

A head start for harmony



Pictures: SINGAPORE INTERFAITH YOUTH FORUM 2007

Young Singaporeans (above and below) participating in the Singapore Interfaith Youth Forum 2007.

More and more, projects to build trust among Singaporeans of different races and religions are starting young.

In 2004, Mr Lee Hsien Loong made a call out to reach out to younger Singaporeans with the racial harmony message. That way, the young could “benefit from the experiences and wisdom of the older generation”, he said.

Since then, there’s been a flurry of interracial and interreligious activities targeted at youths and children. Other than Racial Harmony Day, schools have taken steps to make interracial understanding a more frequent affair.

One such project helped students from Maris Stella High, a Christian school, and five Muslim madrasahs get to know each other better. In May last year, 300 Secondary 3 students from Maris Stella and about 400 madrasah pupils came together for a day. They took part in team-building games. In addition, the older Maris Stella students took the effort to tutor the primary school kids from the madrasahs in mathematics and English, in preparation for



their Primary School Leaving Examinations.

Though they came from different backgrounds, common interests helped break down barriers of race and religion. “At first, we were scared of saying the wrong things,” Maris Stella student Charles Tomas George told *The Straits Times*. “But soon, we found out we liked the same things... like soccer!”

One Rojak

Religious and community-based organisations, too, have been coming out with fun programmes targeted at the young.

OnePeople, a centre promoting racial harmony, is one example.

So far, it has held camps, talks, games and other activities aimed at bringing young people of different ethnic groups together.

The centre’s HarmonyWorks! Workshop Series was specially developed for secondary school students. Titled “1 Rojak” after the popular local food, the idea for the workshop is that people who are different can mix together harmoniously, just like the ingredients in rojak. The programme included games and art to help participants discover how to be open and understanding to different cultures.

Workshop trainer Muhammad Faizal Abdollah said that, at the beginning, some students thought the workshop was about food,

because of its name. “When they realised it is about racial harmony, some got little uncomfortable,” he said.

Mr Abdollah recalls an incident where a student was a little uncertain. But as the workshop progressed, he became more and more interested. In the end, the student was even leading his group in a discussion about Malay culture.

“Our workshop design makes it easy for students to open up. So even in situations like these, students can learn more about different races and religions,” said Mr Abdollah.

Trust through talk

Having a discussion can be a great way for people to sort out their differences. This is why many dialogue sessions have been held for people of different faiths to better understand each other’s beliefs, and work side by side to come out with solutions for living more harmoniously together.

These sessions are not just for grown-ups. The Singapore Interfaith Youth Forum 2007 brought 60 youths together to exchange views on youth-related religious issues. Participants came from the Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Taoist communities.

One of the aims of the forum was to clear common misunderstandings about religious groups. Undergraduate Farhana Munshi told the *Today* newspaper that she used to think Christians only befriended non-Christians because they wanted to convert them. Through the conference, she learned that only a small number carried those intentions.

“It is very important for young people to learn about religious harmony,” said Cell Tono Lim, Programme Executive at the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (KMSPKSM) Youth Ministry, which facilitated the forum. “To help them grow to become sensitive and responsible adults, capable of uniting as one Singapore, interfaith activities for youths have to start right now.”

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