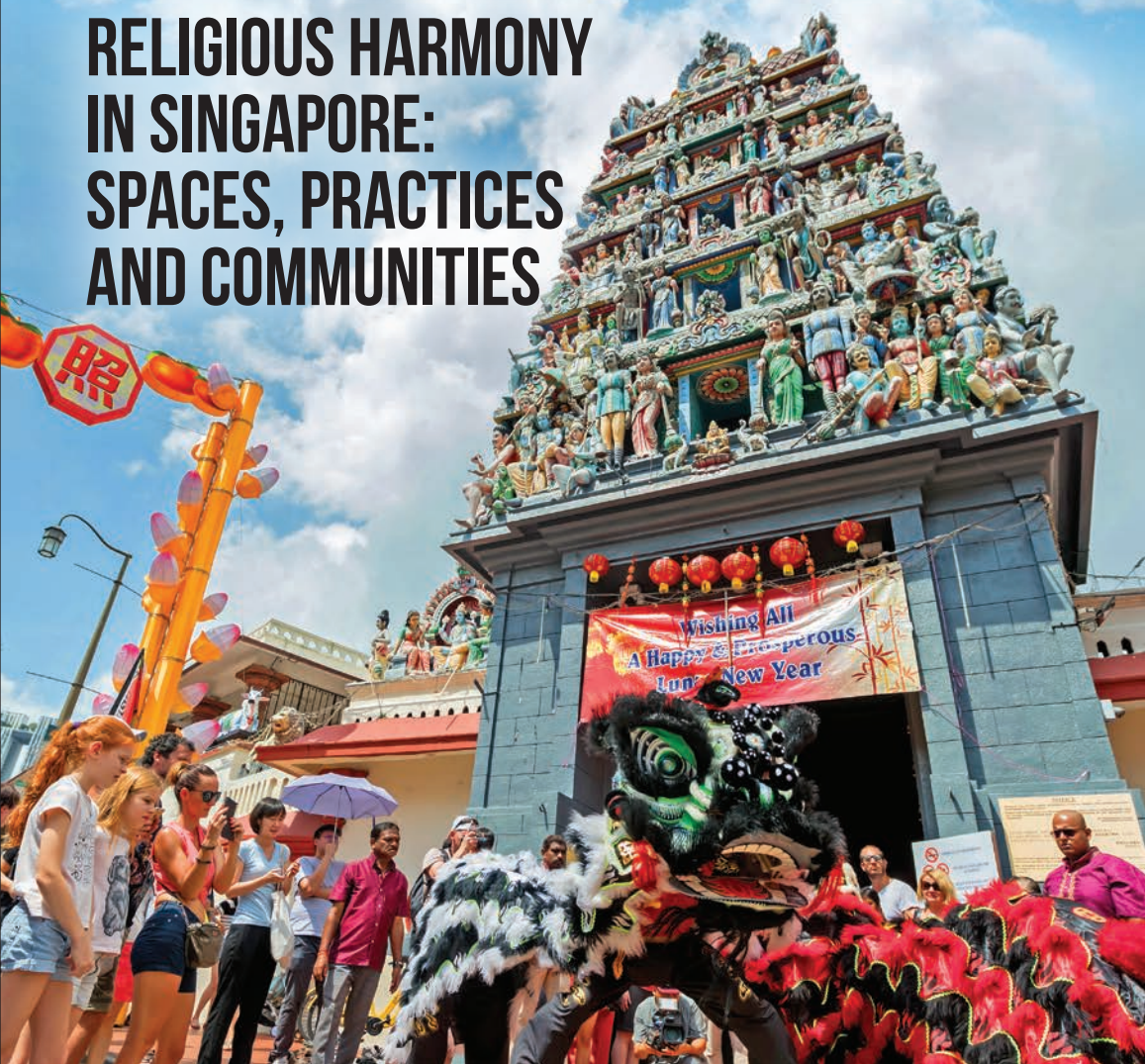# URBAN SYSTEMS STUDIES

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE: SPACES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE: SPACES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES

URBAN SYSTEMS STUDIES

RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE: SPACES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES

CENTRE for LiveableCities SINGAPORE

Singapore, 2020

CENTRE for LiveableCities SINGAPORE   CLC is a division of **MND SINGAPORE**

Set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, the Centre for Liveable Cities has as its mission "to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities". The Centre's work spans four main areas—Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms, and Advisory. Through these activities, the Centre hopes to provide urban leaders and practitioners with the knowledge and support needed to make our cities better. For more information, please visit www.clc.gov.sg.

Research Advisors for the Centre's Urban Systems Studies are experts who have generously provided their guidance and advice. However, they are not responsible for any remaining errors or omissions, which remain the responsibility of the author(s) and the Centre.

Cover photo:
Chinese New Year celebration at Sri Mariamman Temple.
Image courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

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FOREWORD

Singapore is one of the most religiously diverse nations in the world. One of our founding premises is that for our nation to survive and prosper, everyone, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background, must be given their fair share of space and opportunities in Singapore. We take pride in this diversity not only for what it means to be a Singaporean but also as a model we can share with others who are managing diversity in their midst. Our faith communities live and worship in a dense, urban environment. We celebrate the similarities we share, appreciate the differences that exist among us, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's religious traditions. Underlying what we have achieved thus far are years of effort by everyone, including our government. But we should never believe our work is done, as moulding a nation of diverse communities is always a work in progress.

Today in Singapore, it is not uncommon to see different faith communities coming together to help the less fortunate in our society. It speaks well of our desire to focus on our common interests and common pursuits for the good of our greater community. Their efforts show that religion serves a social as well as a spiritual function. This helps to foster a culture of charity and voluntary work, which pulls us closer together as a community. Many have volunteered to clean up places of worship and give them a fresh coat of paint and some others have brought food and other items to those in need. There are indications that what we hold dear as a nation is now being embraced by younger Singaporeans. Hence, I am cheered to see younger Singaporeans taking the initiative to know each other's traditions and faiths.

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And yet at the same time, we are facing an increasingly complex world of rising religiosity, increasing migration and the pervasive presence of social media. Hence it is ever more important for Singaporeans to not only understand Singapore's journey of maintaining religious harmony but to be pro-active in developing new ways of maintaining our community values and spirit. *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities* is timely in documenting the lessons in the planning and governance of religious harmony in Singapore, covering aspects such as planning for places of worship, managing religious practices in common spaces and cultivating community networks in building inter-faith trust. This book will be of interest to policymakers, planners, community leaders, academics, students, and even the lay reader who is interested in the challenges and innovations in planning for a diverse, multi-cultural city.

Dr Yaacob Ibrahim
Former Minister for Community Development and Sports and
Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs

PREFACE

The Centre for Liveable Cities' research in urban systems unpacks the systemic components that make up the city of Singapore, capturing knowledge not only within each of these systems, but also the threads that link these systems and how they make sense as a whole. The studies are scoped to venture deep into the key domain areas the Centre has identified under the Singapore Liveability Framework, attempting to answer two key questions: how Singapore has transformed itself into a highly liveable city over the last five decades, and how Singapore can build on our urban development experience to create knowledge and urban solutions for current and future challenges relevant to Singapore and other cities through applied research. *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities* is the latest publication from the Urban Systems Studies (USS) series.

The research process involves rigorous engagement with our stakeholder agencies, and numerous oral history interviews with Singapore's urban pioneers and leaders to gain insights into development processes. The tacit knowledge drawn out through this process allows us to glean useful insights into Singapore's governance and development planning and implementation efforts. As a body of knowledge, the Urban Systems Studies, which cover aspects such as water, transport, housing, industrial infrastructure and sustainable environment, reveal not only the visible outcomes of Singapore's development, but the complex support structures of our urban achievements.

The Centre would like to thank Dr Yaacob Ibrahim and all those who have contributed their knowledge, expertise and time to make this publication possible. I wish you an enjoyable read.

Khoo Teng Chye
Executive Director
Centre for Liveable Cities

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE SINGAPORE LIVEABILITY FRAMEWORK

The Singapore Liveability Framework is derived from Singapore's urban development experience and is a useful guide for developing sustainable and liveable cities.

The general principles under **Integrated Master Planning and Dynamic Urban Governance** are reflected in the themes found in *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities.*

High Quality of Life

Competitive Economy

Sustainable Environment

Integrated Master Planning and Development
- Think Long Term
- Fight Productively
- Build in Flexibility
- Execute Effectively
- Innovate Systemically

Dynamic Urban Governance
- Lead with Vision and Pragmatism
- Build a Culture of Integrity
- Cultivate Sound Institutions
- Involve the Community as Stakeholders
- Work with Markets
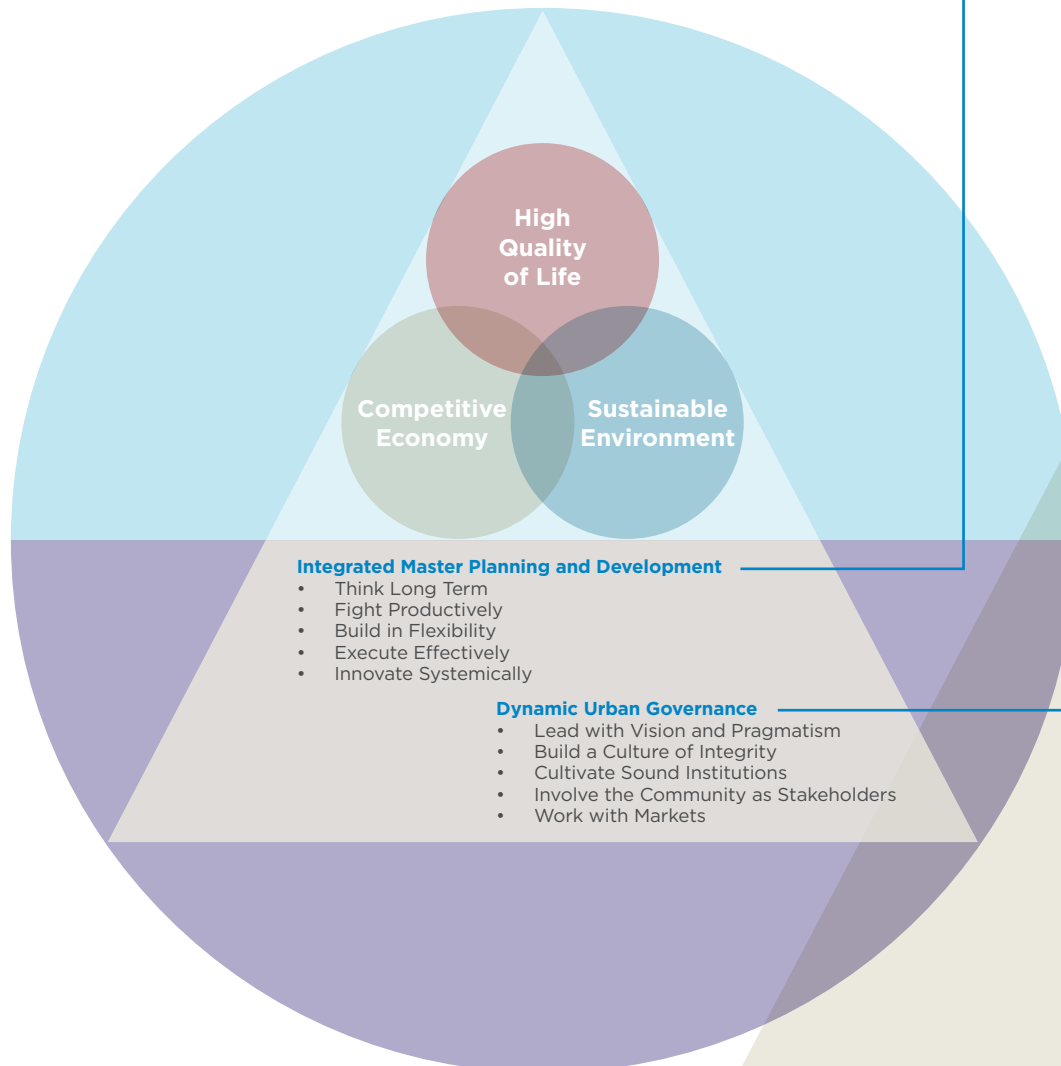
Integrated Master Planning and Development

Innovate Systemically

Innovations in planning and policies have allowed the religious needs of the population to be met, despite Singapore's limited land. The Mosque Building Fund (MBF), subsequently the Mosque Building and MENDAKI Fund (MBMF), has allowed the government to remain secular while contributing to the religious needs of Malay/Muslim Singaporeans. The MBF/MBMF has provided the Malay/Muslim community a steady and systematic source of funding for the building and upgrading of mosques as well as socio-religious support programmes. It also allowed mosques to be upgraded systematically over the years to make them more accessible as the population ages.

The joint allocation of land for smaller temples to pool resources for a new temple, or combined temple, was effective for temples affected by resettlement to retain their practices and devotees. Setting aside land for the development of Places of Worship (PWs) hubs where multiple religious organisations belonging to the same religion are housed together in multi-storey development is also another planning innovation. As religious organisations from the same religion co-locate and share facilities such as car parks, Singapore's limited land resources will be better optimised.

(See Mosque Building Fund and Mosque Upgrading, p. 20; Combined Places of Worship, p. 25)

Dynamic Urban Governance

Build a Culture of Integrity

In planning and governing a city of people with diverse religions, having a culture of integrity and fairness by being impartial to all religious groups is critical and builds trust between the government and the people. In the resettlement period during Singapore's early nation years, the resettlement policy was impartial and clear-cut. While resettling religious sites was sensitive and challenging, resettlement officers evoked the "human touch" in engaging affected sites, and resettlement systematically continued to allow for urban development. Following resettlement, planning provisions were made for every new town to have PWs.

Religious organisations and PWs that are charities are regulated through the Charities Unit, which was established to ensure proper public accountability and good governance among charities. In applying to be an Institution of a Public Character, the charity has to ensure that its activities are beneficial to the community in Singapore as a whole, regardless of race, creed, belief or religion.

(See Resettlement of Religious Sites for Urban Renewal, p.14; Governance of Charities, p. 81)

Cultivate Sound Institutions

Having a strong rule of law has been fundamental to Singapore's success in becoming a highly liveable city, including the safeguarding of religious harmony. The freedom of religion, as enshrined in Singapore's Constitution, has allowed Singapore to grow into a cosmopolitan city welcoming of people of all religions. Singapore remains a secular state and ensures that religion and politics do not mix, which is key to preserving harmony. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act serves as a strong legislative tool for the government to respond swiftly in maintaining religious harmony as and when needed. Even though the Act has not been used since it came into effect, it is useful in setting the boundaries for religious activities in the multi-religious society of Singapore. In the fight against fake news, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act passed in 2019 gives the government more targeted powers to stop the spread of any falsehoods.

(See The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, p. 57; Emerging Challenges, p. 105)

Involve the Community as Stakeholders

In the planning and governance of religious matters, the government works closely with the community as stakeholders. Close partnership with religious and grassroots communities allows them to have a stake in issues that directly affect them. Religious leaders and groups are also in a better position to reach out to followers to convey any decisions or issues.

In looking at religious practices in common spaces, such as the burning of religious offerings in housing estates and managing traffic spillover from PWs, the authorities worked closely with religious groups. The Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles connect community stakeholders such as religious, ethnic, grassroots and community leaders, serving as local inter-faith platforms in every constituency to promote racial and religious harmony. The Community Engagement Programme further extended and deepened networks of trust and vigilance between different racial and religious communities across a variety of institutions such as schools, the media and businesses.

The government's "Many Helping Hands Approach" partners religious groups and other organisations in the provision of social services to needy people. This has allowed greater outreach to the vulnerable population in Singapore, particularly because many religious organisations and PWs are already actively running social service programmes.

(See Religious Practices in Common Spaces, p. 33; Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles, p. 61; Community Engagement Programme and SGSecure Community Network, p. 65; "Many Helping Hands" Approach, p. 76)

OVERVIEW

A Chinese temple with not just Buddhist and Taoist deities, but a Hindu sanctum and a Muslim *kramat* (shrine) as well.[1] Community breaking-fast sessions for Ramadan, the Islamic holy month, held in a church and a synagogue and attended by people from different faiths.[2] Volunteers from a Buddhist organisation serving as road marshals manning a partial road closure to give Muslims from a nearby mosque more space for Hari Raya Haji prayers.[3] These common scenes of diverse places of worship (PWs) and religious practices co-existing and even interacting with each other reflect religious harmony in Singapore. In a 2014 study, the US-based Pew Research Center named Singapore as the most religiously diverse country in the world. More than 10 religions could be found in Singapore with the major ones being Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. With a diverse multi-cultural population living in a dense urban environment, inter-religious harmony is hence critical for Singapore's liveability, quality of life and economic development as a city-state. The religious harmony that we see and experience today in Singapore is not a given, but achieved through careful planning, governance and multi-stakeholder efforts. *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities* aims to document the key lessons in the planning and governance of religious harmony in Singapore, with a focus on PWs and religious practices.

Loyang Tua Pek Kong Temple in Eastern Singapore that houses Buddhist and Taoist deities, a Hindu sanctum and a Muslim *kramat* (shrine). It has a dedicated area for each religion.
Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board.

CHAPTER 1

ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE— DIVERSE COMMUNITIES AND TURMOIL IN PRE-INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

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> " We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place: equal; language, culture, religion."

Lee Kuan Yew, Former Prime Minister of Singapore[4]

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE

Before 1819, there was an estimated population of about 200 persons in Singapore, consisting of a few Orang Laut families, about a hundred Muslim-Malay fisherfolks and a community of about 40 Chinese gambier and pepper cultivators.[5] There is also historical and archaeological evidence of Buddhism (and other Chinese religions) and Hinduism. An early place of worship is Shun Tian Gong, which was originally built in Malabar Street but moved to Albert Street in 1986 and then to Geylang in 1993.[6]

Following the arrival of Stamford Raffles and the establishment of Singapore as a free trading port in 1819, increased economic opportunities attracted migrants who established their religions and places of worship on the island. Chinese immigrants, mainly from South China, set up Chinese temples such as Heng Shan Ting (1828) and Thian Hock Keng (1842) by the Hokkiens, Wak Hai Cheng Bio (1826) by the Teochews, Fuk Tak Chi (1824) by the Cantonese and Hakkas, Fook Tet Soo Khek Temple (1844) by the Hakkas, and Tian Hou Gong on Beach Road (1857) by the Hainanese.[7] A government clerk Naraini Pillai who accompanied Raffles on his second visit to the island in 1819 established the Sri Mariamman Temple in 1827. The temple has been redeveloped several times to its current structure today with intricate sculptural work akin to temple architecture in India. Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka was established by philanthropist Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunied in 1820. It was originally a wooden-structured *surau* that was later replaced by a brick building in 1855.[8] During this period, Christianity also became evident in Singapore with the arrival of missionaries.

The first town plan of colonial Singapore—known as the Raffles Town Plan, or the Jackson Plan of 1828—provided a glimpse of early spatial patterns of different ethnic communities and their places of worship (PWs). The Jackson Plan attempted to allocate distinctive spaces in downtown Singapore for the ethnic communities and early PWs were established by different ethnic groups in their settlement areas. Churches such as Saint Andrew's Cathedral and the Armenian Church were built in European town; Chinese temples such as the Wak Hai Cheng Bio, Fuk Tak Chi and Sian Chai Kang Temple in Telok Ayer; mosques such as the Maarof Mosque, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque and Sultan Mosque in Kampong Glam; and the Sri Mariamman Temple and Chulia Mosque in today's South Bridge Road. It is, however, noteworthy that the division of ethnicities and corresponding spatial patterns of PWs were not cast in stone according to the Jackson Plan, as evident from the mixing of people. As Telok Ayer was the first landing point for immigrants, early communities built their PWs on the waterfront street facing the sea to express gratitude to their respective deities for safe passage through harsh voyages. One can also find diverse PWs in the area around Waterloo Street such as the Sri Krishnan Temple, Maghain Aboth Synagogue, Church of Saints Peter and Paul, and Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple. Despite the division of spaces, the ethnic communities respected and co-celebrated each other's religious and cultural festivals in everyday life.

Hand-coloured print of the plan of the Town of Singapore, 20th century, based on the 1828 engraving after the original by Lieutenant Philip Jackson in 1822.
Image courtesy of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

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Early places of worship established by immigrants: Armenian Church (left), Wak Hai Cheng Bio (top, right), Sri Mariamman Temple and Chulia Mosque (bottom, right).
Images courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

In the early decades of the 19th century, the colonial authorities adopted a policy of non-interference in managing the affairs, including the religious lives, of the ethnic communities. There were few restrictions and control on the building of PWs or their day-to-day functioning.[9] Public religious processions associated with festivals and customary practices were regular occurrences on the streets of Singapore. These resulted in discussions and debates in the English-language press, including complaints and protests by the Europeans, but the authorities did not ban or impose tight restrictions on such practices.[10]

In 1851, a major ethnic/religious conflict that was known as the Anti-Catholic riots broke out. It was the culmination of a series of disputes between members of the Chinese migrant community who had converted

to Roman Catholicism and those who had not. The main factors for the conflict were: (i) many Chinese who had previously been members of the secret society known as Tan Tae Hoe (Heaven and Earth Society) converted to Catholicism, which eroded the society's membership and challenged its power base, resulting in resentment against the Catholics, and (ii) Chinese Christian plantation owners were not part of the plantation networks controlled by the secret societies as they did not belong to secret societies and were perceived to be in competition with the interests of the societies. As a result of these factors, Tan Tae Hoe and other Chinese secret societies attacked and burnt plantations owned by Chinese Christians, disrupting their economic livelihoods. Eventually, the conflict was quelled through the mediation of Seah Eu Chin, a Chinese community leader and businessman who negotiated a settlement in which the non-Christian Chinese merchant community agreed to compensate affected Christian plantation owners for the damages. Despite the severity of the riot and constant requests from the jury to take action, then Governor of the Straits Settlements, William Butterworth, was reluctant to introduce stricter laws to regulate the activities of the secret societies.[11]

RUPTURES IN SOCIETY

After the end of the Second World War, a series of major ethnic/religious conflicts in pre-independent Singapore left a mark on Singapore's society, causing social unrest, injuries and deaths, and divided communities.

