

## EDITORIAL

# Transformed Transformed Transforming

The word “transformation” has become a buzzword. Everywhere – church, workplace or society at large – we hear that “transformation” is the GOAL.

What does “transformation” really mean? The Oxford Concise Dictionary defines it as “a marked change in nature, form, or appearance”. In other words, transformation is not a surface change, but a radical and lasting one.

The concept of “transformation” has great significance for Christians. Firstly, we are the recipients of transformation. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new

has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17)

Secondly, we are to be the catalysts of transformation, the agents through whom God transforms the world. “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world...” (Matt. 5:13–14) More pointedly, Jesus’ Last Commission was that we “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18–20).

Here we will focus on the corporate nature of this Commission. Making disciples of all nations involves not merely discipling *individuals* and teaching them to obey all of Jesus’ commands. Individuals live in communities and nations with their structures, relationships, values and culture.

If the Gospel is to transform sinful individual lives, it must also transform the unjust structures in which those lives are lived. We believe we are called to disciple entire nations. More specifically, we believe we are called to disciple our own nation.

NECF Malaysia is fully convinced of God’s mandate for the evangelical Christians in Malaysia to lead the nation towards the ideal found in Isaiah 9:1–7. This is a prophetic picture of Christ’s future reign and a vision of the Kingdom of God in its final fulfilment.

NECF’s vision is to transform the nation through the local church. We desire

to work alongside local churches to empower them to be visionary in thinking, vital in ministry and visible in action.

Specifically, there are four “blessings” of a disciplined nation that we aim at:

- Economic Sufficiency
- Social Peace
- Public Justice
- National righteousness.

### **Economic Sufficiency**

“... they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest...” (Isa. 9:3) In the Kingdom of God, there will be no poor people. Unfortunately, poverty is a stark reality at the present. In fact, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen.

Our Vision 2020’s definition of economic sufficiency is a happy state of affair where there is not a single Malaysian subjected to gross under-nourishment, where basic necessities are provided for all, where there is a wide and vigorous middle class, and where full opportunities are provided for those in the bottom category to climb their way out.

The Malaysian Church is doing her part in helping the poor and providing for their needs. Can we do it on a larger scale? Can churches in a locality work

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- When One Spouse Converts – Seeking Solutions
- The Great Cartoon Controversy
- Ready for Da Vinci
- Christian Children At Risk
- None of My Business? – The Islamic Family Law Furore

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• FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

together so as to minister more effectively? Do we genuinely love the poor and aim at empowering them to provide for themselves, instead of making them dependent on us? These are questions to ponder.

### Social Peace

“And he will be called... Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” (Isa. 9:6b-7a)

In today's multi-racial, multi-religious and pluralistic society, maintaining social peace is a delicate balancing

act for any earthly government. The Church can play an important role here. Firstly, we are called to live at peace with society at large (Rom. 12:18, Heb. 12:14).

More than that, having been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:8-19), Christians should stand ready to assist in, or even initiate, peace initiatives as mediators. But will Christians be taken seriously if we give no thought to training our people for the difficult task? Or if conflicts threaten to tear our churches apart?

True social peace must begin with peace with God, peace with self and peace within the Church. Let us examine ourselves.

### Public Justice

“He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice...” (Isa. 9:7b) Justice is the foundation of God's rule. Jesus had to die on the cross to satisfy God's justice.

The word for “justice” and related terms occur about 500 times in the Old Testament and 200 times in the New. Justice is the supreme principle of earthly institutions and systems in fallen society.

Public justice is the foundation of social peace. It deals with equitable and fair legislation for everyone. Do we Christians care about justice for the nameless oppressed? Or are we

passionate only when we ourselves are wronged or affected?

An example is the M. Moorthy's religious conversion issue. Do we sincerely care about justice for people of other religions? Let us ask God for more love and a bigger vision, as well as greater wisdom and perseverance to see His justice done in our nation.

### National Righteousness

“He will reign... with... righteousness from that time on and forever.” (Isa. 9:7b). A frequently-asked question is: Can

non-Christians be righteous? If the term means being accepted by God unto

salvation, the answer is “No”. However, non-Christians can be considered righteous if they seek to live by the standards set by our Holy God.

Our Prime Minister is attempting to inculcate positive values in both the government administration as well as the people. Christians should take a leading role in this initiative. In a world where truth and morality are increasingly relativised, Christians must stand up for what is right.

The thought of discipling a whole nation may be too much for some, but every Christian can be a light to those around him or her, every local church can make a difference in the immediate neighbourhood, and a few churches in a community can come together to make a difference in an even larger way. By our testimony, others will be attracted to follow not only our example but also our God's.

In many ways, evangelism in the traditional sense (directed at the individual) remains the top priority of the Church. When hearts are converted to Christ, society will change.

On the other hand, non-Christians living in a disciplined nation will be more responsive to the proclamation of the gospel. Let us renew our commitment to transform our nation through the local church, to be visible witnesses for Jesus Christ in the thick of life. ■

# Seeking Solutions

When one spouse converts to Islam, numerous problems arise because of the dual court system in the country.

MCCBCHS suggests ways to overcome the problems.

MARRIAGES contracted under the civil law and all relating matters – such as religious status of minors, custody of children, inheritance – should come under the jurisdiction of the civil law. This is one of the ways to avoid messy problems that arise when one spouse converts to Islam, as has happened in many cases.

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Christianity (MCCBCHS) has proposed the above measure to government authorities charged with the responsibility of studying matters involving the legal aspects of religious conversions in response to the highly controversial “Moorthy” court case, and other cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims.

In consultative meetings with the government authorities, MCCBCHS – acting on behalf of the nation’s non-Islamic religious groups – presented their concerns and proposals on ways to resolve the controversial issues.

Among the issues that were raised at the meetings are:

## • Legal status of the marriage

Under the Islamic law, when one spouse converts, the non-Muslim spouse is granted a period to also convert. If he/she declines to convert and they stay married, the Muslim spouse would be

considered to have committed *zina*.

There have been proposals of introducing a three-month period for the non-Muslim spouse to convert, failing which the marriage is automatically dissolved. This is contrary to the Law Reform Act 1976, which states that in civil marriages, when one spouse converts to Islam, the marriage is not automatically dissolved.

## • Religious status of minor children (below 18 years)

Most states have provisions in their administration of Islamic law enactments to define a Muslim as a person who has at least one Muslim parent.

Hence, one of the legal consequences of a person converting to Islam is that his/her children also automatically become Muslims, even if the non-Muslim parent objects.

## • Inheritance

Upon death, the inheritance of a Muslim convert must be administered according to Islamic law. The inheritance will go to family members who are Muslim. If the family members are not Muslims, they will not get the deceased’s property. If the deceased had willed his

inheritance to his non-Muslim family members, only one-third of the inheritance can be distributed to them. The rest must be administered according to Islamic law.

## • Guardianship, care and custody of children

If the children are deemed Muslims, then their custody will be determined by Islamic law. Most states provide for the Syariah Court to disqualify the mother from *hadanah* (right to custody) if she is a non-Muslim and pass custody to other persons; and that she is entitled to *hadanah* if she is a Muslim.

## • Religious status of a deceased convert

MCCBCHS discussed with the government authorities on the procedures that all parties concerned should follow in the event that the conversion of the deceased is disputed by family members or any others. An example is the case of the late M. Moorthy whose wife disputed his conversion and went to court when she was told he had converted to Islam.

