

Voices Against Violence - October Month of Prayers

A region wide candlelight vigil held at Anna Catherina on September 16th, rounded off the **Voices Against Violence National Candlelight Vigil** held to mark **World Suicide Prevention Day**, which was September 10th this year. Organized by the **Anna Catherina Islamic Complex** in collaboration with **The Caribbean Voice**, the Lenora vigil, addressed by Prime Minister Moses Nagamootoo, was the last in over 300 vigils countrywide, organized by almost 40 different NGOs, faith based and community based organizations and other interests groups. The vigil campaign was publicly endorsed by Minister of Public Security, Khemraj Ramjattan and supported by a number of business organizations, local government bodies and political groups.

Voices Against Violence was launched as an anti-violence initiative to build community togetherness, enable communities to mobilize for social action, foster nationwide collaborative efforts to tackle violence in all its forms and develop local leadership that will continue to organize efforts of this nature. The success of the candlelight vigil led to a decision to organize monthly activities under the Voices Against Violence theme and thus October has been earmarked a month of prayer with October 30th designated National Day of Prayer.

The organizations spearheading this month of prayer request all Guyanese households to pray for peace and non-violence throughout the month and to participate in any and all gathering where prayers are held, Guyanese are also requested to organize prayer sessions nationwide on October 30th – mandirs, mosques, churches, satsangs, prayer meetings and any sort of gathering where prayers can take center stage, Praying collectively as communities and group is the focus on this day but those who cannot do so can still pray as families or even as individuals.

Why prayers? Well when people are overwhelmed by major challenges lives there is a tendency to seek out someone or something we believe has greater resources than we do to help us in, and through, those crises and God is often the number one resource in this respect. Besides there is a large body of compelling, empirical and authentic research which speaks very highly of the significant role spirituality plays in the physical, mental,

social and emotional wellbeing of humanity.

In the US National Library of Medicine, a Journal dated October 2001 on the Role Of Spirituality In Health Care, Dr Christiana M. Puchalski, Professor of Medicine and Health Science at George Washington School of Medicine and Director of Spirituality and Health found that: “Those who are spiritual tend to have a more positive outlook and a better quality of life.” And the University of Maryland Medical Centre in 2015 stated: “Spiritual practices tend to improve coping skills and social support, foster feelings of optimism and hope, promote healthy behaviour, reduce feelings of depression and anxiety, and encourage a sense of relaxation.” In fact, Journalist Eric Nelson of Communities Digital News in March 2014 in his article on Spirituality and Health Care said: “With more than 75 per cent of all medical schools in the US having integrated spirituality into their training programmes – up from just three schools 20 years ago – it’s safe to say that this once marginalised subject has made it into the mainstream of modern medicine.”

Recent research indicates that prayer fosters self-control. Research participants who said a prayer prior to a mentally exhausting task were better able to exercise self-control following that task. In addition, other studies demonstrate the prayer reduces alcohol consumption, which may reflect the exercise of self-control. Also, researchers found that having people pray for those in need reduced the amount of aggression they expressed following an anger inducing experience. In other words, prayer helps you not lose your cool.

Prayer increases trust. Recent studies found that having people pray together with a close friend increased feelings of unity and trust. This finding is interesting because it suggests that praying with others can be an experience that brings people closer together. Social prayer may thus help build close relationships, enhance community togetherness and act as a brake against various forms of violence.

Prayer offsets the negative health effects of stress. Researchers found that people who prayed for others were less vulnerable to the negative physical health effects associated with financial stress. Also, it was the focus on others that seemed to be contributing to the stress-buffering effects of

prayer. Praying for material gain did not counter the effects of stress. So thinking about the welfare of others may be a crucial component of receiving personal benefits from prayer.

Furthermore, regular prayer and meditation has been shown in numerous scientific studies to be an important factor in living longer and staying healthy. The relationship between prayer and health has been the subject of scores of double-blind studies over the past four decades. Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiovascular specialist at Harvard Medical School and a pioneer in the field of mind/ body medicine discovered what he calls “the relaxation response,” which occurs during periods of prayer and meditation. At such times, the body’s metabolism decreases, the heart rate slows, blood pressure goes down, and our breath becomes calmer and more regular. This physiological state is correlated with slower brain waves, and feelings of control, tranquil alertness and peace of mind.

This is significant because Benson estimates that over half of all doctor visits in the U.S. today are prompted by illnesses, like depression, high blood pressure, ulcers and migraine headaches that are caused at least in part by elevated levels of stress and anxiety. And high levels of stress can and do catalyze acts of violence.

Prayer is also the most widespread alternative therapy in the world today. Over 85 percent of people confronting a major illness pray, according to a University of Rochester study. That is far higher than taking herbs or pursuing other nontraditional healing modalities. And increasingly the evidence is that prayer works. Prayer then can reduce suicide ideation and lead to less suicides.

Dr. Andrew Newberg, director of the Center for Spirituality and the Mind at the University of Pennsylvania conducted a study of Tibetan Buddhists in meditation and Franciscan nuns in prayer which showed comparable decreased activity in the parts of the brain that are associated with sense of self and spatial orientation in both groups. He also found that prayer and meditation increase levels of dopamine, which is associated with states of wellbeing and joy. Such states certainly influences actions in a positive manner and thus can reduce acts of violence.

In one National Institutes of Health funded study, individuals who prayed daily were shown to be 40 percent less likely to have high blood pressure than those without a regular prayer practice. Research at Dartmouth Medical School found that patients with strong religious beliefs who underwent elective heart surgery were three times more likely to recover than those who were less religious. A 2011 study of inner city youth with asthma by researchers at the University of Cincinnati indicates that those who practiced prayer and meditation experienced fewer and less severe symptoms than those who had not. Other studies show that prayer boosts the immune system and helps to lessen the severity and frequency of a wide range of illnesses. Furthermore, a recent survey reported in the Journal of Gerontology of 4,000 senior citizens in Durham, NC, found that people who prayed or meditated coped better with illness and lived longer than those who did not.

But the question remains: By what physiological mechanisms does prayer impact our health? Herbert Benson's most recent research suggests that long-term daily spiritual practices help to deactivate genes that trigger inflammation and prompt cell death. That the mind can effect the expression of our genes is exciting evidence for how prayer may influence the functioning of the body at the most fundamental level. In effect science tells that people who pray and meditate trend to be statistically more healthy and live longer than those who do not. And the positive effects on physical and mental well being can and do trigger less acts of violence both at the individual and societal levels.

In effect it is felt that, beset by violence as Guyana is no one can deny that that challenges abound in the body social with dire effects on the national psyche. Consequently, given the body of available evidence, it is felt that, at best, a month of prayers nation wide could very well impact the ongoing violence in a manner desired by all. At worst there can be no harm in all Guyanese praying together with hope that violence can be significantly reduces and peace given a greater chance.