

PASTORAL LETTER FROM OUR DIOCESAN BISHOP

The Most Rev Dr John Chew

5th Sunday of Easter: 10 May 2009

Dear Members of our beloved Diocese,

Grace, peace and strength in our Saviour's Name.

Over the past week, the Christian church in Singapore, more particularly the Anglican Church, has been much in the media spotlight over the AWARE saga. I am aware that questions and even doubts have been raised amongst our people. I write prayerfully to try to help address some of the issues concerned, and do my best to provide the background and context for certain actions or perceived lack of action to assist you in interpreting them. The last thing which I pray will not happen as a result of recent events is confusion and a break down of trust amongst ourselves.

I therefore write specifically to encourage you in positively and constructively continuing the prophetic and priestly responsibility of our Christian vocation to witness and serve in our society, thereby fulfilling the Church's and the Christian's social responsibility to the nation. This responsibility is a vital part of our calling as the people of God. Through our Christ-like character, exemplary conduct in life, and our faithful, and at times costly, witness to God and His word we are to be the 'salt of the earth & the light of the world' so that others seeing our good works would give glory to God our Father (Mt 5:13f,16).

Our Witness Matters

We are grateful to God for MOE's swift suspension of external sexuality education programmes pending careful review and the recent MOE statement following the AWARE saga:

*"MOE and the schools do not promote alternative lifestyle. MOE's framework for sexuality education reflects the **mainstream** views and values of Singapore society where the social norm consists of the married heterosexual family unit."
(ST, 7 May 2009).*

Encouragingly, this reaffirms the position of our government expressed in the Prime Minister's policy statement on the debate on Homosexuality in Parliament on 23 Oct 2007 explaining why the Government decided that Section 377A of the Penal Code was not to be repealed. What is noteworthy is that in it PM Lee underlines that "a heterosexual stable family is a social norm". This certainly is to be lauded but also no effort must be spared to uphold and strengthen this norm. It is the position we in the Anglican Church in Singapore, together with the National Council of Churches, have all along maintained and contributed in the debates and stood for in our public space.

Our Diocese has recently reiterated its position on homosexuality: "The Diocese of Singapore, in its teaching on biblical faith and order, is firmly committed to (the) orthodox position on sexual ethics...We believe and hold that the Bible is clear and authoritative in bearing witness to God's will regarding human sexuality; namely that sexual relations are to be expressed only within the life-long union of a man and a woman in holy matrimony. All forms of sexual promiscuity, including homosexual relationships between men or women, as well as heterosexual relationships outside of marriage are incompatible with the divine vision and design of human life...At the same time, we hold that there is divine grace of forgiveness, healing and transformation for all who repent of homosexual or other illicit forms of sexual practice. We do not condone inhuman and unsocial acts against homosexuals nor do we discriminate against them. Rather we extend to them God's love, compassionate ministry and true freedom through Jesus Christ." (ST, 8 Aug 2008).

Before I comment on the recent event and some of the measures taken, allow me to share with you on a broader, holistic and equally important canvass, how the Anglican Church has been very much faithfully involved in the forefront of community services and social responsibility over the years and also hopefully you too can be involved and contributing in this regard well into the future.

Our Holistic Social Responsibility

Our Christian social responsibility is to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jer 29:7). This includes the social and ethical considerations we bring to civil life and public discussion of fundamental social issues based on the beliefs and values of our faith. It goes beyond to embrace other concrete ways in which we as Christians participate in nation building and care for those in need in society.

Hence, our contribution as a Diocese, and individual Parishes, in founding Anglican Schools and providing a wide range of critical Community Services which are primarily family-centred, such as Family Crisis Shelters and Mental Psychiatric Rehabilitation, the latest being the St Andrew's Autism Centre. These services meet the various felt needs of our society irrespective of race or religion. In addition, several of our members are involved in their individual capacities in non-religious based voluntary groups and civic organisations that contribute overall to the welfare of our society. This is proper and reflects our awareness that we are part of a uniquely multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-racial society.

In the light of seeking to make a holistic contribution, our voluntary involvement in community development and welfare arms of the nation should not obscure the fundamental contribution we are to bring as Christians to the well-being and progress of the nation by our vocational ("work as God's calling") commitment to our jobs and positions of responsibility in both the public and private spaces.

Our Manner of Discharging our Wider Social Responsibility

Our Anglican ethos, just as in many other parts of the Church, sees a prudent differentiated role for the Church as an institution on the one hand, and individual Christians on the other. The God-given priorities for the Church are to teach her members the full counsel of God's word, nurture them to follow Christ, equip them for service and ministry, and lead and help them to be "ambassadors" on behalf of Christ and His church to the world, holding out to others the truth and love of Christ. Part and parcel of being "ambassadors" to the world is our social engagement with the civil life and public issues of the nation. In this respect, the church is not a political institution but a religious-social institution with Scripturally-formed responsibilities, values and views on matters of national interest. Recently, we have as a Church actively and critically made our views known on various social issues: stem cells research, euthanasia, biomedical matters, homosexuality and gambling among others. We recognise that in the arena of social discourse and engagement at the institutional level in a secular, multi-faith society, there needs to be appropriate "rules of engagement" and "language of discourse" to preserve the harmony and cohesiveness of a society such as ours which has inherent fault-lines.

