Heartland Dialogues 2019: Nurturing Inclusive Communities - Global Peacemaking Efforts

By: Ashley Tan

In a word where divisiveness has become ever-prevalent in our society, practising compassion and navigating social tensions may seem like a formidable task. This often leaves many wondering about what steps can be taken, both on a societal and personal level, to foster cross-cultural understanding and religious integration amongst different groups and individuals.

In an inspiring session titled "Nurturing Inclusive Communities — Global Peacemaking Efforts" jointly organised by OnePeople.sg and Roses of Peace, this seemingly unanswerable question was broken down and tackled by both speakers and participants. Topics ranging from the role of civil society in cultivating cohesive communities, to ground-up initiatives organised by impassioned youths, to the coexistence of religious and humanity identity were discussed by the expert speakers.

The dialogue began with an introduction of OnePeople.sg's Orange Ribbon Project and a request for participants to pin on the ribbon as an indication of their support for racial and religious harmony, as well as intolerance against racism and discrimination in Singapore. This was followed by a welcome speech delivered by Roses of Peace Vice President Mr Nadim Kapadia, who summarised key points from speeches made by President Halima Yacob and Jordanian King Abdullah during the main segment of the inaugural International Conference on Cohesive Societies.

Speaking to the audience: Mr Nadim Kapadia

"There were also many other speakers who spoke about a variety of different issues…
[which focused on] faith as a key ingredient in nurturing peace and harmony. They
showed us how religion should not be seen as a problem, but rather as part of the
solution in trying to build a more cohesive society," Mr Nadim emphasised. This was
a brief but important reminder to the audience, especially given the increasing
propensity to over-politicise religion and pit different communities against one another
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Global Efforts to Promote Peace: Mr Patrice Brodeur

Mr Patrice Brodeur, Associate Professor at the Institute d`études religieuses at the
Université de Montréal and former Canada Research Chair (junior) on Islam, Pluralism
and Globalization, was the first of three speakers slated to speak at this dialogue. He
engaged the audience in an informative session on religious identities, the different
faith-based sectors of society, and the roles of various organisations in contributing to
global peacemaking.

In the context of the existence of religious identities in secular societies in Singapore,
Mr Brodeur raised the notion of how many individuals often view secularity and religion
to be in diametric opposition. However, he contended that the term "secular-religious
tension" is, in and of itself, a misnomer, as it "reduces the notion of 'secular', as if it
were in opposition to religion". Mr Brodeur clarified that secularity actually refers to "a
philosophy of how the government of a specific country deals with and limits the
involvement of religion in politics", and that the country "can be both secular and
religious", where the government adopts a secular framework such that religion does
not interfere with politics. This was a particularly intriguing explication given the tussle
between the desire to incorporate multi-religious harmony into social policies, and the
need to maintain secular objectiveness to avoid tipping the system in preference of a
certain religious community, in Singapore's political scene.

Speaking to the audience: Mr Patrice Brodeur

In the second half of his presentation, Mr Brodeur introduced the audience to the types of organisations that exist worldwide. These include government and intergovernmental organisations, religious institutions, and civil groups. He highlighted that in order for inter-worldview dialogue to be achieved, groups from all levels of society — top leadership, middle-range leadership, and grassroots leadership — need to be involved in the larger conversation as they complement rather than compete with one another. Deciding on which level and sector to engage is also largely dependent on the aims and target group of the social project or initiative in question.

Mr Brodeur also introduced the names and work of intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), and the Organisation of Islamic Corporation (OIC), as well as how the context of international politics has challenged the effectiveness of these organisations. Following an extensive and detailed presentation on other global organisations and groups, Mr Brodeur ultimately concluded that "everybody is necessary in getting involved in completing some piece of the broader puzzle of social inclusion, both globally and locally".

Mobilising Youths from the Ground Up: Mr Mohamed Irshad

The second speaker of the dialogue was Mr Mohamed Irshad, Founder of Roses of Peace (ROP), a ground-up organisation that aims to promote religious harmony in Singapore. Mr Irshad provided a local perspective on peacemaking, as well as the citizen-led initiatives that have been implemented by Roses of Peace to foster integration and concordance amongst different religious communities.

