

# Southern Africa Quaker News

April 2019

## Special Issue on Equality



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## Southern African Quaker News

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**Cover:** An early representation of the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen" of the French Revolution of 1879.\*

*\*It is interesting to note that the declaration applied only to men: after much debate, the National Assembly concluded that women did not deserve to be granted rights.*

# Contents

## SPECIAL ISSUE ON EQUALITY

page 4  
Editorial

page 5  
Equality: My thoughts  
*Duduzile Mtshazo*

page 6  
Is equality possible?  
*Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge*

page 10  
Inequality  
*George Ellis*

page 13  
Equality  
*Helen Holleman*

page 15  
Equal difficulties  
*Jennifer Kinghorn*

page 17  
A personal view on equality and  
Quakers in Southern Africa  
*Justin Ellis*

page 19  
Reflections on race, equality  
and the Clifton Beach drama  
*Justine Limpitlaw*

page 21  
Equality  
*Rory Short*

page 22  
Talking about equality:  
My experiences and reflections  
*Sipho Nsimbi*

page 24  
Equality  
*Vernon Gibberd*

# Editorial

In this special issue of the SAQN, ten Southern African Friends share their thoughts on equality, one of the Quaker Testimonies\*. These range from various personal journeys to very practical issues that need to be attended to, if we wish to see any degree of equality in our various Southern African communities. Several Friends focus on inequalities in education, and the income gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' comes up again and again as the most critical issue that need to be addressed.

Two particular issues entertained my mind. The first is the very strong links between the Testimonies of Equality, Justice, Simplicity, Sustainability and Truth, and that they can, in reality, not be separated from one another. Such a link is also referred to by Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge in her essay. They seem to be components of a complex system with many links across them. One of the fundamental characteristics of complex systems is that the effect of change in one component on the other components is very difficult to predict. And the pursuit of equality is probably what is referred to as a 'wicked' problem, one which can be only partially addressed, but never entirely solved.

The second issue is, what are the origins of such inequalities? Karen Armstrong<sup>‡</sup> traces these back to the origins of agriculture in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, more than 6000 years ago. The advent of growing crops meant that many more people could be fed than was possible in hunter-gatherer societies, which led

to population 'explosions'. This in turn, led to a division between those who produced food (in surplus) and those who acquired it (stole it) to hoard and trade. These latter became the 'haves'. And the structure of such a society could not be maintained without violence.

"Resources and powers are unequally distributed, concentrated in the hands of the few, who do not use them to achieve the possible self-realisation of all members, but use parts of them for self-satisfaction or for the purpose of dominance, oppression and control of other societies or of the underprivileged in the same society."<sup>#</sup>

And several of our essayists focus on the huge disparity in income and education that lie at the root of the critical inequalities that exist in Southern Africa and elsewhere. The question really is, what do we do about it? This is succinctly put the final words of Justine Limpitlaw: "And it starts with me."

Wouter Holleman

\* For the testimonies also see <https://www.afsc.org/testimonies/simplicity>

<sup>‡</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*. The Bodley Head, 2014. For a review see <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/books/review/fields-of-blood-by-karen-armstrong.html>

<sup>#</sup> World Council of Churches Violence, *Non-violence and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Geneva 1972) p.6, in Armstrong 2014.

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**“Before God we are equally wise  
and equally foolish.”**  
**– Albert Einstein**

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# Equality: My thoughts

*Duduzile Mtshazo, Quaker Community of Johannesburg*

## 1. What are my thoughts on equality?

I see and value 'equality' as one of those five guiding principles of my Quaker Faith. (*Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community & Equality*) I value all five of them but *Equality* stands out for me, as the one that made me join Friends and enabled me to stay as a Friend, and has been an *anchor* for me to strive and stay faithful. I found it both *Affirming and Challenging*.

## 2. Why affirming?

I found Friends in 1978, having been brought up in a *divided and unequal society*. I had been made to feel *less than any other human being*. As a girl child, I was less valued than my two brothers. As an adult female, married with four children, I was a *minor*! I could not make decisions even about my body and my health. I was a parent that was expected to raise children to be a 'responsible' members of society but was not given the same value and appreciation as another parent who was maybe a *white woman or man*. As a responsible citizen and member of society, I was expected to bring up children to be *just like me*. Conforming to all values that demeaned and made them accept that they were less valued, and therefore they could not play on the swings or paddle in a pool with children of 'European' or White race. All these exclusions, and emphasis on **'you are not worthy'** — even in my Faith Community (Anglican) — that I was still not equal to my fellow Anglicans just fueled such anger bitterness that I could have killed someone!

Thanks be to God, Friends found me! They said, *"There is that of God in you and the Other!"* With great suspicion, I joined Friends in January 1979. This was after attending a Yearly Meeting in Botswana, where three *females* held offices of Clerk, Rosemary Elliott, Buntz Biggs (Minute Clerk) Elizabeth Roper was Treasurer, I think. Benonia Nyakuwanyikwa led an Interest Group with a full and captive audience. Wow! This was the Faith Group to join.



## 3. Why challenging?

Equality is challenging because, even as society remains unequal, this Quaker Principle exhorts me to be constantly aware of this fact, and I therefore saying to myself, "What can I do, to level the playing field in my own small area of influence?" At home, in my own community, at work or in my Meeting. My actions will speak louder than any pronouncements from my lips: to be able to listen and hear the other, not just what they utter, but where the words come from; to bring a home cooked meal on a Sunday to the young homeless man who guards our cars as we sit in Worship; to see him as a child of the same God that made us *"Fearfully & Wonderfully in His/Her Image"*, and to accept those Friends who truly irritate me in Meeting!

Thank you, Friends in our Striving for an Equal and Just Society!

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## Interdependence breeds Equality

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# Is equality possible?

*Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, Western Cape Quakers*

Two reconstructed benches sit in front of the High Court building. Can separate be equal?

## What is equality and is it achievable?

Equality is ensuring individuals or groups of individuals are not treated differently or less favourably on the basis of their specific, protected characteristics, including areas of race, gender, disability, religion or belief, sexual orientation and age.

Equality is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in international human rights law. Fundamental to this right, is the concept that all people are equal before the law and before God. Yet, around the world, the majority continue to be marginalised and displaced, not only in terms of the ownership of wealth, but also in terms of access to justice and opportunities. According to the World Inequality Report 2018 a combination of large privatisation and increasing income inequality within countries has fuelled the rise in wealth inequality.

Equality is about ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents. It is also the belief that no one should have poorer life chances because of the way they were born, where they come from, what they believe, or whether they have a disability. The South African Constitution has entrenched equality as a basic and inalienable human right. However, the Constitution also allows for positive discrimination or affirmative action. This is in recognition of the historical disadvantage of groups that experienced



discrimination.

Chapter Nine of the Constitution creates institutions that are specifically mandated to safeguard and promote equality. Among these are the South African Human Rights Commission and the Commission for Gender Equality. We also have an Equality Court as well as various laws aimed at promoting equality and equality of opportunities.

The Employment Equity Act No.55 of 1998, aimed at achieving equity in the workplace by promoting equal opportunity, fair treatment in employment



through elimination of unfair discrimination and implementing affirmative action, are measures to redress the disadvantages in employment in order to ensure equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce. This Act provides for additional reporting requirements for employers with the additional task of submitting an Employment Equity Report.

Despite these measures and the provision of social grants for those designated as deserving of social protection, South Africa remains one of the most unequal and violent societies in the world. A 2018 World Bank Report makes the following observations:

- Although South Africa has made progress in reducing poverty since 1994, the trajectory of poverty reduction was reversed between 2011 and 2015, threatening to erode some of the gains made since 1994;
- Poverty is consistently highest among black South Africans, the less educated, the unemployed, female-headed households, large families, and children;
- Poverty remains concentrated in previously disadvantaged areas, such as the former homelands — areas that were set aside for black South Africans along ethnic lines during apartheid;
- Low growth perspectives in the coming years suggest poor prospects of eliminating poverty by 2030 as envisaged in the National Development Plan.

