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Berita NECF

Editorial

Soft Power vs Hard Power

Twenty-first century leaders need to acquire 'soft power' because 'hard power' has its limitations in dealing with today's complex and interdependent world. So said the Raja Muda of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah, when he delivered a speech entitled 'On Leadership' at the 17th Tun Ismail Ovation in July.

According to him, soft power is non-coercive, and it hinges on working with and through people. It is the power exercised by 'transformational leaders' who strive to achieve higher ideals, nobler values and more superior behaviour among their followers. Besides soft power, a 21st century leader also needs to possess two other equally important qualities: 1) charisma, and 2) morality and justice.

How apt for him to mention these qualities that can be translated as the key qualities for our church leaders today.

But let's focus on soft power here. When He was on earth, Jesus used the soft power approach to accomplish His mission. Though the people had expected Him to come as their reigning king to

overthrow the Roman government at that time, our Lord came as a bond servant to do the will of His heavenly Father.

John the Baptist identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). That was the thrust of His mission. Jesus' leadership began by setting an example of Himself, which then spilled over to His disciples. That was how He came to reveal His Father's love to mankind.

Likewise, the Christian leader is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in the world with nothing to offer but his vulnerable self. More often, he will be misunderstood for his 'passiveness', especially when he demonstrates patience and kindness. He will be looked upon as insignificant, but within him lays the latent power of the gospel.

To be such a leader who will leave an indelible print in people's lives, he ought to have this soft power – working with people and through people, delegating and networking with the sole objective of empowering people to advance the Kingdom of God.

But to have soft power demands

humility, an emptying of oneself of his personal ambition and desires, and take on God's vision and His heart.

Besides soft power, leaders who want to consistently, radically and concretely share His redeeming love must have an intimate knowledge of God's heart. Even when fear, isolation or despair invade their soul, such leaders know their God to be faithful, and dependable as David did when he charged Solomon to build the temple, "Be strong and of good courage, and

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Chairman's Message

The Malady of the Bramble Tree Leadership

There is a story in Judges chapter 9, that I feel needs to be brought to our attention occasionally. A wicked man, Abimelech, killed 70 men to ensure that he would be chosen king of Shechem. When the righteous Jotham, Gideon's youngest son, heard that Abimelech had indeed been appointed, he told a very vivid parable about the trees.

The trees were seeking a king and sought first to anoint the olive tree. The olive tree, which produces olive oil, is a symbol of anointing. The olive tree (leadership), though anointed, declined to be king for a seemingly good reason. Next the fig tree was approached. The fruitful but dispassionate fig tree (leadership) also refused. Eventually the grapevine was asked to serve, but he, being alive but somewhat religious, likewise declined.

The olive tree with its valuable oil, the fig tree with its sweet fruit, and the vine with its clusters that could be made into wine – all of them refused the honour.

They would each have to sacrifice something in order to reign, and they weren't prepared to make that sacrifice.

9 .. 'Should I quit producing the olive oil that blesses both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

11 .. the fig tree also refused, saying, 'Should I quit producing my sweet fruit just to wave back and forth over the trees?'

13 But the grapevine replied, 'Should I quit producing the wine that cheers both God and people, just to wave back and forth over the trees?' NLT

Finally the trees requested the bramble (thorn bush), which has neither fruit nor fragrance, to become their king.

Jotham used the parable to make a point about the situation which he and God's people found themselves in.

This is the same predicament the Church at large faces. It seems to me that the trees showed good judgment initially in recognising the one who ought to be their leader, the one anointed, with the most talent and qualified for the task.

Undaunted by the olive's refusal they turned to the fig, who was nearly as talented as the olive. Imagine the frustration felt by the entire group as they could get no one who qualified to take up the leadership responsibility. As the frustration mounted, they turned to the worthless, even troublesome thorn bush.

This phenomenon is not isolated to imaginary forests. This is true of the Christian leadership landscape of the Church and the nation as well.

We desperately need leaders; everyone recognises it. And yet we have refusal after refusal on the part of good and blessed men.

Too many good men are distracted with making money, preoccupied with the future, education of children and even, our own church agendas. Armchair 'leaders' are plenty. 'Consultants' are also aplenty in almost every organisation and church... BUT they are not providing leadership.

It is so often said that the Church rises or falls with leadership. If the able are not willing, bramble tree leaders will fill the void. It's time for the 'olive, fig and grapevine leaders' to rise and take their place.



By Rev. Eu Hong Seng

PM urged more inter-faith dialogues

But don't discuss Islam, he said

More inter-faith dialogues are needed to ensure the continuous harmony among Malaysians of different religions, Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi said in his speech at the 25th anniversary of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MAJLIS – the Malay acronym) on Aug 6

A day later, he charged that matters relating to the Islamic faith could not be “touched” or “changed” (*NST*, Aug 7). His remark appeared to have been exploited to the hilt by the 500 protestors who stormed the Aug 9 Bar Council public forum organised to discuss legal issues arising from conversion to Islam. The forum had to be cut short when the demonstration turned ugly.

Commenting on the demonstration, the PM said, “Issues concerning religion are very sensitive. Matters (on religion) are already spelt out... there is no need for discussions” (*Bernama*, Aug 12). His comment was perplexing, considering that five days earlier, he had called for more interfaith dialogues at the MAJLIS dinner where he was the special guest

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do it; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord God – my God – will be with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you, until you have finished all the work for the service of the house of the Lord.” (1 Chron. 28:20)

What is the task that God has laid on your heart to accomplish? Do not fear nor be dismayed when the going gets rough. He will not leave you nor forsake you until you have finished it.

And as you work out God's calling for you, consider this soft power approach – the non-coercive way – to do His work.

of honour. There, he had also given his assurance that the government would “not ignore the issues faced by non-Muslims in the country, especially problems relating to religion and faith” (*malaysiainsider.com*, Aug 7).

NECF Malaysia Acting Secretary General Sam Ang lamented the inconsistencies of our national leaders who did not appear to walk their talk. “The Prime Minister has pledged to listen to all. He has said that we must remain sincere and ready to talk and listen. Discouraging such public forum is not the way to go, for the issues have long been swept under the carpet,” he held.

In any case, can an interfaith dialogue happen if issues pertaining to Islam – one of the faiths concerned – cannot be discussed?

Conversion of one's spouse to Islam has been the bone of legal contention for decades.

A non-Muslim has no choice but to raise the matters relating to Islam when his or her spouse converts because it involves the dissolution of marriage and custody of children, among other things.

The plight of mothers such as Subashini and Shamala has become almost legendary. Not to be forgotten is the grieving Hindu family of the late Elangesvaran Benedict whose body was taken away by the Islamic authorities for Muslim burial. Body-snatching cases continue to occur.

But, in the midst of public despair of ever finding a solution to all the pain, a streak of light shone when a participant at the Bar Council forum, Dr Mehrun Siraj, said, “Open discussion is the way to discuss the issues between Muslims and non-Muslims.” Words of hope, indeed, from the law lecturer of the International Islamic University. Days after the forum, PAS Research Centre added that they saw “valid reasons for

such forum.”

We need also to remember the many peace-loving and sensible fellow Malaysians in our respective neighbourhoods. We applaud the forum organisers and the speakers, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, for their courage and sincerity to work towards solving the long-drawn problems, as well as their willingness to share their expertise and knowledge with others.

These are among the extraordinary people to whom Malaysia will one day be grateful.

