

***Address by Right Honourable Dr. Denzil L. Douglas, Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis and Minister of Finance on January 29, 2012 to commemorate International Customs Day 2012 at a Service of Celebration at the Wesley Methodist Church, Seaton Street***

Good Morning.

There is always something very special about being at Wesley Methodist.

This church represent an important part of our people's history because it is intimately interwoven with who we were, and who we have become – from the most difficult days of our enslavement to the freedoms and possibilities that we enjoy today.

Wesley Methodist stands as a symbol of our people's faith, resilience, and promise. And it is good that we are here today as we seek God's blessing, and as we join the Customs and Excise Department in this, their special service of celebration for International Customs Day.

On the surface, the work of the Customs Department and the concerns of the Church might seem quite far apart.

What could the connection possibly be, one might wonder, between the Church and Customs?

Upon closer examination, however, we see that they really are, indeed, quite intertwined.

The role of the Church, I am sure you will agree, is to impress upon us the difference between right and wrong. And to instill within us the instinct and the desire to do what is right. Ethics and morality, then, as outlined in the teachings of Christ, constitute the cornerstone of the Church's mission.

Customs Departments, whether in St. Kitts-Nevis or elsewhere, have a very clear and specific role:

They are expected to ensure that products and items that would be harmful to our country stay out.

We count on them to ensure that products and items that are banned not be allowed entry.

They are responsible for ensuring that the agreements entered into between and amongst countries, for the payment of taxes and duties, are paid in accordance with the law.

They are, then, the representatives of the Government. And this makes them the representatives of the people.

A clear delineation, then, between what is right and what is wrong; what is legal and what is illegal; what is permissible and what is not, is key to the proper running of Customs Departments everywhere. And this is where the teachings of the Church and the operations of Customs Departments everywhere intersect. Because it is precisely through the integrity and morality taught by the Church, that Customs Departments and Customs officials are best equipped to defend the interests of their respective nations.

Governments everywhere and people everywhere depend on Customs officials to levy the correct taxes and duties.....taxes and duties that countries depend on for the funding of schools, hospitals, roads, and all of the other Government services on which the public depends.

Like Customs Departments around the world, then, our Customs Department here is a key defender of our country's interests. And so, I am honored to be a part of this Congregation as we seek Divine guidance upon them as they meet their responsibilities on behalf of the country that we all love.

The theme of the Customs Department's celebration this year is "Borders Divide; Customs Connect". This is certainly true in the context of international trade and commerce. However, this theme "Borders Divide; Customs Connect" can also have relevance in areas that have nothing to do with international trade. And since this is a church service, I would like to invite you to examine, with me, the other ways in which this theme can be relevant in our every-day lives.

Borders exist in a geographical context, yes. And these are the borders that matter where international trade is concerned. Non-geographic borders also exist within societies, however. And in our own society, for example, there are borders that distinguish Methodists from Catholics, Pentecostals from Moravians, and Rastafarians, Jews, and adherents of other faiths, one from the other.

Kittitians and Nevisians, thankfully, have been far better than the people of many other countries, in understanding that denominational labels are simply convenient ways of distinguishing minor variations in religious rituals or practices. We have been blessed in our understanding that what are important are *not* minor denominational or religious differences that *could* divide us, but the far more important *commonalities* - the shared belief in the teachings of Christ - that unite us.

Borders divide, yes, but they do not always have to.

Customs connect. And we, in St. Kitts-Nevis, as I have just shown, have proven this time and again. So, even as denominational “borders” divide other nations, our *custom* of acceptance and our *custom* of inclusion have served to connect us one to another; to link us one to another; to keep our nation strong and whole.

And for this, we must give thanks.

In addition to religious or denominational borders, however, there are other borders within our nation as well. There are the borders that separate the young from the old, the rich from the poor, and the educated from those who have not had those opportunities.

And modern life, unfortunately, often makes the “borders” separating the ages increasingly rigid – even in our tiny Federation. But strong societies need strong bonds between and amongst all age groups – between parents and children, between teachers and students, the aged, the young, and everyone in between. And so, we can, and must, work together – faithfully - to improve the support and the understanding, the concern and the commitment, the respect and the regard that connects those in the dawn of their years, those in their twilight of their years, and those who are in-between, across the length and breadth of this country.

The old are not irrelevant.

The young are not beyond understanding.

And it is up to us to use our imaginations and our God-given talents to find ways – large and small – to make those connections across the age groups that can, and will, in the end enrich all our lives, and help us to have the kind of country that we all want.

Another “border” that exists in nations large and small, Church, is that between the rich and the poor.

And this, too, is a border in which we must also work to ensure that there are many “openings” – openings so that the strong may help the weak....so that those who are not currently as materially secure as others could, through sacrifice, faith, hard-work steadily make progress, one year to the next, aided both by their own efforts and by the support of a society that cares.

Borders divide, customs connect.

Let us as a nation see geographic borders for what they are – the means by which we protect the territorial integrity of the nation which our forefathers have left us.

And let us see our societal borders for what they are as well – fleeting and temporary distinctions that can in no way compare with the bonds that have brought us this far.

Let us go forward, then, ever resolved to adhere to the customs that will serve us all; The custom and habit of faith; The custom and habit of decency; The custom of habit of respect for self and others; And the custom and habit of being our brothers' keeper.

For in these customs lies the hope for our country.

And the hope of our country, Church, always has been, and always will be in our hands.

Thank you.

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Larry Vaughan  
Public Relations Officer  
Customs and Excise Department  
Government of St. Kitts & Nevis

T 869 466 7227

F 869 465 8519

M 869 662 3517