Errol Miller  
Recipient of the EI Albert Shanker Education Award

President Mary Futrell, General Secretary Fred van Leeuwen, and distinguished colleagues all, it is with sincere gratitude and deep humility that I receive the Education International Albert Shanker Education Award for 2004. Lifetime awards for service cannot be attributed only to the individuals who receive them for no one is an island or self-made. So tonight let me immediately acknowledge my family, represented here by my wife Sharon and daughter Catherine who nothing could keep from being present. Their love and support have integral to any achievement of mine. Equally, let me also acknowledge the support, friendship and dedication of all the teachers in the Caribbean that it has been my privilege to service with and whose contributions and achievements are intricately intertwined with my efforts. Teaching is a social profession and no achievement attributed to me could be accomplished without the collaboration and corporation of my colleague teachers. So let me ask all teachers from the English Speaking Caribbean present in this banquet hall tonight to stand with me in receiving this prestigious award.

Education International has been generous in recounting several activities in which I have been engaged. Let me put them in the context of the English-Speaking Caribbean, the principal arena in which I have served. The English-Speaking Caribbean consists of 17 small or tiny countries stretching from Bermuda and the Bahamas in the North, to Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana in the South and from Barbados in the East to Belize in the West. Belize is in Central America and Guyana is in South America but they are linked to the chain of islands in the Caribbean Sea by history, culture and language. The total population of this sub-region is about 5,000,000 people. Anguilla is the smallest country with just about 10,000 people, while Jamaica is the largest with 2,600,000.

With respect to social composition we are Africans without tribes, Indians without castes, Chinese without dynasties and Europeans without class. By this I mean that we as a people in the Caribbean have been disconnected from the internal divisions of the continents and cultures from which our ancestors came. Loosened from these traditional social ties we as a people have been forced to embark on the journey to discover the common humanity of all human kind and to build bonds of solidarity across these social divisions.

On this social journey of the discovery of our common humanity our countries are constrained by small size, separated by wide expanses of sea, marginalized in terms of global political economy, have no military might whatsoever, and are burdened with the legacy of the injustices bequeath by slavery, colonialism and the plantation economy. However, neither the enormity of the challenge of the social journey nor the severe limitations imposed by the constraints have dimmed or inhibited our resolve to succeed. We are a people who understand that our destiny lies in defeating the odds. Further, we have never allowed the limitations and constraints of our circumstances to determine what we think of ourselves or how we define the goals and aspirations we embrace and strive to achieve.

Let me illustrate the point being made by a few examples.

- Since the UNDP Development Index began to be published in the early 1990s little Barbados with a population of 250,000 has ranked between 24th and 30th of the 190 odd countries listed worldwide with respect to basic
human needs indicators related to health, education, and other social services that constitute the Index. Hence, Barbados has lower rates of infant mortality, higher rates of life expectancy and higher levels of adult literacy than some Western industrialized countries.

- Tiny St Lucia with a population of just over 150,000 has in the last 30 years produced two Nobel Laureates: one in Economics and the other in Literature.
- Trinidad and Tobago with a population of about 1,300,000 has given the world the only new musical instrument invented in the twentieth century: the steel drum and with it calypso and soca with their withering social commentary that causes politicians to quake in their boots when caught in the cross-hares of their lyrics.
- Jamaica has given the world not only a new religion but a genre of popular music, reggae, that has expanded the choice of young people worldwide beyond those coming out of North America and Western Europe. Indeed, Bob Marley’s song One Love was selected Song of the Twentieth Century by the BBC and his Album Legend was selected Album of the Century by Billboard in the United States.
- Jamaica is still the smallest country and the only one without a professional league that has qualified for the FIFA World Cup for football. Also Jamaica’s tally of medals in the sprints in the Olympics and World Athletics Championship is only surpassed by the USA.
- When the Rhodes Trust celebrated 100 years and Oxford University awarded four honorary doctorates to outstanding Rhodes Scholar it was Professor Rex Nettleford, Caribbean icon, and Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies, who replied on behalf of the four awardees that included President Bill Clinton.

But beyond these achievements that belie the small size and lack of political and economic importance of our sub-region, is Caribbean audacity, which obliges us to stand up and be counted even in circumstances that may seem ridiculous to other or hopeless. For example, Jamaica was the first country to impose economic sanctions against the apartheid regime of South Africa. While in terms of substance this may have appeared laughable in the 1950s when it was done, it set the precedent that the majority of nations in the world community followed in the ensuing decades.

My reason for citing these examples of Caribbean achievements is to underscore the fact Caribbean expectations and accomplishments have never been constrained by our marginality in the political economy of the world or our relative unimportance in terms of size. Further, in our journey of discovery of our common humanity we have embraced education as a principal means of progress. The Caribbean is a shining example of the Theme of this Congress. However, we have gone further than embracing education as a means of progress, we have learned that education in a vital instrument in harnessing the power of the weak.

You see colleagues we in the Caribbean have a long history of resisting the powerful. This orientation is immortalized in the lyrics of many of our songwriters and in the verses of several of our poets. It is not surprising therefore that when Winston Churchill sought appropriate words with which to rally the British people during World War II he turned to the Jamaican poet Claude McKay:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.

If we must die, O let us nobly die
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain, then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honour us though dead!
O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe
Like men well face the murderous, cowardly pack
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.

However, constrained by small size and marginality our major instruments of resistance have never been war and wealth. Our principal instruments or resistance have always included the mind and the spirit. It is the indomitable spirit of our forbears that broke the shackles of slavery. It is the mastery of the mind that finally liberated us from the assertions and assumptions of colonialism. Our forbears prized literacy and sort to be literate even when reading was a punishable offence among slaves. The Caribbean achieved levels of education that rivaled the imperial world while we were still colonies.

The development of the mind and the cultivation of the spirit constitute the very substance of the education enterprise. The power of the weak resides in:

- Forging a strong sense of identity and enduring bonds of solidarity among of diverse backgrounds and circumstances but who share a common destiny.
- Developing the intellect
- Fostering the creative imagination
- Inspiring commitment to integrity
- Cultivating an indomitable spirit that refuses to be broken or crushed by adversity or immobilized by daunting odds.

Teachers in the Caribbean have been in the forefront of harnessing the power of the weak among people in our societies. It is through their sacrifice and that many children from very humble circumstances have become adults that have escaped the cycle of persistent poverty. It is through their vision that many Caribbean leaders have been inspired to break barriers of social injustice, to reach intellectual heights that many thought could not be attained and to establish that excellence is a resident of our region. It is within this framework that I have had the opportunity and the privilege to service and to lead. Hopefully it is for these reasons that Education International has honoured Caribbean teachers and myself through this Albert Shanker Education Award for 2004.

Finally President Futrell allow me to show some small gratitude by presenting you and General Secretary van Leeuwen with copies of my latest book, launched earlier this year, the Prophet and the Virgin. It is a historical sociology of the teaching occupation that adopts a gender perspective. It begins with the Sumerian civilization and traces the masculine roots of teaching to the lineage traditions of this ancient civilization and though the prophetic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It traces the feminine roots of teaching to the ascetic traditions of Islam and Christianity. It concludes by tracing the transformation of teaching in the nation states of the United States and the Caribbean. In a real sense this book records my own exploration into what it means to be a teacher and what is involved in the training of teachers. It is my considered view that in the final analysis teaching is about how vision, values and virtue are construed and constructed in every era of human history.