Continue to pray for:

1. God's grace and mercy upon our nation;
2. God to liberate us from the communal spirit that has been haunting our nation;
3. civil maturity and more towering Malaysians who are able to see beyond ethnic and religious differences;
4. selfless, sensible national leaders to lead the nation with justice and righteousness;
5. independent judiciary and competent judges to rule with wisdom and without fear or bias; and
6. genuine police reform: corrupt-free, vigilant and impartial.

Post script: The government has re-activated a joint committee comprising syariah and civil lawyers, formed in April, to solve conversion, inter-religion and other related issues (*The Star*, Aug 27).

However, the committee will discuss the issues in chambers and not in open court, said Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi.

Pray that good measures to resolve the problems will come out of this committee.

Helping our youths belong

And how to stop the youth drain



Tricia Yeoh

What goes through the minds of Malaysian youths when they ponder the state of the nation? Are they hopeful? Optimistic? Confident? Or are they in dread and despair?

Between July and August last year, a quantitative survey was conducted to find answers to these questions and more. Specifically, it aimed to “unearth young Malaysians’ life values, hopes and aspirations for the present and future; understand (their) attitudes towards and aspirations for national unity in Malaysia, inclusive of racial, religious and social integration; and to understand (their) attitudes towards the education system in Malaysia, and how this contributes positively or negatively to national unity in Malaysia.”

Called the National Unity Study on Young Malaysians, the survey covered 1,000 Malaysians aged between 18 and 35 in urban and rural Peninsula Malaysia. It was jointly conducted by the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) of the Asian Strategic Leadership Institute (ASLI) and the National Young Lawyers Committee (NYLC) of the Bar Council.

Results of the survey were unveiled this April and among other things, it indicated increasing racial and religious polarisation among our youths. Even more worrying is that the younger age group prefers to mix more within their own ethnic and religious groups compared with the older age group.

Berita NECF spoke to CPPS Senior Research Analyst Tricia Yeoh who was at the forefront of the survey. A Christian, Tricia shared her thoughts on how churches can help Christian youths gain a sense of belonging to the country and play a more active role in helping to strengthen national unity.

1) Do you see the parallel between Malaysian youths and Malaysian Christian youths? If you had conducted the survey on our Christian youths, would you have obtained similar results?

I do think that Malaysian Christian youths are generally similar to Malaysian youths. It is the entire Malaysian education system that has bred a generation of youths – Christian or not – who are largely more comfortable interacting with friends of similar ethnic groups. In fact, if there is anything that Christians are more exclusive about is that their religious and church activities isolate them even further from peers of different backgrounds.

The unfortunate trend is that Christian youths eventually mix with people of their own kind without being encouraged to interact with people from vastly different backgrounds. Inter-ethnic and inter-religious interaction should be cultivated from all fronts, and the Church should be playing

a larger role in promoting the same sort of ‘unity’ it prescribes to the Church.

2) National unity is a big load to digest, not just for the youths but the adults as well. Can you put the phrase in a simpler way that is easily grasped?

In a simpler way, national unity can be understood as different community groups – ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, regional – living together in a state of harmony and peace. This does not mean that each community needs to give up its respective cultural tradition and practice. The phrase ‘unity in diversity’ encapsulates this, by showing that each community needs to take pride in his or her individual characteristics that make up that community.

3) Would you agree that a major contributing factor to the weak national unity is the lack of patriotic spirit among our youths, including our Christian youths?

That is only a partial truth, that there is a lack of patriotic spirit among our youths (and Christian youths). This is only an indication of a greater and deeper problem underlying our nation. As maintained in our *report’s recommendations, many (government) policies have been instrumental in dividing the nation into respective ethnic communities, through economic and education (and other) policies.

It is really a systemic problem, and less of a personal one, where over the last decades, institutional systems have eroded democratic space in Malaysia. The youths especially were disillusioned and disempowered to change things (this has changed since the elections this year), thereby leading to the lack of patriotism in the country. Once youths feel that they are empowered to alter situations, they will increasingly engage themselves in issues of public interest. Patriotism has to be tied to how the country treats them in return.

4) How have Christian parents and church leaders affected our youths’ attitude (either positively or negatively) towards national unity?

I may be a little critical on this and I hope that Christian parents and leaders will take this as constructive criticism. Whilst the Church has done an excellent job in teaching biblical values to their youths, I do feel that other aspects of biblical truths have not been sufficiently focused upon in affecting Christian youths’ attitudes towards national unity. For example, although Christianity teaches God’s love,

compassion and generosity, the Church could do more in educating youths on how they can likewise treat their peers with love, care and respect, in a non-discriminatory manner.

They should also be encouraged to increase inter-ethnic and inter-religious interaction, through dialogue and conversation and activities. Many times, these activities will take place outside the church setting – through community projects, working on social issues for the needy. Emphasis should also be placed on interaction with people outside their social and educational classes – the poor, needy and downtrodden. Youths should also be taught to refrain from making any negative statements about other religious and cultural practices, as these inherently affect their relationships with peers of other races and religions. Church leaders could certainly do more by encouraging youths to look beyond their differences and focus on common shared values.

5) Following from Q. 4, we often hear about Christian parents who send their children overseas to study and then urging them not to return. How damaging is this to the Malaysian Church and its nation-building efforts?

I do understand many Christian parents' concerns about the Malaysian education system, and its future career prospects (or lack thereof). I do not judge their decisions to do so, but the more important question is: What is God's vision for the country, and where can we, as His hands and feet, fit in? If we strongly believe that the Malaysian Church has a significant role to play in nation-building, then efforts should be channelled to that end. This is a more long-term, forward-looking model for all Christian parents. For example, young adults could be encouraged to gain experience abroad first, with the ultimate end goal of returning to contribute to the nation.

In this technologically-driven modern society, nation-building can also take place through a number of ways. For example, those who write prolifically from abroad, providing technical and intellectual assistance to those who are physically based in Malaysia themselves. I therefore don't think it's as clear cut as only being able to contribute to the cause in Malaysia. The more macro question is: Where do I see myself fitting into nation-building processes, from wherever I am, in whatever capacity I can?

6) Someone commented that our churches seem to be working against unity by keeping our youths busy with activities that prevent them from interacting with others outside the church. An example quoted is the homeschooling programmes run in churches and centres that are becoming increasingly popular these days. Furthermore, churches and Christian organisations try hard to get them to go to their conferences and other activities. Your response, please.

I think I've answered this in another question above (see

Q. 4). Churches do an excellent job in teaching spirituality to youths, and this is of utmost importance to build up their spiritual foundations from a young age to withstand life's challenges in the future. I do however believe that it is becoming increasingly necessary to broaden the scope of 'church activities' in their traditional sense of the word.

The Church still plays a very important role in building up one's personal relationship with God, and acts as 'family and home' for young Christians. However, justice can only be done to these values if they are practised and executed outside of the 'home'. The 'field', to borrow Christian jargon, is not only out in a third-world country where mission groups flock to, but it is right here in Malaysia.

Churches should explore groundbreaking ideas of how to encourage youths to unite with their peers, and help youths identify which are the most appropriate places to do so: in their schools, residential community areas, working on projects with fellow youths of other faiths to support the poor or other communities like street children, refugees and migrant workers. The Church could perhaps see itself as training ground to teach important spiritual values to the youth, and then thereafter being the coach, guide, mentor, for projects that unite them with other youths. These collaborative efforts will not only shine God's light into the world, but will teach Christian youths to apply what they have intellectually known to society at large. Malaysia is ripe for such dynamic interaction, and I hope the Church is able to respond in a timely manner.

