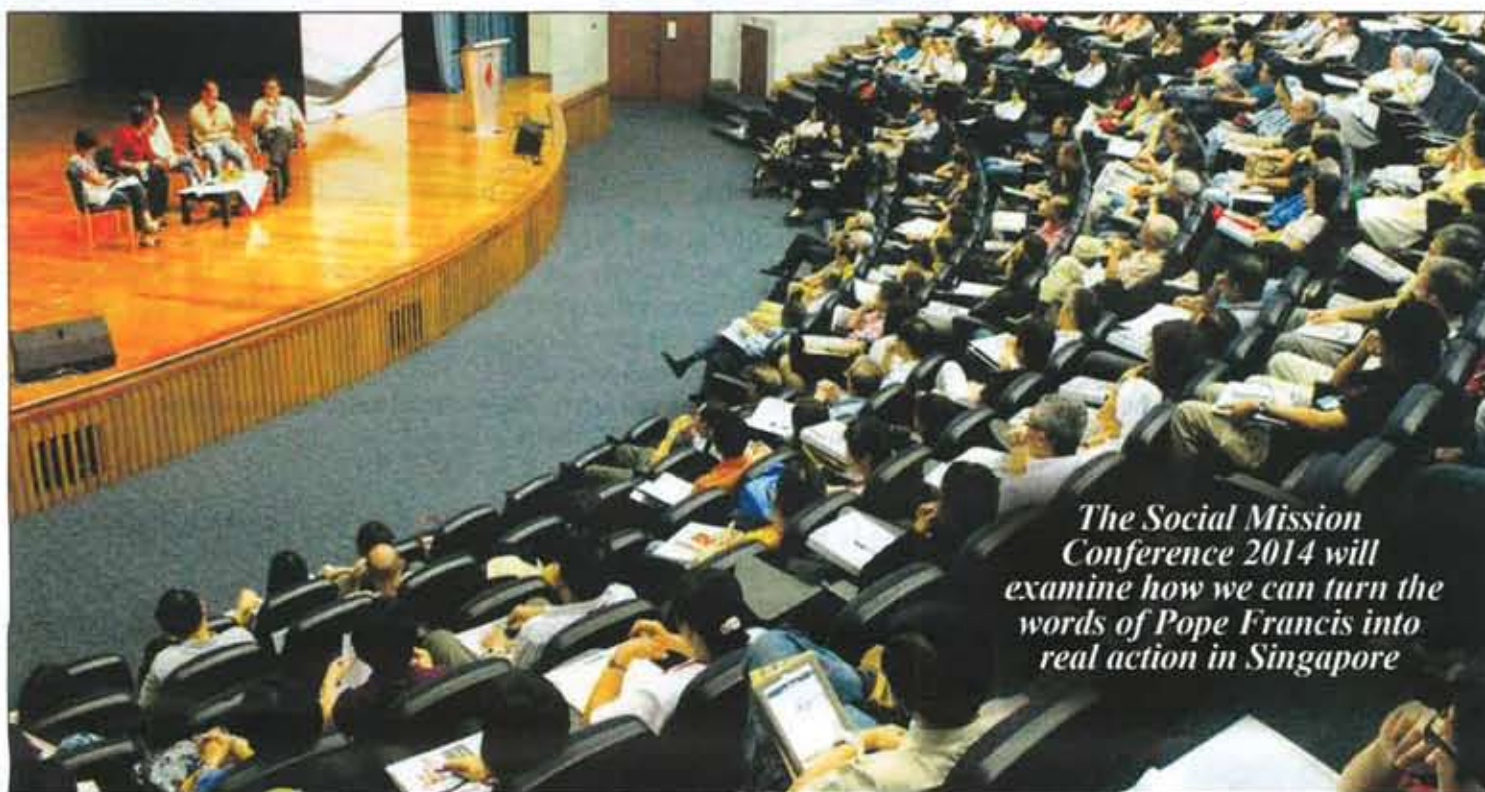




## OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

# 'I want a Church which is poor and for the poor'



The Social Mission Conference 2014 will examine how we can turn the words of Pope Francis into real action in Singapore

The last Social Mission Conference was held in 2012 and unveiled the concept of "partnering the poor", which means we are called to accompany those in need and not merely give to them. This year's conference in August will look at approaches to partner the poor. It will feature an analysis of poverty in Singapore and discussions by workers and volunteers on ways to reach out to marginalised groups, such as poor families, youth at risk, migrant workers, people with mental health issues, and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Nobody is "Ma'am" or "Sir" at one training centre for foreign maids; all the instructors are called by name. At a social service centre, those who seek counselling are not means-tested, and they are referred to as guests, not clients.

These are small ways in which the Archdiocesan Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People (ACMI) and Morning Star Community Services (MSCS) respectively provide services guided by Catholic values. Serving in a manner that upholds dignity is one of the principles of service outlined by Caritas Singapore, the umbrella organisation for 23 Catholic affiliates, including ACMI and MSCS.

