

## Community Explorations

By MD Suhaile

Look into the eyes of a Sikh man and he will magically hypnotise you, or so Betsy Chow thought before her visit to the Silat Road Sikh Temple on Saturday (June 22). “But of course, I am wrong, and feel shame to believe all these rumors,” she said. “After this visit, I understand the truth from what I see for myself.”

Betsy, 54, was one of over hundred people who participated in the Community Explorations event organized by OnePeople.sg. It was a follow up to the high-level International Conference on Cohesive Societies (ICCS) the week before. Besides the Sikh Temple, there were tours to seven other places of worship: Loyang Tua Pek Kong Taoist temple, BW Buddhist Monastery, Masjid Kampong Siglap, the Hindu Sri Thendayuthapani temple, Khadijah mosque, Catholic Centre, and the Anglican Church of the Light.

The programme was straightforward. A site tour, question and answer session, and small group discussions guided by experienced facilitators.

Through this format, Betsy, a Christian, grew to appreciate the Sikh faith. “The (prayer) hall is very peaceful and beautifully built. More importantly, no matter our religion, I think hand in hand practicing the faith humbly in our daily life can help to build a beautiful world.”

Her experiences were not unique. Farzanah, for example, did not know that Catholicism and her own Islamic faith had similar roots until her visit to the Catholic Centre. Although the 18-year-old has Christian friends, it’s not something they spoke about.

In a similar vein, Tan Chian Just does not discuss some issues with his Muslim friends. “They are always uncomfortable” about topics like extremism he added. Hence, he “treasured the opportunity” to learn more at Khadijah mosque, where the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) is located. RRG works on deradicalization.

Tan, 48, was “quite shocked” to find out that most radicalized individuals had a weak grasp of the Islamic faith as he used to think it was the converse. He added: “I am very touched by (RRG’s) sincerity and commitment to uphold their own religion. I respect that pride and salute that effort.”

Over at the Sri Thendayuthapani temple, Jiu Sheng learnt something new even though he had grown up near the Sri Veeramakaliamman Temple along Serangoon Road. “Hinduism has many similarities to Chinese Taoism in practicing the way of life”.

Jiu Sheng brought his family of four along for the visit as he wished to share his childhood with his children. He hopes they picked up important lessons like how

“religion and faith are deeply intertwined with our heritage and custom,” said Jiu Sheng.

Five Hindu children, all below the ages of 12, were also present at the tour of Masjid Kampong Siglap. They were accompanied by four adults from their own temple, Sri Darma Muneeswaran. A Mathivanan, an elder in the group, later shared that it was “quite intriguing” for the children learn that unlike their own religious experience, there were no deities in the mosque, everyone prayed together at specific times, and the “Koran was the only holy book” Muslims followed.

The Hindu guests at Siglap had opportunities to engage in cross-cultural interaction with other Muslim guests from An-Nahdhah mosque. This deepened mutual understanding. Uzair, for example, learnt that each Hindu deity is unique and one made supplications to the deity most “compatible with their prayers”.

The interfaith exchanges may seem basic to the well-informed but for many it was new-ground. Mdm Nurzilawaty, for instance, initially mistook the Anglican Church of True Light for a Chinese temple because of the Chinese calligraphy on the walls! Understanding the history made things clear for her - the Church began by ministering to Heng-Hwa speakers. Today, it caters to all races and even has a Tamil congregation.

For some participants, Community Explorations was an opportunity to get in touch with their roots.

Spring Sun, 40, is a freethinker who said she misses her Buddhist grandmother: “I never really got a chance to ask her about her faith or even her life struggles.” Spring’s desire to know more about her grandmother’s faith drove her to visit the BW Monastery.

There, she learnt that the Buddhist approach to suffering and resilience centered around finding inner peace. Spring reckons her grandmother, who meditated regularly, learnt “how to suffer well because she knew how to find peace internally”. She added: “I felt more connected to my grandmother, to her faith, and to her history, which is also part of my history.”

Similarly, Dillon, 25, a freethinker visited Loyang Tua Pek Kong Taoist temple to understand his own heritage: “I’m Chinese myself, but I can’t say I know much about traditional Chinese faiths.” What struck him at the temple though, was the presence of Indian and Malay folk shrines devoted to Lord Ganesha and Datuk Gong respectively.

He said: “I think that in an era when it is customary to think of religions as mutually exclusive categories, such aspects remind us that syncretism remains alive and is considered to be just as valid to their practitioners.”