The Malaysian Church must caution against the 'Church' merely becoming a place to breed a middle-class apathetic outlook to society, one that is no different from the world in its conscious pursuit of materialism and wealth alone.

Again, I return to the question of whether we see ourselves as active participants in the quest towards God's vision for Malaysia. If God's vision for humanity at large is for reconciliation – between mankind, between man and nature, and between man and God (reversing the destruction at the Fall) – then the Church must actively pursue this end in Malaysia itself. I truly believe that youths have a tremendous role to play in this reconciliation process.

Imagine dynamic, active, idealistic, passionate Christian youths wanting great peace and harmony for the country through all their available talents: writing, organising workshops, camps, educational talks about current social affairs, bridging the current gap between the Muslims and Christians through dialogue, discussion and interaction.

The Church is beginning a most interesting journey, along with Malaysia, and it would be wise to re-evaluate the focus of youth programmes and projects. Spirituality is both inside and out: spirituality encompasses God's relationship with us individually, but it is equally a spiritual affair to promote unity with those outside the Church.

* For more information on the report, go to http://www.cpps.org.my/sub_page.aspx?catID=113&ddlID=344

Moving the Church



The world is constantly seeking meaningful relationships and a community that one feels accepted and secure. Communities living in the margins have a higher risk of relationships being strained at all levels: spousal, families and neighbours. There is a desperate cry for belonging, acceptance and meaningful relationships. Thus, when the local Church is able to live out a community of love and service, it has much to offer its neighbourhood. When the Church shifts its priority from focussing on numerical growth and individual spiritual transformation to transforming relationships that culminates in a church that models a community of love and which embraces the poor, the Church is able to transform neighbourhoods.

Reducing the Great Commission to numerical growth and individual spiritual transformation

Some churches appear to adopt a reductionist approach in obeying the Great Commission. The gospel of the Kingdom of God is reduced to a message that focuses primarily on personal salvation. For this brand of church, the call also largely focuses on spiritual transformation but neglects social transformation. In short, the rich vision of Christian transformation is reduced to a community of spiritual faith which does not meet the social needs of the poor nor does it offer love through practical help and service. This reductionist approach is focused on conversions and transformation of individual spirituality. Individual transformation does not translate into empowering the person to be part of a community of faith to influence transformation in their neighbourhood. The reductionist approach basically starts with an evangelistic programme that reaches out to individuals but neglects the commitment required to build a community of faith and love. Some measure of social welfare help is thrown in, but it is used to draw in individuals to hear the gospel.

The reductionist approach to the Great Commission, firstly, results in an over-emphasis on individual evangelism and church effectiveness popularly measured primarily by numerical growth. Such contemporary church planting methods are in danger of over-emphasizing individual conversions and forgetting the end objective of building a community of faith, love and service.¹ This problem of neglecting community care is particularly magnified in poor and marginalised communities.

Secondly, the reductionist approach fails to appreciate that at the very heart of the gospel, there is the call to build communities of faith, love and service as opposed to individuals of faith built to evangelise others. A

consequence of this approach is that surrounding poor neighbourhoods comprising different ethnic groups is excluded from this transformative vision. Thus, the scope of life lived under God's lordship in love and service to others outside the Church and care for all that God has created is diminished. The approach also has the further danger of deepening hostility between races or at least fails to address the issue of distancing other religious adherents as it projects a crusader faith bent on winning numbers but lacks charity to the needy and disadvantaged.²

Thirdly, the reductionist approach leads to an erroneous assumption that evangelism and conversions will automatically bring about just societies. Looking at some of the most evangelised nations in Africa and South America, it is obvious that these countries are struggling with a culture of corruption. When vital considerations of just and ethical values based on loving relationships are dispensed with for the expediency of numerical growth, the Church will not become a community of faith and love as God intended it to be. It is not empowered to influence the transformation of society into a kingdom of righteousness, mercy and justice.

Hence, when the Church puts the Great Commission ahead of the greatest commandment, it has lost its authenticity. The Church is set on a performance mode that contradicts its foundational objective to glorify God through a community sharing God's love. A community exalting crusading evangelism and numerical growth over the greatest commandment of love will result in shallow relationships and it cannot offer a model of God's community of faith, love and service.

Recovering the greatest commandment to build communities of faith, love and service

The Great Commission of making disciples of all nations must be subject to the greatest commandment to love God and one another. The Church needs to be clear of its core vision of mission – social action is just as much an important and integral call of the Church as evangelism.

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Table 1

Spiritual Great Commission to Go Approach	Greatest Commandment to Love Approach
End point is individual conversion and spiritual transformation	End point is community transformation
Focus is on discipleship with strong emphasis on spiritual transformation and with little emphasis on social transformation	Focus is on spirituality that enjoins spiritual transformation to social transformation
Community outreach uses conversions or presentation of gospel as performance indicators. This often results in short-term presence that works towards conversion and often does not lead towards neighbourhood transformation	Community outreach infuses community with God's love and witness as performance indicators. This involves commitment to a long-term presence that works towards neighbourhood transformation
Members are trained to evangelise	Members are trained to be faithful witnesses i.e. lifestyle evangelism
Emphasis is on individual performance measured by ability to bring in conversions and numbers. Personal faith is integrated with family, work, church and missions (more recently, with the marketplace).	Emphasis is on formation of individual spirituality as a lifestyle which leads to social action and helping the poor. Personal faith is integrated with all aspects of life, including socio-economic well-being, citizenship and governance
Ministries are church-focused	Ministries incorporate church, community and individual lifestyle witness

The outcome is neither of the two, i.e. improved standards of living and conversions, but a transformed community of faith, love and service. And this is achieved only through a balanced and holistic approach.

In Table 1 (beside), I have listed some general characteristics of a church vision that is subjected only to the Great Commission, and one where the Great Commission is grounded on the greatest commandment.

The failure of the church to appreciate the fundamental vision of developing a community of faith, love and service will have far reaching consequences and results in an inaccurate reflection of the gospel.

Firstly, as the approach is by default limited to reaching only certain individuals and families in the neighbourhood, it makes it difficult for the local neighbourhood to participate in this type of church.

Secondly, it does not work towards the holistic and integrated needs of the neighbourhood, nor often times even of its own members. Its programmes are primarily designed as a tool (even tuition classes) for converting individuals but not transforming the neighbourhood. And sadly, for the poor and marginalised, the good news may be personally engaging but socially irrelevant!

Thirdly, mission that is divorced from love and helping the whole person is guaranteed to bring hostility from adverse religious groups who perceive the Church as an agent of conversion and as wanting to destroy their culture. This increases the effect of causing further offence and allows extremist groups thereby to incite greater polarisation.

Finally, the spiritual Great Commission approach has the further danger of conveying an implied message that building a community of God's love is secondary to the Great Commission. Tragically, it is possible to evangelise without loving God or the neighbour.

Indeed, the Church which practises only the spiritual Great Commission approach has little relevance to economic inequities, human dignity, ethnic polarisation, poor governance, corruption and citizenship roles. At the end of the day, such churches have precluded or derailed themselves from achieving the biblical mode of community transformation and building a community of God's love.

Contrarily, the Church with the greatest commandment to love approach takes a long term view of working towards community transformation. It is there to build a 'church community in mission'³ with a long-term witness and transformative impact in the neighbourhood. It is

noteworthy to see a few churches taking a holistic greatest commandment to love approach, and having a long-term commitment to community transformation that develops a community of faith, love and action.

