



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

“Have the courage to swim against the tide. Have the courage to be truly happy! Say no to an ephemeral, superficial and throwaway culture, a culture that assumes that you are incapable of taking on responsibility and facing the great challenges of life!”

— POPE FRANCIS, WORLD YOUTH DAY 2014

Community in action: Courage to be truly happy



Mr Ahmad Habib helped organised parents and residents of Jalan Kukoh set up a welfare organisation to focus on education for their children, employment for parents and alleviate poverty. “Today, no more kids are smoking, 10 to 15 families have upgraded themselves - not that they are well to do, but at least they are okay,” he said.

A community in action is a community with the courage to be truly happy. The third Poverty RoundTable held on May 17 captured a picture of a vibrant community wanting not only to be truly happy but also trying to live simply and emphatically. The truth is that people in Singapore do care about poverty, each in their unique way.

For the third year, Caritas Singapore has invited Singaporeans deeply interested in tackling poverty in our midst to attend the roundtable to share, brainstorm and collaborate on initiatives to raise the levels of understanding of poverty and spur community action. This year we heard numerous inspiring stories showcasing solidarity from the ground.

Parents and residents of Jalan Kukoh set up PEKIK (Persatuan Kebajikan Jalan Kukoh), a welfare organisation, to focus on education for their children, employment for parents and alleviate poverty. Why did they do it?

“I saw children not respecting their elders, young children smoking and hanging out at the playground until 2-3am,” said PEKIK chairperson Ahmad Habib, referring to what he saw more than two years ago. “Today, no more kids are smoking, 10 to 15 families have upgraded themselves – not that they are well to do, but at least they are okay.”

Another group, acts29, started the Angel Network to befriend lonely elderly folk in one-room Housing Board flats, identify their needs and link those in need with appropriate assistance.

Back in 2006, Sherlyn Khong, coordinator

of acts29, wondered whether poverty really existed in Singapore. So she went knocking on the doors of one-room flats and discovered many elderly people living alone or with another elderly person. The reality is that many senior activity centres cannot cope with the growing number of the elderly who are not able to join their activities.

What happens then? “They stay behind four walls and wait for time to pass. They don’t have a phone. Nobody calls on them. They don’t go out because they are scared they will fall, afraid they will get robbed. They don’t feel safe,” she said.

Bernise Ang, executive director of Syinc, explained that they use a multi-disciplinary approach to develop creative solutions to urban poverty beginning with the Bukit Ho Swee neighbourhood. While crowdsourcing is one method used, this approach also brings together professionals from across disciplines into the community to come up with a range of solutions that must be human-centred.

Polytechnic students Nicholas Feng and Lewin Low shared their bold and inspiring final year project, “Living with Less”. Since June 1, the two have started trying to live on \$790 a month – that is the public assistance given to a two-member household. They will also live in a HDB rental flat and work at low paying jobs for two months.



Sherlyn Khong, coordinator of acts29, found elderly people living in one-room flats had many needs. “They stay behind four walls and wait for time to pass. They don’t have a phone. Nobody calls on them. They don’t go out because they are scared they will fall, afraid they will get robbed. They don’t feel safe,” she said.

Besides hoping that Singaporeans will learn more about relative poverty in our own backyard through their project, Lewin hopes “to break my own personal stereotypes and to humble myself to learn and listen”.

The conversation continued with more stories of action, revealing people committed to upholding the fundamental value of the human dignity of everyone.

In the words of South Central Community Family Service Centre executive director Ng Bee Leng: “I was inspired by the parents and residents of Jalan Kukoh. They do not have a lot in terms of material things but they have a lot in terms of

conviction and belief that they can do something for themselves.”

Surely we can identify too, and recognise that this is what having human dignity is all about – to respect that every person, no matter how down-and-out, has strengths and the power within them to help themselves and others in their community.

People from outside can also protect the human dignity of residents in the way they enter and engage with the community. Taking the initiative to befriend elderly residents isolated by poverty needs time. Nurturing self-confidence in the young, for example through sports, also takes time. Unlike handouts, the emphasis is on helping oneself and building relationships. Many need

friendship even more than money.

But both befriender and resident need time to grow to trust each other. When there is trust, residents will not be afraid to speak about deeper issues and problems. Befrienders will be able to listen with their hearts instead of judging from a distance. Together, they are creating social support by breaking down all social barriers and all shame attached to asking for help from each other. Both take ownership of poverty in their own way through changing attitudes as well as taking responsibility for the choices they make every day.

Yes, as Pope Francis said on World Youth Day, on Jan 21, we “need to experience a conversion in the way we see the poor. We have to care for them and be sensitive to their spiritual and material needs... Faced with old and new forms of poverty – unemployment, migration and addictions of various kinds – we have to learn from the wisdom of the poor!”

This year’s RoundTable was also special because the majority who came to share about their actions were young people. They were also people of faith, Christians and Muslims, joined by people without religious beliefs but committed to universal values that respect and protect human dignity.

The Poverty RoundTable is Caritas Singapore’s attempt at being faithful to the social mission of the Church which is poor and for the poor. It also supports youth leadership, ecumenism and social dialogue as a contribution to peace.

**SINGAPOREANS
AGAINST
POVERTY**