"Singapore is a diverse country — ethnically, religiously and culturally. We want to ensure that Singapore is not negatively affected by global events and that peace is preserved." This has been one of the core beliefs that members of Roses of Peace have adopted since the organisation's inception in 2012.
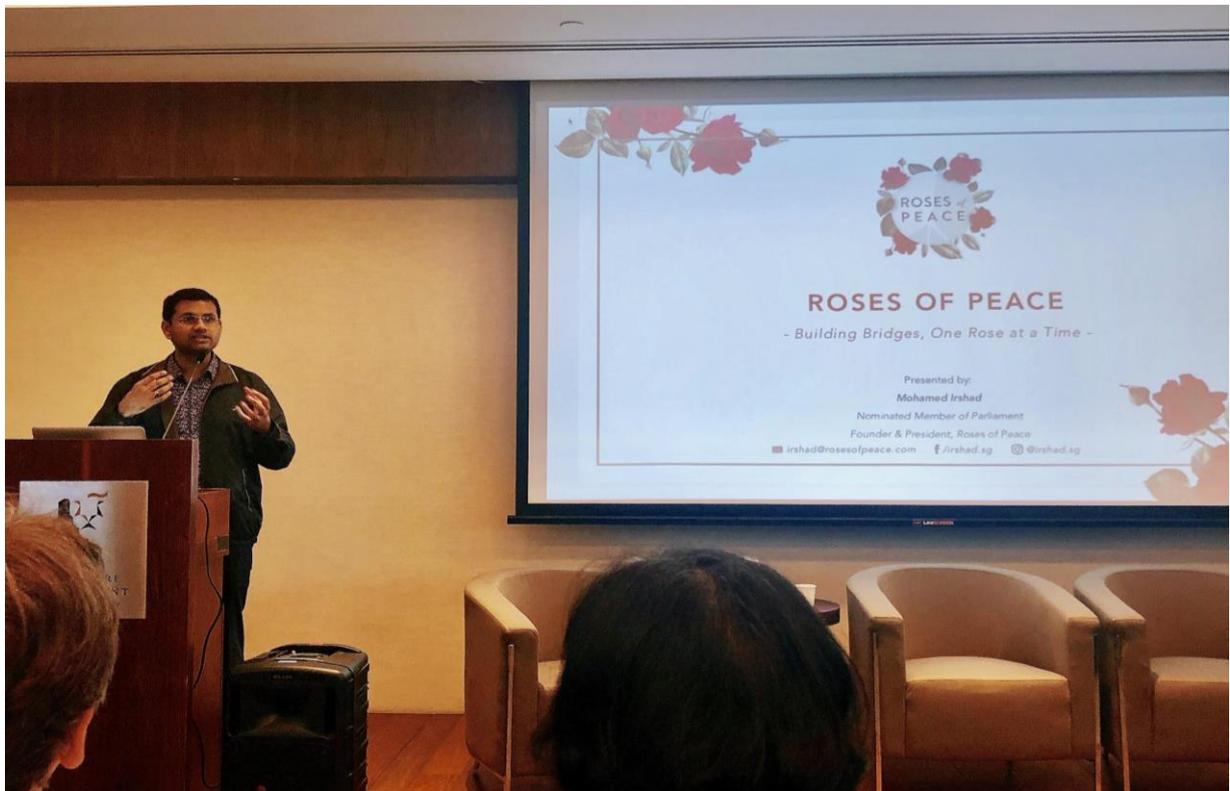
Speaking to the audience: Mr Mohamed Irshad

Driven by the desire to maintain inter-faith harmony in Singapore following the atrocities of the Charlie Hebdo incident in 2015, Roses of Peace embarked on its first nation-wide initiative by attaching messages of peace from different faith luminaries to stalks of roses in a symbolic attempt to remind Singaporeans of the need to spread peace and love over hatred.

"But we realised that giving out roses wasn't enough, so we started working with institutes of higher learning and with grassroots organisations," acknowledged Mr Irshad. Since 2015, Roses of Peace has organised a slew of other initiatives in support of social cohesion and religious appreciation. Some of these include organising a conference in commemoration of the Christchurch attacks earlier this year, holding a Roses of Peace Youth Forum to connect youths with community leaders, and starting an Ambassador programme.

If anything, these efforts have underlined the power of youths, as well as the amount of traction ground-up organisations could potentially gain when persistence is combined with passion.

Inter-faith Understanding and Reconciling Identities: Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan

Dr Hannan began his session by sharing a video which featured a lady who resides in Canada, as well as the work that she does to help the less fortunate, with the audience. Also known as a "living version of Mother Theresa", this kind-hearted individual cooks and offers free food to everyone in her community, regardless of their race of religion.

Using this clip as a springboard to his talk, Dr Hannan spoke of the value of humanity, and how humanity binds us all. In his opinion, understanding the commonalities that connect us with one another is the single most important construct of intercultural exchange.

