

One Body with Many Parts

A Contribution from a Soweto Friend to the
FWCC 50th Anniversary Celebration

by
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Dear Friends, I bring you greetings from my meeting, Soweto Monthly Meeting, the Southern Africa General Meeting, Southern Africa Yearly Meeting, and those mothers I live with in Soweto.

It is a great pleasure, and indeed an honor, to be part of Friends World Committee for Consultation's 50th Anniversary celebrations. This invitation to participate in the celebration has affirmed three things in my life.

- 1) *That we are One Body with many parts*
- 2) *The Light Within each one of us cannot be put out by the darkness which sometimes surrounds us*
- 3) *That we are in this together, and never without a friend. The Lord is our friend, and we are each other's friend.*

St. Paul wrote in one of his letters to the Corinthians, a long time ago, something that could have been written to us today. I would like to share this letter with you. I Corinthians. Chapter 12:12-13 and 25-27:

One Body with Many Parts

"Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts.

"In the same way, all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same spirit and we have all been given the one spirit to drink.

"And so there is no division in the body but all its different parts have the same concern for one another.

"If the one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness. All of you are Christ's body and each one is a part of it."

I think at this time I should briefly introduce you to that part of the body which is Southern Africa General Meeting (SAGM), of which I am clerk. SAGM is made up of six Monthly Meetings and two Regional Meetings. Five of these meetings are in South Africa and the other three are in each of the following countries: Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland. The overall membership is about 120. SAGM and Central Africa General Meeting (CAGM), which includes Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia, form Southern Africa Yearly Meeting (SAYM). There are 29 million people in South Africa, 95 of that figure are Friends.

I have brought a candle with me which I would like to light. And I would like to share its glow with you and what it symbolizes to me. This light is a symbol of my profession:

nursing. Secondly, it symbolizes that *Light Within* each one of us which sometimes can be dimmed by all sorts of drapes that we drape around it through our long journey in this world. Thirdly, it symbolizes the *hope* that it brings to those who may be going through intense darkness, for the knowledge that there is a light somewhere out there may be all the inspiration that someone needs to search and find that Light.

I come from a troubled part of the world, as you well know. And you may be wondering what it is like to have been born and brought up, and even brought up children, from a background such as mine. It wasn't easy and I don't think life is easy anyway. I would, then, like to take you through a journey of my life. This is simply an offering to help you understand me better. When you see my Light flickering rather dimly and you wonder why, perhaps this will enable you to understand just a little more.

I was born in a small village, in Natal, called Kingsley, near Blood River. I was the second of five children. My father was a migrant worker and mother a domestic servant. So my parents being away in the city, I was brought up by a devout Anglican grandmother. This life history is very typical of many South African blacks. Even today "grannies" still play a very vital role in the nurturing and bringing up of grandchildren.

The impact of the Group Areas Act, which is the cornerstone of South Africa's racially divided society, hit me at the age of 11 when my father died. At that time the whole

community was moved to a new area for resettlement. I had to be separated from Grandma to live in Ladysmith with an uncle who was a teacher and could assure education for his brother's children. Grandma died during this process of moving.

This was a traumatic experience for the whole family and the small community I'd known and loved. But mother experienced an even greater loss. She lost her husband, her home, her childminder, and had to endure a five year separation from all her children, the youngest of whom was 3 years old. She went to Durban to seek work as a domestic worker at £3 per month. After five years, this was the end of a chapter, an era, of my life. At the age of 16, I had to leave school and seek employment to try to help mother put the younger three children through school. Nursing was my first choice because I could study and at the same time earn some money to bring up the three younger children. Between mother and me, we would have £10. I was going to earn more than double her salary—£7. The future looked much brighter and more promising. And, indeed, it was. I thank my Lord for this.

The next chapter of my life opened when, at the age of 19, I met a young man who was also a student in the health professions. His life history was similar to mine. He had been brought up by his grandmother, who had educated him with the money she earned doing washing for various people. This young man, together with two cousins, had to go after school every Monday to collect dirty bundles of laundry from the flats in town for Granny to wash and

iron. On Thursdays he would again do the rounds after school and deliver the clean laundry. This he did for ten years of his school-going life. Some of these people grew to know and like him very much. He got gifts of books and old shirts that were still good to wear. Granny would then maybe mend and turn the collar around, and the shirts would be as good as new. This young man was also an actively practising Anglican and, therefore, was most acceptable to my family, and to me! He was so acceptable that he came to be the father of my four children. He is at this moment keeping the home fires burning and taking care of the children. I thank the Lord yet again for this.