Footnote

¹I believe that the rationale of starting cell groups is a positive move in the direction of strengthening community. But, it can easily steer away from its true goal when it replaces its core objective of building a community of faith, love and service with evangelism. Hence, cell groups have to keep their vision clear to avoid being side-tracked.

²On the other hand, mere social work is also inadequate. It is in this backdrop that more radical models in working with the poor are needed. The gospel has to move beyond the either or other categories (personal redemption to transforming society). It cannot do so through just conversion programmes or social work. The answer is not a simplistic one or the other, and it not necessarily even in sequential order of the two or the two being done simultaneously together. The crux is that a group of believers must come together to live out a community of faith. They must be committed to empower their community to transform the neighbourhood and to promote God's peaceable kingdom of righteousness. Reaching out and social action belong together; so do prayer and service. They all form a web of connectedness in building the Kingdom of God.

³A term borrowed from CB Samuel

This is an extract from Kon Onn Sein's article "Transforming Neighbourhoods: Grounding the Great Commission on the Greatest Commandment." The full paper will be published in the upcoming NECF Malaysia Forum VI. Onn Sein was Managing Director of the Foundation for Community Studies and Development, an organisation focussing on poverty alleviation and community development programmes for the poor and needy, in particular the Orang Asli and the urban poor.

A Praying Church

Praying for the nation has become a key pillar of the church life in Malaysia, but it took centrestage in July and August with various prayer and prayer-related events in conjunction with Merdeka (Independence) Day. Churches throughout the country drenched the nation in prayer as individuals, from children to youths to adults, took up the serious business of pleading with the Supreme Ruler to have mercy on Malaysia.

The Chinese-speaking churches had their annual prayer camp up at Genting Highlands in early July (see pg 12), followed by the yearly 40-Day Fast and Prayer which kicked off on July 22.

Next came the National Children Prayer Conference in Petaling Jaya in mid-August where over 900 children had a hollering time digging deep

into the disciplines of evangelism and prayer. The theme, “Power Up”, exhorted the children to be fearless witnesses for God, and to experience the power of intimate prayer.

Following this was the National English Prayer Conference attended by over 600 people (see Pr Dr Chew Weng Chee’s message on pg 9) at end-August. Themed “The Lord Revives”, it ended with the Merdeka prayer rallies all over the country on Aug 30 and 31. In the Klang Valley, the Aug 30 prayer rally saw some 2,000 people coming from different churches to pray for God’s peace on the nation.



HANDS UP FOR GOD – (fr top) Children responding to the altar call by speaker Pr Sam Phun (far right) at the National Children Prayer Conference; adults worshipping at the Klang Valley Prayer Rally.



Youth fill GAP

Youths showing respect to the state flags at the national youth prayer gathering in Kluang.

First, it was the adults, burdened by the anxious events sweeping the country, who took up the call to pray for the nation. So, we had all the various prayer initiatives, spurred by the Merdeka prayer events, taking place throughout the country. These initiatives helped break down barriers among churches which saw the need to come together to pray for the nation.

As the prayer wind gathered speed, it blew on the hearts of the people to set up a national prayer body that would act as the centre to coordinate, network, and mobilise even more prayer among the churches. Thus, the Malaysian National Prayer Network (MNP) was

established last year.

Then, the prayer leaders got the burden to mobilise the children to pray. Their strategy is simple – fire the passion while they are still young and they will be fervent intercessors for the rest of their lives. So, the NECF Malaysia Prayer Commission launched the annual children’s prayer conference four years ago. From some 200 children the first year, the number quadrupled to nearly 900 this year as the vision caught on among the churches and the prayer flame gathered intensity.

In addition, there were the regional Children in Prayer consultations that were held throughout the peninsula for

children’s pastors and workers to meet and discuss issues relating to prayer and chart strategies to increase prayer among their children.

With the prayer wheels rolling on the sides of the adults and children, there’s still a gap to be filled – that of the youths. On July 19, that gap was filled when some 500 youths and some adults from throughout Malaysia gathered in Kluang, Johor, for the country’s first national youth prayer gathering.

Mobilised and organised by the youths themselves, the gathering was a call to our youths to seek God and pray for the nation, besides establishing and strengthening ties among the other prayer and youth networks in the country.

Through the networks, the organisers hoped to raise 100,000 passionate praying youths within the next five years to channel them to be directly involved in the 10 pillars of nation transformation – education, health care, business, media, performing arts, NGOs, legal, government, family and church.

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Revival for What?

This is an extract transcription of Pr Dr Chew Weng Chee's message at the recent National Prayer Conference held annually in conjunction with Merdeka Day. Pr Chew (right pix) spoke passionately on the purposes of revival and how to achieve it, and made an impassioned plea to senior pastors to take the lead in prayer in their churches.



Why pray? Prayer unleashes the power of God. I see this in history, in the Bible. Prayer precedes revival. Without prayer, there cannot be revival. History tells us that. Even in our own country in East Malaysia, the revival in Ba Kelalan (Sarawak) in the mid-70s and 80s started because schoolboys started to pray, and when schoolboys started to pray, God poured forth revival. And the cry today is, "God, pour forth Your revival."

Ephesians 6 says that ultimately, we do not battle against flesh and blood but against principalities and power. The battle is in the heavenliness. It is not the size of our church or the way we do church. Everything has to do with prayer. Yes, efficiency is important. Effectiveness is important. But we've passed that. We should be going for efficacy, that is doing the right thing at the right time, in the right way, to the right people, giving the right result. We have to sense what God is doing.

It's time the church wake up, not even for ourselves but for our children. The best time to plant the seed was 30 years ago and we missed it. When I was in Sabah for 14 years in the late 70s and early 80s, they stopped 1,000 bibles from Indonesia at the Customs. The bibles were meant for SIB churches in the interiors. We sent a message to the West Malaysian (Church) to do something, help us. Nobody did anything and they made a public bonfire of the 1,000 bibles. God is giving us a second chance. Are we going to sleep again, to be indifferent again, to guard our turf again with every church doing her own thing. The best time to plant the seed was 30 years ago. We missed it.

The next best time is today.

Eph 6:10 exhorts us to be strong. Strength is in the finished work of the cross and in the Word of God. Everything has to be anchored in the Word of God. Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armour of God but be undergirded by prayer and the Word of God.

Having done all this, pray, pray, pray. We have to continue to pray. If you are too busy to pray, we are finished. And it is my thesis that prayer has to be anchored by the senior pastor, not the intercessors. Yes they (intercessors) are important, but senior pastors, you have to take the lead. You have to pray and don't relegate it

down to the intercessors. You have to take the lead, hear from Him.

One of the best books I have read on prayer is Pr Edmund Chan's book, "Growing deep in God, integrating theology and prayer". He says, "Without the power of God, the Church is as powerless as a man armed with a rubber band in the face of a charging rhinoceros." That's what prayer-less churches are trying to do.

The battle is in the heavenlies; it's not in the way we do things, the mechanics. It's not efficiency but efficacy. There are many ways to work for God but only one way to work with God – through humble and contrite prayers. You want revival, you have to pray.

There are so many things happening in this nation, but the good news is the atmosphere has changed. I tested it in June when I wrote a letter to a local English daily touching on a sensitive issue. I wrote that June 4 was a historical date for the US when Barack Obama became the first Afro-American presidential nominee of a major political party in the US. Fifty years after our independence, our politicians are still arguing and trampling the cause of the supremacy of one race over the other in Ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy). No matter how we twist and try to explain the phrase, it still sounds patronising.

