

Every month since February 1987 the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation has produced one-hour TV programs on issues related to peace, social justice, economics, the environment, and nonviolence. The Olympia FOR's program airs several times every week for the entire month on Thurston Community Television (TCTV), channel 22 for Thurston County's cable TV subscribers. You can see TCTV's schedule at [www.tctv.net](http://www.tctv.net).

You can also watch the program described below (**and many more than 100 of our previous interview programs and special programs**) at the Olympia FOR's website, [www.olympiafor.org](http://www.olympiafor.org). Simply click the **TV programs** link, scroll down, and click the program you want to watch. Many of our website's TV program listings also include links to documents describing the program in Word and/or .pdf format.

## JANUARY 2016

### “Bold, Friendly Action to Help LGBTQ Ugandans Flee to Safety”

by Glen Anderson, this TV series' producer and host

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's January 2016 TV program lifts up a bold, compassionate, non-violent way to help people who are in danger because of the homophobic political culture in the African nation of Uganda. The action began with courageous, compassionate people within Uganda and is supported by Quakers and other people in Olympia WA USA and elsewhere.

This month's TV program explores a bold and courageous way that people in Uganda and elsewhere are protecting the lives and safety of people in Uganda who are endangered because they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. People in Olympia and elsewhere are providing financial support to help endangered LGBTQ people escape from Uganda through the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund.

Three guests help us explore this topic. All three are active with the local Quaker congregation, Olympia Friends Meeting:

- **Kathleen O'Shaunessy** is a clinical psychologist with a long interest in serving people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.
- **Alan Mountjoy-Venning** has been a very active local Quaker in the Olympia Friends Meeting since the 1970s.
- **Gabi Clayton** is a key organizer of the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund. She has long experience working for human rights, including people who are LGBTQ.

#### **Background:**

Decades ago, our society as a whole assumed that people were only of two kinds: men who were attracted to women, and women who are attracted to men. Now we know that people are much more varied. It is common for people to be attracted to others of the same sex – lesbians and gay men – and to people of both sexes – bisexuals.

There are also people who were born with one kind of anatomy, but in their hearts they know their personalities are of the other kind. These people might identify themselves – and live their lives – as transgender persons. A few even have surgery to become transsexual. Some people have adopted the old negative term “queer” and affirmed it in a positive way for themselves. Therefore, a common summary for these various kinds of people is LGBTQ.

Uganda is a nation near the middle of Africa – actually, just a little south and a little east of the middle. In recent years, Uganda has been brutally abusing and even killing LGBTQ people, but the roots of this problem go back long before. Some roots go back to a brutal emperor there. More recently, some American Christians who were homophobic went there and evangelized – and simultaneously brought their homophobic and anti-gay baggage to Uganda. Just a few years ago a brutal anti-homosexuality law was passed. Uganda’s constitutional court ruled it invalid for a technical reason, but a new law was passed that criminalized homosexuality, with sentences up to and including life imprisonment. The law also made “aiding and abetting” homosexuality a criminal offense, carrying a sentence of up to seven years in prison for family members and straight allies who helped LGBTQ people. Assaults and denial of basic human rights became common. Hospitals and clinics have even denied treatment to LGBTQ people. Some LGBTQ persons have been murdered.

By the way, Uganda is not the only place where LGBTQ people are in danger. That happens in many places in the world, including right here in the USA!

A concerned citizen who had been a refugee in another country returned to Uganda and started setting up “safe houses” to protect LGBTQ people there. A number of local people in various parts of Uganda work on this – at great risks to themselves. Several local Quakers in Olympia WA USA have contacts in and near Uganda, so they started organizing a project to support these Ugandans’ bold efforts.

## **The Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund:**

In April 2014 the local Quaker congregation in Olympia WA USA (Olympia Friends Meeting) took formal action to start raising money to support those Ugandan volunteers’ courageous efforts to help Uganda’s LGBTQ people. The **Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund** is an urgent matter of life and death.

When the U.S. allowed slavery, some Quakers and other people who respected human rights helped slaves escape oppression by helping them move from place to place until they could settle somewhere else in the U.S. or Canada and be free. This process was called the “underground railroad,” because it operated in secrecy along routes from oppression to freedom. The Ugandan effort uses this kind of model – including the historical term “conductor” and “passenger” – to help LGBTQ people find “safe houses” in Uganda where they can stay until other volunteers provide transportation out of the country.

