Sharing Love and Knowledge in the Time of COVID-19

An Interview with Beverly G. Ward

“IT’S LIKE PEELING an onion: layer after layer of pandemics and it all makes you cry,” shares Beverly Ward. She’s referencing the built-in injustice of her home state of Florida, where she works as Field Secretary for Earthcare for Southeastern Yearly Meeting (SEYM) and clerk of Quaker Earthcare Witness’ United Nations Working Group. Sea levels are rising and sunny-day flooding is the new normal. It’s hurricane season. Florida’s numbers of COVID-19 cases represent some of the worst in the nation. Beverly shares, “Tourism is a major industry. That industry and its ancillaries, e.g. restaurants, hotels, etc., have been decimated. The maximum weekly unemployment benefit is $275.00. However, the governor recently described the online unemployment application process as a deterrent to apply for benefits!”

All these factors are parts of a much bigger story, one that Beverly shared with Friends from the US and Kenya and beyond in July as part of a forum hosted by QEW’s United Nations (UN) Working Group and held during the UN’s annual High Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.

Quaker Earthcare Witness holds four UN agency accreditations with the mission of bringing a spirit-led Quaker voice to UN deliberations on the environment. In the last few years, the UN Working Group has connected with diaspora communities as part of their “Diaspora Where you Are” project and in honor of the International Decade of People of African Descent.

Beverly shares, “As a group, it is important for us to be involved in as many different parts of the UN as we can, like indigenous peoples rights, the Commission on the Status of Women, the 2015 - 2024 International Decade of People of African Descent and the Water Action Decade, because we can talk about the connections between all these issues both domestically and internationally. We share messages about the impacts of colonization, climate change, and economic structures that are making it so only a few people are benefiting. But we know that those benefits are temporary; we are so quickly exhausting our most basic resources: potable water, clean air, and land.

Beverly connects these messages back to Florida, where she’s worked as a researcher for over a decade finding ways to respond to and understand climate change in a state already experiencing its severe effects. “You have to start with the outer layer of the onion: the structural stuff of Florida’s history of clearing most of the indigenous people out...to clear lands for agriculture, and then African Americans were brought to work the fields. Now Disney plays the same role: Black and Brown workers have to clean up after tourists. Both industries—agriculture and tourism—represent low-paying jobs. The same people who provided services historically are at the front-lines of the crisis now, too. What you’ve been calling ‘essential’, we’ve been saying ‘expendable.’ They live in expendable communities—they’re being put on the frontlines as Corona-fodder. These communities
can’t social distance because they are working multiple part-time jobs while living in intergenerational households. Some of these same communities are still in recovery from the mortgage-lending crisis. You can pick any portal to look at these structural layers: housing, food security, or water.”

The UN Working Group works to look at these different layers. During the forum in July, Nancy Abwalaba Owano, PhD of Pawn University in Kenya, shared about water and sanitation issues. Forty-one percent of Kenya’s population rely on unimproved water sources like ponds, shallow wells, rivers, streams, while 71 percent lack basic sanitation (World Health Organization and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme). These issues are exacerbated by climate change while lack of basic sanitation increased the possibility of disease, like COVID.

Another guest to the UN Working Group’s forum was Elizabeth Wathuti, known as Liz Mazingira, a young Kenyan woman who founded the Green Generation Initiative which addresses issues like deforestation, pollution and environmental injustices through conservation. Antoinette Jackson, PhD and chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of South Florida, presented on the connections between tourism, colonization and racism.

What to do about these many layers? Beverly shares “One of the things that we are not paying enough attention to is how communities are coming up with their own solutions during these ongoing crises. How can we get involved in how our own communities are coping? Particularly within a lot of the communities of color in Florida, there is a history of mutual aid societies or ‘sousous.’ People have been left out of the formal economy for so long, they came up with their own solutions, like insurance, trading, and bartering services, and alternative banking structures. These lessons are important now because we can learn how to better respond to emergencies, how to plan for displacement due to climate change, and because these networks make it easier to contact trace for COVID-19.”

“These lessons can apply to our meetings too. In Southeastern Yearly Meeting, I am trying to encourage meetings to do this sort of emergency assessment. To ask questions like, ‘Who has capacity to shelter people? Who could or should evacuate? Which meetinghouse has solar panels? Who can generate ice for medications when the power goes out?’ Those are the kinds of planning things that I am thinking about. And this brings me back to the UN Working Group. We ask, what can we do with this knowledge? Where do we go with this? We don’t just meet and talk about the Sustainable Development Goals. We are asking, what should the policies be? What can our communities do? How can we share this knowledge?”

“Let’s remember also that this is not the last of the pandemics. We really should be spending this time preparing for the next and learning as many lessons as we have. And making these global connections. Maybe Liz from Kenya has a strategy that we could use in Florida. Maybe I have a strategy they could use in Kenya or throughout the diaspora. The more we are able to engage with each other in understanding how communities are adapting, the more we will all benefit.”

And finally, “Find joy and love.”