

Cooperation between women of faith and their role for advancing peace and development in the Caribbean

Speech delivered at the World Conference of Religions for Peace Conference at Cascadia Hotel, Trinidad by Leela Ramdeen on November 29, 2005

Brothers and sisters,

Firstly, I must thank the World Conference of Religions for Peace and the IRO for the opportunity to address those present at this important event. If we read the signs of the times we will realize how important it is for all of us to work to strengthen the growing commitment to inter-religious dialogue and cooperation. Gatherings such as this are to be welcomed as a great sign of hope for the peoples of the world.

More than 5 billion people adhere to one of the world's religions and since women hold up more than half the sky, as the saying goes, more than half of this 5 billion are women and girls. Women play a key role in advancing peace and development – and I mean sustainable development –in the Caribbean and in the world at large.

The fundamental values of all religions strive to protect the dignity of every human being. To promote the dignity of the human person requires us to advance development and peace. I believe that women of faith have a special role to play in this process. They have the power to heal, to educate, to enlighten, and to transform.

I am a Christian woman of faith who believes, as Gandhi did, in the essential unity of all people. To profess myself as Christian demands that I make a clear and conscious decision to integrate Christ into every thread and fibre of the fabric of my life. However, as a Christian, I realize that I do not journey through life on my own, or indeed, only with people from my own faith community.

Indeed, the teachings of the Catholic Church stresses the need for us to work with others for the common good. In my address, I will not refer to documents such as *Nostra Aetate* (Pope Paul VI: 1965), the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Church's relationship to other religions, and documents published by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, since the purpose of our gathering is to focus more on mechanisms for inter-religious cooperation rather than on doctrinal matters.

Last year the Catholic Church published a *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. It states that:

“Every society worthy of the name can be sure that it stands in the truth when all of its members, thanks to their ability to know what is good, are able to pursue it for themselves and for others. It is out of love for one's own good and for that of others that people come together in stable groups with the purpose of attaining a common good. The different human societies also must establish among themselves relationships of solidarity, communication and cooperation, in the service of man and the common good”.

The Compendium tells us that “since something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men. Moreover, this is the ultimate foundation of the radical equality and brotherhood among all people, regardless of their race, nationality, sex, origin, culture, or class.

“ Only the recognition of human dignity can make possible the common and personal growth of everyone. (Jas 2:1-9) ...there must be an awareness that it will be possible to safeguard and promote human dignity only if this is done as a community, by the whole of humanity.”

Pope Paul VI said in his Encyclical, *On the Development of Peoples (1967)*:

“Development is the new name for peace...If you want peace, work for justice...Only through the mutual action of individuals and peoples sincerely concerned for the good of all men and women can a genuine universal brotherhood be attained; otherwise, the persistence of conditions of serious disparity and inequality will make us all poorer.”

He said that we have a “collective responsibility” to promote development worldwide. He called for a holistic approach to human development, taking into account the social, political, economic, educational, cultural, spiritual and moral development of the human person. Writing of the need for solidarity between rich and poor nations and people Pope John Paul II wrote:

“Solidarity helps us to see the “other” - whether a person, people, or nation – not just as some kind of instrument with a work capacity and physical strength to be exploited...but as our “neighbour”, a sharer, on a par with ourselves, in the banquet of life to which we are all equally invited by God. Hence the importance of reawakening the religious awareness of individuals and peoples.”

John Paul II also stated that because of the interdependence of the world today, we need a more integrated international system. International solidarity is a requirement of the moral order; world peace depends on this, he says. The promotion of development and peace is a key social justice principle in the Catholic Church. John XXIII’s encyclical, *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)* was the first encyclical by the Catholic Church that was addressed to all men and women of goodwill and not only to Catholics.

I realized very early in life that women of faith, and, indeed, people of faith, can make a difference in our troubled world if they stand in solidarity with each other for the common good and for the good of God’s creation. My father is a Hindu and my mother was a Catholic (she died a few years ago). I grew up learning to respect the dignity of each person. It is this basic respect that we must have for each other that will inevitably lead us to cooperate with each other.

During my 35 years in the UK, I was involved in inter-faith dialogue and cooperation at various levels, in particular with women from different faith communities. Such cooperation is essential if we are to make progress. At the end of October I attended the

first ever Conference on *Women, Development and Peace*, organized by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace at the Vatican in Rome.

Cardinal Martino, President of that Commission started his opening speech by acknowledging that “Women are true bearers of peace and reconciliation.” He urged us to look towards the face of women to bring about development and peace.

