

Leadership and the Pursuit of the Common Good

It was the late Bishop Neville deSouza, who in reflecting of our national motto in the 1990s said:

Though we chose that magnanimous motto of “Out of Many One People”, why is it that we cannot even come up with a social contract? “One people” does not suggest a cold calculated commitment to seek goals which are mutually gratifying. Rather, “One People” suggests community, a shared life and existence, closeness and participation. This society has not a social contract and there is no group value that informs our participation. Instead, our participation is motivated by our personal goals and ambitions, rather than by the desire to promote the common good.

The context of that comment was one in which the nation was wrestling with the extent to which we could arrive at some kind of common vision for our nation that could embrace the population as a whole and its commitment to a common, social, political and economic vision for the nation. Clearly, there remains a disconnect between intention and reality at this most significant time of a health crisis in the life of our nation.

Today, that expression of a search for a common vision and commitment by an overwhelming segment of the population is an even more urgent concern embracing the same ends, but driven by the COVID-19 pandemic which has the potential to destroy the current achievements of our nation, however short it may have fallen of our motto.

All of us are aware of the fact we are in the midst of a third surge in the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic which has impacted our world and our nations in ways without parallel, at least in recent history. It has created untold suffering due to infection, sickness, death, disruption in the world of work, schooling and education, lockdown of nations and communities, isolation, disruption of family life, emotional distress, the lockdown of churches, the confinement of vulnerable persons, primarily the ageing and those with comorbidities from social interaction, even as it has served to expose in profound ways the social inequities which exist

in our societies. The daily tally of new infections, deaths and the alarmingly high rate of infection tell a story which only those in a state of extreme denial cannot see.

The tragedy is that, while we could not have alleviated the initial impact of the pandemic in 2020 beyond the exercise of the protocols, as much was not known by the scientific community regarding the nature of the virus, neither was there any developed vaccines at the time, today the situation is different and we hold within our hands the means for reversing the impact of the virus and moving towards a measure of normality in the diverse spheres of our national life. What then is preventing this from happening?

Through the contribution of the scientific community and the commitment of the health care professionals to the alleviation of all forms of suffering and diseases and the promotion of wellness, we now have available to us in Jamaica a supply of vaccines, albeit inadequate up to this point, but enough to take us along the path to the achievement of herd immunity, thereby protecting us against the most severe consequences of infection by the virus in the case of the immunized.

Vaccines – Not New to the Caribbean

Vaccinations are not new to the experience of the people of the Caribbean. Indeed, so successful have been the programmes of vaccination in the nation and Region, that we have been able to achieve a quick containment of certain infectious diseases, such a poliomyelitis which still plagues other parts of the world. This we were able to achieve, not by having a referendum or a period of national consultation. The government of the day, and subsequent governments, in taking seriously the leadership function, decided, after consultation with the scientific and medical community, that this was the desired path to pursue, and mandated it for all children, making it compulsory for them to obtain this and other vaccines in order to be allowed entry to school. There was no questioning of the wisdom of the scientific and medical community of the day or of the authority of the government to pass such a directive. Neither was there any popular demand for each citizen to be informed concerning the content of the vaccine to his or her satisfaction, nor any conspiracy theory regarding the motive of the medical community and the

government of the day. Any hesitancy was reflected in the face of the children whose parents and teachers saw to it that they were vaccinated as their responsible duty. As the World Health Organization often reminds us, the scientific community does the research and develops the vaccine but, it is the population that ends the pandemic.

The Church and Vaccines

I unashamedly stand within a religious tradition which asserts that there is no inherent conflict between science and religion, and so stand with the Prime Minister in his public pronouncement that it is God who endows humanity with the capacity for rational and scientific thinking for the benefit of humanity, even as God has endowed us with the capacity for spiritual experiences and relationship with himself and each other.

Unfortunately, there is a significant segment of the population that has adopted a position of vaccine hesitancy and downright anti-vaccination stance, as well as those who have chosen to subscribe to misinformation and conspiracy theories regarding the origin and nature of the vaccine, and have sought to encourage others not to take the vaccine. Much of this development has come from access to technology, especially the social media, and it points to a down-side to technology where critical thinking is not taught along with an orientation to the value and the dangers associated with the technology. In this vacuum, there has come to the fore the persistence of the folk culture which is not grounded in modern medicine nor the knowledge of human biology and scientific thinking, and which promotes the idea that a drink of white rum, some turmeric and a variety of bush remedies can boost the immune system preventing infection or kill the virus if it infects the body.

Sadly also, there are some religious bodies and their pastors, some with no judicatory authority to which they are accountable, that promote uninformed teaching regarding Scripture and its interpretation and application to our contemporary world, and that have been misguiding persons with notions that the vaccine represents some kind of evil device and instrument for hurting the people of God. You can be assured that this is a fallacy. One of the things that this should

do for us as a people is to acknowledge that there is the existence of a pluralistic religious culture which does not promote critical thinking and an informed religious people, and who are subject to manipulation and being misled, something which is inherent in the multiplicity of religious traditions which exists in the nation.

