



## OUR SOCIAL MISSION

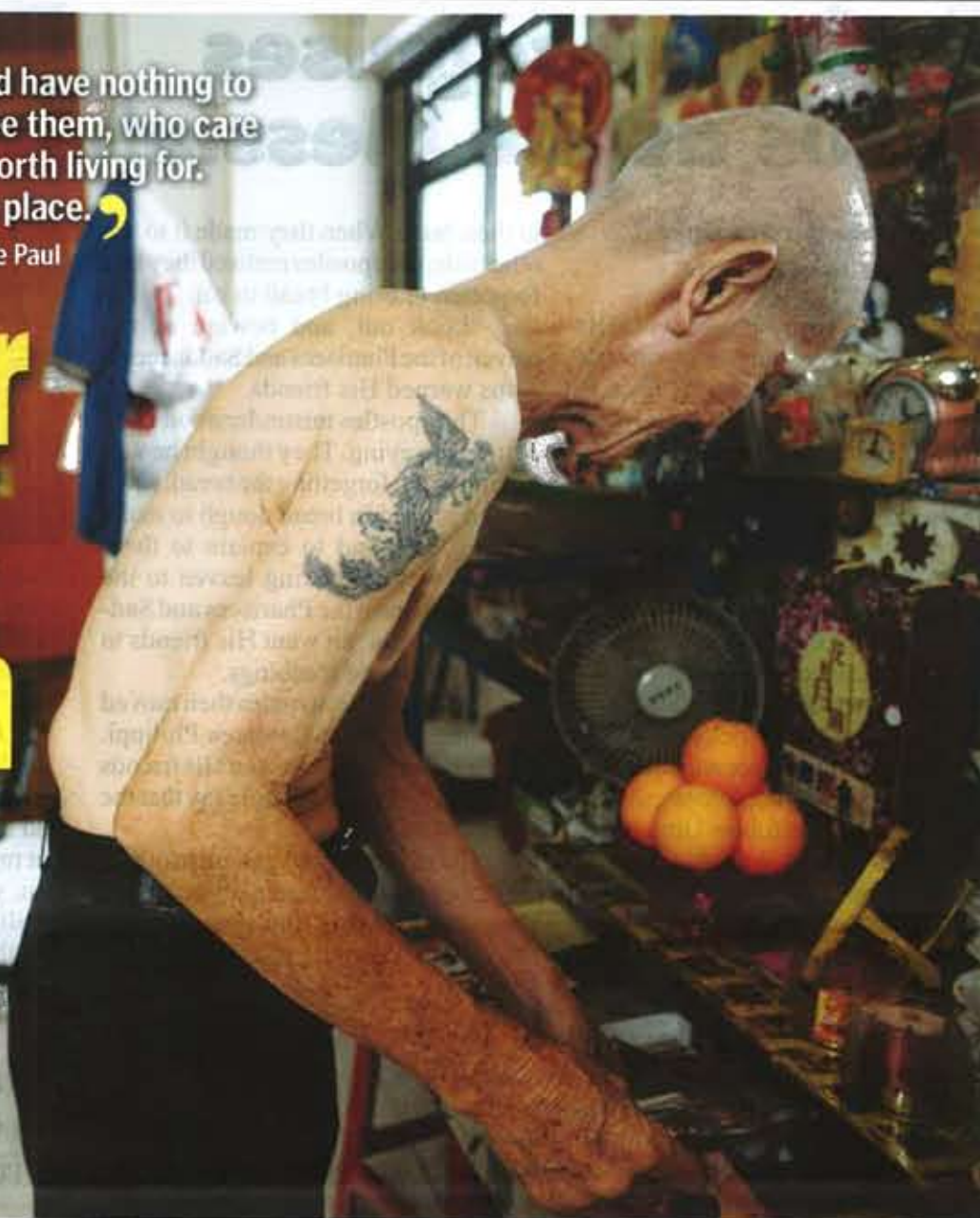
BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Some of the lonely elderly lead mundane lives and have nothing to look forward to. They need people who come and see them, who care for them, so that they can feel there is something worth living for. Once they have that, many other things will fall into place.

— Paul Foo, president, Society of St Vincent de Paul

# Finding Our Forgotten Generation

Many old people need friendship and assistance to live out their days meaningfully and in dignity. As the number of elderly rises in Singapore, we need more Catholics to step forward as volunteers and helpers to show the love of Christ to our pioneers.



Singapore is a global model of success. We have a healthy economy, low crime, clean streets and an efficient government. Our evolution from Third World to First has been described as nothing short of a miracle.

