

To Change It, One Needs to Name It  
For FWCC Section of The Americas - 2021  
By Sarah Hernandez

I was raised in Tepic, Nayarit, Mexico. My family was the only Quaker family in the city. Soon I learned that one can choose one's religion and that I had to find my own calling. An aspect of Quakerism that is of particular importance for me is the belief that we are constantly searching for truth, and that the truth may shift. This openness allows us to change some of our views, while reaffirming our shared core values. It seems to me that we allow the Light to guide us through these difficult paradoxes, through the capacity to change while remaining the same.

For instance, early Friends would wear simple clothing, generally grey in color and plain in style. However, as the world around Friends changed, they began to realize that their dress was no longer plain nor simple. This led many Friends to change their ways, they adapted to changing circumstances, wearing commercially available clothing as we do today. While adapting to change, we still share core values. I name only a few: We share our belief that there is a spiritual dimension in our lives (God or a Divine Spirit), that there is that of God in everyone, that everyone is capable of a direct relationship with the Divine Spirit, that spiritual truth is revealed continuously here and now, and that we are guided by six testimonies [peace and nonviolent resolution of conflicts, simplicity, integrity, equality, community, and the right sharing of the earth's resources].

Our section members are once more called to grapple with the way we walk with our faith as we adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Of course, I do not have the answer, for that answer arises as the spiritual truth that is revealed continuously here, now, and through our group explorations guided by the Light. I humbly only offer some frameworks that may be helpful in this journey.

There are many things I have learned in my studies and activism against racism. One of these is the importance of naming an injustice, of acknowledging its existence. For, without this acknowledgement, we cannot make amends and build forward. So, it is important that we name the challenges we face both within FWCC and as Friends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

These are indeed difficult times for all religious and social justice organizations, and Quakers are no exception. Some argue we face two pandemics, Covid-19 and racism. I believe that humanity continues to face multifaceted and interconnected challenges. In addition to health challenges and racist discrimination, we face the widening gap in income and wealth, our contributions to environmental harm and the need to adjust to the changes in our natural environments, as well as the continuing ways in which we humans bring harm upon each other, with a very diverse set of excuses to justify war. In each of our countries and regions, we also face various local challenges.

It is equally important to name the challenges as it is to acknowledge the work that Friends do to address them.

Friends are active, called by their inner Light to work on international peace, environmental protection, educational reform, and take action against discrimination, to name just a few. Thinking of the most prominent Quaker organizations, each was created to address specific needs and actions. QUNO incorporates a Quaker voice into the United Nations, AFSC provides on-the-ground peace and development work, while FCNL and the Quaker Council for European Affairs bring Quaker values to national or regional legislative bodies. Friends are also — individually and as a group — collaborating with various other organizations to whom the Light guides us. These efforts are our collective work. We individuals cannot be actively embedded in each and every one of these organizations. Each of us chooses where our energies and limited capacities can best serve, whether in our schools, workplaces, towns, cities, or states. But together, this is a significant contribution from Friends worldwide. Along the way, we also innovate and adjust to the current challenges and needs.

This committed and many times selfless hard work should not prevent us from engaging in selfcare.

That is another important lesson I have garnered from anti-racism work in the USA. I have come to realize that part of the work against racism is the oppressed community's need to respect themselves and their own health, to acknowledge the need and right to rest, the importance of finding inner joy. Joy was something that had been denied to slaves. Joy is something that in many historical moments and parts of the world has been, and is being, denied to women and many other oppressed peoples. Hence, giving ourselves the space for selfcare and joy is important. It is not about selfishness or self centeredness, it is about the reaffirmation of our humanity in a world where too many forces push against such affirmation.

This brings me to FWCC. As Friends in the Section of the Americas grapple with who we are and how we adjust to this new era and its challenges, it would be helpful to remind ourselves who is FWCC, why it came about, of the new circumstances Friends face, and how the Section of the Americas may need to adapt to meet our changing needs.

Our stated mission is:

Answering God's call to universal love, FWCC brings Friends of varying traditions and cultural experiences together in worship, communications, and consultation, to express our common heritage and our Quaker message to the world.

Our vision:

We envision a thriving and integrated network of Friends from the Arctic to the Andes, woven together in transformative faith, learning to love, listen, and witness.

The purpose of FWCC is to encourage fellowship and understanding among all the branches of the Religious Society of Friends. FWCC brings Friends together in multiple ways to celebrate God in our lives, to gather the Quaker voice and build networks to address issues of our time, and to unite us within our diversity.

FWCC plays a unique and very important role. In my mind, it is a role that focuses on self-care. It is a space where our lonely existence in our communities stops being so lonely (remember, I grew up in the only Quaker family in my city). I miss being here with all of you. Participating in the section gatherings I felt connected once more with Friends in Central and South America, Mexico, and the Caribbean, and met Friends from various parts of the USA and from Canada. It is encouraging to know that we are not alone with our faith. It is a space where I experienced nurturing reinvigoration.