Police statistics on domestic violence in this country are limited, but 15 609 murders and 64 500 reported rapes in 2011 to 2012 suggest massive levels of violence in our homes. The strong link between income inequality and violence has been documented by many scholars and researchers. According to *The Economist*, “Fifty years ago Gary Becker, a Nobel prize-winning economist, advanced an argument that all crime is economic and all criminals are rational.”

Richard Wilkinson (2010) says, “The most well-established environmental determinant of levels of violence is the scale of income differences between rich and poor. More unequal societies tend to be more violent.”

This underlines the urgency of the need to address social inequality.

While we speak of equality, what we have been

seeking is *equal dignity*, a society that respects each person’s right to have access to fair treatment and to be able to meet basic human needs. What everyone desires is respect for their dignity. Dignity is the first right in our Constitution. It was placed there because we lived in a society where the rights of the majority had not been respected. What we wanted to achieve through the Constitution was to restore the inherent dignity of all people. The Constitution provides the framework and tool for us to work together towards a more equal and just society, where everyone has access to basic human rights and necessities, such as shelter, personal security, water, food security, health, bodily and psychological integrity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) links the concept of equality to that of dignity and states that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Equity and equality are two strategies we can use in an effort to produce fairness. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful. Equality is treating everyone the same. Equality aims to promote fairness, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same help.

To achieve equality we need access to justice for all. This ensures that all obstacles are identified and removed in order for all to enjoy full human rights and human potential. The four types of justice are commutative, distributive, legal and social. Commutative justice is based on the principle of equality while distributive guarantees the common welfare by sharing what God has created. Legal justice refers to the obligations of the government to its citizens and society. Social justice is about ensuring that everyone has a right to a fair say in society.

Quakers believe that everyone is equal before God. Equality is therefore a fundamental testimony underpinning Quaker faith and practice. A testimony of equality is an act, usage, or course of conduct by a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) tending to assert or promote equality of persons, arising from the Friends’ belief that all people are equal in the eyes of God. This inspires us to try to change the systems that cause injustice and that stop us being genuine communities. It also means working with people who suffer injustice and are marginalised, such as prisoners of conscience and asylum seekers.

Quaker history is full of examples of campaigning

I joined Quakers having initially joined the South African Communist Party. Although some Quakers had difficulty with this, it was the principle of equality that attracted me to both. In the Communist Party we were told an equal society was possible. In reality though, some were more equal than others. Although the Religious Society of Friends believes in and is based on equality, the composition and attitudes of our meetings have reflected some of the divisions in the society. This issue is addressed in more detail later in this article.

individually and collectively these testimonies are essential ingredients to building a just peace – not simply an absence of war but a way of life that actively promotes social justice and peaceful co-existence.

Simplicity is a core value that makes equality possible. Capitalist accumulation and consumption are the main cause of inequality. To achieve equality, we need to actively counter the culture of accumulation and greed. Accumulation and greed drive corruption. Quakers try to live according to the deepest truth we know, and we connect most deeply to this in the stillness of worship. This means speaking the truth at all times, including to people in positions of power. As we are guided by integrity, so we expect to see it in public life.

For the Quaker movement, speaking truth to power goes far back. We challenge those in power to stay true to the people's mandate and the call to serve. As early as 1660, one of the first Quakers, Margaret Fell, who became a political spokesperson for the Quaker movement, petitioned the newly reinstalled king, Charles II, about freedom of conscience. In 1783, 300 Quakers again petitioned parliament,





this time to call for the abolition of the Transatlantic slave trade. And in 1917, prominent Quakers were imprisoned for defying government censorship of a pamphlet about conscientious objection to military service in the 'war to end all wars'.

Bearing witness on matters of integrity, justice and peace is what Quakers are called by faith to do. So, we have consistently spoken truth to power over the last four centuries. Indeed, the very phrase 'Speaking truth to Power' can be traced back to Quakers. The pursuit of lasting peace involves working to remove all obstacles and barriers to equality of opportunity.

Quaker process is a combination of contemplation and action. In 2000, Southern Africa Yearly Meeting wrestled with the issue of my appointment as Deputy Minister of Defence and developed a Statement for Peace in Africa which says, 'Peace is not brought about by preparation for war. Peace is achieved by ensuring democracy, good governance and justice, and upholding the rule of law and human rights. It is achieved by addressing the basic needs of people such as provision of adequate health care, fighting the scourge of HIV/AIDS, eliminating inequality and poverty and providing education, including early childhood education, adult literacy and peace education.' (C & SAYM Statement 2000)

While Quakers have a history of activism for social justice the challenge remains of achieving full transformation and equality within the Religious Society of Friends, to make it more inclusive and representative. Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship (McDaniel and Julye, 2018) "recounts the history of Quaker efforts to achieve racial equity from its beginnings in the New World to the modern era." In reference to Quaker schools, "Quakers had

created schools for free people of African descent and newly freed African Americans in the 18th and 19th Centuries but, well into the 20th century, they showed little interest in educating students of colour in the schools they had created for their own children." Some Friends began to examine admission practices of their own schools as consciousness of racial inequality began to grow as well as the belief that education was the primary way to create equal opportunities.

South African Quakers have similarly had a concern about race relations in broader society and in their own meetings, but were slow to move towards integration and still do not represent the diversity of the population at large. In relation to other churches Quakers have been leaders in the appointment of women and blacks as leaders in their own organisation. Yet we are not expanding and we remain largely unrepresentative of the society at large.

We have agreed on Equality as the theme of our Yearly Meeting in 2019. Are we adventurous enough to accept the challenge of transforming the composition of our meetings and growing our membership and diversity through a bold sharing of our vision and testimonies?

Sidney Bailey who continuously interrogated his role as a Quaker and of his journey and the role of Friends had this to say, "The task of a peacemaker is a daunting one, for pacifists are a minority in every country in the world. The challenge for the Society of Friends is to find distinctive kinds of peace witness and action, accepting the fact that there are many important things that we will have to leave undone."

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**“The history of the past is but one  
long struggle upward to equality.”**  
**– Elizabeth Cady Stanton**

# Inequality

George Ellis, Western Cape Quakers

There is massive and unacceptable economic inequality in the world at large and in South Africa in particular. As is well known, a tiny fraction of the most well off own more than all the rest. The issue is described in Paul Collier's book *The Bottom Billion*, described briefly here: <http://beta.nottingham.ac.uk/gep/documents/newsletters/issue-23-winter-2007.pdf>

There are two issues as regards economic inequality: firstly, **relative poverty** is increasing: the inequality is becoming more and more extreme and is becoming more and more visible. As a result, it is associated with resentment underlying more and more turbulence both internationally and in South Africa in particular, probably also underlying much of the violent crime that is taking place countrywide. Secondly, **absolute poverty** means that huge numbers of people are living in dire conditions: very poor housing, very bad sanitation conditions, not enough food. It is a humanitarian crisis which is spilling over into "service delivery" protests that simply make the situation worse by destroying community facilities and local shops. By its very nature, this dire poverty has to be of concern to Quakers, who have for centuries done what they can to alleviate poverty. In South Africa in particular. Quaker Service was for decades operational in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and the Eastern Cape, often working with other organisations. However, the last South African Quaker Service branch has now closed – the political and economic situation has changed greatly since Apartheid days and the old mode of operation is no longer viable.

In my view the real effort Southern African Quakers should make now is to try in whatever way they can to tackle the underlying causes of this poverty and inequality, and particularly the policies that are demonstrably failing to lessen poverty of the majority. An overview of the issue is at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic\\_inequality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_inequality)

At a rough approximation, one can understand the South African situation in terms of six components:

**Short term issues: BIG.** Dire poverty and destitution need to be relieved in the short term. South Africa has an excellent social grants system, but it has been completely undermined by corruption in the



Social Welfare Department associated with the previous Minister, and in particular through dubious deductions made from grants as they are paid. But additionally, the system does not have provision for people who are simply unable to attain work, because jobs are not available ("the men by the side of the road"). What is needed is a **Basic Income Grant (BIG)**, for which I and others campaigned for a decade. The Government refused to countenance it. I personally spoke to Thabo Mbeki's advisors about it, with the response "We can't just give handouts to the poor". They have lost touch with the poor; they simply do not understand the desperation of having no source of income whatever, and the positive feedback effect of providing a source of income that can be invested in micro-economic projects, growing both individual and community welfare. Pieter Le Roux has looked at the economics of the proposal in detail. It should go back on the table.

