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Generosity: Befriending at the Margins, Re-centring Human Dignity

HealthServe Team

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I Introduction

This is the story of a community called 'HealthServe' that emerged out of a desire to serve the poor and marginalised groups in Singapore.

At its inception in 2006, HealthServe was a medical clinic set up through the generous donations of second-hand furniture and medical equipment, including supplies of medicines. However, the critical contribution to the functioning of the clinic was the generous offering of time, energies, professional skills and talents of a team of volunteers who had 'no fancy blueprint but only a simple dream of reaching out and making a difference'¹ within the eclectic neighbourhood where the clinic was being located.

Six years later, these volunteers have learnt that generosity in sharing material resources and professional

skills was but only the beginning of a much larger 'dream'. When the clinic doors were opened to the neighbourhood, the volunteers realised they were being challenged with the potential of forming friendships across the inadvertent boundary between giver and recipient or between a people leveraged on social acceptance and a people marginalised by society. When such boundary collapsing friendships began to flourish it nurtured a generosity of mutual acceptance and respect that paved a way to restore and re-centre human dignity despite the social divisions. The initial act of generosity in volunteering medical assistance had begun to emerge as the first step to a larger 'dream' of 'making a difference' to how the neighbourhood outside and the community inside could relate.

The Global Generosity Network affirms that generosity is more than the stewardship of material resources but a principle that extends to all aspects of created life that God as Creator has entrusted humanity to care for.² In the HealthServe community acts of gener-

¹ Dr Goh Wei Leong, Chairman and a founding member of HealthServe.

² <http://generositymovement.org/network/> accessed 9 July, 2012.

osity are expressed in the stewardship of the material and in the stewardship of the *imago Dei* as the theological foundation of human dignity.

The HealthServe stories that follow were collected when the community organised a workshop on 21 April, 2012 to reflect on their different perceptions of generosity. The workshop participants were not only from a spectrum of social classes ranging from the healthcare worker to the construction worker, but they were also of different religious convictions as well as of different nationalities. Making space for this unique mix of experiences and cultures to learn and share together meant having to negotiate patiently the interpretation of mother tongue languages into the working language of the workshop and to also make time to explain Christian theological concepts to the uninitiated. However, it was this element of diversity and plurality of the community that added to an invigorating time of sharing. There were also follow-up personal interviews after the workshop with select story contributors to add and clarify details of their accounts.³

The set of stories in this presentation describes the acts of generosity that have come to distinguish the everyday life of the HealthServe community. These initiatives in befriending have come to mean advocating on behalf of the friend who is being exploited, sharing the problems of the friend who was injured and left impoverished or attending to the friend suffering the pain

of cultural and human isolation. The stories also capture the community's experience of the integral link between cultivating friendships and the restoration and re-centring of human dignity in their interactions. The restoration of human dignity is critical in large part because of the socio-economic realities and context that the HealthServe stories are embedded in.

The rest of this presentation will outline the socio-economic context within which HealthServe operates and the series of initiatives that have evolved out of their response to a range of human predicaments emerging from that context. Finally, the HealthServe stories will offer the lessons in generosity that they have gained in their journey as a community.

II Introducing the HealthServe Context

1 The Geylang neighbourhood

'Geylang' is the name of the neighbourhood where the HealthServe clinic is located. The area harbours a past that persists in defining its present. The name, 'Geylang' is a corrupted Malay word referring to 'mills' or 'factories', as Geylang was historically a farming area and a processing centre of farm produce. Others believe 'Geylang' referred to a tribal group notorious for their pillaging forays.⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, the Malay community was sharing their space with

³ The interviews and content of the article were compiled and edited by Goh Wei Leong, Kimhong Hazra, Eric Lee, Shirley Lee and Jacqueline Tan.

⁴ Victor Savage and Brenda Yeoh, *Toponymics: A study of Singapore street names* (Singapore: Marshall and Cavendish, 2004 2nd ed.), 138-9.

waves of migrant workers from China who arrived in the then British colonial port of Singapore to look for their 'pot of gold'. The men eked out a living through backbreaking and sweaty work as labourers or rickshaw pullers whilst desperate women resorted to prostitution to feed their families.⁵ Sadly, the 'pot of gold' eluded these migrant workers. They did not find passage home and they were compelled eventually to build new homes in independent Singapore.