MCCBCHS spokesman Rev. Wong Kim Kong, who participated in the meetings, said the government authorities were currently finalising the steps to be taken to avoid all possible potential problems. He added that the meetings were productive and the authorities seemed genuine in their desire to see these matters quickly resolved. ■



## 2005 Charity Fund to Aid Needy Children

THE balance from the 2005 Charity Fund will go towards helping needy children. NECF Malaysia, which initiated and manages the fund, has identified several areas of assistance to the children:

- Education – textbooks, school uniform, school fees, transportation to school and others;
- Nutrition – meals and vitamins and others;
- Health – hospital expenses; and
- Other legitimate areas of need

To date, close to RM500,000 has been collected and the

funds are still coming in. Of this, NECF Malaysia has donated RM100,000 to the Pakistan earthquake victims.

The Charity Fund is part of the yearly *Lighting Up Our Nation* programme held during the Merdeka period where participants of the 40-day National Fast and Prayer donate the money saved from skipping their meals.

Last year, NECF gave away the entire 2004 Charity Fund to improve the quality of education and 33 schools were selected as beneficiaries. In choosing the beneficiaries, NECF works with local churches, which will nominate the suitable people or establishment to receive the assistance. This way, the churches will be able to continue to serve their community.

# The Great Cartoon Controversy

**THE 12 CONTROVERSIAL CARTOONS** depicting Prophet Muhammad that was commissioned by and published in Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* rocked the world and left a trail of deaths and destruction. The whole episode caused many to question the limit of the freedom of speech, especially by the press. In “Responding to the Prophet Muhammad Cartoons”, seasoned journalist BOB TEOH looks at the West’s view of freedom of speech, while “Freedom of Expression in Malaysia” by NECF Malaysia Executive Secretary (Research) LIM SIEW FOONG looks at this freedom in the Malaysian context.

## Responding to the Prophet Muhammad Cartoons

By Bob Teoh

What started out as an experiment to see whether some of the more extreme Muslim tendencies had begun affecting the freedom of expression in Denmark soon went horribly wrong. Many had died including the murder of a Catholic priest in Turkey and hundreds more injured in the ensuing fury following the publication of the 12 Muhammad caricatures by *Jyllands-Posten* (*The Jutland Post*).

How should Christians respond? We must continue to support freedom of expression in no uncertain terms as an outworking of our faith. But, in a manner that is both prophetic and redemptive. Our Saviour and Lord, the Christ Jesus, expects us to always seek the truth as this leads to freedom (John 8:32). Therein lies our prophetic mission. Jesus also reminds us to be other-centred – to love our neighbours (Matthew 22:39) – the redemptive dimension.

Some say free speech comes with self-restraint while others see this as self-censorship and is, therefore, untenable in a free society. Sometimes, as in this case, the price for such experiments is paid dearly by the blood of innocent victims.

This too is untenable. Self-restraint is

not self-censorship nor a burden but a willing and free choice in the exercise of free speech.

Cultural Editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, which commissioned and published the 12 controversial cartoons by Danish illustrators after reports that artists were refusing to illustrate works about Islam out of fear of fundamentalist retribution, said: “The modern, secular society is rejected by some Muslims. They demand a special position, insisting on special consideration of their own religious feelings. It is incompatible with contemporary democracy and freedom of speech, where you must be ready to put up with insults, mockery and ridicule... We are on our way to a slippery slope where no-one can tell how the self-censorship will end.”

The organisation, *Reporters Without Borders*, said the reaction in the Arab world “betrays a lack of understanding” of press freedom as “an essential accomplishment of democracy.”

Major newspapers in the USA and the United Kingdom covered the story, but almost unanimously took a stance against re-publication of the Muhammad caricature.

Although most of the reproductions of the caricatures were in continental

Europe, some newspapers in Muslim countries including Malaysia also carried the cartoons for different reasons. Invariably, almost all were whacked with the big stick by either their owners or governments.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Najib Razak justified the actions by saying: “The government wants appropriate respect to be accorded to all religions and the people must be sensitive and aware of this... We need to enforce tough measures to prevent such articles from creating social unrest.” (Feb 19, *Bernama*)

The Danish freedom of expression is combative, even by Western standards. Despite official German protests, Denmark has for long been a haven for printing of neo-nazi propaganda. *Reporters Without Borders* ranks Denmark on the top of its list of freedom of speech.

Jesus and other religious figures are often portrayed in Denmark in ways that many other societies would consider illegal blasphemy. In 1984 the artist Jens Jørgen Thorsen was commissioned by a local art club to paint the wall of a railway station. The work displayed a naked Jesus with an erect penis.

Three years ago, *Jyllands-Posten*, turned down unsolicited cartoons of Christ, on the grounds that they could be offensive to readers and were not funny.

A 2004 report by the European Network Against Racism, an NGO funded partly by the European Commission, concluded that the Danish media devoted an excessive proportion of their time to the problems posed by immigrants, and most often Islamic immigrants, while often ignoring the problems that these immigrants face. They hold newspapers such as *Jyllands-Posten* blame for the rise of the anti-immigrant right-wing in Danish politics. *Jyllands-Posten* is Denmark’s largest-selling daily newspaper.

Denmark is not alone in its irreverence of things sacred. Post-modernist tendencies are often intolerable of religious sensitivities. We have become

• SEE PAGE 6

# Freedom of Expression in Malaysia

By Lim Siew Foong

## Laws in Malaysia

Malaysian citizens do enjoy the right to freedom of speech and expression as provided by Article 10 of the Federal Constitution. Such freedom, nonetheless, is qualified in terms of national security, public order or morality.

Article 10.2a says: "...such restrictions as it deems necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of the Federation or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or of any Legislative Assembly or to provide against contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to any offence".

Malaysian journalists, in addition, have to contend with several more restrictions. Among them are: The Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, Broadcasting Act 1988, Official Secrets Act 1972, Seditious Act 1948, and Internal Security Act 1960.

The Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 imposes stringent licensing requirements. Licences are granted at the complete discretion of the Home Minister, must be renewed annually, and can be revoked or suspended at any time without the right to be heard. Publishing without a permit can attract a jail sentence of up to three years and/or fines. Publications that do not carry the names of the publishers and printers are liable to be jailed for up to one year and/or fines.

After Operation Lallang in 1987, the Act was amended to give the Minister "absolute discretion, which was not to be questioned in any Court of Law, to ban publications present and future which he considered prejudicial to public order, morality or security, or likely to be prejudicial to the public or national interest." Included also was a new offence of malicious publication of false news, (three-year jail sentence and/or

fines if found guilty).

It is worthwhile to note that the Paris-based *Reporters Sans Frontier* has ranked Malaysia 113 out of 167 in its Worldwide Press Freedom Index for 2005, an improvement from 2004's 122<sup>nd</sup> placing.

## Ethics and Freedom

The media can effectively shape or alter public opinion through various means of reporting. In Malaysia's multi-ethnic and -religious society, the media has not only made significant contribution to socio-economic development, but it has also contributed to national integration.

The Prime Minister has assured the media that the government recognised the key role it plays as a platform between the people and those in power (*Star Online*, July 21, 2005). Over the past few years, the media – the press in particular – has been given a greater extent of freedom. It has helped in the decision-making process through feedback from the public, as well as created social consciousness and cohesiveness.