**Medium term issues: Jobs.** The other issues (housing, sanitation, etc) could be largely

overcome if people had reasonable jobs. Our huge unemployment rate is the single reason underlying all the other problems. However, Government policy is jobs-unfriendly in many ways: through massive red tape before any project can get going, labour legislation that has been shaped in such a way as to discourage creation of employment opportunities, unfriendly visa requirements for people wishing to come here to invest, overall through **discouraging entrepreneurship and job creation**. BEE policy has also been a major hurdle in terms of getting the right people for the job in place, and in discouraging foreign firms investing here. A long-term view should be taken whereby getting really competent and creative people to run companies, whoever they are, will in the end create far more job opportunities in the population at large, at lower and higher levels, than all these restrictions can do. But the biggest reason for the jobs problem is the poor level of education of so many of our population. The single most important factor needed in getting more black people employed at all, and employed in high level jobs in particular, is an improvement in our education system.

**Long term issue: Education.** We have some excellent schools and teachers, but education for the majority has been hugely hampered by inappropriate education policy (particularly introduction of Outcomes Based Education under conditions where there was no chance it would succeed), through low quality and motivation of so many of our teachers, and most importantly through having a teacher's trade union that has steadfastly been a major obstacle to quality education in so many ways. A large number of teachers work minimal hours (often only starting to prepare for the term once the term has started), spend teaching time in the common room, drink, sexually abuse students, and so on; and SADTU stands in the way of them being called to account. Leadership that supports quality education is crucial. Policy must also tackle the **language issue**: many children are being taught from Grade 3 on in a language (English) they do not understand well, by teachers who are also not fully competent in that language. Bi-language education should be extended to all levels. And one further major impediment is in the making: an influential group of economists and others in the Education sector are pushing strongly for a strong phonics-based approach to teaching reading and writing, instead of an approach centred on meaning making and understanding. The crucial step of learning to read with understanding, which

is the foundation for all the rest of educational progress, is likely to be degraded in the future (this is already happening in some countries overseas).

**The failure of government: Incompetence and corruption.** The effect of having so many incompetent and/or corrupt people in high positions throughout national and local Government and the parastatals has not merely been to lead to siphoning off of billions of Rands that could have been used for the welfare of the community at large, as for example in the Estina dairy project. It has been to debilitate all the organisations involved: SAA, SABC, ESKOM, SARS, and so on, with devastating effects on the economy and so on employment and inequality. A courageous independent press is exposing this industrial-scale corruption, enabled by state capture (but even some of the previously great newspapers have now been captured). The promised reforms are not materialising at the rate needed: indeed, they are being strongly resisted (the current rolling electricity blackouts are probably due to sabotage at ESKOM). Commissions of enquiry are producing solid evidence, but the transformation of these enterprises to profit is far away. Simple steps, such as restoring the SAA flights to Mumbai and to Europe from Cape Town, have not yet been taken.

**Predatory capitalism.** Associated with this is predatory capitalism, the other half of corruption, which seeks only its own welfare at the expense of others. Underlying this is an economic dogma, based particularly in the Chicago school of economics, that explicitly (as stated by Milton Friedman) lauds greed as the sole purpose of the firm – at the expense of everyone else. This is occurring internationally: for example, Michael E Mann has written “the fossil fuel industry used their immense resources to create fake scandals and to fund a global disinformation campaign [about global climate change] aimed at vilifying the scientists, discrediting the science, and misleading the public and policymakers. Arguably, it is the most villainous act in the history of human civilisation, because it is about the short-term interests of a small number of plutocrats over the long-term welfare of this planet and the people who live on it.”<sup>a</sup> For a local version, see “KZN’s killing

<sup>a</sup> <https://cosmosmagazine.com/climate/the-most-villainous-act-in-the-history-of-human-civilisation-tyler-prize-winner-michael-e-mann-speaks-out?fbclid=IwAR2ZfWhbiSl1qkj6VC7rT-YmFRsKqfDL9pqKuuiVIQueBAFqvtMCZoUfhf4>

fields: 6 activists dead after questioning oil project”<sup>b</sup>

In the end, the crisis facing us is a crisis of values. This is where we can have much to say.

**Realistic methods of solution.** Quakers should be involved in trying to influence policy nationally and internationally to change these conditions, on the basis of our well-established values. This requires firstly open-minded analysis of the present situation and alternatives, eschewing emotional analyses and slogans and fake news, and second analysis of ways to change things – which does indeed involve emotions and values, as well as a clear mind, as such changes involves combatting prejudice and emotion.

The kind of analyses of what changes for the good could be made are given in *The Future of Capitalism* by Paul Collier, and *Prosperity: Better Business Makes Greater Good*, by Colin Mayer. The point is that it is indeed business that creates wealth and employment: how can it be done in a principle centred way? Even those who have a gut reaction against the word “Capitalism” should read these arguments and the way they try to incorporate values into our economic system. The systems need to be changed, but not in a simplistic way. There is also intellectual work to be done in terms of countering the standard economic propositions used to justify the predatory view of the firm: that the economic market is perfect and its nature should not be questioned. For those who feel like looking at this at a technical level, I recommend *Debunking Economics*, by Stephen Keen, who demonstrates clearly just how flawed those arguments are, and his *Debtwatch Manifesto* at <http://www.debtdeflation.com/blogs/manifesto/> Together with SALDRU analyses of South Africa: <https://www.facebook.com/SALDRU/>, these can provide the basis for well-based policy options.

**Systemic change.** In summary, systemic change is needed. It must be grounded in the right values. We can try to assist with a synoptic overview of the issue, and developing application of values in that context, or specific issues that are for whatever reason our primary concern.

**Influencing what is happening.** It won’t just happen by rational argument! It needs persuasion, emotional

engagement, and eventually transformation. This is a process that takes time and commitment. One way to go is to engage with a growing movement with the capacity to make such change based on **Theory U** by Otto Scharmer, presented in his book *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*. It is described in a 2-page summary available here: [http://www.presencing.org/assets/images/theory-u/Theory\\_U\\_2pageOverview.pdf](http://www.presencing.org/assets/images/theory-u/Theory_U_2pageOverview.pdf)

Its application to the current world situation is given in *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaeufer (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Leading-Emerging-Future-Ego-System-Eco-System/dp/1605099260>), which has been used as an important reference by African Quakers. It is a product of the **Presencing Institute**, see <https://www.presencing.org/>, which has available free online courses where one can learn the basics of the approach, see: <https://www.edx.org/course/ulab-leading-change-in-times-of-disruption> (a free course running till Jun 27, 2019). Their African project is Ubuntu Lab (see <https://www.presencing.org/programs/ubuntu-lab>.) A Quaker version of Theory U is *Discernment and Inner Knowing* by Joycelin Dawes, described here:

<https://www.feedaread.com/books/Discernment-and-Inner-Knowing-9781786977793.aspx>.

**Dimensions of Poverty.** Finally, a further issue is that poverty has many dimensions: there are other aspects of poverty in addition to economic poverty, and hence similar dimensions to inequality. I do not have time to present this here: see The Development of Quantitative Social Indicators.<sup>c</sup> Perhaps the most important outcome of a wider viewpoint is the **Capabilities Approach** of Sen and Nussbaum: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capability\\_approach](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capability_approach). However practical measures to make a change remain the same: analyse, develop an approach, and spread it by social media, public presentations/campaigns, plus something like the more in depth approach of Theory U. And do this all in the Quaker way: strongly based in values, but recognising the integrity of others as one engages with them.

