

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, MINISTER FOR  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS AT THE ONE  
PEOPLE.SG COMMUNITY LEADERS' CONFERENCE ON 20  
NOVEMBER 2010 AT STI AUDITORIUM**

Mayor Zainudin Nordin,  
Chairman, OnePeople.sg

Members of the OnePeople.sg Management Committee

Mr Yam Ah Mee,  
Chief Executive Director, People's Association

Imam Ashafa and Pastor James

Community and Religious Leaders,  
Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen

1 It is my pleasure to join all of you at today's Community Leader's Conference organised by OnePeople.sg. I am pleased that we are gathered here to share thoughts on interfaith engagement.

Rising Religiosity

2 According to recent Gallup Global Surveys, 84% of respondents from 114 countries have stated that religion continues to have a major role in their lives. Singapore is no exception to this global trend.

3 Religion is a positive force. It provides meaning, solace, a sense of purpose and moral guidance. However, while pursuing our faiths, we should always be mindful of the fact that others will have different religious views. Aggressive proselytisation and intolerance can potentially harm community cohesion. The formation of religious enclaves and insistence on exclusivity may separate us further. It would be even worse when politicians or people with political agendas hijack religion for their own parochial objectives.

4 Even in Singapore, we have seen examples of how careless comments by religious leaders can create misunderstandings. Fortunately, the religious leaders concerned were willing to apologise for their careless comments, and the other religious groups were willing to accept the apologies. Such gracious and mature acts of public courtesy and mutual respect helped to quickly diffuse tensions. The immediate call by religious leaders across the different faiths to uphold respect for our religious diversity also calmed potentially tricky situations, and set the tone for healthy interfaith relations.

5 We must always bear in mind the fragility of racial and religious relations. As a multi-racial and multi-religious society, we must respect and protect the common spaces we share.

## Misuse of Religion

6 In each of our faiths, we will find teachings which underscore the universal values of humanity, compassion and forgiveness. Unfortunately, all too often, we have witnessed religious conflicts in many parts of the world resulting in fragmented communities living in fear and suspicion of one another. At first glance, religious differences come across as the obvious fault line. However, there is always a far more complex combination of factors, such as political instability, economic deprivation, social division, systemic discrimination, and radical influences, involved in these communal tensions. It is an incredible irony and human tragedy that people take up arms, to deprive and kill, in the name of religion. This appears to be a fact of history that we are doomed to repeat *ad infinitum*.

## Ground Up Inter-Faith Initiatives

7 While Government policies and legislation can help maintain peace, it is ground-up initiatives that truly promote healthy exchange among religious groups and strengthen inter-religious harmony. To drive such initiatives, the National Steering Committee of Racial and Religious Harmony was formed. Apex ethnic and religious leaders come together to discuss collaborations, address issues that impact community relations, and, where necessary, offer their joint perspectives to the Government. Through regular dialogues, our religious leaders have forged closer ties and play a significant role in fostering interfaith understanding and trust among our multi-religious communities.

8 At the community level, the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCCs) bring together members from different faith groups, to develop mutual understanding and build networks of trust. For example, during the month of Ramadan, IRCCs encourage non-Muslim residents to join our Muslim friends at the mosques and in the breaking of fast to appreciate the significance of the occasion.

9 Religious groups have also come together to address social needs. An exemplary initiative last year saw the Singapore Buddhist Lodge, Jamiyah Singapore, Hindu Endowments Board and the Taoist Federation working together, to hand out more than \$400,000 worth of education bursaries to needy students of all races and religions.

10 Besides collaborations, it is heartening to see interfaith engagement gaining momentum on the ground. OnePeople.sg has been working hand-in-hand with the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) to hold bi-monthly interfaith dialogues, which attract members of diverse religious groups. These dialogues provide deeper insights on the key tenets of different faiths, clarify contentious issues, and convey universal values. They have proven particularly useful in forging friendships between members from different religious groups.

### Moving Forward

11 As a nation, we have come far in building bridges among our different religious communities, but there is still more that can be done. As leaders, we need to cascade inter-religious engagement to the ground, and involve

more of our people to interact with each other, build connections and nurture friendships. In this regard, we can draw inspirations from the experiences of our international guest speakers here with us today.

12 Imam Ashafa and Pastor James come from a different environment from ours. Hailing from Nigeria, the two gentlemen were involved in the civil unrest in the 1990s when racial and religious tensions between Christians and Muslims were high. Once in opposite religious camps, these two men overcame deep personal losses and resolved their differences to become strong advocates of religious harmony. Through promoting grassroots peace-building initiatives, as well as conducting interfaith engagement through peaceful and constructive dialogue, the duo's sharing today will certainly provide us with many exemplary instances to draw lessons from.

13 Today's Conference is a continuation of our efforts to encourage greater thought and action towards promoting interfaith understanding in Singapore. I commend OnePeople.sg for initiating this effort, and hope the exchange of ideas at this Conference will spark more interfaith initiatives, not only in the academic arena, but also at the grassroots level. Together, we must continue working for a deeper commitment towards sustainable respect for our religious diversity. For peace and harmony to prevail in our country, we need these values to be ingrained in the Singapore spirit.

14 I wish you a fruitful Conference ahead. May we all be blessed with peace. Thank you.