



Mr Mikhail Goh and his wife Tengku Suzana Tengku Abdul Kadir are the co-founders of Have Halal, Will Travel, a travel publication for Muslim travellers. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

### Journey to Islam started with love

It was love that introduced Mr Mikhail Goh, 29, to Islam. But it was the answers to life and the universe he found in the faith that made him embrace it.

Mr Goh, who is Chinese and comes from a Buddhist family, said: "Some people assumed that I converted but I'm not serious about the faith. That I still drink (alcohol) and eat bak kut teh. I feel sad when I hear that. My faith is hard fought for and dear to me."

His journey to Islam started when he met his wife, Tengku Suzana Tengku Abdul Kadir, 28, when they were both business undergraduates at the Singapore Management University. That she is of a different race and religion was not a deterrence in their budding romance.

During their seven-year courtship, he met a religious teacher who "opened his eyes" to Islam. He spent three to four years learning about the faith at the Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore, before converting in 2016. Mikhail is Arabic for Michael, the name of the angel mentioned in the Bible and the Quran. His Chinese name is Goh Wei Jia.

His parents were concerned when he told them of his decision to convert. Chief among their fears was that he would be alienated from them due to different beliefs and practices. "They did not object and tried to understand why I wanted to convert," he said. "I'm very lucky they are so loving."

Last year, he married Ms Suzana. The pair are the co-founders of Have Halal, Will Travel, a travel publication for Muslim travellers.

While his family has been supportive, he has heard all sorts of unkind remarks from those around him. But he takes them in his stride. He said, "Islam has transformed the way I think and behave. I have developed a love for humanity and all living things and learnt to control my anger and fears."

Theresa Tan

# More mixed marriages and conversions

Number of new Muslims jumped to 775 last year, up from 574 converts in 2007

Theresa Tan  
Senior Social Affairs  
Correspondent

Ms Li Jinghan, 28, used to be a "full-on" atheist, until she fell in love with a Muslim she met in university.

Her boyfriend told her she had to embrace Islam if they were to marry. She was reluctant at first, as that would mean a complete change in her world view and identity.

But through her own search for meaning and direction in life, she started learning about Islam.

Ms Li, who converted and wed civil servant Muhammad Aizat Khalis Daud in 2015, said: "I saw how the teachings of Islam made his family so close-knit, so contented and happy."

"Through Islam, I also found the answers to my purpose in life."

There has been a steady rise in the number of people who, like Ms Li, converted to Islam in the past

decade. Last year, there were 775 new believers – a 35 per cent jump from the 574 converts in 2007, the Muslim Converts' Association of Singapore told The Sunday Times.

The association was appointed by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore to be the centre for conversion to Islam.

The surge comes even as the number of mixed marriages within the Muslim community has grown.

Last year, there were 2,300 inter-ethnic unions, comprising 38 per cent of all Muslim marriages. This is up from 1,222 such unions in 2007, making up 30 per cent of all Muslim marriages.

In contrast, the number of inter-racial unions in civil marriages saw a slight dip to 17.7 per cent last year, down from 18.2 the year before.

The jump in inter-racial Muslim unions helped contribute to an overall increase in inter-racial marriages last year, according to the Marriages and Divorces 2017 report

released by the Department of Statistics on July 10.

Ms Rasimah Jar, founder of Pro-wise Consultancy which runs marriage preparation classes, said of the rise in mixed marriages and conversions: "Compared with two or three generations ago, people see less of one's colour and religion now."

"We understand other races more and people integrate well."

She added: "Many people think that those who marry Muslims are forced to convert."

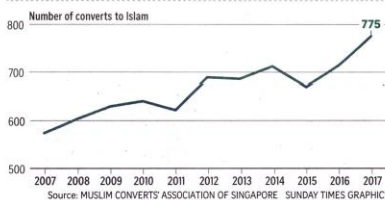
"But many whom we talk to say they have learnt more about Islam and decided to convert based on their own choice, without any compulsion from their partners."

The association's website says it is mandatory in Islam for both parties intending to marry to be Muslims for the marriage to be legal.

Slightly over half of the Muslim mixed marriages last year were between Malay grooms or brides, with a spouse from the "Others" group. "Others" include all ethnic groups, excluding the Chinese, Malays, Indians, Eurasians and Caucasians.

Those who run marriage preparation classes for Muslim couples said spouses in the "Others" group include Filipinos, Indonesians and those of Middle Eastern ancestry.

### Growing number



Besides foreigners, the new converts also include Chinese and Indian Singaporeans from other religions and all walks of life.

The increasing number of converts to Islam is also due to growing religiosity and rising interest in the Islamic faith.

Ustazah Liyana Musfirah, a certified religious teacher and a representative from Art of Marriage, which runs marriage preparation classes, said: "The younger generation may feel they have something missing in their life, so they search for the purpose in life."

"They fall in love with Islam which offers them what they are looking for."

Those seeking the faith are en-

couraged to attend foundation courses to learn about Islam and the practices of being a Muslim before they convert, said the Muslim Converts' Association spokesman.

New converts interviewed said they faced concerns and even objections from their families.

Mr Mohamed Khair Mohamed Noor, who runs SuChi Success which conducts marriage preparation classes, said: "For almost every conversion, the tension is there."

"But many of the families accept it over time, especially after the grandchildren are born."

Ms Li, whose Islamic name is Nur Jihan Li, said her freethinker parents were supportive of her conversion and marriage.

Ms Li, who has a 14-month-old daughter, said: "My parents are the best. I have friends who have cold wars with their parents for a few years because the parents couldn't accept their decision to convert."

She said Islam has made her a better person. "I'm a lot more contented now and more reflective. Islam is the right path for me."

theresat@sph.com.sg