

EDITORIAL

Two men were discussing the Moorthy's case. *Abe was explaining to *Ben the significance of the Syariah Court's decision in ruling that the deceased Moorthy was a Muslim. The two then talked about the implications if one spouse converts to Islam and Ben remarked, "What's the big deal? If converting to Islam causes so much problem, then convert out lah."

(*Names have been changed.)

Ben's remark probably reflects many Malaysian Christians' shallow and naive understanding of the dual legal system (Syariah and Civil Court laws) in this country.

How many of us know that "once a Muslim, always a Muslim"? To those who are married, do you know what happens to your properties and your children should your spouse convert to Islam?

In the Moorthy case, does it not alarm you that the Syariah Court has not to date made public the documents of Moorthy's alleged conversion to Islam? Even Moorthy's widow, S. Kiammal, and her

'WE want to convey a very strong message to the Government that we are uneasy and uncomfortable... Eventually, slowly, we are fearful that people may assume syariah is the supreme law of the land.'

- Reverend Wong Kim Kong
(Spokesman for the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism)



Justice For All Malaysians

lawyers have not sighted the shadow of the alleged document.

And does it not frighten you that non-Muslims have no legal remedy or recourse in court cases that involve both Muslims and non-Muslims? In simple terms, it means that if a non-Muslim files a court case which involves a Muslim, the case will be thrown out!

It must be categorically stated here that the NECF Malaysia upholds the right of everyone to choose his/her religion, and that every Malaysian be given the freedom to convert from one religion to another at any time of his/her life, without any interference from the state. But while we uphold this right, we desire that conversions be transparent – not shrouded in secrecy as in Moorthy's case – especially when they affect the inheritance and religious status of the non-

converted spouse and children.

The Moorthy case has indeed opened a cantankerous case of worms. The Syariah Court's ruling that Moorthy was a Muslim has far-reaching repercussions on the constitutional rights of the non-Muslims in this land, rights that have been insidiously eroded with the High Court's refusal to intervene in the Syariah Court's ruling. That is why we feel compelled to devote a large part of this Berita NECF issue to the controversy with the hope that you will understand the seriousness of the situation.

Ultimately, we hope that this will encourage in you a more passionate involvement in and intercession for our beloved country.

May God have mercy on Malaysia. May justice, mercy and righteousness flow like a life-giving river in our land. ■

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Each New Year brings
with it fresh challenges.

From The
CHAIRMAN

Many people enter a new year with mixed emotions – excitement because of new opportunities and anxiety because of the unknown.

Jesus' command to His disciples in John 14:31 "Arise let us go from here" is a very apt scripture to ponder on as we look to the year ahead. In this scripture passage, the disciples needed hope and direction. Jesus was about to return to the Father, leaving them to complete the work He had assigned them. They would be facing many new challenges.

Today, this command continues to speak positively and forcefully to the challenges we face; to bring hope and comfort to those who are fearful and aimless in life; and to emphasise our need to arise and go from where we are to where and what God wants us to be.

Arise & Go

Let us consider the scriptural context of the command.

"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. You have heard Me say to you, 'I am going away and coming back to you.' If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, 'I am going to the Father,' for My Father is greater than I. "And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me. But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here" (John 14:27-31).

The scriptural context of the command points out three sources of power for us to "Arise and go".

The source of Peace (John 14:27)

Jesus promised them His peace. The Greek word for peace "eirene" means, "bound together or weaved together".

We can be joined together with God and with others. The Hebrew equivalent "Shalom" means, "freedom from trouble". It is possessing the highest joy and possessing all the inner good possible.

The world looks for peace through escapism, avoiding trouble, by refusing to face reality and denial of problems. It is sought through pleasure, satisfaction and material contentment that does not last. The peace of Jesus in contrast is a peace of tranquility of mind, calmness in the face of troubled situations. It is more than feelings or emotions, even more than attitude and thought.

It is the peace of conquest – "overcome the world". "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

It is a peace of assurance – unquestionable confidence and a guaranteed outcome of good. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

It is the peace of intimacy with God. It is the peace that settles the mind, strengthens the will and establishes the heart "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

This peace is yours as you face the New Year.

The source of joy (John 14:28-29)

This speaks of "inner gladness or a deep sense of satisfaction and assurance" which comes from the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus delivers us from sin, death and hell. "Most assuredly, I say to

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The Moorthy Story

A summary of the case and related events of Kaliasammal Sinnasamy vs Islamic Religious Affairs Council of the Federal Territory, Director Kuala Lumpur General Hospital & Government of Malaysia.

By K Shanmuga
Advocate & Solicitor
(Watching brief for Malaysia
Consultative Council of
Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism
and Sikhism)

Moorthy Maniam is a national hero. He had been a member of the Malaysian team that had climbed Mt Everest. The plaintiff, Kaliasammal, had been married to Moorthy since 25 Nov 1995. They had one child, now aged about nine. Moorthy became paralysed from the waist down in 1998 as a result of an accident in the Sg Udang Military Camp. On 11 Nov 2005, Moorthy fell from his wheelchair, injured his head and went into a coma. He did not recover and passed away on 20 Dec 2005.

Kaliasammal was suddenly informed on 1 Dec 2005, for the very first time, by one Major Shukri that Moorthy had converted to Islam and that his body would be given an Islamic burial. When Moorthy died, the Islamic Religious Affairs Council came to collect the body. However, because Kaliasammal objected, the Hospital director, Dr Azmi Shapie, said he would not release the body until he received a court order certifying the status of Moorthy's religion.

On 21 Dec 2005, Kaliasammal filed the above case in the Kuala Lumpur High Court asking for declaratory and injunctive relief related to her claim that Moorthy professed Hinduism as his religion and that his body should be released to her to be cremated in accordance with Hindu rites. Amongst the facts she relied on in support of her application were the following, none of which was denied by adducing evidence to the contrary:-

i) Moorthy had never told Kaliasammal or any of his family members, relatives or close friends that he had converted to Islam.

ii) Throughout his life, Moorthy professed himself a Hindu and practised a Hindu way of life.

iii) There had been no announcement at the army camp where he stayed that Moorthy had converted, and his military identity card had never been changed to show his new Muslim name or his change of religion.

iv) Moorthy frequented temples and applied the Hindu holy ash ('Thiruniru') on his forehead.

v) In Jan 2005, Moorthy took part in the Thaipusam festival in Batu Caves by carrying a 'paal kudam' (or milk pot) and shaving his hair. He was apparently carried up the 256 steps of the Sri Subramaniam Temple at Batu Caves in his wheelchair by RELA volunteers.

vi) Just 11 days before he fell into a coma, Moorthy and the rest of his family had appeared on a TV3 Buletin Utama programme on 31 Oct 2005 which broadcast an interview with Moorthy done that same day on how he was celebrating the Hindu festival of Deepavali.

vii) From the affidavits, it is seen that Moorthy ate pork, drank alcohol, had not circumcised himself and had to the knowledge of his wife, sister and close friends never participated in any Islamic religious course.

