

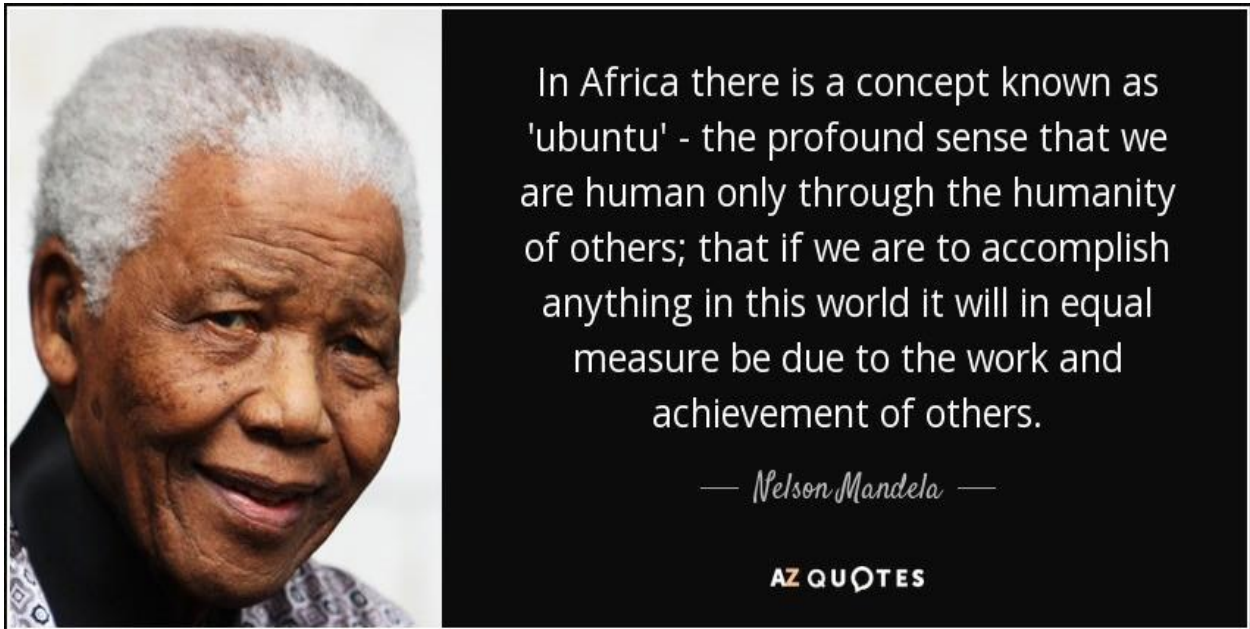
Ubuntu: A Profound universal value and our hope for World Peace

Public Lecture

Ireland Yearly Meeting

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Thank you for inviting me to join you during the 2024 Ireland Yearly Meeting. I am deeply honoured to speak on Ubuntu as a philosophy and way of life that recognises our common humanity and interdependence and as a viable path to peace and justice. I really appreciated the time I spent with you in Belfast in 2022.

I am joining you just before the FWCC World Plenary Meeting taking place in Johannesburg in August 2024, which puts ubuntu in the centre as a theme: **‘Living the spirit of Ubuntu: Responding with hope to God’s call to cherish creation – and one another’**.

This is an important time for the Quaker world community to reflect on the challenges of our time and how best to respond to them. As you know, it will be possible to join online.

Ubuntu, the African philosophy of interconnectedness. Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu - I am because you are. At its core, it recognizes the humanity in others and encourages treating them with kindness, respect, and empathy - values upheld by many African societies for centuries. Ubuntu promotes a sense of belonging and inclusivity.

Ubuntu is a profound universal value and our hope for a just peace. When people feel valued within a community, they are more invested in its well-being, reducing conflict and building unity. It emphasizes communication, dialogue, and finding common ground to resolve disputes peacefully. Additionally, it encourages forgiveness, reconciliation, and letting go of past grievances to build trust and a shared destiny.

Growing up in an African village, I was taught to greet everyone, including strangers. In isiZulu, when two people meet, they stop and say “Sanibona” meaning, “We see you.” Greetings are in plural form to indicate we are not meeting as individuals but as representatives of our families and communities. My family greets your family, my community greets your community.

Quakers believe in living life in the spirit of love and truth and peace, reaching for the best in oneself and answering “that of God” in everyone. Quaker testimonies or spiritual insights unite us worldwide and are expressions of the commitment to put those beliefs into practice.

