



GREETINGS BY

THE HONOURABLE CAROLYN SEEPERSAD-BACHAN

MINISTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

MP FOR SAN FERNANDO WEST

85th ANNUAL PRESBYTERIAN

CHURCH WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

ST. AUGUSTINE GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL

SATURDAY 2ND FEBRUARY, 2013

"I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME"



Ministry of
Public Administration

Salutations

The Rt. Rev Brenda Bullock, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church
of Trinidad and Tobago

Mrs. Rowena Ramlochan, President of the Board of Women

Ms. Joanne Mahadeo, Principal of the St. Augustine Girls' High
School

Members of the Board

Other invited Guests

Fellow servants of The Lord

I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was hungry and you gave
me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink.

This is from the gospel of Matthew (25:36). It held a special meaning
then when a group of men and women left their jobs and what had
been their lives up to that point to follow Christ as he sought to
transform the world. These were hard and anxious times but even then
it was clear that the hunger and thirst were not just physical and that

the welcome was not merely to village households. There was always a much deeper meaning to everything that Christ said and a much greater truth that He was here on earth to reveal.

This is the true meaning of what is termed “Christian charity” and it is based on the Golden Rule that is at the foundation of all religions, “Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You.” It is echoed in the commandments and also holds true for those who are not strangers. I am definitely not a stranger to most of you and certainly not to St Augustine where you have chosen to celebrate your 85th Anniversary and to meet to chart the future of your organization and your Church. I have grown up in this religion and you have welcomed me and taken me among you. You have exalted me by asking me to be part of your observance and celebration. In turn, let me wish you well even though many of you are not strangers to me. We are all here in God’s name to do His work and to carry on His ministry.

The Women's Conference has played a major part in the life of our Church and, in these times that seem to be the best of times and sometimes the worst of times, you have an even greater role to play in the future.

Your choosing the theme, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" is especially significant when we consider the development of the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago. There were these families, almost exclusively of Indian origin, among whom strangers from Canada came to spread a Gospel that was entirely different from what they had grown up with in a language that was still largely unfamiliar to many of them. The good people of Iere Village and of Trinidad as a whole did not throw them out or reject them. Consistent with their upbringing, their code of hospitality and their own philosophy of life, they welcomed these foreigners and strangers with open arms and hearts. This is how the Women's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) from the Presbyterian Church in Canada came to play such an integral part of the development of women in the Presbyterian Church in Trinidad and Tobago. Our people gave these

strangers not just a hearing but a place in their lives and the lives of their children and their children's children. This behavior is part of a culture that is as common to ancient India as it is to Africa, the two areas from which most of our ancestors came. Even now, anyone who comes into my mother's home and the homes of many of us here, must drink something when they arrive and cannot leave without eating something. This is our culture and it is one that characterizes us even in the midst of hardship.

Iere Village, just outside of Princes Town, was the crystallization of the connection between the WFMS and the women of Trinidad and Tobago. It was the first of many. In 1912, one hundred and one years ago, the Iere Home for Girls was established. Isn't that incredible? Who would have thought that anyone would start something so significant, a movement so far-reaching, in what was really the country, the cane and agricultural area, instead of in Port-of-Spain or San Fernando? In many ways, this symbolized the growth of Presbyterianism in this country. It was based on the twin pillars of

Faith and Education and it found fertile soil in the country areas and among the women.

This is not surprising. I have always said that if you educate a man you only educate one person. When you educate a woman, you reach beyond the individual – you educate a family a village, a community, and a nation. The UN agencies all know that the key to progress in the under-developed world is in education of women. The WFMS found that out over a hundred years ago and applied the lesson to other institutions. Naparima Girls High School was also founded in 1912 and I was pleased to be part of the celebration of its centenary. It is a formidable institution with a history of service that is incomparable. The Archibald Vocational Institute was founded in 1931, three years after the first Annual Presbyterian Women's Conference and SAGHS, the St Augustine Girls High School, the venue of today's momentous conference, in 1953. I think it is fitting that we are here for this year's ceremony. This is the Diamond Jubilee Year of this amazing school for girls – its contribution to this community and country is incredible. It has added so much value to

public life, education and the quality of life of so many people. Like Naparima Girls, it towers over the educational landscape turning out generations of female leaders. My daughter attended SAGHS for her first five years of high school and then Naparima Girls High School.