Kaliasammal also said that if at all Moorthy had converted, it was not of his own free will. In support of this it was stated on affidavit that since 1998 when he became paralysed, Moorthy was always ill and had lost his powers of

concentration. An example was given of how at one point in 2004, Moorthy was unable to find his way home and had to telephone to ask someone to fetch him to take him home. He was said to be suffering from emotional disturbances and frequently forgot what he was doing. Since it was an urgent application during the Court vacation, a hearing date was fixed on Thursday, 29 Dec 2005.

However, the Kuala Lumpur Syariah High Court in Civil Case (Kes Mal) No. 14100-099-0090-2005 on 22 Dec 2005 made an order that Moorthy had embraced Islam and that his body must be buried in accordance with Islamic rites.

"The application and supporting documents, if any, to prove that Moorthy actually converted to Islam has to date not been given to Kaliasammal or her lawyers."

The Syariah Court directed the parties having custody of the body to deliver it to the 1st defendant and the police to assist to ensure this was done. This order was made on the application of the Islamic Religious Affairs Council without reference to the wife of the deceased.

Kaliasammal was not named as a party to the suit in the Syariah Court (as a Hindu, she would have not been able to be a party in any event) and no notice was given to her of the proceedings in the Syariah Court. The application and supporting documents, if any, to prove that Moorthy actually converted to Islam has to date not been given to Kaliasammal or her lawyers.

Bernama reports on 22 Dec 2005, "Syariah Court Rules Everest Climber Moorthy a Muslim", that the application in the Syariah Court was filed at 2pm

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Answers To Your Questions

NECF Malaysia Religious Liberty Commission Chairman LEE MIN CHOON explains the implications of the Moorthy case and how the ruling by the Syariah Court and High Court affects non-Muslims. He also clarifies the controversial Article 121(1A) and how the clause came to being. Interview conducted by NECF Executive Secretary (Research) LIM SIEW FOONG.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MOORTHY'S CASE?

There have been a number of court cases which decided that a Muslim who wished to leave Islam must get a certificate from the Syariah courts and not the civil courts. Moorthy's case was one where the court decided that if there is a question whether a non-Muslim had become a Muslim, it should be decided by the Syariah courts.

WHAT PROBLEMS DID MOORTHY'S CASE CREATE FOR HIS FAMILY?

The High Court refused to entertain a suit from Moorthy's family challenging the conversion of Moorthy even though they had strong evidence. It was not a case where the family was unable to prove that Moorthy's conversion to Islam was questionable. What the High Court judge said was, "I cannot hear your case. You must go to the Syariah court." However, Moorthy's widow was not a Muslim and therefore cannot bring her case to the Syariah court. Thus, she was denied a right of hearing, which is supposed to be a basic tenet of law.

IS THE MODE OF BURIAL FOR MOORTHY THAT IMPORTANT?

It may be important from the point of view of family's religious understanding. Besides the issue of burial, the family could face other complications arising from the denial of the right and opportunity to challenge his conversion.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER COMPLICATIONS?

Let me outline four:

1) Estate and inheritance

Moorthy as a Muslim can only make a will on one-third of his property. The rest of his property must be administered according to Islamic Law. This also covers his EPF and insurance monies. In the recent case of the Lim family of Malacca, the family was deprived of the convert's estate which fell completely under the administration of the state Islamic trusts. As a result of public outcry, the religious authorities returned half of the estate to the family but only on an *ex gratia* basis (*The Star*, 11 Oct 2005).



2) Religious status of Moorthy's children

Most states have provisions in their administration of Islamic law enactments to define a Muslim as person who has at least one Muslim parent. One of the legal consequences of a person converting to Islam is that his children also automatically become Muslims. Objection from the non-Muslim spouse would not prevent the children from becoming Muslims.

3) Custody and upbringing of infant children

If any of Moorthy's infant children are deemed to be Muslims, then their custody will be determined by Islamic law. Most states have provisions to say if the Syariah Court is of the opinion that the mother is disqualified from *hadanah* (right to custody) it can pass custody to other persons, and that a woman is entitled to *hadanah* (right to custody) if she is a Muslim. Therefore, it is possible for Moorthy's widow or a non-Muslim spouse to lose custody of her children.

HOW ARE NON-MUSLIMS AFFECTED, OR LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED BY MOORTHY'S CASE?

If a non-Muslim is identified as a Muslim and it is disputed, a suit cannot be brought in the civil courts to challenge the fact. We see from Moorthy's case that it is very easy for Muslim quarters to allege that someone has converted to Islam. There were no documents to prove Moorthy's conversion except for his army colleagues saying so. The Syariah court seemed very willing to certify a person as a Muslim convert without much of a judicial inquiry. However, it is near to impossible for such a person to get out of Islam. More so, if his conversion needs to be challenged, the civil courts will decline to hear the case.

There could be a variety of situations where a non-Muslim could be wrongly identified as a Muslim. One would be the Moorthy kind of situation. This was a case where there is a serious doubt that a conversion to Islam took place. Moorthy's widow brought evidence of Moorthy's state of dementia and his uninterrupted practice of Hindu rites. In his state of mind,

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Moorthy could have succumbed to his colleagues' persuasion to become a Muslim in the most informal of ways. He may not have meant or intended to convert to Islam.

Another could be where a non-Muslim is caught in a *khalwat* (close proximity) situation with a Muslim and is pressured or threatened to convert to Islam and to marry the other party.

Mistakes in entering data into birth certificates or Mykad could also occur. If a person's personal documents wrongly say that he or she is a Muslim, then *prima facie* of that person falls under the jurisdiction (or authority) of the Syariah courts and he/she is barred from going to the civil courts.

Most states have Islamic enactments prescribing similar provisions for conversion into Islam. The conversion process usually involves reciting the *Shahadat* or the Islamic confessional creed. However, free will is a requisite of a valid conversion. In all the above examples, there is no free will or intention to convert to Islam. Such conversions are theoretically invalid.

The most obvious place to challenge this conversion is in the civil courts. If it is proved that the alleged Muslim was never a Muslim in the first place, then the Syariah court has no jurisdiction over him in the first place. Therefore, if there is a likelihood that a conversion to Islam will be proved to be invalid, then the proper forum is the court which the person will fall under if he is indeed proved to be not a Muslim.

Thus, at the heart of this problem is: Which court can a person go to in order to prove that he is not a Muslim, or if he is a Muslim to prove that he has left Islam? People who say that they are not Muslims or no longer Muslims generally do not wish to get their "exit certificates" from the Syariah court. By submitting to the Syariah court, a person is saying that he is a Muslim. People caught in both situations described above are basically saying that they are not Muslims. Thus, submitting to the Syariah courts will undermine or will be inconsistent with the legal stand which they take.

IS IT NECESSARY TO GO TO COURT OVER THIS MATTER?

Usually, there is a need to change one's official documents, such as Mykad, birth certificate, passport, etc. to show that one is not a Muslim. This will be important if a person who says he is a not a Muslim wants to marry a non-Muslim in a civil marriage or register his newly-born children as non-Muslims. However, the National Registration Department will not change a Muslim's status to non-Muslim unless there is proof that the person was never a Muslim in the first place or that he had converted out of Islam. This proof is usually a certificate or a declaration from the court. Beginning with the *Soon Singh* case in 1999, the

courts have ruled that it is the Syariah courts and not the civil courts that have the jurisdiction to issue such declarations.

