

Racial differences 'easier to bridge'

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SINGAPORE - People are more likely to step forward to get to know a person of a different race than a different religion, according to new data from a recent study.

It found that 60 per cent of 4,131 Singaporeans surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they liked meeting and getting to know people of other races.

But 50 per cent wanted to do the same for people of a different religion.

"It will take a little more time for us to bridge some of our religious differences because religion goes to the core of who we are, as individuals, as people," said Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) research fellow Mathew Mathews on Saturday.

Dr Mathews, who led the study, was responding to a question on the differing focus placed on racial and religious harmony which emerged tops among some 800 young people at a forum on Saturday. It was organised by racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg, which did the study with IPS.

The students, who were from a cross-section of secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, religious and international schools, could vote electronically for questions they wanted to pose the panellists.

Other speakers on the panel, moderated by OnePeople.sg chairman and Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC MP Zainudin Nordin, were Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin and writer Neil Humphreys.

Dr Mathews noted that while race and religion have traditionally been conflated in Singapore, the survey findings show this may not necessarily be the case.

For instance, respondents were more receptive to inter-racial marriages than inter-religious ones, he said, adding that more data will be released at a later date.

The panellists also discussed the complexity of dealing with stereotypes, with several asking students to resist forming judgments based on one or two encounters with someone of a different race, religion or nationality.

However, noting that race and religion are "primordial" and "very much part of who we are", Mr Tan said: "I believe that there's no point pretending that we're colour blind. There's no point pretending that these things don't matter."

While some have told him Singaporeans have attained a level of maturity that obviates the need to keep talking about racial and religious harmony, he feels it is important to continue to work at it.

"Not because we are not confident in ourselves but because we believe that it's precious," he said.

They also discussed attitudes towards foreigners.

Mr Tan said the Government realised in 2008 or 2009 that the influx had crossed a "social threshold" and has been tightening the tap ever since.

"Processes, policies, we will make adjustments," he said. "But as people, we have a choice in the way we regard others. We may not like it, but we can still determine the way we talk about it. We can still determine if we treat people with dignity and respect."