Irish International Solidarity an example of Ubuntu

I believe the spirit of ubuntu has existed in most societies, particularly during the pre-industrial and pre-colonial periods. During industrialisation, life changed for the indigenous peoples. This forced people to change their way of living, working in the mines or as domestics under the migrant labour system. They had to adapt to new ways of living in most aspects of their lives.

Similarly, Ireland faced the negative impact of colonisation and industrialisation in the UK. Ireland's experience of colonisation by Britain had a profound impact on its national identity, religion, and industrialisation. Families were separated as the male breadwinners went away to work in industrial areas, e.g. in mines, leaving their families behind.

Irish workers were recruited during the industrial revolution to work as cheap labourers under the migratory labour system to build mills and canals in the UK. This led to the fragmentation of homes and families.

Looking at Irish society, there are many great examples of Ubuntu. Irish Quaker action includes the relief provided during Ireland's Great Famine, when 3000 Irish Quakers contributed their time, money and influence to alleviate the suffering of those around them. What are your own examples of Ubuntu in your personal life and history?

For me, I wish to highlight Irish international solidarity with struggles around the world, especially the Irish Anti-apartheid programmes.

The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement played a crucial role in dismantling apartheid in South Africa through initiatives like boycotts, conferences, and supporting strikes. Founded in 1964, it was instrumental in raising awareness and mobilising support for the anti-apartheid cause in Ireland. Key initiatives included:

- Persuading Irish playwrights to refuse permission for their plays to be performed before segregated audiences in South Africa
- Organizing a major conference in 1979 featuring ANC President Oliver Tambo as the main speaker
- Supporting the 1984-1987 strike by Dunnes Stores workers against handling South African goods, which led to a ban on fruit and vegetable imports in 1987
- Hosting Nelson Mandela in Dublin in 1990, where thousands greeted him as he signed the roll of honour as a Freeman of the City.

An example of Irish international solidarity and Ubuntu was when it welcomed South African exiles and provided them a home. Kader Asmal lived in Ireland and taught at Trinity College, specialising in human rights, labour, and international law for 27 years and eventually becoming Dean of the Faculty of Arts (1980-1986). Upon returning to South Africa, he became a Professor of Human Rights at the University of the Western Cape (1990-1994).

Asmal served on the ANC's constitutional committee from 1986 and played a key role in creating South Africa's post-apartheid human rights framework, contributing significantly to the writing of the country's constitution, which is considered exemplary worldwide.

Nelson Mandela appointed Kader Asmal as Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry in South Africa's first post-apartheid cabinet in 1994. As Minister of Water Affairs, Asmal focused on ensuring universal access to clean water as a basic human right. He established the Working for Water Programme (WfW) in 1995 to combat invasive alien plants, providing jobs and training to marginalised communities.

The programme, now under the Department of Environmental Affairs, has cleared over one million hectares of invasive plants and employs around 20,000 people annually, with 52% being women. WfW operates over 300 projects across all nine provinces of South Africa.

Asmal also chaired the National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NACC), ensuring compliance with arms control laws.

Asmal's legacy lives on as testimony to the spirit of Ubuntu his life embodied.

The **Kader Asmal Fellowship** enables early to mid-career professionals from eligible countries, with leadership potential, to benefit from a prestigious, world-class, quality education contributing to capacity building.

The post-apartheid government under Mandela initiated many programmes as an attempt to rebuild the country from its apartheid past. At the core of these programmes was the spirit of Ubuntu.

Since 2002, an Irish entrepreneur and philanthropist Niall Mellon, has organised annual charity building blitzes by Irish people in poor townships in South Africa. The Niall Mellon Trust has built about 20,000 homes and housed more than 100,000 people.

About 8,000 Irish people had travelled for the various building blitzes, raising about €40 million in donations for his ambitious housing programme for the poor of South Africa.

A 'building blitz' means a group of volunteers travelling out to South Africa to work for a week on a building project. In isiZulu this concept is known as "Ilima". The practice is an example of the Ubuntu philosophy in practice. When a person is building a house, for example, the community can be invited to come together and help or in instances when they need help to plough their fields or harvest their produce. It becomes a community effort, and makes it fun and easy.

Another Irish builder, Paddy Kelly, 56, matched that sum and other construction companies in Ireland flooded Mellon's offices with offers of assistance. This means more than R20-million was raised, with a further R10-million scheduled to be collected by the middle of the following year.

This project of building houses, helped uplift and transform the lives of a depressed community in Cape Town, a place that remains divided along the apartheid geographic spatial planning lines. Formerly known as Site 5, residents renamed their township Masiphumelele, which means 'we shall succeed' in isiXhosa.

