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The Church of Christ in Malaysia

ONG KOK BIN

Malaysia, the expanded successor to Malaya, was once a British colony, like the United States of America. She gained her independence on August 31, 1957, with eleven states on the Malayan archipelago federating together to form the fledgling Malaya. In 1963, Sabah and Sarawak, on Borneo Island, and the island of Singapore joined the Malaya Federation to form Malaysia. However, in 1965 Singapore left the Federation and became an independent country in her own right. Today, Malaysia comprises thirteen states and three federally administered territories, with the newly established Putrajaya as the new administrative capital of the country.

Malaysia has a written constitution, which among other things enshrines Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language) as the official language and Islam as the official religion. Malays, the major ethnic group in the country, are by birth and constitution Muslims of the Sunni sect; otherwise, freedom of religious faiths is guaranteed in the constitution to all non-Malay citizens. Besides Islam, other major religions practiced in the country are Daoism (Taoism), Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. Within the Christian rubric are the Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists (the more traditional power-houses), and of later introduction, the other denominations. Presently, the fastest growing groups are the charismatics and the neo-pentecostals, led by the Assemblies of God and other related churches.

THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN MALAYSIA

A Brief Overview

The story of the Church of Christ in the Restoration heritage in Malaysia began with the late Ira Y. Rice, who came to Singapore as a Dale Carnegie course instructor in 1955. Ira Y. Rice would double up as an evangelist along with his secular vocation (or, was it the other way round?). He made frequent trips into Malaya, especially to Johore, the southernmost state and the closest to Singapore. Amongst his earliest converts was one Lye Hong Meng. In Ira Y. Rice's own words: "WHEN LYE HONG MENG, a former Methodist preacher, of Muar, Johore, Malaya, became convinced of the truth of the gospel in June 1955, he motored all the way down to Singapore (130 miles) to have himself immersed into Christ, like the Bible teaches."¹ Others were Lim Ann Woon, a "pork dealer" and a former Presbyterian, Chew Seng Teck, a former Presbyterian preacher, and his younger son, Chew Yee Chiang (better known to the local brethren as David Chew) and Ng Fock Lam (Charlie Ng to most who know him), a former Baptist. Ann Woon and David Chew were both from Kluang, Johore, and were baptized in August 1955. Charlie Ng, originally from Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar), had studied at the Baptist Mission Seminary in Penang. "Renouncing Baptist error, late last summer, Brother Ng began associating himself with us in the cause of pure undenominational, New Testament Christianity."² Thus, the earliest Church of Christ congregations to be

¹ Ira Y. Rice, *Singapore—Far East Report* (July/December 1956): 6.

² Ira Y. Rice, *Singapore—Far East Report* (January/February 1956): 10.

established in Malaysia were in Muar and Kluang in the state of Johore, both having their nascent beginnings in the later half of 1955. (Charlie Ng was to move himself from Penang to Singapore and help Ira Y. Rice with mission work among the Cantonese-speaking Chinese on the island.)

The Rice family moved to Kuala Lumpur, then the capital city of Malaya, in April 1961. They established a congregation in the city that met at 123-D Ipoh Road. Amongst the earliest converts that Ira Y. Rice made were Chan Kim Foh and his fiancée Doris (both were baptized in April 1962). The Rices were soon joined in the mission field in Kuala Lumpur by Frank H. and Joan Pierce in July of the same year. The Pierces later moved down south to Seremban about February 1965 to begin new work there. However, they left shortly in May and returned to the United States. In April 1965, Jud and Pancy Whitefield and Philip and Kay Wright arrived as missionaries in Seremban. They were followed by Richard and Winima Matlock in June. The Whitefields subsequently moved up to Kuala Lumpur to work with the church there. A year or two later, the Wrights, and later, the Matlocks returned to the States. Following them into Seremban were Kenneth Leroy Sinclair and his wife Estelle. They came in 1967 and stayed until September 1971 when they returned to the States. They returned to Seremban in January 1973 and remained until 1977. In their second stay of mission work in Seremban, they also planted a church in Port Dickson, a coastal town in the state of Negri Sembilan (of which Seremban is the state capital). A government ruling forbidding foreign missionaries from working in the country came into force in 1975. All missionaries had to leave the country; Ken and Estelle Sinclair were the last of the Church of Christ missionaries to leave.

