

THEME: *WHAT BINDS US TOGETHER, WHAT PULLS US APART*

TOPIC: *Love in Action-Bringing Hope for Healing a Wounded World.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Good morning, Friends.

Thank you for introducing me. May I also express my gratitude to the SAYM community for affording me this opportunity to share in my own way the Richard Gush legacy. I will be talking to our theme “What Binds us together, What Pulls us Apart” under the topic “Love in Action-Bringing Hope for Healing a Wounded World”.

First, I wish to acknowledge the valuable inputs and guidance from various Friends who have shared their insights on this theme and thus added their voices on this engaging subject.

I was also fortunate to have had easy access to the wide range of Quaker resource materials at the BQM library to anchor my talk. Mostly I have refrained from paraphrasing some of my references, preferring to quote them verbatim to honour the “place” or “source” where they sprang from.

I will also use the terms “Quakers” and “Friends” interchangeably depending on which term comes first to my mind. With reference to the term “us” in the theme, I have opted to leave it open to be defined by the context it will be used in and my scripture references will largely come from the 2nd Edition of the New Living Translation Bible.

In acknowledgment of music as one of those aspects with great potential to bind us, I have included some songs I felt would ground my talk. The singers, Michael J Smith and Cece Winnans are duly acknowledged.

My gratitude to all.

INTRODUCTION

What we believe in usually determines how we live and most of those beliefs are usually handed down to us by our forebears and significant others.

The old proverb “the apple never falls far away from the tree” is echoed here as the characteristics children often display are from their parents. I want to believe that Quakers fall within the bracket having inherited a way of living pioneered by George Fox. A lifestyle that guides people to cherish their common humanity. With this legacy, the Quakers do not need to constantly redefine themselves as they are bound by the values that provide a great framework

on which they go about “letting our lives speak”. This proclamation by George Fox has become a central tenant of Quakerism.

Even as we cherish the spirit of oneness created by these values, Friends remain mindful of the social injustices of the world around them that breed conflict and threaten to pull people apart. What are Friends to do in the face of these dividers which challenge what would otherwise be peaceful spaces for both our physical and spiritual well-being?

Inspired by the wisdom and optimism of Friends who have gone before us, we have been encouraged to put our faith into action by using our capacities to change the bad into good. This is the kind of optimism Ram Dass, the American spiritual leader, alluded to when he said “everything in your life is there as a vehicle for transformation, use it.” And for Quakers this translates into a strong awareness that they cannot afford to be bystanders but rather need to get involved in processes that can change lives and situations. This sentiment is also echoed by Robert Lawrence Smith in his book “A Quaker Book of Wisdom”. He describes the “urge to heal and make ourselves and others whole” as a Quaker obsession. It is no wonder that Quakers play a watchdog role and are visible when issues of social justice and human rights are discussed. In all this all God asks of us is to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with him (Micah 6v8).

Reflection on Theme/Music

May we take a couple of minutes to reflect on our theme while listening to Michael J. Smith singing “Ancient Words”, not to get trapped in the past, but rather to draw strength from a faith that continues to nurture and bind us. A faith so ancient, yet so current.

Friends - Michael W. Smith singing “Ancient Words”

WHERE AND WHEN IT ALL BEGAN

When I started preparing for this lecture I remember sitting for a whole two hours, pen in hand to write down something, but only succeeding in filling half my waste paper bin. I then decided to go and sit in the garden with my copy of “Living Adventurously” instead. I regularly read from it but on this day, I was purposeful in my reading. It was as if I was reading it for the first time. As I went through Quaker journeys of various Friends, I began to really appreciate the role of Faith in our lives. It seems that once we are convinced that we are under guidance from the Spirit, we act even against all odds. It was also clear that no action is considered too small as hundreds of lives may depend on you taking that action at that particular time. So, it seems that armed with this combination of faith in our capacities to achieve good outcomes and the optimism in God’s promise that His plans for us are always for good and not evil, we feel equipped to go out and “heal the world”.

The common adage that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step resonates with my personal story and with this theme. It is the strong roots of my tree of life I believe that enabled me to blend quite effortlessly from my biological family into the Quaker community. Apart from providing us with a sense of identity, the family and relationships therein often mirror who we grow up to become. Confucius the Chinese sage in his wisdom explained the importance of family well-being through the following poem :

To put the world right in order
We must first put the nation in order;
To put the nation in order
We must first put the family in order;
To put the family in order,
We must first cultivate our personal life,
We must first set our hearts right.

What's in a name

There is a strong parallel between the physical family and the spiritual one. They both spring from the heart where everything really gets personal, like when someone calls you by your first name. Allow me to share some milestones that have shaped my beliefs, my name featuring strongly among these.