It is my belief that women of faith, and indeed other women in secular society, can and many do cooperate in the urgent task of building a Caribbean/world in which development, peace and justice can become a reality. There is common ground on which we can agree and which does not compromise my religious beliefs.

For example, I am sure that many women of faith will agree with me that the main elements of the culture of death that pervades our world today are easy to enumerate (materialism, consumerism, secularism, relativism and hyper-individualism). The bleakness of this picture, however, is relieved by the continuing presence of unusual opportunities for women and men of faith to witness to their faith.

And we can witness to our faith by building alliances with non-faith-based organizations when appropriate. For example, the Commission of which I am Chair, has worked for 2 consecutive years with a Organisation called: Women’s Institute for Alternative Development (WINAD) on a campaign to rid our streets/country of small arms – guns etc. There is strength in unity and we can find common ground within the secular community also.

One of the most potent forces that is propelling us – men and women – in the Caribbean region to see the need to advance development and peace is the complex phenomenon of ‘Globalization’.

The Confederation of Bishops’ Conferences of Latin America stated in a book entitled: *Globalization and New Evangelization in Latin America and the Caribbean*: “For some people Globalization has meant life and creativity, progress and fulfillment, while for the great majority it signifies selfishness and frustration, exclusion and death. The challenge now is to humanize Globalization and globalize solidarity.

Faced with Globalization, we must ask ourselves: How does Globalization affect us in the Caribbean? We know, for example that the current model of Globalization has been satirized as: “You liberalise, we subsidise”.

Today we have an international trading system which Kofi Annan described in a speech to the WTO as unfair and dishonest. He said: “The reality of the international trading system today doesn’t match the rhetoric. Instead of open markets, there are too many barriers that stunt, stifle and stop them.

Instead of fair competition, there are subsidies by rich countries that tilt the playing field against the poor. Just look at what has happened to sugar and bananas in the Caribbean;

maize and cotton in countries such as Mexico as a result of the US Farm and Cotton Subsidies. Pope Paul VI stated in *The Development of Peoples* that free trade can be called just only when it conforms to the demands of social justice.

What can and what should we do in the face of Globalization? Fr Michael Campbell-Johnston, Chair of the Justice and Peace Commission in Barbados, highlights areas for action in his book: *To renew the face of the Earth: Global Concerns*. Father refers also to the work of a US-based organization, the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment. The Group has published a statement containing 5 principles for building a more just, sustainable and prosperous human society through trade and investment. These have been endorsed by numerous organizations and institutions across the USA.

Women of faith in the Caribbean must stand together in solidarity to devise and implement strategies that will advance development and peace. But first, as women we must raise our awareness of the issues that confront us and understand not only the meaning of the terminology used in the debate about Development and Peace, but the political and other dynamics at play.

At the second meeting of the *World Conference of Religions for Peace Latin American and Caribbean Women of Faith Network* which took place from 19 – 20 Dec. 2004 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Mr. Daniel Zider presented an analysis on the significance of **social capital** for sustainable human and economic development.

Mr. Zider defined social capital as social cohesion, trust within a society, civic conscience and ethical values in any society. He stressed that to achieve peace and sustainable development, we must work hard to regain the ethical values in our society, politics and other aspects of life. Mr. Zider offered his expertise to assist the women participants in developing proposals on concrete projects in their respective countries.

There is still much to be done to mobilize our women of faith to seek appropriate training on development and peace issues if they are to be effective in the struggle. Women of faith need to know what the development issues are particularly in the Caribbean area and within our own countries.

For example, 10 of our Caribbean nations had benefited from favourable price arrangements with the European Union (EU). On Thursday 24th November 2005 the EU slashed the prices 36%. This decision means that countries like Jamaica that export both sugar and bananas have been dealt a double whammy since the EU has also cut banana prices. CARICOM issued a statement relating to this issue stating that:

“This pattern in the EU-Caribbean relationship does not augur well for future trade agreements and, coming as it does on the eve of the Hong Kong ministerial (WTO) meeting in December, raises troubling questions about the reliability of any commitments to and agreements emerging there from.”

There can be no peace without justice and structural injustices are major obstacles to human development in various parts of the Caribbean. For example, in TT there are major issues to be addressed. Some of you may have read in Sunday's Newsday (p5) of the campaign by The Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FITON). Next Friday has been declared 'Social Justice Day' by FITON.