Maria Hertogh Riots

The Maria Hertogh Riots were a series of violent clashes that took place between 11 and 13 December 1950 over the custody of Maria Hertogh, a child born to a Dutch-Eurasian Catholic family but placed under the care of a Malay-Muslim family friend after Maria's father had been detained during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. After the Second World War, legal proceedings were carried out between Maria's biological and foster parents over her custody and later on over her marriage within the Malay-Muslim community. On 2 December 1950, the High Court ruled against Maria's marriage on the grounds that she was not of age. On 11 December 1950, which was to be the day of the court's hearing on the appeal for Maria's marriage, violent conflicts broke out and escalated. The conflicts resulted in 18 deaths, 173 injured, 191 damaged vehicles, and damages to personal properties in just three days.[12]

A large crowd of people breaking through the police cordon near the
Supreme Court during the Maria Hertogh Riots.
Image from the Kenneth Chia Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

1964 and 1969 Communal Riots

Violent communal clashes broke out between the Chinese and Malay
communities in July and September 1964, resulting in 36 deaths, about
600 injured and over 5,000 arrests. On 21 July 1964, a procession
celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday started in the Padang and was
attended by around 20,000 Malay-Muslims. Along the procession route,
clashes broke out between the Malay-Muslims and Chinese bystanders in
the Kallang area and at Kampong Soo Poo near Geylang. The escalation
of violence and destruction of property led to an island-wide curfew being
imposed until early August. In September 1964, riots again broke out after

the suspicious murder of a Malay trishaw rider opposite the Changi Market
at Geylang Serai, resulting in the Malays taking retaliatory action against
the Chinese. Violence spread to other parts of Singapore and another
island-wide curfew was imposed. The riots were largely stoked by rising
political tension between the People's Action Party (PAP) government
in Singapore and Malaysia's ruling Alliance Party, a coalition led by the
United Malays National Organisation (UMNO). The tension was due to
the perceived interference by the PAP in Malaysia's domestic affairs and
the Alliance Party's unhappiness with the PAP's stance that it would not
accord Malays in Singapore the special privileges, such as job quotas, that
their counterparts in Malaysia were receiving.[13] The celebration of Prophet
Muhammad's birthday had been a long-standing tradition in Singapore
and was trouble-free until 1964. Former Minister of Social Affairs Othman
Wok reflected:

> I believe the riot was planned; it did not start spontaneously. They were
> very smart to choose a religious procession so that if we had stopped
> it, we would be called anti-Muslim. The inflammatory communal and
> racial speeches made by Malaysian UMNO leaders worked up Malay
> sentiments in Singapore.[14]

After Singapore gained independence, another communal riot broke out
in May 1969 between the Chinese and Malay communities. The trigger
for the riot was the Malaysian general election results; the Chinese–
Malay riots that broke out in Malaysia spilt over to Singapore. Tensions
were heightened by rumoured atrocities committed against Malaysian
Chinese and biased treatment by the Malaysian Armed Forces. The
riot in Singapore resulted in four deaths and 80 injured. However, it
is noteworthy that even in the midst of the riots, it was common for
residents of different ethnicities in settlement areas to protect each other
regardless of their race or religion, as recounted by Benny Lim, former
Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs and National Development.[15]

Nevertheless, these major racial-religious conflicts demonstrated the
sensitive nature of race and religious issues and the ill effects of distrust
and disharmony within a multi-cultural society when amplified through
the lens of divisive politics. To this day, these conflicts serve as important
reminders of the importance of harmony between people of all races and
religions in the diverse nature of Singapore society.

EARLY INSTITUTIONS FOR RACE AND RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Two institutions in pre-independent Singapore that contributed to fostering race and religious harmony are the Inter-Religious Organisation and the Goodwill Committees.

Inter-Religious Organisation

The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), originally named Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru (renamed in 1961), was founded officially on 18 March 1949 with the support of several religious leaders and organisations, political figures and the then British colonial government. They included Reverend Dr Hobart Baumann Amstutz (then Bishop of the Methodist Church of Malaya which then included Singapore) and Maulana Abdul Aleem Siddique, an eminent Mendicant Sufi missionary who travelled extensively to set up missionary associations (jamiyah) in India, Malaya, South Africa and Mauritius. The latter is generally acknowledged to be a key initiator of the IRO's formation. The early IRO's aims and mission were to inculcate the spirit of friendship and cooperation among the leaders and followers of different religions, and to give mutual respect, assistance and protection among the adherents of different religions.[16] The first six religions represented on the IRO were Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism.

In the early 1950s, the IRO requested the colonial government to declare public holidays in Singapore to celebrate the birthdays of Buddha and Prophet Muhammad, as a means of recognising local religions in Singapore. The IRO also played a part in calming communities during the Maria Hertogh Riots by condemning the riots in a statement jointly signed by Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, Theosophist, and Quaker leaders. During the 1964 communal riots, the IRO urged the people of Singapore to work for the national good by issuing statements that were broadcast on radio, newspapers and television. It also promoted inter-faith understanding by giving weekly speeches on the different religions. IRO members also made visits to console families and those injured during the riots.[17]

When the IRO was founded, its constitution provided that the council would be composed of Muslims, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists, Sikhs, Jews, and other religious groups. The

founding members of the IRO also had the foresight to make provisions for the growth of IRO membership to include followers of minority faiths. As Singapore became more religiously diverse, more religious representatives joined the IRO, including Zoroastrianism (1961), Taoism and the Baha'i Faith (1996), and Jainism (2006).[18]

As expressed by anthropologist Lai Ah Eng:[19]

> *The Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore (IRO) is an exceptional structure within that [Singapore's multi-religious] landscape. It is an expression of the belief held by individuals, representatives and constituencies of various faiths that the "inter-religious" is a necessary field of interaction and which requires ongoing joint attention, and that commonality is the basis for joint action.[20]*

Minister for Labour Jek Yeun Thong, with members of the Queenstown Goodwill Committee, visits kampongs in the Jervois Road area to distribute food to riot victims.
Image from the Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

CHAPTER 2

Goodwill Committees

During the communal riots of 1964, Goodwill Committees, made up of racially diverse community leaders, were established in all 51 constituencies to calm the situation.[21] The committees comprised community leaders, village headmen, heads of clans and local leaders, whose jobs were to help mend race relations that had been torn apart during the riots. The committees helped to gauge ground sentiments, allay residents' fears, advise people not to spread or heed rumours, and even accompany frightened residents to the markets or schools.[22] The effectiveness of Goodwill Committees in promoting social cohesion and political participation led to their formalisation into Citizens' Consultative Committees within a year.[23] Today, these committees come under the purview of the People's Association and are the umbrella bodies of grassroots organisations in Singapore.[24] The Goodwill Committees also formed the foundation for today's Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (see Chap. 4).

DECLARATION OF SINGAPORE'S INDEPENDENCE

On 9 August 1965, Singapore became an independent nation. In a press conference, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated:

> *We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. We will set the example. This is not a Malay nation; this is not a Chinese nation; this is not an Indian nation. Everybody will have his place: equal; language, culture, religion.*[25]

This simple, but firm statement set the foundation for the development of Singapore as a secular nation where everyone would be treated equally, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

The Freedom of Religion in Singapore was also enshrined in the Singapore Constitution, under Article 15, that every person would have the right to profess, practice and propagate his/her religion as long as it is not contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality.[26]

With a determination to become a multi-racial nation of equality, Singapore began its nation-building years. An early planning challenge it would face in maintaining equality among its diverse population was when some of its religious sites had to be resettled for urban redevelopment.

RESETTLEMENT OF RELIGIOUS SITES AND PLANNING FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP IN NEW TOWNS

> " I think one of the reasons that we have achieved good racial harmony is that in HDB estates, we provided religious sites for different faiths. The Chinese, Indian temples, mosques, and also churches. Always think of human needs—not just the practical ones, but the ones for human well-being and plan for it."

Liu Thai Ker, former CEO of the Housing & Development Board
and Chief Planner of the Urban Redevelopment Authority

RESETTLEMENT OF RELIGIOUS SITES FOR URBAN RENEWAL

To understand how places of worship (PWs) of different religions in Singapore co-exist harmoniously today, one must first look back at the early days of Singapore's urban renewal.

In Singapore's early nation-building years, the government's most pressing priorities were in providing housing for the population as well as urban renewal for economic development. The majority of the population was residing in overcrowded slums, squatters and villages, and the newly elected People's Action Party government was confronted with

problems of high unemployment, poor living conditions and widespread crime. Backed by the Home Ownership for the People Scheme launched in 1964 and the Land Acquisition Act (LAA) that took effect in 1966, large-scale resettlement and renewal took place as land was acquired for development, and people were resettled into new housing estates built by the Housing & Development Board (HDB). This inevitably impacted religious sites such as temples, *suraus* (Muslim prayer halls) and shrines, both makeshift and formal, in settlement areas across the island.

Just like any piece of land earmarked for acquisition under the LAA, land owners of religious sites were awarded compensation while non-land owners of religious structures on state land were given ex gratia compensation. Temples that were affected by resettlement had the choice of coming together, with a minimum of two to three temples, to take up a joint allocation of land elsewhere where they would not have to submit a tender or to purchase alternative sites on their own (see Combined Places of Worship, p. 25).[27] The HDB worked with the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) to move mosques and *suraus* that had to be resettled to newly built mosques in new towns. However, as explained by the then Ministry of Culture in a press release, given Singapore's land constraint, it was "not possible to have a temple for temple, a mosque for mosque, [or] a church for church substitution. This [was] uneconomic, impractical and, in the limited land space of Singapore, impossible".[28]

As widely documented, resettlement—and gaining the people's acceptance of its necessity—was not an easy process.[29] An additional layer of challenge in the resettlement of PWs was the sensitivity involved in handling sacred spaces—people saw such spaces as "the dwelling place of god(s) and a place in which one experiences god's presence".[30] Apart from people's social and emotional attachment to religious sites, the sacred nature of these sites added complexity to the resettlement operations. As such, the government adopted a clear stance based on the principles of pragmatism and fairness in resettling religious spaces for urban development, resettling only in situations where it was absolutely necessary and unavoidable. Former Minister of Social Affairs Othman Wok said:

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Progress in Singapore cannot be achieved without change. The numerous development schemes such as oil refinery, public housing, etc., have necessitated the [resiting] of burial grounds and religious institutions. These have affected all sections of the community. It is not a deliberate policy of the Singapore Government to demolish places of worship. The process of urban renewal has necessitated the moving of [the] population from one area to another. However, every effort has been made to ensure that the way of life of the people concerned is not adversely affected both economically and spiritually. In fact, the object of development is to upgrade the living standards of the population as a whole. In the process of development, the old must make way for the new and [the] demolition of some masjids, temples and churches affected by redevelopment is inevitable. Such action has only been resorted to when absolutely necessary and unavoidable.[31]

A representative case in point of the state being even-handed in engaging religious groups was the clearing of land for comprehensive urban redevelopment, which included the construction of Mass Rapid Transit stations in the Orchard Road corridor. Religious buildings that either had to move or be demolished included the Angullia Mosque, Bethesda Chapel, Chek Sian Tng, Sri Sivan Temple, and a Sikh temple at Kirk Terrace.[32] Former Senior Minister of State for National Development Tan Eng Liang stated:

The resettlement policy is clear-cut, irrespective of religions, irrespective of owners and irrespective of organisations.[33]

Laws and principles aside, what former HDB resettlement officer Yeo Eng Chuan called the "human touch" was very important when resettling religious sites. He said:

I mean definitely there is resistance. But what we need to do is that we have to talk to them, to be fair to them, we have to give them time to move out; we cannot just ask them to move out overnight...Actually, this human touch we call it in layman's term—ulu tarik [Malay for "pull from a distance"]. In other words, sometimes I let go a little bit, but I pull too. As a resettlement officer, we know the target date. So we always keep certain months, a few months' buffer.[34]

Maintaining an attitude of respect and professionalism helped resettlement officers when working with religious groups to handle the resettlement of the sacred elements of religious sites. Yeo elaborated:

When we want them (resettlement workers) to move the deities out, a bit pantang [colloquial for "superstitious"] for some of them. We have Indian, we have Malay, we have Chinese...What we do is that when we go and resettle religious place, I think we shouldn't talk nonsense. Whether you believe or you don't believe, you respect.[35]

Similarly, Kwek Sian Choo, then Head, Land Management, Urban Redevelopment Authority, recalled the intricacies involved when handling cases of PWs in the central area:

You have to be very sensitive. Before the expiring date of the Notice to Quit to deliver vacant possession of the site, you have to go there and observe the site, whether do they increase activity or decrease activity on site. You have to observe whether there are more devotees or they increase their activities within the premises before they vacate.[36]

Despite the urgent need to make space for urban development, the government, while firm on executing the LAA, showed some flexibility when it came to facilitating the resettlement of PWs. When the government urgently required sites, temples that had taken up a joint allocation were allowed to erect temporary structures for worshippers on the allocated site while construction of the new temple was ongoing.[37] Time extensions were given when possible. In exceptional cases, the government would help religious groups look for suitable sites. In the case of the resettlement of the Sikh community's Central Temple, the government helped to look for a suitable site as it was the main Sikh temple catering for all sects.[38] It should also be noted that despite extensive resettlement work, there were PWs, such as the Former Siong Lim Temple (now Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery) and the Masjid Omar Kampong Melaka that were not affected by resettlement.

LESSONS FROM RESISTANCE TO RESETTLEMENT

Opening of the new Central Sikh Temple at Towner Road in 1986.
Image from the Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

Even though the majority of the affected PWs eventually accepted the need to resettle, there were rare cases that highlighted the challenge of resettling sacred religious sites and the importance of pragmatism, fairness and the "human touch".

An example was the resettlement of the Sikh community's Central Temple in 1978. The temple community had rejected the government's prior resettlement offers of Albert Street and Manila Street. After this, 750 members of the community met and passed a resolution, which was then sent to then President Henry Sheares and Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew, asking the government to preserve the temple (as evidence that it was treating all religious groups equally), protect the religious rights and interests of the Sikh community, and allow the temple to remain on Queen Street. In May 1978, PM Lee met with nine Sikh community leaders to emphasise that all religions were and would continue to be treated equally. However, Singapore's progress through redevelopment had to go on and this included the demolition of religious sites. The Sikh leaders agreed with PM Lee that there had been no discrimination against the Sikh community in Singapore, and a spokesman for the group expressed confidence that the matter would soon be resolved amicably "as the Sikh community want[ed] also to contribute to the progress of the nation".[39]

Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as guest of honour for the "Tribute to Him" ceremony by the Sikh Community in 1990.
Image from the Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

The Central Temple eventually moved out into a temporary site until their new temple in Towner Road was ready in 1986.[40] This case illustrated the importance of being impartial to all religious groups, the "human touch" involved in helping the affected group to understand the need to resettle, and the pragmatic way that the government dealt with the issue to pave the way for urban redevelopment.

MOSQUE BUILDING FUND AND MOSQUE UPGRADING

The Al-Ansar Mosque was built in 1981 under the Mosque Building Fund.
Image from the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura Collection, courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

In the early days of resettlement and development during the 1970s, there was an urgent need to raise funds to build mosques in new estates. Muslim community leaders in Toa Payoh, a new satellite town at that time, decided to go door to door to collect funds for a new mosque. However, while the community there was willing to contribute, their progress was slow and the donations gathered were insufficient.[41]

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew soon found out that while most PWs had been successfully rebuilt soon after resettlement, it was not quite the same for mosques as the economic status of the Malays was still weak at that time, and this position was not politically tenable.[42] As Singapore had always been a secular state, the government could not fund the construction of PWs as a matter of policy; the community had to raise its own funds.[43] In 1974, PM Lee invited members from the MUIS, Malay Members of Parliament (MPs) and Ministers, including then MUIS President Buang Siraj, Mufti Syed Isa bin Mohammad bin Semait, Minister of Social Affairs Othman Wok and Parliamentary Secretary for Education Ahmad Mattar to the Istana for a meeting. In the meeting, PM Lee expressed concern about the ability of the Malay/Muslim community to raise funds to build mosques in new housing estates. After understanding the difficulties of the Malay/Muslim community, he proposed that every salaried Muslim employee contribute towards the development of mosques through the Central Provident Fund.[44, 45]

The meeting led to the establishment of the Mosque Building Fund (MBF) the following year. On 19 August 1975, the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) Bill was passed by Parliament to provide for the establishment of the MBF.[46] Under the MBF, every working Muslim in Singapore, including foreign workers and permanent residents, had to contribute S$0.50 a month (regardless of salary level) for mosque building with the right to opt out.[47] With the help of the MBF, Toa Payoh residents soon witnessed the inauguration of the Muhajirin Mosque on April 1977.[48]

The MBF rate was revised to S$1 a month in 1977 due to rising construction costs.[49] In 1984, the MBF was redesignated as the Mosque Building and MENDAKI Fund (MBMF) where a rate of S$1.50 (revised to S$2 in 1991) was collected monthly and a portion channelled towards MENDAKI efforts. The Yayasan MENDAKI (Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community) is a pioneer self-help group formed in 1982 to provide educational and developmental programmes for disadvantaged Malay/Muslim children.[50] The MBMF was subsequently revised in 1995, 2005, 2009 and 2016, where contributions were pegged to income levels. The MBMF's role was also further refined in 2009 to support religious education initiatives, as well as to include upgrading and revitalising older mosques.[51] The revisions of the contribution rate were due to an expanding Muslim population and the escalating cost of education and construction, and hence there was a need to ensure the availability of funds to support the growing socio-religious needs of the Malay/Muslim community.[52]

In 2009, the Mosque Upgrading Programme (MUP) was launched by the MUIS to renovate and improve existing mosques, increase prayer spaces as well as provide barrier-free facilities for congregants. A key feature of the MUP was the installation of elderly-friendly facilities such as wheelchair ramps and lifts in light of an ageing population. A function hall was also added to newer mosques that could be rented for events like weddings and celebrations, serving as a source of revenue for the mosques. For the older mosques, there were some challenges in conducting upgrading works. Yaacob Ibrahim, former Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, recounted:

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MOSQUE BUILDING FUND AND MOSQUE UPGRADING

Continued...

There is a mosque in Chai Chee, called [Al]-Ansar Mosque. It was built at the side of [the] hill and to access the main prayer hall one had to climb several steps. When we were younger it was not a problem to get to the main prayer hall. But now with an elderly population, most of the congregants would occupy the space at the foot of the staircase leading to congestion in that area. And there were no lifts then in our mosques. Hence we decided to rebuild the entire mosque to make it accessible to all congregants. We kept the original minaret and added several new features including a lift.[53]

The MUP was funded through the MBMF and money raised from the community. Since its introduction, 27 mosques have been upgraded. Eleven of these mosques have each expanded their prayer spaces by between 300 and 1,500 spaces to provide a total of 7,700 additional prayer spaces. These additional prayer spaces from existing mosques and prayer spaces provided by four new mosques built since 2009 have helped meet the increasing demand for prayer spaces over the years.[54]

Originating as a simple idea for the Muslim/Malay community to raise sufficient money for mosque building, the innovative policy of the MBF, and subsequently, the MBMF has ensured

that the Malay/Muslim community will continue to have a steady and systematic source of funding for future mosques or upgrading of existing ones as well as socio-religious support programmes. The MBMF was also key in allowing mosques to be upgraded to make them more accessible as the population ages. The MBF/MBMF has shown an avenue for meeting the religious needs of Malay/Muslim Singaporeans within the framework of a secular state.

The Al-Ansar Mosque was renovated under the Mosque Upgrading Programme and reopened in 2015 with a larger prayer space and handicap-friendly facilities. Other new features included multi-purpose classrooms, an auditorium, a heritage wall, a family prayer area and a library.
Image courtesy of Dunner99.

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The resettlement of sacred sites of worship was a challenging and sensitive issue due to people's social, emotional and spiritual ties to these places. Even though people were resistant to varying degrees, eventually they were able to accept the necessity of resettlement for urban development. The government was pragmatic about resettlement— it had to be carried out in order for urban redevelopment to take place. A fair resettlement policy and being able to evoke the "human touch" in communicating with affected groups were key enablers to the resettlement process and in alleviating the impact of resettlement on affected people.

PLANNING FOR PLACES OF WORSHIP IN NEW TOWNS

PWs in Singapore are planned meticulously to optimise land use and minimise disamenities. In the planning of new towns, the government safeguards land for use as PWs. PWs are generally located near or within neighbourhoods in HDB towns for the convenience of worshippers, and are planned meticulously to optimise land while taking into consideration the character of the surroundings to achieve a good built environment. Alongside other town amenities such as shops, supermarkets, schools, library, community centres, and sports and recreation facilities, PWs are planned as social amenities.

Each land parcel for PWs is released for tender by the State and is only open for tender to a particular religious group. For example, bids by Christian or Hindu groups cannot be placed for a site for a Chinese temple. Under the MBF/MBMF arrangement, all mosque sites are allocated to the MUIS at a price determined by the chief valuer, rather than tendered in the open market.

