

## **Actions Speak Louder Than Words**

**"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).**

Living by the principle of justice for all seems to be the clarion call of those who continue to advocate for the rights of the elderly. Recently I have heard discussions concerning the need for a United Nations Charter on the rights of the elderly. Here the view is expressed that there is an increase of the elderly population throughout the world and the increase is projected to continue for some time to come. In an article published in the West Indian Medical Journal in December 2008, Dr Denise Eldemire Shearer point out the growth in the number of elderly persons in developed and developing countries as follows:

“In 1950, the older population of the world's people was 8%; 11.7% in developed countries and 6% in developing countries. By 2000, it had increased to 10%; 20% in developed and 8% in developing countries. It is projected to grow to 21% in 2050 over a 100% increase [33% in developed, 20% in developing countries].<sup>1</sup>

With such increase in the elderly population a reality in the world, the question is, what are we doing as a people and a Church to prepare ourselves for an increased

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<sup>1</sup> West Indian medical Journal: Dec 2008

number of elderly people? What can we begin to do as a Church to make our congregation friendly and welcoming to the elderly?

Before answering the questions let us explore a perspective suggested by the first reading from the book of Amos which point to one reason we need to keep the essential message in view. In the book of Amos 5:24 the writer says: "**Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**" Justice is the hallmark of a people and a society which accepts God as the source of its existence. For the prophet Amos, life with and in God means accountability by all who swear allegiance to God. In the words of one Biblical commentator: "The prophet shows the cherished traditions of Israel to be not causes for complacency but measures of Israel's accountability to God."<sup>2</sup> Justice is one way God's people show their commitment.

In the icon on the front cover of the bulletin today, sister Gillian invites us to reflect on one way we can serve in the ministry of justice. This ministry is not the one which reports to parliament but the one which reports to the maker of heaven and earth. You will notice in the picture on the front cover of the bulletin,

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2 [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=179](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=179)

it suggests an elderly person doing the ministry of justice to someone in need.

This action of justice reminds us of Jesus' words of judgement in Matt 25: "I was hungry and you gave me food...naked and you clothe me." Here the picture suggests we are not to entertain pictures of older persons as having no contribution to society. On the contrary, older persons have a contribution to make to the Church and the society and we would do well to attention and act as the picture suggests.

This brings me to the two questions I raised earlier. **First, what are we doing as a people and a Church to prepare ourselves for an increased number of elderly people?** In addition to Dr Eldemire Shearer, in a recent presentation to a workshop of ATG participants, Dr Carol Archer, of UTCEH, reminded us of similar statistics. Two things we should bear in mind. One is that we are to expect an increased number of elderly people helping to shape society as is demonstrated on the cover of the bulletin. In other words, an increased in the number of elderly people does not automatically mean increased burden for the society. On the contrary, people who are elderly have a storehouse of wisdom which enables them to continue making positive contributions to society's development. Being elderly, therefore, does not mean it's time to be excluded from society. Indeed,

justice as God's way of relating with the world demands that we see the elderly as key stakeholders in the development of Jamaican society and in the mission of the Church.

One way to give attention to the matter of the care of the elderly in the Church is the development of a policy position for action. Such a policy will allow members across the Diocese to be aware of, and responsive to the needs of the elderly. Indeed, as I read somewhere earlier, we need to focus on building and maintaining elderly friendly congregation. In this regard, we will focus on ensuring congregations welcome the positive contributions of the elderly and ensure they are not pushed aside if, and when their faculties begin to fail. Whatever their status of health or physical condition, the elderly have a vital place in the Church. To this end, I challenge this congregation, working through the Anglican Togetherness Group (ATG) to move a resolution at the next synod to ensure a policy on the elderly is in place within the next two years.

A second question to ponder is this, **what can we begin to do as a Church to make our congregation friendly and welcoming to the elderly?** One commentator on the text of Amos 5, Carolyn Sharp, Associate Professor of

Hebrew Studies, at Yale Divinity School, has this to say: God's own justice will roll down like floodwaters, and God's own righteousness like a perpetual torrent! "Ever-flowing stream" is far too gentle an image for the meaning of the Hebrew here. Amos's point is this: because God's people have not shown justice to the poor, God has no choice but to unleash God's own justice and righteousness as punishment." Put in another way, God will take steps to take care of God's people, whether we care for them or not. Nevertheless, God's expects us to care because we have received the capacity to care from God.

God's care, especially for the elderly, can be mediated through us in three ways. The first is patience. The elderly have a mind of their own. They have developed years of experience and wisdom. There are times when such wisdom will need to be interpreted and translated for a new generation. At no time should we view the elderly as a bother; rather we should see them as important aspects of ourselves teaching us ways we are to prepare ourselves to become when we get older. A second way to mediate God's care for the elderly as an act of justice is faith. We who interact with the elderly must learn from the strength of their faith in God and seek to model the confident trust they have in God. Finally, God's care can be mediated through us as love. Let us love the elderly unconditionally. In this

way we will love them as God loves the world. Love means giving ourselves unconditionally to the other; we need to give unconditionally to the elderly even as they give unconditionally to us as exemplified by the senior citizen on the front cover of the bulletin.

Let us therefore work for justice and righteousness by practicing patience, faith and love toward each other, especially those who are elderly. This would be our way of letting God's own justice roll down like floodwaters, and God's own righteousness like a perpetual torrent! In the name...