So who are the people who built Singapore and where are they today?

Some are doing well. Surrounded by loving children and grandchildren, many of our pioneers are enjoying the fruit of their labour.

But not all. First, let us go back a few years.

In 2007, school teacher Ignatius Lee was shocked to find Madam Png, an elderly Singaporean, sleeping in the corridor on the seventh floor of an Housing and Development Board (HDB) block in Hougang. Ignatius and his friends befriended Madam Png and brought her Milo powder and Jacob's crackers. Sadly, she passed away in the corridor on that very spot not long afterwards.

The experience inspired Ignatius and a group of young Catholics to start the Angel Network, a team of volunteers who visit and journey with the lonely elderly living in rental flats. The Angel Network, which started in 2007, is a project of acts29, one of Caritas Singapore's 23 Catholic charities.

Angel Network volunteers survey one-room HDB blocks to locate the most vulnerable elderly —

those who have no relatives or have lost contact with them, and those who are not mobile enough to attend community activities. These elderly may have diverse and inter-connected problems. For example, financial difficulties may cause them to skimp on medical expenses, resulting in poor health and reduced mobility, and subsequently the loss of social support circles.

In many cases, the Angel Network is able to refer these elderly to one or more Voluntary Welfare Organisations that can meet their needs, such as the Lions Befrienders or Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS).

For the elderly who are not supported by any social service organisations, Angel Network volunteers befriend them and identify their specific needs. For instance, many rental flat residents enjoy free medication through Public Assistance or various charity schemes, but are found taking their medicine in the wrong quantities and at the wrong times. The volunteers help them to check the doctor's instructions and sort out their medication.

Other elderly have unusual issues. One lady had a phobia of metal objects and only found peace of mind after volunteers brought her a wooden bed. Others hoard discarded furniture, turning their tiny flats into potential death traps if a fire were to break out.

**25,398**

elderly households live in small rental flats

**56,200**

seniors work as cleaners or labourers

**More than 50 elderly**

passed away alone at home from 2007 to 2012

Finding our forgotten generation and bringing Christ's love to them is not easy, as our young Catholic volunteers will testify. The numbers are big — and growing. 25,398 elderly households were living in one- or two-room rental flats in 2008, according to the latest HDB survey. 56,200 seniors work as cleaners or labourers as stated in a 2013 Ministry of Manpower report. The Straits Times reported that more than 50 elderly persons passed away alone at home from

2007 to 2012.

Today, there are 404,400 Singapore residents above the age of 65, and the government's 2013 White Paper projects that there will be more than 900,000 by 2030. Ensuring that all of us are cared for in our golden years is going to take nothing less than a nationwide partnership among the government, social service sector organisations and the community.

Among the many groups stepping up to help fill the gap is the Society of St Vincent de Paul, whose members in Singapore have lived out Christ's call to serve the poor since 1951. They are frequent visitors at the homes of the disadvantaged, and 60 per cent of their clients, or "Friends-In-Need", are above the age of 65.

Society president Paul Foo says that befriending activities are important because psychological and emotional issues are critical obstacles to a happy retirement for many of Singapore's seniors.

"Some of the lonely elderly lead mundane lives and have nothing to look forward to," he says. "They need people who come and see them, who care for them, and so that they can feel there is something worth living for. Once they have that, many other things will fall into place."

'Many other things' can include regular exercise, medical care, games, handicrafts and other hobbies and passions that keep the

elderly physically and mentally healthy, he adds.

With more than 700 members in 30 conferences in parishes all over Singapore, the Society regularly supports more than 3000 Friends-In-Need. But this covers only a fraction of the population and the Society recognises that more can be done to reach out to the forgotten elderly.

In line with this, the Society plans to integrate its West district operations with the Social Works Office at the Church of St Mary of the Angels in early 2015. This pilot programme will bring together the expertise of professional social workers with the dedication of Society members and the enthusiasm of volunteer parishioners, in a single unit dedicated to reaching out to the poor, aged and needy. And if all goes well, the programme could be replicated in other parishes across the island.

The Society welcomes all parishioners to join their members in journeying with the growing elderly community in Singapore, while growing in faith together.

Are you ready to be Christ's light to the vulnerable and forgotten in our midst? Get in touch with the Angel Network at [sherlyn@acts29mission.com](mailto:sherlyn@acts29mission.com) or visit [ssvpsingapore.org](http://ssvpsingapore.org) and approach the Society of St Vincent de Paul members in your parish.