

REMEMBERING PAUL SINAPPAN BY KON ONN SEIN

Today is a privilege for me to share my memories of the late Paul Sinappan. Maybe its best that I put my thoughts into 3 aspects of his life that inspires and continues to inspire me. The first is he was champion of the poor. Second, Visionary and third, humility.

1) Champion of the Poor

But he was more, he was a friend of the poor. He walked alongside the poor. He started with working among the Tamil plantation workers. With low incomes, the husbands were frustrated and turned to toddy. In a state of drunkenness, they abused their wives. Paul had the challenge of finding a solution to address this entrenched and systemic problem. He did not come to separate the family but to restore them. He was able to restore the marriage through creating mutual respect and gender balance. And this was not just done through counselling but he also equipped them by starting a credit cooperative. Starting with humble savings of 5-10 sen , the families were able to buy erasers and pencils. And later, the women were able to obtain loans to start small businesses. This income added on to the low incomes of the husbands. This in turn gave hope for them to get out of their poverty and also empowered the women be economically secure. Paul further started women support groups and finally even the men joined in to support this change. It was unconceivable that this credit union approach with humble beginnings of 5 sen savings could have resulted in such a transformation. But Paul did it.

2) Humility

One time, Paul took a bus and came all the way to visit me in Muar. I was a young and unknown lawyer at that time. Paul was not into big numbers or with name. He was prepared to invest in lives that would make an impact on the poor. He spent time with me building relationships, shared freely of his ideas , methods and coached me to be more effective in impacting the Orang Asli.

3) Visionary

Paul was not one who sat on the laurels of his achievements. One could understandably retire comfortably with his amazing work among the plantation workers with profits of RM4 million. For Paul, that was not enough. He was expanding his work to rural Malay farmers. Whilst in Kochin, Kerala, he was also doing something with the garbage collectors and he was sharing with me his plans to reach out to the sex workers. He was always wanting to reach out to the untouchables. There was no one too poor, too uneducated and too far to reach. He believed in a god who was colour blind, who loved everyone regardless of colour, ethnicity or beliefs. Paul walked his talk.

4) Paul a True Malaysia

Finally, Paul was a true Malaysian. He loved his country , his people and contributed to those left behind. His passing away is a great loss to me and I believe also to our nation. I take comfort that today, he has completed his pilgrimage to heaven and earned the highest commendation and recognition from his creator God. "Well good done and faithful servant."

