

To all Friends everywhere,

August 12, 2024

We send loving greetings from the Friends World Committee for Consultation World Plenary, held August 5 to 12, 2024 online and in Vanderbijlpark near Johannesburg, South Africa, on the banks of the river variously known as the Ilizalazi, Lekwa, iLekwa and the Vaal. We are truly 'down by the riverside' as we lay down our burdens and lift them up to God.

500 Friends have gathered at the river's edge and online, coming from 53 countries and representing 95 Yearly Meetings, worship groups and Quaker organisations. Half of them joined the gathering online, individually and organised in 50 hubs all over the world, a first for a World Plenary Meeting. With joy we reflect on how great it has been to have the contributions from online Friends in the room. For those of us online, it was a joy to be included and to experience the togetherness. Sadly, some Friends were prevented from joining us. We regret their absence and hold them in the Light.

Our theme is 'Living the Spirit of Ubuntu: Responding with Hope to God's Call to Cherish Creation and One Another'. Ubuntu is a Zulu word that speaks to the power and ceaseless work of the Holy Spirit between us, enabling us to go beyond our individual selves and grasp that 'I am because we are'.

In this joyous gathering, we have expanded our understanding and appreciation for who we – as Quakers – really are. What a gift. Despite our multitude of differences, we have celebrated that we share not only our Quaker founders – happy 400th birthday, George Fox! - but also deep Friendship, an openness to new Biblical interpretations, our structures and processes, our deep commitment to peace and justice, our love of the Earth, and our love of God.

Eager that all gathered Friends may participate as fully as possible, we have bridged geographical distance and differences in language with technology, patient interpreters, and God's grace. We are thankful. In the inclusive spirit of Ubuntu, we have all – and particularly English speakers – been challenged to speak slowly and clearly enough for our interpreters to do their work. We have all been challenged to find a Spirit-led balance between speaking and listening, between action and contemplation, between doing and simply being.

Prior to this gathering, 46 of the Young Adult Friends among us came together for four days of shared experience, conversation, reflection, laughter, worship, and song. Living in community, Young Adult Friends explored, held, and danced with commonalities and differences. In an exciting development, a world committee of eight Young Adult Friends from all FWCC sections was formed. This reflects a joyful commitment to keep nurturing the newfound sense of community. Aware of the magnitude of the responsibility, Young Adult Friends call on all of us for support and trust.

We were warmly and joyously welcomed by our hosts from Southern Africa Yearly Meeting and the Africa Section of FWCC. A local Friend shared with us the South African greeting 'sawubona', which means 'I see you and not only you, but all who have made you who you are'. She also spoke of how coming to Quakers helped her to believe in life beyond racist segregation. Excursions both virtual and local enriched our programme. Field trips to the Cradle of Humankind and the Apartheid Museum grounded the gathering in the context of our host country's own painful and turbulent journey. We have been inspired by the Spirit-

filled resilience of our hosts, emerging from the struggles of the past and present steadfastly to affirm that through God's grace, **we are s'll here. We are one.**

Together, we have worshipped, prayed, sung, been warmed by the sun, chilled by the evening frost, and, of course, we talked -- and talked -- and talked some more. We have sought to discern Spirit-led ways forward to honour our commitment to our three interconnected themes: care of creation, the healing of relationships in the light of historic and ongoing injustice, and nurturing Ubuntu. Our emerging concerns have been captured and woven together in a tapestry document.

We are seized with the urgent need to do transformative work in the world. We are also called by that still small voice to pause, to listen deeply to one another and to creation. *Jeremiah 29: 11-14 says: 'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.'* God is with us. **We are here. We are one.**

We have been challenged, and many of us are called to join collective, global Quaker action to live out our concerns -- to be, as George Fox said -- "valiant for Truth". Others among us focus on local community. We are learning to expand our compassion for who we are, just as we find ourselves in all our brokenness and our beauty.

The variance in our perspectives, some large, some small, have become more apparent, at times painfully so. We have been able, with God's blessing, to resolve some tension through compassionate conversation, while some was simply held in our midst. We are not discouraged.

Our past and present reminds us of our capacity to be faithful, courageous changemakers. With radical hope, we trust in our collective ability to "recognise, repent, redeem and restore" and to work together in beautiful and transformative ways. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* We know that through Jesus' invitation to new life, 'All things are made new.' God has no hands but ours, no feet but ours, no lips but ours, so we keep imagining a better world. I am because you are. I am because we are. I see you. We belong to each other. **We are still here. We are one.**

George Fox's radical insistence on bringing the Kingdom of God to all aspects of our lives, invited what he called 'the new creation'. Are we ready for what is to come? Are we prepared to do what is required of us to birth the new creation? How does our living Ubuntu change the world?

As we return to our homes, with renewed love for our international Quaker family, may God bless the spaces between us as we seek a better world for all creation. Let the new creation come.

In God's love, with radical hope,

Simon C. Lamb, Clerk, FWCC, on behalf of all who were part of our World Plenary Meeting