I wrote, "When can I, an ordinary Malaysian, born and bred in this country and know of no other country, ever see my dream of a Malaysian Malaysia fulfilled." I had no confidence my letter would be published but it was. It shows time has changed. The results of the recent general election have given me the confidence that I may see this dream fulfilled in my lifetime.

Times have changed, and all the more now, we need to understand the signs of times and take the lead.

The Church cannot be contemporary but we must be prophetic. The difference is this – if we are contemporary, we are just playing catching up. When we are prophetic, we take the lead to understand the signs of the times, and discern. We are not to be an echo but to be a voice to the nation.

Why pray? Prayer unleashes the power of God for

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revival. The second question is: “Why revival?” The conventional thinking is that when revival comes, the Church will be revived, souls will be saved, miracles will happen and communities changed. That has happened through history. My question is: “Is that all?”

Revival is only a means to an end, and not an end itself. Therefore, what is revival for? Joel 2 says that for your children’s sake, pray, speak up, do something. Let’s discard our personal agenda, territorial space. And Joel said look at the locusts, they have invaded the land, laid waste to the vine, fig tree. It’s a symbol of the Church and Israel. Locusts were a metaphor of evil forces. They have ravaged the land; priests were mourning; and the productivity of the land destroyed. God laid it upon Joel at that time to sound the trumpet and call the elders.

Look, pastors and leaders if you don’t take the lead, how can the sheep follow? You got to pray and not just talk about the prayer. Take the lead, call the elders and sound the trumpet. Men, go back to your churches and inspire the people to cry to the Lord. Don’t stop praying.

Three postures we need to adopt – wake up, weep and wail. This is a posture of repentance. Judgement begins in the house of God and the Church of Jesus Christ in Malaysia got to repent, beginning from us pastors. There’s so much ungodly flesh things happening.

Revival has three purposes:

1) Judgement for Israel and the nations. First, judgement begins with the house of God because only a cleansed Church can judge the nations. Revival cleanses the Church so that God can prepare us for judgement (of the nations).

2) Warfare – it’s not for the weak, not for the uncommitted, the masses. It’s not the number, but there’s a war to be fought. Not for churches to enjoy the goosebumps of revival, and be so comfortable and snug. God needs people who are watchful, resilient, committed and alert. Revival has already come but it’s not the end. God needs us to fight. Will you fight for Jesus? Will you be counted for Him in the days to come for the survival of this nation? I’m committed, not to build a strong, dynamic church, but to build strong churches everywhere. Many big churches are weak. It’s not about size; it’s about strength and our strength is in the Lord.

3) Harvest – ultimately God’s concern is that those who do not know Him will be saved. God’s heart is for the salvation of souls. Evangelism still has to be a prevailing dynamic in your church. So, it’s not revival for revival’s sake. The role of the Church has still to be saving souls, not just community transformation for its sake, but for the lost to be saved.

There’s work to be done. Inspire your people to pray. Senior pastors, take the lead. Turn your churches into houses of prayer because ultimately, the battle belongs to God. It’s for His glory.

Continued from page 8...

In his message to the youths, Pr Kenneth Chin challenged them to commit to “full-time vocational ministry”, aligning their professions with a missions focus wherever they work. Youth leaders and pastors also shared their vision of raising a generation of youths to go into areas of influence in society – such as business, education and law – and to move to live in towns where the gospel has yet to make inroads. They wholeheartedly agreed to collectively work towards raising leaders to go where faith costs the most.

The gathering ended with a declaration of God’s love and promises to us and our beloved country Malaysia.

Similar gatherings were held in Kulim at the Kulim Wesley Methodist Church on Aug 20 and Petaling Jaya (People’s Park Baptist Church) on Aug 23.

Both gatherings rallied youths to have prayerful hearts for God and for the nation. The Kulim gathering aimed to, among others, initiate a continuous and intense youth prayer movement in each church in Kulim for revival and evangelisation. The PJ gathering aimed to rouse the PJ churches “from their dangerous oblivion and becoming a party to complacency, social and moral decay, and ... embrace nation-building and transformation.”

How to make the Church more visible



HOW can the Malaysian Church increase its visibility in corporate witness, nation building and community development? This is the question NECF Malaysia has been mulling over and after much brainstorming, it has come up with a nation-building agenda that will galvanise churches to actively participate in the nation-building process.

To help pastors and church leaders understand the agenda and vision, NECF leaders will be holding regional consultations throughout Malaysia. At the consultations, NECF will present four key areas where churches could be involved in the nation-building transformation process:

- Financial (for example, establishing a micro-enterprise company that will work with churches in identifying viable projects to impact the community);
- Health (for example, helping churches to establish community clinics or hospitals for the rural poor);
- Education (for example, helping to educate the migrants and the needy); and
- Socio-political (for example, engaging and raising awareness on issues facing Malaysian Christians and providing pastoral support to Christian politicians).

Thus far, NECF has conducted a national consultation with representative pastors from throughout the country. The next consultation will be in Johore and Penang on Sept. 18 and Oct. 21 respectively.

One Hundred Days

Sam Ang reflects on his 100 days as NECF Malaysia Acting-Secretary General.

1) What were your initial feelings about the great task ahead when you first accepted the responsibility? After 100 days, has there been a change?

Like Paul said in 1 Cor.2:3 *"in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."* Each time when I meet someone in public, they would often remark, "You are sitting on the hot seat." It is indeed a hot seat when taking over from someone who has been over 10 years on the job and has done an excellent work.

What NECF Malaysia is today is attributed to Rev. Wong Kim Kong (former Secretary-General and now Executive Advisor) and the staff. We have grown by leaps and bounds, thanks also to the support from the member churches. Without the NECF Council Members' support, I would not have dared taken up this responsibility.

Over the last 100 days, it has been nothing but hectic. Some of the things, we have worked on together are:

- 1) Realigned our focus on the 'main thing' of NECF, that is strategising on 'transforming the nation through the local church.' I believe we are on track in 'nation building' and we are working on involving the grassroots in nation building;
- 2) Incorporated NECF Samaritan Sdn Bhd to provide micro-enterprise services;
- 3) Explored community projects inter alia community clinics and setting up educational centres;
- 4) Met key relief organisations to help coordinate training in relief work for 2009, so that the evangelical church can quickly and meaningfully respond to local and overseas crisis;

- 5) Reactivated the Evangelism Commission and planned COHM 2 so that we can share God's love this Dec.;
- 6) Kicked off the search for a new Secretary-General;
- 7) Consolidated the various prayer rallies for 2009, incorporating the Global Day of Prayer and 40-day prayer and fast; and
- 8) Planned a National Pastors and Leaders Conference in August 2009 with the theme, "fathering the nation" – this is going to be a significant event as we encourage and recognise spiritual fathers of the nation to father the nation.

2) What do you think you have contributed or have started to contribute towards the work of NECF during this short 100 days?

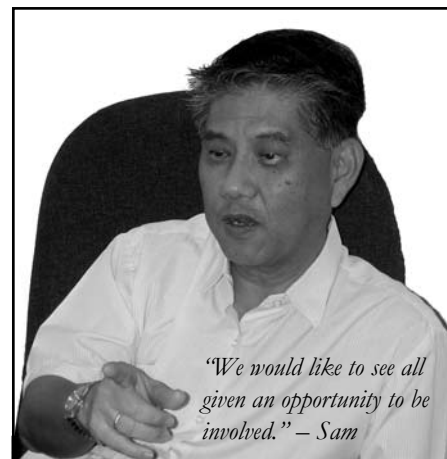
I have been blessed to work with a more proactive executive committee. I don't see it as "my work" – the new season before us is going to require team effort and partnering with the local churches is not an option.

