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SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, MINISTER OF STATE (EDUCATION),
AT THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY DINNER & DANCE OF
THE METROPOLITAN YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION,
SINGAPORE, AT THE PAVILION INTER-CONTINENTAL HOTEL
ON SATURDAY, 6 DECEMBER 1986 AT 7.30 PM

My wife and I are very pleased to be present at this dinner to join you in celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Metropolitan YMCA. Today, you form a network together with the 126 community centres in our constituencies in providing a wide range of social, educational and recreational services for our citizens. Yet when you started 40 years ago soon after the war, there were hardly any such centres. You were indeed pioneers in those difficult post-war years in providing for the needs of the community. You showed the way for the later community centres what could be done in practical and realistic terms. You also showed what socially-conscious and dedicated men and women, working voluntarily for your cause could do to bring new hope and opportunity to many in the community.

2 Today, our community centres, including the YMCA's centres are like lights in our community. They are planted in all our new towns reaching out to their residents with a rich menu of programmes and activities. Taking as a rough guide that each centre caters for about 12,700 people each year, our CCs reach out and serve altogether about 1.6 million people. This is a sizeable part of our population.

They are of all ages, all races and backgrounds. Their interests range from recreational and sports activities to cookery, computer and art classes. Most important of all, they mix together in the centres, make friends and thereby add to the harmony of our society as a whole. Your centres and our CCs are indeed the social melting pots in which the long and important process of community development is taking place.

I received a brief history of how the Metropolitan YMCA was founded and how it subsequently evolved. Two things struck me. The first is a minor one but is worth recounting as it points to an important concern. Apparently, when the Metropolitan, then known as the Chinese YMCA, was started, there was some disquiet among the members of the other YMCA on Stamford Road. The concern was over whether there would be unnecessary duplication and competition between the two YMCAs. This is a natural enough concern. It was quickly resolved by meetings between the two bodies. But in retrospect, it was not a valid concern. Not only are there two thriving YMCAs each catering for their own members, there are also 126 community centres with similar programmes catering for thousands of Singaporeans; and more community centres are still being built to meet new needs.

For those whose instinctive reaction is to fear duplication of effort, the lesson is that in the field of community service, the demand always exceeds the supply. This is true whether it is homes that cater for the aged or organisations that care for the handicapped. The real problem is not that there is any danger that there are too many organisations trying to do the same thing, but that there are not enough volunteers and people committed to the cause of service to others.

In fact, service is best provided by small groups to a small number of recipients. Any very large organisation of necessity becomes more bureaucratic and loses the human touch so essential to community service. Hence, the case can be argued that the need is for many small community service groups rather than a few large groups. Hence, we should never worry about duplication of effort and should rather take the view that the field is wide and the harvest is plentiful.

The second point that struck me when I read the early history of the Metropolitan YMCA was how everything depended on the vision and commitment of a handful of dedicated men. If these men were not there, we would probably not be here tonight for there would be no 40th Anniversary to celebrate!

Who were these men? They were successful people in their professions. Dr Chen Su Lan, their leader was a doctor. The others included a few businessmen, Church pastors and school principals. There were of course other equally if not more successful business men and professionals at the time. Logically, if Dr Chen and his colleagues had wanted to further their careers, they should have concentrated on their professions. This would be the same logic which guides many today. But Dr Chen and his colleagues wanted more than successful careers. They wanted to do something beyond themselves which was meaningful for their community. They wanted to give back to the society some service which went beyond their careers. This is the "second mile" which Scripture talks about.

The problems were there. They had to raise funds. They had to plan and organise. They had to mobilise support for their project. They sacrificed their own time and

resources. In the end the seed they planted germinated and grew. It was a good seed. Today, the Metropolitan YMCA has 5,000 members and serves the needs of some 40,000 persons through its activities and facilities.

What can we learn from Dr Chen Su Lan and his colleagues? It is that beyond our careers and professions, we have a responsibility to society to give something back to it. It may be in financial donation, it may be in offering our service. This is particularly relevant to those who are successful in their careers. Because you have received much, there is a greater obligation to give something back to society.

Service can be in many forms. Many voluntary organisations are crying out for members - the community centres, the RCs, the YMCA itself, other voluntary organisations. There is more work to be done than hands to do it.

If reasons have to be given on why our successful should become more involved in giving something back to society, I can suggest at least two. First, if we want a better and more pleasant society, we must work for it. This often means voluntary service and commitment of the kind exemplified by Dr Chen Su Lan and his colleagues. The second is derived from enlightened self-interest. If we want a more stable and harmonious society, then those of us who are more successful and more able, must reach out to help those who are less successful and less able. The reverse would be growing schisms and divisions which will strain the fabric of society itself - something which none of us would want.

May I conclude by wishing the Metropolitan YMCA, its Board of Management and its members well. You may be 40 years old today. But I am convinced that you have the vision and vigour to march on for another 40 years.

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