New ambassadors of faith

IN MULTI-ETHNIC Singapore, all sorts of misconceptions can arise, as some young citizens found out.

Undergraduate Farhana Munshi used to think that when Christians befriended people from other religions, their sole purpose was to convert them. The 19-year-old realised she was mistaken after speaking to a Catholic priest from the Church of Saint Mary of the Angels.

“He told me that only a small group of people think this way. Most befriend others with no hidden agenda,” she said.

Then, there are the Taoist devotees perplexed about why Muslims seem to pray facing the wall, according to Mr Chung Kwang Tong, a priest from the Taoist Federation (Singapore). Said the 22-year-old: “I know that Muslims pray in the direction of Mecca, but I am now better able to explain to others why they do so.”

Righting such misconceptions was the aim of the Singapore Inter-Faith Youth Forum. On Saturday, the first batch of young Inter-Faith Ambassadors was honoured at the Singapore Management University. To earn the title, 26 budding leaders of various faiths had to undergo a series of activities that included doing an internship at a religious establishment and visiting places of worship.

The forum even attracted young people who profess no particular faith. “All of us need to be able to relate to the next person,” said freethinker Serena Sim, 20.

At a separate interfaith event on Saturday, Foreign Minister George Yeo stressed the importance of creating a culture of dialogue through interfaith programmes in Singapore.

“We are derived from ancestral cultures and tribes all over the world. We should maintain these links because they sustain us economically. But these links bring their own problems, and we must have a ‘software’ to overcome these problems,” he said. — NAZRY BAHRAWI