Speech by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs at the MCYS Committee of Supply Sitting 2008, 5 March 2008, 6.30pm

Ma'am, the Malay/Muslim community continues to progress. Primary 1 school enrolment is almost 100%. At least 1 out of every 3 students from a P1 cohort enters local tertiary institutions.

2. The Malay workforce is better-educated. At least 20% of Malays are in professional and higher-skilled jobs, three times the proportion in 1980. The median monthly income for Malays has also more than tripled over the same period. More than 9 in 10 Malays (93% in 2005) own their homes.

3. Ma'am, we are also beginning to see the results of our efforts to address the social challenges faced by the community. First, the number of divorces among Muslims dropped by 11% - from 1,944 cases in 2006 to 1,747 cases last year. The number of minor marriages - where either bride or groom, or both, are below the age of 21 - also dropped by 7%, from 440 in 2006 to 410 in 2007. And I hope this trend continues.

4. We have not shied away from tackling difficult issues. In fact, the community has come together, in the spirit of *musyawarah* or consultation. We have openly discussed issues such as dysfunctional families, the inclusion of Muslims in the Human Organ Transplant Act (HOTA), and the changes to madrasah education system. It is through this spirit of *musyawarah* that we have been able to address key issues affecting our community and our nation. Let me take this opportunity to thank everyone in our community – community and religious leaders, parents, asatizah, workers and students– for our unity and joint efforts to help our community move forward.

Challenges

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5. **Mr Hawazi Daipi and Mdm Halimah Yacob have raised concerns** about the low-income group and about the effects of rising cost of living on all Singaporeans, especially the economically vulnerable in our community and low-skilled and low-wage workers. Both members have also asked what the community and Government will be doing to help the low-income families.

Financial Assistance and Empowerment Programmes

6. From the recent data from the Department of Statistics shows that among employed households, all income groups – including the bottom 20% of households - experienced increases in household income from work per household member in real terms for 2007. Nevertheless, we are aware that many low-income families still need help to meet rising costs. So , we have adopted a two-pronged approach: first,

we leverage on the government's initiatives, and second, we develop programmes for specific vulnerable groups within the community.

7. The recently announced Growth Dividends and last year's GST Offset Package, which are weighted in favour of the low-income families, provide relief to needy and disadvantaged families. Assistance schemes like the Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme (KiFAS) and the Centre-Based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare (CFAC) help their young children attend preschool, while programmes like the Home Ownership Plus Education (HOPE) scheme provide incentives for them to improve their lives and financial situation. The Healthy Start Programme also provides a holistic intervention for at-risk families. Other ComCare and Workfare Income schemes provide financial assistance while developing self-reliance.

8. Last year, MUIS disbursed $4.2 million of zakat funds to help poor and needy Muslim families. Of this, $3.5 million was disbursed as direct monthly assistance and $700,000 on empowerment and capacity building programmes.

9. To answer the question by Mdm Halimah on what is being done, let me give a summary. Between 2004 and 2007, 400 families with young children participated in the Empowerment Partnership Scheme (EPS) to help needy families become self-reliant. 209 families have successfully graduated from the EPS and are no longer reliant on MUIS' financial aid. Mr Imran Tukijoe's family is a good example. Mr Imran, who has four school-going children, approached MUIS in 2004 for financial assistance as both he and his wife were unable to find work. Under EPS, Mr Imran took various courses to enhance his job prospects while his wife completed a professional beautician course. Both of them are now gainfully employed and have a combined household income of more than $3000 per month. 200 new families joined the EPS last December, giving us a total of 600 families that have either benefited or benefiting from the scheme.

10. I am happy to announce for 2008, MUIS has set aside a sum of $6.5 million for low-income families and empowerment programmes, a 55% increase over last year's budget. So, we will do more to help low-income families. The increased budget will allow us to better help needy and disadvantaged Muslim families in Singapore.

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Helping Single-Parent and Dysfunctional Families

11. To address the needs of specific vulnerable groups, Mendaki started its Dedicated Programme for Single-Mother Families (or DPSM) in February 2007. Under this scheme, single mothers and youths from single-parent families will be referred to social service agencies, based on their needs, to improve their employability.

12. Response to the programme has been encouraging. A total of 438 single mothers and their older children joined this programme between February last year

and January 2008. Of the 438 participants, 226 or more than half were placed in jobs. 1 in 3 participants stayed on in those jobs for more than 3 months. One of the success stories involves Mdm Mislinah Bte Bakar. Mdm Mislinah wanted to return to work after leaving the workforce for more than 10 years. She had lost her bread-winner husband to lung cancer. Taking into account her need to care for her four school-going children and her health, DPSM helped Mdm Mislinah upgrade her skills and find a job with a research company, earning $600 a month. I think she also benefited from the WIS.

