
PROFILE

Jacqueline Vongai Pratt

Dialogue with an Adventist Chief Law Officer from Zimbabwe



Jacqueline Vongai Pratt is chief law officer of customary law in the Ministry of Justice of Zimbabwe. A passion for justice and peace born of deep

Christian convictions has led her to support the rights of women in society. She is also committed to opening more opportunities for the education of her people, and has served for several years as member of the University Council of Zimbabwe.

Born in a peasant home in Masvingo (formerly Fort Victoria), Mrs. Pratt received her elementary and secondary education in Adventist schools and later graduated from our Solusi College. While serving as a teacher and raising her family, she completed the admission requirements for the University of Rhodesia (now the University of Zimbabwe), where she obtained a law degree.

Mrs. Pratt's career includes service as assistant town clerk in the capital of Zimbabwe, Harare; assistant secretary

in charge of legal affairs in the Ministry of Local Government, and senior law officer in charge of legal aid. In her current position as chief law officer, she supervises all 67 community courts and several primary courts in her country.

Mrs. Pratt's husband is a financial director of a commercial firm in Harare. They have four children ranging from 22 to 12 years of age.

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We spoke with Mrs. Pratt during her recent visit to the United States. She had come to Washington to take part in the annual meeting of the Cabinet of Counselors. This advisory group is composed of experienced Adventist lawyers representing all world divisions.

Please tell us about your family background.

I was born and raised in a rural Seventh-day Adventist home. My father was not an educated person, and my mother can't read or write, but both of them encouraged me and my two brothers and four sisters to live a good Christian life and to make the most of every opportunity. My oldest brother is in charge of the small commercial farm that used to belong to my father. My second brother and my youngest sister are teachers. My two other sisters hold civil service positions—one in the Ministry of Local Government and the other in the Ministry of Tourism.

Were there some people that influenced you when you were young?

I remember two missionaries who were very important to me. They were like parents to me and later as my brother and sister. In my early teens, when I was attending one of our schools, I worked in

the house of Miss Dora Greive, an American missionary. She took a strong interest in me. She never treated me as a servant, but as a person. She encouraged my involvement as a speaker in our temperance society and as a singer in church. I believe that a lot of my caring attitude and my determination come from her.

Another person who influenced me was Dr. Kacelenga, an English professor at Solusi College. He understood young people well. Although I was a very difficult person, he was both firm and caring. If you made a mistake, you'd get the punishment; but then he considered that the matter was over—he didn't punish you for what you had done yesterday. I think that was a fair treatment.

What specifically attracted you to the legal profession?

I suppose it was the plight of African women. Before Zimbabwe became independent in 1980 we didn't have a voice. We couldn't defend our own rights.

No woman then would have held the position I now hold unless she were foreign-born. I wasn't happy with that and looked for a way women could have their say in areas of life that affected them directly.

Do you see a connection between your Christian convictions and your work?

Yes, in some ways. For example, as a chief law officer you have the opportunity to counsel people who are bringing family matters before the court. If they are husband and wife, for example, you can make the issues clear and help them find a fair solution. Sometimes you can help people that are quarreling to reach a just settlement and even become friends. When children were involved I have had the satisfaction of counseling parents regarding their legal duty and the Christian duty towards them.

What are your current responsibilities as chief law officer of customary law?

I am in charge and responsible for the supervision of courts throughout Zimbabwe that deal with customary law, involving family disputes, divorce, deceased estates, seduction, and similar issues. I inspect the operation of these courts to ensure that the cases are handled correctly by the judicial officers. If a particular case raises a complaint, sometimes it is solved in my office. At other times it is referred for review by provincial magistrates. Sometimes this requires extensive research to determine the correct application of the law. My duties are therefore both legal and administrative.

Are there advantages in having a woman in the position you now occupy?

Some men in my country may argue that it is a disadvantage because under a new customary law in Zimbabwe, African women are now entitled to receive maintenance [alimony] in divorce cases. They may think that as a woman I would be partial to women involved in family disputes. But they would be wrong. I believe that as a woman lawyer and as a mother I can be not only fair, but also more understanding when it comes to custody of children.

When you were studying law at the University of Zimbabwe, did you have to face difficulties as an Adventist?

No. In Zimbabwe we have been very lucky. Both before and after independence we have been free to worship according to our own beliefs. However, when I served as a prosecutor, I struggled to combine my role as a person expected to request the judge for the application of the law in all its force and my own Christian inclination to be merciful toward those who commit crimes.

What can you tell us about the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zimbabwe? Which are our main activities and challenges?

There are 150,000 members in a country of a little over 10 million

inhabitants. Our Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) carries a few projects. However, we are weak in the health area. Most of our activities center on education. We provide a practical program, but mostly at the lower levels of schooling. This means that we don't offer A-levels, which would prepare students for admission to the university.

At present, I am involved in the development of a document to be submitted to the government authorities requesting that Solusi College (founded in 1894) be chartered to operate as a university. The recently approved Higher Education Act allows for the establishment of private universities in our country. I dream of additional course offerings at Solusi so that students can receive a thorough professional education to benefit both our church and our country. We need to find ways to providing more educational opportunities for our young people. Our country needs more educated people with solid Christian characters.

Have any of the graduates from our schools reached positions of responsibility in Zimbabwe?

Yes, several who have gone on to complete advanced degrees are active in the church and now occupy important positions in government entities. For example, the registrar at the University of Zimbabwe is R. Zinyemba, a Seventh-day Adventist. There are also a few Adventist lecturers there in economics, education, and pharmacology. The current minister of labor, John Nkomo, is from a family that was among the first in Zimbabwean Adventists. He studied at Solusi College. Dr. Simon Andifasi is a health officer. The governor of Midlands, Herbert Mahlaba, is also an Adventist. Norman Maposa occupies an important position with an international labor organization based in Harare. There are also several others that I could mention.

What are your children doing

now?

There are all studying, according to their own inclinations. Our oldest son is doing a mechanics course. Our oldest daughter, head girl at her school, is preparing to enter the university and intends to become a teacher in one of our schools. She is a strong leader of the Christian Youth. The other two children are still at lower levels in school.

Are you involved in activities related to the church?

Yes. A congregation meets in our home. We provide a home for the church pastor in our district. I share my religious convictions with other people whenever I can. As I said earlier, I am also assisting Solusi College in obtaining its university charter. Above all, I try to relate to other people on the basis of the Christian principles I learned at home and during my studies in Adventist schools.

Humberto M. Rasi

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