

## WHAT DOES “UBUNTU” MEAN?

This year in Cork, at our Yearly Meeting, we have chosen to explore the theme “The Spirit of Ubuntu”, linking us to the theme of the World Plenary Meeting in South Africa a couple of weeks later. In doing so we are joined by many other Yearly Meetings and Quaker groups who are reflecting on this issue.

Some Friends in Ireland have asked for some more thoughts on this theme as they prepare for Cork. Last month, Hezron Masitsa, Justice and Peace Secretary of FWCC gave an excellent talk at the Annual Meeting of the European and Middle Eastern Section of FWCC, giving a really valuable overview of the theme.

Hezron explained that the concept of Ubuntu emphasises that what happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group, community or country happens to the individual. In this way people, country, environment and spirituality are intricately related. The individual can therefore only say: 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am' (Mbiti, J, 1969)

This approach seeks to foster empathy and compassion by encouraging people to consider the needs and happiness of others. Realising that our actions have wider implications for the community, we should be driven towards a sense of responsibility toward the collective well-being. The emphasis is therefore on peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and harmony, serving as a moral compass in interpersonal relationships and community engagements.

He emphasised that in Kenya, people embraced communal living where a group's needs are placed before an individual's. The term Harambee has been used to symbolize the spirit of Ubuntu that points out to "an unwritten law of generosity (lending a hand to assist anyone in need regardless of class, ethnic group, gender or religious background).

This theme resonates with the New Testament. Thus Paul in 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27 describes the Church as a unified body; "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit to form one body-whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so, the body is not made up of one part but of many." The church is called to be unified. Each person has a special function as part of Christ's

body. The members of the body must all work together. Verses 15-17 emphasize the fact that each individual member must appreciate his God-given role and the contribution s/he personally makes to the well-being of Christ's spiritual body, the church.

Hezron also points to Philippians 2:3-4. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your interests but each of you to the interests of the others"

This requires us to restructure our relationships towards a community, emphasising the human dignity and well-being of everyone. We need to focus on affirmation, trust, equal access to resources and opportunities, fundamental rights and freedoms. We also must. create a shared security and change the ways we make decisions to be inclusive. It also requires a renewed commitment to sustainable use of resources that guarantees the future generations (simplicity, stewardship, care for creation, climate justice).

Looking forward to our gathering in Cork, and our exploration of this important theme.

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