



## Newsletter – October 2008

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### Who is my neighbour?

About 15 years ago, when I first arrived in a small town in Illinois, the advice given by my fellow Singaporeans was to avoid certain rough neighbourhoods in that town at night. These are mainly slum areas occupied by the majority black population. After saying that, my friend added that if I were to be alone in a quiet street. I should also be on the lookout for suspicious characters especially the black males.

Shortly after arrival, I started working as a volunteer in a soup kitchen run by the Catholic community. The people who were there for their free lunches were mainly black males. Most of them walked miles even during the coldest day in winter just to get a minimal meal. They behaved themselves at the soup kitchen, waiting patiently for their turns to sit at the table and then waiting patiently to be served. That was my very first encounter with the African Americans. One summer Sunday afternoon, I had to attend a meeting at the soup kitchen. As the weather was very pleasant, I decided to take a walk there instead. The soup kitchen is about 6 blocks away and as it was bright daylight I decided that I would take a short cut through the back lanes of some of the homes. That afternoon was indeed a quiet one as most of the students living in that vicinity were not at home.

I was enjoying the serenity of the walk when from a distance about 20 metres, I saw a black man on a bicycle turning towards my direction. Panic grabbed me and my hands started to feel cold in the warm afternoon sun as I remembered the words of my Singaporean friend. Thoughts of being robbed flashed through my mind as I clasped my gold miraculous medal hanging on my neck. I started to pray earnestly for protection. As the bicycle approached me, I held my breath and fixed my eyes on the ground instead. Suddenly, I heard a gruff voice greeting me cheerfully “Good afternoon, ma’am”. I looked up and saw a grin on his face....he was one of the regulars at the soup kitchen! Grippled by my own fear, I had not look at him hard enough or I would have recognised him from afar. This incident taught me how stereotyping people can have an adverse effect on the way I behave towards them. The negative perception that stems from stereotyping invariably instil an unfounded fear and suspicion of others.

The recent furore over a proposal to temporarily house foreign workers in a disused school complex in a middle class private housing estate called Serangoon Gardens is one such example. It was reported that about 1,400 households out of the 7000 in the estate signed the petition that claims that such a move will “create security and social problems, and spoil the ambience of the estate”. The residents met up with their Members of Parliament and expressed their fears about these workers breaking into their homes, robbing their elderly. Others expressed their fears of their maids sleeping with the workers, fears about the safety and possible outrages of modesty of the young girls in a nearby



all-girls school, fears about the din these workers can create after drinking sessions. There were fears about them overcrowding and littering of the estate's parks, fears about traffic congestion which arise from the trucks waiting to ferry the workers from the dormitories to their workplaces, fears about having to fight with them to get on board the only bus service that ply the estate, fears about walking safely at night in the estate, fears about the declining value of their properties as a result of locating such a 'dormitory' in their midst, etc.

I am not about to dispute the concerns of these residents for they are indeed genuine. As a resident, I would not have any qualms signing the petition. After all, I have a young daughter who walks to the nearby girls' school everyday. I often brisk walk around the estate on cool evenings or take short cuts from the main roads to my home. My daughter's and my security are at risk here just as anyone of our neighbours who were openly against it.

But, as a Catholic and a member of the Christian Family and **Social** Movement, my social consciousness was acutely aroused. I cannot bring myself to pen my name on the petition.

I have been taught that every human being is created in the image of the Creator and all persons are equal in dignity. As such, a foreign worker deserves the same dignity as myself.

Who am I to judge that the foreign worker is a thief, a robber, a molester, a rapist even before he has committed such crime? By signing the petition, I am indirectly hinting that they have such evil tendencies in their nature and therefore are no better than any criminal locked up in a jail. I acknowledge that there could be one or two black sheep in the flock who may stray but by saying that they will pose a security risk, we are already stereotyping everyone in their communities.