I am the second of eight siblings born to a Christian couple who were both teachers in the Salvation Army schools in the Matebeleland South Region of Zimbabwe. Beyond teaching they were also envoys or preachers in the church. These combined roles made them leaders and pillars of the community and this contributed to my parents having a huge sense of social responsibility. Needless to say, this role modelling put a lot of pressure on us as children to live exemplary lives and really excel in education. But the real story begins with my name or rather our names as eight siblings - five sisters and three brothers. Giving a name to someone or something is not an easy task. It involves one being truthful about one's relationship with the subject, perhaps to be prophetic and name them based on what you want them to become. Sometimes you can give a name that resonates with something that greatly impacted you. Families have this task and my parents were no exception. They gave all eight of us names that make one sentence, all of them prophetic. They tell a story of who they wished us to become. I have done my best to translate the Ndebele names here:

The 1st born is Sihle - meaning” blessed and highly favoured”

By this

Siphon - treasured gift

That has

Malusi - a good shepherd

Because it shall

Dalubuhle - always do good

As it is

Thintiwe - led and guided

To be

Bongile - grateful and thankful

For being

Gciniwe - preserved and kept safe

to

Qondile - walk upright always

This gift that was me had value because of being blessed and having a good shepherd with goodness likely to follow it because of being always led and guided to be grateful. Hence it is going to be preserved and kept safe and able to walk upright. Each one of us is a value addition to the others and feels a collective responsibility to live up to our names, letting them speak. Friends, for those who still wonder “what’s in a name?” I would like to say there is plenty. While I do not want to dwell on the issue I want to point out that that this experience was truly humbling for me. My father said this deliberate effort to name us this way was to cultivate unity and interdependence amongst us as no man is an island. I can boldly say these were my first lessons on Ubuntu - I am because you are. We are different yet with equal worth before God.

In the same vein let us look at the various names that Quakers have been called by. The basis of unity here being in their actions - what they have been led by the spirit to do and made visible to the outside world. They were once called “Children of Light”, then “Publishers of Truth” before they were referred to as “Friends of truth.” Finally, they became the “Religious Society of Friends”, a name that has survived to this day. They took the name “Quakers” in their stride, even putting a positive spin to it since it was originally coined in ridicule.

What has remained constant and binding them together despite these name changes has been the practice of stillness in their meetings for worship, which they find essential for connecting with the divine. This has changed very little since the days of Gorge Fox. While we acknowledge that many Meetings especially in the Americas and East Africa have since embraced the pastoral style of worship much like the Protestant churches, yet even there as in other churches, a moment of silence has a place. Beyond this diversity in worship practice, Quakers still find unity in upholding that of God in everyone and corporately waiting for the spirit to lead them into "truth and love". No divisions are therefore insurmountable among members of this faith community as long as they heed their moral compass that leads them to exalt equality, to be of service to others and to promote peace.

Calling each other "Friends" is another dimension of bringing everyone into the fold. Ephesians 4 v2-5 captures the essence of this friendship marked by humility, gentleness, patience and "making allowance for each other's faults" because of "your love and peace". There is a meeting of minds here. No wonder friends are comfortable calling each other by their first names resonating with this challenging statement by Myles Monroe, the Bahamian evangelist, author and leadership consultant, that declares: "live until your first name is enough" because the more effective you are, the less titles you need. After all, your children won't bare your titles but your name".

Legacies and Life lessons

Friends, this brings us to the issue of legacies. There is so much that flows out of the names George Fox, John Woolman, William Penn and not forgetting Richard Gush, that screams Quakerism - the vision, the values, the voice of conscience, bold actions, non -violence, deep spirituality and much more. So many experiences of Gorge Fox shaped this rich legacy that we as Quakers uphold and want to protect today.

I can recall a few significant moments and life lessons I hold on to even today since my childhood. I am inclined to believe that there is nothing worse than attending a school where both your parents teach and the right thing to do is that they treat you the same way as other children, which they did. Like when you get to school late and the headmaster who is none other than your father must give you two strokes just like any other late comer. The funny thing is that he knew why I was late coming to school that day but he wouldn't entertain it otherwise he would be required to show leniency to all. When reaching home, the only reference made to the incident was my father encouraging me to leave early for school the next day so that I wouldn't miss morning assembly. I later realized that the lesson here was on self-discipline while also raising awareness that the world out there will not give the headmaster's children special attention. Rules would apply to all and one must be prepared. There is a lesson on equality too, not showing favoritism because it is divisive.

Then there were weekend chores especially the ones we had to do at neighbors' homes. As community leaders my parents had identified a few people in the neighborhood who through age, sickness and living alone needed a little help with some tasks. We would clean, feed the chickens or fetch water for them. Needless to say, I hated this at the time but later realized that without our assistance, these people would have really struggled. He never missed an opportunity to remind us not to let a day go by without doing something good for someone.