Planning standards guiding the minimum provision of PWs are derived in the same way as for other town amenities. Factors taken into consideration by planners in drawing up planning guidelines include the potential catchment size (i.e., number of new Dwelling Units being injected), adequacy of existing worship/prayer spaces as well as space requirements for the different religious groups.

The URA and the HDB ensure that the religious needs of the population are met by planning for PWs in each town alongside other town amenities. These agencies also take great care to ensure that PWs are well-integrated into the wider built environment through development control guidelines.

Development Guidelines for Places of Worship

PWs, like other town amenities, are also guided by the URA's development control guidelines to ensure desired overall planning outcomes and a good built environment. The allowable gross plot ratio is dependent on site conditions, traffic situation, impact of the PW on nearby developments, and requirements by other government agencies.[55] Religious symbols such as crosses, minarets or statues may not be overly large such that they become a dominant feature of the PW; generally, they must be kept no taller than the allowable number of storeys and if mounted on the roof, the religious symbol cannot be higher than 5 m from the roof level.[56]

To ensure that PWs retain their core function as a worship space, at least 50% of the total proposed gross floor area (GFA) of the building shall be used for praying only, while the remaining GFA may be used for ancillary functions such as religious classrooms or the priest/caretaker's room. Up to 10% of the GFA may be used for non-religious ancillary activities (e.g., library, meeting room, childcare/kindergarten).[57]

Combined Places of Worship

Temples affected by resettlement were encouraged to combine to take up a joint allocation of land by the HDB and build a new temple elsewhere. The first combined temple, the Wu He Miao (Five-Combined Temple) in Toa Payoh Lorong 7, was an initiative of five different temples originally scattered around rural Toa Payoh that served different Chinese communities who worshipped different gods. When these temples were asked to move for the development of Toa Payoh New Town, the temple committees of all five temples gathered to work out a common solution as the costs of constructing new temples and purchasing new plots of

land were overwhelming.[58] They decided to merge the contributions of their respective devotees and collectively submitted a plan to the HDB to purchase a joint-site for a new temple in order to maintain the worship of their respective temple's deities. The HDB gave its approval and the Wu He Miao was completed in 1974. The temples were independent of one another despite sharing the same building; each temple had a separate room, its own doorway, altar for its gods, and incense burner.[59] This decision to merge was lauded by the devotees of the various temples and also received support from Cheong Yuen Chee, then MP for Toa Payoh, and Chan Chee Seng, then MP for Jalan Besar.[60]

Combined temples consisted of three temples on average, but could have been made up of up to 12 temples. When temple lands were affected by resettlement in Tampines in 1982, then MP for Tampines Phua Bah Lee proposed that the 10 affected temples set up an organising committee to build a united temple.[61] He managed to successfully persuade the various temple heads to combine and purchase a new site, known as the Tampines Chinese Temple today. There are currently about 300 former Chinese rural temples that have merged into 64 combined temples. Similarly, for Hindu temples, as many as 13 of them merged into four in the mid-1990s. This was in response to a call by the government, which had noticed that the Hindus were overstretched in trying to raise funds to build temples.[62]

Temples sharing the same plot of land have to work out differences and find ways to accommodate one another, such as holding celebrations and rituals without disturbing the other temples within the same building. Nevertheless, the joint allocation of land for smaller temples to pool resources for a new temple was effective for temples affected by resettlement to retain their practices and devotees.

Similar to Chinese and Hindu temples, some churchs have pooled their resources to overcome problems of land scarcity and high construction costs.[63] One such example is the Yishun Christian Church, where Anglicans and Lutherans collaborated to build a S$4.5-million church in Yishun in 1985. In this church, there were separated Anglican and Lutheran services and a joint parish committee coordinated the separate and combined uses.[64] A more recent initiative in co-locating and cost-sharing is the Jurong Christian Church, which houses six Protestant churches of different denominations. The Lutheran Church spearheaded this project, with the Renewal Christian Church and the New Life Baptist Church

Jurong Combined Temple, a combined temple with six constituent temples—five in one building (note the plaques showing the name of constituent temples that are displayed above the altar) and the sixth temple in another building.
Image courtesy of Esmond C.M. Soh.

contributing to the construction of the S$24.5-million hub. This hub is also currently rented out to the Jurong Tamil Methodist Church, Bible Mission Church and Hearts Alive. The church hub was allowed to raise its plot ratio to test the feasibility of the concept and was also given an increased allowance for its height to provide enough headroom to give worshippers a sense of being in a service hall.[65] To minimise disamenities such as traffic jams and noise from congregants, the managing team for the church implemented measures such as arranging for services to start at different timings.[66]

Given Singapore's limited land and high land prices, the combined PW (or hub concept) has allowed smaller and medium-sized religious groups to have a place to carry out their religious activities.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA OF TENDERERS FOR LAND ZONED FOR PLACE OF WORSHIP

In 2015, the Ministry of National Development (MND) initiated a review of the land tender framework. The review concluded in 2018, when a new tender framework for Place of Worship Land was released, stipulating that only religious groups that actively contribute to the community and have a genuine need for worship space can bid for PW land. This new framework aims to ensure that Singaporeans' religious and worship needs are met while ensuring optimal use of Singapore's land resources. This review followed an event that occurred back in July 2014, when Eternal Pure Land, owned by the Australian-listed company Life Corporation, won a public tender site for a PW-zoned land with a bid of S$5.2 million. The 2,000 m[2] site in Fernvale Link, Sengkang, was located next to the upcoming Build-to-Order housing project, Fernvale Lea. The developer had planned to build a Chinese temple with an integrated columbarium to test out its automated columbarium system and operating model. Flat owners and prospective residents in the vicinity did not respond positively to the prospect of having a columbarium as being part of the temple. The feedback received ranged from concerns over the impact of a columbarium on the

resale value of their flat to feeling uneasy about living near the dead. More fundamentally, faith organisations and property experts were surprised that a commercial, profit-focused entity had been able to bid for land earmarked for religious use. The Sengkang West Citizens' Consultative Committee and the local MP held a three-hour closed-door dialogue to hear the residents' views. Representatives from Life Corporation, the URA and the HDB were also present. In January 2015, it was announced in Parliament that the project would no longer go ahead on the Fernvale Link site as the proposed use was not congruous with the planning intentions of land zoning. The MND then proceeded to sign a mutual termination agreement with Eternal Pure Land, with the government refunding the company the full land premium as well as associated taxes and duties paid for the site. In addition, to show support for the development of end-of-life services in our ageing society, a 0.1 ha site along Tampines Road, originally zoned for cemetery use in the URA's Master Plan 2014, was sold to the company at market value based on columbarium use to pilot the development of an automated columbarium system. A new tender was called for the Fernvale Link site for a Chinese temple, which attracted bids from four religious groups. The site was eventually awarded to the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society at a winning bid of S$6 million.[67]

This case thus served as a catalyst for the government to review its land tender framework, as it was the first time a commercial entity, independent from any religious organisation, won a parcel of land zoned for a PW. With the new framework in place, the potential problem of religious groups with genuine need for land being outbidded by corporate groups with financial resources can thus be averted. Although there have been arguments made for corporate and religious partnerships, religious leaders have stated that they would rather set their own conditions for religious space as guided by their respective religious doctrines, rather than risk having to serve the interest of for-profit shareholders.[68] Through extensive consultation with religious organisations, the revised land tender framework now ensures only religious groups that actively contribute to the community and have a genuine need for worship space can bid for land zoned PWs.

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A New Land Tender Framework for Places of Worship

Under the previous land tender framework, tenders for PW land were evaluated solely based on price. Under the new framework, tenderers will go through a two-stage process. The first stage ensures that only religious groups that actively contribute to the community and have a genuine need for worship space are eligible to proceed to Stage 2. Tenderers must meet all of the following criteria:

i. Registered for advancement of religion: Only entities that are established or constituted for the advancement of religion will be allowed to tender for PW land.

ii. Community support and involvement: Tenderers have to demonstrate that they have organised regular activities that involve/benefit the wider community in Singapore. Examples of such activities include religious, volunteer or community events.

iii. Need for space: Tenderers will need to demonstrate their need for the new dedicated site.

Tenderers shortlisted under Stage 1 will proceed to Stage 2 where an assessment will be made on whether the tenderer has adequate and sustainable local funding to finance the purchase and development of the site. This will be assessed based on the tenderer's submission of audited annual financial statements for the past three years, its tender bid for the land, the projected site development costs, and its declaration of sources of funding for the purchase of the land and site development. The site will be awarded to the qualified tenderer with the highest bid price.[69] The review of the PW land tender framework was made in close consultation with apex religious groups to better understand the needs of religious organisations for worship spaces. These groups have also welcomed the efforts to ensure that new PW sites are tendered out to religious organisations with genuine space needs.

Apart from introducing a new tender framework for PW land, the MND also announced that it would release at least two church and two Chinese temple sites each year over the next few years. This provided greater certainty for religious organisations in planning for worship space needs and would result in more PW land supply than in the past when sites were put out intermittently. The MND will also continue to monitor the trend in PW land tenders and adjust the supply of PW land when necessary.

For the first time, the MND will be releasing land specifically for the development of PW hubs. These hubs could house multiple religious organisations belonging to the same religion in a multi-storey development. Through co-location and sharing of facilities such as car parks, Singapore's limited land resources would be better optimised. Smaller religious organisations that found the standard PW sites too large for their use could co-locate together under one PW hub. The MND would release sites for one church hub and one Chinese temple hub via Concept-and-Price tenders, and religious organisations could jointly apply to develop and manage these PW hubs. In proposing plans for a hub, tenderers have to demonstrate how the facility and tenants/tenancies of the PW hub would be managed, and how potential conflicts between tenants and potential disamenities generated from activities and human/vehicular traffic can be mitigated.[70] A tender was eventually launched for a church hub in Ubi and another for a Chinese temple hub in Tai Seng.

Systematic Planning and Innovation for PWs

Due to the scarcity of land in Singapore and the need to balance between numerous developmental needs, land for PWs has been and will continue to be limited. Despite existing challenges, Singapore has applied systematic planning and development guidelines, and innovating when necessary, in the planning of PWs to meet the religious needs of Singaporeans.

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN COMMON SPACES

> The strong community relations we enjoy today arose neither by accident nor by the laws of nature. We strove to enable every community to have its own space to practise its culture and customs. At the same time, we sought to maximise our common space so that Singaporeans can live, work and play side by side in mutual respect, sharing common experiences, and growing a sense of shared identity."

Grace Fu, then Minister for Culture, Community and Youth[71]

The multi-religious nature of Singapore means that there is a diversity of religious practices, where some are carried out in common spaces beyond the confines of places of worship (PWs). This has contributed to making Singapore a culturally vibrant city. However, religious practices have to be carefully managed by the different stakeholders in order to ensure that while religious groups are able to freely practise their religion, they do so in ways that do not cause inconvenience to others. This is especially the case for a high-density pluralistic environment in Singapore where common spaces often have overlapping uses.

COMMON SPACES FOR RELIGIOUS USES IN HOUSING ESTATES

The void deck is a unique feature of Singapore's public housing estates. Introduced in the 1970s by the Housing & Development Board (HDB), void decks were to free up ground-level spaces of HDB flats to create opportunities for residents to meet and interact through the regular use of shared common spaces and to provide residents with the space to hold social and religious functions. Examples of such functions include Malay weddings, Chinese funerals, Seventh Month prayers, Hari Raya prayers and *terawih* prayers (prayers done during the nights of the Islamic month of Ramadan). Over time, other common spaces were also introduced, such as amphitheatres and communal halls. Residents apply to the town councils for use of these spaces, with some functions requiring a supporting letter from the Grassroots Adviser and/or the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS).

BURNING OF RELIGIOUS OFFERINGS

The burning of joss sticks, incense papers and religious offerings is a traditional Chinese religious practice. Devotees carry out this practice during festivals such as the Qing Ming and the Hungry Ghost festivals. This practice is commonly carried out in housing estates and has to be carefully managed to ensure that the burning does not result in disamenities to other residents. Possible disamenities include damage to grass patches or walkways, creating unsightly common spaces, and fire risks. In the past, HDB officers managed this practice by issuing summons in housing estates. However, due to the sensitive nature of the issue, enforcement proved challenging, and the HDB had to adjust their approach.[72]

To facilitate proper and considerate burning practices, the HDB placed metal burners at convenient locations around housing blocks, displayed posters, and distributed pamphlets urging residents to burn offerings in the burner. It also mounts periodic campaigns jointly with the Residents' Committees to inculcate in residents a greater sense of social responsibility when burning joss paper and appealed for cooperation through the mass media.[73] In 1998, the Ministry of the Environment (ENV) put in place control measures to disallow the burning of overly large joss sticks and candles and limited the number of joss sticks and candles allowed to be burnt within enclosed areas and the distance from

Burning of incense papers and religious offerings during the Hungry Ghost Festival.
Image courtesy of Kokkai.

which they may be burnt from a building.[74] A penalty of S$2,000 was imposed when these measures were violated.[75] Ministry officials worked closely with various stakeholders in preparation of the implementation of these control measures, for example, by holding discussions with the Singapore Religious Goods Merchant Association, festival operators, temple management and grassroots organisations.[76] Even with these control measures, there were still complaints about flying ash and smoke from the burners affecting the living environment of housing estates. To tackle this problem, the ENV worked with some Town Councils (TC) and the Taoist Mission to introduce a burner cover for existing burners. The cover was effective in preventing flying ash from escaping while also allowing air to flow through to ensure that the joss paper was completely burnt.[77] During the Hungry Ghost Month of 2013, three religious groups— the Taoist Federation (Singapore), the Singapore Buddhist Federation and the Wat Ananda Metyarama—issued a joint advisory urging their devotees to practise "responsible burning" of joss paper and incense sticks.[78] The advisory was pasted on the noticeboards of HDB blocks. The advisory also advised against the "customary throwing" of joss paper in the air to indicate "prosperity" (pointing out that this practice was not needed), discouraged open burning, and encouraged the reduction of the use of joss paper and incense in light of the haze situation in Singapore.[79]

In 2014, TCs piloted an eco-friendly burner that could cut down smoke emissions by half. The stainless-steel burner had holes to improve airflow for more efficient burning and a lid to prevent ash from flying out—it was reported that just 3% of ash was produced, compared to the old burner.[80] The new burner could last about two years, compared to the older model that would last for only six months.[81] However, even though the new burner was more environmentally friendly, residents still required time to get used to the new model. Simon Koh, Senior General Manager, EM Services Pte Ltd, Tanjong Pagar Town Council, said:

There are pros and cons (to the new burner). Because you want to restrict the amount of smoke, therefore, the opening is small, and hence you still have a problem. People like bigger openings of the traditional bins to throw their incense papers, and hence they didn't like the new burners initially. We have a mixture: We have the traditional bins and that. We cannot rely totally on that. At the end of the day, for Seventh Month, there is still a need for Town Councils to come in the next day to clean it up.[82]

Nevertheless, with the introduction of the more environmentally friendly model and outreach efforts by the National Environment Agency, TCs, building managements and religious organisations to encourage responsible burning, complaints have declined from about 1,100 instances in 2015 to about 500 in 2018.[83]

Residents would also need to obtain the approval of their TC for the use of large metal cage burners on a Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) basis for events like the Hungry Ghost Festival or funerals. The Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources works very closely with the TCs to ensure that large metal cage burners are not located close to dense residential areas, and educational materials are shared with residents and religious organisations to make sure that burning is done within the large metal containers and in small quantities to mitigate the emission of smoke.[84]

Temples and religious facilities that are located near residential estates have also attempted to curb the amount of smoke produced from burning. For example, the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery in Bright Hill Road imposed a ban on the burning of bulky paper boxes as offerings to the dead during the Qing Ming Festival in 2019—the rationale being that the cardboard used in the paper boxes produces higher amounts of ash and smoke when burnt. However, the burning of

other paper offerings within the temple's burners is still allowed. While worshippers generally understood the environmental rationale behind the measures, there were some who continued to worry about the dilution of tradition.[85]

TEMPORARY *SURAUS* IN VOID DECKS FOR *TERAWIH* PRAYERS

In the years following Singapore's independence, the Malay-Muslim community continued to largely live in Malay villages that usually contained a mosque or *surau* (a Muslim prayer hall). As Singapore urbanised, worshipping was increasingly carried out in mosques built across the island. However, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, certain void decks and multi-purpose halls in housing estates are transformed by the Muslim community into temporary *suraus* for their *terawih* prayers, which take place after the evening prayer. In these places, which can accommodate up to 200 people, cloth is usually draped on the pillars, carpets placed on the floor and overhead lights are installed. Worshippers also use the space for the distribution of food, drinks and communal meals. These makeshift *suraus* are given a temporary permit from TCs to conduct prayer sessions till 10.30 p.m. every night during the month of Ramadan. Former Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs Yaacob Ibrahim reflected on the genesis of one such *surau* in his current ward and how members of the non-Muslim community were included in the celebration:

> *My constituency is Kolam Ayer, which is a relatively mature estate comprising the Geylang Bahru and Kallang Bahru areas. One of the previous MPs [Members of Parliament] for that area, Mr Sidek Saniff realised that there was no mosque nearby. He obtained permission to use one of the void decks for the* terawih *prayers. I have continued that practice. But we work closely with the neighbourhood so that our non-Muslim residents are familiar with it and [are] not inconvenienced by it in any way. And now every time Ramadan comes, our non-Muslim residents know that a space will be provided for prayers and out of respect, they will avoid that space entirely. In fact, during Ramadan, my Muslim residents organise porridge distribution and hand it out to everyone who come by to pick it up, irrespective of their religion.*[86]

Following the emergence of temporary *suraus*, there was a discussion within the MUIS on whether or not to continue allowing the use of common public space for *terawih* prayers. Yaacob Ibrahim elaborated:

> *I was in the MUIS council when there was a discussion as to whether we should allow Muslims to perform their* terawih *prayers at the temporary spaces in the void decks or encourage them to go to the mosques. So there were two views. The first view was to allow these temporary places of prayers as long as it did not inconvenience the neighbourhood given that it is convenient for the Muslim residents. And the second view was to popularise going to the mosques during this period. I was inclined towards the first view. So today we have many of such temporary places of prayer across the country and generally, the local MPs are supportive and the Muslim residents appreciative of the convenience. I think people accept this arrangement as it is used once a year for about 29 or 30 days only.*[87]

These *suraus* are especially helpful for people who do not live near mosques, or for the elderly and people who are unwell and prefer not to pray alone. Communal meals and food distribution, which are welcoming of people of other races and religions, help to strengthen community bonds and inject cultural vibrancy within the neighbourhood. In 2019, there were 31 temporary *suraus* that are set up during Ramadan.[88]

The void deck of Block 724 Jurong West Street 72 is transformed into a temporary prayer area during the month of Ramadan.
Image courtesy of The New Paper © Singapore Press Holdings Limited. Reprinted with permission.

SURAU AT
GHIM MOH ROAD

The *surau* at the void deck of Block 2, Ghim Moh Road, has been a permanent *surau* for 39 years, an exception to the norm for temporary *suraus* in common spaces in housing estates. The *surau* was set up in 1981 for 500 Muslim families who had been resettled into HDB flats in the area when their villages were cleared for redevelopment. At that time, there were many requests for a prayer space in the neighbourhood as the nearest mosque was 30 to 45 minutes away by bus, and there were more than 100 elderly Muslims in the community who might have difficulties in long-distance commuting. Despite some hesitation from the authorities who were concerned that the communal void deck would become less inclusive, former Cabinet Minister Ahmad Mattar and then interim MP for the constituency Abbas Abu Amin championed for an exception to be made due to the unique circumstances of the neighbourhood. The *surau* began only with a canvas and cardboards for praying, but with the approval of the TC, amenities such as fans, lights, rolling blinds, partition walls, and a space for ablutions were installed. Religious classes and other Islamic events were also held within the *surau*. In the early 1980s, residents collectively paid S$50 a month for rent and

The void deck at Block 2, Ghim Moh Road, has been a permanent *surau* for 39 years.
Image courtesy of Gregory Lee.

S$1 a month for utilities; they no longer pay for rent now but only for utilities that cost between S$45 and S$50 a month. Money collected from residents and visitors is used also to fund religious activities, gatherings and maintenance of the space. However, in recent times, there were difficulties in maintaining the *surau* due to a gradual decline in the number of Muslim residents in the area. Nevertheless, the *surau* has become an integral part of community life in the area, serving also as a rest area for residents and other people such as taxi drivers, delivery riders and passersby of all races and religion. During Ramadan in 2019, the Singapore Buddhist Lodge donated rice, which was then made into porridge at the Al Huda Mosque in Bukit Timah before being distributed to Ghim Moh residents by volunteers from the Church of Saint Ignatius.[89]

The interiors of the *surau* at Block 2, Ghim Moh Road.
Image courtesy of Gregory Lee.