Masiphumelele was originally created in the early 1990's from an overflow of people from the Khayelitsha township and a nearby squatter camp. It was designed for only 750 families, with no provision for community based businesses. The township has grown rapidly and although official figures suggest around 16,000 residents, unofficial estimates reach as high as 30,000. Residents come from a diverse background, including the Eastern Cape, other parts of South Africa, Somalia, Zimbabwe and other neighbouring countries.

Thousands of shacks have been built around the brick houses as the population has continued to explode; this has led to even poorer living conditions for the inhabitants of the township. During winter months people in shacks struggle with the lower temperatures and rain, and there is often a risk of flooding, which can be devastating for those located on the wetlands.

In the summer, there is a real danger of fires, which can destroy a large number of houses before any help can arrive. The township also suffers from the same social and medical problems that trouble other informal settlements.

There was no school building or health clinic in the township until 1995, but development is progressing with many small shops and businesses located within Masiphumelele.

Mandela saw his role as encouraging such initiatives. He saw the task of nation-building and reconciliation as intertwined with reconstruction and development. In his mind, the one set of tasks was a prerequisite for the other. On the one hand, continuing social change was necessary to eliminate the very socio-economic conditions that had generated conflict in the first place. On the other hand, comprehensive social transformation required a peaceful environment.

Among the programmes initiated during the Mandela government were the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the Masakhane programme, the People's Housing Process, the People's Health Programme and the Community Policing Forum Programme. These programmes were aimed at civic involvement and participation in the total reconstruction of the country. The programmes were also aimed at promoting self-reliance and community.

I want to cite the Victoria Mxenge Housing Project, which is a local example of a building blitz, like the one I described earlier organised by Mellon. The project is named after a martyr of South Africa's struggle for freedom. After the death of her husband, she carried on with the law practice. She often intervened to protect youth ill-treated in detention. Mxenge was part of the defence team in the 1984 **treason trial**, against leaders of the **United Democratic Front** (UDF) and the **Natal Indian Congress** (NIC) in the Pietermaritzburg Supreme Court. Mxenge started a bursary fund in memory of her husband. She became a member of the Release Nelson Mandela Committee (RMC), the **National Organisation of Women** (NOW) and the Natal Treasurer of the UDF.

In July 1985 she was invited to speak at the funeral of **Matthew Goniwe**, **Fort Calata**, **Sparrow Mkhonto** and **Sicelo Mhlauli** (the Cradock Four) attended by approximately 50, 000 mourners to mark the death of activists who had been murdered by the security police.

Within days of the funeral speech, on 1 August 1985, four men attacked Mxenge in the driveway of her home in Umlazi, Durban and murdered her in front of her children. She was laid to rest next to her husband at Rayi Cemetery in the presence of 10, 000.00 mourners.

At the beginning of South Africa's democratic change in 1994, the Victoria Mxenge Housing Project was founded by a group of 12 women who lived in shacks on the barren outskirts of Cape Town. These women had come from rural areas and were poor, vulnerable and semi-literate. Yet they learned how to build, negotiate with the government and NGOs, architects and building experts, and form alliances with homeless social movements locally and internationally. The desolate piece of land they occupied is now a thriving, sustainable community of more than 5 000 houses.

Today, South Africa has a constitution that celebrates diversity, ends the death penalty, recognises 12 languages as official, including sign language, and forms the basis for South Africa being known as the Rainbow nation—a term fondly associated with the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Rooted in diverse ethnic, cultural, and spiritual traditions, the values embedded in the constitution inspire us to act with courage, compassion, and integrity.

The constitution is an aspirational document based on a common will for our society to return to the values of ubuntu, which emphasises the interconnectedness of all beings and the importance of mutual respect and care, justice, and dignity, and more profoundly a sense of community under our shared humanity.

The all-party negotiations after 1990 transformed South Africa from an oppressive apartheid regime to a non-racial, non-sexist democracy. This change, often hailed as a near miracle, was the result of the courageous struggle and resistance of people facing imprisonment, punishment, violence and the risk of death over many decades. It is an example that should inspire those of you who are peace activists and justice seekers not to give up acting today to address the world's seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Current World Crises and Ubuntu

Our world is facing an unprecedented convergence of crises, each exacerbating the other and collectively posing a threat to humanity's well-being and survival. These crises are intertwined with social and economic injustices, including widening inequalities, poverty, and systemic discrimination. Moreover, armed conflicts, fuelled by geopolitical tensions, resource scarcity, and historical grievances, continue to claim lives and destabilise entire regions.