The first duty of an ethical journalist, as stated in the National Union of Journalists' Code of Ethics, is respect for truth and the right of the public to truth. But does truth spell total freedom of speech?

British socialist Francis Williams said in his book on journalism, "The freedom of the press differs from, and ought always to be recognised as greater than, the simple freedom of an entrepreneur to do what he pleases with his property. A journalist has commitments to the commercial interests of those who employ him. But he has other loyalties also and these embrace the whole relationship of a newspaper to its public." (*Dangerous Estate: The Anatomy of Newspaper*, London, 1959)

Freedom of speech and expression can be a hindrance to society when the majority of the people are not trained to think for themselves but allow their

emotion and religious zeal to be manipulated for political gain. This can be illustrated by the demonstration of political parties over the Non-Sequitur cartoon published by the *New Straits Times*.

While the media must be relatively free from political pressure, it should be held accountable for the interests of society at large. Perhaps the questions to ask are: What is the dividing line between the rights of the press to its freedom and the claims of social responsibility? How should the rights of all in freedom of speech and expression be reconciled with social and public interest?

More importantly, how should we Christians view and use such freedom? NECF Malaysia Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong believes God intended absolute freedom for men at the beginning of creation but this was thwarted when sin enters the world with Adam and Eve's disobedience.

"Biblical laws were initiated thereof to prevent the abuse of freedom in order to safeguard the moral, religious and ethical well-being of the created order. While Christians support the principle of freedom and an independent media, Rev. Wong cautions us to "think hard and consider carefully before expressing ideas that are bound to cause deep offence," he says.

A British Statesman and Philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), correctly remarked, "What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils, for it is folly, vice and madness without tuition or restraint."

"Indeed, freedom is the most cherished asset of all, but when misused, it becomes a dangerous cause. Freedom of speech must entail ethical and moral accountability and responsibility to the welfare of society. It should also include the credibility of truth," adds Rev. Wong. ■





## Good Start to NS Christian Class

When Pastor William Than volunteered to teach a Christian class for National Service (NS) trainees at an NS camp in Sarawak, he thought only a few would attend.

“Lo and behold, over more than 200 turned up instead! We were so surprised,” he gushed. “The group was just too big, so we divided them into two groups. My wife (Marian) took the girls and I took the boys.”

The following week, Pr William brought along two helpers who helped to teach the Bible lesson based on the materials from the *Youth Aflame* curriculum.

While Pr William had a good start, Robert (not his real name) had a “horrific experience” at his first session at a camp in Selangor. The lawyer who volunteered to run the Christian class had to endure the trainees’ indifference and the chaotic situation in the class.

“I asked myself whether I’ll be the first to start the class and also the first to resign!” he shared. Though discouraged, he was at the camp the following night and in his words, “a miracle happened”. The youths were suddenly attentive and they actively participated in the group discussion. Robert believed this was because at the start of the class, he told them that the class would be run like a youth fellowship with their

own appointed committee.

Pr William and Robert were among the volunteers who responded to NECF Malaysia’s call for volunteers to run the weekly Christian class at 12 NS camps for the January–March session, the first one where NS trainees were given the opportunity to attend religious classes organised by the *Jabatan Latihan Khidmat Negara* (JLKN).

NECF Malaysia helped JLKN to coordinate the Christian classes at the 74 camps nationwide. However, due to unavoidable reasons, only 12 camps managed to hold the classes, which were held on Thursday and Friday nights and only at camps that have a minimum 15 Christians. JLKN has subsequently given flexibility on the number.

Statistics provided by the JLKN show that Christians at the January–March session constituted close to 10 percent of the 31,000 trainees nationwide. There were some 65% percent Muslims, 18 percent Buddhists and seven percent Hindus.

The March–June camps are currently running and the response for volunteers from churches has been encouraging, according to NECF Executive Secretary (Leadership Development) Patrick Cheng who coordinated the volunteer mobilisation. “I wish to thank those who have responded. One commandant actually told me that because there were no teachers, he had to send the Christian trainees to the Buddhist classes instead!” he said.

Those interested to volunteer are urged to contact him at [patrick@necf.org.my](mailto:patrick@necf.org.my) ■

• FROM PAGE 4

accustomed to a culture of resorting to profane, obscene, false and blasphemous devices as intellectual and artistic benchmarks.

A case in point is the current best selling *Da Vinci Code* fiction written by American author Dan Brown. He raises the absurd idea that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, that he had children.

In 1988, the protests against *The Last Temptation (of Christ)* were unprecedented. Major religious leaders in the United States had condemned it as pornographic.

*Piss Christ*, a controversial photograph by American photographer Andres Serrano which depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist’s urine was a winner of an arts award in 1989 sponsored in part by the United States National Endowment for the Arts.

In some Muslim circles, the reactions against perceived blasphemy can be more severe. In 1989, Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie was sentenced to death for blasphemy by a fatwa issued



by Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini for Rushdie’s depiction of Muhammad his novel *The Satanic Verses*.

In 2004, Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh produced a film about violence against women in Islamic societies. Qur’anic verses allegedly unfavourable to women in Arabic are painted on the bodies of four abused naked women. Van Gogh was stabbed and shot dead on November 2, 2004, in Amsterdam by Mohammed Bouyeri.

John Piper, Christian author and minister, reminds us that the work of Christ is based on being insulted. This produces very different reactions to mockery. Already in the Psalms the path of mockery was promised: “All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads” (Psalm 22:7).

When it actually happened it was worse than expected “They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on his head. . . . And kneeling before

him, they mocked him, saying, ‘Hail, King of the Jews!’ And they spit on him” (Matthew 27:28–30).

For Christ, enduring the mockery of the cross was the essence of his mission. And for a true follower of Christ enduring suffering patiently for the glory of Christ is the essence of obedience, according to Piper. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matthew 5:11).

He says the caricature and mockery of Christ has continued to this day. How should his followers respond? On the one hand, we are grieved and angered.

On the other hand, we identify with Christ, and embrace his suffering, and rejoice in our afflictions, and say with the apostle Paul that vengeance belongs to the Lord. ■

Bob Teoh is a freelance faith-based writer. He was formerly secretary general of both the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists and the National Union of Journalists Malaysia.

In May, one of the most popular books of all time will hit the big screens across the world. *The Da Vinci Code*, a fictional novel by Dan Brown which has sold more than 36 million copies worldwide, will feature Oscar-winning megastar Tom Hanks in the lead role.

Brown's riveting whodunit is expected to draw millions to the theatre, of whom many are devotees of his novel. Many more who have not read the book will flock there just to find out what the hullabaloo is all about.

Some Christians are concerned and for good reason as the novel issues outrageous claims that challenge the bedrock of the Christian faith – that is, Jesus was a mere man; he married Mary Magdalene; they had a daughter named Sarah and their descendants are well and alive to this day. Additionally, this “secret” was kept alive by a secret society that was patronised by 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painter Leonardo da Vinci who left clues of the “secret” in his painting, *The Last Supper*.

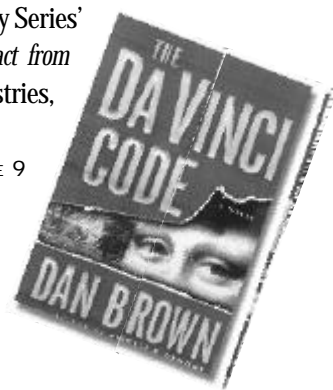
These are the main elements that the story revolves around but there are many more shocking and scandalous claims targeted at the Christian faith and the Church. (See the box story “Brown’s Believe It or Not”.)

engage in fruitful discussion and avoid impassioned denunciation and over-reaction that may lead to foolish behaviour.

