



Singaporeans of different backgrounds meet to discuss ways to help people avoid problem gambling.

help Singapore avoid problem gambling.

The members don't all represent religious groups. For example, there is Elaine Lim, who's the principal of Fairfield Methodist Secondary School, and Mohd Guntor Sadali, who's a newspaper editor.

A few, however, are leaders of religious groups. S. Rajendran, for example, is the chairman of the Hindu Endowments Board. Tan Thiam Lye, a grassroots leader, is also the chairman of the Taoist Federation and is active in several Taoist groups. He's given talks about problem gambling during his visits to temples.

### Reaching out to youths

Another member, the Venerable Seck Kwang Phing, is a Buddhist priest and the secretary-general of the Buddhist Federation. He has counseled problem gamblers, and says most of them were influenced to gamble when they were young. "They see gambling as a social activity they can control, but in the end, they can't," he said. "They have to go around begging for money, just to clear their debts. They even go to illegal moneylenders to borrow money." Some gamblers he's met have even lost their homes.

The NCPG meets regularly to think up new ways to prevent problem gambling. The NCPG also works with voluntary welfare organisations to provide public education programmes. Some of these groups have religious roots, but their programmes try to reach people of all faiths.

Two Christian-based groups have been especially active in engaging youths. St Andrew's Lifestreams runs a series of guided classroom sessions entitled "Handling Underaged Gambling". The Methodist Youth and Children Centre, meanwhile, runs the "Win Big, Don't Gamble Roadshow", which even includes interactive IT games. Together, they've reached out to 11,000 students from 19 schools.

To help adults, the council works with

two groups: the Christian-based group Care Corner Counselling Centre, and the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society, a religious group that believes in five faiths. These groups have been giving talks to educate adults, as well as offering counselling services to problem gamblers and their families.

All these efforts will be put to the test when the casinos open. However, even before that, what

they've already proven is that Singaporeans of different religions can work side by side for a worthy cause.

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# Saving people from the ills of gambling

**Singapore's different religious communities have their own unique beliefs. That hasn't stopped them from cooperating to help society deal with issues such as gambling.**

**S**ingapore has big plans to add more buzz to the city. Two giant resorts are being built to attract tourists. The first, Marina Bay Sands, will open at the end of 2009; the second, Resorts World at Sentosa, will open in 2010. Each of these complexes, called an integrated resort or IR, will create thousands of new jobs for Singaporeans.

Each IR will be allowed to open a casino, which is like an arcade where visitors can gamble. Although gamblers hope to win lots of money, most of them don't. It's only the casino owners who win big from all the betting. That's why both Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World at Sentosa want to open casinos: the casino business will help to pay for their big resort plans.

However, allowing casinos to open in Singapore was not an easy decision for the government. Gambling is not new to Singapore, but casinos may increase the number of Singaporeans who are attracted to this activity, and they may spend more money on it, too. This is why many religious groups were against the idea of allowing casinos.

### Religious worries

Several of Singapore's religious groups were worried. Some had worked with people who suffered from problem gambling, which is when people become so addicted to gambling that they can't stop, no matter how much money they lose or how much it hurts themselves or their

loved ones. After listening to all the views, the government announced that it would go ahead with the plan to allow two casinos to be built as part of IRs. The business benefits for Singapore were just too great to ignore.

Still, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong agreed with the religious groups that the casinos could lead more people into gambling addiction. He asked for their help in controlling the problem.

"Religious faith is a powerful force motivating Singaporeans to help their fellow citizens, not just gambling addicts, but everyone who is in need of help," he said. "I particularly hope that the religious groups will work together with the government to help to build a stable society."

So, the government set up a new body called the National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) to advise the government. The group has 19 members. Although they come from different backgrounds, they are united by their mission to



A model of the integrated resort at Marina Bay, with its three hotels capped by a rooftop garden. A casino at the bottom will help to pay for the huge development.