



Amarjot Singh speaks to Wisconsin Rapids-area residents gathered Sunday at Grace Lutheran Church, 1531, Whitrock Ave., Wisconsin Rapids, to learn about the Sikh faith. / Karen Madden/Daily Tribune Staff

About 100 Wisconsin Rapids-area residents took time Sunday to learn that, despite outward appearances, the similarities between followers of the Sikh religion and themselves outweigh the differences.

Officials from Grace Lutheran Church, 1531 Whitrock Ave., invited Devinder Sandhu, associate professor of biology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and two members of the Oak Creek Sikh temple, Upinder Singh and Amarjot Singh, to explain the religion to the congregation and community.

Rick Barten, a member of the church's Board of Stewardship, got the idea for the presentation after the Aug. 5 shooting death of six members of the Oak Creek Sikh Temple by a gunman who then committed suicide. The shooting was a terrible tragedy that came from prejudice, intolerance, ignorance or all of the above, Barten said.

Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbors, he said.

"How can we do that, if we don't know them?" he asked.

Sikh is the fifth-largest religion in the world, said Amarjot Singh. The faith has 23 million followers worldwide, with 1 million in the United States, 20 million in India and the rest spread throughout the world.

The Sikhs believe in one God, Singh said. Guru Nanak founded the religion in 1469 and was the first of 10 gurus who taught their students, or Sikhs, the path to God. The last guru died in 1708. The gurus left writings, gathered in a 1,430-page holy book, which today's Sikhs use to pray and learn their religion.

The Sikhs accept all faiths as a path to the one God, Singh said.

Sikh men do not cut their hair or shave because that is the way God made them, said Upinder Singh. They wear turbans and bow to honor God. They also wear a bracelet-type band around their arm to show their faith.

It's the wearing of the turbans that have made the Sikh a target of hate crimes since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said Upinder Singh. After 9/11, there were frequent photos in the media of terrorists in turbans. However, he said, Osama bin Laden and his fellow Muslim followers wore turbans to protect the head from the extreme sun, not to honor God.

About 99 percent of the men wearing turbans in the United States are members of the Sikh faith, Upinder Singh said.

"In the 15 years I've lived here, I've never seen anyone in a turban who wasn't Sikh," he said.

People practicing the Sikh faith do not smoke, drink or use any mind-altering drugs, Upinder Singh said. The religious rules have been in place for hundreds of years, long before anyone knew of the health implications, he said.

The Sikh also do not believe in revenge. At the memorial service for those killed in the Aug. 5 shooting, the congregation also said a prayer for the soul of the shooter, Upinder Singh said.

The Sikh people have focused not on the shooting but on the community that united around them the day afterward, Upinder Singh said. About 5,000 people attended the memorial services, and only 1,000 of them were Sikh.

The invitation from Grace Lutheran is another sign of people reaching out to the Sikh people, Upinder Singh said.

Debbie Brown, Grace Lutheran Church member, enjoyed the opportunity Sunday to learn about the religion.

"I like the idea of the similarities," she said.

Upinder Singh was pleased that the message got out to the group that Sikh is not that different from Christian religions.

"We all have one God, the same God," he said.