



President of the Barbados Amateur Radio Society Ishmael Cadogan (left) making a point, while also in attendance are fellow members (from second left) Shanty Bowen, Mark King, vice president, Basil Yearwood, Wilfred Hall (obscured), Haschel Bynoe and secretary Michael Williams.

Radio Society speaks volumes

There is a group of professionals who are extremely well versed, educated and competent in most things related to radio communications. The irony is they call themselves "amateurs".

The Amateur Radio Society is an organisation of individuals, male and female, that practise radio communications. It's a group of 100-plus radio hams who are passionate and excited about their favourite pastime. Not only that, but on occasions of natural disaster, the group is often called upon to lend invaluable assistance.

President of the Society Ishmael Cadogan was more than proud to tell Barbados **TODAY** recently that the group communicates daily with people from all over the world.

"We do it as a hobby, hence the term amateur. We get involved in communications with people all over the world. As a hobby we would practise it in Morse code, in voice (talking through the microphone) and digital modes because this is the age of the computer. So, we connect the computer to the radio and we communicate with people all over the place. So for instance, let's say the internet is down and I wanted to send an email to any of these fellows in here, I could still send an email over the radio and I could do it to Trinidad, to Dominica, any place in the world via the radio at the same time," he explained.

In addition to places on earth the group can also communicate in space.

"We can talk to the international space station. So, the sky is actually the limit. Recently, I spoke to China and that is something our licence also allows us to do satellite communication and there are satellites up there for amateur use."

Cadogan said the society has lost some members over the years and was now rebuilding.

"We're about 100-plus strong but if I may say this, our membership is now being rekindled. We had a period where we weren't recruiting anybody and we lost 20-something amateur radio operators because it isn't easy to get an amateur radio licence.

"It is only in 2018/19 that the amateur radio regulations have been renewed. So now we change from doing one general licence to now we are doing three licences – the foundation licence, intermediate and advanced," the president said.

The society suggested that those now starting out do so with a VHF handheld radio. Added to that, in order to operate locally a person interested would have to do the course or pass an exam.

The course, which is run by the society, lasts for three months. Then the licence is issued by the Telecommunication Unit. After that one must get an international licence. One then has a call sign which is 8P 4, 5 or 6 licence and then one would be able to communicate worldwide. The course conducted last year added 58 new amateur radio operators into the fold.

But the exam is not the only structured learning offered by the society. The president said there was also online training.

"We did some training last year and we had plans of doing at least two training courses this year but due to COVID-19 we had to shelve it. We were looking at doing online training but getting all the facilities in place for the online training is one of the things that we were looking at.

"For the Government of Barbados, training in schools was something easy because they had a platform available. We now have to start everything from scratch to put it together for the online training."

The group also does critical work by aiding essential services such as the Department of Emergency Management (DEM) and the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA).

Cadogan said: "Our communication plan has in it that we will assist the Government through the Department of Emergency Management when there is a disaster. Barbados hasn't really been hit by a natural disaster of that nature that we have been activated as such but we've been assisting CDEMA with disasters through the other islands. So, we go back to 2017, when Dominica was hit by the first storm.

"We were at CDEMA passing traffic between Barbados and Dominica. And we do local traffic and international traffic. So, if it is something happening locally, we would get involved and if it is something happening internationally, we would get involved also."

When Hurricane Maria struck Dominica in September 18, 2017 and caused major destruction and devastation, the society was actively communicating with people in distress. Radio was the only means of communication between Dominica and the outside world for a while immediately in the aftermath of the hurricane.

"In Dominica, the Internet down, the cellphone was now a camera. From Barbados we were able to talk to people in Dominica, pass on information, get information about friends and family, so it becomes relevant at that time.

"It's like you being on a ship and the ship has on all kind of electronic gear and the ship breaks down and then you got to go back to the normal compass to steer the ship. So, when all else fails, amateur radio will still be there," he said.

Members of the society have done the advance licence in Morse code, which has proven to be a deterrent to a number of people. Many consider it difficult to learn. But during the Dominica ordeal when everything was stripped to bare Morse code played a part.

"Morse code, it is easy for you if you want to make it easy. But then you find a lot of guys after two or three years they want to learn Morse code because it sets the men apart from the boys.

"They say in the United States a lot of people are paying to

learn Morse code and we will find the same thing happening in Barbados just now. When we recruit all of these guys and they don't know Morse code, they will find themselves wanting to learn Morse code because that is the epitome of being a radio amateur," Cadogan explained.

In terms of attracting younger membership, the society is acutely aware that they are competing against modern technology which may appear to be more seductive to that generation.

"A lot of younger people shy away because of the fact that you have to be licensed. You have to go through a training programme which requires you to study and an exam. The average young person really wants to pick up a cell phone and **Whats App, Tik Tok, Instagram** for free.

"I think that before cellphone there would have been a lot of activity where amateur radio operators would have been out front," he said.

Nonetheless, the society continues to do its part to make people aware of its existence and to generally educate people about radio communications.

"We had a demonstration here at this club where we invited the neighbourhood and we invited some students, we had radios and we had computers and everybody gravitated to the computers, so the radio is an old thing.

"It isn't something that many people want to get involved in and in order to get a licence you have to train and you don't need to train to get a cell phone or train to get on a computer. So that is one of the basic problems that you would find," he said.

However, the society does not believe that amateur radio is dying, rather the leader of the group thinks it is "evolving".

"Amateur radio will survive. It is challenged because of all the other things like anything else. If you look at sports, everybody in Barbados used to play cricket at one stage.... Younger generation they are easily attracted to other things especially if you find yourself getting involved in something that you don't have to work too hard for it will actually attract as opposed to something that has discipline existing throughout."

"Beyond getting the licence, once you get the licence you still have to be disciplined when you get on the radio because it is generally self-policing. The hobby is challenged in that respect but there is a lot of evidence to suggest that it will survive. And it is evolving." The president said he was confident that the pastime would live on.

"One of the things that people fail to recognize is that amateur radio has been at the forefront of telecommunications worldwide. Most of the developments in the new aspect of radio started in somebody's bedroom, playing around, experimenting. They perfected it and then they sold it to so-called conglomerates. So as long as you have people who are thinkers, amateur radio will never die," Cadogan said. **(IMC)**