

INTEGRITY FOR SALE?

By William Ogara

How many of us today are ready and willing to go an extra mile to live a life of personal and organizational integrity?

I recently took part in a community conversation about honesty. I was profoundly affected by a story which the Bishop present at that meeting related. She explained: "We were recently visited by a politician in our church. After the worship service, he called briefly in my office and offered me an envelope which I passed over to the Church Treasurer. After a while, I was approached by some members of the church. They insisted that the envelope was for them to divide amongst themselves. They said 'After all the money was meant for the poor like us. It is not for the church.' We argued for some time and I told them that I had given the money to the church for buying iron sheets for roofing. They were not happy with this. They insisted that the issue be brought up as an AOB in the church committee meeting that evening.

At that meeting, I almost felt overpowered, but I refused to give in. Eventually a member stood and agreed that purchasing iron sheets for the church was the best way of using the funds. Finally we carried the day. Afterwards I received so many calls thanking me for standing up for my principles"

I heard this Bishop's story just 30 minutes after a disturbing conversation with a friend. I had asked him about his recent trip from Mzima. Initially he did not respond. It was as if he had not heard me. When he eventually spoke it was with utter disbelief, as though it was from an imaginary dreamland. He hesitantly related how he was taking his two heifer cows back to his home village. He had hired a van for the two hour journey and had a permit for transporting animals. He explained:

"Almost as soon as we set off, we were stopped at a police post. Before I knew what was happening the police officer insisted that the vehicle that we were travelling in was not in good condition - in spite of the fact that we had it checked thoroughly the previous day. To allow us to continue the journey, he insisted our driver pay him. This was just the first time. Over the next six and a half hours we were stopped no fewer than 15 times with police asking for money every time. At one stage they even threatened to lock up the driver if he did not

pay...”

As if these two experiences were not enough, that evening I read about the Minister of Education in Germany who had to resign over a scandal linked to her doctorate degree. The University had concluded that “investigations had indicated she plagiarized other people’s work for her thesis and claimed ownership of the same”.

These three experiences made me reflect on integrity. That evening as I sat and meditated I realized how integrity has become a commodity – something which can be bought and sold. Yet integrity is about conscience and conscience must not be sold. The more I pondered over the experiences I went through, the more I realize that:

Integrity is about wholeness. It is from *integer*...a whole number and anyone who chooses to practice lack of integrity would be seen to be living a divided life. As the Bible says: “*Our yes should be yes and our no should remain no*”.

Integrity is for all of us, not just public officers. It is amazing how often with corruption scandals (like the MPs expenses in the UK or when people fall foul of ‘Chapter Six’ of the Constitution in my country) they defend their actions as being ‘not illegal’. They do not use the benchmark of integrity and honesty. Their actions would clearly fail the test of integrity. Yet it is not just about ‘them’. How many of us point our fingers at authority and yet fail to admit that we are in fact in a worse situation?

Integrity is like vital to defend the poor. Voiceless, marginalized communities are often unable to really defend themselves. Unless actions are consistent with integrity, they can be taken advantage of by those who are in fact supposed to assist them.

I was reminded of the passage from Isaiah 32 verses 1-3 (GNV)

Someday there will be a king who rules with integrity, and national leaders who govern with justice. Each of them will be like a shelter from the wind and a place to hide from storms. They will be like streams flowing in a desert, like the shadow of a giant rock in a barren land. Their eyes and ears will be open to the needs of the people. They will not be impatient any longer, but they will act with understanding and will say what they mean. No one will think that a fool is honorable or say that a scoundrel is honest. A fool speaks foolishly and thinks up evil things to do. What he does and what he says are an insult to the LORD, and he never feeds the hungry or gives thirsty people anything to drink. A stupid person is evil and does evil things; he plots to ruin the poor with lies and to keep them from getting their rights. But an honorable person acts honestly and stands

firm for what is right. Someday there will be a king who rules with integrity.