The next chapter, and one that was colored with a lot of pain, was bringing up the children, nurturing them, socializing them and educating them, but being unable to answer some of their questions. The questions were, "Why, Mother?" "Why, Mother?"

"Why can't we paddle in the pool with other children?" "Why can't we sit on the park bench?" "Why can't we go into that empty train coach, instead of this crammed one?" "Why can't we ride on this bus? It looks empty and needs passengers!" And many others.

I didn't have the answers. The only way I answered was with a firm tug on the arm of that gentle hand in mine. And to that very trusting and innocent face looking up into mine, expecting some kind of explanation, the answer must have come with a disapproving facial expression. Gradually the questions disappeared, but I was left with a

searing hurt and pain for being unable to be strong enough to answer those questions truthfully. This must have happened to many parents of young children, especially mothers who still carry the major responsibility of socializing their children to be responsible citizens. I became part of a system and I perpetuated it.

The next chapter came with a thunderous, fiery impact that will live with us for a long time to come. This was 1976. Some of us realized with great pain and loss of life that answers to those questions, "Why, Mother?", were being sought by our young people. The half-socialization we had provided had brought about pent-up anger and frustration. We had lost the trust of our young people. We had betrayed the trust they had in us. The gentle innocent young faces were now older and seeking to find answers to unanswered questions. They were now challenging some of the institutions which we as parents had been unable to question, let alone challenge. This was a painful price that we had to pay! The wounds that were suffered then will take a long time to heal.

A wound, dear Friends, cannot heal unless all the muck and dead tissue have been removed. Wound healing is a process. A process that involves cleansing and then growth. Even when this process has taken place, a scar is left. The bigger and deeper the wound, the bigger the scar will be. Some scars can disfigure the body, or they may even interfere with the movement of a part of the body. This is where we are back home in South Africa. The wounds are there, deep and hurting, the healing process

has not even begun yet. There are still a lot of unanswered questions. There is still a lot of dead tissue in these wounds. And all these interfere with and inhibit the process of growth and healing. Spirit flow and heal us!

The anger that I see expressed in the violence that you see in the media I feel is a legacy we have passed on to our young people. My restraint on those young tender hands was an act of violence. My inability to provide answers to simple questions was an act of violence. I tried to write on those clean slates violently. I tried to mold that clay in my hands violently. But I continue to trust and pray that I will be forgiven and that the Light Within will continue to burn. You can help me remove the dark drapes that I have draped around that Light. Your Light and mine, together, can make a bigger and better glow, and a lot of that ugly stuff can come to the Light, and the Spirit can start to move and heal those wounds.

The next chapter of my life opened when, during a spiritual drought as my world was crumbling all around me, I was invited by a friend of mine to come and worship with some people called "Quakers". The name Quakers brought very vague recollections of some history lessons. As far as I could remember, these people had gone from Great Britain and settled somewhere in America, and one of them was William Penn. Anyway, I felt no harm could really come through this encounter. I was spiritually so low that I felt I couldn't possibly sink lower from that experience. Indeed this was true. I was to be uplifted in more ways than one.

This friend had not prepared me in any way as to what to expect. Anyway, at that time I was quite numb and dry, I needed no preparation. We walked into the room. A group of about 20-25 people sat in silence. We took our seats, and somehow I just melted into the silence. After some time we shook hands. That was it! I noticed afterwards that these people were all *white* and somehow were not particularly surprised by our presence or what had brought us there. They were very accepting and welcoming, and even offered us tea *in the same cups as they were using*. This to me was strange, much stranger than the silence I had melted into. These were people I had never known, except a few who had been my mother's employers, my employers, behind a shop counter, or where I paid my monthly rental for our house. This group of people fascinated me! Someone gave us some handouts to read, and their true name was *Friends!*

These Friends opened a door which had always been closed to me. They offered me water, spiritual water, which I had gone without and was needing so much. They opened a doorway into an inward journey, for they said to me, "There is that of God in *YOU*!" "The Inner Light," they called it. They said God was in me, with me, and in all of creation. They said I could seek and find Him everywhere, even in the most humble of places and people. They said I served Him in everything I did, in every word I uttered – not only on a particular day of the week in a specially designated building, reciting a particular creed, with a particular person mediating between me and God. They said to me, "God needs you just as you are." But what about all of those

hats and costumes I had accumulated as part of the process of being acceptable to God's eyes? These, they said, were not essentials; in fact they could interfere with direct communication. That was a revelation to me! And it was a discovery I made with a mixture of ecstasy and awe. It was the beginning of a relationship, a personal relationship with my God. That relationship entails responsibility, and, at that time, I did not quite comprehend the impact that that would have. It is a major responsibility.