I would like to see the new NECF Council Members play a more active role in the NECF activities and build better working relationship with staff and commission members. And as half of the Council Members are located outstation, we would like them to increase the deputation work by sharing the NECF work in their respective areas.

We encourage them to take the lead in the pastors' fellowships. The NECF Executive Members will be traveling to get feedback from member churches.

3) What do you hope to accomplish within the next two years?

I would like to see a strong foundation laid for the eight things we initiated



in the first 100 days. Essentially, nation building is a long-term process. The next two years is going to be a vision-casting and foundation-laying season. We would like to see all given an opportunity to be involved. For instance in the area of micro-enterprise, medical and education, our role is to facilitate churches and individuals to join together in undertaking these projects.

I also hope that the staff team would strive for efficacy, and stay relevant with the times. We hope to build a strong staff team that would meet the coming challenges, for the next Secretary-General to take NECF to the next level.

4) Any other observations/ comments about these 100 days?

I read a commentary about Nehemiah who was described as a vigorous administrator, a calm crisis manager, a fearless initiator, a courageous decision maker, and a persevering leader. Those qualities propelled Nehemiah to complete rebuilding the walls in 52 days.

Our 'present walls' may not be obviously broken down, but we are definitely going through difficult and trying times. Resources seem limited and the window of opportunities is uncertain. I covet your prayers to have the qualities of Nehemiah and also to take heed what Jesus said in John 9:4 "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. ..."

I am privileged to do the work, His work ... and I invite you to partner with me.



Chinese Prayer Prayer Camp

Commission in Genting Highland. The speakers were Dr Eddie Ma who spoke on renewal and passion for national transformation, and Rev. Wong Kim Kong who shared about the current challenges and opportunities facing the Malaysian Church.

In his message on the Church's role in light of the current political upheaval in the country, Rev. Wong said he believed that God had granted the Malaysian Church five to 10 years' grace period to intensify intercession for a genuine reform within the authorities and society, and also to actively pursue God's Kingdom expansion plans. He impressed on the participants the urgency of this period of grace given to the Malaysian Church.

Dr Ma conducted a teaching session on intercession and the importance of keeping silence so as to hear God. He shared that in Hong Kong, pastors from 18 districts would regularly gather for intercession and during their sessions, they would listen to God first and then pray.

The camp concluded with a time of ministry which saw many participants, young and old, finding healing from the hurts they suffered from the lack of care from their pastors and leaders. It was a highly emotional time with much weeping that ended with a commitment from the pastors and leaders present to be more caring 'fathers' and 'mothers'.

Reflecting on the camp, NECF Executive Secretary Cheong Tze Ying observed a growing unity among the Chinese-speaking churches and that this annual camp has finally become an event in their church calendars. "I feel that the walls separating the churches are coming down, and the camp has inspired the participants to really want to pray and seek God," she said.

Youths, Arise Seniors, Cheer Them On

This is the generation for our youths to arise and work out the 'visions' they see. For the older generation, they must release the youths to do what God has put in their hearts and cheer them on. This is the message participants at the July Chinese Prayer Camp took home.

Over 200 people, including five Sarawakians, representing 47 churches attended the three-day annual camp organised by the NECF Malaysia Chinese

NECF MALAYSIA WELCOMES NEW MEMBERS

ORDINARY MEMBERS

Lifeline Church, Perak, *pastored by James Willson*; Bukit Mertajam Renewal Christian Fellowship, *pastored by Ben Yeap Ee Beng*; Kuala Lumpur International Friends Fellowship, *represented by Michael Moey*; World Deaf Mission Centre, Selangor, *represented by Rev. Hahm Kyoung Soo*; Hosanna Baptist Church, Penang, *represented by Ir. Lim Thean Heng*; Assembly of Christians, PJ, *represented by Ng Kok Hoong*; Glory Calvary Church, Puchong, *pastored by Cheoh Kheng Tuan*; Dunamis Deliverance Centre, Skudai, *pastored by Elijah Maniam*; Praise Christian Church, Kuala Lumpur, *pastored by Rev. Roger Woon*; Antioch Christian Church, Petaling Jaya, *pastored by Rebecca Yap Kuy Yong*; Harvest Sanctuary, Teluk Intan, *pastored by Joshua Ramesh*; SIB KL (Chinese), Petaling Jaya, *pastored by Inky Ong*; Calvary Charismatic Centre, JB, *pastored by Rev. Benedict Rajan*; Masai Mission Church, Johor, *pastored by Charles Sundram*; Christ Sanctuary Church, JB, *pastored by Francis Ponniah*; GGP Outreach Bhd, KL, *represented by Edmund Ng*; and Borneo Evangelical Mission, Miri, *represented by Rev. Peter Pengiran Mutang*.

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

Pr Abel Benjamin a/I P.P. Selvadurai; Rev. Dr Christopher Raaja Wilson; Rev. Rosalind Tai Lee Cheng; and Teng Luen Foong.

Donations for Disaster Victims

Generous individuals have, as at Sept 8, given over USD47,000 to NECF Malaysia to help victims affected by Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the Sichuan (China) earthquake. Specifically, they donated USD20,000 for the Myanmar victims and USD27,000 for the Sichuan victims.

Thus far, NECF has disbursed USD20,000 to three bodies that are directly helping the victims in Myanmar as follows:

1. OM Relief work – USD10,000
2. Purchase of tractors for farmers – USD8,000
3. Water Treatment EFC Myanmar – USD2,000

A total of USD15,000 has been disbursed to a Sichuan local church. NECF is awaiting its contacts in China to advise which reliable organisations to channel the balance to.

Readers will be kept posted on where the money is going to and how it is being used. To all the generous givers, we wish the Lord's favour upon you.



Book on Religious Liberty in Malaysia

This is one book that will challenge readers to consciously and conscientiously seek to be informed of the state of religious liberty in the country. With a better informed mind, we will then be better equipped to pray and make a stand for our rights and liberty to practise our faith.

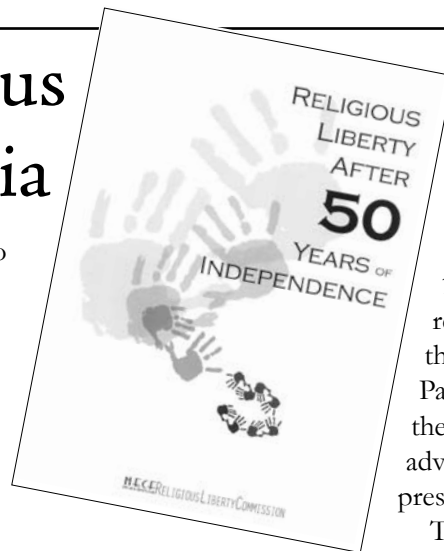
The book is a collection of 10 papers presented at a consultation on 11 August 2007, organised by the NECF Malaysia Religious Liberty Commission.

Entitled "Religious Liberty after 50 Years of Independence", the consultation was held in conjunction with Malaysia's 50th independence. The consultation had four aims, including assessing prospects for religious liberty and exploring new social/legal initiatives to strengthen religious liberty; and informing the public on trends and current controversies of religious rights and multi-cultural politics.

Following is an extract from the book's foreword penned by the commission chairman, Lee Min Choon.