The Olympia Friends Meeting created the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund in April 2014 to raise money necessary for supporting this program, which Ugandan people devised and have been operating as volunteers. Initially the Quaker-based effort was called the “Friends New Underground Railroad” to describe what it was and to affirm the Quaker roots of the antecedent in the U.S., but they changed our local project’s name when some African-Americans expressed concerns that this was appropriating a term significant for African-American history and applying it to a different setting. Local organizers readily agreed and chose the name **Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund**.

Local Quakers here profoundly respect the work that Ugandans are doing there. The overall project was conceived and organized by people in Uganda, and they continue to operate it and make all relevant decisions. The Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund publicizes the need and the project and raises funds to support these courageous Ugandans’ efforts. Fundraising began within Olympia’s Quaker congregation, the Olympia Friends Meeting, and they have reached out to other Quaker congregations (“Friends Meetings”) and the larger community. Local organizers here – especially Gabi Clayton, one of our TV program guests – communicate frequently with organizers in Uganda and elsewhere.

Gabi also maintains [www.friendsugandansafetransport.org](http://www.friendsugandansafetransport.org) as the project’s website. She invites people to e-mail her through the website and to phone her at (360) 888-5291 for more information.

## How it operates in Uganda:

The widespread danger for LGBTQ people – and their family members and straight allies – requires strict privacy and secrecy, so the project operates by word of mouth with nobody knowing who else is participating in other parts of the project. Everybody protects privacy and safety. Each “conductor” hides people until it is safe and possible – and they have funding – for a “transporter” to move the “passengers” out of the country. One conductor can get a person out of Uganda for \$52, while transportation from the other location is more remote with more transportation changes for a total transportation cost of \$185 from that location.

Some of the activities are in rural areas. Some of the people need food, housing and/or medical help. All participants are volunteers. Some of the volunteers also donate their own money to help cover the costs.

Some people in Olympia already had good working relationships with people in that part of Africa, so we are working with people we know and trust, so we know this is not any kind of scam. Also, Quakers have earned good reputations and good working relationships there over the years. Our local role here is fundraising. Ugandan people do the work and make the decisions, so we simply support them and communicate often.

You can get answers to many of your questions about the project, how it works, etc., in the “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) part of their website, [www.friendsugandansafetransport.org](http://www.friendsugandansafetransport.org)

## Success stories:

Since the spring of 2014 the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund has helped many people escape from Uganda. On December 5, 2015, while planning the TV program, the total was 1,194 persons. When we videotaped the program on December 10 an additional 54 persons had been transported out successfully or were *en route* out of the country on their way out to freedom.

As of that date the project had raised about \$115,000, which is a phenomenally huge amount, considering how new the project is and how small Olympia Friends Meeting is (about 60 adult members plus about 20 other attenders who have not formally joined).

They have resettled people in 14 welcoming countries, including Rwanda, some other African countries, and several European countries. The U.S. has not accepted anyone, so this is an opportunity for local volunteers here to work on, through public advocacy and urging Congress and the Executive Branch to help.

Several of the LGBTQ persons who have escaped from Uganda have courageously written from their new homes about their experiences. The blog at [www.friendsugandansafetransport.org](http://www.friendsugandansafetransport.org) shows some of these, and so does the Facebook space, <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsUgandanSafeTransportFund> Also on the blog, a “transporter” tells how he converted from homophobia to strongly supporting human rights in this way. Anybody who is skeptical might be reassured and inspired by these stories.

## Why do Quakers do such things? How do they turn faith into action on issues?

This TV interview explored a bit about the Quaker way of working on issues that their faith leads them to work on. A number of Quaker-based organizations are very well respected. At the national level we have the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which provides high quality direct aid and advocacy for peace, human rights, and other goals, and we have the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), which lobbies Congress and educates people nationwide on issues. Here in Washington State we have the Friends Committee on Washington Public Policy (FCWPP), which works through our state legislature.

Behind all of these efforts – and other examples of Quaker work – there is a concept sometimes called the “Friends’ testimony.” Alan explained that Quakers look for the “Light” (a presence of the divine spirit) in every person, including people who do bad things. Every person is capable of more and better than what they

have done before. He said Friends work with their hearts – and their “state of being” – not just their thoughts. They emphasize “faith and practice,” so they feel “led” to act upon their faith in real, substantive activities that reflect their faith and values. This happens across a range of issues.

Alan mentioned that the acronym **SPICE** stands for a combination of Quaker principles – **S**implicity – **P**eace – **I**ntegrity – **C**ommunity – **E**quality – and he spoke briefly about each of these.

