

PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY DR TONY TAN KENG YAM, MINISTER FOR EDUCATION,
AT THE METHODIST GIRLS' SCHOOL 100TH ANNIVERSARY FOUNDER'S
DAY DINNER AT THE WESTIN PLAZA GRAND BALLROOM
ON SATURDAY, 25 JULY 1987 AT 7.30 PM**

Let me first thank your Organising Committee for kindly inviting my wife and me to join you this evening in celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the Methodist Girls' School.

The 100th anniversary of an eminent institution like MGS is an appropriate occasion for us to reflect on how the institution started, who provided the driving force, what were the ideals and vision of the founder, and how has the institution grown over the years. In the case of MGS, our starting point must surely be the arrival of Miss Sophia Blackmore in Singapore on the 16 July 1887.

Miss Blackmore, a young pioneer missionary from Australia, was sent to Singapore under the aegis of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. Originally she had her heart set on going to China. But while working temporarily in India, she received a cable calling her to come to Singapore which was then described as "most appallingly in need for woman's work."

She responded with eagerness and faith to serve. After her arrival in Singapore she was told that the Tamil residents here wanted a school for their daughters. An Indian gentleman, by the name of Mr Rama Krishna Rao, offered a shop house in Short Street rent-free for use as a

school, while another, Mr Murgasu, gave \$60 to pay the teacher. Others gave donations for desks, benches and other furniture. So on August 15th 1887, the school started with Miss Blackmore as the Principal, Miss Hagedorn the teacher and nine little Indian girls.

The school grew slowly in the initial years. Although the children enjoyed going to school, they enjoyed festivals more. Attendance fluctuated. Any festival or happy event at home meant absence from school. Some attended school out of curiosity; many stayed for just a short time and left. Miss Blackmore had a most difficult time persuading parents to send their daughters to school and overcoming their prejudices. It was only by visiting homes that she could convince more and more parents of the benefits of educating their daughters.

With time, girls of other nationalities and diverse backgrounds came. Unlike now, there was no school uniform then. A class would look like a social gathering with all the girls in their varied costumes in gay colours - the Straits Chinese sarong-kebaya, the Indian blouse and skirt, the Chinese samfoo and the Western style dress. The only person in quiet colours was the teacher.

In 1894, the school amalgamated with a nearby school for English-speaking girls and became known as the Methodist Girls' School. An interesting feature of the school then was that there were a few boys studying side by side the girls. This was because their parents insisted that they attended school with their sisters. A distinguished old boy of MGS was the late Dr Benjamin Sheares, the second President of our Republic.

Today sitting for examinations is an often-expressed worry of parents and students. The situation was not so different at the turn of the century. In those days, there were so many examinations that they frightened the pupils. There were altogether five public examinations in 11 years - examinations at Standard IV, Standard VI, Standard VII and then the Junior Cambridge and the Senior Cambridge Examinations. MGS prepared the first batch of four girls for the Senior Cambridge Examinations in 1911. All passed.

In 1925, the school moved to Mt Sophia. It also made use of a part of Nind Home, a boarding house for girls. In 1933, the Short Street building was sold and all classes moved to Mt Sophia where MGS functioned as a full school.

Then came World War II in 1941. Schooling was disrupted for three and a half years. After the war Mrs Ellice Handy, the first post-war principal, strove hard to restore the school and laboured untiringly on the school's building extension programme. The old Nind Home and dilapidated dormitories gave way to what you see today of the present secondary school, consisting of the Mary Nind Wing, the Louise McKee Wing and the Sophia Blackmore Memorial. The appearance of the summit of Mt Sophia continued to change under Miss Lau Meau Eng, Mrs Lucy Kandasamy and your present Principal Mrs Anna Tham, all of whom have worked with dedication and commitment. The latest addition was the Ellice Handy Building which became the new home for the Primary School in January 1983.

Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered over the years, MGS has distinguished herself and won honours in many fields. Academic excellence has always been a hallmark of the school. MGS can be proud of the several Queen Scholars and President Scholars she has nurtured, and many others who have won scholarships and prizes, both locally and abroad.

In my view, however, MGS stands for more than academic excellence. MGS stands for a body of traditions which have not changed over the 100 years that the school has been in existence. The faithfulness and devotion of principals and teachers to their work, their efforts in developing the potential of their pupils to the fullest while grounding them in Christian values and the training of character are the same today as in the early days of MGS.

The unique contribution of MGS lies in infusing the education of the young womanhood in Singapore with a special emphasis on service founded on Christian values. The abiding values imbibed has provided a foundation for the education of MGS pupils in accordance with the ideals of your founder, Miss Blackmore. MGS, through its heritage, has made it possible for generations of your graduates to mature into young women, concerned as wives and mothers for their families and the proper upbringing of their children and who as professionals have made significant contributions in the fields of education, social welfare, medicine, law, architecture and other fields. Singapore is all the better for having MGS pupils in our society.

In the last six months there has been a lot of discussion in Singapore concerning how schools can achieve excellence. Your Principal, Mrs Anna Tham, was one of the 12 principals who accompanied me on a visit to good schools in Britain and the United States. This visit culminated in a Report, "Towards Excellence in Schools", which has received wide publicity. In this new climate of change and creativity, the challenge facing MGS is how to respond to the changes without deviating from the ideals and purpose which Miss Sophia Blackmore had when she founded MGS. This is a question which only the school and all those interested in the school - students, parents, old girls, church officials - can answer. But whatever the changes that take

place in MGS over the coming years, I am sure that all of us would want MGS to continue to adhere to its fundamental mission of providing not only academic education for girls but also working with parents to give children a good moral upbringing.

In conclusion may I commend and congratulate you for your good work done. I would also like to thank the past and present principals, teachers and old girls for their hard work and unstinting sacrifices, the MGS Alumnae Association and the Methodist Church for their ardent and unflinching support, and parents and well-wishers for their generous help that have made MGS what she is today.

I hope that present and future generations of MGS girls will continue to perpetuate the good work started by Miss Blackmore and live up to the MGS motto "To Master, To Grow, To Serve."