Geylang today continues to be a multi-ethnic neighbourhood of predominantly low-wage income families housed in old buildings built in the mid 1940s and in modern subsidised apartment buildings. It is a bustling satellite town with a range of social amenities in public transport, schools, markets and worship spaces. There are several small businesses in manufacturing and retail industries, including a competitive range of eateries that appeal to local and tourist palates alike.

Contemporary Geylang has also retained its historic legacy of being home to the marginalised communities of transient foreign workers and commercial sex workers. There are sections of the neighbourhood where foreign workers are crammed into rented low-cost rooms. Close to these 'dormitories' is another grid-like layout of small lanes lined with brothels creating an enclave that has earned Geylang the appellation of being the red light district of the country.

2 Marginalised Communities in Geylang

The social and economic realities that dictate the marginalised world of the transient foreign labour and commercial sex worker communities are harsh and grim.

One reality is the *modus vivendi* relationship that binds the foreign worker to the employment agency and the employer. The worker depends on the employment agency to broker a job that he may secure only after paying exorbitant mandatory fees that he predictably does not have in hand but must be raised through loans from family and friends. Thus, before he leaves home the worker has imprisoned himself in debts, making him vulnerable to any potential wiles of the employment agent and his potential employer. The worker is dependent on a work permit from his employer to enjoy legal status in the country. Thus feeling at the mercy of the employer, the worker is often reluctant to protest about long hours of work with inadequate rest times or even delayed payment of wages, lest the employer rescinds his work permit.

A second reality is the State bias towards the interest of the employer over that of the foreign worker. Most civic societies concerned about the rights of the foreign transient worker concede that the State's Labour Office has been more proactive in addressing labour issues relating to the fair and just treatment of the worker in recent times. This includes ensuring that adequate work safety measures are being maintained. However, these civic groups would also say that more stringent vigilance of 'high-handed' methods that employment agents and employers use to exploit the workers is needed.

⁵ See James Warren, *Ah ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Rickshaw coolie: A people's history of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

One oft-quoted example is the lack of policing over employers who hire 'repatriation companies'. The civic society community has accused employers of cancelling the work permits of the foreign workers in their employ and then hiring a repatriation company to forcefully detain such workers in order to deport them to their countries of origin. Such tactics close the doors on these workers to available legal channels for lodging their complaints.⁶

A third reality is that life for foreign workers is difficult because they often feel desperate and caught between a rock and a hard place. The worker lives as a marginalised alien in a culturally unfamiliar environment and often in accommodation that typically ranges from basic to sub-standard. He is isolated from family and community and worries constantly about them and is on his mobile telephone to them once or several times a day. He is burdened by the debts he incurred in coming to Singapore that he has yet to pay off; he is troubled by the bills at home that had compelled him in the first place to become a foreign worker and the hopes he treasures to build a better life at home for the family. Thus, he decides that he should lie low because he cannot afford to lose his job however crushed he feels by a situation that is not what he was promised. He chooses

to avoid rocking the boat with his employer because the status quo is preferable to being repatriated home.

In contrast, the idiosyncratic transactions in the world of commercial sexual favours are vastly different from what takes place in the world of the transient foreign worker, yet strong parallels undergird the lives of the people of both communities. Both are essentially unhappy with the way they must work but feel they have no viable options for how else will they make a living that will meet their needs and expenses?

While prostitution is legal in Singapore, public solicitation, engaging in prostitution as a means of livelihood and running a brothel along with pimping are illegal activities. An international transient traffic of women and men from around the region and further afield such as from India and China visit and keep the nightlife in Geylang busy.

The HealthServe community has discovered that relating to the commercial sex workers and their associates is an enigmatic and elusive undertaking. In seeking to befriend and understand the women, HealthServe volunteers have realised being available as friends who can be relied upon to be on hand to help solve problems is a concrete expression of generosity and care that makes the difference.

Befriending has meant getting involved in the women's families such as participating in the care of their children's welfare or education and sometimes helping out the children's fathers and grandparents when resources are desperately needed but not available.