Other missionaries that came to Malaysia from the mid-sixties to the early seventies, either to establish a new congregation or to revive or assist in an existing congregation, were: Hayden O. Jenks (1965–1969), Anna Klyde Davis (1967–1971), Miles Cotham (1969–1070)—all three worked in Penang; Frank and Joan Pierce (1971–1975), who established a separate congregation in Penang; Don and Ann Green (1966–1969), who began a new work in Ipoh; Dennis Cady (1966–1968), who though based in Kuala Lumpur, pioneered a new work in Port Klang (Port Swettenham at the time); Thelma Eubanks (1966–1972) and Jayleta Glaze (now Heflin) (1968–1969), both worked as secretaries and Bible correspondence course instructors in Kuala Lumpur; Ron and Judy Warpole (1972–1973) in Kuala Lumpur; Ken and Clyde Ann Willis (1971 in Malacca and 1972 in Kuala Lumpur); Charles and Cloyce Bishop (1972–1975), who worked in Klang (Jud Whitefield had helped to restart the church in Klang in 1970); and Jim and Janice Dearman (1987–1988), who established the Malaysia School of Preaching in Klang.

The churches in the places thus far mentioned all lie on the western north-south axis of the Malayan archipelago. The reason for this is that all these cities or towns are more urban and they have very sizable populations of Chinese and Indians, as compared with more rural places on the eastern side across the Main Range, with Malays forming the core of the population.

Two churches, Ipoh and Seremban, stood out in this time for the simple reason that they provided the bulk of local men who went into full-time preaching beginning from the 1970s. Of the group from that era, two remain in active service in the ministry: Lau Kin Fatt (Ipoh), who recently launched a new work in Puchong, a precinct in Kuala Lumpur, and Ong Chong Fatt (Seremban), who now ministers to the church in Petaling Jaya. Both were graduates of the Four Seas College of Bible and Missions (started by Pence Dacus) in Singapore. They also did undergraduate and graduate studies in Bible at Abilene Christian University in the mid- and late 1990s.

As of the present moment, there are about twenty congregations (varying from “house churches” to larger churches with attendances in excess of one hundred on Sundays) that are linked to the first churches that were started by Ira Y. Rice and others in the early period of Restoration mission work in Malaysia.

Developments and the Present

In terms of inter-congregational unity and co-operation and evangelistic effort, the Church of Christ in Malaysia probably had its “golden era” in the 1970s. Congregations in that decade were filled with highly

energized and enthusiastic youth (mostly high school students) who were more than willing to travel great distances, often on small motorcycles, to attend youth fellowships, year-end grand camps, and to help out in city-wide gospel meetings that were styled as Campaigns for Christ. There was a very strong sense of fellowship amongst members of the different congregations. All recognized that they were the church of Christ, the undenominated church that Jesus built, the church that Jesus died for, the church that began on 33 A.D. in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, to be exact. Each and every person identified with one another as belonging to the body of which Jesus was the head. If a church in one place had a need, all would rally to contribute to meet the need. If a church had a gospel meeting, other churches would make certain to send representatives to assist in the meeting; and if it was a Campaign for Christ, the support and assistance would be that much more overwhelming. It would be as if all the churches had descended upon that one host place.

The unity and cooperation of the 1970s would be replaced by disunity and suspicion in the 1980s. It would be too simplistic to point the finger for this change to the fall-out between Ira Y. Rice and Gordon Hogan sometime in the early 1980s. Gordon Hogan was the missionary minister to the church in Moulmein Road in Singapore. He was also the President of Four Seas College. Ira Y. Rice, though living in the United States, had control of Four Seas and had maintained a huge influence on the churches through his network of “sons” and “grandsons” (he was fond of calling any of his direct or indirect converts “sons” and “daughters,” and the subsequent generation “grandsons”) and his publication, *Contending for the Faith*. Both Hogan and Rice (and for that matter, all the missionaries who came to Malaysia and Singapore) had espoused the conservatism that characterized the far right of the Restoration spectrum.

The change probably came about through subtle awakenings and unwitting causes and events. The fall-out between the two “giants,” more probably than not, provided the catalyst for bringing the subtle awakenings to surface. However, it must not be concluded that there was a massive shift to the liberalism of the far left. Restoration conservatism in this region is too deeply rooted for that to happen (not then, not now, and not in the immediate future). The shift or polarization is within conservatism itself.

