

Religious Youth Service Volunteers Help Build School in Sri Lanka

Chung Sik Yong
December 18, 2015



Yakkala, Sri Lanka—Young volunteers built a preschool at an ashram, a community of Buddhist nuns, in the Gampaha district northwest of Colombo as part of the annual Religious Youth Service project, from December 11-18, 2015.

The project, whose theme was “Youth for Civic Engagement,” was held in Kirikitthamulla, a small village located in Yakkala township in Gampaha district. Working with local villagers and the Buddhist nuns, the 57 volunteers and staff also cleaned and scrubbed the entire premises of the ashram.

Day 1 – A Joyous Journey to Gampaha District

On the late afternoon of December 11, thirty-six participants with three staff traveled from Colombo to Veyangoda in Gampaha district, where they would stay during the project. In spite of heavy traffic, they reached the site in time for dinner. The evening served as an informal ice-breaker for the participants, as most of them were new comers.

Day 2 – Orientation

The next day, all the participants were given orientation by Ms. Dinesha Liyanasuriya, secretary general of RYS-Sri Lanka, and project staff. Ice breakers were organized and the vision and norms for RYS 2015, “Youth for Civic Engagement,” was discussed in the morning. The afternoon session was conducted by former RYS-Sri Lanka national director, Dr. Ravindra Galhena, who spoke on “Leadership and Motivation.”

Every evening throughout the week, participants belonging to different cultures and faiths—Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, and Christian—conducted a cultural program. On this day, the Muslim participants organized an Islamic cultural evening.

Day 3 – Opening Ceremony

Every morning, participants belonging to different faiths led prayer. On this day, an Islamic prayer was offered by a Muslim participant, followed by meditation.

After breakfast, Dr. Gerard Muthukumar, a well-known lecturer from Canada, now residing in Sri Lanka, spoke on ”Facing Your Fears” and leadership, for the morning session.

In the evening, the opening ceremony was held, which started with prayers and blessings different faith representatives.

RYS staff member, Ms. Dilini Sandeepika, welcomed the participants; Dr. Chula Senaratne, secretary general of RYS-Sri Lanka, delivered the opening remarks; and Dr. Chung Sik Young, chair of UPF-Asia, gave the keynote address.

Wearing colorful costumes, children from the local village performed a dance and sang.

The guest of honor, Western Provincial Councilor, Hon. Upul Rajapaksa, gave special remarks in which he expressed his appreciation for the work of UPF and RYS. The ceremony concluded with a vote of thanks delivered by Ms. Sujatha Mehenin, the head bikkhuni (nun) of the Buddhist ashram.

Day 4 – First Day at the Worksite

After breakfast, the volunteers went to the worksite where they were assigned to different groups and were given details of the work to be done. While some groups placed concrete on the floor of the building and filled the stage area with soil, others cleaned an area with Bo trees, scrubbing the moss off the walls, and other areas of the ashram. Each and every participant became fully involved in the spirit of service. Tea was provided by the villagers and all the volunteers enjoyed local snacks and sweets.

In the afternoon, Dr. Robert Kittel, education director of UPF-Asia, spoke on leadership and UPF's principles of peace. Dr. Kittel, who has been an inspiring presence in many RYS and UPF projects, also gave other presentations during the project.

Day 5 – Work in Progress

On the second day at the worksite, some participants lay concrete on the stage area and dug soil to create a 6-foot hole for the washroom area, while others continued on scrubbing and cleaning areas of the ashram.

The day closed with a cultural show.

Day 6 – A Fabulous Finish

On the last day at the worksite, two groups and an expert mason completed building the washroom area, while two other groups completed the cleaning. With there was so much work to do, the masons offered to paint the building as well.

The staff then invited the villagers for a multi-religious prayer and a group photograph.

Day 7 – An Unforgettable Field Trip Visiting Religious Sites

On the seventh day, the volunteers went on a field trip to visit a Buddhist temple, a Christian church and a Muslim mosque. The religious leaders at each place of worship explained the beliefs of their faith. At the mosque, the mawlawi (an honorific Islamic religious title given to Muslim religious scholars) offered everyone snacks and drinks.

Later, the volunteers went to climb a rocky hillock that had a waterfall. Afterwards, the team returned to where they were staying, for dinner, which was followed by sharing, singing and dancing around a campfire.

Day 8 – Sharing Experiences & Closing Ceremony

On the final day, December 18, Ms. Liyanasuriya organized time for reflection and the closing ceremony for all the participants. At the end, certificates and souvenirs were distributed.

Many of the participants shared that the project was a transformational experience, and expressed their gratitude to UPF and RYS for the opportunity to develop leadership skills and work together for the greater good of the society. Many also expressed a desire to apply what they had learned during the project in their communities, and to volunteer again for RYS' 2016 project in Sri Lanka.