As street life can be both dangerous and unpredictable, being available

⁶ <http://theonlinecitizen.com/2011/11/repatriation-companies-manpower-ministers-response-belittles-the-efforts-of-migrant-workers/> accessed 13 July 2012. See also HOME and TWC2, *Justice delayed, justice denied: The experiences of migrant workers in Singapore, 2010 Report* (Singapore: The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics and Transit Workers Count Too, 2010).

when there is a crisis has been the cardinal test of the friendship the HealthServe community is willing to offer. At other times, organising a party on the streets to celebrate a birthday, a marriage or Christmas are important acts of generosity. These moments not only inject celebration in an otherwise morose and sombre atmosphere but also affirm to the street community the trustworthiness of a HealthServe friend.

Both the transient foreign worker and the sex worker communities in Geylang experience a violated human dignity from discriminating and unjust social policies and structures and relationships of exploitation. At the same time, both communities are also broken and accountable for wilful personal errors of judgements, mistakes and poor decisions in each of their personal life journeys. There is a convergence of systemic and personal reasons, regrets and errors of judgement that have contributed to the marginalised realities found in the Geylang neighbourhood.

When the doors of the HealthServe clinic opened to this neighbourhood, it resolved to offer acts of generosity in medical assistance but was uninitiated and naive regarding the myriad layers of human need. Thus, the open doors became a window into the possibilities of human transformation that faithful acts of generosity might usher into their newfound neighbourhood and community.

III The HealthServe Community in Geylang

In entering the world of the marginalised communities of Geylang, the HealthServe clinic inadvertently ex-

panded into an international community of folk from Bangladesh, China, India, Malaysia and Nepal. It evolved from being a space to give and receive medical assistance into a meeting point for the exchange and interaction of people whose paths do not normally intersect. As professional urbanites, foreign construction workers and sex workers met and interacted they were not just a mix of people of varying social and economic class, they were also people belonging to a plurality of religious faiths and diverse if not conflicting life values and perspectives who now shared a common space to learn to work together.

More painfully, the clinic realised that while medical assistance was a generous and important service to provide, there was a deeper and profound need to contribute to a restoration of human dignity in a marginalised context:

CJS was from China and had sustained a head injury at work after barely four months in Singapore. He was now penniless without work, depressed and suicidal. We then realised that simply running a clinic was not holistic. We also realised that more medication was not the answer to the struggles of loneliness, poverty and exploitation that CJS was undergoing. The Lord led us to start a counselling service, a social assistance programme and a legal advisory clinic.⁷

The awareness of the need of a holistic approach led to the conception of a series of projects and priorities

⁷ Goh Wei Leong

in response to the plethora of issues and problems besetting the Geylang neighbourhood. In addition to providing medical assistance, a holistic approach began to take the shape of lending support to the foreign worker friend advocating for a just redress to his labour problems and providing food and accommodation while he waits out the long haul for a legal resolution.

As essential as these legal and practical processes have been in supporting a stranded foreign worker, many of these initiatives stem from a basic desire to extend generosity to a friend in need. Thus, being available as a friend has been an act of generosity that has restored human dignity and wrought mutual human transformation in the community.

Furthermore, the demands of a holistic approach in servicing the marginalized communities prompted some volunteers to become HealthServe employees and so invest and channel their life energies into standing in solidarity with newfound friends in the transient foreign worker and in the commercial sex worker. Thus, in generously offering their time and energies to solve the problems of friends from these communities, the HealthServe community was experiencing a reciprocal effect in the way they were being challenged to reshape their perceptions and vocations to become more concrete in their 'dream to make a difference'.

1 Advocating on behalf of the injured worker

The volunteers who helm the pro-bono legal advisory clinic spend many hours reviewing and re-interpreting the fine print in the employment contract and

thus map a way forward to ensure the worker will be paid the wages owing to him or get his rightful compensation for injury suffered on site which are some of the more common employment irregularities dealt with. But the crunch was to know which office door to knock on, how to speak the business language and articulate the issues of the case and in convincing and succinct terms that will get a hearing. Furthermore, this was going to be a diplomatic as well as laborious undertaking, demanding many hours of waiting in hospital queues to retrieve the relevant medical report, twiddling thumbs at the Labour Office to catch a glimpse of the targeted case officer and streamlining the paperwork to substantiate the nuances of the case.