WHY DOES THIS LEGAL COMPLICATION EXIST?

Previously, the High Court has jurisdiction to make judicial declarations on a person's religious status. However, in 1988 the Malaysian Constitution was amended whereby Article 121(1A) was inserted to say that the civil courts has no jurisdiction over any matter that fell within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts.

Unfortunately, the civil courts themselves have ruled that whether a person has converted out of Islam is a matter for the Syariah courts to decide. In Moorthy's case, the courts have gone further to say that whether a person has converted into Islam or not is also a matter for the Syariah courts to decide.

Which court can a person go to in order to prove that he is not a Muslim, or if he is a Muslim, to prove that he has left Islam?

WHY WAS THIS CLAUSE INSERTED DURING

THE 1988 CONSTITUTION AMENDMENT?

When the British ruled Malaya, they imposed the English legal system upon a population that consisted largely of Muslims and who had their own Muslim customs that applied in a variety of situations. The first judges were British, of course, and in a number of cases they were called on to decide disputes that involved Islamic principles.

In 1927, Justice Thorne of the Supreme Court of the Federated Malay States in the case of *Ramah binti Ta'at v. Laton binti Malim Sutan* made the following observations: (a) that Islamic practices differed from state to state; (b) that state enactments should be passed to deal with certain issues pertaining to Muslims like divorce and inheritance; (c) that special Islamic tribunals should be established to deal with such issues; and (d) that the jurisdiction of the civil courts should be excluded in such cases.

The Constitution of Malaya in 1957 incorporated the framework for Islam to be administered on a state-by-state basis. Powers were given to the state legislatures to pass laws to administer Islam on Muslims. Since then, the states of Malaysia have introduced enactments to administer Islam in their territories by establishing Islamic authorities and structures, *kadi* or Syariah courts, defining religious offences and establishing Islamic trusts.

Up to 1988, the High Court could still intervene and reverse decisions of the Syariah courts or Islamic authorities. Finally, in 1988 the final piece of the puzzle was put in place when the Constitution was amended. The new Article 121(1A) was intended to define clearly the jurisdiction of both the civil courts and the Syariah courts. Thus, the civil courts had no jurisdiction over matters that fell under the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts.

The matters that fell under the jurisdiction of the Syariah

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<p style="text-align: center;">Pre-1988 ARTICLE 121</p> <p>(1) Subject to Clause (2) the judicial power of the Federation shall be vested into High Courts of co-ordinate jurisdiction and status, namely –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (a) one of the States of Malaya, which shall be known as the High Court in Malaya and shall have its principle registry in Kuala Lumpur; and • (b) one in the States of Sabah and Sarawak, which shall be known as the High Court in Borneo and shall have its principle registry at such place in the States of Sabah and Sarawak as the Yang di- Pertuan Agong may determine; • (c) (Repealed); <p>and in such inferior courts as may be provided by federal law.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">ARTICLE 121 (as at 10th September 2002)</p> <p>121. Judicial power of the Federation</p> <p>(1) There shall be two High Courts of co-ordinate jurisdiction and status, namely –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (a) one of the States of Malaya, which shall be known as the High Court in Malaya and shall have its principle registry in Kuala Lumpur; and • (b) one in the States of Sabah and Sarawak, which shall be known as the High Court in Sabah and Sarawak and shall have its principle registry at such place in the States of Sabah and Sarawak as the Yang di- Pertuan Agong may determine; • (c) (Repealed); <p>and such inferior courts as may be provided by federal law; and the High Courts and inferior courts shall such jurisdiction and powers as may be conferred by or under federal law.</p> <p>(1A) The courts referred to in Clause (1) shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts.</p>
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courts had already be laid down in the 9th Schedule to the Constitution.

HAS ARTICLE 121(1A) BEEN INTERPRETED CORRECTLY?

Basically, a dual legal system had been created for Malaysia: the civil law applying generally on the whole population and running side-by-side with it, an Islamic legal system applying Islamic law in restricted situations on Muslims only.

In a dual system, there would be people caught in between the two systems. The Islamic law applied to Muslims only. Such people would be (a) non-Muslims mistaken for Muslims; (b) Muslims wanting to get out of Islam; (c) non-Muslim spouses of Muslims; (d) children of Muslim and non-Muslim parents; (e) non-Muslim parents or siblings of Muslims.

It is a fundamental principle of any modern legal system that a person must have access to justice. This means that there must be some court to which a person can go to to obtain relief or remedies. By their interpretation of Article 121(1A), the civil courts have surrendered any jurisdiction or responsibility in respect of conversions into and out of Islam. Thus, they forced the people mentioned above to go to the Syariah courts.

People wanting to be declared as non-Muslims do not want to go to the Syariah courts as they feel that they will not get a fair hearing. Indeed, to be asked to be declared as having converted out of Islam is to admit to *murtad*, which is an offence punishable under Islamic law (see the Daud bin Mamat and Kamariah

Ali's cases). Non-Muslim family members of Muslims have no *locus standi* in Syariah courts, meaning they cannot bring a suit in Syariah courts because they are not Muslims. The Syariah courts can only hear cases involving Muslims. Therefore, we have a group of people caught in between the two legal systems in a kind of no-man's land. They cannot go to civil courts or Syariah courts.

Parliament must understand the true meaning of freedom of religion. If one is to have free choice, then there must be mechanisms for peaceful entry and exit from religions.

IS THERE A NEED TO CLARIFY OR TO AMEND ARTICLE 121(1A)?

The present interpretation of Article 121 (1A) by the courts is creating serious problems and hardship for many individuals and families. It is unacceptable that under a constitutional form of government, there are Malaysians who do not have access to justice. If the judges are unable for whatever reason to interpret Article 121(1A) so as to do justice, then Parliament must step in to address the injustice.

Parliament must understand the true meaning of freedom of religion. If one is to have free choice, then there must be mechanisms for peaceful entry and exit from religions. Vital issues of conversions must not be entrusted to forums which are partial by reason of their theological nature. Independent arbiters must be appointed to determine questions of conversions into and out of Islam. The civil courts are the best forums for such issues. If a question of Islamic law or principle does arise, the civil courts can seek a *fatwa* or an opinion from the *Syariah* courts. Jurisdiction however must be given to the civil courts. ■



Memo to PM

Letter to SUHAKAM

THE Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism has appealed to Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to urgently address the problem created by the dual-legal system (Civil and Syariah) in the country that has created hardship for non-Muslim citizens.

In a memorandum to the prime minister, the council expressed deep concern over cases where non-Muslims had no legal recourse to address their grievances.

It said this "denial of justice is completely untenable in law and totally inconsistent with the Federal Constitution and furthermore, tarnishes Malaysia's good standing and reputation".

The memorandum expressed fear that if the current situation was not resolved, it would accelerate the pace of social disunity and division.

The memorandum outlined several measures that could help to resolve the issue., one of which was to repeal Article 121(1A) and restore the pre-1988 Article 121.

The council also handed a letter to SUHAKAM (Human Rights Commission of Malaysia) on the same issue. The letter stated several resolutions, and among them is that non-Malay converts have the right to revert to their former religion or

enter any other religion of their choice.

