



Southern Africa
Yearly Meeting

Epistle from Southern Africa Yearly Meeting Gathering

Held in hybrid format (onsite at Good Shepherd Retreat Centre, Hartbeespoort, near Johannesburg, South Africa, and online) from 3 to 8 January 2023

We send warm greetings to Friends everywhere!

Friends Southern Africa were excited to meet in-person and to welcome Friends from Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda and Britain; and Friends online from Southern Africa, Britain and Sweden Yearly Meetings. Also attending were Tim Gee, General Secretary of Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC), and Bainito Wamalwa, Clerk of FWCC Africa Section. Our delight is in the attendance of an unprecedented number of young friends, children and young young friends representing almost all local meetings. We give sincere thanks to those who have made this meeting of 132 Friends possible.

In the face of structural and systemic inequality, environmental and climate degradation, and social instability we considered the theme of Ubuntu as both exploratory and as a response. Ubuntu is a word that means “humanness”. Its essence is captured in the principle: “a person is a person through other persons.” A person’s value as a human being depends on acting for the sake of community and promoting community interests before individual interest. The concept of community is a core Ubuntu value in African thinking about humanity. Statements which encapsulate the essence of ubuntu include *Umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu* - I am because you are.

In introducing the topic the clerks mentioned the vision of the Prophet Ezekiel who saw a valley of dry bones and the hope of the gathering would be to put flesh on the dry bones.

In considering the applied meaning of Ubuntu in other cultures and Quaker testimonies, we drew on the life experiences and reflections from Friends. We also shared concerning the equivalent of Ubuntu in other cultures, how the Quaker community lives or can embrace the precepts of Ubuntu; whether Ubuntu could be applied in all geospatial contexts; whether Ubuntu can be associated with the growth of Quaker churches in East Africa; what Ubuntu could mean in efforts to resolve the climate crisis and other crises we face, including inequality; whether Quakers- in the spirit of Ubuntu were doing enough to promote economic inclusivity. Lastly, we explored the concept of Ubuntu from a Quaker perspective. We valued the researched inputs and recommendations of the panelists who inspired the rest of the discussions which followed.

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Further dimension was added by the Richard Gush lecture presented by David Niyonzima from Kwibuka Yearly Meeting in Burundi, who is vice Chancellor of the International Leadership University of Burundi and President of Trauma Healing and Reconciliation services. He shared his personal experiences of the genocide in Burundi and how he had felt the light of God, telling him to overcome fear and hatred. This led him to forgive the person who had informed the army which subsequently killed 8 of his students. He cited many countries where darkness had been overcome by Light and spoke about African countries in need of healing from trauma. He said that Quakers need to respond to the ocean of darkness with Light. The talk led to deep feelings of unresolved trauma amongst us and reflections on forgiveness and healing.

We shared remembrances and testimonies to the lives of departed Friends.

The Young Friends focused on the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). This was enriched by facilitation from Quakers from different meetings. Young Friends appreciated the emphasis on better communication as a life-skill. There was a wider discussion on how SAYM should conduct AVP training in future. It was suggested that AVP training should not be concurrent with YM to enable facilitators and Young Friends to attend YM sessions. There was a report on AVP progress in Southern African countries and possible further SAYM involvement.

Children and Young Young Friends used the SAYM motif of the hands symbolically to explore Ubuntu from an Individual (one finger) and family, community, Ubuntu in different languages (the other fingers). They also went swimming, watched movies, went on night-walks and the cable car excursion. The children presented a short video made during their night-walk and read two poems which they had written concerning Ubuntu.

Southern African Faith Communities Environmental Institute (SAFCEI) Executive Director Francesca de Gasparis, in her impassioned presentation, spoke of Wangari Maathai with whom she had worked in Kenya for six years. Her recommendation to Quakers was that we work collaboratively with other faith organisations on issues regarding fossil fuels, energy, food security and climate change. We should work from the individual level upwards and embrace different types of activism.

In anticipation of the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) World Plenary Meeting in South Africa, 5-13 August 2024, an update on the various preparations was given by the Clerk of the Local Arrangements Committee, Thuli Mbete. The IPC Co-Clerks, Bainito Wamalwa (Clerk FWCC Africa Section) and Nancy Fee, contributed to the update. Tim Gee (General Secretary FWCC) taught us the new Quaker song.

With warm Friendly greetings from Southern Africa Yearly Meeting which we all felt was one of the most loving, connected, spiritually enriching and *African* Yearly Meetings we have ever had.

The spirit of Ubuntu lives!