There are some life lessons here about caring for one another and living beyond self. What I remember as the worst experience was having to go without a lot of things for a whole year because there wasn't enough money to go around. My father did not want any child of school-going age not attending school. So, he allowed many to attend even though they were not able to pay fees. So when the education officials came and found that the fees account was in arrears, they took my father's salary for a whole year to clear the arrears. This meant that the family had to manage with just my mother's meagre salary for a whole 12 months. You will note that those days women earned much less than men for the same job. This experience held big lessons for me on principles of equality for all before God and caring for others. The headmaster's children cannot be the only ones attending school.

Friends there is nothing more important to children than their friends. When coming from school one day in the rain, we got our books wet. Our parents decided to buy us proper backpacks to move us away from using plastic bags to carry our books.

Needless to say, we were so excited by this. But after carrying the backpacks for half the school term, we stopped using them, no longer feeling comfortable to use them as our friends did not have them. We gradually went back to using plastic bags like the others. The funny thing is that our parents did not make an issue of it. They seemed to understand the real reason even though we told them they were too heavy. Backpacks threatened to divide us and we did not want to lose our friends over this. We were children then but we learnt to rely on our gut feeling if something didn't feel right. We were not comfortable doing something that separated us from others.

I have just realized that I have not said much about my mother who was always present for us. She was a disciplinarian who taught us the basics of practising social responsibility through the principle of covering gaps. If there was a task to be completed and the person who would normally take that on was not available, somebody else was expected to just step in and get it done. After some anxious moments of each of us looking at each other wondering who will step in, one look from my mother in your direction would tell you that it was you to get on with it. But the sense of balance that this practice brought to our lives is a rich legacy. When they least expected, the boys were assigned to do laundry, wash the dishes and mop the floors. In the same vein, the girls would have their smiles wiped off their faces when assigned to milk the goats, round up the donkeys and sheep and water them in a complete reversal of traditional gender roles. This happened often and it led to all of us being empowered to undertake any chores and manage all roles.

Needless to say, this made us versatile and as my mother would always say, no one knows what life will throw at you. The best part was being rewarded for these efforts by freshly baked scones and pumpkin pudding which my mother as a home economics teacher was famous for. Our evenings after supper were the highlight of the day and were always memorable. If we were not playing under the moonlight with our friends from the nearby homesteads, we were sitting by the fireside listening to our grandmother's folktales. At other times we would just listen to our parents' beautiful melodies as they sang various church songs. My parents were great singers and I think that is where I got my love for music and singing.

After completing my secondary education, I started training as a nurse at a Bulawayo hospital but only managed to do nine months of that before getting a British Council scholarship to study Sociology at a British university. While my father was excited about this development, my mother doubted the wisdom of discontinuing my training, citing a bird in hand being worth two in the bush. But off I went to attend college in Buckinghamshire, having to move with speed because others were already two weeks into the first semester. Luckily, I had some money saved from my trainee nurse's salary to allow me to just pack up and go. On arriving at Victoria Station from Heathrow airport I remember asking a policeman nearby how far I was from London because I guess my surroundings did not match the images I had about the city. He looked at me with a puzzled look, then laughed telling me "young lady you are in the heart of London!". I will never forget his exact words. Sheepishly I went on to ask him how I could get to the British Council offices quickly. This time he was ever so kind and went out of his way to call me a taxi cab to get me there. The rest is history. University was a blast and after completing my three-year course I did not have the luxury of taking a gap year like some of my colleagues. I started working as a residential social worker for two London Boroughs. Then I got married to a man who still owes me a honeymoon because the day after the wedding ceremony he had to rush to Manchester some 260km away to sit for an exam. I am still waiting to this day. This has to be the biggest lesson in patience!

An even bigger lesson was yet to come when I was twenty-seven, having come home to visit, now married and with a one-year-old son. My father and I sat down and settled into what turned out to be a deep conversation that would further mould my character. His first question was how Mrs Nsimbi was doing? I responded that she was doing ok. The second question was "How is the mother of this handsome boy doing?" After a little hesitation trying to process its meaning, I responded that the mother was fine and adjusting to motherhood. Then the third question came – Tell me how Sipho is. For this one I really paused with concern wondering whether my father was going senile as he seemed to be asking the same question over and over! But as it turned out, these were different questions enquiring on the well-being of Sipho the daughter he raised, Sipho now a married woman and Sipho now a mother. These were separate roles and identities each with its own level of responsibilities. His concern was whether his daughter did not lose herself and compromise her good character while fulfilling these different roles which he thought would be a pity. It wasn't until much later that I really appreciated the sense of this conversation and its

hidden life lessons - not to allow situations to change you and that your good character must shine through all of them. As we go through different situations whether within Meeting or outside there is always a risk of being conflicted by different opinions and different responsibilities. This is when we need to “be still and know that He is God” (Psalm 46v10) who can lead us on the right path.