I also felt that the petition was focussed on the "I" mentality of the residents and ignored the needs of the weaker parties in the process. Are the needs of the foreigner workers adequately met? The food centres and the wet market in the estate are known for charging slightly higher prices than elsewhere. Can the workers afford to buy their basic provisions here? There is only 1 bus service that serves the whole estate. Most of the residents here own cars. Would there be transportation problem for these workers during the weekend? Would there be enough recreational facilities for them to unwind on their days off?

While I recognised the contribution of the hard labour that these workers have contributed to building my country, I am certainly not going to show my gratitude by treating them like lepers and isolating them to the remote parts of Singapore. By deliberately alienating them from the mainstream society is likened to building a leper colony for them. Are we signalling to them that they are not good enough to mix with us? When I was living overseas I wanted to know about the people and the culture of the place I was living in and to assimilate into that society as quickly and as best as I could. What makes me think that these foreign workers would not want to be part of our larger community?

Would the reactions of the Serangoon Gardens residents be any different if the dormitory was not the blue collar foreign workers but for professional men who are highly educated and who worked in posh offices in our Central Business District? Would we be more ready to accept their existence because their higher salaries would have put them in the same class category as the middle class residents themselves? Do we perceive that the rich are less likely to commit crimes than the poor foreign workers?

When Jesus commands us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, He is asking us to love everyone. Do we, unconsciously, only love selective neighbours who share similar traits (eg similar educational background, skin colours, dialect groups, race, parish, nationality, housing type, cars model etc) as ourselves. If Jesus had just died for his own people (the Jews), then I am sure I wouldn't be where I am today.

Can I accept these poor foreign workers as my neighbours? Can I be like the good Samaritan in the parable, who saw all human beings as equal in dignity and helped a fellow being lying by the wayside, not caring about the latter's race, language, religion and wealth?

It was reported that the number of Singaporeans who volunteered to go abroad to do mission work has significantly risen over the last few years. I remember some of the youths in our parish went to Thailand to help a poor community build their homes. Why can't we also help the foreign workers in our midst, have their temporary homes next to us? Are we only comfortable to help only when it does not encroach into our own personal lives and our homes?

As a Christian community is there a way that we can reach out to them and understand them better, to overcome our own perceived biasness towards them?

CFSM celebrates Labour Day every year by organising a talk cum gathering. I remembered attending my first one in 2002 or 2003 and in our midst were a group of workers from Thailand and another group from India. At that time, my contact with foreign workers had always been restricted to those who repaired our roads in the estate. I would sometimes offer them drinks and they would thank me profusely. For the very first time at that gathering, I heard them talked and shared about their difficulties about managing their family expectations' of them. For the first time, I saw them not just as a foreign worker, but a caring father, a filial son, a selfless brother to someone in their home country. They are no different from the men in our lives, our fathers, our husbands, our sons who sacrificed to provide food and homes for us.

Perhaps, it is time for us to change our mindsets and get to know better these foreign workers in Singapore. Only by doing so can we help them fit into our society better, and accept them more readily as our brothers in Christ.

.....article by Joanna

### Reflection: Matthew 25:35-36

"For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me into your house. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you went to see me"

### Social Teachings of the Church

"Two different aspects of this injustice, necessarily related to one to the other, need to be taken into consideration. The first concerns the situation of persons and families who either totally lack housing or do not have decent housing. These families and persons are victims of a grave injustice because of this lack of suitable housing however simple they may be. In such conditions, they are unable to live a dignified life either as individuals or as families. To this can be added that, at times they just do not live at all, but rather simply exists....."

".....the poor and marginalised are waiting for a concrete answer, and, first of all, for a change in the attitude of certain sectors of society that are indifferent if not hostile to their plight...."

.....from "What Have You Done To Your Homeless Brother? The Church and the Housing Problem".

...a Document of the Pontifical Commission 'Iustitia et Pax' ( Justice and Peace). 1987.