## **How did Olympia Friends Meeting decide to create Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund?**

The Religious Society of Friends (the Quaker denomination’s official name) has centuries of experience taking bold, conscientious stands for peace, nonviolence, social justice and human rights. This has carried on wherever Friends Meetings exist worldwide.

In the early 1990s Olympia Friends Meeting decided that it would marry same-sex couples and take public actions to show compassion and fairness for LGBTQ people. They have done things that required courage, even at the risk of making some people uncomfortable. Quakers were far ahead of most of the rest of society in this matter, as in so many other matters of principle and conscience.

The Quaker term for documenting a decision is to write a “minute” about it. In April 2014 – when the Ugandan government was getting ready to pass a strong anti-gay law that included possible death sentences – the Olympia Friends Meeting approved a minute about this. Although that law was rescinded, anti-gay dangers still existed, and subsequent laws and policies continued the dangers to LGBTQ people in Uganda. Some local Quakers have contacts there. A concerned citizen who had been a refugee in another country returned to Uganda and started setting up “safe houses” to protect LGBTQ people there. A small group there works on this. Olympia’s Quakers decided to support these efforts by creating a fundraising project, which became the Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund.

Quakers operate by consensus, so they have a centuries-long tradition of needing a long time to reach decisions. This has become a subject for frequent jokes among the Quaker community. This particular decision in April 2014 came very quickly because it was so obviously just the right thing to do. In such situations, Quakers feel a strong “leading” by the Spirit (or the “Light,” as Quakers often call the divine presence) to take action for fairness and human rights.

When Olympia Friends Meeting passed the minute about this, local Quakers started raising funds for this project and started reaching out to other local Quaker congregations (“meetings”) and other constituencies.

## **Settling these refugees safely in other countries:**

It is one thing to get out of Uganda’s hostile environment, but something else to be settled in a safe country. Volunteers in Uganda help LGBTQ people escape, and volunteers help these refugees settle as immigrants in other countries. These volunteers in other countries help them with visas, immigration procedures, etc.

They need to stay away from United Nations refugee camps, which are dangerous places – and especially dangerous for LGBTQ people.

When these refugees get out to a safe country get on with their lives, some of them still need help with some trauma they had experienced in Uganda.

## **Family members, straight allies, and others in Uganda are at risk:**

In Uganda, it is not just the LGBTQ people who are in serious danger, but also their friends, allies, family members, volunteers protecting them, and people who are simply perceived or assumed to be LGBTQ. This project's website says:

There continue to be many arrests, with few emerging from the jails; lawyers are afraid to take cases as they might be seen as aiding and abetting homosexuality. LGBT people are being evicted summarily from their homes as landlords don't want to be known as harboring them. University students are being expelled, as are high school students, seminarians dismissed from theological colleges, people fired from their jobs. And families are disowning their children and throwing them out – church leaders are calling on parents to turn their own children in to the police.

Someone who is in danger in Uganda needs to get out quickly because anyone they interact with can also become endangered.

## **Two conductors have died:**

Gabi Clayton mentioned that two of the “conductors” in Uganda have died. One died after having been assaulted. Another conductor who had several serious illnesses was so committed to the work that he focused on that instead of taking care of his own health, and he died from prioritizing LGBTQ people's safety ahead of his own.

## **Current numbers, needs, costs, etc.:**

A few days before we videotaped the program, one “transporter” had 54 people in hiding, and we needed to raise \$5,018 to get them out of Uganda. When we taped the program on December 10, 2015, somebody had loaned the money to meet that emergency need for their safety, so those people were out of the country or on their way out, but fundraising was underway to repay that loan and about \$9,000 in other loans from local Quakers to meet urgent needs. Ten other people were still waiting at a different secret location in the care of another “conductor.”

Some “conductors” in Uganda pay their own money to meet emergency needs but then suffer “cash-flow” problems in their own personal lives until we reimburse them.

This project has raised about \$115,000 from April 2014 to early December 2015.

This project will need to continue for some long time because the problem is still very bad. Horrible new laws and related dangers are likely to continue.

Our TV guests invited people to volunteer to help in various kinds of ways (outreach, fundraising, etc.), because the needs always exceed the current human and financial resources. Please contact them if you'd like to throw a fundraiser or staff a table at an event.

They are happy to speak with faith communities, non-profit organizations, media, and events. If they can't come in person, they are willing to use Skype to speak with audiences anywhere.