"In the area of religious liberty, the past five years have seen more violations and incidents than the first 45 years of the nation's existence. Critics have attributed these to the ineffectiveness and inconsistency of the present administration of Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Badawi. While we do not believe it is his intention to oppress religious minorities... his administration and the Malaysian society appears to have provided an environment for extremist religious elements to proclaim and pursue their respective agendas.

The 50th year had the highest incidence of religious liberty issues when names such as Lina Joy, Moorthy and Subashini became household terms. The coining of new words, such as body-snatching, demonstrated the existence



of religious tensions simmering beneath the veneer of a civilised society.

It was in this context that the NECF Malaysia Religious Liberty Commission held a seminar on 11 August 2007. Topics addressed represented critical issues facing the minority religious communities. Paper presenters were drawn from the frontline of able and courageous advocates of religious freedom in the present struggle.

The consensus of the papers published in this volume is clear:

Malaysia is heading down a dangerous and slippery slope of extremism and intolerance. Serious initiatives are needed to arrest this trend in order to preserve a harmonious and peaceful plural society.

As a post-script, the results of the March 8 general elections surprised every level of the Malaysian society. Among the many interpretations of the election results is the possibility that Malaysia is entering the phase of a two-party system. This may augur well for the nation. Among its positive benefits, a two-party system is more likely to ensure accountability and professionalism in politics and government. It may also provide a fertile ground for human rights to flourish. For the first time in Malaysia's history, there is the exciting prospect that Malaysians have the destiny of the nation in their hands. What we become depends on us... The Church, as the agent of transformation, must be faithful in carrying out what she is called to do; even in times of chaos, she will not lose heart. What has happened and is happening are merely the birth pangs towards the evolvement of a transformed nation under God."

(Note: The book can be purchased at the NECF office, Canaanland and SUFES at RM15 a copy. Or order on-line at www.necf.org.my or www.canaanland.com.my)

Famous Bible Characters

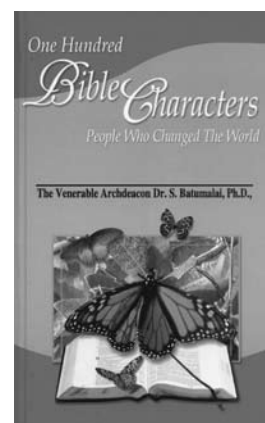
"One Hundred Bible Characters – People Who Changed The World" is a new publication of the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia authored by Ven. Archdeacon Dr S Batumalai, Vicar of Christ Church, Malacca.

As the title of the book suggests, it features 100 Bible characters from both the Old and New Testament. The author gives a brief summary of salient features of the person's life and his/her character before dishing out more detailed information about how he/she dealt with their lives, their interactions with other people and with God. At the end of each character write-up, there are also some

questions to prod the readers to reflect on their own lives and relationship with God. This hard cover book makes a good reference book for those who need to get quick information as the characters are arranged in alphabetical order.

Priced at RM30 each, it is available from the Council of Churches Malaysia (CCM) office at 10 Jalan 11/9, 46200 Petaling Jaya. Proceeds from the sale of the book will go towards the CCM Building Fund.

For more information, contact 03-7960 8926 (tel.) or 03-7956 0353 (fax).





Kuala Lumpur

Kuala Lumpur (KL), is the capital of and the largest city in Malaysia with a population of 1.89 million. It houses the Malaysian Parliament on which the country depends for cultural, economic, political and major transportation needs.

In 1952, election was introduced and it began with the KL municipal election. The idea of an alliance between UMNO and MCA evolved. On 8 Jan, the KL UMNO branch and the Selangor MCA branch made an official announcement that they would jointly contest the KL election. They won 9 out of 12 seats. When UMNO and MCA saw the pact as a workable formula to gain cross-communal support, they moved towards closer cooperation in the pursuit of self-government. An Alliance was formalised in Feb. 1953.

After gaining independence from the British, KL remained as capital through the formation of Malaysia on 16 Sept 1963.

In Oct 1957, the Alliance Party – a coalition of UMNO, MIC and MCA – was registered as a political entity.

In 1969, racial tension broke out when the Alliance encountered a major setback albeit a simple parliamentary majority in the general elections. The May 13 incident took place in Kuala Lumpur. This resulted in many deaths and led to a state of emergency and suspension of Parliament until 1971 and eventually a reform in economic policy.

The recent March 2008 general

elections saw the opposition parties, for the first time, dominating the majority of the constituencies. Barisan Nasional (BN, formerly Alliance) was left with only one representative, i.e. Federal Territories (FT) Minister Zulhasnan Rafique in the Setiawangsa seat.

Religious Overzealousness

Last year, Attorney-General Abdul Gani Patail suggested that the country's legal system be changed to take Islamic legal reference rather than English common law as its basis (*Bernama, Aug. 26*).

In June, two restaurants (owned by a Hindu and a Muslim) in Bangsar were raided by officers from the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), DBKL and the Domestic Trade and Industry Ministry. Religious pictures from both restaurants were confiscated.

In June, JAKIM declared the Celcom SMS contest un-Islamic as it was tantamount to betting, "and betting is a form of gambling which is forbidden in Islam" (*Bernama, June 18*).

In July, FT PAS Youth presented a memorandum to the KL mayor to cancel a concert by Inul Daratista, an Indonesian dangdut singer, because her dance movement was 'too sexy and immoral'.

In August, FT PAS Youth called for a ban on Avril Lavigne's concert. Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal subsequently rejected the application

to hold concert on grounds that it coincided with the Merdeka period and religious programmes. However, the cabinet allowed the concert with certain conditions. On the 29th, a Muslim NGO organised a peaceful rally from Masjid Negara to Dataran Merdeka in the afternoon, while PAS Youth distributed flyers in the evening at the stadium to show their disapproval.

In June 2007, the then Internal Security banned 37 books titles and publication on Islamic teachings on grounds that they contained 'twisted fact' that could undermine Muslims' faith. In November, the ministry banned another seven books fearing they would create confusion and anxiety among Muslims and harm public peace. In Jan 2008, 11 books were banned because the contents deviated from mainstream religious teaching. Recently in August, two books were banned for giving misleading view on Islam. One of the books, 'Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism,' had been distributed since 2005.

Body-snatching

Last Dec. 30, 54-year-old Wong Sau Lan died at Hospital Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her husband was told that the body would be released only for the purpose of performing Christian rituals and must be returned to the FT Islamic Council for a Muslim burial. A certificate of conversion dated Dec. 31 stated that Wong converted to Islam on Dec. 24 at a flat in Cheras. Finally on Jan. 18, the KL High Court ordered Wong's body to be released for Christian funeral after the Islamic council retracted its claim that she had converted to Islam.

In April, Prime Minister Datuk Abdullah Badawi (Pak Lah) suggested a notice-to-convert requirement to prevent problems caused by disputed religious status of a deceased person. The announcement, lauded by some, was heavily criticised by many.

Conversion, apostasy & intolerance

The Bar Council forum on “Conversion to Islam: Article 121 (1A) of the Federal Constitution, Subashini and Shamala Revisited,” held on Aug. 9, demonstrated not only deep distrust among religious groups but a close-mindset on dialogues related to religious matters.

The federal government had, in its various responses, been too quick to predict the consequence and discourage open dialogues, arousing unwanted sentiments among the people. Ironically, two days before the forum, Pak Lah had called for more interfaith dialogues in his address at the MCCBCHST dinner.

In response to calls for resolving marital problems involving conversion of one party Islam, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department Datuk Mohd Zaid Ibrahim (who has resigned from the position) said several amendments had been proposed.

