

World Quaker Day 2020

An Epistle from the Gathering of the Bohol Worship Group in the Philippines

Twenty-twenty has been a year of major changes for everyone in the world, even for those of us who endeavour to be in it but distinctly not of it. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought forth a new set of rules with which life is to be lived. They have been variously modified, tightening and easing up according to the virus' rate of infection. For countries whose citizens are mature enough to elect leaders (mostly women) who take stock of the facts and show compassion for their constituents, there might exist a sense of security due to the existence of institutions put in place to protect and serve its citizens. In the Philippines, however, this does not exist. We had been acknowledged as having the longest lockdown period of any sovereign state and yet the infection rate is still rising, while the national government has chosen to prioritize installing artificial white sand on a beach in the country's capital. While we could have easily met face-to-face, following the prescribed health and public safety protocols, we opted to meet virtually for the group's (and the rest of the world's) 7th opportunity to celebrate World Quaker Day.

We wish to express gratitude to Friends Peace Teams Malaysia for lending us a Zoom Meeting Room using their account, thereby affording us the opportunity to use the platform for our gathering. We chose an hour in the evening – 8:00pm – and began the occasion with an hour of Silence in Waiting Worship, which was partly attended by Ronis Chapman, the secretary of Friends World Committee for Consultation - Asia and the West Pacific Section (FWCC-AWPS). We then proceeded to introduce ourselves to each other through an exercise adapted from a tool used in AVP workshops – giving ourselves affirmation by finding positive adjectives beginning with the first letter of each of our names and subsequently using these words to address each other during the rest of the gathering. We were all familiar with each other, but we did it anyway as an effective way to affirm each other's presence.

One member then gave a brief overview of the work of Friends in the AWPS before another gave an insightful presentation on the work and practices of Friends Peace Teams (FPT), not only in our section but all over the world. Reminiscent of the past years, it was an inspiring part of the gathering since it affirmed the sustainability of the work of Quakers in the region and gave us an image of the growth of the section in spite of many challenges. Following this, the group drew its attention to the theme for this year's celebration: "What does it mean to be a Quaker Today? Living a Faithful Life in a Changing World." We began by each sharing insights on the ministries we do in our personal capacities, in consonance with our values rooted in the Friends Testimonies. The most common theme in the sharing was the lesson in fortitude learned through the pandemic – how fear is set aside in favor of doing what is right and continuing to serve others in spite of the looming dangers. After this discussion, we moved forward with an exercise in the format of the Power of Goodness, beginning with a reading of a true story about Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan woman whose persistence resulted in the creation of a sustainable grassroots reforestation movement in her country. We used the story to ask ourselves important questions, examining our faithfulness to our deeply-held principles. We were inspired by the eventual triumph of the endeavour of the story's subject and were likewise reminded that as long as someone has faith in a good thing being pursued, it will eventually succeed if it is rooted in love and kindness.

Not forgetting the Kabarak Call for stewardship, we also shared ideas and practices in "making peace with the Earth." We kicked it off by way of a short game which involved physical movements representing items each one would take on a trip out to see the natural world. After this, we each

took turns examining the barriers we face that challenge our commitment to make peace with the Earth. On a positive note, we then gave ourselves the opportunity to name our strengths that helped us walk in the appropriate direction, conscious of the things we do for Earth healing as individuals as well as the things we do as a group.

After just a little over two hours and a half, we were at the end of our gathering. It was very short, compared to the preceding years. And if the previous celebrations held were simple, this definitely takes the top spot. But in spite of the very humble way it was conducted, it was meaningful. While face-to-face gatherings are most effective, this year's alternative worked very well, nonetheless. We were still able to share smiles, stories, insights and ideas, and open up to the leadings of the Light. It is, therefore, merited to declare confidence in the growth and fortitude of the Society of Friends as it wades the unfamiliar waters of the future, especially through the extraordinary difficulty brought about by COVID-19. In difficulty and ease, together with all Quakers around the globe, we shall continue to work towards affording every being the opportunity to experience the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, upon us.

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