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TRAFFIC SPILLOVER FROM PLACES OF WORSHIP

In Singapore's dense living environment, parking spillover from PWs, especially during worship hours or religious festivals, can cause inconvenience to the surrounding neighbourhoods. The issue is made worse when there are worshippers that park indiscriminately, blocking residents from driving in or out of their homes in private estates or along narrow roads where other cars could have difficulties passing through.[90] Motorists have reflected that sometimes they do not have a choice due to a lack of parking space.[91] Many residents have shown tolerance for such situations, in a give-and-take spirit, as they mostly occur for short periods of time during worship hours or religious festivals, but there have been complaints as well.[92]

The approach to alleviate traffic issues and to prevent unhappiness from residents has been a multi-stakeholder effort. Religious groups proactively advise their worshippers not to park indiscriminately, encouraging carpooling and the use of public transport as well as hiring traffic marshals or working with the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to manage traffic flow.[93] The LTA exercises flexibility for PWs of all religions when it comes to illegal parking during worship hours or special events, as long as the vehicles do not cause obstruction or pose safety concerns.[94] In the event that indiscriminate parking endangers other road users or causes serious obstructions, the LTA will take strict enforcement actions.[95]

The Traffic Police also adopts a problem-solving approach to tackle illegal parking at the source. First, it will form a working group, which involves the community living around the problematic area. Participants in such working groups include representatives from schools, grassroots organisations, PWs, and other agencies such as the LTA and the Urban Redevelopment Authority. The working group will then assess the problem and work towards a solution that meets the needs of all the stakeholders. Typically, the group will arrive at a consensus after meeting for about one to six months.[96]

The issue of traffic spillover from PWs shows the importance of taking individual responsibility, adopting a multi-stakeholder effort, and adhering to the spirit of tolerance in multi-religious Singapore in ensuring that such incidents do not escalate into a major disamenity problem. In minimising the inconvenience of traffic spillover, individuals have to be aware of his/her onus to not park indiscriminately, while religious organisations also work in partnership with the authorities to manage the traffic situation. Residents in the affected neighbourhood have also shown tolerance and understanding of the parking woes of worshippers.

MOSQUES' CALL TO PRAYERS (*AZAN*)

The Islamic call to prayer, known as the *azan*, is recited five times a day from every mosque to inform Muslims of the prayer times, namely before dawn, noon, late afternoon, after sunset, and evening. Singapore was the first city to experiment with the use of loudspeakers for the *azan* with the installation of loudspeakers on the minaret of the Sultan Mosque in North Bridge Road in 1936.[97] This technological progress allowed the *azan* to be heard more than a mile away.

During the early years of Singapore's urban development, the government was concerned about the increasing sound levels from a variety of sources as part of modern living, which were deemed disturbing and even harmful. A Community Noise Abatement programme was implemented in 1974 to control the volume of sound amplification systems in public places. This policy dictated that sound amplification systems used at public gatherings have to be fitted with sound attenuators issued by the Singapore Institute of Standards and Industrial Research.[98] The new policy on sound amplification inevitably affected the *azan* of mosques. Ahmad Mattar, then Acting Minister of Social Affairs, emphasised in Parliament that the policy did not discriminate any particular religious group:

> Research has shown that there is a direct relationship between growing tension and noise levels of urban living. It is, therefore, necessary for the Government to control the volume of sound amplification systems in public places. Government's policy on sound amplification affects not only mosques, but also Chinese wayangs, Chinese temples, Hindu temples, churches and all public gatherings where sound amplification systems are used.[99]

In order to minimise the impact of the new policy on the worship practice of the Muslim community, officials from the MUIS and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MSA) tested different levels of sound amplification for the *azan* and decided on an acceptable sound level—60 dB—for the broadcasting of the *azan* from external loudspeakers of mosques. MUIS officials also visited mosques to explain to Mosque Management Committees on the rationale of fixing sound attenuators to control the decibel levels of external loudspeakers. Most mosques accepted the reasons and cooperated with the policy. From 15 August 1977, the MSA arranged for the *azan* to be broadcast by Radio Singapore five times a day; the radio station was restarted about an hour earlier in order to be on air before the first *azan*.[100] Newer mosques built after 1975 had loudspeakers directed inwards. Today, the *azan* is broadcasted both within the mosque and on the radio (Warna 94.2FM).

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The pragmatic approach of the government in the Noise Abatement Campaign of the 1970s has allowed for a healthier aural environment in Singapore. Having to disrupt the way in which the sacred *azan* was broadcast risked creating unhappiness among the Muslim community, but coming up with alternative solutions such as a radio broadcast, engaging the Muslim community in gaining their understanding, and emphasising on the non-discriminating nature of the policy, have allowed the community to accept the change.

SACRIFICIAL SLAUGHTERING OF LIVESTOCK (*KORBAN*)

The *korban*, or sacrifice, is an annual Islamic practice during Hari Raya Haji, where Muslims slaughter sacrificial livestock, usually sheep and cows, to commemorate Prophet Ibrahim's obedience to Allah, as seen in his willingness to sacrifice his son. The yearly sacrifice is a non-compulsory obligation but something that is very much encouraged for all Muslims who can afford it. Following the slaughter ritual held in mosques, *korban* meat is given out to worshippers and the needy. Yaacob Ibrahim reflected on how the smell from the ritual was foreseen and managed as an issue of contention:

> Our biggest problem is the smell from some of the mosques that conduct the sacrifice. And it's right in the HDB heartlands. So we, in fact, have worked with AVA [Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority] officers very closely to see how we can do that. And I'm thankful because every time we have a korban at the mosques, AVA officers are there to help us….We put soda ash and the waste is all cleaned up. But you know like anything else, there's this smell that lingers around. So when I was minister, even now when I go for my prayers for Hari Raya Haji prayers, I will visit the places where they have the sacrifice. I just want to see how's the operation and this and that, keep reminding them that you are not alone, there's a neighbourhood around. What mosques have done over the years is to inform the neighbourhood, you know, that it's coming [the korban ritual], and distribute flyers as we want to be good neighbours. We reach out to our neighbours to explain the tradition.[101]

INFORMAL PLACES OF WORSHIP

While land was made available for affected PWs such as temples and churches to relocate during the resettlement period in the 1960s and 1970s, not all resettled PWs were able to successfully find and purchase a new site. Some temple operators who could not find new sites took their temples' altars and effigies to new homes in public housing.[102] Many temple operators continued to use their public flats for religious activities such as worshipping and spirit medium consultation. The Taoist Federation estimated that there could be as many as 2,000 of such house temples open to followers.[103] There was also a growth in house churches, which were attractive because of lower rentals compared to the high costs of land and facilities in business areas.[104] Such unregistered PWs can be a concern, as they may result in disamenity and safety issues. PWs in homes could affect local liveability due to issues such as loud religious sounds and litter from worshippers. As Tan Poh Hong, then Head of Area Office, HDB, recounted:

> When I was heading the Area Office in Jurong in the 1980s, residents had just moved into their new flats and held religious practices such as spirit medium consultation. In one case, the spirit medium while in a trance even jumped around the corridor of the flat, which has caused inconvenience for other residents. Together with the grassroots leaders, we resolved this issue by visiting and talking to the worshippers in their flats.[105]

More dangerously, PWs in homes could also be a fire hazard if precautions are not taken. In November 2013, a fire that broke out in a house temple in Jalan Gaharu claimed two lives.[106] In view of the abovementioned disamenity and safety concerns, the government does not approve public flats for use as PWs, and generally does not approve the conversion of private residential properties to PWs. Due to the sensitivity of religious matters, the government works with religious and community leaders to establish informal links with religious groups, including those unregistered and operating unauthorised in homes.[107] These groups are also invited to become part of the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles to facilitate dissemination of information (see Chap. 4). This allows the government to maintain a balance between keeping these informal PWs in check while not being heavy-handed in removing them. As mentioned earlier in Chap. 3, other models, such as PW hubs, are also being introduced to provide an alternative space for these PWs.

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TOA PAYOH
TREE SHRINE

In the middle of Toa Payoh town centre, a ficus tree with a Buddhist shrine stood between Block 177 and 178. The tree shrine, or Ci En Ge, is popular with Toa Payoh residents and visitors from other parts of Singapore, with many praying for blessings and other wishes there.

The tree predates the development of Toa Payoh town and has been regarded as sacred since the area's kampong days. It was one of the six deity trees (*shen shu*) that were prominent landmarks among villagers. During the redevelopment of Toa Payoh in the early 1960s, the

tree stood steadfast and workers operating bulldozers were said to be unable to move their vehicles in the direction of the tree. Monks were even sent in to pray for the tree to make way, but it was futile. A monk later brought a statue of Guan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy) from China to the tree and began sleeping beneath it. The shrine dedicated to Guan Yin and the Four-faced Buddha was reportedly set up in 1969.

In September 2013, the six-storey-high tree was struck by lightning during a thunderstorm and part of it fell. The caretaker, the son of the monk who had taken care of the tree for decades, had left for his hometown in Malaysia. Realising the tree shrine's significance to the community and its heritage value, the Toa Payoh Central Merchants' Association (TPCMA) took over the running of the shrine. The TPCMA engaged an arborist to stablise the tree and renovated the shrine at an estimated cost of S$70,000. New flooring, lights, fans, fences, handrails and a ramp for easy access for the disabled were installed. It also applied for an extension of the shrine's Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) from the HDB, which was approved but subjected to annual renewal. Part of the conditions for the renewal of the TOL was an arborist report certifying the tree as healthy. The TPCMA also hired night security to guard the tree. The TPCMA also plans to install a heritage marker at the shrine to share its history with visitors and tourists.[108]

The shrine currently hosts a vegetarian buffet for the community, funded by donations from devotees, on the 15th day of every lunar month. It also organises celebrations during Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. The shrine also hosts an annual dinner at the Toa Payoh Community Centre to honour its elderly devotees, typically in the period of late December to early January. There would be about 100 tables at the dinner and the cost is borne by the TPCMA.

Even though the tree shrine exists on a TOL and is considered an informal PW, it serves as an important religious and social node for the community, both past and present. The efforts of the TPCMA, in working with the government to restore and upkeep the tree shrine illustrate the role of non-governmental and community organisations in working to maintain such sites of religious and social significance, despite their informal status.

The shrine is especially popular with the locals, who often stop by to offer prayers for blessings.
Image courtesy of Gregory Lee.

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MERCY RELEASE OF ANIMALS INTO THE WILD

During Vesak Day celebrations and other special occasions, animals such as fish, birds and terrapins are sometimes released into the wild as an act of compassion and respect for life. This practice is known as mercy release (*fang sheng*) among Chinese Buddhists, and "jiwitte dana" ("the gift of life") among other Buddhists such as Theravada Buddhists.[109] Experts have cautioned that while the release of animals is a well-intentioned act of kindness, the practice could affect the local ecology as released animals would compete with native breeds in the wild for food. Most of the released animals also do not survive for long.[110] PWs such as the Kong Meng San Phor Kark See and Thekchen Choling have attempted to discourage this practice by coming up with programmes for families on Vesak Day, rather than going with the tradition of releasing animals.[111]

The National Parks Board (NParks) and Public Utilities Board (PUB) staff and volunteers took part in "Operation No Release" in 2017, a programme targeted at discouraging the mercy release of animals or unwanted pets into parks, reservoirs and nature reserves, especially on Vesak Day. In the days leading up to Vesak Day, NParks and PUB staff worked with volunteers to patrol 18 sites to discourage the practice. NParks, together with the PUB, AVA and Nature Society (Singapore), worked with students and volunteers to conduct educational initiatives such as exhibitions, roadshows and school outreach activities. The Singapore Buddhist Federation and Buddhist groups have also urged followers to consider alternatives, such as becoming vegetarian or supporting animal shelters. Since the initiation of "Operation No Release", there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of animal releases as the general public becomes better informed of the consequences of animal release into Singapore's nature reserves and reservoirs.[112]

RELIGIOUS PROCESSIONS

Religious foot processions in public are banned in Singapore, with the exception of three Hindu processions, namely Thimithi (firewalking ceremony), Panguni Uthiram and Thaipusam (the latter two festivals are held in honour of the Hindu god Murugan), as they were deemed necessary for devotees to complete their specific vows. The various engagements between the authorities and the Hindu community to manage the procession during Thaipusam illustrate the importance of state-community partnership in achieving positive outcomes for all in the practice of religion in Singapore.

Thaipusam is an annual Hindu thanksgiving festival usually held between January and February, where thousands of devotees fulfil their vows by completing a 4-km walk from the Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road to the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tank Road. Some devotees on the walk carry the *kavadi*, a heavy wooden and steel structure mounted with religious artefacts affixed to the bearer's body by long sharpened rods or chains and small hooks, as a form of offering. The procession usually starts very early in the morning and lasts until 7 p.m. in the evening. The playing of musical instruments, or live music, during Thaipusam was banned in 1973 as there were rivalries and fights that broke out between competing groups that disrupted the procession. In December 1980, the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB), the statutory body that organises this festival, appealed to the police to reconsider the ban on live music during the procession on the grounds that it was traditional to have music accompanying the *kavadi* bearers. The appeal was rejected as the ban applied not only to Hindu religious processions but also to those of other religious groups. In January 1981, five people were arrested and charged with using criminal force on members of the Police Task Force during the Thaipusam procession.[113] The police also seized 62 musical instruments and 12 improvised instruments. In February 1985, the police issued a reminder that dancing and the playing of music on public roads were not permitted, and the reminder has been repeated every year since then.[114]

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Some relaxation in the regulations was seen in 2011 (singing of hymns without amplification was allowed) and 2012 (static music points were introduced along the procession route for the broadcast of religious hymns).[115] However, the issue of music during Thaipusam came into public scrutiny once more in 2015. Three men were arrested after scuffling with the police during the foot procession over the playing of drums.[116] After videos of the incident were posted on the Internet, netizens debated on why devotees could not play instruments during the Thaipusam procession and questioned the absence of similar restrictions for lion dances and the use of *kompangs* (traditional Malay hand drums) during Malay weddings. In a detailed post on Facebook, Minister for Law K. Shanmugam explained the distinctions: Thaipusam is a religious event, while Chinese lion dances and the use of *kompangs* usually happen during non-religious gatherings, such as social and community events.[117] He explained the reason behind the ban on religious foot processions, describing them as events that carry a higher risk of incident because of the sensitivities involved, and that the Hindu community had been given an exception. He also explained that in terms of scale and duration, Thaipusam is also more challenging for maintaining law and order. Unlike social and community events that are of smaller scale and locality, Thaipusam involves large groups of people and cuts through major roads in the city and lasts for 26 hours.[118] He, however, did not reject the possibility of instruments being played during the procession to support the *kadavi* bearers, and suggested that the HEB could work with other agencies to reassess the ban and evaluate the conditions under which music could be allowed during the procession.[119]

Acknowledging the authorities' primary concern to tackle disorderly behaviour during the Thaipusam procession, the HEB conducted a public feedback exercise comprising over ten sessions with more than 100 participants on the festival. These participants shared that music was important to the festival with 65% wanting traditional auspicious Indian instruments to be part of the religious event; some also suggested that live music be played at strategic locations along the route.[120] The HEB made a number of recommendations following the exercise: (i) to reinforce the ban on the sale and consumption of alcohol during the procession, (ii) to allow the last *kadavi* bearer to leave the Sri Srinivasa Perumal temple at 7 p.m. to improve the flow of devotees in the procession,[121] and (iii) to approve musicians to play specified traditional instruments such as the *nadhaswaram* (wind instrument), *tavil* and *urumi melam* (drum) at three points along the route. Four additional points were also approved for the transmission of music over a broadcasting system.[122] Following the government's agreement to these recommendations, the HEB's Chairman R. Jayachandran described the government's acceptance of the recommendations as a "historical first step", showing "that the authorities are taking the concerns and needs of the (Hindu) community seriously".[123] During the Thaipusam procession in 2016, three live music points were allowed where *urumi melam* players performed on a stage along the procession route. The live music points were identified by the police and were located in Hastings Road, Short Street and Dhoby Ghaut Green, at least 100 m away from residential areas.[124] The music would also help the *kavadi* bearer to reduce the pain from the *kavadi* piercings and enhance his spiritual focus throughout the procession.[125] To ensure that the procession went smoothly, the HEB deployed 800 personnel, set up a website and introduced a kit for participants to familiarise themselves with the guidelines.[126] In 2017, the number of music broadcasting points was increased to 23. The HEB also discouraged participants from supplying their own musicians or instruments with more music points along the route.[127]

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Following the 2018 Thaipusam procession, comments appeared online that contrasted the celebrations of Thaipusam and Saint Patrick's Day, in that the government had allowed the latter to be celebrated with a parade of bagpipers and drummers. However, Minister Shanmugam quickly clarified that Saint Patrick's Day, which honours one of the patron saints of Ireland, is considered a cultural event in Singapore and that it had to adhere to a number of conditions, such as not allowing religious music and gear.[128] Minister Shanmugam later met about 200 members of the Hindu community for a post-Thaipusam dialogue, where he explained the historical context behind the regulations on music and musical instruments during Thaipusam processions. He also re-emphasised the differences between religious celebrations like Thaipusam and cultural events like Saint Patrick's Day and the Chingay Parade in Singapore, of which the latter two are held in contained areas and religious elements such as symbols, music, attire or rituals are not allowed.[129] During the dialogue, a devotee suggested that a registration procedure for official procession singers and musicians be put in place. Minister Shanmugam responded that he would support the suggestion if it could be operationalised. He also highlighted a suggestion to have volunteer groups to sing and play musical instruments and that he had already asked the HEB to study it.[130]

In 2019's Thaipusam procession, devotees accompanying *kavadi* bearers were allowed to play selected percussion instruments such as the *ganjira*, *thavil*, *dhol* or *khol*.[131] This was the first time since the banning of live music in 1973 that the playing of instruments along the procession route was permitted. Twelve more broadcasting points were also added along the route, bringing the total number of broadcasting points to 35. The further relaxation of the rules was welcomed by devotees, as the use of live instruments helped create a better procession experience, especially for the *kavadi* bearers.[132]

The case for the gradual reintroduction of music—first broadcasted ones and eventually the return of live instruments—during Thaipusam processions over the years holds important lessons for the management of religious practices in Singapore. Due to a series of incidents in the

Route map of 2020's Thaipusam procession showing how the procession took place on a 3.2-km stretch of road in the city centre.
Image courtesy of the National Heritage Board.

1970s and 1980s that disrupted such processions, the government had to ban live music to maintain law and order. However, through feedback and engagement sessions between the government, the HEB and the Hindu community, greater flexibility on the presence of music during the procession was allowed progressively over the years as order continued to be maintained. However, there was the challenging task of explaining the distinction between Thaipusam as a larger-scale religious event and other smaller community events that involved the playing of music. It was thus critical that the government was able to understand and allay the concerns of the Hindu community and that of the public, and to achieve a balance between the religious needs of the Hindu community and pragmatic considerations for law and order.

Selected percussion instruments were allowed to be played during the
Thaipusam procession in 2019.
Image courtesy of Catriona Ward.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES IN MANAGING
LIVEABILITY ISSUES

Liveability issues may arise as religious practices take place or overlap
in common spaces, particularly in the dense urban environment of
Singapore. However, as examples in this chapter have shown, through
collaboration and communication, the government, religious organisations
and stakeholders can collectively innovate solutions that allow religious
communities to engage in religious practices while co-existing with each
other and the wider community.

CHAPTER 4

GOVERNANCE
OF RELIGIOUS
HARMONY—
LAW, INSTITUTIONS
AND COMMUNITY
NETWORKS

> **We will preserve the harmony and trust between our different communities. That means constant care and attention by the government and the people and it means working together, which has enabled us to live in peace and harmony in a multi-racial and multi-religious society.**"

Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore[133]

SINGAPORE AS A SECULAR CITY-STATE

The impact of global religious revivalism in the 1980s had repercussions on the multi-religious society of Singapore. Tensions occurred within and between religious groups as a result of aggressive proselytisation, subversive activities, foreign influences and the use of religion for political and social causes.[134] In responding to incidents and feedback of religious tensions, the government was clear about the need to strengthen the separation of religion and politics to maintain religious harmony. Then Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew once said:

> A religion looks after the spiritual, moral and social well-being of its followers. But religious organisations should leave the economic-political needs of people to non-religious groups, like political parties. This is because if any religious group tries to define the socio-economic agenda of Singapore and mobilises the grassroots by "social action programmes", other religious groups will do likewise. Once people are mobilised on socio-economic issues on the basis of religious loyalties, the consequences will be bad for all.[135]

The importance for multi-cultural Singapore to maintain secularity without mixing religion and politics was reiterated by then Deputy PM Wong Kan Seng, who said:

> We are a secular Singapore, in which Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others all have to live in peace with one another...Keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement.[136]

THE MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY ACT

On 26 December 1989, the White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony was presented to Parliament. Referencing the Maria Hertogh Riots as an example of how religious harmony[137] can be easily disrupted by inter-religion friction, which Singapore is particularly vulnerable to with the rise of religious fervour worldwide, the White Paper stressed that conscious efforts would be needed in maintaining religious harmony. It identified two key conditions necessary for religious harmony in Singapore: religious followers must exercise moderation and tolerance and avoid doing anything that would cause enmity or misunderstanding between religious groups, and religion and politics must be kept separate, because if one religious group became involved in politics, other religious groups could follow suit to protect their own interests. Political parties could also advocate policies that favoured one religion over another to garner political support from its followers, which could lead to conflict and political instability.[138] The White Paper proposed for legislations to maintain religious harmony. The consideration was that legislation empowers the Government to effectively maintain the two key conditions necessary for religious harmony. Furthermore, it was deemed better to implement the legislation while relations between the different religious groups were good, rather than in a scenario where religious groups were suspicious of each other.[139]

Following the White Paper, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill was tabled in Parliament on 15 January 1990 and committed to a Select Committee of Parliament on 23 February 1990.[140] The public was invited to provide written representations on the Bill, which were presented to the Select Committee for deliberation.[9] The Select Committee presented its recommended amendments to the Bill to Parliament, and the Bill was passed on 9 November 1990, with the Act coming into effect on 31 March 1992.[141] Under the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA), the Minister for Home Affairs may issue a restraining order against any

leader or member of any religious groups who causes ill feelings between religious groups, promotes a political cause, carries out subversive activities or excites disaffection against the president/government under the guise of propagating/practising a religious belief. The order restrains any individual from addressing any congregation, publishing any publication or holding office in an editorial board for up to two years. A restraining order may also be issued against a person who incites any religious group to commit any of the aforementioned acts. It could also be issued against a person who is not a member of any religious group but causes feelings of hatred and hostility between different religious groups. A person who violates the restraining order may be fined up to S$10,000, face a prison sentence of up to two years, or both.