<sup>b</sup> [https://city-press.news24.com/News/kzns-killing-fields-6-activists-dead-after-questioning-oil-project-20190212?fbclid=IwAR1eExSgVoB-Vexuzjq0JAzL-IL7Y6CtFP\\_-wRqhtJnHZWWPBqDIQGZW7MU](https://city-press.news24.com/News/kzns-killing-fields-6-activists-dead-after-questioning-oil-project-20190212?fbclid=IwAR1eExSgVoB-Vexuzjq0JAzL-IL7Y6CtFP_-wRqhtJnHZWWPBqDIQGZW7MU)

<sup>c</sup> [http://www.math.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image\\_tool/images/32/Staff/Emeritus\\_Professors/Prof\\_George\\_Ellis/Overview/qol.doc](http://www.math.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/image_tool/images/32/Staff/Emeritus_Professors/Prof_George_Ellis/Overview/qol.doc)



# Equality

*Helen Holleman, Eastern Cape Quakers*

I battle to grasp the meaning of 'equality', not because the dictionary isn't helpful – *the state of being equal, especially in having the same rights, status, and opportunities* – but because it seems to have been overlaid by so many others connotations. I'm not sure that our Quaker forefathers would recognise it today. For them it certainly meant treating all others as equal in status – no taking your hat off for the king, the streetsweeper, a woman – and no calling anyone by a title; no 'Mr President', 'your Majesty', your worship'. I'm not so sure about the 'rights and opportunities' bit in the definition above – my reading of Quaker history suggests that early Quakers focussed on 'improving the lot' of others: slaves, prisoners, women. Perhaps the 'rights and opportunities' were implied.

However, just as *diversity* (which to me captures the richness and necessity of our differences, as in 'biodiversity') has been squashed and tamed to mean *inclusion*, so it seems that *equality* is being politically corrected to mean *equity*, which carries a new force and focus on the human condition.

Behind this, I sense we're losing touch with the spiritual as we concentrate so much on the human, and I ask myself: is humanism the new religion – the worship of humankind? Have we put humankind at the pinnacle of all being? Are all our efforts directed at making human life longer, better, healthier, whatever the cost? It certainly seems so. In spite of the evidence on our TV news screens, there is actually less violence, more food, longer lives for most people in the world. But ... when I step back to look at the planet we call home – this beautiful, blue, green and golden orb spinning through the unfathomable – I want to weep in shame and sorrow. What has humankind done to it? More than 75% of the world's biomass consists of people, their domesticated animals and their domesticated crops. The remaining 25% (under threat) is what is left for God's wild things. Clearly human rights trump all other rights: animal, plant, sea creature, insect ...

Ask yourself the question: how often do you have to clean insects off your windscreen – even on a long journey? Hardly ever. They're disappearing. And as they disappear, so do the frogs, the spiders, the lizards, the chameleons, the birds. Insects may not



be as emotionally moving as rhinos, polar bears or tigers, but they are the foundation of the food web on which so many other, larger creatures depend. Do you recall telephone lines sagging under the weight of the swallows gathering for their northward migration? I think I've counted six swallows this year.

How did it happen? And so fast? Insecticides, pesticides, herbicides have killed them. Humans have to eat, so we've chopped down and ploughed up insect habitats, poisoned insect food sources and the insects themselves for our crops and grazing space. Their demise is a contributing factor to the mess we've made of ecosystems. And then, we've proliferated; how we've proliferated, filling almost every wild space! We've 'conquered the earth'. Our actions send the clear message: *Human beings are the most important life form on the planet*. This disturbs me profoundly; I think we are **only equally** important; not **more** important.

If Quakers profess 'There is that of God in everyone' and hold that God is the source and mover of being, is it taking it too far to say, 'There is that of God in everything'? And, if that is true, can I say with any conviction, "My life is more important than that

owl's life?" or "I am more important than that tree by virtue of being human"?

Deep inside, this feels like an important question that needs an answer, but I'm uncomfortable even asking it because I'm trapped in a course of history shaped by technological, religious, political, cultural and social decisions made by our ancestors and by my fellow human beings here and now. Answers to the question require me to make choices I don't know how to make, or am afraid to make. To answer them, I have to swim uncertainly against the tide.

For all the goodness that exists, for all the love and kindness we share and show, there is no denying that our species has overrun the planet like a plague, destroying each other and our source of life. Yet, to raise the topic of over-population is taboo in the religion of humanism. I feel the tension of the issue of over-population within myself, too. After all, a significant part of the pressure of over-population

comes from those living longer than people did in the past ... like me. If I needed bypass surgery, would I have it? If I needed cancer treatment, would I say "OK"? I hope not, but I'm not really sure that I have the courage, yet.

I remember an account of an old San woman walking slowly, deliberately and with quiet determination out of the camp as the group was disbanding it to move on to better hunting grounds. She walked away, out of sight of the camp and sat under a tree. She picked up a pinch of the dry, red sand and put it into her mouth, savouring the taste of her mother. She waited for leopard, hyena, thirst – whichever came first – to return her to the dust from which she had come. She waited quietly and unafraid. Perhaps, never having lost touch with her origins, she was not afraid to go back to them. I see grace in that. And – I believe – a profound understanding of what equality really is.

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**“I believe in Nelson Mandela’s  
vision. I believe in a vision  
shared by Gandhi and King  
and Abraham Lincoln. I  
believe in a vision of equality,  
justice, freedom and multi-  
racial democracy, built on the  
premise that all people are  
created equal.”**  
**– Barack Obama**

# Equal difficulties

*Jennifer Kinghorn, Quaker Community in Johannesburg*

Equality is a concept which has different meanings at different levels of existence, from the micro to the macro.

At the level of humanity as a whole, the macro level, our expectation is that as human beings we should each one of us be treated fairly and justly, i.e. equally, by others in society.

At the individual, or more micro, level, even though we all belong to the human race, we are different and, fair and just treatment is not a one size fits all, but needs to recognise these differences.

The beauty of being human is that we all have different talents and abilities. A superb dancer for instance should not be denied the opportunity to become a dancer just because their academic performance doesn't meet some socially determined standard. Everybody has different academic capabilities and society is wrong if it tries, in the name of equality, to slot people into particular academic pigeon holes.

Our different talents and interests will lead to some people being more successful in their careers than others. You might be very interested and talented in politics, for instance, but that does not necessarily mean that, in the name of equality you must automatically become the President of South Africa. You should have every opportunity to do so if you so wish, but the getting there is up to you alone.

So, equality is really about providing a *level playing field* for everybody from which individuals can jump off into the careers of their choice. It is society's responsibility to everybody to provide that level playing field. This not a simple responsibility to meet however.

What are the components that contribute to the playing field?

The first component must be bodily health. People should enter their working lives in a condition of bodily health and the State must ensure that one, the physical environment is not damaging to the individual and, two, that medical services are readily available should they be needed.

The second component must be psycho-emotional health. People should enter their working lives in a condition of psycho-emotional health and the State must work to ensure this. This responsibility involves



two aspects, one, is the psycho-emotional health of society, and two is the psycho-emotional health of the individual.

The psycho-emotional health of society is a political matter and is the responsibility of the community as a whole, but the stance of the government of the day has a hugely important influence on the psycho-emotional health of society.

The psycho-emotional health of the individual is their own responsibility, but the State should provide necessary medical services to aid the individual in achieving this.

The third component is education, early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary. The State should ensure that quality education is available for every child by providing an education voucher for each child as it is not something that in the breadth and variety required the State itself can possibly provide. Thus, it should be left to the market to provide but, the providers must be monitored for quality by the State. Where the market is not interested in

providing because of particular circumstances then the State must step in.

The fourth component is financial. The financial circumstances on entry into adulthood are very different for every child. In an effort to level the

financial playing field the State should provide a lump sum, to be spent at the recipient's discretion, for every child whose family's poor financial circumstances warrant it.

## A conversation – What do you mean by equality?

*Does it mean “the same”?*

No, definitely not! I don't want to be the same as those people who just happen to be richer, cleverer, better looking than me. I don't want to be a copy, a sham. I want to be ME.

*Does it mean “take away from someone else and add to me”?*

No, I don't want to take away anything from anyone else except the people who are horrid to me. I would like to take away their smugness and self-satisfaction, but I don't want it to be given to me!

*Does it mean that I want to be respected and helped as much as anyone else?*

That sounds more like it.

*Does it mean that I am allowed to be as nasty to others as they are to me?*

No! No! Being nasty gives me a horrid feeling. I prefer someone to stop me from being cruel, mean, nasty.

