

Religious activities not a must in mission schools

■ BY GRACE CHUA

PRAYER, Bible classes or other religious activities must not be compulsory activities in mission schools, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in his National Day Rally speech.

These schools, run by religious groups, are popular with families of all faiths for the quality of their education.

"I know it first-hand. I went to a Catholic school which gave me a good education," PM Lee said, referring to his time at Catholic High School.

Schools must remain a common space for students of all religions, he emphasised.

If mission schools were allowed to make prayer and Bible classes compulsory, "then we would have Christians,

Buddhists, Muslims, etc all attending different schools, and our common space will shrink," he said.

He held up St Joseph's Institution (SJI), run by the De La Salle Brothers, as an example of a mission school which has accepted students of all religions.

One Malay student, Mr Salman Mohamed Khair, fitted in so well there that he was named the 2003 Josephian of the Year. This is an award given to one student a year for all-round academic, service and sporting excellence.

He told *Berita Harian* that year that he was initially apprehensive about attending a Catholic school, but religion was never an issue during his time there.

SJI principal Koh Thiam Seng told *The Straits Times* yesterday: "Our hallmark is that we're always respectful of people's faiths and never impose religion on anyone."

Dr Koh noted that SJI's religious and moral education programme has options for Catholic and non-Catholic students.

He added that the inclusivity is not surprising: only about a quarter of the SJI student body is Catholic.

The Ministry of Education has stringent guidelines for mission schools: Prayers, religious classes and services must be optional, and admission to the school cannot be contingent on taking part in such activities.

In 2005, after public complaints about proselytising in schools, it ordered teachers not to engage in such acts.

Researcher Vicknesh Selvam, 25, who attended Methodist schools Anglo-Chinese School (Independent) and Anglo-Chinese Junior College, though he is not religious, said the chapel services at school put an emphasis on values such as integrity.

"In all honesty it's the values that count, not who you worship," he said.

caiwj@sph.com.sg

Mr Salman Mohamed Khair was named St Joseph's Institution Josephian of the Year for 2003.

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