David Abdullah, President of FITON, states that too many workers are being exploited. They are lobbying for decent jobs for all workers; permanent jobs for the unemployed and part-time workers and so on. Workers' rights need to be safeguarded to avoid exploitation.

Another key area to be addressed is rising food prices. There are over 300,000 people living in TT on less than US \$1 per day. As food prices continue to escalate more and more people are finding it difficult to afford even basic foodstuff.

Human development involves more than feeding hungry bellies. When I look around at the number of NGOs, CBOS, FBOs in operation in TT, for example, I recognize that women, including women of faith, are in the forefront of many of these e.g. in the area of domestic violence, literacy and so on.

Groups such as the Adult Literacy Tutors' Assoc., the RAPE Crisis Centre, Families in Action are doing sterling work in TT. We can never hope to achieve developed nation status if we do not tackle areas such as this. Pope Paul VI referred to illiterate persons as 'starved spirits'.

We need to build partnerships within the region and with international agencies. Networking is critical if we are to optimize the use of our limited resources. Women of faith need to create fora to meet and discuss issues such as: What are the core principles for sustainable societies? 10 Core principles have been identified by the *International Forum on Globalization*. They provide a good summary of the task to be undertaken – see list on p77 of Fr Michael Campbell-Johnston's book).

As women of faith we should be involved in outreach work – working at grassroots level – mobilizing women of faith to become advocates for change/equipping them to deal with issues such as conflict issues/engaging in capacity building/ developing and implementing action-oriented partnerships/sharing best practice.

Thanks to modern technology, we can sit at home also and read on the internet reports such as that produced after the second meeting of the *World Conference of Religions for Peace Latin American and Caribbean Women of Faith Network (LACWFN)*, or gain access to documents such as: "*Women of Faith – Transforming Conflict: A Multi-Religious Training Manual by the World Conference of Religions for Peace.*

The foreword of this Manual makes it clear that "Religious women and the myriad organizations they have built in the service of their communities are on the front lines of religions working for peace...they are assuming leadership roles in their communities."

This manual offers practical training materials which have been tested in the field by women of faith from West Africa and Southeast Europe. It brings together the best work of two *Religions for Peace* programme areas: Conflict Transformation and Women's Mobilization. Material such as this can help to mobilize religious communities to work together to prevent and mediate violent conflicts and to rebuild peaceful societies in the aftermath of violence.

What are some of the development issues that women of faith can address? The family is the basic cell of society. It is said that if we 'fix' the family, we will 'fix' communities, and if we 'fix' communities we will fix the nation. A key priority for women of faith is the task of strengthening family life – both within their own families and in the wider community.

There are too many dysfunctional families in our communities. Too many of our children are living lives on our streets as 'barrel' children – with absentee parents working abroad and sending barrels of 'goodies' for them.

With the erosion of family life in many parts of the world, women of faith, the primary educators of their children – together with their husbands, have a key role to play in instilling proper values in their children's minds to counteract the negative values that bombard them daily in the media, from peer pressure etc.

Mr Claudio Providas, UNDP's Deputy Regional Rep. said at an event that I attended last week that a woman is more likely to survive childbirth in the Gaza Strip than in rich T&T. Health care is certainly a key area for development in the Caribbean e.g. in areas such as

- HIV/AIDS,
- other viruses such as Human Papilloma Virus which causes cervical cancer,
- diabetes which is the second leading killer in TT. 14% of the population has diabetes and diabetes mellitus accounts for 13% of all deaths (Central Statistical Office). This is way above the world average. TT ranks 5th in the world in diabetes,
- hypertension, heart diseases (leading killer in TT causing about 27% of all deaths. It should be noted that diabetes can be a causal factor in both heart and kidney disease),
- alcoholism and other substance abuse
- domestic violence which is rampant in e.g. TT.

Also high on the list of areas to be addressed if we are to promote development and peace are: issues such as Education; employment; trade and industry; tourism; eco/environmental justice e.g. global warming, deforestation etc.; crime and violence – including violence against women, rape, incest; poverty and social exclusion etc.

Social exclusion is a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environs, bad health and family breakdown.

It is worth noting what the Sustainable Development Department of the IDB says about Social Exclusion:

“The Latin American and Caribbean region is one of the most unequal in the developing world. It is a region where income, opportunity, and resources systematically and disproportionately accrue to only certain, more elite segments of the population. For many years, the poverty and social degradation that results from the region’s inequality was considered largely an economic problem.

