

EDITORIAL

# The 'I' Factor in Church Splits

In the past, doctrinal issues and heretical teaching were the main reasons for church splits and divisions. The scenario has changed over the years. Today, the main cause is most likely – the conflict of personalities.

A church on the verge of splitting may appear to be fighting over controversial issues, but in reality, it is the protracted struggle, clash or opposition between personalities, ideas, and interests of strong-willed individuals that are tearing the church apart.

Differences, even clashes, between leaders in a church do not in themselves constitute conflict of a destructive kind. Transparency in terms of views and expression of differences can be signs of vitality in a congregation. It is when we defy peaceful resolution and become protracted and entrenched in the personality clashes that the issues become contentious and destructive.

A church split usually finds its roots in our passion to make ourselves – our needs, our opinions, our group, our goals, our theology – the centre of our egoistic pursuit. It is the “I” factor; the self-centeredness and individualistic mind-set that cause the separation. The attitude of many Christians is that unless something represents their views, or conforms to their positions and beliefs, it is not acceptable.

Pride and obstinacy are the strongest advocates for church splits. The refusal to admit wrong and the unwillingness to



submit to authority inevitably lead to the breakup. Typically, the situation will be controlled and influenced by deception, manipulation and domination. It is the manifestation of such carnal acts that hurt and divide the Body.

James expressed clearly this weakness of the leadership of the church today. “What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and do not obtain; so you fight and wage war.” (James 4:1–2).

### Can any good come out of church splits?

Generally, one would view church splits as something sinful and in contradiction to God’s call for unity. A conflict between two parties in a church may at any time affect an entire congregation; unresolved tensions between pastors and leaders may rob the church of effective leadership; and disputes between members may lead

to fragmentation of the Body.

As a result, people are hurt; some leave the church or ministry, or worse leave the faith. The question often raised in times of conflict is: “Is it the will of God and is it biblical?”

Let us look at the biblical principle of divorce and derive a parallel from the word of Jesus in Matthew 19:8, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.” Jesus said the reason for this tolerance was the hardness of their hearts and because of this, they were permitted to divorce their wives.

Moses complained of the Israelites in his time, that *their hearts were hardened* (Deut. 9:6; 31:27) against God. This implied that their hearts were hardened against their relationships; they were generally violent and outrageous. They succumbed to their appetites and their passions, and if they were not allowed to divorce their wives, they would have treated them cruelly, to the point of murder.

Likewise, the weaknesses of human leaders, personality differences, and the inability to work together may necessitate the splits. It is tolerated, but not intended by God. Church splits occur out of expediency to minimise damage or hurt to relationships. The split is acceptable as long as the separation is *amicably* effected by all concerned parties.

The other justification of a church split is mentioned in Acts 15:39–40. There was a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over their choice of



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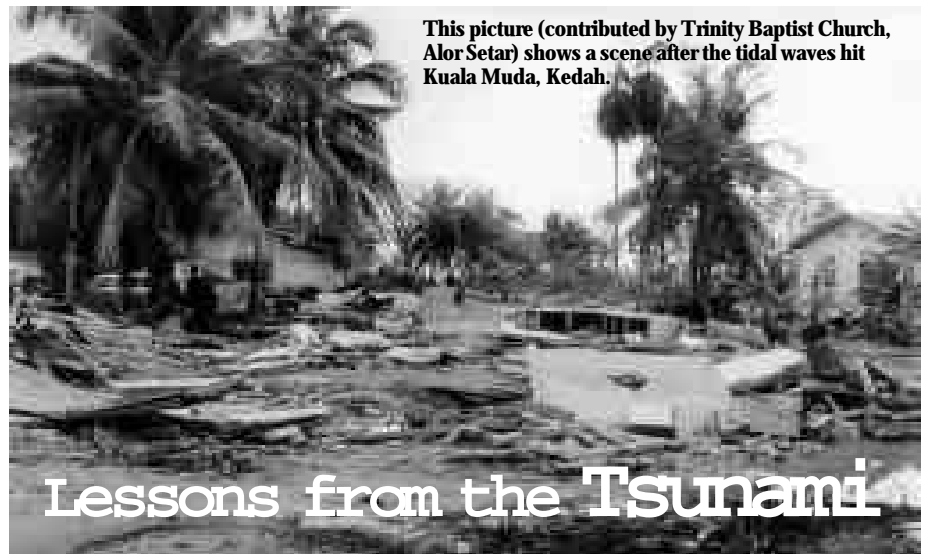
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This picture (contributed by Trinity Baptist Church, Alor Setar) shows a scene after the tidal waves hit Kuala Muda, Kedah.