Minor marriages

13. We have intensified efforts to help minor couples as well as their parents make informed decisions about marrying young. Last year, two centres dedicated to this effort were established. Known as INSPIRASI Hubs, the centres are run by the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and the PPIS-Jurong Family Service Centre. Their efforts are also beginning to show results. Last year, among the 443 couples who attended pre-marital counselling, 141 couples, or 1 in 3, dropped their plans to get married early.

14. For young couples who decided to proceed with marriage, the INSPIRASI Hubs have formed Club INSPIRASI in December last year to equip married minor couples with skills and knowledge to deal with marital challenges and to strengthen their families. Since its launch in December last year, 83 couples have joined the Club.

15. We have not spared efforts to educate the community on strong family values and the need to keep marriages intact. An 8-episode TV programme, entitled Kpak Bing Bing which is the sound of the 'hadrah' was launched early this year. Its key message was 'a happy marriage requires effort, and sometimes assistance'. Such programmes have proved to be very useful in reaching out to the public. According to Suria, Kpak Bing Bing has been the channel's top weekly programme since its first telecast.

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16. Several members, including **Dr Fatimah Lateef** commented that despite these efforts, the number of Malay-Muslim teenage divorce remains significant. Minor divorces – where either husband or wife, or both were minors at the point of marriage – make up 30% of total Muslim divorces each year. Marriages involving minors are twice as likely to result in divorce during the first ten years of marriage compared to marriages involving adult persons, probably because their young age and lower educational levels do not give them a stable start to married life.

17. The Government has studied this issue and I have quietly consulted many community leaders including the Malay MPs. One upstream measure that we are planning to introduce is to raise the minimum age of marriage for Muslims from 16 to 18, in line with the Women's Charter. This will signal the Muslim community's resolve to tackle the divorce rates by curbing minor marriages. We are targeting to

raise the minimum age later this year, when the Administration of Muslim Law Act (AMLA) is amended.

Coordinated Approach

18. **Dr Mohamad Maliki Osman and Mdm Halimah** suggested that efforts and initiatives to help low income and disadvantaged families should be better coordinated, so as to maximise our resources, reduce duplication, enhance outreach and ensure holistic intervention. I agree with both members. Let me highlight two coordinating platforms which have been set up by MUIS and Mendaki.

Enhanced Mosque Cluster

19. The first coordinating platform is the Enhanced Mosque Cluster or EMC under MUIS. Under the EMC, mosques will take over the social assistance function previously centred at MUIS headquarters. Mosques will directly disburse financial aid from zakat funds to the needy within their respective communities. This is similar to the CDCs when they took over the schemes from the then MCDS. With this scheme, mosques should also collaborate with other agencies to come up with specific programmes and customise services according to local needs. It also means the mosques will be closer to the ground, quicker to respond to needs and able to customise their programmes.

20. MUIS piloted the EMC in the Southeast Cluster (corresponding closely to the Southeast District) in December 2007. This pilot involved 13 mosques, with the Al-Ansar Mosque in Chai Chee as the operations centre. The programme will be reviewed in June, before extending it step-by-step to other clusters.

Action Plan for Strengthening Malay/Muslim families

21. The second coordinating platform is spearheaded by Mendaki under the Community Leaders Forum (CLF). The Action Plan for Strengthening Malay/Muslim families is a wrap-around approach to help families facing multiple problems. This platform will improve the coordination of intervention efforts across national and community agencies. This is the point that was raised by Dr Maliki on the need to coordinate various programmes. With the platform, we should be able to achieve the objectives.

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22. To date, 5 project managers for 5 zones island-wide agencies have been appointed to build partnerships with within the districts, coordinate case conferences, advocate for families through the agencies as well as consolidate and analyse data on the community. Both the Enhanced Mosque Cluster and the Action Plan for Strengthening Malay/Muslim families will augment the national efforts to support and strengthen low-income and disadvantaged families. Dr Maliki also touched on the complexity of the dysfunctional families. I would like to announce that Mendaki is conducting a research on this. We agree that financial assistance may

not be the solution to this problem. In relation to this, we also hope to tap the expertise of social workers to assist such families.

