

# the week

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NEWS

## BOLSTERING TIES

Al Amana Centre is one of the oldest charity organisations here

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There are charity organisations for children, old people and women. Then, there are charities for the poor, unemployed and disabled. Ever heard of a charity for strengthening religious ties? Over 112 years old, Al Amana Centre (which means 'faithful' in Arabic) or AAC aims to do the same by developing a bridge of understanding between Muslims and Christians.

The centre, which came into being in 1893, was involved initially with education and health care in the sultanate. "We opened the first hospital in Oman and started co-educational schools," Michael S Bos, director at the centre, told **TheWeek**.

Later, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health incorporated the schools and hospitals. But, there remained a wonderful legacy of Muslims and Christians working together for the common good of the community. Today, the AAC is building upon this heritage by working internationally to foster understanding, trust and peace between Muslims and Christians.

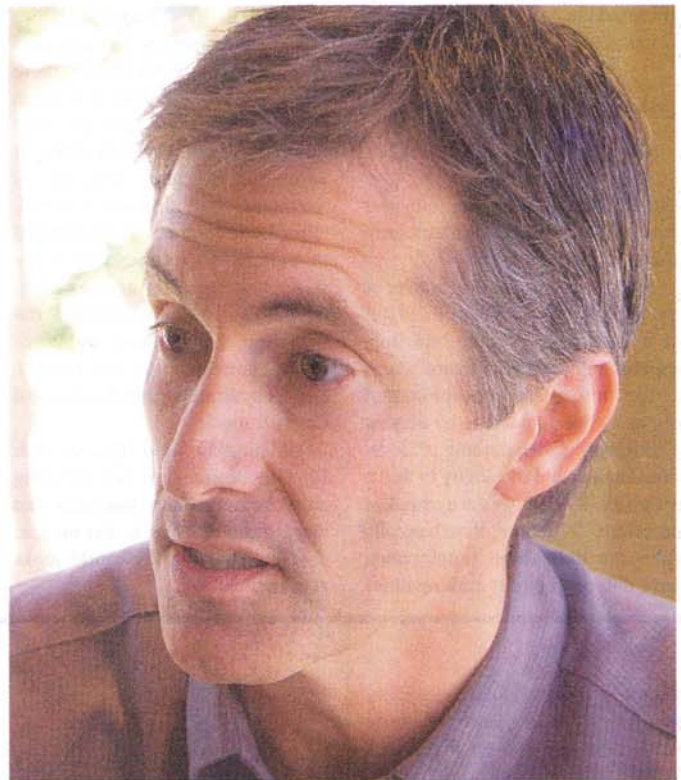
"Since Oman no more needed guidance in education and health due to rapid progress, we shifted our

focus to strengthening ties between Muslims and Christians," Bos explained. "One of the AAC's initiatives is hosting university students, from the West, who come to Oman for a short-term experience. The goal is to help these students shed false stereotypes and develop an understanding and appreciation for Arab culture."

Recently, a group of students from the US was hosted by their counterparts from Sultan Qaboos University to discuss and compare student life. Afterwards, one of the visiting students remarked, "It's almost surprising how much people have in common across the world."

AAC also works to facilitate scholarship on religious coexistence, and Oman provides an excellent environment for this. "The Ministry of Religious Affairs hosts an annual lecture in which leading scholars in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies participate." Oman's current initiatives and history of tolerance make it the right place for research and scholarly contribution.

The oldest charity organisation in Oman also runs another programme called the Ecumenical Council for Charity (ECC), which raises financial support to assist people facing problems beyond their resources. For some, a death in the family or



Bos feels that Oman is a perfect example of religious tolerance

health problems can lead to grave financial difficulties. The ECC helps support them to make it through the crisis. "The ECC has gained considerable momentum in the past few years. In 2002, we helped 26 people,

and as of today, we have helped over 500. The type of cases vary from a lady whose spouse just died, a man in need of a kidney transplant or the medical bills of a prematurely born baby," he concluded.