

Ex-foes link up to promote religious tolerance

Pastor and imam, once embroiled in Nigerian conflict, now travel to spread interfaith peace

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They started out as enemies, leading armed militias against each other when religious conflict rocked northern Nigeria in the 1990s.

But now, Pastor James Wuye, a Christian, and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, a Muslim, travel the world together promoting good interfaith relations.

Yesterday, they recounted their dramatic story of reconciliation to 250 religious, community and grassroots leaders from Singapore at a dialogue organised by OnePeople.sg – the national body for racial harmony – at Capitol Tower's STI Auditorium.

Holding up his right hand, a prosthesis, Mr Wuye said: "Years ago, Imam and his group cut it off because we did not know how to talk."

It was at a meeting among community leaders in May 1995, which both men attended, that they began mending fences after a government official challenged them to work together.

The two men had lost close relatives and friends to the violence where fatalities numbered in the thousands because of communal clashes. Suspicious of each other at first, they eventually became friends after Mr Ashafa showed care and concern for Mr Wuye after the latter's mother died.

Together in 1996, they set up Inter-faith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, Nigeria, which aims to cultivate peaceful relationships between the Christian and Muslim communities.

"It is very expensive to fight a war; it is cheaper to maintain peace," said Mr Wuye.



Mr Ashafa (left) and Mr Wuye used to lead armed militias against each other in a religious conflict in Nigeria in the 1990s.

Mr Ashafa said inclusiveness was of the utmost importance and that religious leaders should be true to their faiths yet be able to accept other religions for what they are.

He said: "It's not about a melting pot; it's about being a salad bowl. In salad, everything is unique, stands out on its own and together they form a nice flavour."

Both speakers said Singapore was a good model of interfaith tolerance, and can be an example to other countries racked by religious violence.

Also speaking at the event, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan said the dialogue was a "very

salutary lesson for Singapore not to take things for granted".

He cautioned against intolerance and aggressive proselytisation which could harm community cohesion.

He added: "In Singapore, we've seen examples of how careless comments by religious leaders can create misunderstandings. Fortunately, those concerned were willing to apologise promptly and, even more importantly, other religious groups were willing to accept the apologies."

Earlier this year, Pastor Rony Tan, founder of the Lighthouse Evangelism church, made the news when video clips of him making inappropriate remarks about Buddhism and Taoism surfaced online.

He eventually apologised to the leaders of the Singapore Buddhist Federation and Taoist Federation, promising to work on improving interfaith relationships.

MP Zainuddin Nordin, chairman of OnePeople.sg, said the message shared by the speakers was a powerful and timely one.

He said: "While we can be proud of the progress we have made so far, racial and religious harmony is not a natural state of affairs. It requires effort, and is something we can never take for granted."

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