

THE UNITED CHURCH IN JAMAICA AND THE CAYMAN ISLANDS

Renewal And Transformation For LIFE!

(Liberty Integrity Faith Environmental Stewardship)

CONCEPT PAPER

If ever there was a time in human history that good news is needed, it is now.

The death-dealing realities of life are many: fractured homes and relationships; abused men, women and children. It is a time of mental and emotional fragmentation as persons struggle for stability in a rapidly changing world. Value- principles that served previous generations are being challenged by a culture of new thought creating alternative life-styles that not only contend for their space in the social arena, but contest the doctrines of the Christian Faith. Institutions that were once regarded as bastions of hope and guidance, and in which was reposed the confidence of many, are experiencing a deficit in public trust. Technological advancement has served well to increase awareness and connection with each other making the world a global village, but it has also been manipulated to invade privacy and aid in sophisticated criminal activity. Medical science works hard to develop new interventions for the combating of increasing illnesses, and world leaders struggle to bring equilibrium to the socio-economic and political instability of our times. Many are fearful concerning the future, and humanity's efforts at survival deplete our forests, pollute our waters, melt the northern glaciers and undermine the goodness of God's creation.

Good news is needed now! Not good news that stops at proclamations of hope; but good news that marries words and actions bringing birth to renewal and transformation.

God has a word for times like ours. God has called us into partnership with Godself for the rebuilding of that which is broken down.

God's words through the prophet's utterances recorded in Isaiah, and in particular Chapter 61, are signal for Renewal and Transformation.

It must be noted that chapters 60-62 comprise the core of Isaiah 56-66, the third section of the book of Isaiah. The essential message of these chapters is that God is at work in the historical events of the day to bring a glorious restoration of life, and vindication of the people of God. As God's people are renewed and restored they would again assume their role as witness to God in the world (55:3-5). That which forms the kernel, the centre, the gravamen of God's message and mission of Renewal and Transformation, however, are the expressions of Chapter 61.

Isaiah 61 embodies not only God's desire to break into the tombs of God's people's deadness, but an invitation to humanity in partnering with God in making resurrection a possibility. It is not that God cannot by Godself bring life back into dead situations, but God chooses to involve God's people in the adventure of being co-creators of this New Heaven and New Earth; an environment where those bruised and broken by the machinations of a selfish world are tenderly mended and restored; a space of enlightenment where godly truth unravels and unveils the deceptive designs of those who thrive at the expense of the ignorance of others. God calls humanity into the ministry of accompaniment; to stand in solidarity with those whose mourning and grieving are occasioned by the life-effacing realities of our times. God calls God's people into partnership to turn the world right-side-up so that the earth's resources may be equitably used to properly sustain life. In such a venture we become co-creators with God and harbingers of Shalom.

In assuming the theme **RENEWAL AND TRANSFORMATION FOR LIFE**, the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands seeks to engage our prophetic and pastoral call to a broken and dying world.

Central to this mandate is a wrestling with matters of **LIBERTY, INTEGRITY, FAITH and ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP**

Isaiah 61 challenges us to consider the implications of the Jubilee principle, where socio-economic equilibrium is strived for in debt-relief, the mending of relationships, and restoration of personhood. The understanding however is that socio-economic health is only guaranteed when humanity is in harmony with the entire eco-system; so the resting of the land points to a deliberate step taken for the rejuvenation of the eco-system.

To this end we must wrestle with matters of **LIBERTY** and her twin-sister justice. We must explore what liberty looks like for women and young-girls shackled in economic-dependent relationships. What alternatives do we present to the male who sees criminality or the marketing of his body as a means of survival? How does liberty manifest itself for the ex-convict who desires employment; or the deportee who seeks to be re-integrated into society? How is liberty manifested in the spaces created for open and authentic communication and relationships within family, Church and wider society? How do we make it clear that that Liberty does not necessarily mean license but rather, responsibility to operate by the principles of God?

We must wrestle with the virtue of **INTEGRITY**. Isaiah 61 is an effort of the prophet to show the congruence of God's loving character. God does not only hear and see the groaning of those

who are broken by life's experiences, but divine love prompts God to respond to the groans and the needs. The prophet, being brought into God's enterprise of renewal and transformation, is being led to understand that pity concerning the struggles of others is not enough. What is needed to effect renewal and transformation is a "calling" undergirded by a character of compassion. What then does integrity, this seamless character, this congruent nature require of us as the people of God? How do we show integrity in our several "callings"? How do we ensure that whilst demanding probity of others we live as those whose words and deeds are in congruence? How does the church incarnate the integrity of our calling to be those who "bestow the crown of beauty", "oil of gladness", and "garment of praise" to those robed in despair as they sit in their ashes of anguish? What does integrity mean for the business person who must choose between God's ethics and economic expedience?

It is into this wide array of human issues and experiences that FAITH becomes a critical tool for engagement. Interestingly, the only time the prophet rose to address the myriad of needs around him was when he had an encounter with God. Had he sought to fix the problems by his own genius, nothing would have changed. Could the point of the prophet's experience be that only an invitation by God makes for meaningful intervention? Could the prophet be saying to us that God is not only able to renew and transform, but God is also willing? Faith reminds us that Renewal and Transformation is God's enterprise; and our partnership in the process is on account of God's gracious invitation. This knowledge, that behind the scenes of the human drama is the Eternal God, and underneath our crumbling systems are the Everlasting Arms, and within the human dilemma is the restoring presence of the Holy Spirit, gives us the assurance that as we avail ourselves as instruments of God in "rebuilding the ancient ruins and restoring the places [and lives] long devastated", Renewal and Transformation will be more than a slogan on a banner but a lived reality.

We must wrestle with ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP. Isaiah 61 is the declaration of hopeful restoration of life and land so that generations to come may live in security and peace. There is an obvious relationship between humanity's connection to God, to each other and to the environment. It is this relationship that allows for the harmony of life. In seeking to preserve this harmony, how do we rid our minds of the "subdue and dominate" mentality that depletes our forests, erodes our mountainsides, and pollutes our waters? How do we re-orient our minds to understanding that we are care-takers of the earth, not plunderers at war with creation? How do we preserve the earth so that generations to come will learn the principle of living simply so that others may simply live?

Renewal and Transformation for LIFE must not be just a Synod theme. It must be a way of life for every believer called into partnership with God to engage the complexities and ambiguities of our times.

To this end we will use the symbol of a cedar plant to express our confidence in God's ability to renew and transform life in all its forms, and our commitment to partnering with God in facilitating and protecting life. The cedar is chosen because its attributes embody the principle of LIFE.

The cedar bursts through the earth with such force and determination and stretches to the sky exhibiting the liberty of spirit that mirrors the Christian who pursues the heart of God.

The cedar's durability and resilience are noteworthy for the Christian who must stand in integrity amidst the winds of change and compromise.

The cedar's scent is unique and though sharp to the nostrils, its aroma makes its presence unmistakable. So it is with the faith to which we hold. As bearers of the fragrance of the risen Christ [2 Corinthians 2: 15] our impact for LIFE is formidable.

The Cedar is a valuable tree. But its value is determined not so much by those who would harvest its lumber, but by the seed it produces to ensure the continuation of its specie. By its very nature the cedar embodies the balance and health needed in our ecology.

If ever there was a time when good news was needed, it is now. The United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands avails herself in obedience to God, to champion the cause of Renewal and Transformation for LIFE.