In the parliamentary debate on the Bill before the MRHA was passed, then First Deputy PM Goh Chok Tong reflected on the grave, yet timely nature of enacting the MRHA:

> In a sense, this Bill is a recognition of a retrogression, a potential deterioration in religious harmony. The Government takes no joy in speaking on this subject. It is not something which we are very proud of. We introduce it more with sorrow or more in sorrow than with joy. It is to prevent us from sliding backward. It is an act aimed at preserving common sense and harmony.[142]

He also explained how the MRHA was intended as a "finer way of dealing with the problem":

> We wanted a law that could deal with the problem in a very fine way instead of having to resort to the Internal Security Act or the Sedition Act, or to use court prosecution…It is like trying to use a scalpel to make a precise incision to deal with problem cells, instead of having to use a chopper to amputate.[143]

Existing laws that safeguard religious harmony include Section 298A of the Penal Code and the Sedition Act. The Penal Code criminalises the promotion of enmity between different groups on grounds of religion or race, or any act that is prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious and racial groups. Under the Sedition Act, it is an offence to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore.

The MRHA also provides for the establishment of the Presidential Council for Religious Harmony. The Council's role is to consider and report to the Minister for Home Affairs on matters affecting the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore. It will also deliberate over and make recommendations on the restraining orders referred to it by the Minister. The Council consists of a chairman and between six to 15 other members, which includes representatives of all major religions in Singapore and prominent Singaporeans who have distinguished themselves in public service and community relations. The pioneering council included former Chief Justice Yong Pung How and representatives from the Buddhist, Muslim, Roman Catholic, Protestant Christian, Hindu and Sikh communities. The members of the Council are appointed for a period of one to three years and are eligible for reappointment.

In 2009's National Day Rally, PM Lee Hsien Loong reflected on the introduction of the MRHA and the background work of building trust between the government and religious communities in maintaining harmony:

> We foresaw these dangers [impact of rising religiosity] 20 years ago. So we presented a white paper on maintenance of religious harmony in Parliament. We passed a bill, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act in 1989–1990. Before we did that, the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Kuan Yew and the key ministers met all the religious leaders. We had a closed-door session at MCYS [Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports]. We spoke candidly. We explained our concerns, why we wanted to move this Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The religious leaders spoke up candidly, and they gave us their support. We moved with their support. And we have continued to keep in close touch with them, to meet them regularly.…If there is a problem, we are not dealing with strangers but with somebody we know and trust. And once or twice, I have had to meet them over specific difficult cases, not general discussion of religious harmony in Singapore but dealing with specific difficult issues. No publicity, but relying on mutual trust and the wisdom of our religious leaders to defuse tensions.…Because of this active work behind the scenes, we have not needed to invoke the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act for 20 years but it is something which is important to us which we must keep for a long time. We can never take our racial and religious harmony for granted.[144]

Even though the MRHA has not been used since it came into effect, it helped to maintain harmony by setting the boundaries for religious activities in multi-religious Singapore. It also provides the government with a strong legislative tool to respond swiftly in maintaining religious harmony as and when needed. This demonstrates the effectiveness of having a strong rule of law in Singapore where strong legislation supports the government in pre-empting, and reacting if necessary, to actions that threaten religious harmony in Singapore. However, as reflected by PM Lee, a crucial part of maintaining harmony goes beyond legislation but requires active behind the scenes work in building trust between the government and religious communities.

DECLARATION OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

Against the landscape of possible heightened social tensions in the early 2000s following the September 11 attacks, then PM Goh Chok Tong proposed the idea of having a common code in guiding the practice of religion in the context of multi-religious Singapore. This "soft-law" would complement the MRHA in the governance of religious harmony in Singapore. The task of drafting a code on religious harmony was entrusted to Chan Soo Chen, then Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Community Development and Sports. He led a working group comprising various Members of Parliament (MPs) with different religious affiliations to develop the code. Chan elaborated further:

> For five months, from October 2002 to February 2003, the workgroup and I consulted many religious groups. We debated enthusiastically about the Declaration (code). The discussion initially took place group by group. However, the final draft was discussed with all religious groups sitting together to go through word by word. The process was very beneficial. There were many differences initially. All religious groups put forward their viewpoints with vigour and conviction. Hence each discussion was of substance. However, there was also a lot of goodwill and mutual respect. Hence rationality always prevailed. It was indeed an excellent inter-faith dialogue. All of us involved got valuable insights and a better understanding about each religion. In fact, the feeling was so good that we formed an Inter-Religion Harmony Circle (IRHC) comprising representatives of all major faiths in Singapore to continue with inter-faith dialogue.[145]

After consulting different religious groups as well as the gathering public views, the Declaration of Religious Harmony was established in 2003[146] and it serves as a binding code for Singaporeans in pledging to safeguard religious harmony. In schools, students and teachers recite the Declaration during the annual Racial Harmony Day to reaffirm its key messages.

COMMUNITY AS STAKEHOLDER IN BUILDING INTER-FAITH TRUST AND HARMONY

Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, as well as the arrest and detention of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terrorists in Singapore in 2001 and 2002, there were possible effects of heightened tensions on Singapore's society. The concern was about the possible fracturing impact on the social fabric of Singapore should there be a terrorist attack. Modelled after the Goodwill Committees of the 1960s, the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles, later renamed the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles (IRCC)[147] was set up. IRCCs, comprising religious, ethnic and community leaders, served as local inter-faith platforms in every constituency to promote racial and religious harmony. Leaders from these groups come together to build friendship and trust. Muhammad Faizal Bin Othman, current Chairman of Taman Jurong IRCC and an IRCC member for more than 12 years described how the Taman Jurong IRCC linked up different religious and community leaders:

> In Taman Jurong IRCC, we want to strike a balance, and that's why we work closely with all the religious organisations here and we try and take in a senior leader in these particular places of worship....So it's sort of like everybody is equal and we try and work together as a team. It's important for us to work together from different religious backgrounds, from different races [to] promote harmony in Taman Jurong. We need to get the leaders to come in first. Of course, we have other grassroots leaders from different races who are active in the community. Because it is community work, we also need to get buy-in as well as their help when we do our activities to promote religious harmony and racial harmony.[148]

IRCCs aim to deepen people's understanding of the various faiths, beliefs and practices through inter-faith and inter-ethnic themed activities such as visiting places of worship (PWs) of different religions, heritage trails, inter-faith talks and various ethnic and religious celebrations. The Taman Jurong IRCC holds annual dialogues where panellists and people of different religions are invited to share their respective religion's perspectives on topics such as weddings, death and family.

Getting people of different religions to visit one another's PWs was challenging initially and gaining everyone's acceptance of such visits was a progressive process, as Muhammad Faizal Bin Othman found out:

> Even among some of them, they have never been to another place of worship so they felt a bit uncomfortable. But we needed to get that ice breaking done. They must feel comfortable first before they have the confidence to get their congregators to feel confident about visiting other places of worship. So, initially we did our (IRCC) meetings at a neutral place but after that we started to do our meetings in different places of worship, just to get the feel for the leaders you see, and also an opportunity for them to step into another place of worship. We needed to get that barrier to be broken down first. So after several meetings at different places of worship—in a church, in a temple, in a mosque—we did one particular programme, which is the Harmony Walk. So it's a walk in Taman Jurong but we walked from one place of worship to another place of worship. For some people, it's the first time that they step in and that really breaks the ice for them [and that] it's actually alright to go to another place of worship because of the context of living in Singapore.[149]

Apart from engaging religious leaders and PWs, IRCCs also reached out to other community institutions. Venerable Shi You Guang, an IRCC member of Braddell Heights for more than ten years, recounted:

> What really amazes me is that other than ROs [Religious Organisations], the IRCC was able to engage schools and family service centres. We hosted celebrations in the schools and many years back, we even had a counter-terrorism dialogue with Nanyang Junior College. I think this shows how trust is being built between IRCCs and the grassroots.[150]

Racial and religious issues associated with everyday life in the neighbourhoods are brought up to IRCCs as soon as possible so that conflicts can be resolved in the early stages before they escalate further. The relevance of IRCCs in this capacity could be seen in a report in 2004, which stated that more than two-fifths of IRCCs had dealt with cases of neighbours complaining of noise from Chinese funerals or Malay weddings at void decks.[151] The resolution of such conflicts by IRCC leaders require tact and sensitivity, as Muhammad Faizal Bin Othman will attest to:

> We had one case whereby there was a dispute between a Hindu resident and a Muslim resident. The Hindu resident was burning incense, then the smoke went into the house of the Muslim family, so the Muslim family was not so happy. But we sensed that it was just a trigger, they (already) were not so friendly with each other. They complained to Town Council and the Town Council got us to come in. We got a grassroots leader who is a Hindu to speak with the Hindu family and then I got the mosque representative to speak with the Malay family. And then after that, all of us met up and it had a good outcome. We were trained by MCCY [Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth] to facilitate or mediate. In our training, we were supposed to try and get the solutions out of the parties. We don't give the solution, they have to come up with the solution. It's interesting because when they came for the last meeting for us to meet together, they came from different paths but they go back together![152]

IRCCs helped to widen channels for inter-racial and religious dialogue. Instead of avoiding the issue, IRCC sought to facilitate and build a stronger network of trust, so that such issues were able to be discussed, and through the process, to foster mutual understanding. The Taman Jurong IRCC regularly meets once in two months, where issues are discussed openly. Muhammad Faizal Bin Othman said:

> If there are any issues that surface in the media like arrests or violence, religious violence, we speak openly and then ask whether there are any issues on the ground. So it's better for us to know and it's also good that we are open because everybody sees that...we are discussing this because we want to make sure that harmony prevails in Singapore.[153]

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IRCCs are also trained to respond quickly to crises, which may spark racial and religious tensions, by remaining calm and resilient on the ground. In the event of a crisis, IRCCs will assist their communities in managing and maintaining harmonious relations between different groups.[154] IRCC leaders took part in crisis preparedness exercises organised by government agencies, which have been conducted since 2007 to prepare religious and community leaders to handle tensions that may affect social harmony in the event of a crisis.[155] For example, about 60 members from five IRCCs in Tampines, including representatives from citizen consultative committees, residents' committees, community centres, ethnic activity committees, family centres, mosques, temples and churches, came together to simulate a mock crisis. During the two-hour simulated exercise, they had to derive quick responses to address concerns on the ground, deflate rumours and preserve solidarity after an imaginary terrorist "attack". Participants also practised their mediation and communication skills through role-play and simulated media interviews.[156] All 89 IRCCs in Singapore have taken part in the crisis preparedness exercise.

Members of IRCCs taking part in a crisis preparedness exercise in Tampines.
Image courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

IRCCs are therefore useful local networks that connect different segments of the community—grassroots and religious leaders, residents and worshippers—to build trust and friendship. This helps to foster harmonious relations and forge stronger bonds within the community in everyday life, while allowing the community to remain resilient in the event of a crisis. Partnering with IRCCs also allowed the government to better understand ground sentiments, communicate key messages as well as coordinate crisis preparedness and response efforts.

Community Engagement Programme and SGSecure Community Network

With the success of IRCCs, the Community Engagement Programme (CEP) was launched in February 2006 to further extend and deepen networks of trust and vigilance among different racial and religious communities in a variety of institutions. The aim was for the different communities, bonded through regular trust-building initiatives, to take greater ownership in strengthening the long-term resilience of Singapore society. This is particularly important to ensure that Singaporeans can remain united and carry on with their lives in the event of a crisis. Benny Lim, then Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), reflected on the establishment and operationalisation of the CEP:

> The CEP was an effort to create an operational structure across various key domains to coordinate and manage response so that social cohesion is maintained during crises. One of its aims is to identify and train an activist cadre in each domain—workplace, schools, constituencies—to be the first responders when an incident occurs. This was based on the observation that in most disasters, it was always the people on site who saved the most lives, because no matter how fast the firefighters or police can arrive, they would always be slower than those already there. Another objective was that through the frequent emergency exercises, we would be able to build a network of trust and mutual confidence among the key actors, who can be relied on to maintain calm in their respective domains following an incident.[157]

Under the CEP, various institutions in Singapore were grouped into clusters and supported by a government agency (see Exhibit 1) in coming up with initiatives to foster race and religious harmony.

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Exhibit 1

Each CEP cluster consists of institutions in Singapore with a related supporting agency.

Cluster	Supporting Agency
Religious groups, IRCCs, ethnic and clan associations, and voluntary welfare organisations	Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY)
Education institutions	Ministry of Education (MOE)
Media	Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA), now the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI)
Businesses and unions	Ministry of Manpower (MOM)
Grassroots organisations	People's Association (PA)

In unison with the CEP, the National Steering Committee (NSC) on Race and Religious Harmony was established. Chaired by the Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (now Culture, Community and Youth), the NSC guides IRCCs and provides a national platform for the apex faith, community and government leaders to build familiarity, trust and friendship. A variety of activities, ranging from sports to training workshops, are regularly organised to bring religious groups together. For example, the inaugural Community Engagement Games Day (now Harmony Games) spearheaded by the National Council of Churches of Singapore in 2008, continues to be hosted yearly by different apex faith organisations/communities to bring diverse racial and religious communities together through a common activity that everyone enjoys.[158]

In 2017, building on the CEP and SGSecure (a movement launched in 2016 for all Singaporeans to be part of Singapore's anti-terrorism efforts), the SGSecure Community Network (SGCN) was introduced. Through SGCN, the MCCY seeks to reach out to all religious organisations beyond existing members of IRCCs to inform them of their role in preparing and responding to the threat of terrorism. In preparing PWs to be crisis-ready, the MCCY works with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in conducting counter terrorism seminars, guiding religious organisations in developing crisis management plans, and organising crisis exercises for religious organisations.[159]

Through partnership platforms between government agencies and community stakeholders like the SGCN and IRCCs, strong and extensive networks of trust and rapport are built between race and religious communities in different institutions, thus strengthening the social fabric of Singapore.

Inter-Religious Organisation

The Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO) has grown since its founding in 1949 to include representatives from ten different religions in Singapore. The IRO's main goal is to develop friendship and strengthen ties between religious groups based on mutual trust, respect and understanding in order to enhance inter-religious harmony in Singapore.[160] The IRO holds regular public talks to engage members and the public on inter-religious topics as well as conducts dialogue on the impact of inter-religious work in the everyday lives of Singaporeans. IRO members are also involved in activities of IRCCs and the CEP. In its continuing effort to engage more people in fostering religious harmony in Singapore, the IRO has also expanded to include a youth's wing and Women of Faith, its women's wing. President Halimah Yaacob elaborated:

> *Women discuss a lot of such issues at home with their children, their family, so they play a very important role in the maintenance of harmony...With access to social media, the young also need a safe place where they can talk and discuss different faiths and their own faith as well.*[161]

The IRO also has a tradition of inter-religious prayers where representatives from each faith in the organisation come together to conduct prayers for various public and private institutions and ceremonies. The first such inter-faith prayer service was to commemorate the annual Remembrance Day memorial. By 1966, the inter-faith service at the Kranji War memorial was conducted on an annual basis. Due to the symbolic nature of the inter-religious prayer, the IRO prayer group, led by Harban Singh, was invited to conduct prayers for a variety of significant public and private events, including groundbreaking work for the construction of the Mass Rapid Transit, the exhumation of Bukit Brown, the opening of the Formula One race and memorial services in the wake of tragedies. The inter-religious prayers have become an icon of the strong unity of Singapore's multi-religious society.

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An inter-religious prayer by the Inter-Religious Organisation.
Image courtesy of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

From Joint Social Service Centre to OnePeople.Sg

The Central Singapore Joint Social Service Centre (CS JSSC) was first suggested by then PM Goh Chok Tong in 1996. He envisioned a joint body that would enable Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and community organisations to pool resources and draw on synergies to reach out to all Singaporeans. Rising to the challenge, the SHGs—Chinese Development Assistance Council, Yayasan Mendaki, Singapore Indian Development Association, The Eurasian Association, Singapore, and Association of Muslim Professionals—worked together with the Central Singapore Community Development Council to form the CS JSSC by 1997. The CS JSSC provided social services and enrichment programmes, reaching out to thousands of children, youth and elderly of all races in the community.[162] The CS JSSC also provided a course for frontline staff, such as nurses and social workers, to enable them to better appreciate ethnic differences and serve their clients of different races more effectively.[163]

The CS JSSC was repositioned as OnePeople.sg in 2007. On 27 May 2007, PM Lee Hsien Loong launched OnePeople.sg as an organisation promoting racial (and religious) harmony. It also spearheads programmes and initiatives to bring different ethnic communities together and aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of race relations. Apart from reaching out to youths, OnePeople.sg holds community engagement programmes to build capacity among stakeholders such as educators, religious, community and grassroots leaders, and members who have a significant influence on community relations. These programmes, some in partnership with IRCCs, include understanding religious diversity, facilitating inter-ethnic/religious discussions, ground sensing, new media engagement, crisis management, and mediation and conflict resolution.[164]

Harmony Centre

The Harmony Centre, housed in the An-Nahdhah Mosque in Bishan, was opened in 2006 as one of the MUIS' key initiatives to promote a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims within Singapore's multi-religious and multi-racial society. The centre showcases exhibits and artefacts on inter-religious relations in the Islamic history, religions in Singapore, Islamic Civilisation and lifestyle. The centre has also built deeper networks and bonds with other religious communities through inter-faith dialogue, training and engagement, and has become an integrated hub for the promotion of greater understanding and engagement of all faith communities.[165] These activities often explore common themes and issues from the perspective of different religions to promote inter-faith understanding. The centre piloted the "Building Bridges Programme" in 2012 based on the feedback from partners of the centre who were keen to enhance their understanding of the different faiths beyond the basic tenets and practices of each faith. The programme brings together representatives of two or more faith groups to study and share their unique perspectives on pertinent contemporary issues confronting religious communities. For example, the centre collaborated with the Singapore Buddhist Federation for a Building Bridges engagement session in 2014 where presentations were given on human suffering from Islamic and Buddhist perspectives. By building a cohesive and resilient

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platform between religions in Singapore, racial and religious harmony could be preserved and strengthened. The Centre also piloted the Abdul Aleem Siddique Memorial Lecture in 2011. The program was launched to bridge relations and build meaningful engagement between faith leaders and youths. Ustaz Dr Fatris Bakaram, former Mufti of Singapore, was the inaugural speaker for the programme.

While starting out as a centre for Singaporeans, the centre has received strong interests from other countries keen to learn more about strengthening ties between religious groups. Some of the dignitaries who have visited the centre include Senior Minister of the State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the United Kingdom (UK) Minister for Faith and Communities, The Right Honourable Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Canada's Governor-General David Johnston, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the Malaysia High Commission, the UK High Commission, Charles, Prince of Wales, Australian Member of Parliament Ed Husic, UK Member of Parliament Sajid Javid, the Paris Foreign Mission Society and the Palestinian High Commissioner. Representatives from countries such as Sri Lanka, Norway and Austria have expressed interest in opening similar centres.[166] The centre has also been invited to present its inter-faith work at overseas seminars.

Harmony Fund

Following incidents involving insensitive comments on people of different races and religions, the Harmony Fund was set up by the MCCY in 2013 to encourage more ground-up initiatives in allowing Singaporeans to understand and celebrate diversity.[167] The S$5-million fund was targeted at attracting projects that would raise awareness of the importance of inter-racial and inter-religious tolerance, promote understanding of various ethnic, racial or religious groups, and boost interaction among the groups, or reduce negative stereotypes or misconceptions of them.[168] Open to non-profit organisations and schools, the fund would support 80% of the cost of a project, up to S$100,000.

Since its launch, the fund has supported several meaningful community-initiated projects of different scales that strengthened religious and racial harmony. A game inspired by SimCity—a city-building simulation game—and developed by polytechnic students required players to compete to build a city and keep the peace between its inhabitants. They will get credits to build more buildings if they answer quizzes about cultural practices correctly or help residents get along harmoniously in the game.[169] Ground-up projects supported by the Harmony Fund allowed more people to be engaged in the efforts to maintain and strengthen the social fabric of Singapore.

Exhibitions at the Harmony Centre provide information regarding Muslim life and culture and that of other religions in Singapore in promoting inter-faith understanding.
Image courtesy of the Harmony Centre, Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura.

Harmony in Diversity Gallery

Launched by then President Tony Tan on 2 September 2016, the Harmony in Diversity Gallery (HDG) was developed by the MHA in collaboration with the IRO, academics and other community partners and organisations.[170] The youth wing of the IRO mooted the idea in 2015 to create this gallery. They were concerned that it would be much harder in future to foster mutual respect and understanding amongst younger Singaporeans if there was no basic knowledge and awareness of the major religions in Singapore and the common values that bonded them together.[171] The HDG comprised four galleries of exhibits, artefacts and interactive features. The galleries showcased inter-religious conflicts from around the world, the commonalities between different religions in Singapore in terms of values and practices, the effects of social disharmony, the common spaces in Singapore that can foster positive inter-faith interactions, and a call to reflect the role that individuals can play in preserving social harmony in Singapore. Through these exhibitions, the HDG aimed to demonstrate the centrality of religious harmony to Singapore's continued development, as well as the efforts required to build inter-faith peace in a religiously diverse society.[172]

GOVERNING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Governance of religious harmony in Singapore is achieved through both top-down and bottom-up approaches. On one hand, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act provides the government with a strong legislative tool in governing religious harmony while setting the parameters for religious activities in Singapore. On the other hand, community and institutional networks like IRCCs and the CEP, as well as community institutions like OnePeople.Sg and the Harmony Centre, connect people from a diverse range of racial and religious backgrounds in Singapore. Together, these initiatives build trust and communication among various groups, allowing problems to be resolved swiftly and amicably.

