

Sunday afternoon

In retrospect, I am not sure of the exact timeline, but I do have a crystal clear recall of the moment that I knew I was called to do more to support Quaker work in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe.

Let me describe my experience – a prompting, which I now realize is part of our shared tradition of recognizing and then acting under concern.

My Friend, David Jobson, then at Hlekweni Friends Rural Service Centre near Bulawayo, kept saying to me, ‘when are you going to come and do some work here’? I finally went in spring 2007 and learned a great deal – it was a time when inflation was mega, there was little food or fuel to be had and people were struggling. Central and Southern Africa YM met at Hlekweni, and, to be honest, my month was mainly exhilarating despite the (relative) hardships of living there.

I went back in 2009, and again saw poverty, hunger, the consequences of Aids – this time, the aftermath was very tough: I think I was soul-sick on my return. What is our world like to tolerate such inequalities? How could I continue my life here in the same way? What could I, or any small group, do?

The process of discernment, of uncomfortable-ness, of internal ‘nudging’ was underway. It was not an easy time.

Alongside, in response to wanting to support David Jobson’s work (and an instruction from our financial Examiner) our Meeting encouraged the formation of a small charity, Friends of Hlekweni; I was involved – alongside other faithful Trustees.

However my involvement was then directed.

My dog and I were walking round our usual morning circuit; I was not thinking of much at all, the dog was doing her thing. Suddenly, and without warning, I found myself stopped in my tracks by the realization that I was being asked to do much more. This was both a spiritual and physical experience. I think I shook my head; I know that I turned away and walked back in the meadow, as if I could somehow ignore this call. I then stopped, took a few tentative paces in various directions – the dog was beginning to eye me quizzically by this stage – before another recognition: that I had accepted the call.

This probably all sounds rather woolly – but this was my experience. I knew that I had some attributes – gifts? – to bring, but I also had faith that I – we - would be given whatever was needed.

My Meeting supports the work of Friends of Hlekweni – we discussed whether it was a ‘concern’ (John and Diana Lampen’s chapter on Quaker concern in Endeavours to Mend has been helpful to me – ‘concern’ is not an easy concept for the Society to grasp). No Meeting for Clearness was involved. Elders supported me: on one visit, I asked for upholding – a prayer rota was organized and I experienced the palpable power of being upheld when struggling.

I would say the call to service transformed me. I carry with me constantly a sense of being somehow ‘alongside’ my friends, and the schoolchildren, in Zimbabwe who are struggling with poverty and injustice: currently with hunger. There is much to be said for a ‘ministry of presence’. But compassion on its own can be paralyzing: what can these

hands do as part of God's work? I – and other Trustees - wrestle with what Friends of Hlekweni can and can't do. The work here is often routine (boring?) but necessary.

There is a constant challenge to decide whether my time is better spent on my laptop/the phone here or being 'in the field' – I often muse why I am being asked to work 6000 miles away: it would have been much easier, God knows, if it'd been closer to home. I try not to 'out-run my Guide', prayerfully asking for guidance.

There have been abundant joys and blessings involved in the service – being part of a longstanding Quaker commitment to work in this area of Zimbabwe, getting to know others in the things are eternal (sharing bumpy long hot journeys in a bakkie gets one very close to others), trying to 'walk a mile' in another's shoes, numerous small acts of faith, worshipping with the much smaller Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting, travelling 'in the ministry' with another companion, appreciating new friendships, being thankful for the huge generosity of Friends. These – usually – take me through the times of struggle.

I am far more conscious about my own use of the world's resources, particularly food.

How will I know when and if God wishes me to lay down this concern? I don't know; I continue to trust in the process of discernment and open-ness to the workings of the Spirit revealed to me in a meadow whilst walking my dog.