



27 MAY, 2025

A common place for all

The Star, Malaysia



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Imagine houses of worship opening up spaces that people of all faiths can visit.

I HAVE read widely about many religions, and one thing comes across clearly and without any ambiguity in all those books: all religions nurture the idea of helping fellow human beings whatever the faith they practise.

We have seen it in action on the ground: In helping the needy, the orphans, the travellers and those affected by natural or conflict-caused disasters, every mainstream religion has stepped up to the plate.

If that is so, how do houses of worship in each religion answer the call of nation-building?

Nation-building in Malaysia is, to me, the art or politics of building a community of different faiths and cultures that can stand strong together.

So, how do our houses of worship step up to the plate in this endeavour?

Before commencing a discourse about common spaces in houses of worship, I would like to dispel one particular evil genie that has been let out of its bottle.

This genie loves to convince people to help only people of their own faith and no one else.



MOHD
TAJUDDIN
MOHD RASDI

Over the top

Associating with or going to a different house of worship is tantamount to being branded a traitor to the faith.

If this is how we want to live, then we should simply cease to be a nation and go our separate ways, becoming different nations separated by different faiths.

This is the *katak di bawah tempurung* (frog under a coconut shell) method of existence.

With this circumscribed view of separate and exclusive notions of religion, we invite nothing but mistrust, hatred and prejudice – so much so that we will cease to function effectively in economics, environmental issues and sovereignty.

It is my belief that my body of

knowledge of socially inclusive spaces in all houses of worship will bring us closer together and thus create mutual trust, compassion and brotherhood among adherents of different faiths.

I believe that a house of worship should endow 20% of its built-up area as free space.

So if a church, temple or gurdwara is 1,000sq m, then I think roughly 150sq m should be used as a common space open to all for social, economic and educational objectives.

Imagine that you are a government officer calling a church and saying, “*Salam sejahtera tuan, bolehkah kami tempatkan mangsa banjir Kampung Sena di gereja tuan* (may we place the flood victims from Kampung Sena in your church)?”

Or perhaps the government could distribute vaccinations quickly through all houses of worship for all people to access to prevent a virus from spreading.

I look forward to the time when I could be in mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples, gurdwaras and Bahai places of worship to give a talk on Islam, the mosque

and nation-building.

I pray that day comes despite ignorant social media influencers, and that narrow-minded politicians won’t accuse me of being a disloyal Malay or a *sesat* (lost) Muslim, and ask that my citizenship be revoked.

I believe that if we remain behind our own walls in our own houses of worship, fenced in by fear, we will forever remain enemies and be cannon fodder for politicians to gain their power, and for social media influencers to gain their advertising opportunities.

Houses of worship should be designed with social spaces like a playground, public toilets, and rest places like the R&R (rest and relaxation) stops on highways that are open to all – maybe we should even have convenience shops.

Houses of worship should also contain humanitarian spaces for the homeless as well as for disaster relief.

It would also be good if houses of worship had galleries for small talks and exhibitions of different important and interesting things

to bring the community into a shared mind space made “taboo” by misinformed clerics and opportunists preachers.

But what about the threat of “conversion” from one faith to another?

Well, as one teacher I much admired, Satya Narayan Goenka (one of the foremost lay teachers of the Vipassana method of meditation), would say, that conversion should be about moving people from indifference to compassion, from arrogance to humility.

Malaysia is now almost 70 years old, and it needs a new perspective to get through a new “S” curve of nation development.

The real key is not economics, it is mutual respect and dignity through interaction in common spaces in our houses of worship.

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SUMMARIES

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