Mr Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad says how society reacts to the terror threat depends on trust between the different races. ST PHOTO: LEE JIA WEN

Roses to spread peace

A Muslim student called up Mr Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad in 2012, saying she wanted to stage a protest against the growing anti-Muslim sentiments in the West.

But Mr Mohamed Irshad, 28, founder of the Singapore Management University's Islamic Business and Finance Society, felt what were needed were bouquets and not more brickbats.

"I felt we should take a step back and channel the negative feelings into something more positive," he said.

Instead of a protest, the students decided to give out roses, a symbol of love, and spread messages of peace from Prophet Muhammad to the public. To their surprise, friends from other faiths wanted to join the effort and messages of peace from other faith leaders were added to the mix.

Roses of Peace, an inter-faith movement to promote peace and understanding, was thus born. In November 2012, about 100 young people handed out 3,000 roses to the public in places like Orchard Road.

It has since become an annual event. The non-profit group has tapped the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's Harmony Fund, which supports ground-up projects that encourage racial and religious harmony, to fund its activities.

These include an inter-faith conference to give young people a chance to ask questions and to hear from people of other faiths.

Said Mr Mohamed Irshad, who is now a commodity trader: "Many are afraid to talk about religion as it's a sensitive topic. But we must address misconceptions, which will breed hatred, prejudices and divisions."

For example, he noted that some people are afraid of Muslims, given the negative impressions that have arisen as a result of terrorism linked to Muslims.

Last month, Roses of Peace launched an ambassador programme to train young people from different religions to promote peace and harmony.

Mr Mohamed Irshad said this is needed as Singapore is not immune to terrorism, and how society reacts to the terror threat also depends on trust between the different races. "So we must get youth from different faiths to build friendships," he said.

Theresa Tan

NECESSARY DISCUSSION

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MR ABBAS ALI MOHAMED IRSHAD