

PROPHETIC PARTNERSHIPS
IWJ NATIONAL CONFERENCE

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Thank you so much for inviting me to speak with you this morning. It certainly is a privilege to be in your midst. It is not often that I find myself in a group of people who are committed to exploring and building the kinds of relationships that witness to the truth and value of the Gospel principle of solidarity; for indeed prophetic partnerships should lead us to this end. I do hope that these brief thoughts will lead you to a deeper reflection on this topic, will lend some insight as you continue your dialogue and provide some incentive for pursuing the entering into partnerships that are prophetic for the sake of God's people, for justice.

We gather this morning to reflect on prophetic partnerships as a people of faith, a people who bring to issues related to the workplace and labor force a commitment to the rights and dignity of the human person. In my religious tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the recognition and respect for the rights and dignity of the human person is essential to the Covenant. This most prized of partnerships, which articulates our relationship with God and God's universe is the way in which we express our adherence to the great command, to love of God and neighbor. And it is the manner by which we give witness to the presence and activity of the God who is in our midst. This tenet of faith is articulated differently but shared and adhered to by our Muslim sisters and brothers and other faith traditions.

In light of this conviction and the demands of our faith we can truly say that partnership is the relation that we should strive to form and that our partnerships need to be prophetic. Partnership is another way

of being in relationship, a way of interfacing, interacting and working together to accomplish the mission, to realize the vision. Again our faith traditions and common humanity demand that this work and mission insure that all are accorded the rights and dignity due the human person and that all have what they need to achieve the fullness of life: a living wage and just benefits packages, healthy and safe work environments, opportunities to grow and develop, avenues for participation.

It would appear to me that in our day and age prophecy and partnership of necessity should be linked. We continue to struggle to bring to the public forum those issues that guarantee just employment and labor practices. Our efforts to help people make the connection between the faith they profess and common human decency, civil rights and social justice is still quite a challenge. Recently I was criticized for speaking on behalf of immigrant rights. A person, who made a point to identify herself as catholic, told me I was ruining this country by promoting the church's teachings on social justice. Talk about a disconnect. In meeting this challenge we need to continue to strategize and to work together in dramatically new ways. We need to be direct, bold, persistent and consistent, a voice for the voiceless. We need to be the voice of what is good, right and just, the voice of the Holy One. There is an inherent relationship between our "partnership" with God and the call to be prophetic!

In so many aspects of our world today we see little and not so little "empires" emerging. We recognize this reality in the political actions of our own country, in the economic strategies of multi-national corporations and the ever-growing gap and social domination of the rich over the poor. Prophets speak to the inhumanity of the "Empire" and offer to the people of the Holy One a new vision, right relationships among peoples and a world that reflects God's plan. Prophets are those persons in our spiritual heritage and social histories who stand out as beacons of justice and hope. They give voice to the truth, testifying to what is right and just. They confront us with harsh realities. And they do so at

great risk, whether it be life or limb, reputation, social status, ability to influence, being ostracized, etc. They disturb our comfort zones and get in our face. They challenge us to faithful witness in the living out of our “partnership” or Covenant with the Holy One.

The prophets speak for and act on behalf of God. They speak to the Holy One’s *hesed* or steadfast love, compassion and mercy, love and concern for the poor, the oppressed and abandoned. Called by the Holy One, they spoke directly to the corruption civil life, social injustice and empty worship. They did not mince words when demanding that people examine their lives and reorder them so as to live faithfully as God’s partners. They warned the people of the consequences of their infidelity and reminded them of the hope to which they were called. Prophets are “in your face” reminders of the rights and obligations that belong to God’s people.

The prophets from our faith traditions commanded the attention of God’s people. They were persons of passion, whose fierce devotion to God inspired them and allowed them to see what others did not see. Those whose intense anger was directed against injustice and oppression and whose sense of humor enabled them to get in touch with their own foibles and point out the silly ways/practices of others. The prophets were able to empathize, to feel the pain of others, to understand a person’s desires and needs.

The prophets were committed to the liberation of persons and to the restoration of right relationships. They spoke to those political, social, economic and religious situations that oppressed people. There was no dichotomy between church and state, secular or divine. Life and society were a unit. They were one. The prophets took on kings and priests. No one was exempt from what they needed to do to be faithful to their mission. They were outrageous in their behavior and vehement in their speech. They admonished the corrupt and those who abused their power. The prophets denounced wrongdoing and greed of any kind. For such deeds were always at the expense of another’s integrity. They called for

the end of violence and destructive behavior, for healing, forgiveness and making “things” right, between persons, families, within countries, among nations, within systems and institutions. They called people to live in partnership with the Holy One. They called people to live as a covenanted people, the one’s who enjoyed God’s favor and who bore responsibility for making God’s ways the standard, God’s reign a reality

The prophets of old and those that we can identify in modern times share common characteristics which I will not reiterate. Addressing the signs of the times, prophets speak clearly and directly to the demands of righteousness and justice. They denounce all forms of social, economic and political inequality, indecent and corrupt realities. They call for reforms that guarantee the rights of all peoples to live with dignity, in harmony, and at peace; that all would live in such a way as to make interdependence, responsibility, accountability and human decency the norm, justice the highest priority. Calling for adherence to these standards, they continue to challenge us to reorder systems, institutions and structures in such a way so as to reflect the plan of God for the universe and create a world where all would find the fullness of life and enjoy satisfaction in being.