It was evident that to serve a foreign worker friend it was needful to travel and accompany him to negotiate the dreaded maze of bureaucratic protocols and so mount a meaningful case for a fair and just redress to his labour problems.

2 The Geylang Food Project

When a foreign worker has sustained an injury at work, he needs not only medical attention, he also needs adequate medical leave to recuperate. If his injury requires an extensive recuperation, he may lose his job as well as his work permit. If such a worker approaches HealthServe for assistance, its volunteer-lawyer will assist but apart from needing legal aid, the worker is now also desperately in need of refuge to rest his head and to find food while waiting for his appeal for injury claims to pan out through the legal system. The crunch sets in and starts to

bite if the waiting period for his claims to be met, stretches from a couple of months to more than twelve months.

HealthServe initiated the Geylang Food Project (GFP) through generous donations from the larger community to relieve this crunch. GFP has a special arrangement with the vendor of a neighbourhood eatery to serve two hot meals a day from Monday to Saturday to the person who produces a GFP 'voucher'. In addition, HealthServe has secured a space on their clinic premises to accommodate some who were stranded without accommodation. Others, who have found their own accommodation but located a distance from Geylang, are also remembered. HealthServe staff bring the GFP to them by delivering weekly groceries and sharing an afternoon to talk and to eat together.

3 Community art therapy

Community art therapy is a vehicle to help a person get in touch with one's inner thoughts and feeling and to own them through articulating them in images. A volunteer, SX, who was trained as a facilitator in community art, explained that a piece of artwork is the artist's ownership of his own life and voice. A good lawyer at best speaks on behalf of the client but the foreign worker-artist speaks in his own voice and becomes visible to listeners. In this way, SX felt human dignity might be recovered.

SX was inspired while mingling with the HealthServe community to introduce a community art workshop for the workers as she had begun to identify with their sense of 'longing for home' which was her experience while

studying art as a foreign student away from home.

In the early sessions of the workshop, there was more jeering and scoffing at the idea of doing art than actual human transformation taking place, but in time the participants learnt to respect the validity of each other's voices and in particular, the voice that is not understood. The workers were guided to reflect on their time in the country since leaving home and prompted to articulate their strongest impressions in images, craftwork or in words. There were moments when the raw emotions stemming from both personal mistakes and the unjust repercussions of social injustice were caught, such as in these words:

I came to Singapore with much hope.

But I ended up with an injury and no pay.

Hope shattered. Confused heart.

Wandering spirit. Pressurised.

I was treated unfairly by my boss.

My heart filled with rage.

Learned to let go of hatred at church.

Understood that forgiveness begets forgiveness.

Much is gained while much is lost.

I have learned to express myself and unlock my heart through their exercises.

I felt that my heart was detoxified.⁸

In conducting the workshop, SX felt she was taken beyond her own social, economic and religious boundaries as a Buddhist into another orbit of real-

⁸ The poem was written by Chai Shui Hong and translated by Jessie Koh.

ity where it was the norm to have to struggle to keep body and soul together because of a world of unscrupulous exploitation, unfair and bullying treatment. She also appreciated the common space for herself as a Buddhist to work with people of different religious convictions to seek transformation.

4 A platform for friendships and partnerships

It is distressing that fighting to make ends meet is iconic of the struggle that wearies the foreign worker community. Material poverty is depressing but it is equally disconcerting to suffer poverty in meaningful relationships as the foreign workers are removed from the family as fathers, husbands and brothers. There is also the injustice of having to suffer as a marginalised community as the disenfranchised worker is handicapped in accessing adequate legal and medical support. In this context acts of generosity in kind and in human kindness are most significantly found in a sharing of friendship that dignifies both giver and recipient.

a) Befriending as healing

When YJ was living in a dormitory, he got into a scuffle with a dormitory mate and unwittingly ended up waving a knife at his friend. The police were called in. YJ was locked up and subsequently sent to a psychiatric hospital for tests and observation. The HealthServe volunteer-lawyer who was assisting YJ with his work injury case, visited him in hospital and spent a few hours talking to him, advising and comforting him. The lawyer-friend went on to act on behalf of YJ in court and the charge against him was dropped. YJ

was very touched by the generosity of the lawyer-friend, who made time for him at the hospital, who took up his knife-wielding scuffle case in court and also argued the case on his work injury claims.