These approaches to partnering the poor will be among the topics featured at The Social Mission Conference 2014, organised by Caritas Singapore. It will be held on Saturday, August 23, at Catholic Junior College, and is themed after Pope Francis' declaration, "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor".

The forum includes a reflection on the Pope's words by the president of Caritas Asia, Bishop Isao Kikuchi, as well as an analysis of poverty in Singapore; and discussions by workers and volunteers on reaching out to marginalised groups, such as poor families, youth at risk, migrant workers, people with mental health issues, and people living with HIV/AIDS.

There will also be a time of prayer with songs from the

renowned Taizé community and an update on Agape Village, a one-stop social service centre being built in Toa Payoh to bring together all the services of Caritas Singapore affiliates. Details on how to sign up for the conference are provided in the box on this page.

The concept of "partnering the poor", unveiled at the last Social Mission Conference in 2012, goes beyond giving to the poor and speaks of accompanying the person in need, explained Brother Matthew Tan, SJ, who will be speaking at the conference in August. The "principles of service", which are underpinned by Catholic Social Teaching, have a wide relevance, he said.

"Partnering the poor reminds us of the need to focus on the other person, specifically a human person who needs to move towards wholeness. The need could be more than the material poverty seen. There may be other issues that need to be attended to, to holistically help the person. The principles remind us of this," he said. "Caritas Singapore would like to effect a change in mindset – to recognise and adopt elements in the helping process such as the active participation of the poor to take ownership and personal responsibility for their own lives. They are helped, yet responsibility remains theirs."

At ACMI's training centre for foreign domestic workers, which provides language and skills training, the women come to a place where they can call everyone by name, including the instructors. "This arrangement was introduced

by the instructors themselves, as we want to give the students an environment free of the employer/employee scenario. This is unique to our Catholic environment and appreciated by both students and teachers," said Mr Timothy Karl, executive director of ACMI. The agency also distributes food and essential items to construction workers; collaborates on shelter services, legal and medical aid; and provides counselling, befriending and other services.

The dignity of the human person, a key Catholic Social Teaching, is also upheld at Morning Star Community Services. Executive director Freddie Low said: "We are careful with the way we use words because there are implications on the other. For that reason, we don't call the people we work with, beneficiaries. We don't call those who come for counselling clients; we will more often than not refer to them as guests."

Neither does the agency require means-testing for those who seek counselling. "We don't do means-testing, we take the person's word," said Mr Low, adding that the agency has never been exploited in this regard. "It takes a lot of courage for people to say, 'I want to see a counsellor'," he said.

Morning Star also provides student care and learning support services, family life education, family support groups, community events and other services.

There are, of course, obstacles and challenges in carrying out these principles of service.

"Sometimes the people who need help most refuse to ask for help or accept help," said Mr Low.

Brother Matthew said: "One challenge would be how long is needed for change, if any, in the person being helped. In our result-oriented Singapore culture, that can be a challenge."

Besides calling for a poor Church in "The Joy of the Gospel" (Evangelii Gaudium), Pope Francis also said that the poor "have much to teach us". Elaborating on the Pope's words, Bishop Isao, a keynote speaker at this year's conference, said: "The poor know the sufferings of Jesus in a real sense. To the suffering people, God gives priority to proclaim the Gospel, the good news. They may know the tender compassion of God in a real sense. Living in the faith is something the poor can teach us."

"I have had numerous encounters with so many people in challenging situations in different countries because of natural disasters, conflict and poverty. Many of them told me the same phrase over and over again which is, 'Do not forget us'. In fact, many a time we do forget... Where is our solidarity? We give and we forget."

"But the solidarity which the Church has been teaching requires us not to forget. Rather, we are to continue to walk along with suffering people. In doing so, we also realise that it is not enough to just give but we also have to reform our lifestyle in order to create a human society based on justice and equality so that the real cause of suffering of people ceases to exist."

### 'WE CAN DO MORE'

Even though a belief in self-reliance cuts across income groups in Singapore, there is a growing feeling in society that we can do more to help the poor, said Associate Professor Irene Y H Ng, who does research on poverty issues.

"The notion of self-reliance is very prevalent in Singapore," she said. Poor people here might also embrace this viewpoint, she said. In some other countries, studies have shown that people in low- and high-income brackets hold different attitudes towards poverty.

Prof Ng will speak at the Social Mission Conference 2014 on the key issues faced by poor families and the root causes of poverty. In terms of helping the poor, "generally as a society, most of us feel that we can do more," said Prof Ng, who is with the Department of Social Work, National University of Singapore.

In speaking about "a growing empathy for the poor" in Singapore, she said that previously there was little awareness of poverty in Singapore, but this is not necessarily the case now.



### Have you signed up yet?

Saturday, August 23, 2014  
8:30am to 5:30pm  
Catholic Junior College  
Performing Arts Centre

Join us in this call to reflect on what it means to be 'A Church which is poor and for the poor'. This is an opportunity to listen to the voices of the poor and those working with them, and be inspired to action by those who are partnering the poor, enabling them to live lives of dignity. Pick up a registration form from your parish or visit [www.caritas-singapore.org](http://www.caritas-singapore.org).