



QPSW Journal Letter from South Africa

Anand Madhvani, Journal Letter No. 8, September 2004

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Telephone: 020 7663 1075 Fax: 020 7663 1049 email: joannaw@quaker.org.uk

e-mail: anand@dosima.org

Dear Friends,

At the end of September I will finish my QPSW placement in South Africa, after two very rich, valuable and productive years here.

Most of my work has been linked with the Quaker-based Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). I've now facilitated around 25 such workshops, and helped to set up an additional 20. At my main school project in a township called Orange Farm, we have now trained around 450 pupils, teachers and community members there, making a huge difference to many individuals, and also visibly affecting the character and atmosphere within the school. Two generations of facilitators from the school were successfully trained to run workshops there fairly independently, which gave them new skills and confidence, while help to localise the content and style of the workshops and creating strong positive role models for the other pupils.

Other workshops ranged from youth awaiting trial to special needs teachers in Johannesburg, students in Durban, trainee missionaries in Kuruman, teachers in Gabarone, a township school in Grahamstown and staff of the Quaker Peace Centre in Cape Town. Because of the nature and content of the AVP workshops, these experiences have been a real privilege, giving me insights and new friendships with lives very different to my own, in some ways, yet also so similar in terms of underlying needs and values.

(I still don't understand teenagers though! One of the more puzzling and surprising aspects of South African society for me, probably globally as well, is the complete disengagement of a small number of deeply disaffected young people. I've seen that most starkly at a richer whiter school in the Western Cape, and with well to do students around Grahamstown, more than with young black people here. It seems almost like a cultural apathy or ennui affecting young people living more comfortable, privileged lives than those around them, which both intrigues and worries me).

AVP is always a personal journey as well, and through these workshops I have learnt much about myself on the way, recognising the things I do well and learning which things I could do differently. The increased awareness has, for instance, helped me put my previously difficult relationship with my brother on a completely new footing. I continue to learn how the behaviours we learn from childhood, families, work etc. can be very unhealthy, yet alternatives are often available as well.

Another side of my work linked with African languages, culture and local tourism. As well as new marketing materials for potential tourists, I was very fortunate to take part in several of our Soweto tours and cultural exchanges, with a variety of groups. The different expectations, cultures and resultant encounters were fascinating. After about a year, and once I'd started getting my bearings

and some sense of the history, I even began taking individuals on short tours around the township. As an outsider, this was quite special, allowing me to open the doors to a new and unexpectedly rich experience for others, as they had been opened for me.

Some aspects of working with my host organisation proved harder than we all anticipated. Differences in expectations, skills and working styles were not helped by the structural incongruity of being the only full-time foreign placement within an organisation run mainly by and for local part-time volunteers. Mine was the first such placement with the organisation, and useful practical lessons have been learnt all round from this initial experience.

homeless community in a derelict
Johannesburg building



Methodist soup kitchen
'Paballo ya Batho'
www.paballo.org.za
inner city – first stop

Johannesburg is constantly changing, shifting, re-inventing itself. In just the time I've been here, I've seen many things alter, including how the homeless communities are dwindling in the face of aggressive redevelopment and 'city beautification'. Regeneration is both exciting and sad to see, having experienced such different sides of the city.

Exploring the region, both through workshops and with visiting friends and family, has given fascinating insights into its diverse cultures and histories. I've now sampled all the provinces of South Africa, and most of the neighbouring countries. Being a keen photographer, this kept me click happy – I've often spent more on film and developing than on the month's rent, and have taken around 15,000 pictures in total.

I've ridden horses, ponies and elephants, seen whales and penguins, dived in the Indian Ocean and climbed Table Mountain. I also learnt how to hotwire and jerry-rig bits of the old QPSW vehicle, which had a habit of catching fire, and track down errant QPSW donkeys around Kuruman with Helen, my co-worker based there. (There is now a new brand QPSW vehicle, but it does not provide so many opportunities to meet local mechanics, who have proved to be an interesting and talkative source of diverse life experiences and, in one case, astonishingly colourful language).

It seems as if, despite and because of the difficult recent past in this country, some individuals have grown uncommonly wise and strong, although of course many others were left with damaged or incomplete lives. South Africa is an extraordinary place on an amazing journey, and I've felt very alive here.

Though I have not met Bishop Tutu or Nelson Mandela, I consider myself very privileged to have worked with, and spent time getting to know our young, exciting and inspiring AVP facilitators

from Soweto and now Orange Farm as well, and many other fantastic people who are making a difference to their own lives, and those of others around them.

In particular, it has been wonderful to get to know the local Quaker community, with its wealth of experience and diversity, and which has been a welcoming source of both friendship and support. One of the more fun little projects I've involved with is the development of a new website for Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting (www.dosima.org/communities/quakers/) which should continue to develop and grow over the coming year. It's been fun finding out more about the extraordinary individuals in this community, for the website, and will form a nice way of keeping in touch with people while I am far away.

(I also wonder if the enormity of the recent past is part of why some young people disengage, particularly those living with privileges obviously rooted in a system now openly acknowledged as unjust. As I understand it, the immediately post-war generations in Europe also struggled with a sense of history having passed them by, and not having played a part in the obvious struggles of their parents' generation).

In a few days I'll travel back to Bulawayo, in Zimbabwe, to finish the last few weeks of my contract there. Returning to the Hlekweni Friends Rural Training Centre will be interesting – I last visited on a young Friends' workcamp in December (Journal Letter no.6), when many changes were just beginning to take place. It sounds like much progress has been made, and much remains to be done. Following that, I'll be travelling slowly overland to East Africa, ending the journey in December at my childhood home, Nairobi, in December. Connecting together these experiences, and having time to meet people on the way, is going to be wonderful.

It was always awkward, filling in forms at the beginning of these two years, to know how to describe my profession – was I some kind of volunteer, doing social work, connected to a church? In the end, I started simply writing 'peace worker', and that phrase stuck. I'm going to miss it!

I would like to thank my host organisation, Phaphama Initiatives, QPSW and, ultimately, the Quaker communities in the UK and Southern Africa for making this placement and work possible.

with best wishes,

Anand

You can find more pictures and information about my experiences in South Africa at:
www.dosima.org/home.pages/anand.madhvani/south.africa/