My journey into Quakerism in 1997 began with a chance meeting with Edna Caddick at Hlekweni where I had gone to check on courses offered by this Quaker institution on behalf of someone. We had a good conversation and I was inspired into attending Bulawayo Monthly Meeting after that. Little did I know that this encounter would lead to my board membership at Hlekweni from 2004 to 2014. Between these two legacies, one of my childhood and the other of Quakerism, I have great optimism that my conscience which springs from the great life lessons from my upbringing and “the voice of truth within”, will lead me to shun discord and do the right thing.

Connectors and Dividers

Under his section on Faith in Action, Geoffrey Durham in his book “Being a Quaker”, talks about Quakerism as a faith where the religious and the everyday meet and are indivisible. I guess this should come as no surprise since Quakerism is a way of life that is simple without rituals, no clear theology or creeds. It starts with friends going for a Meeting, listening to the message of Quakerism, then spend the rest of the time putting into practice. This could be at home, in the streets or workplace, basically responding to the inner light in others as best as you can. This sounds simple enough and ordinary, yet impactful and sustainable.

What invisible thread or pillars of strength are binding Quakers and keeping them on this path and direction? One would be forgiven for thinking that a lifestyle so simple, unencumbered by bureaucracy and hierarchies, could easily fall apart with seemingly nothing to hold in place when shaken. A meeting clerk, a business meeting, a nominations or clearness committee to a non-Quaker and from a distance, do not sound authoritative or structured enough to provide unity and strength. Indeed, different Quakers have been known to have different religious beliefs, remaining open to ideas and experiences of others. While we cannot rule out that this open-mindedness can be a vulnerability, leaving them open to be swayed by other forces around them, we prefer to be optimistic and see it as a strength. One would be opting to be guided by the spirit, instead of trusting oneself to find the way to God’s love and his promises. Proverbs 3 vs 5-6 speaks to the benefits of surrendering ourselves to God’s guidance. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.” This implies obedience to the voice of truth through which our lives will speak.

For ease of discussion, I will refer to things that bind us as connectors and those that pull us apart as dividers, even though experience has shown us that these are fluid and not cast in stone. A lot of good has come from some really bad situations that have divided people and families. A good example is one of people who suffer from drug addiction and after rehabilitation go back to their respective communities to join the fight against substance abuse with great success. These are people being moved into action to reach out to others, inspired by their experiences. A great testimony I would say to Advises and Queries 27, as it relates to the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of our gifts in the service of God and the community.

As Quakers our connected-ness to the source, which Jennifer Kinghorn spoke about in her Richard Gush lecture of 2005, has enabled us to separate ourselves from all that inflicts pain and causes injustice. The spirit is the source that puts us in a frame of mind where we are constantly seeking. We are seekers at heart and this aspect really binds and connects us. The following Advises and Queries really set this clearly for us as:

- Seeking to respect and understand that of God and everyone though it might be expressed in unfamiliar ways or difficult to discern (17)
- Seeking to know one another in things which are eternal, bearing each other's burdens and praying for one another. (18)
- Seeking to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear and working to bring about a just and compassionate society... and foster the desire to serve. (33)
- Seeking to maintain the beauty and variety of the world --- ensuring that our increasing power over nature is used responsibly with reverence for life. (42)
- Seeking Gods guidance so that you may find the evil weakening in you and the good raised up. (9)

Dear Friends, all this seeking (hopefully resulting in finding) is designed to set us on a path to righteousness and service to others. It will unlock in us a lot of spiritual gifts that God has purposefully endowed us with. The scripture in Peter 4 vs 10-11, underscores this sentiment:

“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies...”

A clear mandate is given right there, but with no guarantees that there wont be challenges on the way. For instance there will be issues around religion and politics to navigate, the balance between rehabilitation and punishment for prisoners, issues of social injustice and use of force to achieve peace, among many. This is the nature of some of the issues before Quakers and non-Quakers alike that could be sources of connectedness or division. To highlight the roots from

where some of the divisions and connectors spring from I have grouped them into 4 specific categories for clarity as follows:

Systems and Institutions

In national, economic and cultural systems one comes across many divergent views and actions. These arise from tribes and their traditions, religious practices and political affiliations, gender stereotypes and power dynamics influencing access to resources. It could be argued that some of these aspects are not designed to be divisive, rather it is how they have been manipulated to cause pain and injustice, greed and intolerance as well as causing fear and violence. Hence some of these issues have become dividers. These symptoms are not easy to overturn but driven by their conscience, Quakers will advocate for justice and petition the systems to right some wrongs, basically giving light so that people can find the way according to Ella Baker, the American Civil Rights activist. Yet there is no absence of connectors even in such scenarios. All around us we see central markets where vendors from all ethnic groups gather for their economic activities literally serving everyone in the community without discrimination. In South Africa progress has also been made in having in place a meaningful basic income grant to be accessed by all deserving beneficiaries. We have seen people across the board uniting on this issue and lobbying with one voice. Hence hope for positive change and justice is kept alive, the words of an African Proverb “However long the night, the dawn will break” ringing true.