The other resolutions included:

- Protection for the rightful inheritance and property of the non-Muslim family members.
- A minor's conversion must have the written consent of **both** parents or **all** guardians.
- Any enforcement by the Islamic Religious Department should be accompanied with compassion and sensitivity towards the people. The manner in which the various state religious authorities enforces Islamic law is a grave concern.
- A plea to the Attorney-General and AG's chambers to act in the public interest in "Moorthy's case" and all similar cases, and to equally represent the rights of all citizens with full regards to the entrenched values of equality in the Federal Constitution irrespective of race and religion.
- Issues of faith should be removed from the governmental sphere. What is important is what a person "professes" or acknowledges himself to be. It should not be up to any authority – religious or otherwise – to "authorise" conversions.
- An adult who undertakes a conversion should be made obligated to inform his/her spouse in civil marriage. ■

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and heard an hour later at 3pm. They report further that Moorthy "embraced Islam on 11 Oct 2004 based on information on embracing Islam from the Malaysian armed forces dated 8 March 2005." This registration was apparently done in May 2005. This cannot be confirmed as these documents have

not been sighted.

This Syariah Court order was served on the Hospital. However, the Hospital Director says he did not release the body on the advice of the legal adviser in the Ministry of Health because there was a dispute and the situation in the hospital was tense. The hearing of the case in the High Court was brought forward and heard on 27 Dec 2005 from 11.30a.m to 2.30pm based on affidavit evidence before Yang Arif Justice Dato' Raus Sharif.

Whilst Kalliammal's counsel argued that the defendants ought to show evidence to prove Moorthy had converted, counsel for the Islamic Religious Affairs Council and the Government argued that this was not necessary as the High Court could not question the decision of the Syariah Court.

Although the plaintiff had no remedy

in the Syariah Court, senior federal counsel for the government submitted that this was the position at law and the plaintiff had no legal remedy through the courts.

Decision was reserved to 28 Dec 2005, when at about 10am the learned Judge proceeded to read out his judgment. In summary, the learned Judge dismissed Kalliammal's suit stating that the civil High Court had no jurisdiction to review, nullify or ignore the order of the Syariah Court.

After a brief hearing, the Court then dismissed an application for a stay of execution or an Erinford injunction preventing the Hospital releasing the body until the disposal of an appeal to the Court of Appeal. Senior Federal Counsel objected to a stay. Court was adjourned at about 11am. It is learnt that by about 3pm, the body had already been buried by the Islamic authorities. ■

Signature Campaign

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism is appealing to the Government to repeal Article 121 of the Federal Constitution and take other necessary steps to protect the rights of non-Muslims. You can now put your signature on-line at the NECF website at www.necf.org.my. Your signature can make a difference.



Implications of converting to Islam

Note from Editor: This article has already been published in our September/November 2005 Berita NECF issue but because of the recent legal controversy, we feel the need to publish it again.

IF you convert to Islam, there are important changes in your legal status and what you can or cannot do. Your conversion to Islam will be registered with the Religious Department and the National Registration Department, both of which are computerised, so that access to this information is available throughout the country.

Under Syariah enactments of most of the 13 States of Malaysia:

1 Conversion back to your former religion is either (a) not allowed under the law, or (b) a criminal offence which means you may be fined, whipped, detained or imprisoned under most State Islamic laws.

2 If you are under 18 years of age, you require your parent's permission to convert to Islam.

3 Your identity card will record your conversion to Islam. Therefore,

even if you are no longer practising Islam, you may be fined, whipped, detained or imprisoned for violation of Syariah laws, such as praying in church, eating in public during fasting month, khalwat etc.

4 If you decide to divorce and attempt to convert out of Islam, you will lose custody of your children because they are Muslims.

5 Upon death, your non-Muslim relatives will lose their rights to any money, property, money etc. that you want to leave to them. The corpse of a convert to Islam will be taken away from his or her non-Muslim family for Islamic rites and burial even if you have not been a practising Muslim for many years.

6 In the event that your spouse converts to Islam, you may have no right to either your children or your spouse's property.

We know that certain Christians who convert to Islam for whatever reasons, are not aware of or do not consider seriously the implications of such conversion.

Hence the need to inform you. By this, we are neither against Islam nor freedom of religion, which is guaranteed for all Malaysians in Article 11 of our Constitution which gives the right to an individual to freely choose his or her religion.

But to choose correctly, you need to know clearly what you choose and the consequences of your choice. ■

• *The above was a letter that appeared in HERALD (The Catholic Weekly) on Aug 14, 2005. It was signed by Archbishop Murphy Pakiam, Bishop Antony Selvanayagam and Bishop Paul Tan, SJ. Reprinted with permission.*

NECF on Nationwide Awareness Campaign

NECF Malaysia kicked off a nationwide campaign to raise awareness of the implications of the Moorthy episode with a seminar on Jan 10. It was 'standing

room' only as some 150 pastors and leaders from nearly 50 churches in the Klang Valley gathered at the NECF office to hear NECF Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong explained the implications of the Syariah and High Courts' rulings. Rev. Wong stressed that the core issue was not religion but human rights – that is, the right of all individuals to choose and practise their religion.

He informed the participants of the action taken by the *MCCBCHS to lobby for a change in the laws. Throughout his talk, Rev. Wong reminded the participants to continue to love the Muslims and to pray for their well being.

He also challenged them to express their support for a change in action, and proposed three ways they could do so – pray, attend the month-long candlelight vigil at the High Courts and participate in the signature campaign.

Besides the Klang Valley, the NECF team also conducted the seminar in Ipoh, Melaka, Penang and the East Coast.

(*MCCBCHS stands for the Malaysian Consultative Council on Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism. Rev. Wong is the council's acting secretary-general cum chairman of its special taskforce to address this issue.) ■

Candlelight vigil at the High Courts in Kuala Lumpur.



Multi-task, Multi Stress

Plight of the Modern-Day Woman

They are outstanding women of our times. One is a fast-rising politician and renowned social worker, while the other is a dynamic pastor and speaker who sidestepped her career in paediatrics to co-pastor a rapid-growing church in Petaling Jaya.

At a recent women's seminar in Petaling Jaya, both women spoke about their work, passion and the role of God in their lives. The 160 women from 42 churches nationwide paid rapt attention to their every word during the half-day seminar, aptly themed "The Woman of Proverbs 31 in the 21st Century", which was organised by the NECF Malaysia Commission for Women's Concern.

The two speakers were: Jawi state assemblyman YB Tan Cheng Liang and Pr Dr Lew Lee Choo. YB Tan spoke on coping with stress in an unconventional role while Pr Dr Lew spoke on coping with stress in multiple roles.

Many things to many people

Like Queen Esther, YB Tan is a woman of destiny "born for such a time as this." Her powerful testimony showed that God is able to use women to impact the nation, and inspired the participants to feel there was hope and scope for women to rise up to God's "high" calling.

Her entrance into politics was in response to a specific calling from God, but even so, she conceded that being a woman politician has been no easy task. Taking on an unconventional role entailed courage, determination, dedication and tremendous stress. The pressure is compounded by the fact that she is a "Christian" woman politician. In enumerating her many different roles, she emphasised that she is first and foremost, a Christian who is committed to her faith.