Madrasah Education

23. Let me move on to the question **Mr Zaqy Mohamad** asked for an update on the progress to help the madrasahs prepare for PSLE this year. There are three key initiatives: Training for Madrasah administrators, Enrichment Programme for Students, and the PSLE-ready package.

i. For **training of madrasah staff,** MUIS has invested $2.27 million since 2003 to sponsor the training of key madrasah staff such as Heads of Department and Principals;
ii. On **Enrichment Programmes for Students,** MUIS spent $120,000 in 2007 to develop and implement enrichment programmes to help Primary 5 and Primary 6 madrasah students prepare for PSLE, in fact some of the students are also enrolled in the Mendaki Tuition Programme;
iii. MUIS will provide a further $700,000 from 2008 to help the madrasahs meet the PSLE requirements under the **PSLE Ready Package**. The money will be used to provide training for academic subject teachers and will fund a teacher mentor scheme, where qualified teachers with experience teaching in national schools will provide guidance to our madrasah teachers. MUIS will review this package annually.

24. Mr Zaqy had also asked how we will ensure that the madrasahs maximise the financial grants given to them. For one, MUIS will be tracking madrasahs' performances in two areas: the participation rate and performance of teachers who have undergone such programmes; and students' performance in subjects like English, Maths and Science.

25. Last October, I announced that 3 of the 6 full-time madrasahs will link up for the Joint Madrasah System or JMS, to be implemented in 2009.

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26. The three madrasahs - Irsyad, Aljunied and Arabiah - together with MUIS are developing a blueprint for the JMS – covering the philosophy, educational policies, desired outcomes, approaches and broad curriculum guidelines. A sum of $2 million has been allocated to start up the JMS. This will be used mainly for recruiting key personnel for the madrasahs. They need new teachers and new staff to implement some of these programmes. As the success of the JMS is critical, MUIS, with the agreement of the three JMS madrasahs has decided to second several senior MUIS officers to the madrasahs to assist in the set-up of JMS during the transition phase. So we will lose some good officers. But we think it would be good for JMS. The two–year secondment will help the three madrasahs build up management capacity within the madrasahs. Our long term goal is for the 3 madrasahs within the JMS to be managed independently, albeit with MUIS assistance.

27. The remaining three madrasahs are welcome to be part of the JMS at any time, and any time they join they can benefit from all the additional programmes and initiatives lined up for JMS. So if they join early they can get more resources.

Self-Radicalism and New Media

28. Mr Masagos and Dr Faishal have asked about self-radicalism. The recent detention of two 26-year olds who became radicalised after being exposed to radical teachings over the internet again highlights the importance of proper religious guidance. Even though we cannot be 100% sure that we can keep out external radical influences, MUIS will endeavour through various measures to ensure that Singaporean Muslims have the knowledge and resources to understand and appreciate Islam, so that they are able to identify and keep away from what is not right. **Mr Masagos Zulkifli** had asked about the profile of the people who had been detained for radical activities. The detainees according to our security agencies do not have a specific profile. However, there are warning signs that friends or relatives could watch out for which could include an increased interest in extremist or radical literature and websites, or expressing support for violence and confrontation in areas of conflict.

29. Both **Mr Masagos Zulkifli and Dr Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim** had asked what measures we have taken to counter self-radicalisation.

30. In September last year, MUIS launched the INvoKE.SG website targeted at youths and working adults between the age of 15 to 35. INvoKE.SG provides information and runs discussions on issues of interest to youths. The website also helps the young have a better understanding of the Singaporean Muslim Identity that we have built up over more than 40 years.

31. In addition to this, MUIS also launched a website, www.radical.mosque.sg, that provides a useful guide to help internet users tell radical ideology websites from the legitimate ones.

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32. While all these efforts empower Internet users with the skills to sieve out inaccurate teachings or misinterpretations of Islam, I think we all agree it is always better to get religious guidance from qualified religious teachers. Hence, I would urge parents and community leaders must emphasise the need for our young to gain and deepen their knowledge through the guidance of our accredited asatizah and to contact MUIS for assistance whenever necessary.

Asatizah Development

33. **Dr Fatimah Lateef** had asked for an update on the Asatizah Development Programme. Asatizah can opt to participate in different programmes. The ***Executive Development*** Programme is intended for all asatizah and develops

participants' understanding of the different religions, as well as national issues. Of the 950 asatizah, more than 120 have completed this programme. Dr Fatimah asked me to publish their names. I don't think it is necessary. More importantly, MUIS targets to train a total of 420 asatizah by end 2009. ***Professional Development*** courses will equip our asatizah for additional roles such as marriage counsellors, and for interfaith work. Some 70 asatizah completed the course in 2007 and by 2009, 170 asatizah will be exposed to this programme.