Values and Interests

The next category that relates to attitudes and actions has to do with stereotypes and threats that are present in a given context, and likely to create disharmony and lack of security for the affected. Examples of dividers here would be propaganda used during the elections to demonize one particular ethnic group or political party. Early Quakers had such an experience as they were victimized and imprisoned for boldly practising their faith. I have a personal experience of community groups with different political affiliations working as a community on nutritious gardens. Their common goal and biggest connector was food security. Some groups would use religious verses to discriminate against another group which would be a way of looking down on the other. Under economic activities we have instances of mining companies extracting minerals irresponsibly and thus clashing with environmentalists around issues of desertification and pollution, an issue of great concern on which Quaker voices have been very loud. A Quaker response in such an instance of bad attitude would focus on searching for the truth on which to base their action, and then allow the light to lead. The scripture in John 3 vs 21 strongly testifies to this as “those who do what is right, come to the light so others can see that they are doing God’s work” .Some

differences have been in the simplest of issues like tastes and preferences. I cannot imagine a group of classical music lovers sitting through a hip-hop concert and vice versa. But even in such cases where there seems to be no common ground because interests are so at variance, not all is lost. How would Quakers respond?

I see them leaning on Advices and Queries 21, highlighting the need for respect for the wide diversity in our lives and a reminder that we are all unique and precious in God's eyes. This would be a different response from the usual "one man's meat is another poison".

Different Experiences

People are connected and at the same time divided by the different experiences that shape their views and relationships. Take the experience of those who grew up in abusive environments. Many carry this trauma with them leading to unhealthy relationships and negative stereotypes. Even in their interactions with others there would be indications of anger being transferred to others owing to some unresolved feelings of fear and mistrust.

Our hope is that with our intervention, they eventually find peace as "... neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow---can separate us from God's love", Romans 8 vs 38.

There is also a current and urgent issue of a prolonged drought that has caused scarcity of water for communities in our region .One would like to believe that all stakeholders would present a unified front to provide solutions to an issue that knows no ethnic division, social class or religious affiliations. Such issues have great potential to unite communities and help build new relationships which could grow into positive partnerships for future engagements. This is what love can do.

Symbols and Occasions

A fourth category of connectors and dividers relates to symbols and occasions celebrated by some but with the potential to magnify differences. A glaring example could be a national flag for one group being a source of pride but for another being a symbol of oppression.

Similarly, not all religious groups celebrate Christmas. We are also familiar with political regalia worn in support of one party, inviting hostility from the rival party. The best part is that these same aspects can be a symbol of unity as well, after rival parties start respecting their diversities. Commemorative days like Workers Day, Africa Day, Human Rights Day and International Women's Day, amongst others, can be great connectors as they rally people around an issue to raise awareness from which they can develop a platform for action. The list broadens to include

music, art, literature and sports as binding people together regardless of ethnicity or political position, reminding us of our common humanity.

May the things that divide us pale in comparison to those that unite us.

WHAT LOVE CAN DO

George Fox had a vision of “an ocean of darkness and death but an infinite ocean of light and love flowed over the ocean of darkness.” I see the ocean of light and love symbolising the abundance of things that bind us and able to overwhelm the ocean of darkness being those things that divide us or have potential to separate us if not mitigated.

The potential dividers are among some Quaker concerns ranging from increasing social and material poverty, greed and prejudices, social injustice and oppression, intolerance and armed conflict, last but not least, environmental pollution and degradation.

Dear friends, showing love through the actions we take in the service of others is what is required to bridge the gap between the two oceans Fox refers to above. Interestingly enough, John Wesley the cleric, theologian and founder of Methodism, makes the same call through one of his famous quotes “...do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the souls you can, in every place you can, at all times you can, with all the zeal you can, as ever you can.”

It would seem Quakers everywhere have their work cut out for them. Indeed, they have over the years built a good track record through carrying out a range of meaningful interventions aimed at addressing some of the concerns cited. With great optimism and hope, good progress is assured as gaps are being narrowed. Walls do come down and the bridges come up so that the

victims can be walked back into the circle of God’s love. In the true spirit of Ubuntu, Quakers do not shy away from working in collaboration with other interested parties and non-Quakers who are in one heart with them. The journey may be full of challenges but the bible verse in Romans (8v28) reignites our optimism: “We know that God causes everything to work together for good to those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose for them”.

In Testimony

To testify to this allow me to give a brief overview of what some Quaker agencies are doing across the continents under various social responsibility programs.. This will showcase how Friends worldwide have borne witness to their testimonies of truth, equality, simplicity and peace. The faith and hope that that they have to change situations, the love and wisdom that

comes from within and the great optimism they have to achieve positive outcomes have combined to enable their lives to speak to heal the world. But first let us acknowledge that the divisions that exist in whatever shape or form are not meant to be permanent. Even parliamentarians have been known to cross the floor, in as much as the “underdogs” have been known to win the championships while historical enemies have been known to find common ground even if it is with the help of third parties. This was the situation with the two world wars which divided British and American Quakers with some deciding to fight and some being conscientious objectors. A profound moral problem I would say. Yet when the need arose to nurse the victims of war, the walls came down and both Quakers and non-Quakers alike answered the call to serve by joining the Friends War Victims Relief Committee or The Friends Ambulance Unit.