From the onset, she laid down three conditions for her involvement in politics. Firstly, she made it clear to her MCA party leaders that she is a practising Christian. She would not miss Sunday worship no matter where she is. Secondly, she would not compromise on her Christian principles. Thirdly, she must be allowed to continue her ministry as a Christian prison counsellor.

Her unconventional role as a *wakilrakyat* requires boldness and compassion for the grassroots. She has to be all things to all people. When she talks to the men, she has to talk like a man! Initially, she faced a lot of opposition and ridicule from the men in her party and constituency, but she soon gained their approval by her dedication, hard work and love for the people she serves.

YB Tan created a new title for herself, "Yang Berkhidmat" instead of "Yang Berhormat". Today, she is much respected by her peers and colleagues, and loved by her constituency

because of her exemplary service to people of all races. As a result, she has risen very fast up the political ladder. At the recent MCA elections, she was voted into the MCA Central Working Committee with the highest number of votes.

However, it's not all rosy for this courageous woman who is not spared the dirty tactics and scandalous accusations by her political enemies. She spoke candidly about the pain and anguish she underwent due to dirty politicking. Just before the last election, she suffered a personal attack on her reputation and character by a political striker who paraded a coffin meant for her. **O f t e n** mocked and slandered, and even spat at by unkind people, she has learnt to "turn the other cheek" and bless and love them instead. That always vindicates her, as she has found.

How does she cope with all the pressure in such an unconventional role? It helps to have a good sense of humour and be able to laugh at yourself, she said. Also, every time she comes under oppression from the enemy (political and spiritual), she runs to God, turns to His Word and clings to His promises.

Despite her busy and very public life, she does not neglect her role as wife, mother, daughter and sister. Her closing remarks are memorable. "One day, I will have to say bye bye to all these – my position, popularity, political clout," she jested. But it doesn't matter to her because her focus is not on this world and what it offers. She exhorts the women to focus on the Cross and Heaven instead of on this world. "Invest in heaven", she urged, "for it pays 100% interest and do good while you can to glorify God."

A season for everything

An excellent teacher and exhorter, Pr Lee Choo began her talk by highlighting the changing trend concerning women over the last 30 years. One facet of this change is the issue of working outside the home. Up to the '70s, women go out to work out of necessity but today women work because they feel it is their right to work outside the home and to, like the men, have a career.

With this come other pressing issues that often bring conflict and pressures such as the issue of motherhood. In addition, they have to cope with the emerging trend of househusbands



(role reversal) since many wives are earning more than their husbands. Pr Lee Choo also alluded to the frightening trend of gender identity confusion experienced by many young people today. She attributed this trend to the lack of male leadership in many homes.

On the Prov 31 woman, Pr Lee Choo assured participants they did not have to be like the multitasked Prov 31 woman. She decried that many preachers preach this portion of scripture as though she is the only right model for Christian women. Indeed, modern women are multitasked, playing multiple roles and therefore, experiencing multiple stress. Part of the reason for the stress is that the modern woman wants to have it all!

Pr Lee Choo shared candidly her own struggles as she played the various roles of wife, mother, career woman, and now co-pastor of a large church. She reminded participants that their lives go through seasons when God puts them in the particular place and position them to fulfill particular roles.

How does she cope with the multiple stress? Pr Lee Choo's "recipe" was the three Ps: Principles, Priorities and Purpose. Firstly, follow the principles that guide. She emphasised that these principles help her to make the right decisions and to grow as a person. The principles include God's Word and God's people.

Secondly, setting the right priority is essential for coping with stress. Thirdly, the purpose of God, that is seeing the big picture. "God is interested in who we become rather than what we do and the role/roles we play," she asserted. The bottom line is not the ministry but "what I am and become as a person."



Conclusion

The response to the seminar was very encouraging. Many were inspired and said the issues touched on were timely. We are living in exciting times and surely, Christian women, we are "born for such a time as this." – Report by SUSAN CHAN ■

New BK Study Guides

THE Malayan Christian Schools' Council last December launched two new SPM Bible Knowledge (BK) Study Guides with the hope that they will attract more students to take the BK paper in the SPM exam.

The guides, authored by Goh Kim Guat, were launched at a meeting graced by Elena Cooke, the doyenne of BK teaching for the last 50 years. The former principal of Bukit Bintang Girls' School is still teaching the subject from her home.

The new guides are the fruition of many years of laborious work. Over the last few years, the council, together with the Teachers' Christian Fellowship, has been heavily promoting BK as an SPM subject out of a concern over the declining number of SPM students sitting for the paper.

Their efforts have visibly paid off as the number of candidates taking BK has increased from an alarming 20 in 1995 to 600 in last year's exam. The new guides will provide the impetus for the revival of BK, a popular subject in the 1960s where thousands – Christians and non-Christians alike – sat for the paper then.

The council is aiming to get 1,000 candidates to sit for the paper in this year's SPM exam. In preparing the guides on Luke and Acts, the council made a radical move to change the study text from the Revised Standard Version to the modern, student-friendly Good News version. The new guides are interestingly and innovatively written and laid out in a readable style. In fact, they contain such a wealth of knowledge that they can be used as Bible commentaries, and so well-written that any student with commitment could take the subject by just going through the notes and exercises contained within.

The guides are available at most Christian bookshops. For more information, call the council at 03-7956 5310. ■



you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (Jn 5:24).

It is a joy that does not depend on "happenstance" – it comes from a relationship with God and is an overflow of it. It comes from an assurance that He will lead you step by step. "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

May this joy strengthen and motivate you as you do His will.

The source of security (Jn 14:30-31)

As we face the New Year, we are safe and confident because of the security in the Father's love for Jesus. "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father" (John 10:17-18).

Furthermore, we find security that stems from Jesus' victory over Satan and know he is a defeated enemy. "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared

in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

This security addresses all anxiety and gives confidence to face the future.

Because of these wonderful truths, we can "Arise and go", prepared to face the challenges of 2006. May you be strengthened and encouraged by the peace, the joy and the security that comes from Jesus! May the Lord give you a fruitful and joyful year ahead as you continue to faithfully serve Him. ■

Sex Swap

A report based on an Evangelical Alliance Policy Commission (EAPC) 2000 report

A local survey taken in 2000 estimated the existence of 50,000 transsexuals in the country with Muslims transsexuals forming the majority (*The Star*, 21 Jan 2001).

The local term for male transsexuals is *mak nyah* for males and *pak nyah* for females. In 1983, the Conference of Rulers in Malaysia decided that a *fatwa* prohibiting sex-change operation should be imposed on all Muslims, except in the case of a hermaphrodite. Although there are no official religious rulings from other faith communities, the groups have staunchly opposed sex change.

In November 2004, a judge dismissed an application by a 33-year-old who wanted to become legally male after a sex-change surgery, and ruled that biological characteristics were set at birth and that biological, rather than psychological tests, determined gender identity (BBC, 2004-11-5). Currently there is no law covering gender reassignment in Malaysia.

Responding to a recent high-profile marriage in Kuching between Joshua Beh and Jessica Chung who underwent a sex-change operation to become a woman, Home Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Azmi Khalid said that Malaysia laws do not allow its citizens to change their gender in their identity card despite a sex-change operation (*The Star*, 15 Nov 2005).

