

EMBARGOED UNTIL AFTER DELIVERY

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Speech by Encik Othman Wok, Minister for Social  
Affairs, at the 42nd District Conference of the  
Rotary Movement held at Shangri-la Hotel on  
Sunday, 20 Mar 77 at 2 pm

President Loke Mun Seng,  
Mr Chairman,  
Distinguished Delegates,

It is an honour, perhaps almost unique, to be asked to address this distinguished gathering on the subject "How can Rotary be more effective in community welfare". I have followed the work of the Rotary movement with interest as the Rotary has always been in the forefront of community service in Singapore. I observe that during this 42nd District Conference, your theme is "Service with a Smile". Service to the community is most important at a time when we are concentrating our efforts in developing a cohesive community. It is the basic principle governing community life, and it applies to all institutions including industrial and commercial establishments. Serving our community and others with a smile indicates our sincerity and willingness to serve our fellowmen. Through service to the community, we can infuse the sense of community pride and the sense of common identity and common purpose.

2 In a modern society, services provided to citizens can either be through government action or through the voluntary effort of private citizens. What the government can do is limited by its budget. Government cannot increase taxes all the time to provide for everything required by citizens, and so priorities have to be established. There are of course citizens who are happy to get everything for free. In a sense, of course, it is free, since the persons enjoying the benefit of the services are not called upon to pay directly for the cost of establishing these services. But in a real sense, nothing is free because it has to be paid out of taxes which are collected from everyone in the whole country.

3 On the other hand, there are many activities which should be done through the voluntary effort of private citizens. Community service is an area where there should be a high level of participation by free private initiative. If in this area only the government takes an active interest, then it is a sad reflection that the people themselves are indifferent to the public good.

4        The extent of community participation in community welfare programmes depends very much upon the local leadership especially leadership exercised by community organisations. By and large in Singapore, we are very fortunate to have community organisations which are quite active and they have well-planned programmes to foster civic responsibility and to mobilise the people to participate in community welfare projects. Looking through the activities of the Rotary movement, one is impressed with the numerous and diverse activities which have been organised in Singapore. On the welfare programmes, it appears to me that perhaps you are covering too wide a range of projects and I would like to suggest that you concentrate on a few of them each year. This concentration of effort and resources will result in more productive and effective service.

5        Let me first deal with "care of the aged" which is one field in which Rotarians can make a major contribution. I feel that more could and should be done for the old folks, not only by the Rotarians, but by other organisations dedicated to serve their human needs. In Singapore, we do have an acute social

problem of old people, a problem that is peculiar to the immigrant communities in South-East Asia. The tradition in Asian countries is for these old people to be looked after by their children; this is a laudable tradition which should be encouraged and preserved. But unfortunately, due to several factors, there is a growing tendency for the aged in Asian society to become isolated from their families. This means that more and more old people would require care and help from outside their families.

6        There are two fundamental approaches to the problem of care of the aged. One is to encourage the elderly not merely by exhortation but by all practical forms of help to continue to lead an independent life for as long as possible. The other is to ensure that those old people who can no longer look after themselves and have no friends to look after them, be cared for with kindness and understanding. These two approaches are complementary.

7        It is certainly a welcomed move to form old people's clubs such as the one to be established at Maude Road. Properly conceived and organised, these clubs can make the old people

feel that they are still an integral part of the community. I hope more community organisations will utilise their resources to form such clubs to serve the aged as part of their community service programmes.

8        Employment for the elderly is another area in which community organisations and commercial and industrial establishments can make a contribution. At present, we have organised groups of old people doing work in various government departments. It is of great importance to health that men should remain in work. The aged should never sink into idleness. Usually, light work is given to the aged. Perhaps, there is a need to have a survey to determine what employment for the aged is feasible. I hope to see better response to this scheme from employers who should take the initiative to approach the Social Welfare Department for groups of old people to do light work in their establishments.

9        The setting up of small homes for the elderly is still in a pioneering stage. The Henderson Home is a good example. We need to set up more homes of this type to provide residential accommodation for old people who are in need of care and attention.

Community organisations can certainly play a part in helping groups of old people to set up their homes on an adoption or sponsorship basis.

10        It seems to me that this is an area of social concern in which private voluntary efforts should match what the government is doing in looking after the old people who require accommodation and care. The old people require more than just a roof over them. They need some money to be able to live in decent comfort. For this, even a few thousand dollars may be adequate to see an old person through the rest of his or her life. We would like to encourage community organisations like the Rotary to make donations or to organise donations towards the establishment and maintenance of a ward in a home or even a bed. Those of you who have personal experience of the living conditions of these old people, would know how urgent the problem is. What is needed here is organised private effort working in co-operation with the government to reduce the extensive suffering and destitution now being experienced by the old.

11       The next example I wish to mention is the field of youth services. This is quite a broad field and our main concern in Singapore is assistance to those who drop out from school. For these people, we need to provide for their adjustment to society particularly to the world of work. Employment assistance as well as vocational and educational guidance are the key activities. Related to these are services for the family, services to help those with financial difficulty aimed at alleviating hardship and distress as a result of insufficient income and also community services which aim at fostering neighbourliness and encouraging co-operative efforts and self-help programmes and projects of a recreational, social and cultural nature to develop civic consciousness and individual potentialities. This is an area of community work in which the Rotary can make a contribution. It is increasingly important to serve youths on their own terms and on their own grounds. Youth workers need to "reach out" through the community-oriented approach. The quality of youth services needs to be improved, mainly through the development of more creative, attractive, and skilfully conducted programmes.

12        Although we have in Singapore a vast network of community services providing educational, social, cultural and recreational programmes for the people, there is still much to be done. Those who are involved in the field of community welfare, will realise that we are just beginning our work in community development and there are many problems to be solved and projects to be implemented, and we still have not been completely successful in getting more people to take advantage of the facilities and programmes of the various community organisations. We need to improve on our organisation and strengthen the leadership at all levels. Those who have management roles in community organisations need to develop a firm grasp of problems involving policies and principles. They should investigate the situation, point out the direction, map out operational plans in line with the policies, and mobilise all talents within particular districts to develop viable programmes which best serve the needs of the people in a particular locality.

13 We must be more civic-minded and more disciplined than ever, if we want to continue to enjoy the good life and to make progress in all fields of endeavour. I would like to stress that for progress to be sustained, each and everyone of us must feel that he belongs here and identifies himself with the national interests and the needs of the entire community. Rotarians like other community leaders have an important part to play in galvanising our people to be committed to our national effort of carving out a future for ourselves and for the generations to come, in this part of the world. I am confident the Rotary movement will grow from strength to strength and continue to take the leadership role in community welfare services. I wish you all every success.

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