YJ had sustained injuries to his head and back after he fell from a height in 2009 and since then he had been waiting for his injury claims to be paid up by the insurance agents. He spent ten months in hospital and then in a nursing home to recuperate from his injuries and was banned from all work while waiting for his injury claims. He has been living without income and dependent on the goodwill of the community and unable to send home any support to his wife and two school-going children.

b) Befriending as cultural sensitivity

A major factor in befriending is the need to exercise cultural sensitivity. In the HealthServe community, most of the foreign workers come from rural districts of China and are unfamiliar with the urban etiquette of Singapore life and Singapore work culture. When and if caught in the dilemma of incurring a work injury it becomes a particular challenge for the worker to process the vicissitudes of a paper culture that defines Singapore society. Yet persevere they must if they want to secure that longed for and deserved compensation for their injuries.

LYF was hospitalised because he had inadvertently suffered an allergic reaction that had immobilised him when he was being treated for a work injury. As a result, he was deemed ineligible for compensation because his hospital bills were for an allergic

reaction and not for a work injury. In addition to being strapped down with illness and with no personal resources because his work permit was cancelled when he was hospitalised, LYF was in a quandary because he could not decipher the maze of insurance and legal processes in order to resolve his problem. At that point in time, the foreign workers' grapevine pointed him to HealthServe. As HealthServe was listed on the hospital's list of trusted Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO), they used that leverage to retrieve a pertinent medical history and then mounted a legal defence with the Labour Office and so ironed out the kinks in LYF's predicament, to his grateful relief.

The community spends many hours interpreting differences in attitudes and manners between Singapore and other countries. These conversations also address and empathise with the emotional hurts and aftershocks suffered from negotiating the circuitous infrastructures that comprise the insurance companies, the hospitals and the Labour Office of the country.

Sadly, there is a bristling unease between the local community and the growing foreign worker community. About a third of Singapore's total work force is made up of transient foreign workers while more than 80 per cent of the construction industry is manned by the foreign worker.⁹ Thus, the country's public transport system and public space for recreation are stretched close to their bursting limits. Yet, the

government has reiterated the need to maintain the foreign worker population to ensure the continued growth of the nation's economy.

The negative vibes from the local environment exacerbates the sense of social isolation felt by the foreign worker. In contrast to this lack of welcome, there is no more human activity than to talk about the cultural idiosyncrasies that sets one community apart from another. This same conversation highlights the common humanity shared between foreigner and local. The culture dialogue centres human identity in human interaction and preserves human dignity that is essential to friendships.

However, nuances of human cultures can emerge from unexpected quarters. While all the patients who visited the clinic were appreciative of the medical assistance that HealthServe offered, it was noticed that some Chinese patients were not as enthusiastic about taking the medicines they were prescribed for their ailments. The health workers were culturally sensitive and adept in engaging their Chinese patients in the Chinese language but could not penetrate this particular scepticism.

Finally, it came to light that some Chinese patients were suspicious of treatments that were not under the exigencies of Traditional Chinese Medicine or TCM. In Singapore, TCM is a recognised discipline and there is also a State registered roster of licensed TCM practitioners. This hiccup in culture sensitivity was resolved when a licensed TCM practitioner agreed to counsel those suspicious of non-TCM approaches to healthcare.

9 HOME, *The exploitation of Chinese migrant construction workers in Singapore, 2011 Report* (Singapore, The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics, 2011)

c) Befriending as play and skills learning

It may be an understatement to say that it is a demoralising prospect to be stuck as an alien in an unknown country, without any opportunity to earn some form of income, while at best waiting with a vague idea of when one may go home—yet this is often a typical worker dilemma in the HealthServe community. The community battles to keep depression and bitterness at bay and at the same time to keep hope and self-esteem alive. One approach is to inject play into community life and in this regard, recreation activities such as fishing or running in open spaces to launch and fly a kite is balm to the inert spirit. These activities wake up the mind and body literally and provide a safe space for interaction as well as nourishing a culture of befriending.