Like every form of medicine we take into our bodies, there may be some initial side effects but, its beneficial impact on the human body is far-reaching, and the consequences of not taking the vaccines, while undetectable for some, are serious and deadly for others. The daily disclosures regarding new infections, hospitalizations and deaths speak to an undeniable reality. While we can follow certain protocols as a means of preventing infection, the reality is that we cannot be assured that we will not be infected, as it is not a case of our finding the virus but, the virus finding us.

While recognizing the right of every adult to determine whether they take the vaccine, the decision to take the vaccine, we believe, is part of our moral duty for the benefit of the national good, unless there are medical grounds for deferring or abstaining from taking the vaccine. From a Christian perspective, it is first of all part of the way in which we take care of our bodies, the temple of the Lord, with a sense of responsibility and accountability. It is also a means by which we exercise our social responsibility. As long as we remain a part of the population that refuses to take the vaccine, where it is readily available, we pursue an individualistic and selfish path, thereby participating in activities which are counterproductive to the life of our nation as one people.

Negative Impact of Vaccine Hesitancy

Failure to be vaccinated is having the following effects on the nation:

- We prevent our children from returning to school for face-to-face learning in a situation in which many have already lost a year of education. Those who have responsibility for children who are eligible for the vaccine should see to their vaccination in order for them to return to face-to-face schooling as soon as possible.

- We run the risk of infecting others of our household, workplace, and community.
- We take lightly the pain and distress we may cause our families and loved one's by a refusal to be vaccinated, leading to the unnecessary consequences of serious illness which may remain chronic for life, or which may result in death.
- We retard the process of return to a level of normality for the operation of our economy.
- We delay the return of our congregations to viable face-to-face worship.
- We are likely to become part of that infected population filling all the beds in hospitals relegated to Covid-19 patients, while preventing others requiring other legitimate medical care from being admitted, and more importantly, overextending the ability of the medical staff to deliver care to their patients, and draining the health care budgets of our nations on unnecessary areas of expenditure.
- We contribute to the maintenance of a context of infection transmission in which other and more serious variants than the Delta and MU variants may evolve.

In the long run, all of these things are constitutive of the persuasive path which has been pursued since the vaccines arrived in the island. So what if the resistance continues and the infection and death rate remain at the current high levels? It seems clear that the government, through the leadership, must do what leaders do in times of a crisis and take decisive action.

It is true that we must acknowledge that our political culture is one which has fostered a lack of trust on the part of the people in government and its leadership. It is also true that ours is a culture of governance/leadership which frequently does not lead from in front, taking action where it is necessary, but keeps its eyes constantly on the next elections and how people may perceive its actions, and especially how the Opposition may then play its cards.

Case for Mandatory Vaccination

The nation is now in the midst of a debate about mandatory vaccination, as those who have been vaccinated are getting frustrated and angry regarding those whose refusal to take the vaccine is not only restricting their lives but preventing and prolonging the process of return to a measure of normality for the country. With the increasing availability of the vaccines, there is now a clear call, and which seems well founded, for there to be a directive regarding mandatory vaccination from the government, as has been done in other jurisdictions. These are not normal times when every individual can choose to play by their own rules while, untold suffering and loss of lives, wellbeing, the ability to conduct one's daily life, and the return to the vibrancy in the economy are at stake. We are in a critical time which requires unusual action and the good of the whole must count at some point. While there are divergent views on every issue related to human rights and the law as it relates to the issue of mandatory vaccines, there have been sufficient legal luminaires who have stated clearly the appropriateness of such action in our national interest.

While mandatory vaccination does not involve physically restraining persons and injecting them, the government must now indicate that it has a responsibility to protect citizens from infection by those employed in the public service, as well as customers who come to receive the services offered by public institutions by requiring proof of vaccination. Likewise, employers in various spheres of our national life must also claim the discretion to determine the kind of working environment they would like to promote for the wellbeing of their staff and the public they serve.

As a Jamaican, I find it reprehensible that there can be a requirement for persons serving in sectors of the hospitality industry to be immunized while this is not extended to the wider society for the protection of our people. Likewise, I find it reprehensible for Jamaicans to declare that they will get the vaccine, if and when the United States of America requires it of them for the purpose of travel. It is time we assert a greater sense of self-respect and dignity in doing what we know is right and in the public good, rather than await an external agency to enforce what we should do under appropriate national leadership for ourselves.

As a fellow citizen who has been fully vaccinated and has been subjected to repeated PCR and Antigen Tests for various reasons, I strongly urge all Jamaicans and those who identify as Christians, in particular, to kindly take the vaccines, as an expression of your duty to care for yourself and your responsibility to your brothers and sisters in Christ, even as I appeal to the government to take the appropriate step and put in place the avenues for mandatory vaccinations for the good of the nation.

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