In order to engage meaningfully and intelligently with others, we therefore ought to be familiar with the controversial elements of the novel. For this, we should attempt to read the book. Some Christians have advised against reading the book as it depicts a running theme of sexualised religion and contains violence and sex that may be unsuitable for many readers. If you cannot stomach these, try reading just chapters 55 to 60.

It also helps to read the critiques of the controversial elements of Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which you can easily find in the bookstores. Recommended reads are: the *The Gospel Code* by Ben Witherington III; *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* by Darrell L. Bock; *The Truth Behind The Da Vinci Code* by Richard Abanes; *Cracking Da Vinci's Code* by James Garlow and Peter Jones; and *The Da Vinci Deception* by Erwin W. Lutzer. For a quick grasp of the controversies, try the Discovery Series' *The Da Vinci Code – Separating Fact from Fiction* published by the RBC Ministries,

• SEE PAGE 9



## Ready For Da Vinci

Brown's genius is in writing a convincing story, weaving facts with fiction so skilfully and seductively that many readers would have trouble separating fact from fiction. On the title page of the book, Brown claims: “All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate.” He also lists a long list of acknowledgement that gives the impression that he collaborated with all these prestigious sources and institutions in his research.

Will the film further popularise the book's controversial portrayal of Jesus and undermine the Bible? Most probably not, but there is concern that youths and teens may be influenced, the way they were influenced by “The Force” theology of The Star Wars trilogy.

Christians, especially Christian leaders, should therefore be ready to respond to questions and guide those who are confused or whose faith is challenged as a result of reading the novel.

More importantly, we should see the film as an opportunity to talk about the real Jesus with our non-believing friends in a clear, sane and persuasive manner. The point is to

### Brown's Believe It Or Not

THE following are some of the false scandalous ideas promoted in *The Da Vinci Code* as historical facts:

? Jesus Christ is not God, but a mere man. It was only from the fourth century onwards that He was considered divine and God, when Emperor Constantine declared Him a deity, supported and endorsed by the church authorities at that time.

? Mary Magdalene was the wife of the Jesus, and not a prostitute. Jesus and Mary had a daughter named Sarah and Mary fled Jerusalem with the child following the crucifixion of Jesus. When Jesus went to heaven, he left Mary behind on earth and she secretly sailed off to Gaul (France) with the help of Jesus' trusted uncle, Joseph of Arimathea.

? Mary Magdalene is also a goddess. An ancient secret society called Priory of Sion still exists, worships her and is trying to keep the truth alive.

? The Bible is not the Word of God

but was compiled by a pagan Roman emperor as a political tool to promote unity among Christians in the empire.

? The four gospels in the Bible had been written and edited to support the beliefs and practices of latter Christians. They are not accurate and true records of what actually happened. “The early Church needed to convince the world that the mortal prophet Jesus was a divine being. Therefore, any gospels that described earthly aspects of Jesus' life had to be omitted from the Bible”. (pg 268)

? The purpose of sex was to unite man and God. The book's hero, symbologist Robert Langdon, says: “Physical union with the female remained the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve gnosis – knowledge of the divine... By communing with woman, man could achieve a climatic instant when his mind went totally blank and he could see God”. (pg 335) ■

There is a wealth of information available on all aspects of parenting. From books to journal articles to magazine write-ups to information available on the Internet to televised documentaries, new parents are certainly not starved of information.

However, for those not used to sifting through vast archives of available material, making sense of it all can be a

which couples can prepare themselves for parenthood.

### CHECKING OUT

So how do you sift through the vast amount of material available? If it is printed or online material, is it based on solid scientific research? Are its claims backed up by proper references that you can also check out and read if you want to? If you are reading an article on the Internet, is it published by a reputable website? For example, articles made

attitudes, some of these choices would have been made some time ago and individuals do become trapped in certain lifestyles sometimes without really realising what has happened or actively choosing to remain where they are.

### • Material comforts

The first lifestyle choice that significantly intrudes on parents' ability to spend time with their children and typically results in leaving children for extended periods with other caregivers – maids,

# Christian Children At Risk

formidable and sometimes even insurmountable task.

Our present generation's fad of wanting quick answers to everything does not help matters – it is all too easy to seek out those materials that promise quick solutions to all parenting problems, to want to believe in claims of simple 10-step approaches that make your child smarter or sleep better or eat better or behaved better.

The truth is that bringing up a child is a lifelong commitment with no easy answers or one-size-fits-all quick-fix methods. It is in fact very hard work, but it is also great fun and the most rewarding job in the world.

Still, misinformation through inadequate education as to what parenting practices are actually in the best interests of the child is still sadly very widespread, even among Christians, with the internal challenge to be overcome here being sheer laziness.

Parents-to-be, especially Christian parents-to-be, need to recognise that their new role will be one of the most important ones they will ever play, and therefore requires their best efforts at self education.

Time needs to be set aside to read, to discuss and pray over parenting choices with spouses, to attend childbirth and parenting classes together as a couple. These are some of the basic ways in

available on the website of the World Health Organisation (WHO) or the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) or other university-based early childhood research centres can be considered reliable.

The other criterion to consider when evaluating any material you read or advice you are given is: Is it consistent with the principles by which we live as found in the Bible? Another way of looking at it is: Would Jesus do it?

New parents who have themselves been negatively affected by their own past childhood experiences may be scarred and require spiritual and emotional healing before they can overcome their hang ups.

Besides all the usual ways of educating themselves for parenthood such as reading, these parents (even if it involves only one – either the mother or the father-to-be) would be well advised to seek pastoral or professional Christian family counselling before the arrival of their newborn in order to avoid transferring their own hang ups onto their children.

### L I F E S T Y L E CHOICES

Although lifestyle choices are in fact the result of individual

grandparents or babysitters – is materialism.

Parents – and in the Malaysian context this often includes either both mother and father or sometimes just father alone – feel compelled to work long hours to support a certain level of material comfort. This is true even for Christians, especially urban Christians who can easily become caught up in the race towards an ever more materialistic lifestyle.

Teachers in schools within the Klang Valley regularly testify that many problem-children have claimed that misbehaviour is the only thing that catches their parents attention.

Some parents even leave for work before their children wake up in the morning and get home after they have gone to bed; many others spend long

• SEE NEXT PAGE





• FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

hours in school only to come home to spend time on their own or with the maid; yet others spend the hours outside of school at childcare centers, seeing their parents only for brief periods when they pick them up and drop them places.

Parents often claim they have no choice but to work like this, but do they? Perhaps there may be a need to sell off one car or to live a more frugal lifestyle.

As Christians, we should be aware that material possessions are not everything anyway. If prospective parents really cannot afford not to work or to cut down on their working hours, perhaps they should consider delaying having children until they are more ready for the time commitment required to raise them well.

• **Self-fulfilment**

A second lifestyle choice that has the same final result as materialism is career mindedness. Some people are engrossed in their jobs, not for the love of money but for the job satisfaction or self-fulfilment it brings.

This is all well and good, as long as children are not in the picture. Having children means compromising on certain things, and spending long hours at work is certainly one of those things that need

to be reconsidered.