HealthServe volunteers have also initiated classes on how to operate a computer, on how to acquire the working language of the country, in addition to organising celebrations such as a water festival for Burmese workers and cricket tournaments for the South Asian workers.

d) Befriending begets more generosity

Much as the foreign worker who is sojourning under the wings of the HealthServe community recognises the timely support and help he is enjoying, he often seems to hold closer to his heart the simple everyday acts of generosity. They notice HealthServe staff digging into their personal pockets to meet community needs; they notice the volunteer doctor who is willing to fill in an eleventh hour vacancy that crops up on

the clinic roster and with home-made cakes in tow; they notice that the food vendor on the Geylang Food Project doles out extra servings on the food queues and they also notice that the HealthServe Director thinks nothing of doubling up as the driver to provide transport for workers attending language classes.

The HealthServe community celebrates every time someone is finally successful in getting his claims met and can go home. It is especially meaningful to the friends who are going home to have their HealthServe friends escort them to the airport and wave them off, regardless of the hour of day or night of departure. These 'send-off' parties have become iconic of a HealthServe tradition and an act of generosity that has sealed many friendships.

What is particularly delightful to HealthServe staff is the unanticipated experience that generosity and friendships begets more of the same. They can point to a modest pile of watermelons and cans of Coca-cola that are the signature gifts of appreciation they are blessed with from their friends when they finally go home. Workers have also made donations from their compensation package towards a fund to assist others who are also caught in the distress of waiting for their compensation.

Migrant friends become accustomed to living on the periphery of society and think only of how to survive the days till they may retrieve what they can of the money they have lost and go home. So it touches them when HealthServe staff and volunteers make time for them and accompany them and interpret on their behalf at the hospital, at the Labour Office, with the employer

and befriend them and become the few Singapore friends they have.

Sharing and participating in community allows different members to enjoy a sense of belonging despite the concrete realities of social and economic demarcations and cultural gaps. Befriending at the margins becomes akin to entering an experience of dependence and trust that nourishes a sense of humanness and restores and re-centres human dignity in relationships.

e) Befriending beyond Geylang

As the transient foreign workers comprise some 85 per cent of the workforce in the country's construction industry, ensuring that these hundreds of thousands of people have adequate accommodation has been a point of discontent and debate in overcrowded Singapore. There have been damaging reports of gross overcrowding and unhygienic conditions including housing people in improvised metal containers without ventilation or proper washing facilities.¹⁰

The accommodation issue is contentious from the perspectives of poorly housed workers, tight-fisted employers, turf-minded citizenry and a harassed Labour Office. While the Labour Office may have set down terms of reference for what is deemed decent accommodation, sub-standard accommodation persists. In Geylang in February 2012, about half of the residences checked were deemed inadequate which meant charging 200 employers to relocate 430 workers into suitable

accommodation.¹¹

Public space for recreation has also emerged as a point of dissonance as house owners do not want to share the same open areas in their neighbourhood with foreign workers who need a space to relax after a week of back-breaking construction work.

One way out has been to build foreign worker dormitories in outlying areas. The HealthServe community is trying to run its medical and dental services at some of these new dormitories because access to such amenities is scant in the new locations.

However, moving beyond Geylang has also meant recruiting new volunteers willing to be generous with their time and skill and energy to travel into unfamiliar corners of the country. This is where partnering educational institutions where their students agree to do an internship with HealthServe, such as those from the university's medical faculty, is inspiring. Another group of humanity students from the polytechnic said they had not thought of foreign workers as human beings and had gone into Geylang with fears that they might be robbed or even molested. After a couple of weeks walking the streets of Geylang, the students reflected that,

In interviewing the workers I had better insight into their lives and the problems they had to go through, their kind of living conditions, how they were being exploited and the way we locals sidelined them... It was a life-transforming experi-

¹⁰ HealthServe case notes.

¹¹ <http://www.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120214-327953.html> accessed 9 July, 2012

ence...We can make a difference because change begins with us.

In the desire to 'dream...to make a difference', an opportunity to influence the country's young people towards befriending the marginalised communities is an opportunity to sow seeds of generosity in civic life.

f) A full circle in the befriending journey

It is another HealthServe tradition to visit their returned Chinese friends on their home ground and so renew the friendships forged in Geylang. The Singapore team reports that they are invariably overwhelmed by the warm welcome and generous hospitality they receive on these visits. These journeys are experiences that reaffirm the potential of how befriending at the margins may narrow the gaps between givers and recipients and so partially fulfil a 'dream...to make a difference'.