This effort gave them visibility and won them early recognition, leading to AFSC-USA being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace jointly with the Friends Service Council (UK and Ireland) in 1947. While Quakers were in no position to prevent the war, they nonetheless stepped in to “bandage the wounds” and became life savers to the affected. That of God in them was making them respond to that of God in the victims without necessarily seeking accolades.

Mother Teresa is quoted as having said “not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” This seems to be the case with Quaker Service Australia, a typical example of how a small group of people could come together in unity to help change the world “one step at a time.” Launched in 1959 this agency initially put great effort in fundraising and resourcing the Quaker Peace and Social Witness in the UK. These were funds which over the years supported Friends Rural Service Centres across the world including our former Hlekweni in Zimbabwe. For Hlekweni, the focus was on narrowing the education gaps for disadvantaged communities through skills training in appropriate technologies for sustainable living. The Hlekweni counterpart in India was the Rasulia Friends Rural Training Centre, originally established by the Religious Society of Friends in England but gradually collaborating with QSA to support an integrated program to fight disease, poverty, malnutrition and illiteracy.

Meanwhile in Hong Kong QSA responded to malnutrition through establishment of vegetable gardens at detention centres, but for Vietnam in the 1980s interventions were for rebuilding the country’s infrastructure after the war. Hence a sawmills project where housing material and furniture could be produced and restoration of water supplies at the provincial capital Kampong were prioritized.

In response to devastating effects of AIDS in the 1990s, Uganda was assisted to cover the gaps through an AIDS prevention programme and organic farming initiative which soon led to income streams.

In South Africa, nothing pulled people more apart than the system of apartheid. Hence many of the interventions targeted victims of apartheid for support. Following the Sharpenville and Langa

shootings Quaker Service Transvaal came with help on issues of pass laws, poverty, hunger and homelessness while Quaker Service Cape Western had more focus on education, community gardens and peace education, out of which the Quaker Peace Centre was born under a peace worker. Rommel Roberts. focus was on reducing the high level of violence in squatter camps. Needless to say, Quaker Service Australia funded a lot of these programmes with support from Quakers in Britain and the United States of America.

Beyond 1990 with the release of Nelson Mandela and others, the return home of many from exile and the lifting of bans and other restrictions, emphasis shifted slightly from emergency relief to long term support like skills training, conflict resolution and enhancing livelihoods.

Friends in a nutshell, this is the scope and scale of service under just one Quaker agency working to expand the ocean of light and love by addressing social injustices that create divisions among God's people. One could argue that since there is no shortage of injustice in this world, there should in equal measure be no end to the ways to correct them.

Challenging injustice and building sustainable peace to promote community cohesion has been at the heart of AFSC (American Friends Service Committee) work over the years since its foundation in 1917 in Pennsylvania, United States. Zimbabwe and South Africa have benefited from such initiatives, some implemented hand in hand with local organizations.

Just as visible is QUNO (Quaker United Nations Offices in Geneva and New York), an ongoing voice at international forums using quiet diplomacy to advocate for a more peaceful and just world. Meanwhile a very practical grass root approach to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots has been seen through the actions of Rights Sharing of World Resources whose empathy for disadvantaged communities is seen through their seed grant scheme supporting income-generation for groups without access to traditional financial services.

At the other end of the spectrum we have the Woodbrooke Study Centre in Birmingham, UK founded in 1903 by George Cadbury as a resource for Quakers worldwide to enable research and continuous learning. By recently moving to offer its programmes online and with Quaker meetings in the regions of UK wider participation and sustainability is anticipated. Its role as a platform for learning and sharing best practices and fostering cohesion among Quakers has contributed immensely to nurturing and empowering Friends everywhere to be channels of God's love and to live adventurously in their respective communities. While Friends can never claim to solve all the world's problems, they remain optimistic that by staying in the Light, guided by faith and love, they can be a strong buffer against evil forces threatening to divide them.

We don't take lightly the support Southern Africa Yearly Meeting (SAYM) renders to Friends across the board through its various Quaker funds made available on request. Through the Elizabeth Cadbury Trust Fund (ECFT), Friends get support for travel and accommodation

expenses to yearly meetings and regional gatherings to promote fellowship among Friends and travels in ministry. The Community of Quakers in Johannesburg (QCJ) is the custodian of

Christine Agar Quaker Trust (CAQT) which they have used to cover some funding gaps in their in house programs and beyond such as boosting the Food Assistance Fund when funds run low. The Compassion Fund which addresses short term and emerging needs for Friends is another support system bridging some gaps. At the other of the spectrum is the Peace Justice and Development Fund (PJDF, which although still small has added value to peace building programs in our communities. Another fund being envisioned for supporting Friends with educational needs is the Life Long Learning Fund. It is still work in progress and when it finally takes shape, continuing education and training for Friends in need will be feasible. Admittedly, good stewardship of these resources is key to sustain all this needed support. The dividers represented by the ocean of darkness in the world will be steadily mitigated by these various levels of support that Friends have pioneered and kept on track through their great optimism.