I know there have been questions and even disquiet amongst ourselves by the recent NCCS Statement on the AWARE saga. The Statement was made primarily, as it was critically necessary at that particular point of time in the development of events and heightened tensions, to allay public perception and quell social disquiet with potential undesirable consequences that the Church as an organised body was planning and driving the process of change in AWARE, which was not true. That is why the Statement categorically states that the church as a public and responsible institution is not involved and that the pulpit is not to be used for such goals. But the Statement also immediately went on to stress that this "**does not preclude individual Christians... from contributing in matters of social concern... nor does it preclude churches from being involved in public square discussions within the rules of engagement in a multi-religious society that Singapore is.**" (ST, 1 May 2009). Thus, the Statement does at the same time affirm and safeguard the Church's and the Christian's legitimate and constructive role contextually in engaging social issues in the public square. We want to do so in a way that glorifies God and displays a godly blend of openness, fairness, reasonableness, winsomeness and wisdom in sharing and engaging the public square with our fellow-citizens, where all are accorded opportunities for engagement and discourse. So continue in it! As the Bible exhorts us: "Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech (and actions) always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer every one." (Col 4.5f. See also I Pet 2.11f., 3.14-16).

Our Reflection over the AWARE Saga

In terms of the **process** adopted by some members of our Anglican Church who sought to re-direct AWARE to its formative objectives, we can learn from our mistakes. Important considerations and insights can be gained as we soberly reflect on the views of the more reasonable critics from various communities who are not known to be supportive of the crux of the matter. Their "takeover" actions, though not contravening AWARE's Constitution, nevertheless raised ethical and propriety difficulties and challenges even in the minds of many Christians. While one may not agree, perhaps even on socio-moral grounds, with the way they went about fulfilling their social responsibility in correcting the perceived dangerous direction the civic organisation was taking, we must all remain committed as members of the same Diocesan flock to provide a loving environment to care for and pray with them, and in God's grace reflect together on this episode in the light of Scripture and under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. As Christ's disciples, let us together learn how to express our vigour for God in our social responsibility while at the same time expressing our regard for and sensitivity to the good standing of the larger Christian body before God and the watching world. Our social engagement must be attentive to not jeopardising the organic unity of the Church (Eph 4:4-6) as well as to heeding the Scriptural injunction

which says: “if possible, in so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” (Rom 12:18).

In terms of the **cause** for which this group took action, that cause must not be mitigated or forgotten. As unfolding revelations have shown, the group’s concern for a direction that AWARE was taking in terms of its agenda for redefining **mainstream** sexual ethics and social norms was not misplaced. There is now growing concern in many quarters of Singapore society, not least parents, over AWARE’s perceived advocacy of homosexuality and the content of the Leaders’ Guide of their “Comprehensive Sexuality Education”. Following last Saturday’s EGM, there is a new ExCo in-charge of AWARE. An alarm has been sounded on the promotion of revisionist sexuality norms under the watch of the ‘old guard’. The Ministry of Education has taken commendable corrective action as a first response.

However one views the perceived involvement and the manner of their engagement of some courageous Christians in the recent AWARE saga, their costly effort has undoubtedly done our society a crucial service by directing the society’s attention to the issue of grave concern of what and how sexual education is being taught by some vendors and trainers in some schools. I believe that **mainstream** society at large would be grateful for the continued contribution and vigilance of the Christian community to the moral fabric and social well being of our society. But we should also be prepared that, regrettably, there will always be those who would not, and the ways and means they will employ to express themselves.

As responsible members of our society, we must continue to be courageously and consistently concerned about the direction and trends of our nation, especially those which are ideologically driven by non-Asian values and ‘values-free’ import, not out of moral arrogance but out of genuine care for our nation, our fellow-man and the generations that follow. We rely on God for the strength and grace to do so in those situations where our responsible witness for God and His life-giving values incurs risk and a heavy cost. Our Scriptures remind us that we are called to display the power and wisdom of the Cross in ways that the world would see as “weakness and foolishness” (1 Cor 2). At the same time, our steadfastness in holding to our Christian worldview and values must be authenticated and accompanied by a winsome lifestyle characterized by good deeds and a demonstrated commitment to contribute to the well-being of our nation.

Conclusion

As the people of God, we must fulfill our social responsibility holistically and in keeping with Christ’s character and example of loving servanthood. In terms of social engagement on public issues,

- our cause must be biblically right;
- our process (or manner in pursuing that cause) must be exemplary, ethical, fair and wise; and
- our actions under God as individual Christians and as an institutional church be in harmony with each other, and appropriate to the rules of engagement that govern the wider society.

Tough and searching times give us the opportunity to grow and mature. As the people of God, let us trust in His Sovereignty over all matters and His wonderful ability, as we pray, to work all things “for the good of those who love Him” (Rom 8:28) and, we might add in our Centenary year, “for His Glory, His Name, and His Honour.”

May the peace, strength and favour on the Lord rest on His covenantal people as we journey on as a Diocese and steadfastly fulfill His calling until His return!

In Christ,
The Most Rev Dr John Chew