

Working in Unity Lightens Load at RYS Clean-up

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Auckland, New Zealand—A Religious Youth Service project in New Zealand gave a group of young people the chance to do hard work with their hands and also understand people of other faiths with their heart.

About 50 young people of various races, nationalities and religions took part in the RYS project, organized by Universal Peace Federation of New Zealand, which was held on June 27 and 28, 2015. The young people accomplished a major cleaning of an area near Otara Lake in the South Auckland district on Saturday, June 27. They also visited eight holy sites in the Auckland area, including Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh temples, Catholic and Christian churches, and a Muslim mosque.

The young New Zealanders were joined by eight members of the Oceania Leadership Team (OLT), a youth leadership training program, who had come from Australia.



Leaders from the Auckland Council and participating religions were inspired to see the RYS participants in action, as they exemplified true unity in expressing the ideal of living for the sake of others.

In particular, several youths from the Sikh community came over to help right after a midnight shift, thereby sacrificing their sleep. In addition, all the participants worked especially hard to remove trash, much of which was large or located in hard-to-reach places. The unity among them made their hard work go more quickly.

The service project was organized by Rev. Julius Gicole, the national director of UPF-New Zealand, along with Mr. Jim Sinclair, a UPF Ambassador for Peace; Mr. Antoine Xulue, a South Auckland community development facilitator; Mr. Antonio Taulotoa from the Auckland Council, and UPF-New Zealand youth coordinators Mr. Andrew Halim and Mr. Johannes Seleni Tale Anae.

At the end of the cleaning, everyone gathered for a barbecue lunch provided by the Auckland Council. Mr. Jim Sinclair expressed his appreciation, on behalf of the Otara community, for the youths' hard work and their exemplary results. Mr. Sinclair has tried to restore and maintain the area around the Otara Lake for the past few decades. Mr. Antoine Xulue of the Auckland Council thanked all the participants for selflessly dedicating themselves for others.



The second segment of the RYS Project, which began right after lunch on the first day, consisted of visits to various holy sites in the Auckland area. The first visit on June 27 was to the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where Father Rory Morrissey gave an introduction of some of the Catholic traditions and beliefs.

The next destination was the Shri Shirdi Saibaba Hindu Temple. Mr. Bhaskar Reddy, president of the temple, led the tour and explained the different manifestations of Hinduism's deity in the many statues present within the prayer halls. It is also a practice of the Hindu temple to provide food for every visitor and worshiper, and this they did for the RYS participants.

The last stop of the day was at the Pu Shien Buddhist Temple, whose leader is Master Chang Lin, an Ambassador for Peace, accompanied by her aide, Ms. Mei Foong. She imparted the teachings of Buddhism, the differences in its denominations, along with the meaning of the statues and religious objects in the temple. The kind hospitality encouraged further conversations, before the participants headed back to the Peace Embassy in the Auckland suburb of Parnell to close the day's program.

The second day, Sunday, June 28, started with a visit to the newly built Henderson Hindu Temple, where Mr. Umesh Chand guided everyone to receive the blessing given by their religious leader and shared with them the story of Krishna, which was depicted in the many murals in the prayer hall. He also invited everyone to meditate during the prayer time, before leading them to the cafeteria for refreshments.

After that, the participants visited the Ahmadiyya Mosque. At the serene holy site they were led to both male and female prayer halls where they learned a lot more about the inscriptions written inside the mosque and the meaning of each procedure in bowing, in which one submits one's body for prayer. During a short tea session there was a presentation about the history of the mosque. Mr. Iqbal Mohammed spoke from the bottom of his heart about the peacefulness of Islamic teaching and made clear the stance most Muslims have against terrorism.

The next stop was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Manukau, a suburb of South Auckland. The young visitors were briefly introduced to the Mormon beliefs and given a short tour of the church, which resembles a school environment where followers can commune and worship as a family.



The next destination was the Dasmesh Darbar Sikh Temple. Mr. Jasbir Singh, a youth representative of the Sikh community, greeted the visitors kindly and introduced them to Sikh traditions, which include keeping one's hair covered by a turban because it is a sacred part of the body, and treating their Holy Scripture as a living being, giving it its own room and facilities within the temple. He stated that Sikhism regards all people as equal, which explains the tradition of eating together on the floor regardless of one's status and position in the secular world. The practice was emulated by participants as they enjoyed lunch together in the dining hall of the temple.

The last temple to visit was the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Temple in East Tamaki, another Auckland suburb. The visitors were guided around the largest Buddhist temple in the country and received further explanations of Buddhism, along with the different features of the temple.

Finally the group headed back to the Parnell Peace Embassy to close the RYS Project together as youths of a global, interfaith community. Ms. Natascha Schellen, leader of the Oceania Leadership Team, hosted the proceedings, during which some of the participants testified about their experiences. Rev. Julius Gicole gave each participant a Certificate of Appreciation and expressed his hope for a closer collaboration, in which young people of different faiths can showcase their ideals and bring a positive influence to their surroundings. The project then concluded with a heartfelt dinner for everyone involved.

The RYS Project gave the participants the opportunity to exercise their faith and allow it to manifest substantially for the betterment of the communities around them. Its revival in the New Zealand chapter of UPF also lays down a platform of understanding between people of different faiths.