His deputy Datuk Tan Chai Ho told *Bernama* that the marriage was "invalid" as the Marriage and Divorce Reform Act 1976 does not allow marriage between two people of the same sex, even if one of them has undergone sex change surgery (14 Nov 2005). Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi stressed that the government does not condone same-sex marriages (*The Sun*, 23 Nov 2005).

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

From the perspective of many

transsexuals, the Church may have appeared to be strong on condemnation and weak on compassion. While resting on the conviction that God has revealed His intentions for human life in the Bible, the evangelical churches still have much to offer.

Simply highlighting Deut 22:5 (prohibition on cross-dressing), 23:1 (prohibition on emasculation) or 1 Cor 6:9-11 (in regards to effeminate behavior), and applying them on

transsexuals can result in a failure to do justice to a responsible exegesis, reasonable hermeneutics and application.

The context of Deut. 22:5 intends to maintain the sanctity of the distinctiveness between the two created sexes, while the context of 23:1 supports and affirms the positive value of sex and that sexuality and spirituality are not in opposite to one another. Regardless, all these verses cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the Scripture. To consider the issue of transsexuality wholistically, Christians need to view the whole Scripture in light of creation, fall, redemption and final restoration.

The doctrine of creation shows that our sexual identity is given by God. It also emphasizes the basic and clear distinction between men and women. It sets out the foundation for Christian understanding of marriage as one of God's gracious gifts to humanity and that relationships are heterosexual, monogamous and open to the possibility of procreation.

The doctrine of the fall tells us about the effects of sin on creation as a whole.

TERMS

SEX refers to the biological characteristics which define humans as female or male [These sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive as there are individuals who possess both] (WHO, 2002).

GENDER refers to the economic, social and cultural attributes and opportunities associated with being male or female in a particular point in time (WHO, 2001).

TRANSSEXUAL is a person who undergoes surgical and/or hormonal interventions to reassign his/her sex (WHO, 2002). See below for syndrome.

TRANSVESTITE is a person who has compulsion to dress and act like members of the opposite sex, but does not have strong desire to change sex.

GENDER IDENTITY DISORDER a psychiatric term for transsexuality, transgender and (subject to debate) transvestism.

INTERSEX refers to rare medical conditions where people are born with ambiguous sexual characteristics, and nearly always due to physiological causes.

HERMAPHRODITE refers to rare clear physiological causal medical congenital conditions where the sex of newly born babies is ambiguous due to the presence of gonads and genitalia of both sexes.

Adam and Eve's willful disobedience had resulted in the distortion in God's pattern for living, including biological abnormalities and psychological disorders. We recognize and acknowledge these aspects of our fallen condition and seek to bring our tarnished lives in line with God's will and purpose. We believe that putting things right is central to how God is involved in His creation after the fall. Therefore the doctrine of redemption is important in that those who suffer the effects of sin may find hope, a hope that is based on the healing work of Jesus Christ and His offer of abundant life (John 10:10).

The doctrine of final restoration cautions that our present experience of God's healing work is often necessarily partial and incomplete. The fulfillment of our redemption is in store in the future existence beyond the present world.

For Christians, transsexuality poses significant challenges, both moral and theological. In practice, it is difficult to maintain a balanced approach that

• SEE NEXT PAGE

maintains scriptural convictions with a compassionate response. Yet, it is important to stress that insensitive and ill-advised treatment of transsexuals can prove devastating and dangerous. There is no general formula for dealing with transsexuals, for each person is an individual with a unique personality and history.

“The need for patience, long-term commitment and the active seeking of God for wisdom by all concerned cannot be over emphasised” (EAPC). For Christians, “the emphasis is on both psychological and physical wholeness in the hope that the transsexual people will of themselves produce the desired psychosomatic unity, more truly reflects a biblical view of holistic health” (EAPC). Redemption and restoration begin within the church community and the challenge demands compassion, knowledge and wisdom.

AFFIRMATION & RECOMMENDATIONS

(an extract from EAPC 2000 report)
NECF Malaysia respects individual rights and diverse perspectives on transsexuality but remains steadfast on biblical principles.

•We affirm God’s love and concern for all humanity, and believe that God creates human beings as either male or female. Authentic change from a person’s birth sex is not possible and an ongoing

transsexual lifestyle is incompatible with God’s will as revealed in Scripture and in creation. After careful consideration, we affirm and recommend the following:

•We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only real hope for sinful people, whether heterosexual, homosexual or transsexual, is for wholeness that is found only in Jesus Christ.

•We deeply regret any hurt caused to transsexuals by any unwelcoming or rejecting attitudes on the part of the Church. We call upon evangelical congregations to genuinely welcome and accept transsexuals, while acknowledging the need for parallel teaching, wisdom and discernment.

•We affirm that monogamous heterosexual marriage is the form of partnership uniquely intended by God for sexual relationship between men and women. We would resist church service for the marriage or blessing of transsexual partnerships on scriptural grounds.

•We appeal to the medical and psychiatric professions to prioritise research into the root psychological, social, spiritual and physical causes of ‘transsexuality’ for the purpose of holistic treatment

•We commend and encourage transsexuals who have determined to restore their birth sex identity as a result of biblical conviction, and/or who have decided to resist gender reassignment surgery. We would seek prayerfully to

A FORUM ON TRANSEXUALITY – A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Date: February 11, 2006 ((Saturday)

Time: 9.00am to 1.00pm

Venue: NECF Office

SPEAKERS:

Dr Wong Sam Keong (Medical Aspect)

Rev. Ng Kok Kee (Theological Aspect)

Rev. Wong Kim Kong (Pastoral Aspect)

MODERATOR:

Steven Wong, NECF Research Commission Chairman

support their reorientation through the grace of God.

•We prayerfully affirm and encourage those family members who are subjected to the impact of transsexuality and would seek to support them pastorally.

•We commend the work of those organisations, pastoral workers and churches that seek to help and support transsexuals.

•We in principle are opposed to civil discrimination against transsexuals, for example in respect of human rights and employment. ■

(Note: This is an extract. The complete article is available on the NECF website under the Research Commission section.)

CFM CHRISTMAS GATHERING



The special guests from Rumah Charis receiving gifts from the lady guests.

Politicians, government officials and religious leaders were among some 150 people who attended the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) 2005 Christmas celebration hosted by NECF Malaysia. The occasion is held yearly on Christmas Day to celebrate one of the two key events in the Christian calendar with representatives from other races and religions.

Among the guests who graced the occasion were Home Affairs Deputy Minister Dato’ Tan Chai Ho; PJ North MP Dato’ Chew Mei Fun; Segambut MP Dato’ Dr Ron Tan; Bukit Gasing State Assemblyman Dato’ Dr Lim Thuang Seng; Petaling Jaya OCPD Tuan Mohd Hazam Abdul Halim; and Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism Honorary Secretary-General R. Thiagaraja.

NECF’s neighbours, pastors, para-church organisations leaders and about 30 children from the Rumah Charis

Looking for a Christian spouse?

Try the Internet

The time was the 1970s and Dr Benjamin George was then attending Imbi Gospel Hall, Kuala Lumpur. As he looked around, he was puzzled by the many single men and women in his church and other Gospel Hall Assembly churches. Somehow, they seemed unable to find matches and this got Dr George very concerned.