The website – [www.friendsugandansafetransport.org](http://www.friendsugandansafetransport.org) – includes a full-page 8.5"x11" flyer and a smaller version laid out 4-per-page. Both are in color in .pdf format on their website, but you can print them out in grayscale as well. Please help them reach out to inform more people and more constituencies about this project.

Like their Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/FriendsUgandanSafeTransportFund>

## Fundraising:

I very much appreciate the bold, faithful witness of the local Quaker congregation – Olympia Friends Meeting – in creating a way for people to help save lives and protect safety of LGBTQ people in Uganda. When Gabi and I were talking on the phone to prepare for this TV interview, Gabi told me that the account was down to less than \$10.

The Olympia Friends Meeting’s project is the primary funding source for this, but their volunteers are reaching out to other Quaker groups, other faith communities, and various parts of the larger community. (For example, the Unitarians’ national level – the Unitarian-Universalist Association – supports this project and encourages Unitarians to donate.) The Friends’ project asks directly for financial support, and – with a few volunteers – they can organize a variety of fundraising efforts. They really need more volunteers to help with all of these efforts, including special benefit events.

Anyone can write a check to help the **Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund**. Make checks payable to **“Olympia Friends Meeting,”** earmark lower left corner **“Uganda,”** and mail it to: **3201 Boston Harbor Road NE, Olympia, WA 98506-2800**. The Friends Meeting does not take anything for processing these donations, so 100% of donations go to this humanitarian purpose.

It is also possible to donate through their website, **www.friendsugandansafetransport.org**, which has a PayPal account. However, PayPal takes a small amount of each donation as a fee for processing it, so writing a check to the Olympia Friends Meeting is slightly more cost-effective.

## How to find more information:

The Friends Ugandan Safe Transport’s website, **www.friendsugandansafetransport.org**, offers much information. They wrote the section of FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) to respond to the questions that Olympia’s Quakers asked while making the decision to create this project, and that other people have asked since it was founded. Gabi updates the FAQs occasionally as needed.

Also, interesting information is posted to the website’s blog. Blog posts include items written by people who have written about their experiences. Also, a “transporter” wrote a blog post about how he converted from homophobia to strongly supporting LGBTQ rights.

The project has a presence on Facebook, too, which includes personal stories from people who have been helped. See **<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsUgandanSafeTransportFund>**

They also have a Twitter account.

Gabi invites people to phone her at **(360) 888-5291** for more information or to offer any kind of help.

## Further encouragement:

TV program host Glen Anderson thanked Kathleen O’Shaunessy, Alan Mountjoy-Venning, and Gabi Clayton for serving as guests on this program and for their good work with Friends Ugandan Safe Transport.

Glen noted that people of good will who pay attention to the world around us can easily feel overwhelmed by the huge numbers of serious problems. Problems – especially elsewhere in the world – can seem too big and too remote, so we can feel powerless. But fortunately, some people figure out creative ways to address the problems through bold nonviolent action.

The Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund, based in Olympia Washington USA, is one example, because it mobilizes local people in the U.S. to help courageous people elsewhere who are risking their own lives to help people whose safety and lives are in serious danger.

Courageous people in Uganda – and allies in other countries who are resettling LGBTQ refugees – and generous people in the U.S. are all collaborating in a great humanitarian venture to affirm human dignity. The Friends Ugandan Safe Transport Fund really is a matter of life and death.

Their website, **[www.friendsugandansafetransport.org](http://www.friendsugandansafetransport.org)**, offers much information, including “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQs) -- and the **Blog**, which recounts some personal stories from people who have been helped.

You can visit and like their Facebook page, **<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsUgandanSafeTransportFund>**

They have a Twitter account too.

Gabi Clayton offers her phone number **(360) 888-5291** for people who want more information.

They invite tax-deductible donations payable to **Olympia Friends Meeting** with the lower left corner of checks earmarked for “Uganda.” Mail checks to **Olympia Friends Meeting, 3201 Boston Harbor Road NE, Olympia, WA 98506-2800**

Their website lets people donate through a PayPal account, but PayPal deducts small amounts for their overhead, whereas 100% of the amounts in checks payable to Olympia Friends Meeting go to this worthy cause, with nothing taken out for overhead.

The world needs more projects such as this, where people courageously and nonviolently stick their necks out to help other people. This kind of bold action is an antidote to feeling overwhelmed by the world’s problems. It feels good to help!

You can get information about a wide variety of issues related to peace, social justice and nonviolence by contacting the Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation at (360) 491-9093 or **[www.olympiafor.org](http://www.olympiafor.org)**