## Lessons from the Tsunami

In mid-December 2004, massive floods submerged large sections of the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Some lives were lost and many people were evacuated.

Then the tsunami that resulted from the earthquake caused many more lives to be lost. Yet the damage inflicted on our shores pale in comparison to the devastation seen in countries such as Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, to name but a few. No one in the way of the waves was spared their impact. At last count, more than 150,000 had lost their lives.

Every day of our lives is potentially our last day on earth. I wonder what went through the minds of the thousands upon thousands as they saw the tidal waves approaching and as the waves crashed over them. The things they wanted to do but now would not have time for. The things they wanted to make right but did not get down to doing them.

Perhaps some intended to seek God some day but it was now too late. Were there Christians among those who perished who wanted to serve God, but procrastinated? Those who were overwhelmed did not expect the waves of death, but the waves came anyway.

This devastating occurrence, coupled with other destructive events around the world, is also a grim reminder of Jesus' soon return.

In response to a question to His disciples concerning signs of His second coming, Jesus said, "... many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For

nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains" (Matt. 24:3-8).

How then should we live in the light of life's uncertainties and Jesus' soon return? Peter tells us how. He said, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4:7-11).

Let us therefore:

- Live seriously and soberly – having a clear mind understanding of God's purposes and plans, always being self-disciplined, self-controlled (vs. 7).

- Live watching and praying – being alert and awake, not just only bringing prayer requests before Him but staying in close communion with the Lord by meditating on His Word (vs. 7). The Psalmist says, "... his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Psalm 1:2-3).

# PRAYER ALERT

NECF Malaysia has called for a round-the clock prayer season beginning Jan 21 to Feb 20 in response to the serious events plaguing the world and the country.

The Indian Ocean tsunami aftermath problems, the dengue danger in Peninsular Malaysia, and the continuing terrorist threat to the world at large are just a few of the issues that require our unceasing intercession. Recently, Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan reminded Asian governments not to be distracted by the tsunami disaster and relax their guard against terrorism (*The Star*, Jan 14). Just like the battle against terrorism must go on unhindered and with keen vigilance, our intercession to God must be passionate and 'without any rest'.

Isaiah 62: 6-7 say, " I have posted watchmen on your walls, Jerusalem. They will never be silent day or night.

**Whoever calls on the LORD, do not give yourselves any rest, and do not give him any rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it an object of praise throughout the earth (emphasis added)."**

Likewise, let us "not give ourselves any rest" (by our intercession) and "do not give Him any rest" (with our cries) as we commit to pray for His work and purposes to be fulfilled in our nation. Pray Psalm 46.

You may sign up for the half-hour slots:

- On our website [www.necf.org.my](http://www.necf.org.my); or
- Manually through your church (fill in a form); or
- SMS your slots to Ann Low at 016-334 9239; or
- Forward your slots to the NECF office by fax 03-7729 1139; phone 03-7727 8227; or e-mail [prayer@necf.org.my](mailto:prayer@necf.org.my)



• FROM FRONT COVER: THE 'I' FACTOR IN CHURCH SPLITS

co-workers for their missionary journey. The Greek word "parozymos" in the verses refers to "provoking, stirring up, arousing." It certainly indicated a very sharp contention between them.

Good came out of the dissension, for through it, two missionary journeys instead of one were made – one to Cyprus by Barnabas and Mark, the other to Syria and Cilicia and ultimately Europe by Paul and Silas. Probably both Paul and Barnabas were right in their assessments of Mark. However, because of the differences in their perception of the issue, they agreed to depart.

The lesson here is that the parties of contention must work towards amicable solutions for their differences and departure. As in the case of Paul and Barnabas, Paul later spoke of Barnabas in positive terms (1 Cor. 9:6; Col. 4:10), showing that they later reconciled.

The final outcome of a church split depends on the willingness of the concerned parties to amicably resolve the conflict. The success in the parties' future ministries also lie in the reason for the separation, and the willingness of the parties to assume responsibility of their weaknesses and failure. If the split is truly for the sake of the Kingdom, both parties' ministries will flourish.

However, church splits can be avoided if early intervention is sought. It is appropriate for the parties involved in the conflict to resolve the problems directly and personally according to the principles established in Matthew 18.

If after both parties have tried to resolve their issues between themselves and there is no sign of progress or potential reconciliation, the leadership must be willing and humble to seek third party mediation. The involvement of a credible Christian leader may help to resolve the conflict or at least minimise the damage to human relationships.

In Malaysia and Singapore, church splits have brought forth church growth with the emergence of mega churches. But this growth must not be used to justify church splits. It is the mercy and divine hand of our God who is able to work good out of a bad situation.