With the light leading Friends, and also drawing encouragement from St. Francis of Assisi words urging us to “start doing what is necessary, then do what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible”, the lives of Friends can continue to speak.

When telling the Quaker story, one is never quite done until one gets to the non-violence part. It has been a journey of over 300 years that Quakers have travelled, promoting peace and non-violence. They have made it central to all their programming when rebuilding lives and restoring hope and dignity to communities. They found in AVP a vehicle for this work done through experiential workshops with diverse people of all ages. Since its origins in New York in 1975, it has spread to several countries including Zimbabwe and South Africa where it has been used to address the culture of violence in communities. The strong link between Quakerism and AVP on non-violence is acknowledged.

Quakers have always worked to make the world a more peaceful place starting by finding peace in their own hearts. Admittedly they do not have a monopoly over the peace narrative as there are other peace disciples like Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu and Martin Luther King, a Baptist.

Both men embraced non-violence as a powerful tool for overcoming injustice. Indeed India's road to independence can be traced from Gandhi's inspired civil disobedience while for King it was the bus boycotts and sit-ins that broke the yoke of segregation in America.

Dear Friends, this historical narrative is meant to show that the centuries old Quaker values we hold continue to endure and that even now we are still grounded by them to transform lives and address the inequalities that divide us.

Strength in Diversity

The diversity among Friends does not necessarily mean division. The issue then becomes how we can harness these differences to promote each other's humanity.

This is how the perceived barriers can come down. We have members who are hardworking, calm and insightful, serious and humorous, the haves and have-nots, students and professionals, widows and orphans. A diverse membership indeed committed to letting their lives speak and guided by that of God in them. Advices and Queries 22 cautions us to avoid being pulled apart unnecessarily by refraining from making prejudiced judgements about the life journeys of others." Rather we should "foster a spirit of mutual understanding and forgiveness." It is the nature of close relationships that sometimes they will bring us joy and at other times be a source of pain. In both instances we may find the balance we need by opening ourselves to the workings of the Spirit as captured in Proverbs 3v5-6 an encouragement to "trust in the Lord with all your heart; lean not on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do and He will show you which path to take".

While the fundamentals of our faith remain unchanged, a few other things have changed, especially the drop-in membership since 1947. Amongst this lost membership were Quakers who were rich industrialists who supported the work of Quakers through their generous grants. Now there are more "convinced Friends" than "birthright Quakers". This development has led to a change of approach for Quakers who are now having to raise money from within their own membership and from interests generated from their modest ethical investments to support their programmes. They need to continue to be of service to one another for their testimonies to have meaning. We note how Friends have individually and collectively taken different paths in this ministry of service. Some initiatives have been very basic and ordinary such as regularly dropping off old jam jars and boxes to a community project for recycling, very much like what our Friend Edna Caddick used to do for Hlekweni and Samathonga School, over and above her selfless contribution to tertiary education in Zimbabwe in the 1960s. Others may reach out to a neighbour struggling to get into town by offering them a lift even without them asking. Some may even reach out by educating a vulnerable child or orphan to give them a chance in life. We are also aware of many who have joined peaceful protests and appended their signatures on petitions against injustices, thus showing their commitment to non-violence and social responsibility. It is mango season in Zimbabwe now and some Bulawayo Quaker Meeting (BQM) Friends with mango trees at their homes will be bringing mangoes to the Meeting for Friends to share.

Dear Friends, this is the length and breadth of the open heartedness and caring that defines Quakers as they impact other people's lives to bring change, no matter how small. These voluntary and often spontaneous actions are more than visible acts of charity that bind this benevolent community of Quakers together. They represent Quakers practising "Ubuntu".

In Compassionate Ministry

Issues of compassion and social responsibility are big connectors for Quakers demonstrated by some of their in-house programs. I am aware of QCJ having a compassion fund for Friends in their Meeting to alleviate suffering. KwaZuluNatal Friends have been linked to the Beany Project in support of new mothers and Phoenix Zululand runs restorative justice programs for prisoners. Meanwhile Eastern **Cape** Quakers are behind the Makhanda River Rescue Project, working to clean up the environment and reclaim polluted water sources. For their testimonies to peace, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia are linked to AVP with communities in their respective countries spaces. This is to mention but a few initiatives among many showing how Quakers have answered the call to be agents of change and thus reduce the ocean of darkness threatening to overwhelm God's people. The parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37 coming to the rescue of a wounded Jewish man left for dead by robbers is a great lesson to us in this regard. By going out of his way to render assistance and even pay for his care without expecting anything in return, the Samaritan demonstrated a true measure of love and good neighbourliness.

