

Women of Spirit and Vision in Trinidad and Tobago

By Leela Ramdeen, Attorney-at-Law, Education Consultant, Chair of The Catholic Commission for Social Justice

I try to live a purpose-driven life. I know God had a plan for me when he placed me in a home in which both my parents were concerned about justice issues. Coming from a loving, caring family makes me realise the importance of building strong families. This is an important part of my work.

Together with my teachers at school, my parents, who were my first educators, helped to mould my character; to motivate me by boosting my self-esteem and confidence. They were my early mentors who guided me to determine what my 'purpose' on this earth is - to play my part in building a just and equitable society/world; a world in which justice, peace, truth, love and freedom prevails. This is my vocation.

My faith as a Catholic underpins all my actions. Having a Catholic mother and a Hindu father has broadened my horizons and has informed my interfaith work. In a world in which the negative aspects of secularism threaten to overwhelm us, I am totally committed to promote interfaith dialogue in my efforts to build a culture of peace. For years I collaborated with Westminster Interfaith and joined others on the annual Multifaith Pilgrimage for Peace across London.

Each of us comes into this world with certain gifts. Indeed, life itself is a gift from God. The choices that we make as we journey through life will determine whether or not we use our God-given talents to build the common good.

My passion to promote justice and equity seems to have been evident even in my early years. My parents told me that when I was about 3 years old I used to stand on an upturned bucket pointing my fingers at an imaginary audience and speaking about a range of things that I did not think was 'fair'.

My father had served as an MP with the Democratic Labour Party in TT for 5 years (1961-1966). When he lost the election as a member of the Liberal Party in 1966, he decided to read Law at Lincoln's Inn, London. He took his wife and 7 children with him. It was when my family migrated to London, UK, in 1967 that the struggle for justice began to 'consume' my life.

Once I developed awareness of the nature and extent of injustice in our world, I was determined to spend my life combating this hydra-headed monster. I became involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London – opposing South Africa's system of Apartheid and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and others. Together with like-minded people I would stand for hours in the cold outside South Africa House in London. I joined the throngs of people who gathered in London when Mandela was released on 11 Feb. 1990.

During my studies for my B.Ed. Degree in London, I realised how racism was affecting the life chances of black students. In 1970 Bernard Coard wrote 'How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British Schooling System'. This book helped to galvanise support for the anti-racist movement in Britain.

I joined the many academics, parents and community members – both black and white, in the struggle against racism in the UK and in Europe. After the British Government published the interim Rampton Report, which acknowledged that there was racism in the education system, and then the Swann Report entitled: “Education for All” (1985), I was appointed to lead a team of teachers - covering all London Boroughs, to promote success among students of Caribbean origin who were attending some of the 750 Primary Schools in London, and challenging racism in the curriculum in these schools.

In 1984 the then Cardinal George Basil Hume OSB, OM, appointed me to lead a team to conduct empirical research to help him review the Catholic Church’s commitment to the black community in Westminster Diocese in London. The report of our Committee, entitled: *With You in Spirit?*, made a number of important recommendations which he undertook to implement. He then appointed me as Vice-Chair of what was termed ‘C5’ – The Cardinal’s Continuing Committee for the Caribbean Community. He was the Chairman of C5. For 25 years, until he died, I worked with him to promote racial and social justice in Church and society.

I was appointed Inspector of Schools in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1985. Over the years I have held key positions on a number of justice groups/organizations in the UK e.g. Ken Livingstone (former Mayor of London) and I were Co-Chairs of Britain’s Anti-Racist Alliance (cross-party alliance). I was also Vice Moderator of the Council of Churches in Britain and Ireland: Churches Commission for Racial Justice and a member of the Catholic Bishops Conference in England and Wales: Committee for Community Relations.

When the then PM, Margaret Thatcher, disbanded the ILEA, I secured a job as Deputy Director of Education/Head of Quality Assurance in a London Borough. I continued to fight for justice both in my professional work and in my voluntary work. As Mandela said, “the struggle is my life”.

When my mother died in 1995 and my father later decided to return to TT, my elder sister, Kamala, came to look after him. They are both lawyers. I changed career to Law and returned to work with them. Before I knew it, I had said “Yes” to Archbishop Edward J. Gilbert C.Ss.R to Chair the Catholic Commission for Social Justice. I also said “Yes” to sitting on the Board of Credo Foundation for Justice (CFJ). Inter alia, CFJ, which is led by the Holy Faith Sisters, runs 3 homes for socially displaced children. I accepted Prof. John Spence’s invitation to join the Education Discussion Group, of which I am now Vice President. I was also honoured to be appointed an honorary member of the Inner Wheel Club of St Augustine.

In these and other organizations to which I belong, I devote my life to seek to transform society so that it will reflect Gospel values. Some see me as being controversial as my mouth has no 'lid', as we say in local parlance. This is not the time to be an armchair Christian. One needs to be fearless if one is to be a true witness to one's faith and if one is to awaken the conscience of all citizens so that they will also join the struggle.

What drives me to do what I do is my belief in the sanctity of life and the inherent dignity of each human person from conception until natural death. I seek to follow the example of great men such as the Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Hélder Câmara who said, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." Justice involves more than charity. We must address unjust structures and systems also if we are to create conditions that will enable each person to realise his/her potential.

Development must be people-centred. The Catholic Church believes that authentic integral human development must be the basis for economic, social, political and other aspects of development. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, this requires us to promote the development of every aspect of the human person and of each person.

We journey with the rest of Creation and must heed the words of Pope Benedict XVI who reminds us that "Our earth speaks to us and we must listen if we want to survive." Promoting ecological responsibility is one of my priorities.

We are all equally invited by God to a place at the table of life but greed, poor governance, the scandal of poverty and social exclusion, wars and so on, have created conditions in which some of our brothers and sisters live like the biblical character, Lazarus, waiting for crumbs to fall from the plates of the wealthy. I continue to raise awareness of the fact that we are one human family and that, as Martin Luther King Jr. stated: "Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere". Indeed, injustice diminishes all of us.

"The ultimate measure of a man," he said, "is not where he stands at times of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbour will risk his position, his prestige and even his life for the welfare of others. In dangerous valleys and hazardous PATHWAYS he will lift some bruised and beaten brother *and sister* to a higher and more noble life." (Martin Luther King , Jr.)

What motivates me is the belief that good will triumph over evil and that there are more good people in our world than evil people. The challenge is to promote moral and spiritual values; to light the divine spark in each person; and to build societies in which people of good-will put their shoulders to the proverbial wheel to defeat evil. I have a vision that a better world is possible. Each of us can and must make a difference in building such a world. There is reason for hope. Come, join me in the struggle.