While serving as representative to the Section, I wanted to share the love and energy I felt in this group with my monthly meeting and yearly meeting. Yet, I could not. It seemed to me that being a representative in FWCC was not an experience I could fully share, particularly because any story I could tell was only that, a distant story for the listener. Being with and learning from Friends in this gathering is a very unique experience for each of us. I realized that what I really wanted to do was bring Friends to this gathering for them to experience it for themselves.

I am led to wonder, how do we open up to each other? How do we bring the healing, restorative, and formative experience of the section's gatherings to all Friends? Can we turn what feels like the experience of a privileged, select few into an experience for all Friends? Is there an interest among Friends in our home meetings to reach out and be in fellowship with Friends elsewhere? If that interest is not there, should we work to change that? I invite you to consider how we can bring Friends of varying traditions and cultural experiences together in worship, communication, and consultation. How can we develop a thriving and integrated network of Friends woven together in transformative faith, learning to love, listening, and witnessing? How can we encourage fellowship and understanding among all the branches of the Religious Society of Friends? This is part of the puzzle the Representative Engagement Program Group has grappled with. But perhaps we can also ask Friends throughout the Americas these questions. As we do so, we may be creating the space where selfcare among Friends can happen, an exploratory process that may eventually also shine its light into our international work.

This brings me to another lesson from my studies of anti-racism. I have become increasingly aware of the ways I myself have continued to perpetuate colonialism and racism, even when I have been thinking that I am working against them.

Internalized racism and colonialism refer to the ways in which our usual comportment leads us to act in ways that are in fact discriminatory. The very fact that one, for instance, may not seek out or even consider exploring the world view or experience of Friends from developing countries is a form of colonial thinking. Colonialist and racist visions are not limited to Friends in the United States and Canada. It also exists in Latin America where indigenous people continue to be discriminated against, mistreated, where their cultures continue to be othered or viewed as exotic. Black and Asian people are in many Latin American countries not even conceived as nationals, while whiteness receives admiration and reward. There is much we can learn about how colonialism and racism continue to be experienced, even among Friends. To gain such knowledge, however, we must first be open to the recognition that internalized colonialism and

racism exist, even among those of us who hold the best intentions. Without such recognition, we cannot work toward change.

Friends have a long history and experience working through this kind of challenge. It is not new to us. Yet, unless we are in very small, perhaps elite circles, this knowledge and skill seems to be unavailable to most Friends.

The knowledge I speak of arises from the experience Friends have had engaging in peace and development work in oppressed communities, learning to collaborate with the people to whom we offer our support. The skills I am referring to are those of the process to build consensus. Friends have a long tradition of working through the lengthy process necessary to reach consensus. Yet, the homogeneity of some Friends meetings leads to lack of practice with consensus when there is diversity of opinion. So, I offer an invitation to practice Quaker process in a more intentional way and in wider circles and to consider other approaches.

Other groups have developed new techniques in the search to encourage dialogue among diverse populations. These may offer tools that could help Friends learn or relearn how to gather within our Quaker diversity. One framework that I have been pursuing in the past couple of years is called intergroup dialogue. It combines knowledge from the communication field with knowledge from diversity training. Different from the concept of consensus, however, dialogue is an invitation to learn to live within diversity. It is an invitation to desire to get to know and understand others, without necessarily having to reach agreement. As I have engaged in this approach, I have always been reminded of Quaker practice, so I see them as mutually informing. Among Friends we share some core beliefs and testaments, and we coexist with our other varying visions and practices. Rather than focus only on the points of convergence, this approach is an invitation to embrace the joy of our differences by being sincerely open to want to know each other. This capacity, however, requires the development of communication skills that many people, including those among Friends, do not always have. Hence, training with this approach may be beneficial for the effort to expand the exposure of Friends with each other.

Like Quaker process, the concept of intergroup dialogue involves patience, and continuing, longer-term efforts. It may open the space to explore innovative solutions to address the challenges we identify. This dialogic method may allow us to develop various ways to embrace the diversity in the needs, resources, and capabilities among Friends in the Americas. It is only one of many recent efforts that are being used to spread knowledge and develop skills to build broader engagement in social justice. There are others that could also open new paths for us.

In closing, I am thankful for the opportunity to share with you my experience and thoughts, and to suggest that in the work ahead, the section members consider centering on FWCC's purpose, vision, and mission; to name the challenges we face in achieving this purpose; to consider the efforts and approaches being pursued by other entities and embrace those aspects that can help the section achieve its aims, including the lessons offered by the global movement against racism and colonialism. This may show new ways to pursue our mission.