Again, if prospective parents really feel that their career is of vital importance, then they should consider delaying having children until they are more ready for the time commitment required to raise them well.

• **Too Much Church**

A final lifestyle choice that again has the same final result as the two above but a quite different motivation is too much involvement in church or charity-like activities. The sincere motivation here is to serve and to help others, as opposed to selfishly pursuing individual gain – however, the end result is the same.

It is common knowledge that children of pastors and leaders are often the worst rebels. These children often grow up feeling that they are not as important as all those other people that father and/or mother are helping and consequently, many do turn away from the faith of their parents.

**HOW NOW?**

It is imperative that church leadership recognises that too many church activities




that separate the parents from their children are damaging to the spiritual and emotional health of the family. Churches should instead rally around new (and existing) parents and organise

programs that families can participate in together as a family. Pastoral visits to the home to support stay-at-home-moms should be a regular feature of church ministry.

Are current typical parenting practices among Christian parents putting our children at risk? At risk of stunted mental, emotional and spiritual development? At risk of losing their faith in the Lord altogether?

The blueprint for healthy Christian parenting is freely available. Children, especially the youngest ones, need their parents – especially their mothers at first but also their fathers a little later – to be with them all the time, to interact with them, to care for them and to just show them their love. ■

Minni Ang is a member of the NECF Malaysia Research Commission which contributed this article.



THIS booklet is available on a freewill offering basis from RBC Resources, tel. 07-3355919, e-mail malaysia@rbc.org. The NECF office has ordered several hundred copies (in the English and Chinese versions) available on a first-come-first-served basis.

• FROM PAGE 7

available in Malaysia from RBC Resources. The booklet highlights some serious challenges made in the book and provides historical facts, or “reality checks”, to counter-challenge the claims.

Perhaps churches can also organise public talks or discussion groups about *The Da Vinci Code*. Let’s pray that God will use the release of the movie to open a door of opportunity for telling the truth about Jesus. ■

**SEMINAR ON THE DA VINCI CODE**

**Venue:** PJEFC, Heritage Centre, Section 13, P. Jaya  
**Date:** May 4 (Thursday)  
**Time:** 8.30pm – 10.30pm

KAIROS RESEARCH CENTRE is holding a public talk to refute the claims of *The Da Vinci Code* with a presentation of the true history of Christian origins and the trustworthiness of the Gospels. Issues that will be addressed include the following:

- Fiction and Truth in a Post-Modern age
- The Historical Jesus and the Reliability of the Gospels
- The Development of Early Christian Doctrines and the Challenge of Gnosticism

The panel speakers are: Ms Wong Ming Yook (formerly lecturer in the English Department of University Malaya and currently a freelance writer); Rev. Wong Fong Yang (Senior Pastor of City Discipleship Christian Church); and Dr Ng Kam Weng (Kairos Research Director).

Contact Kairos at 7726 5420 (tel.) for more information.

# None of my business?

## The Islamic Family Law Furore

By Ong Juat Heng

Recently, I struck up a conversation with a pretty young Malay lady who works as a beauty therapist. I found out she was newly married and travelled daily to and from work with her husband. In addition, they met for lunch everyday. “Wah, so romantic,” I cheekily commented, to which she replied, “*Eh, mesti jaga-jaga. Ada ramai mak we yang berkelilingi dia* (referring to her husband). *Jangan-jangan, nanti ada nombor dua.*” (Translation: “Eh, must be alert. There are many lover girls around him. Don’t want a number two.”)

Looking at her – a pretty, soft-spoken lass with glossy hair and porcelain complexion – it was incomprehensible to me that her husband would want another wife. I felt a gush of sympathy for her, for she was insecure despite possessing plenty of advantages. At the initial phase of her marriage when she should be basking in her husband’s love, she was worrying about losing him!

She reminded me of the few local Malay TV dramas that I had watched in my spare time. Most of them revolved around the theme of polygamy and the untold miseries heaped on the affected wives and children.

I wondered then about the other married Muslim women in the country. Do they also share the same insecurity?

My question was partly answered by the response to the recent Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) (Amendment) Bill 2005 that was passed at the Dewan Negara on last December.

The public furore and emotional response by the women senators and women’s groups – including non-Muslim groups – spoke volumes of the feelings of our Muslim sisters and brought to surface their unhappiness over what they

perceived as laws that are unjust and discriminate them.

Sisters in Islam (SIS), a non-governmental organisation which seeks to be a voice for Malaysian Muslim women, has been the most vocal in its protest of the amendments.

In a letter of appeal to the public to participate in its signature campaign to get the government to re-look the bill, it said, “Over the last two decades, the trend of amendments to our Islamic family laws have systematically undermined women’s position in marriage by creating unfair conditions regarding polygamy, divorce, maintenance and child custody that benefit men and disadvantage women.

SIS strongly believes that with the bill, men now have even more power to divorce their wives, contract polygamous marriages and also freeze the assets of their wife/wives to claim matrimonial property, while women are denied effective remedies.

In her article “No Cheer for Muslim Women” in *The Star* on March 10, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said: “In our country, there is an insidious growing form of apartheid among Malaysian women, that between Muslim and non-Muslim women.

“We are unique in that we actively legally discriminate against women who are arguably the majority in this country, Muslim women. Non-Muslim Malaysian women have benefited from more progressive laws over the years while the opposite has happened for Muslim women.”

Specifically referring to the IFL amendments, Marina lamented: “Under the newly proposed amendments to the Islamic Family Law, the use of gender-neutral language on the issue of matrimonial property is discriminatory on Muslim women when other provisions

in the IFL are not gender-neutral. Muslim men may still contract polygamous marriages, may unilaterally divorce their wives for the most trivial of reasons and are entitled to double shares of inheritance.”

She boldly remarked, “As non-Muslim women catch up with women in the rest of the world, Muslim women here are only going backwards.”

### Do their miseries concern us?

Specifically, how shall Christians, especially Christian women, respond to the IFL amendments furore? Or should we respond at all?

God has called us to be “salt and light” to the world but how can we be so if we do not engage or involve



ourselves in the lives of the people around us?

Here, it is interesting to note that the Joint Action Group on Gender Equality (JAG) has taken up this IFL issue although five out of the six women organisations that it represents are civil society groups, including the All Women’s Action Society, and Women’s Aid Organisation. (The other member in the group is SIS.)

As Christians, the least we can do for a hurting party is to pray, and oftentimes, prayer is the most effective way of extending help.

# Medical, Biblical and Pastoral Look at Transsexuality

## Transsexual Forum

CONVENTIONAL MEDICAL CURES have been proven to be impotent in attempts to reverse the course of Gender Identity Disorder, according to Dr Wong Sum Keong, who shared the medical perspective of transsexuality at a recent forum.

Instead, the more effective way to alleviate the deep psychological and emotional pains suffered by transsexuals is to manage the disorder along the lines of Gender Reassignment Therapy (GRT), he said. This would include counselling and sex-change surgery.

"Sadly, in many countries including Malaysia, much remains to be done to get various disciplines of the medical fraternity organised to facilitate the management of transsexuals," the gynaecologist lamented.

Furthermore, this effort may also be hindered by lack of resources, governmental backing, finances, expertise and by social attitudes.

"As Malaysian Christians, we cannot just look the other way, but instead look forward to tackle this problem in the light of the Scriptures and as fellow-shepherds of God's people," he urged participants at the forum in February organised by NECF Malaysia.