*Does it mean that I want to be as successful as somebody else?*

Probably. It depends ... successful at what?

*Does equality mean that I will be allowed to reach out to the things that I love to do, to the people I love.*

Yes, yes!

*Does it mean that I should have enough of those things I need?*

Yes. But please, not more than I need.

All I really need is my own amount of food, warmth, shelter, education, someone to love, to be loved and needed.

I would also like everyone else to have these things in the dose that each one of them likes – Not the same dose .... perhaps that is part of equality.

I like the way Jesus of Nazareth said, and showed, that everyone who shares like that, is his brother and sister.

George Fox, St Francis, and many Friends and friends I have met speak and also act this way.

..... Enough food, enough health, enough safety, enough warmth, enough respect, enough to show that I am also one of the brothers and sisters.



# A personal view on equality and Quakers in Southern Africa

*Justin Ellis, Quakers in Namibia*

“Equality? There’s no such thing, of course.”

I paraphrase a reaction that I once heard. And, in a way, the assertion seems to be true. Even identical twins are not quite equal, after all. And some people do achieve more than others in a particular field, due to the talents that they have and make use of. Happily, differences abound among us human beings, and can be a source of innovation and strength. Without such diversity we may not even have survived as a species. However, we in southern Africa are emerging from centuries of institutionalised racism that has left us with extreme and intolerable inequalities. But the economic, gender, spatial and social inequalities that we live with seem very difficult to eliminate, or even shift by a percentage point or two. Alas, even when we look to societies that show less pronounced gaps and tensions, some degree of inequality is to be found there too.

And yet there is a longstanding and widespread demand for equality, memorably in the slogan of the French Revolution, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death.” And in our context the Freedom Charter foresaw, “There shall be equal status in the bodies of state, in the courts and in the schools for all national groups and races.” Not surprisingly, the word equity, or equality, is to be found in our national mottos. Apparently, a basic sense of justice leads us to feel that all of us should enjoy equal rights, or equal opportunities, or equal dignity.

Interestingly, from its roots in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the Quaker movement also seems to have stressed equality as a central value. Early Quakers began to grapple with equality for men and women in their own structures. And, in opposition to nationalism and other factionalism, took a radical stance in opposition to war, and preparation for war.

It seems that the foundation of the Quaker belief in equality is spiritual. George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement arrived at the guiding insight that “there is that of God in everyone”. Every person therefore deserves, for instance, the utmost respect, and to be listened to. This tenet led Quakers to take



up unpopular causes such as the abolition of slavery, prison reform, the confinement of Boer women and children in concentration camps, and opposition to apartheid, amongst many others.

Belief in equality is also essential to how the Quaker movement is governed. Having rejected clergy and hierarchies as exploitative, Quakers have developed a way of worshiping and doing business that entails meeting in silence, waiting for the prompting and leading of the Spirit to come from among the members present. Consensus is required to come to a decision (sometimes with the assistance of clerks and elders.) There is just no way of knowing how the Spirit of God will intervene in a Meeting. A common experience, however, is that the Spirit works more easily with humble souls, and struggles with our egos. The “still small voice of God” may only be heard after a lot of noise and disruption. All members of the meeting are therefore to be valued equally for the potential contribution that they can make to the life of the meeting and the community.

If we as Quakers therefore have the feeling that equality is in our DNA, we perhaps have to think

more carefully about how we can be of greater service to our southern African community, with all its destructive challenges of inequality. Here are some suggested actions offered for discussion and enrichment.

*Reach out to include people from all strata of society in our meetings.* To achieve this we may have to find practical ways of overcoming the spatial and other segregation that seems to be one of the most troubling legacies of colonialism and apartheid. The Cape Western Monthly Meeting has taken an interesting initiative. Although the Meeting House is in Mowbray, they have started a group in Khayelitsha. Every month they hire transport so that everyone can be in one meeting.

*Seek suitable alliances with those civic organisations that represent the dispossessed.* This is not to be patronising. On the contrary, we should make ourselves accountable for what we have agreed to do as part of the alliance.

*Support moves towards the institutionalisation of Universal Basic Income (or at least widespread social grants.)* This policy measure seems to be gaining ground as some smaller-scale projects show promising results. Costs and practical arrangements need to be worked out. The Johannesburg Monthly Meeting has carried out a commendable project in terms of which higher-earning members contribute to a fund that can be drawn on by members in need.

*Oppose all forms of corruption.* The looting of state resources is eventually at the cost of the poor, since

an impoverished state has little at its disposal to bring about greater equality.

*Support land reform.* Although this issue is currently mired in the question of just compensation and property rights, there can be no denying that the God-given resource of land should be more equally distributed in an orderly way.

*Improve the education and health of dispossessed communities.* This could take the form of scholarships, as the Bulawayo Meeting has done for many years. It may also mean support for programmes of adult education or early childhood education, both of which are of long-term strategic importance.

*Question the institutions that we are part of, trying to bring about greater equality wherever possible.* Low pay, and discriminatory pay for women, should be a particular focus of attention, as well as excessive payments to executives.

*Be well informed on the facts of inequality in our societies.* Moreover, we should make these facts, and their consequences, better known. Quakers have a long tradition of tackling authorities in plain language on matters they would rather not highlight.

Unfortunately, this is a long agenda for a small meeting or organisation to tackle. However, we have valuable experiences to evaluate and draw on. Hopefully, as we continue to apply ourselves to these concerns, we will in time discover a shorter list of things that we can do well together for the common good.

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**“There should be no  
discrimination against  
languages people speak, skin  
colour or religion.”**  
– *Malala Yousafzai*

# Reflections on race, equality and the Clifton Beach drama

*Justine Limpitlaw, Quaker Community in Johannesburg*

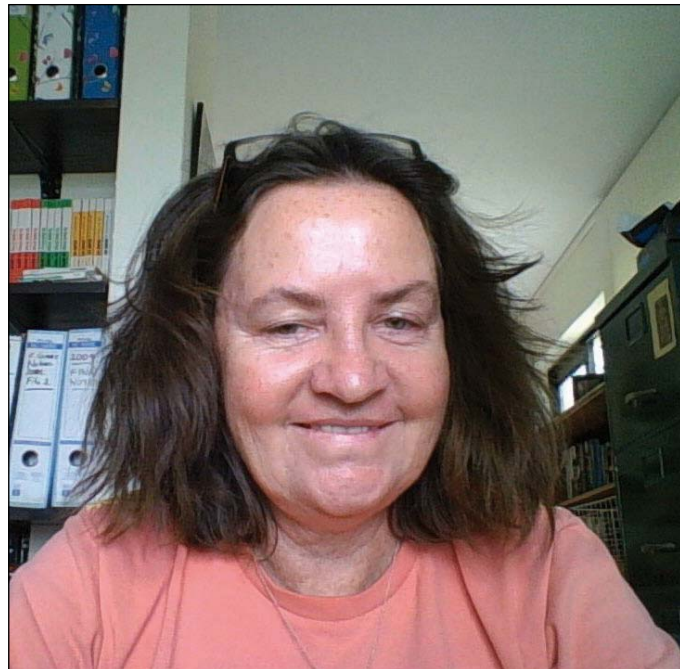
So, as investigations take place and the dust settles, it seems that the “truth” of the matter regarding the private security at Clifton Beach that got South Africa all het up in December, is that the private security guards didn’t ask anyone to leave the beach. Rather they advised beach goers at about 9pm that they shouldn’t be on the beach after dark because of crime concerns. It appears that a local ANC member misread this as private security wanting him to leave the beach because he was black. Friends will know what happened the next day: a number of political formations (Black First Land First, the EFF and the ANC) got together to protest and to slaughter a sheep on Clifton beach to appease the ancestors and to strike a blow against beach racism. Then charges were laid by the SPCA, counter-charges were laid for racism etc.

Now that the “truth” is out – many commentators are having a field day about race-baiters, racial hatred instigators and the media is being excoriated for believing there was an issue in the first place. Smugness abounds it seems, in the white community, it seems. I think that this is a big mistake.

It’s odd how, as a nation, we seem congenitally incapable of experiencing our beaches in December as the places of fun and relaxation they ought to be. Beaches bring out our inner Penny Sparrow it seems – black and white.