The high school students had grown into mature and more discerning adults. While some were content with their form and understanding of their Christian faith, others were experiencing a need to change their stance, not so much as to doctrinal beliefs, but to the tolerance and acceptance of others who might differ from them on certain doctrines or practices. It could be said that they had awakened themselves to a more grace-oriented form of Christianity, as opposed to the strict doctrinaire form that they had been taught and knew. Thus, while there was (and still is) no motive force to embrace denominationalism at large (ecumenism in Churches of Christ was and is unknown here), there was a readiness to keep the arms of fellowship around those who had expressed novel or even divergent views on traditionally accepted doctrines. This willingness to keep open the arms of fellowship did not go down well with those who desired to keep the pattern of “sound doctrine” pure and unadulterated. Amongst the controversies that had erupted to pry open the polarization were marriage-divorce-and-remarriage, all-life-is-worship, the role and “gift” of the Holy Spirit (baptism, indwelling, direct operation, indirect/through the Word), the possibility of others outside the Church of Christ to be saved, and musical instruments (hand-clapping and whether the use of musical instruments constitutes a salvation issue).

It needs be pointed out at this juncture that the worship and teachings of the churches now are as they were in the 1960s and 1970s: non-instrumental, non-denominational—the Church (whether with a big “C” or a small “c”) of Christ is the only true church of the Lord, forgiveness of sins and hence salvation is only through believing baptism in water and into Jesus Christ, plurality of elders and deacons in church government (though churches, save one, still do not have the capacity/will to implement this), local autonomy of churches, and submission of women in church. Women continue to play their traditional roles as Sunday Bible class teachers to children and to adult women. There is no impetus or impulse from them to assume other roles, such as serving in worship services.

In terms of size and location, the largest and greatest number of congregations are concentrated in an area known as the Klang Valley—the most populated, commercialized and industrialized area in the country. Klang Valley extends from Kuala Lumpur to Petaling Jaya to Klang in the state of Selangor. The largest congregation currently is the one in Klang with Sunday attendances averaging 140. It is the only congregation to have elders and deacons presently (Seremban was the other congregation that had once appointed elders, but that was in the early 1970s). Petaling Jaya used to have attendance above one hundred too, but with some of its members going out to form two new congregations—Puchong and Wangsa Maju—its active membership now averages slightly below one hundred. Kuala Lumpur, the largest congregation in the 1970s, has declined to some degree. Muar and Kluang, the two earliest congregations, have been reduced to a mere few individuals (i.e., if they are still meeting together as church). Most of the other congregations have attendances varying from above fifty to below thirty. The main language used in worship and in Bible instruction is English, with several congregations having Mandarin and Tamil services too. Kuala Lumpur has a very small group of hearing-impaired Christians, who sign in the American Sign Language system. Yong Peng and Batu Pahat in Johore are Mandarin-speaking congregations.

Churches here, vis-à-vis society, largely see themselves as agents to convert and bring “the lost” to Jesus Christ. As such, there is very little engagement with the outside community other than to evangelize or invite the people to church. However, from time to time and as the occasion demands it, churches will contribute in cash or in kind to emergency needs like the December 2004 tsunami that struck the region, or to visit and provide cheer to inmates of some social welfare institutions. A few churches have ongoing projects to engage with their immediate communities. Seremban, for example, has a community-oriented program called “Living Skills” which seeks to provide literacy in English, basic computer know-how, and tuition in science and mathematics to children living nearby.

Overall, the state of the individual churches here, particularly the larger congregations, can be said to be healthy, though not exactly flourishing. Some of the smaller congregations may be struggling with their numbers, but the spirit to be the New Testament church of Christ, the one and only true church, remains as strong as ever.

ONG KOK BIN CURRENTLY MINISTERS TO THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN SEREMBAN (SINCE OCTOBER 1988). HE HOLDS A BSC FROM THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE; AN LLB FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON; AND AN MS IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY FROM ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY IN ABILENE, TEXAS. HE IS MARRIED TO ESTHER CHONG AND HAS THREE CHILDREN, LENG (26), SU-LIN (24) AND BENG (18).



Websites of Churches in Malaysia

Church Website URL

Ipoh Garden East ipohchurchofchrist.org

Klang klangchurchofchrist.org

Kuala Lumpur klcc.faithsite.com

Petaling Jaya pjcc.faithsite.com

Subang Jaya sjcoc.bizhat.com

Wangsa Maju czone.org