Over 100 people, including several members of the Pink Triangle, a non-governmental organisation for

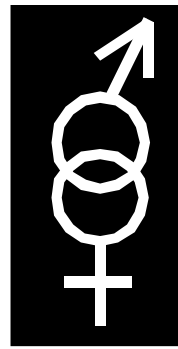
transsexuals, were present.

Following his talk, Rev. Ng Kok Kee shared the theological perspective of the issue. The Bible College of Malaysia principal cautioned against interpreting Scriptures in a narrow-minded way. For example, when discussing the transsexual issue, some Christians like to quote Deut. 22:5 which appears to prohibit cross-dressing. He said that the verse must be interpreted in light of the culture and practices of the people living at that particular time.

The final speaker, NECF Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong, took the pastoral approach to the problem by calling for understanding and acceptance of transsexuals as people designed by God who are victims of the fallen nature of man.

"The doctrine of the fall tells us the effects of sin on creation as a whole. The doctrine of redemption assures us that God has not forsaken His creation after the Fall. He is still involved and He is putting things right so that those who suffer may find hope, a hope that is based on the healing work of Jesus Christ and His offer of abundant life," he said.

"But we recognise that God's healing work may not be complete in this present life. As Christians, we believe in the doctrine of final restoration as we await a future existence beyond the present



world when our redemption will be complete. 1 Cor. 15: 51b holds out the promise that 'we shall be changed.' "

Rev. Wong added that transsexuality is a distortion of God's pattern for living and it posed many challenges, both moral and theological, for Christians.

"But while we condemn insensitive and uncompassionate treatment toward transsexuals, we want to uphold God's standard of the male-female distinction," he stressed. In reality, it is difficult to maintain a balanced approach between scriptural conviction and compassion. There is no formula to approaching the problem of transsexuality, for each person is an individual with a unique personality and history," he said.

How should Christians respond to transsexuals? Rev. Wong advised that it might be helpful to consider the transsexual's present circumstance at the time of counselling.

"If he/she is in the pre-sex change position, we advise against going gender reassignment surgery. If the person is in the post-sex change state, we advise him/her to pursue a normal life of singlehood and abstinence. "Redemption and restoration begin within the church community and the challenge demands compassion, knowledge and wisdom," he concluded.

These views were presented at the forum. We see the need for continuing dialogue – both on the national and church level – to further understand and help those people in this predicament.

• FROM PREVIOUS PAGE: NONE OF MY BUSINESS?

So, let us pray for the lawmakers, that they will be endowed with wisdom and courage to enact just laws that will protect the welfare of the Muslim women.

It is also important for us to understand our Muslim female friends by keeping updated with the issues concerning them, so that we can better pray for them.

In so doing, we show our concern for them as fellow human beings who are equally loved by our righteous and compassionate God. ■

## Special Award for Malaysian Care

MALAYSIAN CARE (MC) has been awarded the 2005 'Anugerah Khas' (Special Award) by the Prison Department of Malaysia in recognition of the organisation's 25 years of contribution to the Prison Department. MC was specially mentioned for helping prisoners by providing services including religious education and counselling, and helping ex-prisoners to re-adjust to society upon their release by providing half-way houses, aftercare, referrals to drug rehabilitations centres and providing employment opportunities. MC Senior Director of Prison, Drugs and AIDS Pax Tan received the award on behalf of MC from the then Deputy Internal Affairs Minister Datuk Chia Kwang Chye.



# Election Time for NECF Malaysia

NECF MALAYSIA will hold its 10th biennial general meeting on May 20 at its office to elect a new council.

The election will be preceded by a talk conducted by NECF Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong who will share about ROS (Registrar of Society) procedures in the registration of churches and the problems faced by ROS-registered churches.

Rev. Wong said of late, there have been several cases of ROS-registered churches whose status have been affected by the churches' internal problems, such as members' police reports against the church leadership. In several cases, church members have made reports with the Anti-Corruption Agency against fellow members. Such problems have caused

## POLLING PLACE



grievous problems to the churches concerned, Rev. Wong said.

He will therefore share on how churches should to deal with these issues, if and when they are threatened with de-registration by ROS. Following Rev. Wong's talk, NECF will proceed with the election of 14 members for the council. ■

## Dance Concert for Foundation Anniversary

THE NECF FOUNDATION will celebrate its second anniversary on July 17 with a dance concert presented by the Christian Dance Fellowship of Malaysia (CDFM).

Tickets to the concert, to be held in Kuala Lumpur, will be available at a later date from the NECF office, and proceeds from the ticket sale will go to the Foundation which provides financial

assistance to needy full-time workers.

The concert will feature CDFM's local and international dancers who would have just attended the CDFM's one-week 6th International Christian Creative Arts Conference in Genting Highlands. The conference, the first of its kind in Asia, will highlight various styles of worship, dance, drama, music from many cultures around the world.

CDFM is a member of the International Christian Dance Fellowship (ICDF), and a member of NECF. They are a fellowship of believers that links individuals, groups, churches and performing arts organisations involved in dance and related movement arts ministry around Malaysia and abroad.

For more information about its July conference, call 013-3088006, or e-mail [cdm@streamyx.com](mailto:cdm@streamyx.com) or log on to its website [www.cdfm.org](http://www.cdfm.org). ■

## Christians all over the world to Unite in Prayer



ON JUNE 4, Christians throughout the world will unite in prayer through the Global Day of Prayer (GDOP) to seek God's blessing on all the nations, "so that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." (Hab. 2:14)

GDOP is an annual event organised by the International Prayer Council. In Malaysia, the NECF Malaysia Prayer Commission is mobilising local Christians to participate in the event to be held at the Heritage Centre, Petaling Jaya, on June 4 at 8.00pm.

GDOP was born from "Transformation Africa", a prayer event in South Africa in 2001 when 45,000 Christians gathered at a stadium in Cape Town to pray for the country. In 2002, Christians gathered in eight different stadiums across South Africa.

In 2003, millions of Christians across 28 African countries united in prayer and in 2004 all 56 African countries, including the islands, prayed for God's blessing on Africa.

Then Africa invited the world to join the African continent in a Global Day of Prayer. On 15 May 2005, millions of Christians from all denominations in more than 156 countries united in prayer to ask God to bless the nations, "... so that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord." (Hab. 2:14)

This event marked the greatest Christian gathering in the world with more than 220 million Christians praying together.

International television channels broadcast numerous events reaching people who could not gather at a stadium, church or other public venue.

Even in countries where Christians are still persecuted they came together secretly in order to join the rest of the world. ■



# Coming Up

## Transforming Leadership Conference

? May 11–12 (Thursday & Friday)  
? First Assembly of God Church,  
Kuala Lumpur



IN LIFE AND MINISTRY, we lead in some areas and perhaps follow in others. A great leader must therefore first understand what it means to follow. Also, Christian leaders must run the race of leadership in such a way that will inspire and challenge others to follow. For that, they must first be equipped to run the race. How do they prepare themselves, what are the qualities of a leader in the first place?

Find out at this leadership conference organised by NECF Malaysia and co-sponsored by First Assembly of God

Church, KL. The three speakers from Eagles Communications, Singapore, are Peter Chao (Founder-President); Dr John Ng (Executive Vice-President); and Michael Tan (evangelist and trainer). As Eagles Communications is renowned for its quality in leadership training, a big turnout is expected. Hence, those interested are advised to register early to avoid disappointment.