Most of these violent conflicts are in Africa and the Middle East. As we see in Gaza, the already vulnerable populations bear the brunt of violence, displacement, and deprivation. In marginalised communities, systemic injustices perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion.

South Africa is a microcosm of the world crises. The country remains a deeply divided and unequal society, with high levels of interpersonal and gender based violence, high levels of poverty and unemployment. The recent national elections however demonstrates that South Africa's democracy is resilient, with people participating actively and making their voices heard. After thirty years in power, the African National Congress failed to get an outright majority and has formed a government of national unity. The mandate from the voters is to get the country on a path to prosperity, economic justice and peace, as envisaged in the Freedom Charter and the Constitution.

The United Nations (UN) and other international bodies charged with promoting world peace and good governance are faced with huge challenges today as they attempt to respond to the unprecedented world crises. Civic participation is vital for supporting the international institutions for multilateral dialogue, consensus building and rulemaking. As the world continues to grapple with these poly crises, could Ubuntu be the answer? Ubuntu has the ability to cultivate social responsibility and civic engagement and it emphasises contributing to others' well-being and the common good.

Healing of Historic Injustices and Ubuntu

The need for healing the effects of historical injustices will be addressed at the FWCC World Plenary Meeting. The Plenary will hear presentations on personal stories of trauma as a result of the historical injustices of enslavement, colonisation and apartheid, whose impact is ongoing, and visible in a country like South Africa. The WPM will have a dialogue on what Quakers are called upon to do, to address the historical and ongoing injustices and to find effective ways to heal and to atone.

Bayard Rustin, an African American political activist, a prominent leader in social movements for civil rights, socialism, non-violence and gay rights urged the civil rights movement to include the right to economic justice in its campaigns. He said: "...I fail to see how [the Black-freedom] movement can be victorious in the absence of RADICAL PROGRAMS for full employment, abolition of slums, the reconstruction of our educational system, new definitions of work and leisure. Adding up the cost of such programs, we can only conclude that we are talking about a refashioning of our political economy."

The BlackQuaker Project will address the gathering and will present Retrospective Justice as a Quaker model of reparations and healing. The term Retrospective Justice is often confused with Restorative Justice. While the terms are related in their objective of restoring or repairing relationships, retrospective justice is not linked to the criminal justice system.

In defining retrospective justice, Harold D. Weaver, founder of the BlackQuaker Project (BQP) draws on the trail-blazing 2006 report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. The report defines retrospective justice as "an attempt to administer justice years after the commission of a severe injustice or series of injustices against persons, communities, or racial and ethnic groups."

The Committee identified three elements common to successful cases of retrospective justice initiatives: 1. acknowledge an offence formally and publicly, 2. uncover, discuss and memorialise relevant facts (truth-telling), and 3. take concrete action to make amends in the present giving material substance to the expression of regret and accountability.

Dr Weaver's perspective on retrospective justice is particularly poignant. He emphasises that this process is not about retribution or revenge but about atonement and building bridges across community lines to enable healing, bring justice and promote peace. The BQP urges Quakers and fellow activists to implement retrospective justice to atone for the hundreds of years of harm, exploitation, and dehumanisation done to persons of African descent worldwide. It is an essential practice in reducing violence, insecurity, and inequality.

Considering the long painful history that Ireland has endured, I imagine Quakers in Ireland might consider looking at the processes of healing outlined in the Retrospective Justice model. You might be interested in the work of Dr Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela on violent histories and transgenerational trauma. Gobodo-Madikizela is the winner of the 2024 Templeton Prize.

Her [insights](#) into the mechanisms of trauma and forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa have created a globally recognized model for social healing in the aftermath of conflict, a model she calls “the reparative quest.”

As Dr Weaver explains, Retrospective Justice is not about retribution or revenge but about atonement and building bridges across community lines to enable healing.

In ***Living Adventurously***, the southern African Quaker Community Faith and Practice, Dudu Mtshazo, a member of the Johannesburg Quaker community says true Africanness obliges us to be more humane, to be here, with and among the people, their values, beliefs, their love and fears, **embracing and holding own and others’ wounds**.

The vision of a society where everyone is welcome, differences are celebrated, and children can grow up without fear of violence or hatred is possible. A society built on the ripples of hope created by those standing up against injustices. A society where the spirit of Ubuntu is alive. The Quaker Peace Centre says peace is a group effort - Uxolo luxanduva lomntu wonke. Ubuntu is a profound universal value and our hope for world peace.