These Friends have been a source of strength, self-discovery, and an awareness of the Lord close to me, even in the least of those brethren I live with, in that gray city, Soweto. I pray that I never grow complacent and think I've found Him and that therefore I can relax. With some people, I seek and find Him with great ease. But in some I know He is there, but I still have to seek and find Him. He is deeply embedded and shrouded under a lot of debris.

These are the Friends who have shared my pain, my fears, my hopes, and some of my concerns that I've brought to the meeting. These Friends in Southern Africa are the ones I seek with to find ways of serving my Lord. Although the problems facing us are huge, we know we are not alone in them. Somewhere out there we have a friend. A friend in you and a friend in God who loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son, who came into this world and paid a supreme price. He gave His life that we may have life and have it in abundance! "With God on our side, who can be against us?" How can we deny offers that promise abundant life?

These Friends sometimes feel isolated to a point that they may not feel quite part of that body: the body of Christ, the body of the Religious Society of Friends. We need you, dear Friends, to remind us of that oneness! We need you, dear Friends, to help us remove some of that thick insensitive skin that we may have developed due to overexposure to an abnormal situation. We need you and your Light to try to bring a bigger and better glow that can be enjoyed by many—even those who are beginning to doubt if there is any Light at all in this gloomy world. We need you to help us try to be the instruments of His Peace, to bring healing where there is hurt, hope where there is despair and doubt, and to help us understand more than to be understood. Help tonight wherever you are by pausing at 9:00 p.m. and praying for peace. God travels across time zones. Maybe together we can wrap this world in prayer, that every hour of the day somebody will be praying for peace. As we all know, no prayer goes unanswered. This one will be answered, too!

Those few Friends are trying with all the strength they have to bear witness, trying to build bridges to enable people to talk. I am thinking of those Friends in the Cape Western Monthly Meeting who have been in the frontline of racial and group conflict.

I am thinking of those few and scattered Friends in Cape Eastern Regional Meeting, who gather to pray, share, and support each other in their work. One of these facilitates a program in a crafts centre—humble premises, but tremendous outreach to a depressed community.

I am thinking of those few Friends in Natal Regional Meeting, who carry on undaunted by all kinds of intimidation which has been levelled at some there, who bear the peace testimony which is one of the cornerstones of our Religious Society.

I am thinking of those few Friends in Botswana whose numbers fluctuate so much, but whose courage goes on. They are sometimes called upon to support and make sense out of chaos and give sanctuary to those in need of a home, or whose home has been lost in the night.

I am thinking of those two Lesotho Friends who, despite their numbers, carry on to bear that Light, sharing it and reflecting it despite difficulties.

I am thinking of those Friends in Transvaal and Soweto Monthly Meetings. Though few and geographically separated, they are spanning a bridge and are dreaming dreams that will find expression through Soweto Quaker Centre, which your financial contributions, through the Friends World Committee for Consultation, made possible to build. A lot of good things are going to be done from that Centre! We hope to reach out and touch people who may be needing that touch.

Dear Friends, in all these dreams, may we never forget that we are seekers and not necessarily finders. Sometimes we seek solutions and do not find them there and then. This has its own value, the value of spiritual deepening, learning to center down, to let go and let God.

I would like to close at this time with another letter of St. Paul's to the Corinthians. II Corinthians. Chapter 4:6-12.

"The God who said, 'Out of darkness the light shall shine!' is the same God who made his light shine in our hearts, to bring us the knowledge of God's glory shining in the face of Christ.

"Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us. We are often troubled but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies. Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus' sake, in order that his life may be seen in this mortal body of ours. This means that death is at work in us, but life is at work in us, too!"

May your Light and mine shine, and together share and wrap our world in the Light. For to each one of us is given a gift very different from any other. But all these gifts are given for the greater glory of God. May the Lord be praised, and may his will be done through ordinary people like us!

About the Author

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