

FACE ACCOUNTABILITY ASSEMBLY

St. Theresa Co-Cathedral

Saturday, March 17, 2007

Neal MacPherson

Here we are, an assembly of several hundred people, representing over twenty religious communities, a trade union, a residents' association, a non-profit housing corporation.

Here we are, an assembly representing every ethnic background one can find in Hawai'i.

Here we are, young and old and middle-aged, economically secure and economically poor, working on a variety of issues that are important to the vast majority of Hawai'i's citizens – issues such as jobs, healthcare, and affordable housing, as well as a cause important to the people of Tonga and the Tongan community here in Hawai'i.

Here we are, holding ourselves and our representatives in government accountable for the common good.

And yes, here we are, acting upon the faith values that are important to us, most importantly of all, the love of neighbor, expressed not in pious thought and noble sentiment, but in our work for justice and the common good. Here we are, FACE – Faith Action for Community Equity. Who are we? **We are FACE – Faith Action for Community Equity.**

When was the last time you found yourselves in such an assembly, an assembly so large and so diverse, working on so many issues that matter? Probably, the last time we met as FACE. We are, my sisters and brothers, democracy in action.

We gather here, exercising our rights of assembly and freedom of speech, both rights that define democratic action. Yet, we also gather here, knowing full well that the democratic ideals which are supposed to govern our society are in great peril.

Unless we are vigilant, our government will become less and less a government by the people and for the people. We have observed that government is fast becoming ruled by special interests rather than by the

common good, a government that listens more to lobbyists representing big business and vested power rather than to the likes of us – the people. We also know that we live in a society that is more and more marked by inequities in educational opportunities, in access to good paying jobs, to quality healthcare, and to decent, affordable housing. We know that the rich are getting richer; the poor are getting poorer; and as for the middle class, it is slowly but surely disappearing.

And what does all of this have to do with religion? Isn't religion a matter of spiritual well-being and moral behavior? What has religion to do with social justice? The Jewish prophets of old surely made a link between religious life and social justice. Jesus talked about wealth and poverty more than any other subject. Engaged Buddhism is teaching us about the connections between individual salvation and social transformation.

We pride ourselves on being a religious nation, but as a nation we have a difficult time translating religious faith into a commitment to the common good of all. We would do well to listen to the prophets of old who said that religion is fine and good, but what really counts is justice and righteousness.

Representing the voice of God, the prophet Amos declares:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
 and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
 and grain offerings,
 I will not accept them;
 and the offerings of well-being of your fatted
 animals I will not look upon.
 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
 I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
 But let justice roll down like waters,
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

- Amos 5:21-24

And the prophet Isaiah envisions the kind of society that will be acceptable to God:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
 they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

They shall not build and another inhabit;
 they shall not plant and another eat;
 for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be;
 and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
 They shall not labor in vain,
 or bear children for calamity;
 for they shall be offspring blessed by God
 and their descendants as well.

- Isaiah 65:21-23

It is all about justice and righteousness. It's all about fulfilling the state motto of Hawai'i.

Ua mau ke ea o ka 'aina i ka pono.

(The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.)

When those who are fulfilling the basic jobs required to sustain the economic life of our community are poorly compensated and poorly treated; when those who must care for elderly parents at home are forced to leave their employment in order to do so because there is no other alternative; when those who are homeless or crowded together in existing living spaces face a lack of affordable housing, when others who have affordable housing live with the real possibility that their housing will be taken away from them, then our society fails to embody the social principles of our faith traditions as well as the motto of our state.

In the end, our society will be measured not by how many luxury apartment towers have been constructed; not by how many big box stores have been put in place; not by how many millionaires have been created. Our society will be measured by whether or not we have housed our people; whether or not our people were able to live and work with dignity and adequate compensation; whether or not our people were cared for when they were sick or when they became elderly.

How will our society be remembered? What kind of society will our children and our children's children inherit? Those are the questions of the hour. And we are the people of the hour. We are here, focusing on the common good, holding ourselves and our public officials accountable. We are here, and we are not going to go away empty handed. We are here. And who are we? We are FACE, Faith Action for Community Equity. Once

again, who are we? **We are FACE, Faith Action for Community Equity.**