



# OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## Social enterprises are welcome at Agape Village

**S**ocial enterprises have been gaining attention in Singapore in recent years but what are social enterprises and how do they work?

A social enterprise is a company that has two main aims: to address social problems or needs and make a profit. Unlike charities, they do not depend on donations to sustain themselves.

Caritas Singapore Community Council (Caritas Singapore), the social mission arm of the Catholic Church in Singapore, is hoping to partner social enterprises in its work at Agape Village, a soon-to-be-launched, integrated social service hub for persons with diverse social needs.

Caritas Singapore is an umbrella group of 23 Catholic social mission groups which serve the needs of the poor and marginalised, including low-income families, youth at risk, ex-prisoners, persons with palliative needs and persons living with HIV/AIDS. A number of the social mission groups under the Caritas Singapore umbrella will provide some of their services under one roof at Agape Village.

One such group and a member organisation of Caritas Singapore is Abilities Beyond Limitations and Expectations (ABLE), which serves persons with physical disabilities.

ABLE runs a social enterprise called ABLE SEAS (Social Enterprise Accounting Services) Ltd, which provides accounting services for companies and charities. The four employees of ABLE SEAS are physically challenged and took up an LCCI accounting course. One employee, Ms Khek Ching Ching, 48, had a partial foot amputation about six years ago.

Ms Khek used to work as a tuition teacher before getting an infection that at first she thought was a blister from wearing new shoes. Her doctor prescribed antibiotics but the infection spread rapidly and unexpectedly. In less than a fortnight, part of her right foot had to be amputated.

"I couldn't walk. It was a very terrible ordeal. I really wanted to give up on life. I was very depressed and had no support," says Ms Khek. Her mother has passed away and her father, who has Parkinson's, is in a residential care home. She adds that she did not receive any support from her elder brother and elder sister.

Ms Khek's life has changed since those dark days. In 2013, a domestic helper from Myanmar who worked for her at that time, Ms Nyein Yinaye, encouraged her to learn to walk again. Ms Khek threw away her wheelchair and walking aids that same year.

"Today I walk beautifully. I treat myself as a normal person now because I'm walking with confidence," says Ms Khek.

Ms Khek, who works full-time at ABLE SEAS, says: "I found that I have a flair for accounting. Before I was doing home-based tutoring and I never got separated from my family. I never knew



Canteen stall at St Joseph's Institution Independent manned by individuals with special needs and supported by volunteers.

how to fend for myself. Now I live alone. It's my first time working in an office and I find it's great."

Caritas Singapore recognises the benefits that social enterprises can bring and wishes to work with them at Agape Village, which will officially open its doors in a few months.

Mr Gordon Pinto, the general manager of Agape Village, says: "Agape Village wishes to have social enterprises in its premises. When Agape Village opens, there will be a social enterprise café and ABLE SEAS will be operating at the hub. We look forward to having more people to collaborate with us by offering their social enterprises and other programmes in Agape Village."

Some of the staff at this café, called "The Bridge", will likely be persons with special needs, says café operator Leonard Sim. The eatery will serve meals and snacks with local, Western or Peranakan influences, including desserts such as Malacca-style chendol.

Mr Sim already runs other canteen stalls in schools such as School of the Arts and St Joseph's Institution Independent (SJI), which are modelled on practices found in social enterprises. His employees include individuals with Down Syndrome, schizophrenia and autism.

Mr Sim, who has employed persons with disabilities since 2006, says: "I have seen people with special needs who are engaged in very monotonous work like removing copper wire from cables. I thought, why don't they see the outside world? It's also a way of providing jobs for these adults if their parents are not around."

Persons with intellectual disabilities are employed at two stalls he operates at SJI, which sell Western food like chicken wraps, burgers, potato wedges, macaroni and cheese, mushroom soup and waffles. This project at SJI is in partnership with Mamré Oaks. Mamré Oaks is an off shoot from the Faith and Light Community, which is a member organisation of Caritas Singapore that serves people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

At these canteen stalls, staff members who have intellectual disabilities work alongside able-bodied volunteers and "two aunties" who do the cooking, says Ms Magdelene Yip, coordinator and volunteer of Mamré Oaks.

"It's not easy for persons with special needs to find a job in open employment. Over here, it's still somewhat protected and there's always at least one volunteer to back them up. Most adults with intellectual disabilities would have certain behaviours, such as sometimes finding it hard to control their feelings and moods. We might pull them aside to talk to them," says Ms Yip.

The reception at the school has been "very good", she says. The students have been "patient and understanding", for example, if they've been given the wrong change; as handling money can be very challenging for people with special needs, adds Ms Yip.

Being employed also gives these staff members dignity.

"These adults with special needs are happy because they have something to do instead of staying at home. They feel very proud to be able to earn money," says Ms Yip.



*Social enterprises and other interested parties who wish to work with Caritas Singapore at Agape Village are warmly invited to contact Penny or Stacie at [agapevillage@caritas-singapore.org](mailto:agapevillage@caritas-singapore.org).*