In 2010, a small team that had travelled to China tragically collided in a road accident and the driver was killed on the spot. Some HealthServe returned China friends got wind of it and very quickly offered help in the form of money and assistance. These friends covered the long distances across their county to get to the team, lobbied the bureaucracy to render help and gave of their personal time to resolve the episode. The returned Chinese friends sacrificially came alongside the HealthServe community at their point of deep need. In an ironic twist, HealthServe Chinese friends had the opportunity to turn the tables around as they negotiated the protocols with the authorities on behalf of their Singapore friends.

In June 2012, another HealthServe

team visited the two Chinese provinces of Anhui and Henan provinces and re-connected with twenty-four returned friends and twenty families. Out of this group, more than ten had found new jobs and others had continued in the church life they had enjoyed in Singapore. The group had travelled from their different regions to designated meeting places in Anhui and Henan to form a welcoming host party. They had pulled their meagre resources together to ensure they hosted their friends to a grand welcome. It was an indicator of the deep appreciation they had for people who had befriended them during their ordeal in Singapore. Their families were no less expressive in their gratitude that their loved ones were given refuge in a strange land and found solace among generous people.

It was an exceptional pleasure for the HealthServe team to renew their friendship with XY and his family. XY had entered the life of the HealthServe community in Geylang when he needed assistance and refuge because he was destitute, waiting for his compensation from a work injury. But the dreaded hiatus for a foreign worker took an extraordinary turn in the case of XY as he came to embrace the Christian faith and made a series of equally unprecedented life decisions.

XY had left home to find work in Singapore because of a quarrel with his wife but he now wanted to apologise. XY not only called his wife on his mobile but also made a video recording of his apology. HealthServe friends were tasked to deliver the video recording to Mrs XY personally on a visit to China. Mrs XY relented and accepted the apology and the Christian faith. Today, XY has dreams to put to use the computer

skills he picked up in his sojourn at Geylang and to initiate a HealthServe-type work in his neighbourhood.

IV Reflections on Generosity

1 Motivations

Volunteers at HealthServe share a common understanding that generosity is borne out in the life of Jesus Christ and his teaching as recorded in the Gospels as some share,

Jesus has given us everything and so not only models generosity for us but also compels us to be good stewards of his gifts to us. God has given us everything in money and talents and time and so calls us to use these gifts wisely for his kingdom.

The father in the parable of the prodigal son was generous in receiving his son after the son had turned his back against the father, in addition to squandering the father's money. The father's acceptance of his son is iconic of the principle of generosity.¹²

In choosing to relate to a marginalised community from a personal context that is buffered against it by economic security and social privilege, volunteers at HealthServe are motivated by two influential realities. One is the personal conviction that generosity is integral to an expression of Christian character and the other is the personal experience of having seen models and acts of generosity that have ministered

to their personal spiritual formation and so shaped their maturing into a generous attitude to humanity. Thus, generosity is more than a principle but is a concrete reality embodied in human acts of generosity given freely and received by others. Many responses from volunteers substantiate this perspective as they share,

I learnt generosity from the way my father lived.

When I was a teenager and did not have the money to buy lunch at school, a Malay [a differing ethnic group from that of the speaker's] classmate paid for my lunch—the experience and memory of receiving that act of generosity motivates me to bless others today.

I experienced generosity from one of my patients on social assistance. When he receives his monthly State allowance, he will buy me a bowl of hot noodle soup. He not only shares with me from the little he gets but shows appreciation for me as his doctor and friend and that ministers to me.¹³

In the context of the marginalised communities in their neighbourhood, the generosity of the HealthServe community is experienced in their offer of a friendship that cares for the practical needs of a marginalised people and thus dignifies both giver and recipient as people and friends sharing the same humanity. Seen in this light, living generously towards others is fundamental to living as disciples of Christ

¹² Select contributions from HealthServe volunteers at a workshop on generosity on 21 April 2012.

¹³ Select contributions from HealthServe volunteers at a workshop on generosity on 21 April 2012.