“In just the last few years, greater attention and analysis is being paid to a more complex set of social, economic, and cultural practices that comprise “social exclusion”, in which certain populations are excluded from the benefits of social and economic development based on their race, gender, ethnicity, or disabilities. Social exclusion in Latin America and the Caribbean affects predominantly indigenous peoples, afro-descendents, women, the disabled, and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Social exclusion affects an individual’s opportunity to find good work, decent housing, adequate health care, quality education, safe and secure living conditions as well as their treatment by the legal and criminal justice systems. A working definition of social exclusion is:

A chronic scarcity of opportunities and access to basic and quality services, labour markets and credit, physical conditions and adequate infrastructure, and the judicial system.

The complex problem of social exclusion appears to be intensified and more severe for individuals that belong to multiple excluded groups. For example, educational and job opportunities are more limited for indigenous women than indigenous men.

Discrimination and racism can occur on multiple levels for the same individual. For example, a black intravenous drug user infected with HIV/AIDS can face racial and legal discrimination, and prohibited from access to health care based on presumed criminal behaviour.

As social exclusion so severely restricts access to the services and jobs needed for a minimal standard of living, there is a high correlation between poverty and social exclusion. Even when they are not the majority of the poor, the excluded typically constitute the poorest. These telling trends make clear that poverty reduction in the region will not be successful without also addressing the complex determinants of social exclusion.”

Social exclusion can be reduced by producing what the UK terms ‘joined up solutions to joined-up problems. The Government cannot tackle social exclusion by itself but must work in partnership with key stakeholders – including people of faith - to develop policies and deliver services.

Women of faith can play a major role in improving understanding of the key characteristics of social exclusion, and the impact on it of government policies. At a local level, women of faith should look at social, economic and political/public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor and work to overcome unjust practices and situations that oppress the poor. They must address social justice issues relating to:

- Promoting the relief of poverty of men, women and children
- Social exclusion & social cohesion e.g. examining combinations of linked problems that could lead to social exclusion, for example, unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environs, poor health/health inequality and family breakdown
- Lack of basic amenities such as running water, electricity
- Hunger/nutrition
- Economic development/TT's debt to IMF, World Bank etc. the ethical dimensions of the economy and of financial activities
- Unemployment
- Local, Regional & International trade & industry
- International debt
- Wages/pay equity (part of gender justice)/pension
- Workers' rights
- Homelessness/socially displaced persons/housing
- The marginalised
- Neighbourhood renewal/environmental well-being
- Land distribution
- Social Welfare, including welfare benefits and the rights of individuals within the welfare system
- the use of the national Budget
- Consumerism/globalisation/international debt/labour markets

The following is a list of questions that women of faith can seek to answer:

- What are the factors that constrain progress in human development e.g. in TT?
- Is there a holistic approach to the development of a Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) e.g. more than just filling ‘bellies’ – social, economic, educational, cultural, political, spiritual, moral and physical development of each citizen?
- What diagnostics/analysis/statistics are available in relation to poverty in e.g. TT?
- What technical support do we have e.g. in TT for analysing data?
- Do we have the necessary infrastructure to support the PRS?
- How are policies costed, prioritised, and linked to diagnostics?
- Is target setting in our countries realistic?
- What is the social impact of key policy measures?
- How is the PRS being integrated into Government decision-making e.g. the budget process i.e. how is EU Funding supplementing the Government’s budget for Poverty Reduction?
- Is the PRS strategy grounded in the objective of sustained economic growth?
- How is the private sector involved in the process?
- Are there effective and efficient links between Government and Civil Society in relation to PRS?
- How are process issues being dealt with e.g. participation by people in rural areas?
- Are Good Governance and effective public sector performance/public expenditure management being seen as central to the implementation of PRS e.g. transparency, accountability, and effective service delivery?
- What monitoring and evaluation systems, e.g. outcome indicators, are in place to determine whether or not the strategy is successful?

The Antilles Episcopal Conference (AEC) has produced 2 booklets on crime and violence and on environmental justice that are very useful and can be obtained at the AEC Secretariat, Gray St., Port of Spain (Tel” 622 2932). The drug and gun culture which feeds the culture of death in our communities must be addressed if we are to promote development and peace in our region.

Many of us are aware of what the agenda for action should be, but obstacles sometimes prevent action. Many of our islands in the region are small and even those that are large

have a myriad of problems to be addressed in terms of development and peace. Women of faith must urge our leaders to try and make CARICOM work.

While Rome is burning around us and countries in other parts of the world are strengthening their links e.g. the European Union and the African Union, it seems as though there is a lack of political will to make CARICOM work more effectively in this Region.