CHAPTER 5

PLACES OF WORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS IN THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICE

> " At the social level, religion strongly motivates us to do good for our neighbours, and help the less fortunate. This helps to foster a culture of charity and voluntary work, which pulls us closer together as a community."

Yaacob Ibrahim, then Acting Minister for Community Development and Sports[173]

PLACES OF WORSHIP IN SOCIAL SERVICE PROVISION

Places of worship (PWs) in Singapore have a long history of providing charitable and social services in helping the needy. Early Hindu temples provided a safe haven for newly arrived Hindu migrant workers; they offered shelter and food for workers who were displaced. Chinese temples had tea stands outside temple gates for the public and were used in flood and fire relief. Chinese migrants also established the *shan tang* (benevolence hall) where a trained physician, who could be a Buddhist monk, Taoist priest or a lay-person, treated patients—many of whom were poor—using traditional herbal medicine.

As Singapore became independent and underwent a period of rapid economic and social transformation, the government recognised the role of religion in meeting the spiritual and moral needs of Singaporeans.[174] While emphasising that religion and politics should not mix, the government urged religious groups to actively contribute to the nation by helping the needy and participating in community building. As then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew explained:

What we want our religious and para-religious groups to do is to give relief to the destitute, the disadvantaged, the disabled, to take part in activities which will foster communal fellowship. Emphasis on charity, alms-giving and social and community work. And priests [had] better stay out of espousing a form of economic system, or challenge the way we do things, social policy or theory.[175]

For example, then Member of Parliament for the Sembawang Group Representation Constituency K. Shanmugam explained how Hindu temples in urbanising Singapore should be different from Hindu temples in India, which are mainly for worshipping:

In India, the social support system is outside the temple…But this approach must change in Singapore, where the traditional support system among neighbours was fast disappearing…The kampung spirit is breaking down.[176]

Shanmugam suggested that Hindu temples could run programmes to help dysfunctional families, the needy and drug abusers, to open these programmes to other races (as the whole idea of community work is to help the needy), and to follow the example of the Hindu Endowments Board, which runs four Hindu temples and kindergartens. In a separate event, Shanmugam also pointed out the reach of temples as gathering nodes for the community as well as the recruitment of volunteers for social service provision.[177]

In a study on Hindu temples conducted in 2005, researchers profiled the Sri Mariamman Temple to illustrate the kind of social services that Hindu temples could provide.[178] The temple offers free food for the needy, conducts charity drives and has adopted a home for the elderly and destitute.[179] The temple, located in Chinatown, has also hosted annual Chinese New Year celebrations for residents, senior citizens from welfare homes as well as representatives from grassroots and community organisations.[180] Guests were served Chinese vegetarian dishes prepared by temple volunteers, tossed yu sheng (traditional dish for Chinese New Year) and were treated to multi-cultural performances such as the Indian Bharatanatyam dance, a lion dance and a Malay dance with Indian and Chinese music.[181] The spirit of giving back to the community regardless of race or religion is core to the work of many PWs and religious organisations in the provision of social services.

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for Community Development Abdullah Tarmugi, the approach develops "self-reliance in a society that is robust, yet compassionate and caring" through "partnerships with concerned citizens, corporations, community organisations, religious groups and family members".[182] Abdullah Tarmugi further explained that "such widespread participation [by the community] provides an environment that soothes and heals, a much warmer atmosphere than could be provided by government bureaucracy alone".[183]

The idea behind the "Many Helping Hands" approach is that the government's "hand" will provide the infrastructure, resources and expertise while working with people on the ground such as religious, community or grassroots organisations in providing welfare services.[184] For example, welfare homes for the aged established by Chinese Buddhist temples such as Tai Pei Old People's Home (Tai Pei Yuen Temple) and the Singapore Buddhist Welfare Services Old Folks' Home were given a subsidy by the state and admitted elderly men and women on the recommendation of the Social Welfare Department (the functions of the department is now taken care of by the Ministry of Social and Family Development).[185] This helped to alleviate the scarcity of bed spaces in welfare homes built by the government.[186]

Land was also provided at nominal prices for religious institutions for welfare centres or homes, with institutions bearing the cost of construction; nominal or below market rate rents may also be offered for religious institutions in housing estates where they run social services as part of their mission.[187] For example, the government funded the Tampines branch of All Saints Home, a residential nursing care unit for the elderly sick of all religions in the community, and 90% of the bed spaces were reserved for referrals from the Ministry of Health.[188]

PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR ALL

A unique feature of social service provision by PWs and religious organisations in Singapore is that many cater to people from all races and religions.

Venerable Shi You Guang, Abbot/President of Samantabhadra Vihara, reflected on his monastery's service for underprivileged children in the neighbourhood that is based on financial grounds, regardless of race or religion:

The Sri Mariamman Temple hosting a Chinese New Year celebration for residents, senior citizens from welfare homes, and representatives from grassroots and community organisations.
Image courtesy of the Hindu Endowments Board.

"MANY HELPING HANDS" APPROACH— PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND PLACES OF WORSHIP/RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

PWs and religious organisations form part of the government's "Many Helping Hands" approach introduced in the 1990s to help the needy and vulnerable population in society. This approach involved a multi-stakeholder partnership between the state (setting the legal, regulatory and financial parameters), social service organisations that include PWs, and religious organisations that serve the beneficiaries, donors, volunteers and the larger community. According to then Acting Minister

We started with Whampoa, as there are many rented flats, so we have this bi-monthly "milk and cereal programme". This breakfast programme is for children from the age of four to seven from underprivileged families. I approached Whampoa CC [Community Centre], I told them that I want to do something that people are not already doing. There was a gap for us in serving the underprivileged children. We took over this programme, with the evaluation of children suitable for this programme done by the CC and the social worker. I often tell my volunteers that we are there not to pity them, we are there to support them, to uplift them, especially with breakfast so that they have a better head start for the day, with no intention of converting anyone's faith.[189]

The bi-monthly "Milk and Cereal Program" by Samantabhadra Vihara for underprivileged children, regardless of race or religion.
Image courtesy of Samantabhadra Vihara.

It is also common for religious organisations and PWs to carry out inter-faith collaboration in the provision of social services of different kinds. An example is the joint effort of the Singapore Buddhist Lodge and Jamiyah Singapore in promoting community welfare for more than ten years. The Singapore Buddhist Lodge has been providing dried foodstuff, donated by its followers, to Jamiyah Singapore for distribution to the poor and needy under Jamiyah Singapore's Welfare Assistance scheme; Jamiyah Singapore, on the other hand, has helped to sell tickets to joint functions such as carnivals and jog-a-walks to help raise proceeds.[190]

The Singapore Buddhist Lodge also worked with Jamiyah Singapore and other organisations in its annual tradition of red packet distribution before Chinese New Year to beneficiaries of all races and faiths.

Another example of a different kind of inter-faith collaboration is the partnership between the Heart of God Church and the Khalid Mosque in a joint inter-faith tuition programme for secondary school students in their congregations and the neighourhood. The tuition sessions alternated between the church and mosque premises, providing many opportunities for participants, both tutors and students, to learn more about each other's faith in addition to academics.

By providing social service and collaborating across faiths, religious organisations and PWs are able to reach out to more needy people as well as build trust and harmony in Singapore's society.

OPTIMISING RESOURCES AND SERVICE DELIVERY—ENHANCED MOSQUE CLUSTER

Similar to village mosques of the past, mosques in modern Singapore serve as social-religious hubs for the Muslim community. Volunteers in mosques help salaried staff to run social and developmental programmes such as fundraising, family events, religious lectures and enrichment courses. The position of Social Development Officers was introduced in mosques in 2008 to support social development services and programmes for low-income families and *zakat* (the Islamic financial system of the giving of one's wealth to charitable causes annually) recipients. In balancing between the religious and social functions of mosques, Yaacob Ibrahim emphasised the importance for mosques to connect with wider networks in the community:

The motivation behind this is to use our mosque as [a] node that can help the Muslim community to leverage on existing social services. I did not want our mosques to become FSCs [Family Service Centres] as mosques are not designed nor planned in a way aimed at working as a social service centre. However, mosques can be a leverage point for the community. So if a Muslim resident drops by the mosque for say collection of the zakat *monies, we hope our mosque manager can evaluate the resident's other needs, which could be served by other existing social agencies like a FSC. If that is the case we can then refer*

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this particular resident to the nearby FSC. Similarly, if a Muslim resident drops by the mosque looking for services [that] we don't conduct such as tuition classes for their children, the manager can refer the resident to MENDAKI [Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community]. MENDAKI will then work with the resident to find the nearest tuition centre to the resident's home. Hence our mosques act as a referral center for services which they do not offer. In this sense, we follow the government's policy of "No Wrong Door".[191]

In this way, beyond its religious function, mosques are some important nodes within the community for the provision of social services in partnership with other organisations, as Yaacob Ibrahim further illustrated:

When I was Chairman of MENDAKI, we started MENDAKI satellite centres. These are MENDAKI run centres located very near certain areas of interest. In the beginning, we had six centres with four located in four mosques, one in a community centre and another at a void deck space. We wanted these centres to be close to places where low income families are found so that they can avail themselves of MENDAKI's services. These centres are manned by MENDAKI staff, usually two of them, and they would literally go door knocking in the neighbouring areas to reach out to these families to offer them MENDAKI's services. We wanted places in the mosques so that we can also reach out to those who drop by the mosques. Hence we work closely with the mosques in our effort to reach out to these families. For example, we have a space at Jamiyah Ar-Rabitah mosque, which is located in the Bukit Merah and Henderson Road areas. There are a significant number of low income Malay/Muslim families in these areas. During the door knocking exercise, we also refer these families to other social agencies if they need services not offered by MENDAKI. For example, some of them may need financial support, and in this case, we will work with the mosque to help these families. So in effect, we leverage on the location of the mosque to do MENDAKI's outreach work.[192]

To enhance the role of mosques in the delivery of services for the community, the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) introduced the Enhanced Mosque Cluster (EMC) system in 2007. Under the EMC system, mosques were grouped into six clusters of between 8 to 20 mosques and re-organised into four clusters—North, South, East and West—in 2018. The EMC system optimises the efficiency of planning, coordination and implementation of programmes across all mosques in each cluster. Yaacob Ibrahim reflected on the rationale for the formation of the EMC in creating synergies across mosques:

In the past, we look at one big mosque, it's very big, we say, let's get a mosque manager. So the mosque manager, actually almost like an estate manager, runs the entire mosque, managing the religious leader, the classes, and allocation of resources. But then some mosques are too small to have an estate manager, but how can we then integrate them with the larger mosques so that there can be more synergy. So we say why don't we group them into clusters and then we hire one mosque manager to oversee two mosques, or three mosques, depending on the size basically. So what do they do? The mosque manager coordinates the programme. So okay, some programmes you cannot conduct, connect with the big mosque; but advertise at the small mosque, and say you register here, you go to the big mosque. Some of the classes in the big mosque we think it's good, we can bring to the smaller mosques. So the duty of the mosque manager, we call the cluster manager, is to coordinate all the activities across a cluster. So that there's an equal balance.[193]

By grouping mosques within a geographic area together under the EMC system, the collective strength and resources of every mosque could be harnessed in the delivery of programmes to the community, helping the needy and in building social trust.[194]

GOVERNANCE OF CHARITIES

Religious organisations and PWs that are charities are regulated through the Charities Unit. Also known as the office of the Commissioner of Charities (COC), the Charities Unit was set up on 1 July 2006 as part of the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore. Its role is to regulate the charity sector and promote the effective use of charity resources. Following the recommendations of the Inter-Ministry Committee on the Regulation of Charities and Institutions of a Public Character (IPCs), the Charities Unit was officially transferred to the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports on 1 September 2006. The division was eventually placed under the purview of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth when it was formed on 1 November 2012. In order to ensure public accountability and good governance, organisations established for exclusively charitable purposes and who carry out activities to achieve these purposes are required to register as a charity reporting to the COC.

All registered charities now enjoy automatic income tax exemption.[195] A registered charity is required to submit its annual report and financial statements to the COC within six months of the end of its financial year, which will be made available on the Charity Portal (www.charities.gov.sg) for public viewing. A registered charity could also apply to be an IPC where it would be able to issue tax deduction receipts for qualifying donations to donors. The IPC is held to a higher regulatory standard—its activities must be beneficial to the community in Singapore as a whole, and not be confined to sectional interests or group of persons based on race, creed, belief or religion unless otherwise approved by the Minister; these activities must also meet the IPC's objectives under its governing instruments and the objectives of its Sector Administrator, and the IPC must also be administered by governing board members, at least half of whom are independent and citizens of Singapore.[196]

In 2007, charities were urged to follow a Code of Governance by the Charity Council, a council established to assist in the regulation of the charity sector. It advised the COC on key regulatory issues that may have a broad impact on the charity sector.[197] The Code was not mandatory, but was widely regarded as an important benchmark of good governance and organisations have to provide a reason if they choose not to follow it.[198] The Code sets out principles and best practices in the key areas of governance and management that charities are encouraged to adopt. In drawing up the Code, a three-month public consultation exercise was conducted that drew responses from more than 700 charities. The Charity Council considered the feedback and made the Code less difficult for charities to implement.[199] For example, religious organisations had asked for leeway on the initial proposal that the organisation board should be totally separated from its executive management, as spiritual leaders of many religious groups were often paid officers and board members; the revised guidelines allowed up to a third of a charity's board to be made up of paid staff.[200] The first refined Code was issued in January 2011 and a second refined Code was issued on 6 April 2017.[201]

PARTNERING RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS IN SOCIAL SERVICE PROVISION

Apart from meeting the religious and spiritual needs of people in Singapore, religious organisations and PWs in the city play a significant role in Singapore's development by partnering with the government in the provision of social service to the needy as part of the "Many Helping Hands" approach. Many of the outreach activities by religious groups and PWs do not just cater to their own religious community, but to all in the city, thus strengthening the social fabric of Singapore.

CHAPTER 6

PLACES OF WORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

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> " At the formative stages of our journey, partnerships were key, and they remain so today. We have taken a more inclusive and consultative approach to co-create and sustain our built heritage landscape."

Desmond Lee, then Minister for Social and Family Development and
Second Minister for National Development[202]

PLACES OF WORSHIP AS BUILT HERITAGE

Places of worship (PWs) are an important part of Singapore's urban landscape, not only catering to the religious needs of people but as built heritage—"brick-and-mortar repositories of memories and as treasured focal points for diverse communities".[203] PWs, and their unique architectural forms, reflect the diversity of Singapore's multi-cultural society and many have deep historical and cultural significance, dating back to pre-independent Singapore.

Institutions of Preservation/Conservation

An early conservation effort was the setting up of the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB) under the Ministry of National Development (MND) in 1971. Through the Preservation of Monuments Act, the PMB was designated the authoritative body to recommend sites and monuments to the MND for protection. Being designated a National Monument confers the highest standards of preservation on a building—the original act dictated that no part of the property may be demolished, removed, altered or renovated, or have an addition without the written consent of the PMB.[204] The PMB was equipped with the legal authority to issue guidelines and work with owners to ensure that a building listed as a National Monument could maintain its integrity even after it had been gazetted. By 1973, the first eight National Monuments were identified and

placed under the protection of the PMB, of which six were PWs. They are the Armenian Church, Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Thian Hock Keng Temple, Sri Mariamman Temple, Hajjah Fatimah Mosque and the Cathedral of the Good Shepherd (the other two national monuments are Thong Chai Medical Institute and Telok Ayer Market, or Lau Pa Sat). In 1997, the PMB was placed under the Ministry of Information and the Arts (now Ministry of Communications and Information) as a statutory board to focus more on the social-historical aspects of buildings. On 1 July 2009, it became a division under the National Heritage Board (NHB) with the passing of the revised Preservation of Monuments Act of 2009. On 1 July 2013, the PMB was renamed the Preservation of Sites and Monuments (PSM) division under the NHB to better reflect its role of preserving not only buildings and monuments but also sites that commemorate heritage as defined under the Preservation of Monuments Act.[205]

The other legal mechanism that guided heritage conservation is the Planning Act. In 1989, with an amendment to the Planning Act, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) was granted the authority to designate conservation areas and conceptualise detailed conservation guidelines. The URA's 1989 Conservation Master Plan comprised five phases, with each phase focusing on different areas and building types that included PWs. The Master Planning approach for land use considers that historic PW sites—their buildings and meanings—are best protected when the original use is sustained. Hence, the operating approach is to retain the zoning for such sites whenever practicable. Thus, through legislations, significant PWs are protected and preserved.

In order to help owners of gazetted PWs and other buildings undertake restoration in a systematic manner, the URA worked with the PMB to develop preservation guidelines for National Monuments. Based on research into archival, library and photographic records and previous plans of the buildings, the guidelines laid out requirements on design, materials and architectural features to be observed, documented changes made to the building, and the stated extent of restoration required for the building to be worthy of its status as a national monument.[206] All gazetted National Monuments are issued with a set of Preservation Guidelines specific to the monument. The Preservation Guidelines is a control document, which essentially acts as an audit of the building and its contents. This document also serves as the reference point on which the annual visual inspection of the building by the PMB's Inspectors is based upon.[207] Monument Plaques were also put up on gazetted buildings to highlight the building's historical significance.

Places of worship that are designated as National Monuments have to keep to the highest standards of preservation, for example: (clockwise from top) Abdul Gafoor Mosque, Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Sri Thendayuthapani Temple, and the Former Siong Lim Temple (now Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery).
All images courtesy of the Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board, except for the bottom right image, which is courtesy of CYRavi.

Despite detailed guidelines drawn up by the authorities, the technical challenge of restoration remained for all owners of historic buildings. This was particularly challenging for PWs, which usually have intricate architectural elements, as there was a lack of know-how in the craft of restoring them. A Monument Inspectorate was set up by the PMB to tackle this issue, as Yeo Kang Shua, former Architectural Consultant of the PMB, reflected:

When I joined PMB in 2007, I was given the mandate by the Board to set up the Monuments Inspectorate. We hired two staff who were former Clerk-of-Works, which are now known as Resident Technical Officers. The main role that I was tasked with is to look at technical matters. Not so much from the regulatory point of view, but essentially to help owners and advise them on the technical aspects of restoration and maintenance. Mr Alfred Wong (then Chairman, PMB) had noticed that as a regulator, the Board required the owners to take on various responsibilities for the upkeep and maintenance of the buildings but very few of these owners, their committees and volunteers, have the technical know-how to do so. That was Mr Wong's thinking and that was how the Inspectorate was born.[208]

A challenge faced by the Inspectorate team then was convincing gazetted PWs and other building owners to work with them. Yeo elaborated:

When we first started, it was very challenging. Owners were suspicious of us. The term "inspection" made them wary....They were afraid we are going to find fault with them. If you try to be legalistic from a regulatory point of view, you could likely find a lot of problems with regard to how they maintain the buildings, what they should have done and what they should not have done. But we took pains to reassure them that we are not here to find fault. Rather, we are here to find out the technical issues that they may have, the challenges in resolving them, and we are here to help them find ways to solve these issues. It took us some time, maybe more than a year, to convince them that we are not here to penalise anyone.[209]

The "human touch" involved in building trust with owners of gazetted PWs and other buildings was crucial in engaging them in the restoration process. To this date, however, there remains a gap in local technical know-how in the restoration of PWs. Experts from overseas were usually brought in to assist with restoration works, which often involved deep traditional cultural knowledge. A team of craftsmen from Fujian, China, was invited by the Hong San See to assist in its restoration work.[210] In the restoration of Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Little India, a team of 20 highly skilled artisans, known as *sthapathis*, were brought in from India.

A DIFFERENCE IN APPROACHES TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION—

CASE OF TAN SI CHONG SU

Tan Si Chong Su is a Chinese temple located near the Singapore River. It was constructed between 1876 and 1878 as an ancestral temple for the Tan clan and gazetted as a National Monument on 19 November 1974. In 2003, the custodian to the temple was convicted for an offence under the Preservation of Monuments Act and fined. This was the first time that the Act had been invoked. The custodian had commissioned renovations for the temple without the approval of the PMB. Part of the temple's roof had been raised and its unglazed roof tiles replaced with glazed green ones, new roofs had also been added, and the ceramic shards ornamentation on the roof's ridge was simplified.[211] Original

paintings on the temple's timber beams and carvings on its granite panels were also replaced instead of being restored, and granite arches were added where the original square side openings of a courtyard used to be.[212] These were deemed as unauthorised alterations as the original character of the temple had been modified. However, the custodian's approach to renovating the temple had cultural reasoning. Yeo recounted:

> When we started [the] PMB Monuments Inspectorate, the Tan Si Chong Su was one of the buildings that I had to look into. I was mindful to go in without any prejudice, with the thought that I am not here to find fault or to take anyone to task, but to help them. I listened to the owner's perspective and realised that there may have been a misalignment in understanding with regard to the approach. For religious buildings, in particular for Taoist or Buddhist buildings, there is the idea of merit-making or ji de [Chinese for "accumulation of merit"]. There are many ways to do so and one of the ways to ji de is to build a beautiful building for your gods. So, there is this ingrained concept of building for gods. This concept exists not just in Taoism, but in one form or another in most religions. For example, the beautiful cathedrals in the West were built over hundreds of years, because people donated and continually added new constructions to the building. In the case of this temple, at the time when this particular caretaker/custodian took over, the Tan clan had some internal challenges. They had few members and a dwindling membership. To support the temple building was increasingly challenging and the temple was "crumbling". Hence, the custodian used his own money to carry out works without consulting the authorities. Although these numerous works were piecemeal here and there but over time, these little bits of renovation efforts added up to something major.[213]

When the custodian of the temple undertook restoration of the temple, he was commissioning work that fell within the framework of Chinese religious traditions, but this work had not been discussed with the authorities and contravened the law which privileges material fabric as the basis of built heritage.[214] The PSM has since worked with the temple to make rectifications and the temple was found to be well maintained on a recent inspection.

