

How religions help prisoners change

If you are looking for religious harmony in Singapore, you may be surprised to know that you can find it in a place full of criminals: in prison. There, different religious groups work side by side to encourage prisoners to turn over a new leaf. Although they may have some different beliefs, the groups know they can get more done if they cooperate.

In 1972, Mr Lee Wing Yew went to prison. He was 21 years old and had been a gangster all through his teens, getting involved in illegal activities like fighting and gambling. But then, to everyone's surprise, he turned over a new leaf: he did his O-Levels in jail (he had dropped out of school way back in Primary 4), and became an honest citizen after leaving prison.

People find different motivations for changing: they may realise that being bad doesn't make them happy; or that it hurts their loved ones. Mr Lee's main motivation was religion. Like all inmates, he could turn to a range of religious services and religious counsellors in prison – like Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs, working side by side to give comfort and guidance to convicts.

Mr Lee is today a counsellor working with Prison Fellowship, a Christian group that works with prisoners, ex-prisoners and their families. His job isn't easy – how can you convince a former criminal to give up his old habits and start a new life? – so he's open-minded about learning new skills from others. In the prison cafeteria, he often chats casually with counsellors of other faiths. The counsellors exchange notes about prisoners and refer more difficult cases to one another.

Joint study trip

Two of the religious groups even went on an overseas study trip together. Prison Fellowship and SANA Muslim Counselling Service wanted to observe religious counselling in New Zealand. The Christian-Muslim team of counsellors from Singapore spent ten days visiting different prisons in that country, picking up ideas for their own social programmes



Residents of halfway houses taking part in the Yellow Ribbon Sports Carnival. Many of the halfway houses, which help prisoners adjust step by step to the outside world, are run by religious groups.

back home. Mr Muhammed Haniff Abdul Razak, secretary of the Muslim group, says the joint study trip was a good idea. "And at the end of the day, we work for a common cause."

Some groups are open to volunteers of any faith. Shan You Counselling, for example, is a Buddhist-based group but also employs psychologists and counsellors who belong to other faiths. "Our volunteers also come from all races and religions," explains Mr Jayson Lee, an executive of Shan You. "To be

Buddhist is not a criterion. In social service, the heart is the key factor."

Shan You focuses on the spiritual philosophy of easing suffering. One of its programmes provides food for families of prisoners so they will not go hungry. A few families they cater to are Muslim, so Shan You makes sure that the food supplies going to such homes are halal.

If they have six months or less of their jail term to go, well-behaved prisoners may be sent to halfway houses, where they are

allowed to live with low levels of security. This gives them the chance to prepare themselves for ordinary life outside of prison.

Several of the halfway houses come under SCORE, the Singapore Corporation Of Rehabilitative Enterprises. SCORE is part of the government, but its work is complemented by the faith-based organisations.

When the halfway houses get together, it's a chance for different religions to work and play together. At road shows, for example, the halfway houses set up food stalls and allow residents to mingle. There's also an annual sports carnival, in which teams of residents play futsal, 3-on-3 basketball and netball.

Groups help each other

This family spirit helped the Hindu Endowments Board when it wanted to set up the Ashram, a halfway house for Hindu and Sikh men. It was able to learn from the Muslims' Pertapis halfway houses and the Christians' Breakthrough Missions. From this study, it realised the importance of having a qualified religious counsellor for the residents. It hired a Hindu priest as a full-time live-in counsellor, as well as a part-time Sikh counsellor.

Influenced by Pertapis, the Ashram set up a banner printing service, allowing a few residents to pick up design skills. Several schools have used the Ashram's printing service when they need banners. The Buddhist Lodge is another client, showing once again how different religious groups can help each other.

Once a prisoner is free, religious groups still continue their work, together with other agencies. Through further counselling and guidance, they help these ex-inmates feel they are part of a wider community, so that they can lead stable lives, far away from trouble. But at this point, people must also play their part everyday by accepting these people into society, giving them a second chance at life.

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Minister VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN:

Rehabilitation is a long journey. It is up to all of us to put our hearts and minds together, and to walk with these young people as they rebuild their lives.'