I want to give a personal, experiential view of my December holiday in Cape Town which included a trip to Clifton Beach in mid-December and how that impacted on my ideas around race and equality in South Africa generally, and Cape Town in particular...

It was a cool morning – early. Daniel, Katie and I accompanied our friends Don and Pedre and their three small dogs for a walk on Clifton beach – the one that is dog friendly. We thought we needed to be on Clifton First but ended up on Clifton Fourth by mistake – we kept getting it wrong and made the trek up the public pathways between the beaches to the road a number of times – on each occasion walking past armed private security paid for by the residents. At one point, one of the guards was right



in the pathway, causing me to ask if we were allowed on the path. He smiled, gestured in a friendly manner and waved us on down to the beach. After our walk as we were heading back up I saw he had stopped a hawkster who wanted to sell his beaded ware (birds and the like) on the beach. I don’t know how it ended but I was left with the distinct impression that the hawkster was not being waved onto the beach as I was.

We were in Cape Town for a week – we went to Kirstenbosch, the winelands, restaurants, up the Cable Car – general touristy things. The entire time I kept remarking on the fact that there very few black people in any of the places we were in – it was absolutely noticeable. It really felt to me like we were no longer in Africa. What was also remarkable was that only two of our numerous Uber drivers (we hadn’t hired a car) were South African. So what was going on? Over dinner one night I met a friend of a friend; he’s in retail at the Waterfront. I asked him about the lack of local Uber drivers and he said nonchalantly that all of his black staff in his shop were foreigners. He said he once hired a local Xhosa guy “but he didn’t fit in at all” and soon left. It seemed

pretty clear he was relieved at the departure.

When the furore over alleged racism by private security exploded on social media a couple of weeks later, I posted a tweet about my experience at Clifton and in Cape Town generally. I wrote: “So two weeks ago, I went to #CliftonBeach. The private security presence was noticeable. The clear message communicated that people like me were welcome. People unlike me? Not so much. Cape Town of today feels a lot like Cape Town of my childhood in the 1970s. It is not OK.”

I have never had such an overwhelming response to a Tweet. It has been read by over 300 000 people. It was liked over 2900 times, retweeted over 1800 times. And the responses were, depressingly, largely racialized. Many white people responded angrily, swearing at me or accusing me of mistaking my feelings for facts. Some agreed with what I was saying but with a “yes, but” response referring to the sheep slaughter. Many black people responded enthusiastically saying things like: “Thank you for being one of the very few honest people out there on this matter” and “Bless you Justine, all we need in this country is honesty, self-reflection but above all humanity”. For me the response that stood out was this one from a black woman: “My first visit there I couldn’t understand why there were so few black people around. I came to understand from the stares I received and the looks of shock that they were simply made to feel unwelcome and so they stayed away”. It was the response that accorded most closely with my experience.

Cape Town is a jewel of a city for South Africa. It is the only fully DA controlled city and is, at least in

the City Centre and southern suburbs, clean with excellent public transport. Rates of investment in the city are high and on many governance matrixes: healthcare, education, internet access, renewable energy use, it does better than any other city in the country. It should be a beacon to all South Africans to vote for the DA. And yet it is not. Why? Precisely because middle class black people who visit appear to be left with the distinct impression that they are not welcome – that they are somehow intruding just by being there. I was on holiday with friends and family, not particularly careful to notice societal mores, but it was clear as day that this was not an integrated city. It sends a loud and clear message that whites are more valued than blacks. No wonder the DA’s support levels remain stubbornly low among a number of middle-class black people, even in the face of some truly dreadful governance by the ruling party.

As Friends we have a particular duty to reach out to each other and to demonstrate that we see that of God in every person – black and white. I find our multi-racial meeting in Johannesburg to be a haven for me, of kindness and friendship. Where I am recognised as so much more than just a white woman. We have something of real value (being able to build a community) to share with our neighbours, colleagues and with our nation. This is of course not exclusive to Quakers but I wonder how that trust and care that we find in our Monthly Meetings and Yearly Meeting can be replicated? I worry that we, as a nation, are simply going to keep bashing heads on our beaches unless we can find a path to general mutual respect and care. And it starts with me.

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“When you’re accustomed  
to privilege, equality feels  
like oppression.”

– *Author unknown*

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# Equality

*Rory Short, Quaker Community in Johannesburg*

The dictionary says of equality, “the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, or opportunities.” So, equality means sameness between people in some sense.

The reality is that we are each genetically unique, so it is simply not possible to be the same and therefore equal in a genetic sense. Even identical twins develop differently as they mature. Nature is inherently evolutionary and to operate effectively evolution requires variety, not sameness. So in matters of equality we are outside of nature. That is why there is simply no general agreement on which attribute should be brought into sameness or equality. As a consequence, equality is a very slippery concept because it is created, not by nature, but by human beings to refer to some humanly created attribute that some of us think should be equalised or brought into sameness.

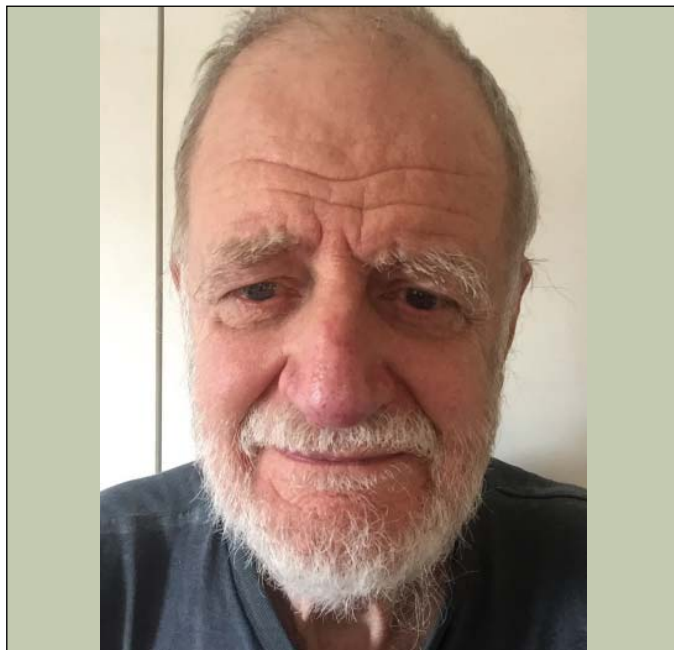
So, let us look into the attributes listed in the dictionary definition of equality given above.

Status was an early issue on which Friends differed from society at large. Friends knew experientially that every person is equal before God and thus a humanly attributed status was meaningless in Spiritual terms. Consequently they refused to use honorific titles within the Quaker community or outside of it.

In a similar vein Friends continue to struggle for human rights to be equally accorded to everybody in the world. Sadly this is still not the case in many countries so the struggle for human rights continues.

I would think equality of opportunities for individuals to flourish is a general condition in society that most Friends would fully support. It is not an easy condition to give effect to, however. This is because the opportunities for individuals to flourish are determined by two factors, one, how the individual pursues the opportunities that are available to them, and two, how other people, both as collectives and as individuals, create opportunities for others to exploit.

Individual pursuit of opportunities is wholly up to the individual and therefore not open to strictures on equality. Opportunities provided by society on the other hand are, however, open to strictures on equality. But what needs to be born in mind



is that the provision of opportunities is totally dependent on the society's capacity to offer them. Where a society's ability to provide opportunities is patchy, as ours is in education for example, then politicians actually only have one choice, to work to upgrade the educational opportunities offered in the weaker patches. But in South Africa, because of an entrenched and widespread false belief in the objective reality of victimhood and therefore of entitlement, also shared by politicians unfortunately, they think that they have another choice.

This other apparent choice is, in the name of equality, to extend the better educational opportunities, offered in some patches, to members of less well-endowed patches by legislating the forced absorption of the children from less well-endowed patches into schools in the better endowed patches.

It is, I think, the politicians sense of victimhood which entitles them to ignore the fact that these desirable educational opportunities are also dependent on the community that is sending their children to the school, and if this community feels that the education opportunities available to their children are being eroded by this legislation, then they will withdraw from the school and the educational opportunities offered to the pupils in the school will naturally diminish as a result.