There is much to be grateful for in the practical ways that HealthServe volunteers share their resources to feed, heal and advocate on behalf of people who are not as privileged. But more than material resources is the infinite healing that comes with restoring human dignity when it has been violated by indifference. Generosity in the sharing of human dignity becomes a profound panacea in this labour conundrum. There is also reciprocal healing in human dignity for the privileged as he or she participates in redressing a wrong.

2 Perseverance

The HealthServe experience is an affirmation of the 'dream...to make a difference' but also a prayer to persevere in that dream. The ugliness of exploitation prevails in civil society and social policies and structures are not abreast in redressing the human damage and injustice exploitation wreaks.

Despite public education on worker rights over a number of platforms, the voice of the marginalised transient foreign worker is often weak as low waged workers inevitably command little bargaining power. The work permit system under which foreign workers enter the country and seek work is a system that opens them to the risk of wrongful dismissals. The channels for appeal against wrongful dismissals are established and in place, but in many instances these conduits get choked up and become impassable.

There is a Labour Court that is empowered by the laws of the country to arbitrate and mediate disputes between workers and employers. If the employer does not comply with the

Court ruling, the worker has the option to appeal to a higher court. But a foreign worker cannot pay the mandatory legal fees to do this. Furthermore, the process will certainly prompt the employer to exercise his option of cancelling the employee's work permit, making him an illegal immigrant liable for immediate deportation unless he gets a special pass from the Labour Office.

In the case of R, HealthServe found a pro-bono lawyer to help him prepare his appeal to a higher court when his employer did not pay R his fourteen months of arrears in wages as ordered by the Labour Court to do so. However, the intervention was belated, as the employer had by that time closed his business, thus cutting off the legal channels that would help R retrieve his money or be vindicated. It was a dismal dead end. With financial help from a variety of individuals and groups, R was able to return home to his family, but without retrieving any of the money he had spent working ten hours daily for over more than a year. Moreover, in seeking redress for his unpaid hard-earned wages, he had incurred a substantial debt that he does not expect to repay for a long time yet, given the unemployment situation in his country. Meanwhile, his former employer suffers only an imposed ban on employing more foreign workers.

Such systemic failure to mediate justice for the oppressed low-wage worker has been raised for debate in State Parliamentary circles, and papers and appeals have been sent by major civic organisations with suggestions for how Labour Court processes could be adjusted to work more justice on the ground. The system may not change today but 'the dream...to make

a difference' must persevere in hope for a just tomorrow.

In befriending at the margins and on the Geylang streets, a persevering available presence makes the difference between hope and futility. G was the manager of a brothel but underwent a radical change of heart to become a Christian when he landed in prison. When G was released from prison, he could not return to Geylang and had to find a living elsewhere.

There are others like G whom the HealthServe team consider friends. Sometimes, their friends tell them about street ladies who may need their help and at other times they have long conversations and arguments about the safety of the women. In this context, being generous and persevering in trustworthy friendships as in a ministry of presence is an end in itself that offers hope for a more just tomorrow.

3 Transformation

The HealthServe stories tell of human transformation that emerges from committed persevering acts of generosity of care and love and from a generosity that befriends at the margins. Such generosity forges a human transformation that provokes the side effect of building community and even civic society because it gives dignity to those who have been exploited and treated with indifference.

Human transformation is embedded in the relationships formed across the gaps that divide the privileged from the marginalised. When such social divisions are conflated then human dignity as conceived on the basis of the *imago Dei* may flourish as a bridge between people who are different socially, economically and even religiously. From this position, it will be very natural to speak of the cross of Christ that metes out healing love and offers forgiveness.

What is Economic Justice?

Biblical and Secular Perspectives Contrasted

Andrew Hartropp

This book argues that a biblically-rooted account of justice in economic life has three great strengths as opposed to the confusing disarray of views evident in the secular world. First, it is harmonious: the various strands of a scriptural perspective on economic justice are clearly woven together and they find their unity in the person of the God. Secondly, it is substantial: able to engage thoroughly and critically with leading secular perspectives. Thirdly, it is contemporary: applying in powerful and relevant ways to current economic issues in our globalized world. This book indicates how a biblical understanding of production and exchange applies to contemporary topics such as the relationships between borrowers and lenders and the use of monopoly power.

Andrew Hartropp has lectured in economics at Brunel University and is currently a Church of England Curate in Watford, Hertfordshire, UK.

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