Registration fee and deadline are RM80 and May 5 respectively. ■

## Regional Youth Workers Consultation (North)

? May 29 – 30 (Monday to Tuesday)  
? Prai, Penang

AT THE NECF Malaysia Youth Workers Consultation (YWC) last October, the NECF Malaysia YouthNet felt a need to hold regional consultations to reach out to and encourage youth workers throughout the nation.

YouthNet will therefore hold the first regional consultation for the northern peninsular region. Those involved in the youth ministry are urged to participate.

Besides sharing the findings from the YWC, NECF will also uncover local issues and problems facing youth and the youth ministry so that churches in



the region can be better equipped to reach and build up the young people in their locality.

Some highlights of the YWC findings:

- Landscape of youth ministry in Malaysia – what is the current situation;
- Staying on in the youth ministry – problems facing youth workers that contribute to the high turnover of workers and what can be done to help them to stay on and find fulfilment in the ministry. ■

## Mentoring Clinic

? 6 April (Thursday)  
? New Life Restoration Centre,  
Petaling Jaya

MENTORING has become an important aspect of the ministry life. What is the biblical mandate in mentoring? What are the skills needed to be an effective mentor? What are different issues in mentoring? How do we overcome these hurdles?

Come and learn from this one-day interactive clinic organised jointly by NECF Malaysia and Eagles Leadership Institute. The topics include: Assessing Self In Mentoring; Practicing the Art of Mentoring; and Developing A Mentoring Plan.

Executive Vice-President of Eagles Communications Dr John Ng, who has extensive experience and expertise in coaching and mentoring both church and corporate leaders, will be conducting the workshop. A gifted teacher and facilitator, he has many years's experience as consultant and trainer to top secular organisations. Registration fee and deadline are RM60 and April 3 respectively. ■

## Orang Asli Leaders' Consultation

? April 26–27 (Wed. to Thursday)  
? NECF Malaysia, Petaling Jaya

THIS CONFERENCE will help Orang Asli Christian leaders understand their inherent legal and religious rights; the role of Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli in managing the affairs of the OA in Peninsular Malaysia; and the ethics of doing ministry among themselves.

The consultation is for pastors and workers involved in the OA ministry in the peninsula. For more information, contact NECF's Alfred Tais at 016-228 3119 or the NECF office. ■

# Regional Prayer Consultations

## First consultation to be held up north

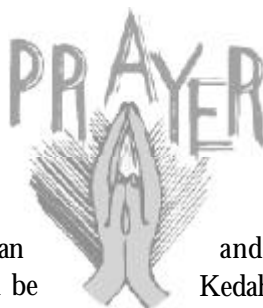
THE NECF MALAYSIA PRAYER COMMISSION will hold its first regional prayer consultation in the northern Peninsula from May 8 to 9.

The consultation will be attended by prayer leaders from Perlis and Kedah and held at Full Gospel Church in Alor Star.

Participants will discuss how they can strengthen their prayer network, and

exchange views on current social and regional concerns. Another objective of the consultation is to find out areas where there is no Christian witness, so that prayer can be focussed on those places.

The consultation is the first of several regional consultations to be held throughout this year in preparation for the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Prayer Consultation to be held next year.



In the Peninsula, the consultations will be held in the Klang Valley; Central (Perak); East Coast (Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu); Negri Sembilan; South (Johor and Melaka); North (Perlis and Kedah); and Penang.

Over in East Malaysia, it will be held separately in Sabah and Sarawak.

The Commission will also hold roadshows with teams travelling throughout the nation to share the vision of praying for the nation. ■



## Retreat for Pastors' Wives

? May 21-23 (Sunday to Tuesday)

PASTORS' WIVES from the central to northern region of Peninsular Malaysia will gather for a fun-filled, inspirational time at this retreat organised and sponsored by the NECF Foundation.

The speaker, Dr Lew Lee Choo who is a pastor of SIB Kuala Lumpur, will impart pearls of wisdom drawn from her experience as a pastor's wife (her husband, Dr Chew Weng Chee, is the church's senior pastor).

The venue will be confirmed. ■

## VACANCY

NECF Malaysia is looking for an assistant to the Executive Secretary (Prayer)

The job responsibilities include:

- Helping smaller towns to start pastors' fellowship and linking existing pastors fellowship within regions;
- Helping to organise prayer gatherings and community and inter-state prayer drives;
- Providing prayer reports/feedback/communication to churches on a constant basis; and

- Assisting with the annual Lighting Up Our Nation programme.

### Qualification

- Have a passion for the prayer ministry.
- Have a pastoral heart and be strong in relational skills.
- Be able to travel to different churches around the country.
- Be able to commit at least three to five years.

Interested persons are to contact Ann Low at 03-7727 8227 or e-mail [prayer@necf.org.my](mailto:prayer@necf.org.my)

## New Members

We welcome the following into our Fellowship as

### Ordinary Members:

- **Chinese Mission Church, Penang**, pastored by Rev. *Jered Lim Kim Chai*
- **Persatuan Penganut Kristian Taman Melawati, Kuala Lumpur**, pastored by *Eng Keck Chon*
- **Jubilee Initiative Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur**, represented by Rev. *Koo Tiong Ling*
- **Agape Baptist Church, Prai**, pastored by Rev. *Ker Kiat Bin*
- **Emmanuel Baptist Church, Kuching**, pastored by *David Kueh Wat Tieng*
- **Batu Maung Baptist Christian Society, Penang**, pastored by Rev. *G.K. Bani*
- **Emmanuel Word Centre, Kulim**, pastored by Rev. *Silas Jug Dip*
- **New Generation Harvest Church, Kajang**, pastored

by *Joshua Mah*

- **First Assembly of God, Gemas**, pastored by Rev. *Tah Ming Teck*
- **Canning Garden Baptist Church (Taiping)**, pastored by *Elder Lian Choon Wah*
- **Canning Garden Baptist Church (Kampar)**, pastored by *Chan Theam Lai*
- **Muar Hephzibah Church, Muar**, pastored by *Gan Siew Chen*

We also welcome 13 people as **Associate Members**: Cheryl Chiew Lai Yoon; Rev. Anna Khor Lee Huang; Mrs Mayumi Yamasaki Cheang; Pr Henry Martinus; Rev. Angeline Leong Sin Keow; Ms Siew Mei Lin; Jimmy Yeap Cheng Hoe; Michael Chieng Hock Lay; Dr P. Vijayan; Melinda Yap Peik Yoke; Pr Lee Thian Chin; Pr Dexter Ng Seng Tong; and Gopal Krishnan Govindasamy.

THIS year's Lighting Up Our Nation programme in conjunction with Merdeka Day will focus on praying for our own nation. Each issue beginning this one, we will highlight a state for intercession. Very often, we live within our own perimeters; we concern ourselves mainly with matters that directly affect our neighbourhood. Our hope is that through "State Spot", our vision and intercession will broaden beyond our zone.



## STATISTICS (MALAYSIA STATISTICS DEPARTMENT, 2005)

**Population:** 1,505,600 (est.)

**Ethnic groups:** Malay 92.50%, Chinese 3.5%, Other Bumiputera 0.82%, Indian 0.26%, others 0.97%, non-citizen 1.95%

### Religious Breakdown (2001):

Islam 94.5%, Buddhism 4.4%, Tribal Animism 0.5%, Christianity 0.2%, Hinduism 0.2%, Taoism/Confucianism 0.1%

**Incidence of poverty (2002):** 10.7%

In 1999 following decades of rule by Barisan Nasional, PAS won the local election and ruled Terengganu. However, it was recaptured by BN in the 2004 general election.

