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**SPEECH BY MR ABDULLAH TARMUGI,
MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
AT THE CERTIFICATE PRESENTATION OF
SYARIAH COURT-ASSOCIATION OF
MUSLIM PROFESSIONALS (AMP)
TRAINING MARITAL COUNSELLING
AT SEMINAR ROOM, AMP CENTRE
ON SATURDAY, 4 OCTOBER 1997 AT 11.30 AM**

Let me begin by thanking the Syariah Court, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the organising committee of today's ceremony for inviting me this morning and to present the certificates of completion to the participants of the Syariah Court-AMP Training on Marital Counselling. I am pleased and heartened to see a group of individuals who have sacrificed their time and energy to attend and complete this six-month training programme to help others who are facing problems in their lives. I congratulate all of you for your dedication and commitment to help others in the community.

The Malay/Muslim community in Singapore is progressing well. In a nation that is competitive, fast-paced and practices meritocracy, many Malay/Muslims have carved for themselves success stories in education, business, sports and the arts. All these augur well for the long term development of the community and the country. As Singapore moves towards

becoming a developed economy, more challenges and demands will come upon the shoulders of individuals and families. Whilst I am confident that most of us will be able to cope with these demands as well as to balance our family needs, there will be those who may have difficulties to cope with these demands. When they falter and need help, the helping hands within the community should provide support to them. The high divorce rate in the Malay/Muslim community which is 25 per cent - or one divorce in every four marriages - highlights the need for more helping hands to couples who encounter difficulties in their marriage. When families break up because of divorce everyone in these families are affected, especially the children. Studies have shown that children from broken families are more likely to fail in their studies and face a greater risk of becoming social deviants in society. They could then be trapped in a vicious cycle of under-development when they grow up and set up their own families. The problems caused by broken families could then go on for more than one generation. This is a tragedy.

The social workers or helpers in the community who provide helping hands thus become essential. Helping hands for families at risk and for broken families thus become crucial. Social workers and helpers in the community, by being equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills especially in marital counselling will be in a better position to help couples who are seeking assistance. Islam encourages the settlement of differences between couples through mediation by learned elders or individuals in the community. The most important objective is to reconcile the troubled couples and to get on with their lives. Meeting the counsellor in a non-intimidating environment such as the mosque is not only convenient, but may also allow couples to have a better state of mind and think rationally about their problems and differences. If more couples opt to seek assistance from these counsellor or para counsellors in the community, the need for a more formal legal process

towards settling the problems can thus be reduced. The Court therefore should be considered as the last avenue for settling their marital woes. However, we have to acknowledge that there will be those for whom divorce is inevitable. For these couples it is important to reach a pre-divorce agreement on several important matters such as maintenance and custodial rights so as to prevent the trauma of going through court proceedings especially when children are involved. It is important to remember that being divorced does not mean that the responsibility as parents is removed. In fact, both parents need to put in extra effort to make the experience of a family breaking up less traumatic and painful for the children.

The inaugural training programme on marital counselling will be a test case on the effectiveness of referring couples who are facing problems to counsellors and para counsellors at the neighbourhood level. This training is part of the overall strategy of my Ministry to strengthen families and towards tackling the problem of the high divorce rate in the community. I am confident that there are benefits to be derived from this programme. Let me once again congratulate the 21 recipients of the certificates of completion for this first course on marital counselling.

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