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6 WORDS THAT SAY IT ALL By Wong Kim Hoh, Senior Writer

What Truly Matters To Me in 6 words

Morning Star Community Services is launching a ground-up, people-driven initiative next week to get people to take stock of their lives by asking the question What Truly Matters To Me and articulating their answers in 6 words. It hopes Singaporeans will use their six-word answers as a personal compass to make positive choices and live life well.



A friend's comment that Singaporeans tend to just go along with the crowd inspired Morning Star Community Services executive director Christian Choo to launch the project. -- PHOTO: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

A GOOD friend of Mr Christian Choo's once told him something that made a very deep impression. The man - a headmaster who gave up his well-paid job to live in a longhouse in East Malaysia and research the learning habits of children - said that being in

Singapore was like being in an Indian train station.

'He said, 'The moment I get down from a train in India, I'm being pushed by the crowd which says 'go go go'. But when I ask the person to my left or right where we are going, nobody knows," Mr Choo, 47, relates. 'He said people here don't seem to make any choices because they just go along with the crowd.' The friend's comment struck a chord with Mr Choo, executive director of Morning Star Community Services, a non-profit welfare organisation set up to enrich and strengthen family relationships. Says the former corporate trainer, who set up Morning Star with his social worker wife in 1999 and officially opened it the year after: 'When I speak to people here, I often hear the refrain 'no choice, no choice'. 'Parents tell me they don't spend time with their children on weekends because 'no choice', the children have to go for tuition, and all sorts of other classes.' He decided that something needs to be done to jolt people out of this malaise in decision-making. 'People should be making their own evaluations and decisions on what is best for themselves, not following the left or the right,' he says.

In celebration of Morning Star's 10th anniversary this year, he and his team took the opportunity to brainstorm ideas which would make a difference in the community.

The result is Prime Time, a series of initiatives to get Singaporeans to take stock of their lives, and to cherish 'the present moments, the people, the relationships, the values... all that matters most in life'.

First off the block is a project called What Truly Matters In Six Words, which will be officially launched next Saturday and Sunday at Plaza Singapura. Conceived as a ground-up, people-driven movement, its objective is to give people a platform to pause, reflect and give a six-word answer to the question: 'What truly matters to me?' Says Mr Choo: 'There's the need to ask that question. It's important because when we really think it through, it can lead to the right kind of action.

'I have seen parents who sacrifice their relationship with their child over five spelling words. When their children do not do well in tests and exams, they use tactics like withdrawal of love, even physical discipline.' The intention is good, but is that more important than their relationship with their child? Sometimes parents are so caught up by anger or frustration, they miss the point.'

The father of five children aged between 10 and 19 takes great pains to emphasise that there is no right or wrong answer.



'We are not here to prescribe answers or tell people what is the right thing to do. Our approach is to make them go through an experience and then choose what's best for themselves.'

The six-word limit helps 'people to structure, and consolidate their thoughts and distil everything down to its most essential'. It is inspired by The Six-Word Memoirs, a project started by United States-based online storytelling journal Smith Magazine in 2006. The project encouraged readers to tell their life story in just six words, and to submit their half-dozen words to smithmag.net or the magazine's Twitter account. It took off in a big way, spawning a Six-Word

Memoirs book series.

Mr Choo and his team are hoping to do the same thing. They have raised \$50,000 for the project, and will be spending the bulk of it on the launch and on its online portal at primetime.sg/whattrulymatters/

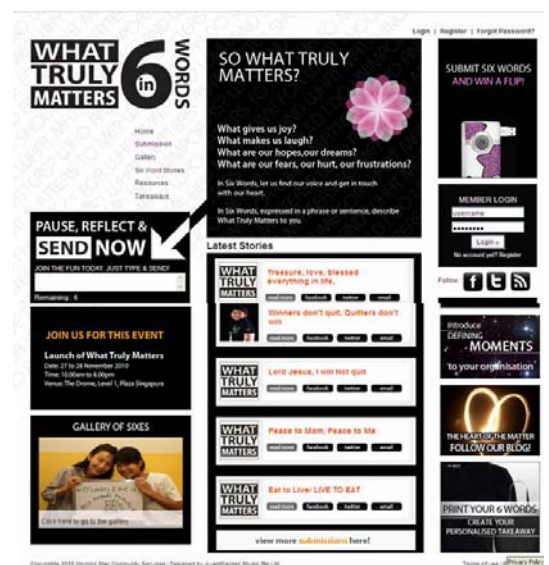
The website went live on Monday.

'Our website will be different. We will be encouraging people to tell the stories behind their six words, and post pictures. People like stories, and to look at pictures; they may be inspired to ponder the question more deeply,' says Mr Choo.

'Our hope is that this will go viral,' he adds, noting that the project can also be accessed via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. He stresses that the initiative is purely people-driven, and is not linked to any government agency. He encourages submissions in languages other than English and hopes to keep the portal 'as free as possible', and will try not to censor submissions unless they are objectionable and offensive.

'We are a social service agency. We also do not want it to be a platform for others to advocate causes,' he says.

Besides the portal, the team hopes to generate awareness through roadshows, 'flash mobs' (where members of the public in a specific location will be approached to spontaneously pen their six words), or through a programme called Defining Moments conducted at corporations and schools.



Conducted by a trained counsellor, Defining Moments aims to help participants scan their lifestyles, explore priorities and develop options to help them achieve their goals in life.

The Morning Star team has already road-tested the project, to positive response. They have ambushed patrons at a pub and revellers at a Halloween party, most of whom gamely gave their six words.



At a Defining Moments workshop last week, more than 20 employees from chic budget hotel Hangout @ Mt Emily enthusiastically wrote down what matters to them.

And what matters most to housekeeper Zulkiple Mohamad Arsad, 50, is keeping his wife healthy because a 'beautiful healthy wife makes life beautiful'.

'She is the backbone of my family,' says the father of six and grandfather of one.

'A man may be king but he needs a queen

to rule the country.' Hotel manager Dora Yeo, 49, is pleasantly surprised by how open her staff were to the workshop. 'It's a good exercise. It helps to reinforce what matters, and if you know that, you will be happier. And we want our employees to be happy because it is reflected in their work,' says Ms Yeo. Her own six words are: 'Love God, love self, love all.'

The project definitely gets the thumbs-up from Mr Ng Kok Song, 62, group chief investment officer of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation.

'What truly matters? The question sets you thinking,' he says. In his case, it is: 'To love and to be loved.' 'As a busy executive, I try to balance my life among my work, health, spiritual matters, family and friends. We need to hold our life in this fine balance. And if all these elements of our life are in good balance, they will energise us.'



Political observer and law lecturer Eugene Tan, 40, lauds the project as 'relevant to each of us regardless of our creed, race, culture, language, gender and age'.

'It is only when we know what truly matters that we can live purposefully and courageously,' he adds. Mr Choo hopes the question will resonate with the rest of Singapore. And what are his own six words? He grins. In the short term, he says, they are: 'Fit into my size 38 pants'. In the bigger scheme of things, he just wants to 'live life, love life, give life'.