Meanwhile the joint committee comprising Syariah and civil lawyers formed in April would be reactivated to solve inter-religious and other related issues, according to the Minister in charge of Islamic Matters in the Prime Minister’s Department, Datuk Seri Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. At the Dewan Rakyat in May, there was a call for an Act on apostasy.

“The questions we need to clarify are whether permission can be given for a Muslim to renounce Islam, how to stop Muslims from becoming an apostate, the issue of faith rehabilitation and the status of a Muslim convert who wish to return to his (or her) original religion,” said Dr Mohd Puad Zarkashi, a BN member of Parliament from Batu Pahat (*theSun*, 6/5/08). There is no provision in the Federal Territories Islamic laws to convert out of Islam, nor is there any stipulation for apostasy.

Places of worship

In February 2007, KL City Hall (DBKL) identified 20 Hindu temples for relocation or demolition to make

way for various development projects. At a meeting on Feb. 14 at DBKL, 20 Hindu temples were identified for relocation or demolition to make way for various development projects.

In March, a suit was filed at the Kuala Lumpur High Court against five local authority officials for contempt of court. Apparently in February, the authorities had demolished Sri Maja Nageswari Temple in Ampang despite a court injunction prohibiting them from doing so.

Recently, the Malaysia Hindu Sangam was outraged when temples were left out in the KL Draft City Plan 2020. It asked if the move was part of a hidden agenda to remove religious sites (*malaysiakini.com*, 21/8/08).

In April 2008, Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Datuk Shafie Apdal revealed that the government had planned to streamline the existing policies on construction and demolition of places of worship to be acceptable to all religious groups.

Freedom of expression

Recently, the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) ordered all Internet service providers (ISPs) to block Malaysia Today website citing “insensitive, bordering on incitement” articles as the reason (the ban has been lifted).

Under the Multimedia Super Corridor’s 10-Point Bill of Guarantees, the Government has promised to “ensure no Internet censorship.”

Earlier in July, Catholic weekly Herald and Catholic Asian News received show-cause letters from the Home Ministry for reporting political issues on Anwar Ibrahim. Publications Control and Al-Quran Texts Unit senior officer Che Din Yusof claimed they had violated permit conditions.

In May, Pak Lah called on the authorities to take action against Karpal Singh for saying

that Sultan of Perak did not have jurisdiction over civil administration, a remark deemed seditious by UMNO politicians.

In April, the Home Ministry refused to renew the publishing permit of Tamil newspaper Makkai Osai for breaching licensing guidelines. The areas of violation were not specified. Permit was renewed after an appeal.

Corruption

Newly-elected Titiwangsa MP Dr Lo’ Lo’ Ghazali remarked that “... corruption is synonymous with City Hall (DBKL)” (*malaysiakini.com*, 7/4/08). On Sept 3, 15 residents from Medan Damansara lodged a report with the Anti-Corruption Agency against DBKL and its mayor for giving approval to hill development. A week before the report, a landslide occurred due to soil erosion from the hill (*The Star*, 3/9/08).

PRAY

- For a stop to racial and religious exploitation by political parties and individuals;
- Clean and transparent civil administration, just and righteous governance;
- Sensible and fair-minded local authorities and religious bodies which uphold freedom of religion for all and respect all religions;
- The people to respect one another, are open-minded and willing to dialogue, do not easily succumb to the agenda of unscrupulous politicians or religious extremists; and
- Against the spirit behind materialism, extremism and apathy.
- THE CHURCH: to be salt and light, Christlike in all our ways, bearing witness and presenting ourselves as role models in the society for the sake of God’s glory; unity of all churches, particularly the larger and more self-sufficient churches.

India In 1969 a Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) proselytiser named Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati established an Ashram (Hindu religious centre) in Kandhamal district, Orissa state, north-east India, and committed himself to countering the work of Christian missionaries. He never succeeded in stopping conversions to Christianity but, with state government support, he has turned Orissa into a tinderbox of communal tension.

On 23 August, Saraswati was ambushed and shot dead. From the evidence, his death was a targeted assassination by a group of Maoist guerrillas who are natural enemies of the caste-perpetuating right-wing Hindu nationalists.

Despite this, Hindu leaders in Orissa publicly charged the Christian community with killing Saraswati because of his anti-conversion campaign. A violent Hindu pogrom erupted and continues to rage and now engulfs nine districts, indicating a high level of VHP (Hindu World Council) orchestration. Tensions are especially high in Mangalore where there has also been rioting. Militants have promised more attacks and the BJP state government is launching an investigation into organisations that use foreign funds to allegedly forcibly convert Hindus to Christianity.

The situation is extremely serious. More than 50 Christians have been killed and multitudes have been raped, bashed, burned and slashed. Some 50,000 Christians are displaced. Even the relief camps are being attacked but, praise God, two attempts to poison their water supplies have been thwarted.

Furthermore, anti-Christian violence is now erupting in other states. Churches have been torched in Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka while nuns from Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity were violently assaulted in Chhattisgarh. The central

government appears paralysed.

Please pray: • for God's intervention; God to use the shame of this violence to trigger a national awakening in India; and • that the present troubles provide the Church with an opportunity to share and explain the gospel in ways previously unattainable.

Pray too for God to be a shield around His children, protecting them from violence and intervening to bring it to an end, pushing back the enemy; and • the 50,000 displaced Christians to find a unity previously unknown; may the Church emerge from this fire in solidarity, brotherly love and faith in Jesus Christ as the Holy Spirit forges Christian unity across race, caste and denomination.

Vietnam Catholics and Protestants in Vietnam have long sought the return of properties seized by the Communist Party. For years the Church has petitioned the government to no avail. Occasionally there is minimal appeasement, but eventually the confiscation and demolition resume. Now a spirit of prayer has gripped the Vietnamese Church.

In March, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South) petitioned 'The Church of God Everywhere' to support them in prayer for their 265 confiscated properties.

Meanwhile, Catholics in their thousands, led by their priests, bishops and the Archbishop of Hanoi, have been gathering at various seized properties to pray. These massive non-stop prayer vigil-protests have the government seriously rattled and a watershed moment looms. Will there be victory or violence?

Please pray for: • God, in answer to the prayers of many, to infiltrate and enlighten the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese masses, particularly those with influence (like the media) and those in authority: may their

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:8-9

hearts be turned towards 'truth, justice and charity' for the Church and ultimately the blessing of the nation and the glory of God; • Holy Spirit to work mightily within His Church, strengthening the body with faith and unity in preparation for days of liberty; and • all the priests and bishops, as well as Christian writers and lawyers who are imprisoned or under surveillance: may the Lord be their shield and strength and comfort.

China For almost 60 years they've heard the story that they did not need religion because the (Chinese Communist) Party will fill all their needs. That's not there anymore. The Chinese are turning to religion because there's an emptiness inside." – English teacher Ann Wilson, who went to China 20 years ago and, along with her husband David, runs a network of Christian teachers called Volunteers for China.

Although the Beijing Olympics has caused much of the world to acknowledge China's economic progress, China Aid Association, an organisation dedicated to persecuted believers in China, has revealed documentation showing the government forced local pastors to sign an agreement to shut down services and meetings for a three-month period surrounding the games. (worldnetdaily.com, 13 Aug.) The reason for the government's action is not known. In any case, human beings' longing to know God is ingrained within their hearts and no religion ban can ever douse that longing.

Continue to pray that those who seek God will be found by Him.