# Talking about equality: My experiences and reflections

*Sipho Nsimbi, Bulawayo Quaker Meeting*

Talk is cheap. For a world that talks so much about EQUALITY, we seem to have succeeded in entrenching inequality. I am reminded of a response by a teenage participant contributing in an AVP workshop to why he thought there was no peace in his neighborhood. He said it is because “people don’t treat each other nice and there is no respect.” Probing him further I asked him what he thought he could do to change such a situation, and he said “nothing – it is just like that”. I brought a smile on his face when I suggested that I hoped AVP would change his attitude as we cannot be “keeping the peace while disturbing the peace.”

## **Outward signs of equality**

I believe the principle of equality is rooted in African culture through caring for one another. This derives from the fact that as humans in general, communities and families in particular we have the same needs of water, food, shelter, to be loved, supported and respected and able to access care and resources when needed. Support systems like the extended family and burial societies are great equalizers and ensure that no one who needs sanctuary is excluded.

I had some hard lessons on this in my childhood. My Father was the headmaster of our local school and insisted on all children in the neighborhood, regardless of who they were and whose they were, go to school. He would personally visit various homes and talk to parents and guardians into allowing all children to attend school. Many complied, but then many were unable to pay school fees. In spite of the education authority regulations being clear about fees required upfront, my father allowed the children in without paying, hoping for a miracle, I guess. By the end of the year all fees arrears had to be cleared and the only way the authority could recover them was through garnishing my father’s entire salary for the rest of the upcoming year. Our family experienced great hardship as a result, needless to say we as the children were very bitter about this. My father saw the opportunity of an education being important enough to be accessed not only by his own children but by all, even if he ended up making sacrifices



for it. It was only much later that I recognized a life lesson here – exercising the principle of equality by taking a bold step to act in the interest of others and acknowledging their worth. Once this spirit of caring or equilibrium is forsaken, inequality reigns. Behind the diversities created by religion, race and cultures, are human beings who yearn to live in peace and dignity.

## **Where we are now**

While we acknowledge that for healthy relationships to prevail, we need to work on balancing the “Ubuntu” equation, we are at the same time losing grip of this human value. Just to share a few vivid scenarios that indicate how our world has failed miserably in promoting equality and in “answering that of God in everyone”, I quote one preacher who had plenty to say about this issue. He talks of how “we have managed to make a living by destroying life”, how “we have ascended high by destroying the weak”, how “we have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values”, how “we are in a world with plenty, yet a world in need”, and “how we have many peacebuilding organizations yet with billions pledged in support and preparation for war” – “a

world where we seem to be conquering yet being conquered". This is a very disturbing narrative which we need to be addressing. This is how far we have come in almost normalizing inequality and largely limiting equality to discussion forums.

### **What does the Constitution say?**

Various nations the world over have enshrined the principle of equality and non-discrimination in their constitutions. Zimbabwe for instance has this captured in Section 56 of its constitution. It talks about every person being equal before the law, women and men having the right to equal treatment in all spheres, every person having the right to be treated fairly and not discriminated on any grounds be it race, tribe, age, disability, social or economic status etc. I have always viewed it as a powerful statement but saddened by the glaring lack of political will to implement it for as long as equality is not embraced, people will not enjoy any freedoms. We bemoan a death of conscience around the issue of equality in all spheres of life and we should all continue to seek ways to uphold this value for all our

sakes and that of future generations.

### **Calling our faith into action**

At their Retreat in June 2018, our Young Friends led in this Quest when they conducted their worship sharing under the theme of Equality. As part of their motivation they came up with a definition of equality as follows:

E – Equality for All

Q – Quakers In Action

U – Unity

A – Achievements /Attitudes

L – Love one another

I – I, as a person am equal with other people

T– Transformation, Truth and Trust

Y – Young Friends doing something about equality

My wish is for us to fight this death of conscience around equality issues where ever we are in whatever way we can for as long as we can!

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**“Massive poverty and obscene  
inequality are such terrible  
scourges of our times — times in  
which the world boasts breath-  
taking advances in science,  
technology, industry and wealth  
accumulation.”**

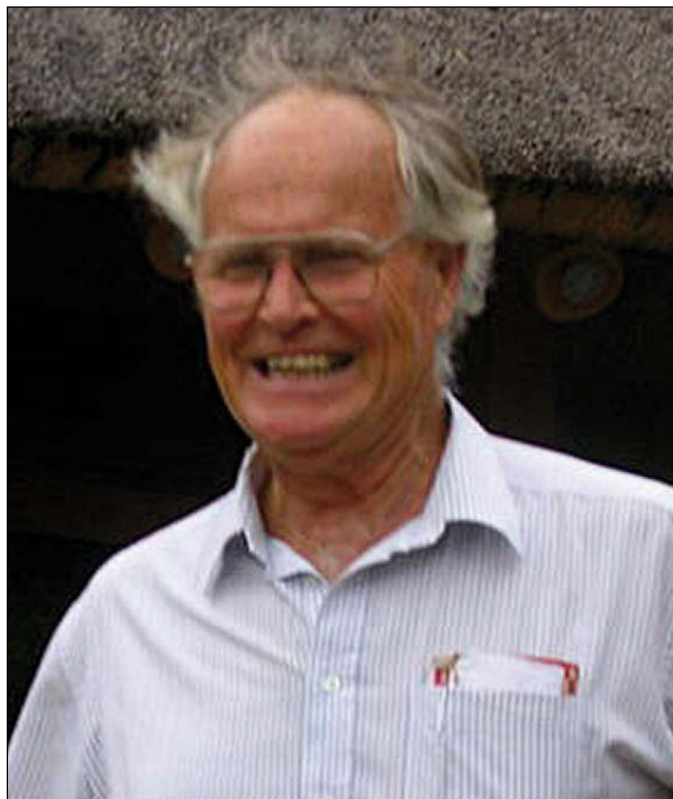
**– Nelson Mandela**

# Equality

*Vernon Gibberd, Eastern Cape Quakers; Nailsworth Local Meeting, Gloucestershire*

Is equality a good thing? Judging by the attention it gets nowadays, perhaps it is. Indeed, it has slipped into today's discourse displacing sustainability as the yardstick to be applied to any new activity, institution or promotion. But first, we should check what we mean by the word equality. Are we all to be equal under this new dispensation we are striving for? Equal as in 'same everything'? Not very practical, as we are all different with very unequal genetic endowments of health, strength, size and – dare I say it? – intelligence? Not to mention inherited privileges. So in what should we all be equal? Or, to ask another question: why are we here? Darwin had a line on this one: to survive and multiply, but he was careful not to apply this to the human species which now realised that it has the potential to almost extinguish life on earth altogether. For with that ability has come other endowments: to use the gifts we received at birth for the Common Good rather than to improve our personal chances of survival and having many descendants – and destroying the earth...

So, how do we go about working for the Common Good? Becoming as rich as we can so that we can create businesses with lots of jobs and then write generous cheques as donations to organisations, helping those who have not become so rich? An alumnus of my university and his wife the other day, wrote a cheque for £100,000,000 to it. So I hesitate to add here ... and pay lots of taxes. My Quaker school teacher once said "I like paying taxes. Look at all the nice things which the government provides for me – roads, street lights, hospitals, schools, libraries!" He was someone who chose not to become as rich as he could and instead chose to teach me and countless other teenagers biology. But I don't think he would have described his motivation as striving for equality. Furthermore, there just isn't room enough, nor are there enough resources for more than a handful of people to become rich enough to create those businesses and write those big cheques. So, "making lots of money" may not be such an effective way of contributing to the Common Good, even if they paid lots of taxes. More especially – as we are now realising – the action of making lots of money is simply the hoovering up of money



from the Common Purse, making the rich super-powerful in that they can wield political influence with their billions and leaving the rest of us – with jobs, perhaps, but in an unstable, even precarious position as regards our survival. The Common Good is clearly not served very well this way.