Coming from a community in Kerala, India, where the pastors were actively involved in matching their single members (his own marriage was matchmade by his pastor!), Dr George decided to do his bit for the many singles around him. He started the Inter-Assembly Singles Fellowship among the Klang Valley Assemblies. He recalled that many men found partners, but the number of women who remained single was "too many".

"Over the last four decades, we saw few, if any, church leaders or pastors in Malaysia taking this problem seriously. As a result, many singles have gone out and married non-Christians," he said.

The advent of the Internet has seen the mushrooming of many matchmaking websites and spurred by the success stories they had heard, Dr George and his wife decided to start a matchmaking website for Christians two years ago. The site, aptly called "rightmatches.com" cost them several thousands ringgit but the couple decided not to charge a fee to attract a wide base of membership.

"This is a ministry, not a money-making venture," he asserted. But there are criteria to fulfil for those who want to be members – they must be believers and are regularly attending their churches.



To verify these criteria, applicants must supply the names of their church and pastor.

"This information will also act to help weed out bad hats and those who are out to cheat girls," explained the retired physician.

Members have access to the details of the other members, and if a member is interested in a particular person, he/she could e-mail the other party using a pseudonym to preserve anonymity in avoid embarrassment should the early contact fail to proceed.

Dr George's concern extends beyond helping singles find matches; he is alarmed by the lack of men in the churches. "More girls get saved and come to church. There are not enough men," he lamented. "We must evangelise men more aggressively. If we do not keep the ratio right, our churches will be overrun by women and they will be filled with spinsters!"

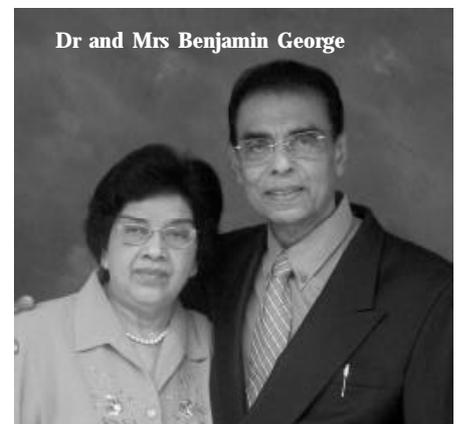
Sharing Dr George's concern for the many singles is A. Mosses Devaraj, who

too started a matchmaking website two years ago out of concern for the many unmarried Christian girls.

His website "www.divinematchmaking.info" operates the same way as Dr George's, except that he is considering charging a fee because he needs the funds to run the website.

Mosses is thrilled that the website has successfully matched two members who got married last year. Another two are planning their wedding next year.

Every Christian marriage is a boost to the Kingdom of God, as it will



Dr and Mrs Benjamin George

contribute towards its growth, at least biologically, Mosses believed.

"If more and more Christians are going to be unmarried, there are going to be lesser number of Malaysian Christians. In other words, lesser salt and light on this part of the world. Hopefully this ministry can reverse the trend and raise a godly generation," he said.

(Dr George can be contacted at benjaminjgeorge@pd.jaring.my while Mosses may be contacted at 016-286 3454 or divine@tm.net.my.) ■

Free Medical and Legal Services for Pastors and Full-time Workers

PASTORS and full-time workers and their family members who require medical and legal services can now get free treatment from the NECF Foundation panel of professionals. However, the service is only available to those working for churches or organisations which are members of NECF Malaysia.

Presently, the panel consists of a lawyer and three doctors in Ipoh. Chun Chee Cheong is offering free legal services, while Dr Lim Wee Yong (paediatrician) and Dr Ng Ngee Keng (gynaecologist and obstetrician) are offering free consultation and medicine. Dr Yeat Siw Eng (ear, nose and throat specialist) is offering free consultation.

The foundation has also confirmed general practitioner Dr Sasi Paul as its panel doctor in Alor Star.

To access the services, patients/clients needs to get a letter from their church/organisation stating the panellist required and the reason, and present it to NECF which will then issue a referral letter. For emergency cases, the patient/client can inform NECF's Rev. Lai Moo Him who



will contact the panellist required.

These services are part of the foundation's continuing effort to assist full-time workers who are in need. The foundation is looking for more doctors and lawyers and other professionals from all over the country to join the panel.

Meanwhile, the foundation is also working on organising retreats for pastors' wives to encourage them in their ministries.

The retreats, to be held regionally, will provide the wives an opportunity to get to know each other and form support networks. ■

Training the Marathon Runner



HOW do leaders attract and inspire people to follow them? Do leaders lead ALL the time? Do they ever follow? Conflict is inevitable when doing ministry. How do leaders manage conflicts in the church? How can leaders go the distance and face fatigue, disappointments and discouragements positively and effectively?

These questions and more will be answered at a conference organised jointly by NECF Malaysia and Eagles Leadership Institute Singapore. The *Transforming Leadership Conference* will be held on May 11 (7.30pm – 10pm) and May 12 (8.30am – 5pm) at the First Assembly Of God Church in Kuala Lumpur. Registration fee is RM65 for those who sign up before April 20 and RM80 thereafter.

NECF has managed to secure the top speakers from Eagles to speak at the conference. They are **Peter Chao**, Founder-President of Eagles Communications (EC); **Dr John Ng**, Executive Vice-President of Eagles Communications; and **Michael Tan**, evangelist, trainer and managing editor of EC's news magazine VantagePoint.

New Members

We welcome the following into our Fellowship as

Ordinary Members:

- **Word of Grace Centre, Batu Gajah**, pastored by *Peter Pragasam*
- **Banner of Love, Petaling Jaya**, pastored by *David Goh*
- **Bethany Church, Petaling Jaya**, represented by *Albinus B. Jidwin*
- **Bethany Church, Kuala Lumpur**, represented by *Saraton Bt. Kawar*
- **Bethany Church, Penang**, represented by *Sheera Anak Puson*
- **Bethany Church, Johor Baru**, represented by *Gay Swee Suan*

- **Connaught Gospel Chapel, Cheras**, pastored by *Tan Thean Chye*
- **CNEC Kemayan Christian Church, Pahang**, represented by *Tang Yong Gui*

We also welcome 15 people as **Associate Members:**

Jessamyn Chen Yoke Lin; Sharon Chang Sau Lin; Batumalai a/l Karuppan; Jayaraj a/l Jacob; Nyanam s/o Nagappan; Lawrence Liew Kin Yip; John Ooi Poey Kee; Stuart Liew Khiam Hon; Ken Liew Ken Fong; Robert Chong Shao Siew; Paul Lim Ooi Joo; Juliet Chan Ji-Quandt; Tan Yen Ching; Pr Foo Kon Meng; and Tan Boon Seng.

Seeking out the *kampung* churches

The NECF Malaysia Chinese Commission is kicking off the year with a survey to identify churches in rural areas (defined as places without town councils) and to find out their needs and how they can be helped.

For some time now, the commission has been concerned about the mass emigration of youths from villages, said Ngeh Hoong Eng. This has affected the churches, many of which face a shortage of youths.

