LIVING THE SPIRIT OF UBUNTU
Responding with hope to God's call to cherish creation and one another

South Africa Yearly Meeting is hosting the 2024 World Plenary, the global gathering of Friends. This is part of a study guide for the event theme.
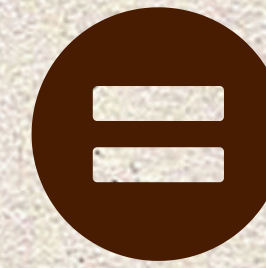
What is ubuntu?

The term ubuntu refers to the deeply held belief, morality and custom, that every person is worthy of being recognised, respected and heard, and that we as human beings are all interdependent.

ubuntu in Africa

Ubuntu is found as a daily practice in many African societies, though terms, languages and nuances may differ. The effect of ubuntu is to maintain cohesion, balance, openness, peace, compassion and dignity in a community. It restrains self-serving and materialism. It ensures strangers are welcome.

Responsibility to Others

Ubuntu also implies a collective responsibility to ensure that all members of the community have the means of subsistence and learning, of participation in communal decision-making and rites of passage. Elders have a responsibility to resolve conflicts.

Responsibility to Creation
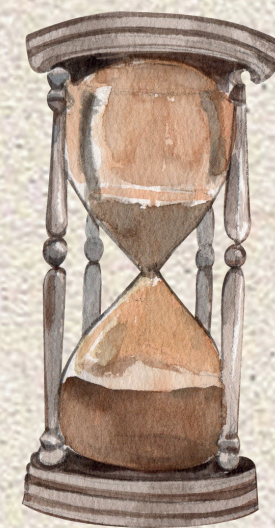
Ubuntu further extends to care for the environment, since people are part of the same Godgiven creation, that is an interdependent whole.

The priority for humanity expressed as ubuntu is an ancient wisdom. It has been asserted in more recent times in the process of liberation from colonialism and apartheid. Christian antiapartheid leader Desmond Tutu explained ubuntu with the words, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours."

Ubuntu is now being taken up in law in South Africa, Uganda and Lesotho. The four principles of ubuntu can be considered as community, interdependence, solidarity and dignity.

Ubuntu resonates with the Quaker belief that we are all equal. Our duty to care for one another was expressed by Isaac Pennington in 1667, "Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand".

A number of Biblical passages have been found to be relevant to the concept of ubuntu, including 1 Corinthians 12:14-27 ("now the body is not made up of one part but many... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it").
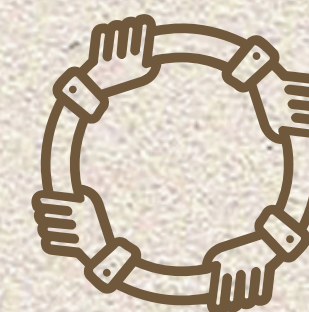
In seeking to apply ubuntu, Southern African Friends are looking to engage in activities concerning a universal basic income grant, clean energy production, food security, alternatives to violence, and overcoming/forgiving past atrocities. The Spirit of ubuntu lives!" (Epistle from SAYM Gathering 2023).

Friends World Committee for Consultation