Assuming I'm right, and serving the Common Good is a Good Thing, how can we best set about it? A good starting point is that book by Wilkinson and Pickett<sup>a</sup> "The Spirit Level", a book that should be on our shelves right next to our Quaker Faith and Practice. The authors studied the statistics of about fifty "developed" countries with regard to their quality of life: homicides, suicides, mental and physical health, literacy etc and – surprise, surprise, those countries with a more equal spread of wealth and income come out *better*! [Apologies for any inaccuracies here, I'm living out of a suitcase just now; my copy is 5,000 miles away]. So, one might say, case closed: equality is a Good Thing.

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*a Published by Penguin, UK. I think it is in print, widely available second-hand from about £1-50*



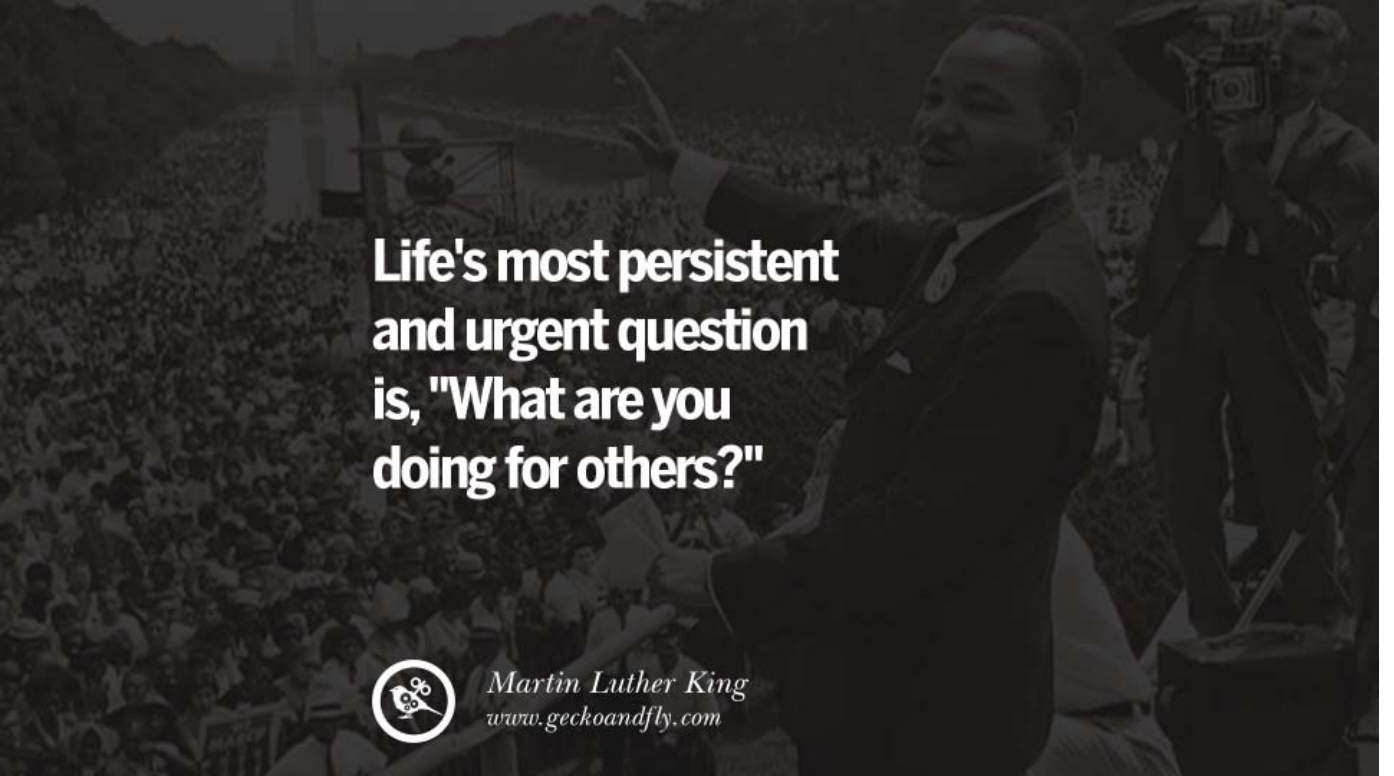
But hang on, that means we are all going to try to be more equal just so that there will be fewer murders, fewer brain tumours, more classical concerts and better street lighting? I think this is where we may have got things back to front in that we are “doing equality” in order to reap material benefits. But our life potential is more than this. Doing something in expectation of being rewarded is not far removed from the motivation of those robber barons who dominate business today, who worked hard, took risks and became “successful” in hoovering up all our money. Can’t we just be nice to other people, be more sharing, more caring, just for the heck of it? Especially when people reciprocate it. OK – so far. But if we restrict our circle of friends with whom we can exercise these caring qualities – as we are wont to do (especially we Quakers, sometimes I think), what good is that really? Jesus said something about how the tax collectors looked after each other...

We have to go BIG on equality. And start with the very beginning of life. Conception. Mothers-to-be hold the future in their wombs and the Common Good requires that we afford them as much space, love, material support and recognition as possible. Then, as they are born, these children must be afforded equality of opportunity and the quality of life that will enable them to make use of such opportunities as are available to them. The idea that there should be a Quaker School with fees so high that I can’t trust my memory to quote them here sits ill with our children having access to the Common Good. I attended one of these 65 years ago when fagging, corporal punishment and military training were normal in British Boys Private Boarding Schools; Quakers had a statement to make about boys’ secondary education and these practices. These schools made it very well, albeit at the cost of charging fees. However, these fees were minuscule beside those of today (possibly only about one fiftieth of today’s); we shared the washing up, had cold baths, slept in rather bleak dormitories and had memorably modest meals. But I was slapped down at Monthly Meeting once for raising this Quaker Schools issue: “Don’t let’s open that can of worms now.” Then there is equality in access to higher education, the interview at which the way you spoke your mother tongue or the extra-curricular interests you might espouse could easily doom your hope of getting into the elite, graduate world. Much better now, but not a Quaker achievement as was the testimony of those schools 65 years ago from which I benefitted.

And so to Life Chances. If you judge a country on how it treats its children, tomorrow’s citizens, and on how successfully or otherwise it eschews the worship of money for the sake of becoming rich, then you can begin to predict what sort of future we are carving out for our young. For a start, it will exhibit social stability, without the extremes that trigger revolution, but with the richness of achievements in sports, arts, science and philosophy that are the product of untrammelled access to learning in all these subjects. Its people will have hope, equality of hope, because there will be a feeling that “we are all in this together” even in bad times. Least of all because there should not/will not be a parasitic class hoovering up all the money, leaving the rest of us with those zero-hours contracts.

In practical terms, what can or should a Quaker start doing tomorrow to help us all move in favour of building on the Common Good – the push towards an equality that will bring social harmony and decrease the ills of society and families that are so clearly spelt out by Wilkinson and Pickett? Look around you and see what’s wrong. A homeless person sleeping in a doorway? Possible responses here could fill a book, from helping him or her to a decent meal to requiring your MP to support a proper social housing policy *and in the meantime supporting, and encouraging your Meeting to support whoever and whatever is doing something practical in anticipation of government accepting that the people it governs have a human right to a home*. This will mean money! Someone tells you that kids come to a local school without shoes. Find out more, they may be hungry, their family life may be rubbish. Get together with your neighbours, friends, Meeting, whatever, and help the school with sustained cash donations (yes, money!) to enable it to make it a more equal place for the kids, pending a government coming to power that would eliminate child poverty. And possibly remove some of the causes of family breakdown. You see where this is heading? Quakers on the whole are rich. We are. And it is in putting my mind into gear to write this that I realise how mean I can be when asked for donations or help with some project. But then, who said that following the teaching of Jesus was easy? To achieve the kind of equality that will strengthen the Common Good, we have to live with a constant tension within ourselves as we acknowledge how privileged we are, but that these privileges have been loaned to us for the sake of (re)building the Common Good.

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**Life's most persistent  
and urgent question  
is, "What are you  
doing for others?"**



*Martin Luther King*  
[www.geckoandfly.com](http://www.geckoandfly.com)



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Nothing humbles  
or uplifts you than a  
realisation that we  
are all the same –  
wanting the same  
things in life.

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