

Healing Society's Fault Lines through Works Of Mercy



+ By Rev David Ho, with contributions from Rita Lee and Natalie Chua.

“Class — not race nor religion — is potentially Singapore's most divisive fault line.” That was what findings from a local survey conducted in 2018 revealed.¹

There is already anecdotal evidence of class-based discrimination. In a CNA report, a security guard related this observation about the residents of the condominium he was working at: “Sometimes, even when the barrier isn’t open properly, they’d start shouting at us. They’d say ‘useless security’ and ‘stupid security’ and things like that.”²

The Covid-19 pandemic threatens to exacerbate the fault-lines in the Singapore society between the haves and the have-nots. What might the Church’s role and response be? I would like to suggest that we look no further than our Methodist heritage.³

John Wesley summarised the Methodist mission as spreading “scriptural holiness” over the land.⁴ Wesley strongly believed that the pursuit of “holiness of heart and life” and “perfect love” is not only a matter of personal piety but must also lead to “works of mercy” amongst the last, the least, and the lost in society.⁵

Wesley followed Christ's example and made the poor — to whom he could show affection and stand in solidarity with — an integral part of his ministry. Some of Wesley's important deeds in the face of social inequality included “teaching, feeding, and clothing poor children; furnishing gainful employment to the jobless; giving loans to struggling entrepreneurs; visiting the sick and the prisoners; providing food, money, clothing shelter, books, medicine, and other essentials to the needy.”⁶

The Wesleyan scholar Richard Heitzenrater maintains that the deeds Wesley performed were uncharacteristic for an individual of such distinction and background. Wesley's interest in social works was not normal for an Oxford don who was educated at one of the best Oxford colleges and from a background of scholarly parents.⁷

REACHING OUT TO SENIORS THROUGH WBOP

Rita Lee and Natalie Chua, who have been serving seniors living in one-room HDB flats through the Wesley Befrienders to Older Persons (WBOP) for over a decade, share their experiences of how stepping out of their comfort zones to help the elderly has made a difference in the community and in their lives.

RYTA'S STORY

Inspired by the servant heart of Jesus, Rita joined WBOP when she returned to Singapore in 2008 from a seven-year overseas work assignment with an international bank.

Together with a small team of Befrienders, Rita reaches out to over 20 seniors living in the one-room flats at Indus Road. Besides coordinating and delivering weekly meals on Sundays, Rita also makes weekly visits to the seniors.

Rita shares how she engages the seniors: “Sometimes we take them to the polyclinic or specialist clinic at Singapore General Hospital. Other times, we help them with reading their mail, usually government letters, as

many of them cannot read. Mainly, we would just spend time chatting with them as they reminisce over their younger days. I can tell that some of them are very lonely and yearn for our friendship, as they look disappointed when we leave.”

During the Circuit Breaker last year, Rita and the WBOP team arranged for groceries to be delivered to the seniors and made regular calls to check on them. In recent months, Rita has been helping the seniors make appointments for vaccinations, and has even brought at least two of them to the vaccination centres at their request.

Through her experiences, Rita has learnt that regular and authentic interactions is the answer to bridging social differences and breaking down the walls of suspicion that some may have. She shares this:

“I recall one senior who was rather reserved initially. When we observed that she was not managing her medicine intake well, we bought two pill boxes and organised her medicine for her. We offered to take her to the polyclinic for her regular consultation, but she declined. After six months of regular visits, she gradually opened up to us and shared that her children were not visiting her.”

She asked whether we could accompany her to the polyclinic.

Initially, whenever we left her flat, her neighbour would stand at his door but would not say much other than a brief “hello”. Over the years, he has since followed his Christian neighbour



Rita accompanying a senior for vaccination



Yen San, Rita's fellow befriender from WBOP, attending to a senior during a hospital visit

to church, and has accepted Christ. He now welcomes us to his home warmly. He also felt comfortable enough to ask if I could bring him for his vaccination, which of course I was happy to do.

Rita no longer views the seniors as beneficiaries or clients – she counts them as friends who are close to her heart. Likewise, the seniors of the Indus Road community view Rita and the WBOP team as “people from the church” who are graciously journeying with them in their years of frailty and illness.

NATALIE'S STORY

Natalie is a young adult who has been delivering meals to over 20 seniors on Sundays since she was a youth.

Natalie shares her journey:

I first started volunteering as a Befriender because my father volunteered and brought me along as a little girl. I remember packing bags of groceries that I struggled to lift, and sweating in the heat. Yet oddly, more than anything, I remember being strangely filled with joy.



Rita delivering groceries to a senior, Mdm Ng

While the groceries and meals that we distribute may be a small blessing to the seniors, we try to give more than just food — we also want to share love and care, and extend friendship to them. As seniors who live alone, they appreciate the friendship and conversations during our visits.



Mr Tan, who has since accepted Christ

One elderly uncle often asked us: “I am so well taken care of by the church and volunteers. I sometimes wonder, what have I done to deserve all this?” Honestly, I did not know how to respond except to smile. One day, the uncle came back with an answer. He had asked a pastor about it, and the pastor said to him, “God gives us things that we did not earn or deserve... well, that is what grace is!”

When we heard this, we were very touched and ‘mind-blown’! We realised that these simple little deeds of service might in fact be God’s grace to someone.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). In my years of volunteering, I have truly and deeply experienced this — God constantly fills me with deep joy and strength as I serve, and I draw closer to



Natalie (extreme left) with the seniors on an outing (photo taken before the Covid-19 pandemic)

Him and depend on Him (e.g. learning what to say to start conversations, finding strength on a tiring day, loving and caring for the elderly, etc).

Through their works of mercy, Rita and Natalie not only glorify our Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16), but also contribute to the healing of fault lines in the Singapore society. Their ministry vividly reflects the Wesleyan concern for personal as well as social holiness.

If you would like to explore avenues to bless and befriend the weak, vulnerable and marginalised in society, e-mail [Christian Outreach and Social Concerns at cosc@wesleymc.org](mailto:ChristianOutreachandSocialConcerns@cosc@wesleymc.org).



Natalie with a senior whose creativity and passion for life inspires her (photo taken before the Covid-19 pandemic)

¹Paulo, D.A., Low, M. (2018, October 01). Class - not race nor religion - is potentially Singapore's most divisive fault line. CNA Insider. Retrieved from www.channelnewsasia.com.
²Paulo, D.A., Low, M. (2018, October 01). Class - not race nor religion - is potentially Singapore's most divisive fault line. CNA Insider. Retrieved from www.channelnewsasia.com.
³The Methodist Social Principles, which may be found in The Book of Discipline of the Methodist Church in Singapore, summarise the basis for social concerns in our Methodist heritage and theology.
⁴“Large Minutes”.
⁵Maddox, R. L. (2002). Visit the Poor: John Wesley, the Poor, and the Sanctification of Believers. In R. P. Heitzenrater (Ed.), The Poor and the People Called Methodists (pp. 59-81). Kingswood Books.
⁶Heitzenrater, R. P. (1994). The Imitatio Christi and the Great Commandment: Virtue and Obligation in Wesley's Ministry with the Poor. In M.D. Meeks (Ed.), The Portion of the Poor: Good News to the Poor in the Wesleyan Tradition (p. 49). Kingswood Books.
⁷Ibid.