already being realized in our students and graduates. Jay Marshall, dean of ESR, was instrumental in introducing ESR Access and is leading the way in which ESR is now responding to the needs of changing times in line with the school’s mission. The faculty continue to be engaged in the research, discussion, and development of courses, programs, and initiatives, not just because of a trend, but because we desire to respond to the ever-changing landscape of theological education to meet the demands of ministry and service in our global society in the twenty-first century.