



Every year, at SAF's commissioning ceremonies, IRO leaders are present. "We say a silent prayer, to make them good leaders, loyal to the country, and to serve the people," says Mr Harban Singh.

MINDEF / PIONEER

Taking a stand for religious harmony

Our series on how Singapore's different religious communities cooperate continues with this report on a unique group called the Inter-Religious Organisation.

In the National Day Parade, you might see a group of people dressed in robes and special hats as fancy as the performers on the field. They are some of Singapore's religious leaders, and they're there to give their blessings and support the celebrations. Although they're from different faiths, they're standing together because they all share a love for their country.

These individuals belong to the Inter-Religious Organisation, a Singaporean group that has admirers all over the world. The IRO was founded in 1949 by Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddique, a Muslim missionary from India. He felt strongly that all religions shared common values and that if people realised this, fewer misunderstandings would occur and there would be peace.

Abdul Aleem traveled widely, from Kenya to Canada, to spread this message. In Singapore, he spoke with religious leaders he met here. Together, they agreed to form the IRO.

The IRO has represented Singapore's different faiths at major events, ranging from celebrations to mourning. "We are invited to functions like memorials or even the opening of a new building," says Joseph Benjamin, current chairman

of the IRO. "The representatives from the various religions usually hold a moment of silent prayer, or they might each lead a prayer in their own languages."

In times of tragedy, the IRO members work together to help the nation deal with grief. For example, after the 2004 Asian tsunami, religious leaders held a joint service to remember the victims. They led thousands of Singaporeans of different faiths in prayer over a two-day period. Representatives from the IRO also travelled to Banda Aceh to mark the 100th day memorial of the tsunami.

By turning up together at such events, the IRO helps to emphasise that Singaporeans, regardless of race or religion, have many things in common and share similar histories and problems. "It's important for all the representatives to be there. When they stand there hand-in-hand, it sends out a message of unity," says Mr Benjamin.

Similarly, they led prayers at a vigil for Aids victims on International Aids Day. Said Theresa Seow, who was then the honorary

vice-president of the IRO, "Their presence underscores the fact that Aids is a disease that cuts across all racial and religious barriers."

Equally importantly, the religious leaders of the IRO work to mend gaps between their communities. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there was some distrust between members of different religious groups. The IRO

denounced the attacks together, and explained to their followers that they shouldn't judge an entire community by the actions of a few stray members.

"The leaders play an important role in setting norms for the members of their community," said George Yeo, Minister for Foreign Affairs. "If religious leaders routinely mix with believers of other faiths, then it sends a very powerful message down to the flock that you should not ostracise people."

This idea led to the formation of the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCC) in 2002. Renamed the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles in 2007, the IRCCs are networks formed of different religious and racial groups all over the island.

The IRCCs help to build bonds

and settle problems between different groups. Mr Abdul Motalif Hashim, a Muslim religious leader and chairman of the Chua Chu Kang IRCC, gave the example of a feud between Malay and Chinese neighbours.

To solve the spat, he went to the Malay family and told them "to be a good Muslim, you have to be a good neighbour and be more tolerant". Then he got a Chinese temple leader to approach the other family and do the same. The families listened, and the problem was solved.

Says Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports: "The chief value of this network is to make sure that in times of peace, we build relationships, trust and confidence. This will create a safety net for Singapore. If ever anything unfortunate were to happen, at that point in time, this safety net would be tested."

But, it's not all about gloom and doom. Just as the IRO and religious leaders take part in the celebrations of life, so do the IRCCs. The religious leaders and their communities attend each other's festivals, sharing the fun, laughter and food.

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Mr HARBAN SINGH:

We get the people of different religions to pray together for peace and harmony. We say it in our own way, yet we are saying the same thing.