

Religious leaders should correct offensive views

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Religious leaders and political observers welcome minister's call for self-regulation

Religious leaders welcomed the call yesterday by a Cabinet minister to correct someone from their own religion if he makes a comment that is offensive and not in line with the mainstream of that religion.

And while political observers note that there are some religious communities without a central authority, they said it would still be easier for leaders of the same religion to do the correction than for those from other religions to do so.

They were responding to Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan's speech yesterday.

Singapore Buddhist Federation secretary-general Seck Kwang Phing feels that a person who makes offensive comments would be more amenable to correction by someone from his own religion.

'The religious leaders of his religion can go deeper, and ask him whether or not he has fully understood others' teachings,' he told *The Sunday Times* in Mandarin.

Mufti Syed Isa Mohamed Semait, Singapore's highest Islamic authority, feels there is no guarantee that people do not make comments that deceive those from other faiths.

But such views should be quickly rebutted by someone from within the same religion. Otherwise, criticism by those from outside might stir emotions, making it hard to resolve matters, he said.

And if religious leaders publicly correct their own people, those from other religions would feel assured, he added.

Mr Lim K. Tham, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Singapore, said he agreed with Dr Balakrishnan's view.

Asked if the council had reservations or concerns, Mr Lim noted that it was a voluntary council of churches and spoke from a consensus arrived at after consultation with its member churches.

While there was a diversity of denominations and churches, he pointed to a commonality in the belief that Christians should have the nation's welfare at heart by serving the needs of the community and fostering harmony among all Singaporeans.

The council also appreciated Dr Balakrishnan saying in his speech that having no talk on religion or relying entirely on the Government were not workable solutions.

Said Mr Lim: 'We appreciate that the minister is not overreacting or proposing any extreme measures to curb religious expression.'

Dr Gillian Koh, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, noted that self-regulation was the preferred strategy used to calm the ground in the wake of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks.

'When we talk about groups within civil society, the best way forward is for self-regulation within a broader framework of what we understand as civility.'

On religious communities that are internally diverse and that are less able to correct one of their own, she suggested that the mainstream group in each community take the initiative to get to know those who are not in the mainstream.

The aim is not to force such people to follow the mainstream view but to build friendship and trust, akin to the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circles formed to build bonds between people of different religions, she said.