

**UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE
JUSTICE RENEWED**

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“Emancipate yourself from mental slavery. None but ourselves can free our minds.” These immortal words of the Jamaican icon Bob Marley provide a profound philosophical framework for the process of our self understanding as well as our engagement with the communities in which we live. In particular, these words provide a challenge to renew and when necessary unlearn our own misunderstandings of unity, peace and justice.

It is an unfortunate reality that peace and unity have become loose jargon, which is often boastful in its proclamation but superficial in practice. Jesus noted that peace as the world gives is a facade (John 14:27). Instead Jesus proclaims a bold, radical faith that lives in the midst of unjust circumstances with a promise of abundant life (John 10:10). In renewing our commitment to justice we must therefore proclaim and live the bold alternatives to counter the current political, economic and social systems that steal and destroy life. In particular, justice demands a renewed approach to learning and the promotion of genuine partnership.

The current systems of learning encourage mass consumption of information without any critical challenge to the current social systems that often render formal education useless. A renewed approach to education ought to encourage as its mandate life-long learning, self awareness, creativity and genuine development of communities.

Renowned Caribbean scholar and thinker Professor Rex Nettleford eloquently describes the issue in this manner: “One area of serious concern for all of us is the delivery of the sort of education to our young people that will allow them to grab hold of their destiny, take decisions in their own interest, consonant with the demands of a country that may be poor in material wealth but rich in human resources, or may be materially well-off but spiritually jaded, so that they may take hold of the legacy of that spirit of independence, of self reliance, individual initiative and the capacity for coordinated social action towards mutual growth.”

Jesus in his own teaching ministry recognised that any form of learning should challenge a person to integrate the way they live with the way they think, which in itself is transformational.

We can see Jesus’ challenge to teach and transform in his discourse with Zaccheus and the rich young ruler: Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 19:16-28. In both instances Jesus’ teaching was focused on enabling both men to understand that their identity was rooted not in money or material possessions but in their right relationships with the communities in which they lived.

Jesus’ willingness to eat with Zaccheus who was ostracised by his own community and his restoration of Zaccheus as a Son of Abraham is in itself transformational. Zaccheus in the face of his restoration to community also matched his new life with a vow of justice to not only reconcile but make restoration of goods to his own community, a vow which in itself holds invaluable teaching for the true meaning of restorative justice today.

By contrast, Jesus confronted the rich young ruler by directly challenging him to see that despite all his riches he still lacked one thing. Jesus’ seemingly exaggerated demand for the sale of his possessions was misunderstood by the rich young ruler to mean a loss of material wealth. The ruler’s own limited

education in his religious teachings dissuaded him from envisioning a new life reality that restoration of right relationships especially with those who are poor and disadvantaged would not necessarily include loss of his own wealth. In our own times it is this very fear that has disabled wealthy nations from demanding true peace and unity that includes restoration of the historical goods and dignity of those who are poor and disadvantaged.

A renewed understanding of identity and community by necessity requires genuine partnership. Our *raison d'être* as humanity and a community of faith is to partner with God to ensure the realisation of abundant full life in the whole earth. This goal requires the ideas, skills and effort of each of us to live, learn and work together, that is, partnership.

What are the values which will encourage partnership to yield meaningful benefits? What challenges arise for the church in committing to practice partnership in its life, work and witness?

First, my own understanding has led me to enumerate the values of partnership as these.

God is sovereign. I acknowledge it as fact that the divine spirit of God is in control of all life and the whole earth. At the genesis of the Biblical testament there is this reminder: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”: Gen 1:1. But lest you misunderstand or misquote my interpretation of God’s sovereignty I hasten to say this. Sovereignty does not encompass the narrow perception of authoritarian, autocratic, or elite domination. Instead it is wholesome and includes the earth and all its fullness- grass, fruit, sun, moon, stars, cattle, fish, man and woman, as symbols and agents of God’s divine creative power. It is a true partnership that allows the whole earth to celebrate being created while being creative.

Partnership demands more than equality. It demands mutual respect. It requires us to transcend labels, perceptions of limitation or scarcity and stereotypical ideas of potential or capacity. It encourages us to value every person and every living thing as representing abundant and unlimited creative power for present and ultimate good. Again at the genesis of the Biblical testament it is recorded: “And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good”: Genesis 1:31.

Partnership requires the promotion of justice and just relationships. Justice is premised on the equal application of the principle of fairness and the practice of living truth in all circumstances and situations. This reminds me of the words of Jesus as again recorded in the Biblical testament. Jesus when tested by a lawyer in summarising the commandments of God espoused as the second of the greatest commandments: “Love your neighbour as you love yourself”: Matthew 22:38.

Despite our struggles with the historical data of the complicity of the church in activities and doctrines that have perpetuated mental enslavement and have even rationalised physical enslavement the church does have a testimony of partnership from its early formation to its existence today. The Biblical testament of the Acts of the Apostles is replete with testimonies of the commitment of the church to daily live the values we have previously considered-affirmation of God’s sovereignty, mutual respect and the promotion of justice.

In my own context of the Caribbean, the annals of history testify that the church even in the face of slavery, indentureship and the discomforts of the birth and growth of new nations continued and continues to bring communities of people together with various, skills and gifts to worship together and care for people united by the church’s inherently inclusive prequalification: our love for God and Christ. The prevailing examples of ecumenism and more so represented by this very Uniting General Council are also examples of the how the church encourages whole communities to work together across boundaries to transform the lives of people throughout the world.

The testimony of the church also reveals what I consider to be the greatest challenge to the church to fully embrace the practise of partnership. It is the challenge of enabling meaningful ways of working together with the non-church community. More specifically it is the challenge of overcoming the narrow perception that it is the church's exclusive right to realise the attainment of fullness of life for the whole earth.

So how does this change the way the church will work towards accomplishing mission? It requires that the institution of the church work together in a multi-disciplinary construct with the community in which we live. The members of our churches already do this each day as they enter their work spaces. So even as we equip and train ministers and theologians the church must work alongside farmers, journalists, counsellors, poets, scientists, musicians, legislators, artists and all God's people in all places to work towards emancipation for all people to celebrate the continuous process of realising our human potential.

More than this it is a direct challenge to the church to openly advocate and act for social justice and change. Social justice is not charity. It goes beyond that. It is in solidarity with those who are poor but also demands that the church utilizes its resources and networks in a systematic way that meets needs, promotes self-sufficiency, and communal responsibility. It is a call for each of us to love God, love ourselves but also love our neighbours- a circle of responsibility that calls us to account not only to God but also to take account of each other.

In final words, it is our enduring commitment to social justice and genuine partnership that will ensure that unity of the Spirit and peace no longer remains an elusive goal to be pursued but never attained. This Uniting General Council therefore stands as prophetic witness to the power of God's Spirit to enable unity and peace. Jesus boldly proclaimed "With God all things are possible": Matthew 19:26. As we read the signs of our times I pray we are each challenged to renew our commitment to justice and follow Jesus' radical faith to boldly proclaim and live the alternatives that will make "Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace" possible for all God's creation.