



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL



*"If I'm with friends and we decide to travel some distance for a meal, I will not be able to join them because I have not made a booking for a vehicle suitable for my wheelchair. I feel it's important to have flexibility and options just like others do." – Judy Wee of the Muscular Dystrophy Association*

## If you were 28 inches wide

I WAS about to muster up some courage and invite a former classmate for some of the famous Waterloo Street rojak a stone's throw from my office. She had been hinting subtly for weeks and for many of us, friendships are fortified over good food. But the problem was less about meeting over a meal, than how my disabled friend would wheel her way to meet me.

The quickest way would be to take the train to Bras Basah, except that certain changes have taken place of late and the signage for the disabled is rather misleading. There are two exits on the Waterloo Street side, but both are not accessible to the disabled. Only one exit, at the Singapore Management University, would be useful but would involve quite a detour. Up to September this year, a disabled person could use that exit and wheel herself across the junction of Queen's Street and Bras Basah as there was a traffic light there. But that set of lights has since moved, although the misleading signage remains.

The lack of universal access is not novel. Shouldn't every person have the right and the responsibility to have a say and take action in matters that determine our shared future? Are we not at a stage of development where nobody should be left behind and where a change in mindset is pivotal in order to become an inclusive society? This requires recognising that we are equally responsible for each other, especially those most in need.

All human persons have a right and duty to take action in what determines their well-being and future. However in society today, those who are not vocal, assertive or powerful and those whose needs are an "inconvenience" to the majority often get ignored. Seeking the good of each person requires dialogue, listening to everyone and understanding each person's needs. In particular, it requires an effort to look out for the marginalised and more importantly, include them.

The future of the small fleet of London cabs has been in the news recently, following the operator's decision to phase them out. These taxis were a novelty when they first arrived in Singapore, but today they are a much-needed means of public transport for the disabled, especially those using high-backed, motorised and bigger wheelchairs.

Unfortunately the taxis are reaching the end of their statutory lifespan, and the operator says its drivers have been facing shrinking demand for their services. After the issue was highlighted in the media, the London taxis have been given a reprieve and will be around for a little longer while transport authorities look for a long term solution.

"The London cabs give us the freedom to



Photo: SOCIETY FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

### Getting around by wheelchair

***If you were 28 inches wide you would think moving about freely should not pose too much of a challenge. Well not quite, because 28 inches - about 72 cm - is the width of an average wheelchair. And that's a stumbling block for the wheelchair bound. SHIMA ROY looks at accessibility.***

move about. If you take this out of the equation what do I do? What do we the disabled do? Are the disabled meant to stay home?" asked June Hoo a regular user of the London taxis. Although prior bookings are necessary, they are available daily without any restrictions on timing and who can use them.

When the matter was raised, June, like several other disabled, were given a list of other options they could use to get them to work, school, shopping or just simply to be able to go out with friends and family and not be cooped up at home. But when they called, they found only the Handicaps Welfare Association has a service for its members which ferries them to

and from work. It is not a taxi service hence it is not available to the public.

June says: "Why is it that disabled equals welfare? A transport issue is not a welfare issue. The disabled should be treated as people and not a group that needs to be handled by welfare groups. What is wrong with having a fleet available, a fleet for both the able and the disabled? Remember these London cabs are not just used by the locals, many foreigners who come here for medical treatment engage the services of the London cab."

Judy Wee of the Muscular Dystrophy Association says: "We would like to lead a spontaneous life not one that is always

planned. If I'm with friends and we decide to travel some distance for a meal, I will not be able to join them because I have not made a booking for a vehicle suitable for my wheelchair. I feel it's important to have flexibility and options just like others do."

Judy points out that Singapore's trains are accessible, with designated space for wheelchair users. "But we cannot get into the train especially during peak hours let alone the designated area. Nobody gives way, even after I say 'excuse me' numerous times.

"If I do manage to get in, it again takes numerous 'excuse me's' to get out, if I can make it out the door in time that is. People need to be more gracious, they need to be more aware, which is why our association is taking that lead and creating awareness and starting with schools."

Although Judy recognises that there has been incremental progress in the accessibility for the disabled, there is also a need for society to play their part.

Universal accessibility must go hand in hand with graciousness and awareness. Every human person is deeply connected to every other person. We are called to stand together as one human family in the Church's social teaching of the principle of solidarity.

#### WHAT YOU CAN DO

A disability may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, developmental or a combination of these. A disability may occur during a person's lifetime or may be present from birth. Many disabilities are a result of road accidents. On Dec 13, 2006, the United Nations formally agreed on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the first human rights treaty of the 21st century, to protect and enhance the rights and opportunities of the world's estimated 650 million disabled people. The Singapore government has expressed its intention to sign the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2012.

The Enabling Masterplan launched in 2007 to develop the basic framework to enable persons with disabilities to better integrate in society, is now working on this next five-year plan. It is expected to be ready by early 2012 and will adopt a life-course approach starting with the early pre-school years, then going on to the education and employment phase of life and the adult and ageing years.

Play your part by sharing your views and suggestions to [feedback-disability@cel.sg](mailto:feedback-disability@cel.sg).