Speaking to the audience: Dr Mohammad Hannan Hassan

Dr Hannan emphasised that our shared identity as human beings ought to transcend any religious identities that we may hold. "We are first and foremost human beings. Whether you are Muslim or Christian, that is secondary, or even tertiary. But you and I are all human beings. Saving a life is like saving humanity," he contended. "In fact, when asked about his religion, Prophet Muhammad didn't go into theology. He said spread peace, feed those who are in need, and strengthen ties and friendship. This shows us that all identities cannot be at the expense of our human identity."

This was an especially important reminder in the midst of all the noise concerning identity politics. Difficult as it may be to recognise and accept, each of us shares the universality of being a part of the same human race, of being a part of the same humanity, which perhaps is what truly matters against the backdrop of our differences.

Q&A Session

The speakers' presentations were followed by a Question-and-Answer (Q&A) segment moderated by Ms Jennifer Yin, who holds several distinguished titles including Board Member of OnePeople.sg.

One of the first questions posed pertained to methods of nurturing inclusive communities — what exactly can we do to play a part in improving harmony in society? "Do the simple things," Dr Hannan advised. "I don't want to be simplistic, but we should simplify things. Feed our neighbours, talk to them… Just help our fellow human beings. When you start doing this, you realise that you never walk alone. Prophet Muhammad teaches me not to underestimate the good things that one does, no matter how small, so do not belittle the small but good things that you do."

For Mr Brodeur, the answer centered around dialogue. "Dialogue at every level is absolutely essential. But dialogue must always occur in a non-violent way and in-keeping with the principle of respect, even if you may be in profound disagreement with one side or the other," he stressed. "As long as the dialogue never stops and continues, some things will change eventually in terms of perception."

Audience listens closely to the speakers' responses to their questions

In response to another query on steps that can be taken to encourage school-going students to delve deeper into intercultural, interracial and intercultural understanding, Mr Irshad explained that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has integrated Values-in-Action (VIA) programme into the education system. In fact, the MOE has also widened the VIA programme to include CultureScope engagement sessions piloted by OnePeople.sg, where students are brought to different religious places of worship to learn more about different religious groups. To date, OnePeople.sg over 40 religious and community partners have come on board the CultureScope programme to engage students in inter-religious exchange.

"But beyond the school setting, Roses of Peace is also looking at how we can provide tertiary students with a space to learn about religious constructs such as the Ibrahamic faith, secularism and atheism. We tend to lump all of them together, but there are actually nuanced differences," Mr Irshad shared. "Such efforts are happening, but there is definitely more scope for engagement."

Maintaining Peace and Harmony

To round up the dialogue, a speech was delivered by Mr Ramesh Ganeson, Director of OnePeople.sg. In his address, Mr Ganeson highlighted an interesting distinction between the concepts of "negative peace" and "positive peace".

"The Institute for Economics and Peace defines peace in two ways — one is 'negative peace', which they classify as 'an absence of violence or fear of violence'. The other is 'positive peace', which is defined as 'attitudes, institutions and structures which create and sustain peaceful societies'," he explained. "An absence of violence does not always equate to peace and harmony. While at the surface there seems to be stability, there may be underlying tensions which could potentially divide societies."

This point is especially relevant to Singapore, where peace and stability are often taken to be a "given" by society. However, Mr Ganeson stressed that these markers of society cannot be taken for granted, and that values of compassion and empathy need to be actively cultivated — especially amongst young children — to ensure that the peace we enjoy is preserved and sustained. Beyond this, however, maintaining peace perhaps also requires each individual to hold up a mirror to reflect on their own attitudes and actions.

"In making peace with oneself, we need to take a hard look and question our own assumptions and prejudices. We should not be too quick to judge based on impressions of one's race or religion, as humanity lies in our hearts and not the colour of our skins," Mr Ganesh emphasised. He also highlighted the need for dialogue and citizen involvement to create positive social change.

Being the Change You Wish To See

A common thread that ran throughout all speakers' sharings was their encouragement for members of the audience — particularly youths — to take steps towards building more cohesive societies in their respective sectors and personal capacities.

In the words of dialogue participant and Roses of Peace Ambassador Mary Ann Peters, "It is important for the work of individuals to be made known. That's how we can galvanise other individuals to work together in small ways which will collectively make a difference to society."

Mary Ann Peters (first row, third from left) with fellow ROP Ambassadors and Founder Mr Mohamed Irshad (second row, second from left)

Taking the first step to advocate for positive social change is often unnerving, especially when the narrative that "change" needs to occur on a grand scale has been ingrained in us since a young age. However, change can occur in many forms — be it calling out insensitive comments, reading up on religious and cultural practises, or organising a conference to stimulate dialogue, all of these are worthy of recognition and amalgamate to a significant difference.

With the support of our immediate circles and civil society, creating waves of change in our individual capacities is not formidable as we might make it out to be after all.