"We are concerned about the state of churches in the villages and though we may have the resources to help them, we do not know where they are and how to contact them. So, this fact-finding survey will be a helpful start for us," said the commission's executive secretary.

The survey is the start of the commission's long-term plan to empower village churches with training and practical help.

"Sometimes, we have town churches asking us where they can send their mission teams to. By locating the village churches, we can provide the link between the two," explained Hoong Eng.

"Furthermore, we can also better distribute any financial donation we receive to the needy village churches," she added.

The survey will cover the nation including Sabah and Sarawak but for this year, the commission will focus their efforts on empowering village churches in the peninsula's east coast – Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu. ■

Buy a gift, help the poor

KHMER LIFE is an income-generating project of Cambodia Missions & Services (CMS), started by DUMC, Petaling Jaya, as a church-planting and community-transformation ministry. The project provides job opportunities to housewives and students from poor families, thereby giving them a sense of dignity and hope for the future.

Through the work, the students are now self-supporting. The housewives' income also supplement their husbands', hence enabling them to have a better quality of life.

All profits from the sale of Khmer

Life products are channelled back into projects that would further improve the livelihood of the poor in Cambodia. More importantly, the funds raised are utilised to soften the ground for the gospel through community projects.

Currently, Khmer Life handicrafts are sold at various churches in the Klang Valley. Christians can help the needy Cambodians by purchasing the handicrafts or allowing Khmer Life to set up stalls at conferences and seminars.

Contact Khmer Life at 7957 6701 (tel.), 7957 5905 (fax); info@oakpublication.com; or 017-889 3990 (mobile).



Leadership Focus for Bahasa churches

The NECF Bahasa Commission is planning a three-day leadership-training seminar from March 13 to 15. The commission will handpick some 30 pastors and leaders from the peninsula to attend the seminar at the NECF office.

In October, the commission will hold separate leadership training conferences in East Malaysia. The conference in Sarawak will be held in Miri from Oct 18 to 20, followed by the Sabah conference in Ranau from Oct 23 to 25.

Rev. Dr Bambang Widjaya, General Chairman of Indonesia Evangelical Fellowship, and NECF Malaysia Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong will be the speakers.

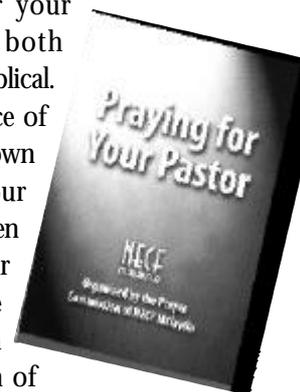
The commission will also hold a two-day consultation from Sept 7 at the NECF office to identify and find solutions to the problems facing the Bahasa churches. The participants will comprise church leaders and those working in the marketplace. ■

Praying For Your Pastors

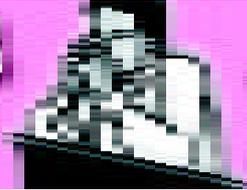
PRAYING for your pastors is both necessary and biblical. It is also a source of blessing in your own life if you labour and faint not. When you pray for your pastors, you are helping them bear the burden of the ministry. (Gal. 6:2)

Praying for your pastors – personal and ministerial needs – will bind your hearts with theirs. As you promote the work of the kingdom and unite with your pastors in the vision for your church and city, you will become a vessel for the Holy Spirit to work through.

The commitment forms are available from the NECF office. ■



FOR YOUR PRAYERS



PAKISTAN

LAST mid-November at Sangla Hill (outside Lahore) a Muslim, during a financial dispute with a Christian, falsely accused the Christian of desecrating Korans. Exploiting this, Islamic clerics called Muslims to the mosques, inciting them to 'defend Islam' and attack the Christians. Over 2000 Muslims rampaged, burning churches and driving some 450 Christian families from their homes. The pogrom went unchecked with tacit support from local police and officials.

The earthquake has left Pakistan in great need of aid, which is coming primarily from Western nations and Christian NGOs. The anti-Christian violence at Sangla Hill is therefore embarrassing Pakistan, with several groups calling for a High Court inquiry. Also reported are hundreds of Christians in Sind Province being evicted and their homes given to Muslims displaced from Kashmir.

Pray that the government Pakistan will have the courage and strength to cut off radicalisation and incitement to violence at its source – in the Wahhabi-led, pro-jihad madrassas and mosques; that the blasphemy law will be repealed; that the High Court inquiry into the violence in Sangla Hill will expose evil and injustice, and lay the foundations for social and legal reform, as well as for religious liberty; that evicting Christian families from their homes in Sind Province will end and justice will be done; that God will break the powerful hold the Islamic clerics have over the poor masses. ■

BELARUS

BELARUS is known as Europe's last Soviet-style dictatorship, and President Lukashenka as a repressive, controlling, pro-Soviet dictator. In 2002, Belarus enacted Europe's most repressive

Religion Law. All religious groups must be registered with the government; registration is very difficult to achieve; and all unregistered religious activity is illegal.

Lukashenka, who is known to have perfected election fraud, has also amended the Belarus' Constitution, removing the limit on the number of terms a president can serve, so he may now stand again in the next presidential elections and effectively rule for life. He is presently clamping down on all freedoms and stepping up security in preparation for the 2006 presidential elections.

'Discrediting the Republic of Belarus' will be a new criminal offence. An individual, church or NGO reporting repression or persecution to the outside world will be guilty of a 'crime against the state', attracting the wrath of the KGB and the government. A senior official recently lamented that officers had not repressed the church enough: religion was not under control, as believers were still worshipping, handing out literature and conducting baptisms.

Pray for all Belarusian officials and KGB who deal with Christians and confiscate Christian literature, that God will use the witness of His Church and His word to lead many to Christ; pray for Belarusian believers to keep growing, preparing for the time when their sowing in tears becomes reaping in joy; God to awaken all Belarusians to the need for justice and liberty, and give them courage to stand for what is right and good; freedom for the Church to be a blessing to all Belarus with her gospel message, to the glory of God. ■

RUSSIA

The year 2005 has seen Russian government authorities continue the policy of supporting the chosen 'traditional' group of religious

confessions while gradually marginalising the others.

This subtle religious discrimination can be expected to worsen. Even supposing the government changes its outlook and includes in the chosen circle some other 'traditional' groups like Baptists, Lutherans and even Catholics, there will still be others like Pentecostals, Charismatics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Old-ritualists (Staroobryadtsy) and alternative Orthodox believers who will be increasingly liable to discrimination and persecution.

Last November it emerged the Ministry of Justice had drafted a law that would undermine the 'non-traditional' religious groups. However, following reaction to reports in the mass media, the Ministry said it was only a working document.

Pray for growing spiritual revival in the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP), that all its members including the leadership may be filled with God's love and power, focusing on the Truth through the knowledge of God's word; the ROC MP to reconcile with other Christians in Russia, realising they are not 'sectarians' separated from the Church; continuing growth among all Protestant churches, for establishing good relationships with local Russian Orthodox congregations, and for their growing spiritual impact in the life of the nation.; God's protection from aggression by nationalistic and religious extremists and officials violating religious freedom, and for their discriminatory actions to be revealed and justly punished.

"May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep the commands, decrees and regulations he gave our fathers." 1 Kings 8:57-58 ■