Tan Si Chong Su today.
Image courtesy of the Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board.

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RECONCILIATION OF APPROACHES TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION— CASE OF COMMUNITY-LED RESTORATION OF HONG SAN SEE

Located on the side of Institution Hill off Mohamed Sultan Road, Hong San See is a Chinese temple established by Hokkien immigrants from the Nan'an County in Fujian Province, China. A full-scale restoration was undertaken between 2006 and 2009 after the corner of a roof collapsed. To ensure a robust and logical decision-making process for the project, the restoration committee and project consultants that the Lam Ann Association (owner of the temple) appointed to oversee work on the temple formulated a set of objectives for the project:

i. To preserve the temple as a living monument, together with its contents, which included among other things, artefacts and documents that are reflective of its history.

ii. To present, through the conservation effort, the temple as a fine example of Quanzhou architecture with Nanyang influences and the related traditions of ornamentation and artistry.

iii. To function for a diverse audience, both religious and non-religious as well as clansmen and the public at large, as a window to the broader context of Chinese art, architecture and culture.[215]

Through discussion on the best approach for restoration, the team agreed on what is known as the relativist approach, an approach that had considerations beyond historic material fabric and sees the replacement of original built fabric as necessary in a building's life cycle. Cognisant of the case of the Tan Si Chong Su in 2003 where modifications to the original fabric without consulting the authorities resulted in legal action against the custodian, the restoration team approached the PMB and the URA to convince them that the proposed works were necessary to the continued viability of the temple.[216] By ensuring that the project's objectives were clear and international best practices, and by demonstrating that all decision-making processes could be articulated with academic rigour, the committee was able to have an open and productive discussion of its approach with the authorities.[217] Eventually, the three parties were able to mutually agree on the temple's restoration. To ensure authenticity, technical consultants from the Beijing Palace Museum were engaged to draft a detailed restoration plan and a group of craftsmen who had expertise in restoring China's national treasures was brought in to undertake the restoration work.[218] Throughout the process, there was constant engagement between all three parties, with the URA (serving as the technical arm to the PMB) acting as a bridge and partner to work through the various on-going challenges.

Hong San See (1983).
Image courtesy of the National Archives of Singapore.

RECONCILIATION OF APPROACHES TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION— CASE OF COMMUNITY-LED RESTORATION OF HONG SAN SEE

Continued...

The restoration project was a success and the project received the Award of Excellence in the 2010 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation and was also rewarded in the URA Architectural Heritage Awards in 2013. The citation by UNESCO reads:

The exceptional restoration of the Hong San See temple has revived an important icon of Minnan temple architecture of the late Qing dynasty, which is a living heritage landmark for the Lam Ann settlers and the Singapore community as a whole. The project serves as an inspirational exemplar in the application of meticulous historical research to conservation decision making concerning appropriate techniques and materials. The project's rigorous conservation methodology has ensured that the authentic structure and fabric of the building are well-preserved, while additions are designed to be compatible and reversible. Moreover, by engaging the wider public through a variety of innovative fundraising and educational efforts, the project presents an innovative model for private-sector-led conservation initiatives. The community-based approach to restoration at Hong San See Temple stands to have a major impact in shifting the paradigm of conservation policy and practice in Singapore and around the region.[219]

Hong San See after restoration.
Image courtesy of the Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board.

The successful restoration of the Hong San See demonstrated the value of working together with the community in the preservation process. By having clear objectives and well-supported decisions, the restoration committee was able to work with the authority in determining the best approaches in the restoration of the temple.

The high cost of restoration work was also another challenge faced by owners of gazetted PWs due to their non-profit nature. In 2008, the PMB set up a S$5-million National Monuments Fund (NMF) specifically for non-profits monuments requiring urgent repairs. The fund works on a co-funding basis where owners, aided by a tax-exemption scheme introduced in 1994, have to raise some money. The PMB also works closely with owners of funded monuments to inspect and document the restoration progress. PWs that have benefitted from the fund include the Saint Joseph's Church, Abdul Gafoor Mosque, Cathedral of the Good Shepherd and Hong San See. In 2015, in recognition of the growing needs of Singapore's National Monuments, and to better support the monument owners in addressing these needs, the NMF was given a second tranche of funding of S$11.77 million. The NMF was also enhanced to include a new category of funding for maintenance. The Maintenance Fund was allocated S$2 million from the second tranche of funding, aiming to ensure that stakeholders conduct regular maintenance work to restrain building deterioration, thereby preventing unaddressed works from snowballing into significant restoration costs.[220] By encouraging responsible ownership of gazetted PWs through co-funding, the NMF scheme has allowed the PSM to support building owners in the preservation process.

In the restoration of historically significant gazetted PWs, there is also the challenge of balancing between faithful restoration and adapting to modern needs. As Yeo Kang Shua, now Associate Professor, Singapore University of Technology and Design, explained:

I would refer to religious sites or buildings as "living heritage" because they are not ossified or calcified in time. They are always evolving, as is religion and the way people practice religion. But you need to also identify what is significant about the heritage that cannot be changed. And then for the rest, you have to exercise certain flexibility in varying degree[s] to allow for modernisation. Take for example M&E [Mechanical and Electrical] services. The challenge is that some of the buildings are built before the electrification of Singapore. If you go to some older temples, the electrical wiring is exposed and laid quite haphazardly. The lights are mostly fluorescent tubes, so they are not designed or integrated with the architecture. It is impossible to demand that these be removed and [we] return to oil lanterns and lamps. Hence, we have to make provisions through design. The addition of air-conditioning presents another set of problems. One of which is that the walls in historic buildings tend to be thick and if you air-condition the entire space, one concern is that dew-point condensation may occur within the walls, thereby introducing moisture into the historic building fabric. And then we also have to deal with the visual aesthetic issue—like where

and how do you run your refrigerant and condensate pipes? Where do you put your air-handling unit or fan coil unit? For example, in the case of the Saint Andrew's Cathedral, we have a central nave with two rows of columns separating the two side aisles. If the fan coil unit is positioned along the wall on the side, the central area in the nave may not get sufficient cool air circulation. Hence, the logical position is to place them by the columns. But these are clustered columns so the fan coil units cannot be placed against [them] directly. That is why they have to be standalone air-condition units. Are they visually obtrusive? Is this acceptable? The easiest way is to not have air-con, and the government agency responsible can certainly not allow the installation of air-conditioning. But we must also understand that while there was no air-conditioning historically and that thermal comfort can be subjective, people are now accustomed to air-conditioning and they "demand" it. As such, there are certain trade-offs to be mitigated between preservation in full and adapting to modern needs.[221]

As time passes and religious practices evolved, the dilemma between faithful preservation to maintain the aesthetics of the old and adapting to contemporary needs will always be present. Preservation/conservation authorities like the PSM and the URA would need to work closely with trustees and other stakeholders of PWs in considering how the character of National Monuments could be maintained while progressing with time.

Air-conditioning units placed by the columns in Saint Andrew's Cathedral.
Image courtesy of the Preservation of Sites and Monuments, National Heritage Board.

SULTAN MOSQUE AS PART OF PLACEMAKING IN KAMPONG GLAM

Located in Muscat Street within Kampong Glam, the historic Sultan Mosque was built in 1824 for Sultan Hussein Shah, the first sultan of Singapore. It was later rebuilt in 1932 and gazetted as a National Monument in 1975.

Sultan Mosque, as a cultural focal point of Kampong Glam, plays a key role in enhancing the vibrancy of Kampong Glam as a conservation district. The URA has included the Mosque as a valued partner in placemaking initiatives in Kampong Glam as it recognises that being long established in the district, it is a community and cultural landmark. Its numerous congregations, spanning many generations of former residents of Kampong Glam and people from elsewhere in Singapore, as well as its long-established Mosque Management Board, allow the Mosque to contribute to placemaking in many ways. This includes: (i) giving insights into the various stakeholder groups of the area, social-cultural values of the community and whether certain programming might meet the needs of their community, (ii) providing advice and connections with the wider network of community leaders, (iii) lending support to programming proposed by One-Kampong Gelam, the local business association, the URA and other community partners, and (iv) contributing directly to the socio-cultural and commercial life of the district such as granting use of its meeting rooms, organising the annual Ramadan Bazaar and facilitating visits and tours to the Mosque.

The URA also works closely with the Sultan Mosque in guiding the conversation with the rest of the community on the values of the area and the direction of its evolution and change. This includes helping to build consensus as to how "vibrancy" should be defined in the area. The Mosque and other stakeholders have given insights to planners on how to better plan and manage the distribution of various uses in the area. It also provides community guidance and a positive influence on the on-ground stakeholders of landlords and tenants in terms of how they should manage their tenancies and businesses in order to help maintain the unique heritage character of the district.

The Mosque is also a member of the Kampong Gelam Alliance. The Alliance is an informal group for key stakeholders in the area and was structured to include all key sectors—Commercial, Cultural and Community (Sultan Mosque falls into the "Community" sector). This is to recognise that as Kampong Glam is a heritage area, it is necessary for effective and inclusive placemaking to go beyond the commercial sector and engage all stakeholders.[222]

Sultan Mosque, a National Monument and a cultural focal point of Kampong Glam.
Image courtesy of Ronnie Chua/shutterstock.com.

The Sultan Mosque organises the annual Ramadan Bazaar held in Kampong Glam, which contributes to placemaking efforts.
Image courtesy of the Sultan Mosque.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Beyond the material fabric of PWs, religious practices and expressions are also important forms of cultural heritage or what is known as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). ICH comprises the traditions, rituals, crafts, expressions, knowledge and skills that are practised and passed on from generation to generation in Singapore; it is part of Singapore's living heritage and is dynamic and constantly evolving as time passes.[223]

The NHB launched the Intangible Cultural Heritage Survey in November 2016. The survey involves research and documentation of cultural practices, trades and traditional knowledge found in Singapore. It also involves interviews with practitioners as well as photography and video documentation. The survey's findings were used to guide future initiatives in safeguarding and promoting Singapore's intangible cultural heritage.[224]

On 22 February 2018, Singapore ratified the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In doing so, Singapore committed itself to the safeguarding and promotion of its ICH for future generations.

Following focus group sessions and public consultations, the NHB launched the Our Sg Heritage Plan in April 2018. The Plan is the first master plan for Singapore's heritage and museum sector, which outlines the broad strategies and initiatives for the sector over the next five years (2018 to 2022) and beyond. One of the broad strategies laid out is to safeguard and promote public awareness of ICH. As part of the Plan and drawing from the earlier ICH Survey, the ICH Inventory (http://roots.sg/ich) was also launched in April 2018 to serve as a repository for ICH elements in Singapore. The inventory is regularly updated with inputs from heritage experts, practitioners and members of the public. Examples of religious practices documented in the inventory are the Nine Emperor Gods Festival, the Hungry Ghost Festival, a pilgrimage to Kusu Island, Hari Raya Puasa, Hari Raya Haji, Pongal, Deepavali, and Easter celebrations.

Religious practices as intangible cultural heritage: (clockwise from top) Nine Emperor Gods Festival, *korban* (during Hari Raya Haji), Pongal, and Easter celebrations.
Images courtesy of Nine Emperor Gods Festival Documentation Team (top left), Dr Yaacob Ibrahim's Facebook page/MUIS (top right), National Heritage Board (bottom left) and Little India Shopkeepers and Heritage Association (bottom right).

The NHB's Heritage Research Grant also supports research into ICH. For example, a team from the Nanyang Technological University studied the Nine Emperor Gods Festival to document its associated rituals, structures and activities. The project included oral interviews with organisers and devotees, as well as photography and videography.[225]

The comprehensive surveying of ICH and the development of an ICH inventory with the public, together with the Our Sg Heritage Master Plan, have allowed for ICH in Singapore to be systematically documented and profiled for increasing public awareness and appreciation. Apart from developing strategies to safeguard ICH, the NHB also recognised the need to give ICH the room to grow, evolve and adapt, or they may lose its relevance and meaning to its respective communities, and to society in general.[226]

LOOKING FORWARD: LESSONS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

" Over the last 52 years, we made significant progress in becoming one people—regardless of race, language or religion….But you must remember that what we have here is not something natural, nor something which will stay there by itself. It is the result of very hard work, a lot of toil and sweat, and the gradual education and bringing together of people."

Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore[227]

KEY LESSONS IN PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY

From the 1964 riots to today where religious harmony is celebrated, Singapore has come a long way. Systematic planning and governance are significant to Singapore's journey to becoming a harmonious multi-cultural city. As distilled in the earlier chapters, the key lessons in the systematic planning and governance of religious harmony in Singapore are (i) fostering a culture of integrity and fairness, (ii) establishing the rule of law, (iii) working closely with the community as stakeholders, and (iv) innovating systematically in planning and policies.

Fostering a Culture of Integrity and Fairness

In planning and governing a city of people with diverse religions, fostering a culture of integrity and impartiality towards all religious groups is foremost. In the resettlement period during Singapore's early nation years, the resettlement policy was impartial and clear-cut for all to allow land for urban development. Though the resettlement of religious sites was sensitive and challenging (due to people's emotional and social ties to their respective places), it was systematically carried out, with resettlement officers evoking the "human touch" in engaging affected sites. Following resettlement, planning for places of worship (PWs) in new towns catered to the religious needs of the population—planners made provision for every new town to have PWs.

In the charity sector, the Commissioner of Charities was established to ensure proper public accountability and good governance among charities. In applying to be an Institution of a Public Character, religious groups and other registered charities have to ensure that their activities are beneficial to the community in Singapore as a whole, regardless of race, creed, belief or religion. In supporting and guiding the social service and charity sector in Singapore, the government has worked to foster a culture of integrity. Having a culture of integrity and fairness is important for building trust between the government and the people.

Establishing the Rule of Law

Having a strong rule of law has been fundamental to Singapore's success in becoming a highly liveable city, including the safeguarding of religious harmony. The freedom of religion, as enshrined in Singapore's Constitution, has allowed Singapore to grow into a cosmopolitan city welcoming of people of all religions. Yet, Singapore remains a secular state and ensures that religion and politics remain separate, which is key to preserving harmony. The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA) serves as a strong legislative tool for the government to respond swiftly in maintaining religious harmony as and when needed. Even though the Act has not been used since it came into effect, it is useful in setting the boundaries for religious activities in Singapore to maintain harmony.

Working Closely with the Community as Stakeholders

In the planning and governance of religious matters, the government works closely with the community—religious groups, residents, grassroots leaders, etc.—as stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process. In looking at local liveability issues such as the burning of religious offerings in housing estates and managing traffic spillovers from PWs, the authorities worked closely with the religious groups. The Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles connect community stakeholders such as religious, ethnic, grassroots and community leaders, serving as local inter-faith platforms in every constituency to promote racial and religious harmony. These networks build inter-faith trust and allow for the swift and amicable resolution of any inter-racial or religious conflicts in the neighbourhood. The Community Engagement Programme further extended and deepened networks of trust and vigilance between different racial and religious communities across a variety of institutions such as schools, the media and businesses.

The government's "Many Helping Hands Approach" partners religious groups and other organisations in the provision of social services to needy people. This has allowed greater outreach to the vulnerable population in Singapore. Religious communities also work with planning agencies such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) and the Preservation of Sites and Monuments division in the protection and restoration of PWs that are gazetted as National Monuments. Partnering with the public in the comprehensive surveying of Singapore's intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which includes a diversity of religious practices, have allowed for Singapore's ICH to be systematically documented and profiled for increasing public awareness and appreciation. Close partnership with religious and grassroots communities allows them to have a stake in planning and governance issues that directly affect them. Religious leaders and groups are also in a better position to reach out to followers to convey any decisions or issues.

Innovating Systematically in Planning and Policies

Innovations in planning and policies have allowed the religious needs of the population to be met. The Mosque Building Fund (MBF), and subsequently the Mosque Building and MENDAKI Fund (MBMF), has allowed the government to remain secular while contributing to the religious needs of Malay/Muslim Singaporeans. The MBF/MBMF has ensured that the Malay/Muslim community has a steady and systematic source of funding for a mosque in each new town as well as socio-religious support programmes. It was also key in allowing mosques to be upgraded systematically over the years to make them more accessible as the population ages. The joint allocation of land for smaller temples to pool resources for a new temple, or combined temple, was effective for temples affected by resettlement to retain their practices and devotees.

Setting aside land for the development of PW hubs where multiple religious organisations belonging to the same religion are housed together in a multi-storey development is also another planning innovation. As religious organisations from the same religion co-locate and share facilities such as car parks, Singapore's limited land resources will be better optimised. Smaller religious organisations that find the standard PW sites too large for their use can band together under one hub.

EMERGING CHALLENGES

Even with strong systems in place to safeguard religious harmony in Singapore, global and local developments amidst an increasingly complex and globalised world present new challenges.

First, with rapid technological advancement, the increasing pervasiveness of the Internet and social media in everyday life creates greater room for the propagation of hate speeches, insensitive remarks and fake news, which could hurt inter-religious ties.

Second, in a 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center, a trend of rising religiosity could be seen in the Asia-Pacific region, including Singapore. With increasing religiosity, the need for careful planning and governance of harmony in a multi-religious city like Singapore becomes much more apparent. An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS)-OnePeople.Sg study in 2019 showed that religious or ethnic practices in common spaces in neighbourhoods in Singapore could be potential for certain types of tensions to increase. Top activities identified as potential tension points include the burning of religious items, religious chanting or praying, loud events at void decks and intolerance towards the smell of ethnic food between neighbours.[228] In the 2018 Social Pulse Survey, an annual study carried out by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), eight in ten Singaporeans were satisfied with race and religious relations, while

two in three agreed that there were enough opportunities to interact with people of different backgrounds and beliefs.[229] As much as the result of the study is encouraging, there is a need to continually build inter-faith/ethnicity tolerance, understanding and trust, particularly in the highly-dense living environment of Singapore.

Third, a 2019 study by the IPS surveyed 4,000 Singaporeans and permanent residents and found that about a third of the respondents identified race and religion as having the potential to result in violence in Singapore if not managed properly. Yet, new faultlines have also been identified, including issues of class, immigration, and lesbian, gay and transgender (LGBT) rights.[230]

Fourth, as Singapore continues to develop and balance multiple developmental needs, land for PWs will continue to be limited. Singapore will also face the dilemma of balancing conservation and development. In a National Heritage Board-supported study of 21 historic pre-Second World War PWs in the early settlement areas of Telok Ayer, Tanjong Pagar and Tanjong Malang, the Singapore Heritage Society (SHS) found that a dozen of these institutions are in critical need of support and protection. The SHS assessed that some of these historic sites (e.g., Seng Wong Beo Temple, Habib Noh and Haji Muhammad Salleh Mosque) had fallen through the cracks in terms of gaining conservation/preservation status, despite having a rich cultural heritage.[231]

In tackling these challenges systematically, the lessons learnt from the past, outlined in the earlier section, would come in useful and Singapore has already made progress in anticipating and tackling these challenges.

In strengthening the rule of law against emerging trends that could affect religious harmony, the MRHA was revised in October 2019. This was the first time it was revised since it was passed in November 1990. With the revised Act, restraining orders that are issued will take effect immediately to prevent offensive statements from spreading on social media and the Internet. This includes ceasing all communication of the offensive material and removing it from the Internet. Currently, the government has to serve a 14-day notice before the order takes effect. Section 74 of the Penal Code, which describes enhanced penalties for racially or religiously aggravated offences, was also strengthened with increased

maximum punishments if an offender targets a victim because of his/her race or religion. It also covers all offences in the Penal Code. Urging violence against another person or group is also considered a more serious offence than insulting or ridiculing a religion, and action can be taken if any religious group or its members attacks another party, including LGBTQ groups or individuals, on religious grounds. Religious leaders are subjected to a lower threshold for offences, as they have a greater ability to influence and mobilise followers. In preventing foreign influence, religious groups will be required to disclose single foreign donations of S$10,000 or more, and their president, secretary and treasurer must be Singapore citizens or permanent residents; the majority of their executive committee or governing body must be Singapore citizens, and they must declare any foreign affiliations. A remedial initiative was also introduced where, with the exception of serious cases of inciting violence, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) may offer an offender the opportunity to mend ties, such as by a public or private apology to the aggrieved parties or taking part in inter-religious events. While this Community Remedial Initiative is not mandatory, if completed, further criminal prosecution will not be taken against the offender. In September 2019, a social media influencer who had made controversial remarks against the Sikhs was invited by the Young Sikh Association for a tour of the Central Sikh Gurdawa where she gained a better understanding of Sikh traditions and practices, and ties were mended. In revising the MRHA, the MHA engaged religion organisations such as the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Singapore, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, National Council of Churches Singapore, Singapore Buddhist Federation, Taoist Federation, Sikh Advisory Board, Hindu Endowments Board and Hindu Advisory Board.[232]

In the fight against fake news, a new law, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was passed in 2019, which gives the government more targeted powers to stop the spread of any falsehoods online that could hurt public interest, such as damaging Singapore's security, foreign relations, public peace, health, safety and finances. The POFMA represents a whole-of-government effort, strengthening inter-ministries/agencies coordination in tackling the emerging challenge of fake news that could potentially affect religious harmony.

