

Towards freedom

07 12 2010 | by Kevin Bales | Read 270 times

[SHARE](#)

Kevin Bales calls on Friends to finish the fight to end slavery

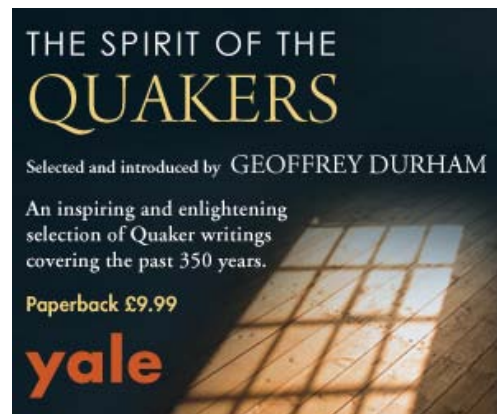


A Brazilian charcoal worker. See below for full description | Kay Chernush/Free the Slaves

One warm afternoon in May 1787, twelve people sat together in a London printing shop. None were rich or famous, there were no politicians or aristocrats, but nine were of that odd and excluded religious body called Quakers. That afternoon these twelve set out to end the slave trade. It was, by any measure of the time, a fool's mission. The slave trade was legal, and a major part of Britain's economy. Slavery was rationalised from pulpits and the Church of England itself owned slave plantations. Politicians were awash with the profits of slavery. Moreover, everyone knew slavery was a natural part of life. In spite of these barriers, these twelve achieved, in the words of Alexis de Tocqueville: '... something absolutely without precedent in history... If you pore over the histories of all peoples, I doubt that you will find anything more extraordinary.' Quakers had taken 100 years to reach this moment, struggling with slaveholding but becoming, by 1750, the first religious body to take a unified stand against slavery. Though actively agitating against slavery, little came of their efforts because they were Quakers, a group known for their laughable ideas. The genius of those meeting that May was to invent a new form of social alliance: the first non-denominational and non-partisan human rights organisation and campaign in history. It was a tool for social change that would be astoundingly successful.

Today non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and campaigns are everywhere; so common that we forget groups like Amnesty International were products of the 1960s. In the 1780s, Friends, convinced that God in every person meant slavery was morally wrong, became the core of this first NGO. Their unity plus close internal communication made them perfect for building a campaign. That campaign was remarkable in the speed of its achievements. In a country where slavery was legal, morally acceptable and economically essential, the campaign ended the legal slave trade in just thirty years.

What's odd about Quaker anti-slavery leadership is that Friends set the task aside when legal slavery came to an end. A handful of Friends continued, but slavery also continued and evolved. Today there are some 27 million slaves in the world, and population growth and vulnerability in the developing world have brought a collapse in the cost of slaves. For most of history slaves were expensive, averaging £30,000 in today's money, but since the 1950s the price has dropped



Subscribe to The Friend

MANY REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE:

1. Get The Friend first every week
2. Become a part of the Quaker community
3. Prices start from just £48 per year
4. Get a FREE trial of the new website

[SUBSCRIBE](#)
[Most viewed](#)
[Most commented](#)

Most viewed

Quaker online discussion group relaunched

02 December 2009 | by Peter Sender | Read 13519 times

Keswick Quakers hit by flooding

FREE 20 November 2009 | by Jez Smith | Read 13210 times

Sheila Hancock inspires Friends during Quaker Week

FREE 07 October 2009 | by Joe Mugford | Read 8190 times

Committed Relationships

31 July 2009 | by Friend | Read 7004 times

The making of modern Britain

FREE 04 November 2009 | by Judy Kirby | Read 6886 times

to around £90. Today slaves are in every country, exploited in dangerous and demeaning work. Some of that work feeds the products we buy, from shirts to mobile phones. Yet, for all the horrors of modern slavery there is also a unique opportunity that slavery can be brought to an end.

Those 27 million slaves are, in fact, the smallest fraction of the world population to ever live in slavery. The £40 billion they generate as profits to slaveholders is a tiny part of the world economy. No nation, no industry, would fail if slavery was ended. With slavery illegal in every country and universal agreement on the right of freedom, the stage is set for complete eradication. Slavery has been pushed to the dark edge of our global society; it stands on the edge of its own extinction. But two key things are lacking.

The first of these is a sizable, coherent and conscious movement pressing for abolition. The second is the resources necessary to get the job done. Today there is a small anti-slavery movement. The committee established in 1787 lives on in the work of Anti-Slavery International in the UK and its sister-organisation Free the Slaves in America. Both include a number of Quakers, but all of their combined supporters are still fewer than the number of Friends in Britain and are dwarfed by the number of Quakers worldwide.

Based on work with local partners in many countries building sustainable freedom, the estimated cost of dismantling systems of slavery around the world and reintegrating survivors would be around £7 billion (equalling the UK pledge to the Irish bank rescue). That expenditure should come primarily from governments enforcing their anti-slavery laws. With the methods of liberation better understood, existing anti-slavery projects simply lack funds to expand the scope of sustainable freedom. Much of the knowledge and many of the tools are in place; it is the popular awareness and leadership that is lacking.

Where slavery exists we know it is ended most effectively when a community makes a conscious collective decision to bring it to an end. Perhaps it is time for our Society to finish the job it set itself more than 200 years ago and re-dedicate ourselves to our collective commitment. Friends already find themselves in many of the places where anti-slavery awareness and action can be most effective – in work with migrants, peacebuilding and environmental work, as social workers, youth leaders and teachers, as supporters of development NGOs, as trustees of foundations. It's not a question of laying down other vital Quaker work, but of making sure that within that work we consciously bring anti-slavery efforts to the fore. Of course, there are many kinds of exploitation in the world, many kinds of injustice and violence to be concerned about. But slavery is important because it is exploitation, violence and injustice all rolled together in their most potent combination. Not to take action is simply to give up and let other people jerk the strings that tie us to slavery.

It would not be the first time that Friends have attempted the impossible. But imagine the pattern of hope that will come when slavery is ended, the knowledge that ancient wrongs can be healed. Imagine the gift we might give our children and our grandchildren: a world, after thousands of years, free of slavery. Quakers have always taken the long view, and this is a job that needs our perseverance.

Kevin Bales is the president of Free the Slaves. His book, *Ending Slavery: How We Free Today's Slaves*, was last week awarded the \$100,000 Grawemeyer Prize for ideas that promote world order. The book is a plan for the eradication of global slavery and is available from the Quaker Bookshop. More at: www.antislavery.org and www.freetheslaves.net.

The image above depicts a Brazilian charcoal worker. The image of the charcoal worker in Brazil links to imports and products touched by slavery – the charcoal is used to make steel, and the UK is a major importer of Brazilian steel. Photo: Kay Chernush/Free the Slaves.



WHERE IS YOUR INVESTMENT GOING?

With Oikocredit your money is invested where you believe it should be.

www.oikocredit.org

SITE BY **milo**

[QUAKERS ONLINE](#)

[ABOUT THE FRIEND](#)

[CONTACT US](#)

[FAQ](#)

[RSS](#)