Of course, we must not forget all the Elementary Schools in our communities, right here the Curepe Presbyterian Primary school, and in my own community of San Fernando the Susamachar Church is on the same compound with the school named after Reverend Dr. Kenneth Grant who started secondary level tuition for his son George and some of the other kids from the mission. This is the Grant Memorial School but it is a memorial not just to Dr. Grant but for those Canadians led by Reverend Morton and his wife who took over the mission at Iere Village and whose commitment to the cause of Christianity opened the eyes, hearts, minds and souls of so many of us over the past hundred years.

We have to look at the early encounters of those two worlds – the Presbyterian Church of Canada and the mainly Indian labourers of

Iere Village as a two-way street. It is true that they were strangers to us and we welcomed them. But we were also strangers to them and they joined us to help make our lives better.

The Presbyterian religion in those days was very much like its founder, John Knox. It was not very tolerant and it was more Old Testament in style than New Testament. I think that our people, our women especially, helped to soften the approach of the Presbyterian Church and we affected the Presbyterian religion just as much as it impacted on us. There were hymns in Hindi. There are Bhajans celebrating God. They became part of the liturgy of the Church.

Even then it was never, and it is not an unequal relationship like colonialism was. It was never part of the colonization of Trinidad and Tobago. The relationship between the Canadians and the people of Trinidad and Tobago was and continues to be a partnership – a partnership in progress, a partnership in prosperity both material and spiritual, and a partnership for peace, harmony and family values. It

was founded on mutual trust and respect. It was founded on the mutual brotherhood and sisterhood of the children of God.

Today, fifteen years from the Centenary of the Presbyterian Women's Conference, and after 85 years of guiding the Church safely through economic and political changes, where do we go from here? What are our next steps and what are our plans for the future of our Conference and our Church?

Trinidad and Tobago is changing rapidly. The pressure on women to contribute to the household is even greater today than it was in the days of the Women in our Bible. While we are the ones that still keep our families together, the burden is even greater. Most of you here today work. You have to be bread-winners as well as bread-makers. You are the rock on which not only this Church but the stability of our religion and our country depends and on which it is founded.

Having said that as women in the Church, we still play the role of women, like women in the Bible, many of whom were required to

mold leaders. The best example of this is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who shaped and molded the Greatest Leader in the world.

Young women today are not like the young women of my generation or the ones in Iere Village who were the first converts to Christianity. They have to make very tough decisions about many things at a very early age. These are what we term “heavy” subjects not the least of which are sex, drugs, religion and education.

Our generation did not have to make these choices until much later. We had time to learn and time to grow. Our socialization was less rapid and within the context of the extended family, we had warmth, safety, security and discipline.

Today, the internet, Facebook, television, the twitter and cell-phone generation have no such safety net, no such comfort zone or nurturing environment. The technology itself is a two-edged sword – it is like the atom in a way. It can destroy lives. But it has an enormous potential and capacity for good. It can make life much, much better

for this generation and generations to come. However, the internet platform has to be supported by pillars of fairness, transparency, equity, honesty, trust and trustworthiness.

Today we are becoming strangers of the truth. In the past, when we welcomed strangers we assumed trust and trust worthiness until I can prove that I cannot trust you. Today, do you realize that when we welcome strangers we start with mistrust until I can prove that I can trust you. It is now incumbent on organizations such as this to ensure that these values are instilled and embedded in our children. It is now incumbent on our schools and our homes to continue to instill and embed in our children.

We as women, as parents, as aunts, as mothers and grandmothers, we do our best but that is sometimes not enough to keep our children, our daughters especially, along the straight and narrow path. It is not easy to walk along the straight and narrow path; it is about having the courage to do so. Technology is a tool, as useful and as dangerous as a knife in the hands of a child or a box-of-matches. We need to work

with them to ensure that they know the dangers and they choose the positive instead of the negative, they must remember the values of fairness, transparency, equity, and honesty. It is in this context that I repeat my public statement regarding the use of the Internet by bloggers for propaganda and to destroy the lives of others. This is indicative of a breakdown in our values system. Are we interested in the truth?

My friends, this challenge OF change, and the challenge TO change, is what faces you for the next fifteen years and beyond. I think you need to reevaluate the role of your Conference and of women in our Church and what we could do for our daughters, our children as a whole, and how we can continue to remain credible and current.

This is not an easy task but in unity there is strength. I believe that our religion, our Church, the tolerance for which it is best known, the mix of economic and social activities that characterizes and celebrates our comradeship, are the keys to the future of our Church.