A number of natural disasters have adversely affected the Region e.g. hurricanes, flooding etc. Disaster preparedness across the region is critical and we are not prepared. Women of faith can address these issues with their local councilors, their MPs, their PM – not as individuals but standing together in solidarity.

The Caribbean is about to embark on one of its most ambitious regional projects ever with the launch of the Caribbean Single Market Economy (CSME) and FTAA may follow.

CSME will bring changes in the dynamic nature of our islands and we need to consider how we can maximize the benefits for our peoples. Women of faith should be concerned to ‘strategize’ with CSME in mind as this could be the catalyst for the region to achieve its ambition of creating a connected future.

We also need strong inter-religious organizations in the region and to develop a culture that will facilitate collaboration between women and men of various faiths within and across the islands. IROs in the region should consider the role that women of faith can play in their work and may consider co-opting women of faith if there are none in their membership.

Although most of our leaders and those in senior decision-making positions in the Region are male, more and more women, including women of faith are securing senior positions in Governments in the Region and in the Corporate world. Women of Faith have a vital role to play in their families and in their workplaces.

We should not be afraid of entering the field of politics and to seek to influence decision-making at all levels. Women of faith in certain positions of responsibility should strive to use their influence to do things such as updating our social indicators.

Although our situation in the Caribbean may be unique in certain respects, there are sufficient regional and international reports that can guide us in terms of action that is required in formulating, implementing, monitoring and evaluating Sustainable Development Plans. Indeed, some Caribbean leaders have met e.g. at ‘Forum 2005’ held in Barbados in May and organized by the Caribbean Development Bank - a regional development policy gathering on managing transformation for competitiveness.

The meeting was designed to foster consultation among Caribbean policy-makers, civil society and the international donor community, and would examine the critical and sometimes unique development challenges facing the region.

It also sought to develop consensus on a strategic direction and an action plan for the region's continued development and interface with the global economy.

In 2002, Anne Kerr, Chief National Information, Strategies and Information Branch, UN Div. for Sustainable Dev., said that Development Planning should seek to:

- Strengthen national and regional information and statistical and analytical services relevant to sustainable development policies and programmes:
- Encourage and promote further work on indicators for sustainable development by countries at the national level;
- Develop information systems that make the sharing of valuable data possible;
- Support countries, particularly developing countries in their national efforts to collect data that are accurate, long-term, consistent and reliable.

Lancelot Busby of the Economic commission for Latin America and the Caribbean stated in 2003 that “Generally, the Caribbean countries have been described as ‘data poor’...The result is years of wandering in the wilderness of development – talking of visions of the promised land of development without the ability to measure proximity to that goal.

“Of equal value to the data to be collected must be the architecture of the system – the roadmap and institutions that must be strengthened to deliver the required data and information. The planners may in fact be too close to the problem to allow objectivity in their assessment of the priority needs of the people without instruments and fora that facilitate a two-way flow of information.

“The people are supposed to be the object of development planning. People must therefore be catered for in planning and must not occupy second place to the macroeconomic variables. People in all capacities must have access to information to enable them to make informed choices. This observation is all the more pertinent to governments.

“Good governance must ensure the bi-directional transmission of information between the state and the citizenry before and after decisions are made. The nature of the data and information to be collected and exchanged is wide ranging”

I want to conclude by saying that I remain confident that with prayer, witness and determination we can overcome most or all obstacles.

The challenge for women of faith is first, to live the teachings of our faith by example, and second, to find ways suited for our times and places to articulate our vision in its fullness. We have to find and build on what is true and good in our culture, and denounce and reject what is false and harmful.

I believe that the time has come for women of faith in this region to take their place closer to the table of life and to speak and act in the interest of each human person in the Caribbean. Each woman of faith has the power to make a difference and she must use that power.

Faced with the tragic situation of persistent poverty and other social ills, women of faith must redouble our efforts and play a greater role in transforming our communities, our society, our region and the world. We cannot afford to fail.

Women's perspectives, experiences and unique contributions must be taken into account if development and peace is to become a reality. But remember, we do not journey as women alone. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church makes it clear:

“Woman is the complement of man, as man is the complement of woman: man and woman complete each other mutually. Pope John Paul II said in 1995: “...in the encounter of man and woman a unitary conception of the human person is brought about, based not on the logic of self-centredness and self-affirmation, but on that of love and solidarity.”

Let us stand with each other in love and solidarity with each other to build a better Caribbean and a better world that befits the dignity of each human person.

I thank you.