We would consider many of our labor leaders to be prophets. Most recently I was present for the funeral of Miguel Contreras in Los Angeles. As many, publicly and privately, shared their stories of his work, it was quite obvious that he shared a prophetic vision. Our labor leaders brought/ bring the same conviction, ideals, passion, commitment to justice, energy for human rights and sense of mission to their bold words and actions, to their union organizing and coalition building. Many of you who are here bring to your work these same qualities. These characteristics should also mark any relationship that we deem a partnership.

Letty Russell, in her book *Growth in Partnership* (Westminster Press 1981), defines partnership as “a new focus of relationship in which there is continuing commitment and common struggle, to interaction, in the context of a wider community.” Partnership is a way of being in relationship and working together that is based on equality and mutuality and strives to achieve the common good. It rejects the dominance or subservience of a person or group over the other and works at creating an environment that recognizes and appreciates differing insight, opinions and approaches. Partnerships demand personal investments and group divestments. Partners must be willing to expand their areas of interest and concern and capacity for involvement, allow their personal resources to be stretched and be willing to put themselves at risk for the sake of the other.

Partnership also involves letting go of some well ingrained ways of thinking, doing things the ways we’ve always done them, rearranging goals or priorities, a momentary shift in the agenda, adopting a new or more inclusive language/vocabulary and a redistribution of tasks. It involves opening up our ranks and circles to include all in the community who are influenced and/or affected by our work.

Partnership acknowledges diversity, respects experiences, recognizes the different skills and levels of expertise while welcoming full participation. Partnership is not a “tit for tat” relationship. All contribute, without measure, the resources they have available to “get the job done,” to ensure the integrity of the mission. Each person and or group brings to this relationship their own personalities, interests, backgrounds, culture, structure, reason for being. Partnership can lead to innovative and creative ways of addressing common goals and the mission, as well as the discovery and development of new talents and skills among those involved in the partnership. I believe that in partnership there exists the real possibility that persons and organizations will grow and develop, networks will be strengthened, coalition building will be enhanced and that we will be effective agents of social change.

Partnership leads to solidarity. This means more than just supporting one another's efforts. It challenges us to cast our lot with one another.

To actualize a relationship that leads to partnership takes a lot of energy and a wholehearted commitment, persistent and consistent work! The partners need to take time to get to know each other, to be open to be influenced by the other and to allow themselves to be challenged by another. This also takes a certain level of trust as well as transparency and a willingness to engage in processes that lead to appropriate self disclosure and critical reflection in order to articulate shared convictions and to take action.

Healthy conflict management policies and practices need to be in place, only "win-win" situations will suffice for partners.

Interaction in a partnership is based on mutual respect and empowerment. The partners/people have an enormous amount of talent, ingenuity, intelligence and creativity among them. Partnership unleashes this energy and these gifts to do whatever is necessary to accomplish common goals and to serve the mission. Partners recognize the dignity and worth of all, acknowledge that they are in this relationship for the long haul, value the significance of giving one's word, listen to and learn from each other, are not afraid to delegate the authority and responsibility to make things happen. Partnership promotes diversity and realizes that people's differences can strengthen the group. Competence and interconnectedness are recognized and all processes, structures and systems are designed to support the vision and mission. Clarity around this is essential and dialogue is the operative principle.

Prophetic partnerships incorporate the bold conviction, persistence and commitment of the prophet to concerns for justice. Like the prophets they should address all those facets of life and experience that

do not promote human rights or the dignity of the human person. They need to confront those persons, systems, institutions and structures that keep peoples oppressed. They need to speak for and act on behalf of those who have no voice or political, social, economic clout. Modeled on our inherent partnership with the Holy One, prophetic partners reflect in their mission and goals that which is good, right and just for all peoples and creation. Their strategies are innovative, creative and address a wider context of community.

And yet there are challenges that seek to prevent or discourage partnership. Prophetic partnership is not about self-promotion or the promotion of a single group's agenda. Sometimes absence of dialogue, a "me first" attitude and lack of shared vision, internal political struggles, apathy and hopelessness work against partnership. Prophetic partnership is about justice and the realization that there can be no justice without the promotion of human life, the inclusion of all peoples, the recognition of the dignity of the human person and the complete liberation from anything that diminishes the human person such as hunger, poverty, disease, violence, and homelessness. Prophetic partnership sees as the umbrella to all its outreach in the struggle for justice and passion for the plight of the poor, a call to conversion and a commitment to transformation of the world.

In this room there are people of faith, union organizers, legal labor advocates, educators, social action people, men and women of different ethnicities, cultures ages, etc. I invite you to reflect on your understanding of prophetic partnership and to continue this dialogue. I encourage you to identify those components you deem essential and to begin to work toward bringing them into fruition. I'd encourage you to identify those who have modeled for you the call to prophecy, and caution you not to miss the prophets in your midst today. I challenge you to look at your own concept of partnership, the gifts and skills you and your organizations have for entering into this type of relationship and to put them at the service of the common good. I pray that you will find your voice to speak out against all that is not of

the Holy One and affiliate as partners to promote human rights and the dignity of the person in the labor force. I pray that you will have the courage to act to bring down the empires that lead to inhumanity and the stamina to persistently act on behalf of humanity. I pray that your integrity will lead to the building up of those partnerships where the truth is hailed, where justice is championed and all whose cause you serve thrive and live with dignity and in peace.

Thank you