34. Finally, there is the ***Leadership Development*** Programme, which is modelled after the leadership programme for senior civil servants, will be offered to 30 senior asatizah. It will provide participants with a holistic perspective of public sector governance, and help develop strategic thinking and leadership. 60 asatizah will be trained under this programme by 2009. The Asatizah Development Programme is progressing well, and I urge the asatizah to participate actively in all of these programmes.

Community Engagement

35. **Dr Muhammad Faishal** asked for updates on our community engagement programmes. Ma'am, over the last year, MUIS invited eminent speakers such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams and the eminent historian Ms Karen Armstrong for its lecture series. Both lectures – just like the earlier lecture by the Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar – attracted Singaporeans of all faiths who were keen to find out more about topics such as the role of religion in the modern world and inter-religious dialogue. The lecture by the Archbishop of Canterbury was the first collaboration between MUIS and the Anglican Diocese of Singapore. We hope to do more with other religious bodies in Singapore.

36. At the community level, our mosques are active in reaching out as important nodes in the neighbourhoods, leading and involving themselves in activities and projects with like-minded community and grassroots organisations. You may have read I was at Al-Khair Mosque last weekend. Members Mr Zaqy and Mr Gan were also there. The mosque launched care and share programme which benefits all students irrespective of background. At the same time, our Harmony Centre at An-Nahdhah Mosque continues to serve visitors of all faiths and nationalities.

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37. This year, our mosques will also get together to organise a signature event in July – a 'Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin' or 'Blessings To All' Day. The event will include a mass blood donation exercise and a reception for 1,000 needy families and elderly of all races.

38. Sir, before I end allow me now to summarise my speech in Malay.

39. Puan Pengerusi, masyarakat Melayu-Islam setempat terus maju ke hadapan dalam dalam usaha meniti tangga kemajuan dan mencapai visi sebagai sebuah masyarakat cemerlang.

40. Dalam bidang pendidikan, pencapaian anak-anak kita kini kian terserlah. Tidak seperti satu ketika dahulu, kini kita lebih sering mendengar berita tentang pencapaian cemerlang anak-anak kita dalam peperiksaan nasional seperti PSLE, GCE 'O' dan 'A' dan juga peperiksaan institusi pengajian tinggi.

41. Beberapa Anggota seperti Dr Mohamad Maliki, Encik Zainudin dan Cik Halimah telah menyuarakan rasa prihatin terhadap isu-isu sosial yang menghambat masyarakat kita. Saya setuju kita perlu mempertingkat usaha kita untuk membantu dan membimbing keluarga pincang, ibu tunggal dan keluarga berpendapatan rendah.

42. Puan Pengerusi, saya juga rasa amat gembira dengan kesediaan dan kerjasama yang dihulurkan oleh setiap lapisan masyarakat dalam usaha menangani beberapa isu sukar tahun lalu. Sebagai contoh, seluruh masyarakat kita sama-sama berganding bahu untuk memastikan kita dapat menangani dan seterusnya menghuraikan isu pemindahan ginjal dan sistem pendidikan madrasah sepenuh masa. Kita juga bersedia membincang masalah keluarga pincang secara terbuka. Semangat musyawarah yang ditunjukkan oleh masyarakat memastikan kita dapat terus bergerak maju sejajar dengan perubahan masa dan kehendak masakini. Saya ingin mengambil kesempatan ini untuk menyampaikan setinggi-tinggi penghargaan kepada setiap lapisan masyarakat kita – para pelajar, ibu bapa, pekerja dan pemimpin masyarakat dan juga AP Melayu – kerana sama-sama menyingsing lengan baju demi kebaikan masyarakat keseluruhannya.

43. Saya akui, masih banyak usaha yang perlu kita laksanakan untuk mempertingkatkan lagi taraf pencapaian masyarakat kita. Kita patut bersyukur atas pencapaian kita sejauh ini yang telah kita raih menerusi usaha keras, tekad dan iltizam kita. Saya yakin kita akan terdorong untuk terus mempertingkat pencapaian kita supaya kita dapat 'duduk sama rendah berdiri sama tinggi' dengan rakan-rakan sewarnegara yang lain. Kita harap usaha-usaha murni kita ini akan mewujudkan satu masa depan yang lebih cerah, bukan sahaja buat diri kita sendiri, malah yang lebih penting, buat anak-anak kita yang tersayang.

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44. Terima kasih. Thank you.