

## **BEYOND DIFFERENCES: A CIVIC CONVERSATION ON RACE AND RELIGION**

**FRIDAY, 28 JULY 20223**

**2:00PM TO 4:00PM**

### **Opening Remarks by REACH Deputy Chairperson SPS Eric Chua**

1. To start off, I really want to compliment everyone for taking time off for being here today. It's really wonderful to see all of you actively engaging with issues, and not just any other issues, but actually sensitive ones like race and religion. These topics can sometimes be quite challenging to discuss but it is important that we do so because we live in Singapore, and we all know that Singapore is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural society. Multi-religious as well.
2. Do you know that Singapore is one of the most – and I use this superlative quite deliberately – most religiously diverse society in the world? Even though we are just 5 point something million of us on this island, we are one of the most religiously diverse. That means we have the most number of religions in any given society around the world at this point.
3. According a National Youth Council (NYC) survey that was done in 2021 two years ago, about 1 in 2 young persons indicated that they would be willing to participate in conversations on race issues if they have the skills and know enough about the topic. NYC<sup>1</sup> therefore developed a toolkit to help young people start their own structured conversations with each other. The conversations are designed to deepen our understanding and appreciation of different races and religions. Since this toolkit was launched last year, about more than 1,000 young persons have benefitted from such difficult, but necessary conversations<sup>2</sup>.
4. I understand that many of us, in fact all of you, are perhaps digital natives, and you are very comfortable communicating and conversing in the online space; and that's where you actually thrive in in terms of communications. Online platforms are great platforms to air our views, but there are also disadvantages. Because of the anonymity it offers, people feel that they can say whatever they want without a sense of responsibility and reflection in being thoughtful about the consequences that these conversations might bring. Discussions can very easily turn into an echo chamber, where people alike and of similar opinions just come together and sometimes intentionally or unintentionally cancel out other opinions or other view points.
5. That is why face-to-face discussions on difficult topics are still important because they then allow us to have deeper conversations with those around the table and understand the context behind their different perspectives. These valuable insights are sometimes actually lost when we communicate these ideas online.
6. Today, it will be your turn to engage in deeper conversations about race and religion with everyone around the table using the toolkit. Take this chance to share your personal stories and experiences and explore each other's cultural practices. Always remember that your own unique experiences are yours and yours only, and that you have every right to share

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<sup>1</sup> The toolkit was developed in collaboration with self-help groups Bold at Work and The Whitehatters,

<sup>2</sup> *Beneath the Surface* a civic conversation toolkit on race and religion was launched by the National Youth Council (NYC) in November 2022. The toolkit is the first in a series of three. The next toolkit on local-foreigner relations will be launched in later 2023, followed by Bridging The Intergenerational Divide at a later date.

them with the person across the table. I encourage you to at the same time be curious and ask questions, but do so respectfully, empathetically, and also be sensitive to others around you.

7. It is only through respectful and sincere sharing we will be able to deepen our bonds with each other. At the end of this year, the National Youth Council will be developing another toolkit to facilitate discussions on local versus foreigner relations, which will incorporate role-playing board game elements, conversation cards, and scenarios on the local-foreigner landscape right here in Singapore.
8. During these discussions, you may be left with more questions than answers about how to navigate these complex issues regarding race and religion. While we may not have all the answers, Mr Thambyrajah as well as myself will share some perspective. During the panel discussions later, I really encourage you to ask away in all the questions that you may have and we will try our best to answer not just as policymakers or people who have been in the non-profit as well as community space, but also to share our views as fellow citizens.
9. I would also like to take the chance to thank the facilitators who are with us today. We know that our young persons will carry Singapore forward into the future. We know that all of you are invested in and are aware of the different issues that is happening in Singapore right now, and that you are taking steps to be involved in the world around you. In fact, in another survey by the NYC, they found that 4 in 5 young people surveyed have participated in at least one civic activity in the past year. Your facilitators themselves are young persons like yourself. They are SINDA volunteers who have taken the time to be trained and lead difficult conversations such as the one you will be having this speech. I hope that many of you, like them, would contribute back to society with your own talents, time and interests. The NYC also has various initiatives in place to support a range of opportunities for young people of different age groups to take meaningful action, such as the Youth Action Challenge and the newly set up youth panels. This is all very exciting for NYC and us here at MCCY because we are going to bring some of the youth panel ideas right into the heart of parliament and have them debated right at the highest legislative chamber of this land.
10. To end off, this event is also co-organised by REACH, the government feedback and engagement unit. I am sure many of you here may have a special interest in national and social issues, and that's why you're here this afternoon. I encourage you to check out REACH's various events and share your views with us, so that we can all collectively build a better, more caring, and more inclusive Singapore.
11. I hope that this event would be an enjoyable and meaningful one – no event is complete if it's not fun -, and I look forward to hearing from all of you as I go around the tables later. I encourage all of you to ask away. Let's have a lively and vibrant discussion in the panel segment later. Thank you very much.