Building on the 2003 Declaration of Religious Harmony, a new and more action-oriented "soft law"—the Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony—was spearheaded by religious groups. The Commitment noted that religious harmony in Singapore did not happen by chance and must be continuously maintained. It reaffirmed ways in which religious harmony can be safeguarded. More than 600 religious organisations in Singapore have since affirmed the commitment.[233] Different segments of the society, such as workplaces, educational institutions and social, civic and community organisations have also stepped forward to support the commitment.[234] In June 2019, the International Conference on Cohesive Societies brought together 700 delegates from close to 40 countries to tackle challenges facing social cohesion and strengthen inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. The delegates, comprising of leaders and experts from academia, government, religious organisations and civil society, engaged in open dialogues and mutual learning to build bridges, explore practical solutions and drive global collective action across societies.

On the other hand, the government is also reaching out to the community more extensively and involving them as stakeholders in building trust. In 2017, the MCCY launched the Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education (BRIDGE) to forge more partnerships with the community and encourage community-led initiatives

An inter-faith dialogue organised by the Taman Jurong Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle.
Image courtesy of the Taman Jurong IRCC.

to deepen racial and religious understanding in Singapore. Ask Me Anything (AMA) and Common Senses for Common Spaces (CSCS) are two community-led platforms under BRIDGE. The AMA is a platform that provides a safe space for honest and open conversations, where participants are encouraged to ask difficult and inconvenient questions related to faith. It is open to the public and seeks to attract the wider audience, whether one subscribes to a particular faith or not. The CSCS is a series of inter-faith dialogues that addresses fundamental questions about different faiths (e.g., traditions, cultures and practices) to promote appreciation of the commonalities in spite of the diversity. For example, an inter-faith dialogue entitled "Holy Smoke!" was held to discuss the culture of incense burning and offerings across different communities.[235] BRIDGE platforms build inter-faith trust, which is critical in light of increasing religiosity and diversity in Singapore.

In January 2020, the Crisis Preparedness for Religious Organisations (CPRO) programme was launched by the MCCY to raise awareness of possible terror threats, inculcate a crisis-ready mentality and encourage the implementation of crisis response plans. As part of the programme, Religious Organisations (ROs) can assess their crisis readiness and identify operational gaps by completing a self-assessment checklist. To enhance their capabilities, ROs, both leaders and congregants, can attend workshops and courses to build capabilities in critical areas, which include emergency response, psychological resilience, community mediation and crisis contingency planning. The CPRO framework was co-developed with religious organisations of varying sizes and faith to ascertain their security concerns, and current gaps in crisis management through a series of Focus Group discussions and workshops.

Beyond the Harmony Centre housed in the An-Nahdhah Mosque, there are new PWs that allow the public and people of all faiths to gain a greater understanding of its religion or inter-faith matters. A new Chinese temple in Sengkang West operated by the non-profit Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society is established with a multi-religious focus. Its library houses books on various religions and host talks and dialogues involving different religious leaders and groups.[236] The Darul Ghufran Mosque in Tampines has a dedicated centre for religious outreach on its premises. It not only provides a place for Muslims to get guidance and advice on Islam from credible religious teachers, but also for the public seeking more information about the religion.[237]

In an increasingly diverse population in Singapore with immigration and transnational marriages, religious groups and PWs have made changes to welcome and accommodate new foreign members. More churches offer not only worship sessions in languages such as Mandarin and Tagalog for immigrants, but also organise food and used-clothing drives for the foreigners in need.[238] Mosques are joining forces with migrant groups to add more community services, including skills-based classes like sewing and cooking, and Buddhist and Taoist leaders are recruiting more staff from China and Taiwan to serve the Mandarin-speaking population here.[239] Hindu temples, acknowledging the variety of worship styles in India, would conduct ceremonies using standardised guidelines while also hiring more Hindu priests from India and increasing the number of daily prayers conducted throughout the day.[240] It would be useful to embark on further in-depth research into how a more diverse population is shaping religious life and worship patterns in Singapore, so as to inform future planning for PWs and religious spaces.

Innovation in planning, such as setting aside land for the development of PW hubs, will provide more worship space. In the conservation efforts of historic PWs, apart from the work of government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the SHS are also stepping up their efforts in documenting, engaging agencies and raising public awareness. The SHS actively worked with agencies to minimise the impact of the new Prince Edward Mass Rapid Transit station construction site directly outside Fook Tet Soo Khek Temple.[241] It also launched a series of public walking workshops as part of Singapore's Bicentennial celebrations, leading the public to visit and learn more about historic PWs in the early settlement areas. Going forward, a progressive model for tackling conservation issues could be in the form of multi-stakeholder partnerships involving government agencies, local communities, the private sector, academia and NGOs. Historically and culturally significant PWs could also be preserved/conserved and integrated into the development of their respective areas.

The Singapore Heritage Society organises walking workshops for the public to learn more about historic places of worship in early settlement areas such as Tanjong Pagar and Telok Ayer.
Images courtesy of See Kian Wee/Singapore Heritage Society.

OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

Having diverse PWs and religious practices, with people of different religions living in harmony is a testament to Singapore as a city with a high quality of life. Even with challenges in planning and governance, a multi-religious Singapore offers many opportunities for the city in enhancing its liveability.

In the international arena, a multi-religious Singapore in harmony is a source of strength. As Deputy Prime Minister (PM) Heng Swee Keat said:

Singapore can turn its racial and religious diversity into a source of strength and advantage on the world stage. The Republic can share its experiences and efforts at building peace and harmony in a diverse society with others around the world, especially in a time of increased polarisation and differences...I don't think we should be arrogant and say, well, we are a model. Every country is different—different culture, history and tradition. But we can join hands with people around the world, to share the lessons we have learned, to share our experiences.[242]

In September 2019, PM Lee Hsien Loong accepted the World Statesman Award in New York, an award given by the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, a New York-based inter-faith group. The award recognises individuals who support peace, prosperity and liberty, and promote tolerance, human dignity and human rights, both in their own countries and internationally through cooperation with other leaders.[243] PM Lee said that he accepted the award on behalf of all who contributed towards building a harmonious society in Singapore.[244]

Within Singapore, even with the emergence of new faultlines such as class and the issue of inequality, religious groups and PWs have continually stepped forward to support the state's effort in helping the needy and expanding the network of support in the city. The number of religious organisations that are registered charities has grown from about 950 in 2007 to 1,072 in 2018, making up 47.1% of the charity sector in Singapore.[245]

In 2019, the Ministry of Social and Family Development and other government agencies partnered various community groups and social service agencies, of which many are faith-based organisations, to form the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network. Through this collective partnership, the PEERS Network served as the bridge between the homeless persons and government agencies, allowing the government to proactively engage and assist, with the intention of improving their lives, particularly in longer-term housing issues. Volunteers from Paya Lebar Methodist Church and the Catholic Welfare Services go out in the streets regularly to befriend and engage the homeless. PWs and religious organisations such as the Yio Chu Kang Chapel and the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple have also opened up part of their premises as shelters, or "Safe Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps)", where the homeless can spend the night to have a safe and sound sleep.[246] The Saint Andrew's Nursing Home in Buangkok, operated by the Saint Andrew Mission Hospital with the support of Saint Andrew Community Services provides treatment and support individuals with mental health conditions, an illness that is still not well understood in Singapore.[247]

Advancements in Internet technology and social media can also be leveraged upon for the planning of religious spaces and community outreach. A chatbot, known as Mr WoOoO, was created by the MCCY for the public to ask questions and learn more about the Hungry Ghost Festival through Facebook Messenger. The chatbot can also provide location-based directions to the closest Buddhist/Taoist temple and culturally unique getai performances (live stage performances held during the Hungry Ghost Festival).[248] There are also bottom-up initiatives that make use of technology to facilitate visits to PWs. For example, a group of 15 Muslim youths coders, known as MSociety has created a mobile carpooling app called Terawhere, which allows Muslims to hitch a ride to mosques for *terawih* prayers during Ramadan. The app is especially useful for those with mobility issues, and it reduces parking congestion at the mosque.[249] When PWs were closed during the outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), technological platforms such as live videos, messaging apps and teleconferencing software have allowed devotees to continue practising their religion at home.[250]

Diverse PWs and religious practices showcase the richness of Singapore's culture and historical roots and enhance the cultural character of the city. In the 2006 Singapore Biennale, a number of artworks were planned to be discovered in the context of seven historic religious sites such as the Maghain Aboth Synagogue and Sri Krishnan Temple.[251] Places of worship along the Telok Ayer conservation area were part of the Car-Free Weekend in March 2019.[252] This has allowed the public to explore, learn and gain a better appreciation of the different PWs in Singapore.

Going forward, the Singapore Together movement was launched in 2019 that encourages all Singaporeans to work with the government in building Singapore. This movement provides greater momentum for diverse religious groups and PWs to come together to further deepen inter-faith bonds and trust while continuing to shape a harmonious future for Singapore.

POST-SCRIPT

Since independence, the government has ensured that Singaporeans of all faiths have the space to freely practise their religion while living in harmony. This was achieved through thoughtful integrated planning and governance, such as making provisions for places of worship as part of urban planning, instituting the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and setting up inter-faith platforms such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles. Beyond the spiritual function of religion, religious groups have also made significant contributions to social causes and engaged the wider community. Today, there is a high degree of social trust and respect within our diverse society.

As our society heads into an increasingly complex world, it is critical that we are able to maintain trust and harmony between diverse groups. At the same time, we can rely on our cohesive, multi-religious society as our unique source of strength in tackling challenges and as part of nation-building efforts, and in the process, strengthening social trust. Doing so requires the government to forge strong partnerships with our religious groups and the wider community, in the spirit of the Singapore Together movement. Here, I outline four areas where the government and religious groups can work together to tackle challenges and advance common causes.

Firstly, to better meet the religious and worship needs of Singaporeans and to ensure optimal use of Singapore's scarce land resources, the government has worked closely with apex religious groups to review the land tender process for places of worship (PW) land. In a new tender framework, only religious groups that actively contribute to the community, and have a genuine need for worship space can bid for such land. The apex religious groups have welcomed these efforts. Land has also been released for the development of PW hubs, which can house multiple religious organisations belonging to the same religion. Through co-location and sharing of facilities, Singapore's limited land resources will be better optimised.

Secondly, the government can collaborate with religious groups in assisting segments of the population who are in need. An example is the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network that brings together public agencies, social service agencies and community-based groups, of which a number are faith-based organisations, to proactively reach out and befriend rough sleepers and homeless persons. During the recent outbreak of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), the Ministry of Social and Family Development tapped on existing partners of the PEERS Network such as the Catholic Welfare Services, Buddha Tooth Relic Temple, Yio Chu Kang Chapel as well as new partners such as the Kassim Mosque and Tao One to provide homeless persons with round the clock shelter on their premises, or otherwise known as Safe Sound Sleeping Places (S3Ps). With trust and relationship built between government agencies and community groups, we

were collectively able to proactively engage and support more rough sleepers in finding longer-term solutions to their social and housing challenges, than if each of us were to work alone.

Thirdly, religious groups can partner the government in preserving and showcasing our rich heritage and culture as a cosmopolitan city. With the government playing a supporting role, religious groups can take greater ownership in documenting, maintaining and sharing their practices to keep memories alive. For example, when the Urban Redevelopment Authority proposed the conservation of the Parish of Christ Church, the spiritual home for Anglican Tamils and a familiar landmark along Keng Lee Road, the church leaders and stakeholders were very supportive. They helped to conduct research of the church's history and launched a storyboard to share their story with the wider public. By working closely together, both the valuable built and intangible cultural heritage of our religious landscape can be better sustained for generations to come.

Fourthly, the government and religious groups can work together to host engagement platforms and initiatives to deepen racial and religious understanding and trust in Singapore. The Broadening Religious/Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education (BRIDGE) programme supports ground-up projects that create safe spaces to facilitate dialogue on sensitive racial and religious issues. For example, an inter-faith dialogue entitled "Holy Smoke!" was held to discuss the culture of incense burning and offerings across different communities as part of the Common Senses for Common Spaces (CSCS) dialogue series. Given the increasingly diverse population in Singapore, working with religious groups in engagement platforms such as these allows the government to get a better sensing of ground sentiments while cultivating dialogue between different segments of the population.

Bringing diverse religious groups together with government agencies and other community groups not only produce innovative ideas and enable shared goals to be achieved, but are also opportunities for fostering inter-faith trust and building social resilience. When faced with unexpected challenges such as a disease outbreak or the threat of terrorism, we can count on our religious community to preserve solidarity, communicate key messages and contribute to recovery efforts on the ground. Strong inter-faith trust and a resilient society ensure that the harmony that the previous generation had painstakingly built up can continue to be celebrated.

Desmond Lee
Minister for National Development and
Minister-in-Charge of Social Services Integration

TIMELINE: PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE OF RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE

- ● Planning
- ● Conflicts
- ● Governance
- ● Heritage
- ● Social Service

1828
▶ Release of the Jackson Plan (Raffles Town Plan).

1949
▶ Formation of the Inter-Religious Organisation of Singapore and Johor Bahru (later renamed the Inter-Religious Organisation).

1950
▶ Outbreak of the Maria Hertogh Riots.

1964
▶ Outbreak of the 1964 Race Riots.

1964
▶ Formation of the Goodwill Committees.

1965
▶ Declaration of Singapore's Independence. Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew reads the Proclamation of Singapore and states that Singapore is to be going to a multi-racial nation.
▶ The Freedom of Religion is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore.

1966
▶ Resettlement for urban development begins through the Land Acquisition Act.

1966
▶ Passing of the Administration of Muslim Law Bill in Parliament.

1968
▶ Establishment of the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) when the Administration of Muslim Law Act comes into effect.

1969
▶ Outbreak of the 1969 Race Riots of Singapore.

Up to 1950

1960s

1971
▶ Establishment of the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB).

1973
▶ First eight National Monuments identified under the PMB, of which six were PWs.

1974
▶ Completion of Wu He Miao, the first combined temple that houses five constituent temples previously located around Toa Payoh and Balestier.

▶ Implementation of the Community Noise Abatement programme.

1975
▶ Passing of the Administration of Muslim Law (Amendment) Bill and establishment of the Mosque Building Fund (MBF).

1975
▶ Newer mosques built after 1975 to have loudspeakers directed inwards. The *azan* is broadcast both within the mosque and on radio.

1984
▶ The MBF is redesignated as the Mosque Building and MENDAKI Fund.

1990
▶ Passing of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Bill in Parliament.

1992
▶ Enactment of the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (MRHA).

1992
▶ The "Many Helping Hands" approach is put forth in Parliament.

1998
▶ The Ministry of Environment puts in place control measures to disallow the burning of overly large joss sticks and candles and limits the number of joss sticks and candles allowed to be burnt within enclosed areas and the distance from which they may be burnt from a building.
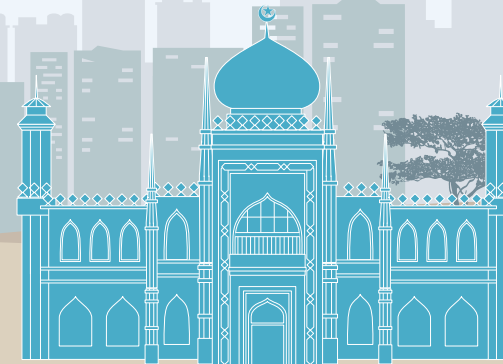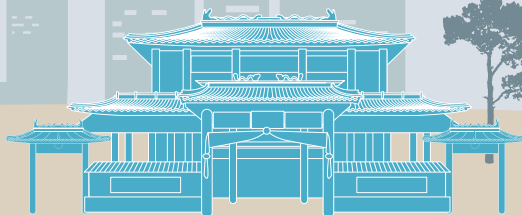
1970s to 1990s

2002
▶ Establishment of Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (later renamed Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles).

2003
▶ Establishment of the Declaration of Religious Harmony.

2006
▶ Establishment of the Charities Unit/ Commissioner of Charities under the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, now the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY).

2006
▶ Introduction of the Community Engagement Programme.
▶ The National Steering Committee on Race and Religious Harmony is established.
▶ Establishment of the Harmony Centre, housed in An-Nahdhah Mosque.

2007
▶ Repositioning of the Central Singapore Joint Social Service Centre as OnePeople.sg.

2007
▶ Establishment of the Charity Council and enactment of the new Charities Act.
▶ Introduction of the Code of Governance by the Charity Council.

2008
▶ Appointment of MUIS Social Development Officers to mosques to support social development services and programmes for low-income families and *zakat* receipients.
▶ Introduction of the Enhanced Mosque Cluster system.

2008
▶ Setting up of the National Monuments Fund (NMF), specifically for non-profits monuments requiring urgent repairs.

2009
▶ Launch of the Mosque Upgrading Programme.
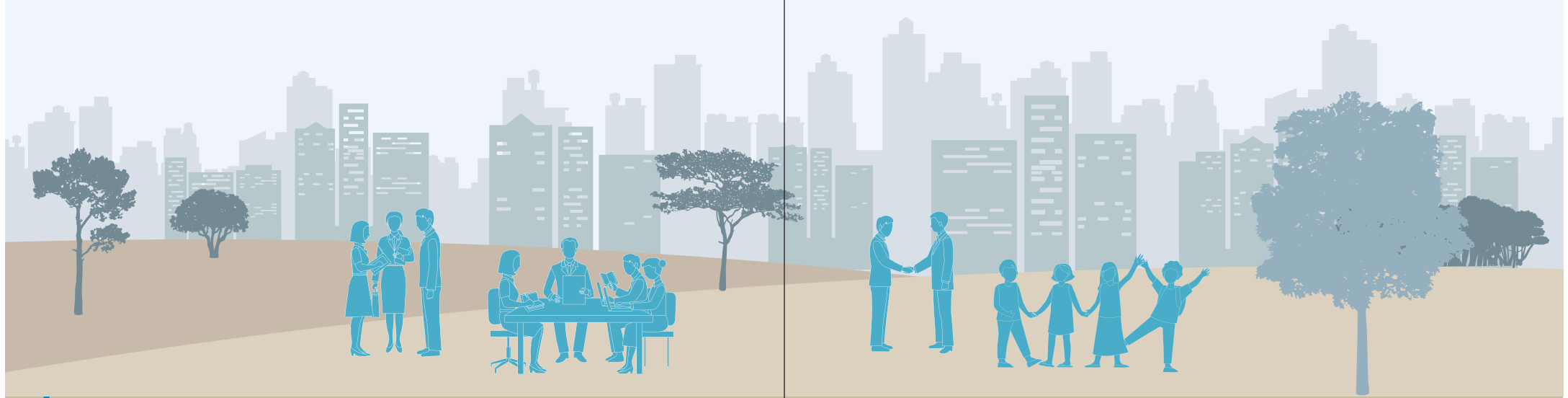
2000s

2013
▶ The PMB is renamed as the Preservation of Sites and Monuments division under the National Heritage Board.

2013
▶ Creation of the Harmony Fund.

2014
▶ Town Councils piloted an eco-friendly burner for burning of incense papers and religious offerings that could cut down smoke emissions by half.

2015
▶ The NMF is given a second tranche (S$11.77 million) of funding and enhanced to include a category of funding for maintenance.

2016
▶ Opening of the Harmony in Diversity Gallery.

2016
▶ Launch of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Survey.

2017
▶ Launch of the Broadening Religious/ Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education (BRIDGE).

▶ "Operation No Release" is conducted where the National Parks Board, the Public Utilities Board and volunteers discourage the mercy release of animals or unwanted pets into parks, reservoirs and nature reserves, especially on Vesak Day.

2018
▶ Religious organisations that are registered charities grew from about 950 in 2007 to 1,072 in 2018, making up 47.1% of the charity sector in Singapore.

2018
▶ Ratification of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity.

▶ Launch of the Our Sg Heritage Plan. The ICH inventory (http://roots.sg/ich) is established.

2018
▶ The Ministry of National Development unveils a new land tender framework for PWs and plans to release land for the development of PW hubs.

2019
▶ The MRHA is revised.

▶ Enactment of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA).

▶ Affirmation to the new Commitment to Safeguard Religious Harmony by religious organisations, and supported by workplaces, educational institutions and social, civic and community organisations.

2019
▶ The Ministry of Social and Family Development and other government agencies partner various community-based groups and social service agencies to form the Partners Engaging and Empowering Rough Sleepers (PEERS) Network.

2020
▶ The MCCY launches the Crisis Preparedness for Religious Organisations (CPRO) to raise awareness of possible terror threats, inculcate a crisis-ready mentality and encourage the implementation of crisis response plans.

2010s

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RELIGIOUS HARMONY IN SINGAPORE: SPACES, PRACTICES AND COMMUNITIES

Inter-religious harmony is critical for Singapore's liveability as a densely populated, multi-cultural city-state. In today's world where there is increasing polarisation in issues of race and religion, Singapore is a good example of harmonious existence between diverse places of worship and religious practices. This has been achieved through careful planning, governance and multi-stakeholder efforts, and underpinned by principles such as having a culture of integrity and innovating systematically. Through archival research and interviews with urban pioneers and experts, *Religious Harmony in Singapore: Spaces, Practices and Communities* documents the planning and governance of religious harmony in Singapore from pre-independence till the present day, with a focus on places of worship and religious practices.

"Singapore must treasure the racial and religious harmony that it enjoys…We worked long and hard to arrive here, and we must work even harder to preserve this peace for future generations."

Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of Singapore.

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