



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

EUGENE TAN

More than charities and schools

The law academic at the Singapore Management University says his NMP experience has been humbling so far.

"There is so much one hopes to do but there is a need to prioritise and strategise, and collaborate with stakeholders," he says. "On issues, I hope to focus on education, issues of social justice and equity."

In his first parliamentary speech, he noted that "how we, as a society, care for the disadvantaged, give voice to the voiceless, and help the downtrodden among us reflect on our heart-ware, and the quality of our nation-building".

"As an educationist in a university, I see the inclination towards a love for degrees rather than a love for learning," he said. "The former is overly instrumental, the latter is what would endow us with discernment and wisdom and a critical mind."

He says he is grateful for the holistic Catholic education he received at St Stephen's School.

"We Catholics tend not to give enough credit to Catholic education. Too often, we forget that a Catholic school has to be more than just a school; it has to be infused with the ethos of our faith and help to right-size the emphasis on the academics and the non-academic," he says. "Take away the spiritual formation and our Catholic schools will be no different from the secular schools."

Mr Tan, who has a son at Maris Stella High School, also noted that, while charities and schools are important in the overall scheme of the Church's social mission, these are "necessary but insufficient".

He serves on the board of governors of the Catholic Welfare Services (CWS) and chairs the tripartite Caritas-CWS-Society of St Vincent de Paul committee on the study of the poor.

"We practise the social mission within the socio-economic, cultural, and political milieu here in Singapore. There is the need to contextualise our social actions," he says. "Even amid the wealth and prosperity, there is so much more that we can do. Not just to help the poor, the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the downtrodden but also to uplift them and work with them to enable them to break out of their difficult situations. We tend to think of money as the solution – money certainly helps but for many, they seek our friendship and our moral support."

For Mr Tan, the Church's social teachings are about "standing up for social justice, rooting out inequalities, and advocating positive change for the betterment of society".

Describing himself as someone who does not wear his faith on his sleeve, he explains: "That is not to say that I hide my Catholic identity but that identity is merely a form. For that identity to have substance, meaning and relevance to the community at large, it would mean that doing right in the public sphere cannot just be about one's faith, especially in the Singapore context."

A spirit of inclusiveness is important, he says, adding: "I believe that there is a role for faith-inspired values in the public sphere but the manifestation of those values must be inclusive."

Our Catholic NMPs

Nominated Members of Parliament Laurence Lien and Eugene Tan have more than their Catholic faith in common. Classmates at Hwa Chong Junior College, both turn 42 this year and became NMPs in February. "We are both similarly interested in issues of social justice and doing more to tackle the root causes of social problems," said Mr Lien.

LAURENCE LIEN

Don't put off philanthropy

Mr Laurence Lien says he was "nominated and appointed to represent the social sector", and there are few as well-suited to this role. He is chief executive officer of the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) and the Community Foundation of Singapore (CFS). He also chairs the Lien Foundation and is deputy chairman of Caritas Singapore.

"Part of the work I need to do is to reflect the social realities on the ground, (as well as) review our social compact, our social insurance," said Mr Lien, whose first parliamentary speech generated buzz for claiming that Singapore was in a "social recession", and calling for measures that could be tracked yearly to gauge the "social health of the country".

Despite greater media attention being paid to the widening income gap, many do not have an accurate perception of poverty in Singapore. The reality is a lot more complex, he points out. "A lot of aid is temporary, for example. Accessibility, too, is an issue. Some feel too ashamed to access help," he says. The process of seeking help can be "undignified".

Another problem is that medically, Singaporeans are under-insured in general, and some end up using all their savings to pay hospital bills.

In his work at the Community Foundation of Singapore, he helps donors become more engaged in their philanthropic pursuits, going beyond writing a cheque, and finding the right programmes for them.

"There is a tendency for people to put off philanthropy as something to do much later on in life, for example, after they retire," he says. "I think people will find, particularly, that engaged giving is highly meaningful... If it makes you happy, joyful, peaceful, why do you want to put it off till later?"

Mr Lien, who has been taking part in parish activities since he was a teenager, says his faith is crucial to many decisions that he makes.

"When you spend time in contemplation, which I do, you find that the Spirit sort of nudges you to feel more strongly about certain decisions, certain choices," he said. "At the end of the day, it's not about me; it's about doing His work."



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