I know how much your President, Mrs. Rowena Ramlochan, the members of your Board and the many other women's groups that are represented here today from so many different communities across the country, are concerned about the future of the Women's movement in the Church and the Church itself. You have done a lot, you have worked hard, but your most important contributions are yet to come.

In San Fernando, as the Member of Parliament for San Fernando West, we are trying to restore the sense of community and pride in our city. I believe that the reason the Presbyterian Church became so firmly established there is because San Fernando is the most cosmopolitan and most tolerant city in the country. Every race and religion finds an equal place here. In fact, it is on the grounds of our Susamachar Church in San Fernando that we have our headquarters.

I am of the firm belief that communities in San Fernando were built by the women of the Susamachar Presbyterian Church. Similarly, many of you here today and the many who have gone before us built the communities in close proximity to the Presbyterian churches.

Today, we need to return to re-building strong and cohesive communities. Strong and cohesive communities build strong and cohesive neighbourhoods. Strong and cohesive neighbourhoods build a strong and cohesive nation.

This will pave the way to community based governance, facilitating governance from the bottom up, deepening participatory democracy so urgently needed for our country to progress.

My Ministry of Public Administration is facilitating the transformation of our national public service. It was part of the British Civil Service but when our country became independent in 1962, it became the national public service. Last year it was fifty years old. Yet, while celebrating those fifty years or Golden Jubilee we were putting in place a plan for the next ten years. By the time the Diamond Anniversary comes around we want to see a public service that is citizen-centric. We want to ensure that any citizen, regardless of creed, race or geography can access the best possible service in the

shortest time, at the highest quality and the lowest cost. Our citizens are demanding value for money. They see better service as a right and our responsibility.

However, while we modernize the public service it must be steeped in the core values of the public service. As we move to delegate authority and empower our public officers to make decisions in the Public interest, we must ensure that they adhere to the core values at all times. It is the same bedrock on which we build our children's future and our nation's future. It is the same core family values that I referred to earlier, values of fairness, transparency, equity, honesty, trust and trustworthiness. To this I must add integrity. Integrity in public life and in the public service must go hand in hand.

As a product of the Presbyterian primary education system and the Church, integrity is my personal yardstick and beacon. It is what I stand for and will always stand for. It is what I hope my children will be known for when they face their own challenges. I have learnt that while it is important for people to like you, it is even more important

that they respect you. I believe that if you don't stand for something you will fall for anything.

As a politician, as a professional, as a Minister of Government and parliamentary representative, as a mother, a wife and a woman, I try to keep to the same core values. I do not believe that I should do as a politician what I will not do as a mother. I have to walk the same walk and talk the same talk. I owe this, my friends to my Presbyterian upbringing. I want the same for my children. This is why Faith Based Organisations like yours is so important.

Every organization, every movement, every group is facing the same test of its relevance and its resolve. We live in trying times where our long-held and deeply-rooted values are vanishing. It is not every stranger who is now welcome in our communities or in our homes as there are many who will try to enter with felonious intent. There are an increasing number of people who do not have food to give or water to share. There are social causes at the root of many of our problems of drugs, crime and prostitution. We cannot be complacent or

comfortable in the midst of the breakdown in values and the escalation of crime. We have to become more active in and outside the Church. We have to look ahead and be pro-active. We have to be advocates for a better Trinidad and Tobago and dedicate ourselves anew to our children's future. We have to preserve and protect our environment and our family values. It is truly said that a woman's work is never done. If our work is done, then our nation will be done as well.

I urge you to spend a little time in this conference and even devote the next one to a long hard look at the future. You are an extremely important group that can help us realize a better future – for our church, our families, our children and most important our beloved nation of Trinidad and Tobago. You have demonstrated over 85 years your grasp of the fundamentals of Christianity- love of family, love for neighbors and community, love for country and, most of all, love for life. You have been a vibrant and active part of our Church and its mission. We need you. This nation needs you.

As I end, I want to remind you of the Conference Hymn. Again, like the theme “I was a stranger and you welcome me” it is appropriate and has far reaching consequences for how we approach the future. It says, and you can all recite with me, “If I can help somebody, as I pass along,/ If I can cheer somebody, with a word or song,/ If I can show somebody, how they’re travelling wrong,/ Then my living shall not be in vain.”

As our country travels through time to its goal of sustainable development, let us commit ourselves to this message. Ladies, join me please, “If I can show somebody, how they’re travelling wrong,/ Then my living shall not be in vain.”

I pray that God will continue to bless each and every one of you and this great organization with strength, courage and wisdom to continue your work and as you move towards celebrating a century 15 years from now.

I thank you.