The state has long been part of the spiritual and religious heart of the country and efforts to enforce Muslim precepts and eliminate "unislamic" practices have been accorded continuing priority.

In July 2002, the State Legislative Assembly approved the Syariah Criminal Offence (Hudud & Qisas) Bill. It was then gazetted in October 2003 authorising stoning, flogging, and amputation for offences by Muslims including theft, adultery, and consumption of alcohol.

Since BN took over, there had been talks on whether the law should be repealed and the Prime Minister was also reported to have said that all laws enacted by PAS would be reviewed (The Star, 29 Mar 2004).

The Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (Ikim) later undertook the study of Terengganu Syariah Criminal Offence laws. To date, decision has yet to be made.

Meanwhile, the current BN administration continues to reflect a strong

Islamic identity. For example, shortly after winning the election, BN banned all concerts except *nasyid* performances, but said the ban was only temporary.

Although it contributes most of the country's oil revenue, Terengganu remains one of the poorest and least-developed states in the country. BN's special manifesto on Terengganu pledged to set up a university, upgrade the Islamic college, expand the airport, and create more employment.

The Terengganu Health Department estimates an average of 300 to 400 new HIV/AIDS cases every year. As of last June, 6,718 HIV patients and 577 AIDS patients have been recorded in Terengganu. Over 95% of the HIV carriers are male, while 92.4% of the AIDS patients are male. Also, the incidence of incest is high.

Terengganu has also been implicated in a foreign report that some individuals are providing moral, logistic and financial support to the separatist movements in South Thailand.

### Religious Freedom & Rights

It has been reported that 2,383 followers of deviant groups were being rehabilitated at Malaysia Islamic Development Department (JAKIM)'s rehabilitation centres in Jelevu and Kuala Terengganu (Bernama, 30 June 2005).

A mob attacked the commune of Sky Kingdom religious sect in July 2005. Police later arrested 45 members and charged them with violating Islamic precepts under Section 10 of the Terengganu Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment 2001.

The Terengganu Takzir enactment of 2001 allows for the sentencing of people

who do not pray five times a day (The Sun, 26/27 Mar 2005).

### The Church

There are 10 churches of various denominations in Kuala Terengganu. All, except one, are located in shop-houses but the state government has said it would consider non-Muslims' requests for land to build places of worship.

Some churches have no pastors or leaders and there is a need for churches to see their presence as a blessing to their community. Recognising the need and importance of unity, several churches have gathered to pray for Terengganu every month on the first Friday since the year 2002.

### Pray:

- For the state government to rule with wisdom, integrity and fairness.
- For economic sufficiency, just distribution of wealth and eradication of poverty.
- For the people to be freed from all forms of spiritual deception and bondage of the occult.
- Against religious extremism.
- For churches to have the mindset of Christ towards others regardless of religious/ethnic background; that they will actively engage and support government projects in eliminating poverty and creating employment.
- For more full-time pastors and leaders
- For Christians to find favour with the government and the neighbours. ■

# FOR YOUR PRAYERS



## MIDDLE EAST

WHILE the Danish cartoon controversy has triggered protests all across the Muslim world, political factors put Christians in the Middle East at particular risk of 'cartoon intifada' (uprising). It is in essence an intifada against Western press freedoms and reluctance to honour Islamic standards, along with implicit demands for special protection and concessions for Islam.

There are multitudes of pictures of Prophet Muhammad in the world: in text books, history books, art works, and even cartoons. But as this is not the first time the Prophet has appeared in art – even offensive cartoon art – why this uprising now?

The June 2005 democratic elections in Lebanon saw the militant Islamic group Hezbollah make considerable gains. Then in November 2005, the banned Muslim Brotherhood, running its members as independents, made significant gains in Egypt's elections. But when the January 2006 election in the Palestinian Territories ended the dominance of the secular Fatah party and put the Islamic organisation Hamas in power, that really sent a great shockwave through the Arab world.

Radicalised, and tired of the depressing, repressive status quo, Muslim populations throughout the Middle East are massively deserting Arab nationalism, hoping for relief through Islamism. Secular and moderate Arab regimes are now having to compete with militant Islamist forces for the affections of their people. These politically threatened regimes are boosting their Islamic credentials and currying favour with their angry, radicalised masses by supporting and even owning this 'cartoon intifada'.

The days of 'moderation' seem to be coming to an end, and Christians in the Middle East risk being treated as

scapegoats for anti-West Muslim rage.

Pray for: God to mercifully protect Christians who are without security in the midst of Islamic protests and rage; and God to intervene and block those seeking to exploit people's frustrations to whip up emotion and incite hatred and violence for their own ends.

## U.S.A.

SURVIVORS of the deadly Hurricane Katrina that hit the U.S. Gulf Coast last August are turning to Christ for hope and strength as they continue to rebuild their lives. Christian organisation World Hope International has been working in partnership with local churches in the hurricane devastated areas.

World Hope's Debbie Hoover told Mission Network News that working through the local church has been a great strategy. "Many people come to the church seeking help and seeking counselling, so we've been able to facilitate that a lot even through some of our more qualified volunteers who have expertise in that area." She added that many people were opening up to the Christian faith as a result of the work World Hope is doing in the area: "Many people have received Christ just through the work of the volunteers.

Pray for Christian organisations such as World Hope that they will continue their good work to rebuild lives.

## UZBEKISTAN

THE religious intolerance and official control of all religious minorities including Christians has escalated since the May 2005 political uprising in Andijan. Ethnic Uzbek churches suffer most, being persecuted by the state authorities and Muslim nationalists. The Full Gospel Church 'Resurrection' in Andijan is continually persecuted, along with their pastor Bakhtier Tuichiev who was severely beaten at Christmas. A group of

Christian lawyers in Taskent is helping believers speak out about persecution, and is working on getting the church 'Emmanuel' in Nukus, Karapalkastan, re-registered after its closure by the authorities. Christian workers are under pressure, with many Christian charities being closed for no stated reason.

Pray for: Uzbek Christians and churches to be protected by God and have more freedom for worship and evangelism; the government to respond with justice in cases of religious discrimination and persecution of Christians and other religious minorities; and for the growth of religious tolerance.

## INDIA

HINDU nationalists staged in February a massive Shabri Kumbh Mela pilgrimage and festival in Dangs, Gujarat with the dual purpose of converting tribals to militant Hindu nationalism and inciting violence against Christians.

However, the event without violence. Clearly God intervened and preserved his children in answer to the prayers of many. But Dangi Christians are facing a very insecure future in this environment caused by the torrent of anti-Christian hate propaganda that was openly distributed.

The Hindu nationalist Sangh Parivar are boasting 'great gains' (many conversions) in Dangs. They envisage exporting their new conversion strategy right across the tribal belt of north India

Sangh Parivar are trying to boost the numbers of Hindu nationalist voters and militants, with the overall aim of getting the Hindu nationalist BJP elected to power in the 2009 federal elections. Violence against Christians is escalating in frequency and intensity, particularly across the north India tribal belt. Pray for God's intervention to protect and empower his Church, and to frustrate the plans of the wicked. ■