

## **Silence is Not Always Golden**

*A speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, Halifax, Saturday, March 6, 2004*

by Mayann Francis, Director & CEO, Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission

Our bartered, busy lives burn dim,  
too tired to care, too numb to feel.  
Come, shine upon our shadowed world:  
your radiance bathes with power to heal.  
(Hymn, *O Radiant Christ*)

Good evening everyone. I want to thank Dr. Steve Martin for inviting me to address you this evening on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ). I have spent some time in the last few weeks learning more about the legacy of this incredible organization. If I could think of a tag line for your 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I think it would be "faith in action." Like the words of the hymn I opened with, you are inviting the spirit of your Christian faith to shed its light into the world.

That is not always so easy in a world which has become more and more diversified and where the need to create space for differing points of view is sometimes believed to conflict with cherished values of religious belief. I want to convey the message this evening that I believe your faith can transcend that perceived conflict. I believe Christian faith requires us to be active participants in the dialogue of human rights and inclusion which takes place every day. In a twist to the words of the Frankie Valli song: silence is not always golden, because our eyes still see.

True Christian faith lies in rededicating ourselves to our core set of values and abandoning our attachment to secular vices. Greed, envy, hate, gossip, deception, prejudice, homophobia, racism, discrimination and sexism are all diseases of the world. These are viruses which keep our communities sick. Peace, grace, and love are gifts from our Lord Jesus Christ. These gifts can help to keep our communities strong and vibrant. If we truly believe in God's message, we must ask ourselves how then can such division exist among us? Like CPJ, we must then decide how we can seek to heal that division.

My deep faith and belief in the power of Christ's message give me the strength to face the challenges of promoting harmony, respect and inclusion as the CEO of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. And it prompts me to remind you that human rights are everyone's business. Promoting respect for the value of human rights starts with each of us as individuals. I believe that as individuals we can be powerful. A simple act of kindness such as helping to feed the homeless or contributing to the alleviation of poverty locally can be important steps in promoting the dignity of each person and their human rights.

As an organization, CPJ has the capacity to organize people at the local and national level in ways that magnify individual voices so they can be heard on a broader scale. You can impact the debate on immigration issues, the struggle to counter discrimination and the challenge of poverty. I have been learning more about the work of CPJ and already see that nationally you have been engaging politicians and other decision-makers to consider the human element of public policy making. As your mandate suggests, you affirm that everyone is responsible for the common good. Respect for human rights is part of that common good.

The first place this kind of civic action begins is ensuring that you cast your vote. Our democratic process should be a primary vehicle for influencing public debate and decision-making. Never rob yourself of that tool by passing up the chance to cast your vote. It is one way that, as a group, you can move public opinion and support the values of community and respect for human rights.

By voting, you are also setting an example of participation for succeeding generations to follow. As an organization, you should be thinking about ways to encourage youth to become active in the political life of our community, province and country. In the fall of this year, municipal elections will be held across Nova Scotia, providing a plum opportunity to have your issues considered as part of the political debate. Municipal politicians make decisions which can have a dramatic impact on the inclusiveness and respectfulness of our communities on a day-to-day basis. You cannot afford to miss this chance to influence that electoral process.

Encouraging youth to participate in civic life helps to ensure the longer term health of our democratic system of government. As always, how that message is delivered is a determinant of how well it will be accepted by the target audience. Seek to involve youth in your organization and enlist their help in reaching their peers. Not only will you help to renew our democracy, you will also renew CPJ.

There are so many issues and challenges facing our communities, our province, our country and our world that it can sometimes be overwhelming to envision how we can have an impact and pave the way for positive change. But there are some basic strategies you can employ to be better prepared to play a part both as individuals and as members of the Halifax chapter of CPJ.

As the popular expression says, knowledge is power. The more information you have about an issue the better equipped you will be to take action. So educate yourselves. Invite more guest speakers to address you on issues of concern to the local community. Then take that knowledge and plug into the debates of City Council and the provincial legislature. Invite counselors, MLAs and Members of Parliament to talk and dialogue with you. And do not be afraid to aim high. The mayor, the premier, these elected officials also need to hear your thoughts about emerging issues. Go as far as to organize debates on crucial issues that can bring public spotlight and enhanced dialogue.

Volunteerism is another vital outlet for addressing the challenges we face as a society. Many

community organizations depend on the time and talents of local citizens to run their programs and deliver their services. The act of volunteering also expands your networks of support and helps you to build coalitions around issues of concern to CPJ. In the process of doing that, you will be increasing the capacity of our community to stand on its own feet.

As I mentioned before, our youth need the benefit of your help and concern also. How often have we heard the phrase, "Youth are the future"? When we hear that, do we spend time reflecting how we might be able to help them prepare to play their role in that future as constructive citizens? Become active in your local schools and learn more about the challenges youth are facing in their lives. Violence in our schools has been featured prominently in the headlines. The suicide of Emmett Fralick several years ago focused attention on the issue of bullying. Recently, Sir John A. MacDonald High School has been dealing with the aftermath of a stabbing involving two of its students. How is CPJ coming to grips with this critical issue? How can you work with schools and young people to promote the values of peace and non-violent conflict resolution?