Dear Friends, a neighbour means more than a person living near another person. Anyone who meets the needs of another person even if they don't live in their neighbourhood is a neighbour to that person. This is what the parable of the good Samaritan highlights. It is about going the extra mile to reach out to the other person and taking action to demonstrate this love is key. There is no room here to be judgemental, to practise favouritism or to look down upon each other for it is from such conduct that seeds of conflict and discord are sown. When dividers like these tip the scales against the connectors, our Meetings would have failed to "be channels of God's love and forgiveness" (Advices and Queries (18)). Peace and harmony in relationships flows from the light that guides us and this means going back to the silence from where the promptings of love and truth are to be found.

Nothing captures the scale and scope of our mandate to build bridges by doing good like the renowned well-known prayer of St Francis of Assisi, here captured in part

"Lord make me an instrument of your peace,

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy ...

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console....

For it is in giving that we receive.’’

CONCLUSION

Friends our mandate is not to separate ourselves and condemn the world but to connect with it, the way it is”, yet remaining open to changing what is in discord with our common humanity. In being moved to mend what is broken, we should remain conscious of who we are, what we do and where we are going, as captured in Acts 17 vs 28, “---for in him we live and move and have our being” This is the basis of our unity and strength made visible and practical through our lives speaking to the testimonies of our eternal values of truth, love, simplicity, integrity, peace and reverence for life. A good seed was sown by Quakers before us. It found fertile ground and continues to produce fruit now as it did in the seventeenth century. These fruits we should freely share as Ambassadors of Christ feeling led in “doing what love can do”. This and the optimism that good will eventually triumph over evil is what binds us together as we “walk cheerfully over the world, addressing that of God in everyone”.

Robert Lawrence Smith in his book “A Quaker Book of Wisdom”, clearly acknowledges that even if Quakers numbered a million, they would never claim the ability to solve all the world’s problems. Ours is not to lose sight of the fact that people rise to expectations, and that if we affirm ourselves and others, we will see them responding to the light in our hearts which will lead to the overcoming of the darkness in the world because it is contagious on contact. As seekers may we continue to discover our own strength for which to navigate our way into peace and to use our differences to complement one another rather than compete. There is a strength in unity and unity in strength. Biblically, Ephesians 6 vs 10 – 17, suggests a level of preparedness for this task, that “we should put on the armour of God---- so you will be able resist the enemy in time of evil---stand your ground putting on the belt of truth and the body armour of God’s righteousness. For shoes, put on peace that comes from the good news so that you will be fully prepared --- hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil--- put on salvation as your helmet and take the sword of the spirit which is the word of God”

In closing friends, may I invite you to take a walk with me to the zoo, where we will watch children interact with some lions. This is not my own creation, but rather one by Dr Jonathan Brakarsh, a child psychologist and Jane Fisher, a psychotherapist, who ran a children’s workshop in Zimbabwe in 2013, on child protection and non-violence. They had their findings captured in most dramatic fashion in a book entitled, ‘Singing to the lions’, published by the African Community Publishing and Development Trust. Children were learning how to protect themselves from violence and abuse as they discovered their own strengths, identified sources of support and used their voices jointly, creatively and convincingly to achieve good results.

I refer to this story because of the simplicity of its imagery, yet one packed with a powerful message.



Children are seen singing their lively song featuring a ferocious lion which eventually gets captivated by the music and starts turning from fierce to tender, from violator to protector, and the children eventually finding safety and protection riding on its back.

Friends, this parable reminds us that there is power in what we speak, a central message in AVP. Positive and non-violent communication is transformative, because it is non-confrontational, it fosters engagement of conflicting parties to work towards a solution to their problems. A peaceful approach represents 'soft strength'. Let us use it to manage the voices, the attitudes and behaviors that can cause pain and strife, things that divide us. Let us take heed to MLK's statement that "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend".

Dear Friends, the stage seems set for us to live out our testimonies in both word and deed, towards a common good. By speaking out against injustices and non-violently confronting them, our lives will find meaning and purpose as we stand united to change the world. Let us try what love can do and draw from our great optimism to exercise wisdom and patience to break down all manner of barriers threatening to break our common humanity. This way we will be actively creating spaces where love reigns because hate is too much of a burden to carry. It is love in action that will enable healing to the wounded, restore hope to the devastated, revive the lives of the defeated thus bringing harmony to disunity. Let us always remember that where there are seeds of war there are also seeds of love, friendship and peace. We may not be able to sing to the lions right now but may we listen to Cece Winnans singing on our behalf about the goodness of God for this far He has taken us.

Thank you, friends for listening

Thank you, Co-clerks for facilitating

Thank you, God, for leading.