The benefits of this type of engagement will run two ways. You will help to strengthen the ethic of education and civic responsibility in a new generation and you may gain new perspectives on your own faith as you interact with young people. In my home town of Sydney, Cape Breton, Dr. Jack Yazer has lead a program called "Youth Against Racism" for many years which exposes young people to dynamic speakers and debates. Perhaps that could be an outlet for the Halifax chapter of CPJ.

It is wise to promote achievements, not just challenges. Profile the good works that are happening in our local community. Encourage people to become involved in active and successful organizations which promote the values of harmony, inclusion and respect.

Seek to partner with diverse faith communities. One of the initiatives the Commission has pioneered in the last several years has been an annual "Day of Reflection" in November. Each year we focus on a theme related to building strong communities and invite faith leaders from all the various spiritual traditions, both Christian and non-Christian, to come together at Province House and offer their thoughts on our theme. The event has become an important part of the Commission's work and seems to have addressed a thirst for dialogue between the diverse traditions in Nova Scotia. That dialogue should continue year round, and CPJ can help to make that happen.

As I noted earlier, the intersection of faith and public life is not always easy or comfortable. Our pluralistic society can often be a challenge to our personal beliefs. Some might say that the broad mandate of human rights legislation encourages a clash to take place. I believe it is a challenge we all must face. The call of scripture to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body" (Col.3:15), enjoins us to build a human community that is rooted in unity, not disunity. In acceptance, not fear. In love, not hate. Whenever we believe our values to be in conflict with the need to be open and accepting of different points of view, we must answer the call to love and compassion. True Christians must never be the agents of exclusion. The power of Christ's love must be our constant guide.

I hope I have challenged you to re-examine your relationship to your faith and your community. The values promoted by CPJ are compatible with encouraging respect for human rights:

- analyzing public policy and offering alternatives rooted in the Biblical call for love, justice and stewardship;
- examining issues ignored by our society and affirming life, building community and standing with the poor and marginalized; and
- working with coalitions and other groups to bring your faith perspective to the public debate.

These values will help ensure that CPJ remains a strong voice for change in our society. As I have suggested to you, increasing your involvement with youth, becoming even more active in the political process and reaching out to new partners in the local community will help to strengthen your commitment to these values.

The key is for your organization to continue to find the channels that will ensure your voices are being heard and actually affecting decision-making and debate in this community.

In this turbulent world where the threat of war, hatred, fear, poverty and violence mark our daily lives, it is my wish that when you return to your home, work, family or friends, that you be ready to embrace the message of healing, harmony and faith. Silence is not always golden, because our eyes still see. How can any of us remain silent when the world cries out for healing? Remember our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who faced the fear and frailty of human existence to open eternal life to us all. May He be your guide and inspiration as you face your fears and build reconciliation in our world.

## Mayann Francis

Mayann has been the Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission since August 1999. In mid-December 2000, she was appointed interim Ombudsman for the Province of Nova Scotia. Prior to taking on these roles, she served as an Assistant Deputy Minister at the Ontario Women's Directorate and for the Ontario Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs.

As a senior official in the public service, Mayann takes a leadership role in helping to develop policies. Her professional work does not exclude her interest and commitment to communities.

She is past a member of the national board for the United Way/Centraide Canada, the Mascoll Foundation and other community initiatives both in Canada and abroad. In September 2002, she was appointed to the General Council of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.


In 2000, she received a Harry Jerome Award recognizing her excellence in management and leadership in a professional role. The Harry Jerome awards, presented annually in four youth and three adult categories, honour excellence and achievement among African Canadians in memory of world-class track and field athlete Harry Jerome.

In June 2001 she received an award from the Multicultural Education Council of Nova Scotia, for exemplary contribution and commitment to improvements in the area of race relations.

Ms. Francis holds a Masters in Public Administration from New York University, a certificate in Equal Opportunities Studies from Cornell University and a Bachelor of Arts from Saint Mary's University. She is a native of Sydney's Whitney Pier, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.



### **Public Justice Resource Centre**

[www.publicjustice.ca](http://www.publicjustice.ca)  [info@publicjustice.ca](mailto:info@publicjustice.ca)

PJRC, founded in 1963, is a research and education organization that responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship in the understanding and discussion of core values and faith perspectives in Canadian public policy debates. It works closely with its sister organization, Citizens for Public Justice.



### **CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE**

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CPJ is a national, non-partisan organization that promotes justice in Canadian public affairs. CPJ responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship through research, education and advocacy. CPJ works closely with its sister organization, the Public Justice Resource Centre.

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