Many churches in Malaysia have experienced restoration and reconciliation of hurts and wounds as a result of past bitter splits. Some have experienced tremendous church growth while others have been successful in their respective ministries.

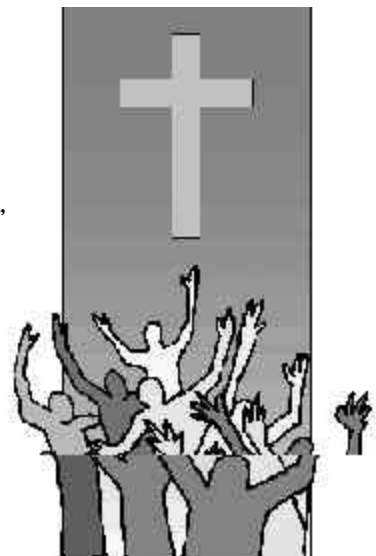
## Conclusion

The issues are sometimes not so clear-cut. For example, personality clashes can be disguised as doctrinal conflicts. Those who think they are right doctrinally can also feel it is their right to have things their way. Paul told the "strong" in Corinth that he had given up his right to receive life support and that they too should give up their rights for the sake for "the weak" (1 Cor. 9).

Human nature likes to emphasise "personal right". The Bible requires that we give up our rights for the sake of the Church. Is the Bible anti-individual? No, because a true individual is one who has self-control over his/her own desires and is able to defer to others. This is a profound paradox. May God help us to obey His Word.

*Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Cor. 9:19)*

**"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"  
- Psalm 133:1**



# Bro. Yun: Rumours Obstruct Gospel

**T**he *Heavenly Man's* visit to Malaysia caused quite a stir with thousands flocking to his meetings in Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Ipoh, Malacca and Johor Baru. At the end of his whirlwind trip spanning the north and south of Peninsular Malaysia, many people had responded to his challenges to: receive Jesus as saviour, commit their lives to sharing the gospel, or participate in the *Back to Jerusalem* (BTJ) mission to bring the gospel to the many nations lying between China and Jerusalem.

Liu Zhenying – or Brother Yun as he is known worldwide – has indeed been an impactful witness for the Lord here. Yet, his visit was not without controversy. Even as he was preaching, e-mails questioning and attacking his authenticity were circulating fast. Most of them pointed to a website that was specially set up to refute his testimony, alleging he is a fraud who is out to gain wealth and status. The website carries pictures of several China house church leaders – such as Samuel Lamb Lin Xiangao, Moses Xie Moshan and Allen Yuan – signing a letter calling for his repentance.



*Berita NECF* executive secretaries **Ong Juat Heng and Ngeh Hoong Eng** met up with Brother Yun several minutes after his arrival back in Petaling Jaya from his Ipoh meetings, and unabashedly raised the allegations and posed other questions to him. The interview lasted less than an hour, for he was being hurried off to a dinner and was set to travel to Malacca and then Johor Baru the following day.

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## **Brother Yun, how do you reply to the accusations that you are a fraud and that your testimony is a big lie?**

Good tree bears good fruit, bad tree bears bad fruit. From the fruit, you can know whether the tree is good or bad. What people say about me is not important. What is important is that Jesus knows who I am and I know who I am. I know whom I serve. I actually don't like to explain or clarify those attacks because according to God's Word, everyone has to bear his own cross to follow Jesus. But I have absolutely no ill feelings towards those who have attacked me.

Some people say I'm a liar, my testimony is false. Actually these are not necessary because firstly, they don't glorify God. Secondly, they won't edify the listeners, and thirdly the people (who make the allegations) won't get any benefit. I was in Paris in early January at the annual BTJ meeting. It was the third meeting and it was the same with many e-mails and phone calls asking people to avoid the meeting. But despite all the rumours, over 1,000 people turned up and many people accepted Christ.

After the meeting, several people came up to me and apologised to me for not attending the last two meetings because they listened to the rumours. They wanted to attend this time to find out for themselves. The rumours are a hindrance to the gospel and the Great Commission.

At the meeting there were two other speakers, Dr Ernest Chan (principal of a leadership institute in the US) and Dennis Balcombe (Senior Pastor of Revival Christian Church in Hong Kong). They told me they were not happy with the rumours

and if the rumours were not clarified, that would hinder people from coming to Jesus and obstruct the BTJ movement. They said they would write a letter to that will help to clarify the rumours. I think the letter has been faxed to the Singapore BTJ office. I realise that wherever I go, there will be opposition.

## **Can you comment about your experience in prison where you fasted for 74 days without water and food? Some people have said you are claiming to be greater than Jesus who only fasted 40 days.**

Let me clarify that it wasn't my intention to fast and pray at that time. At that time, I wanted to die because I was not able to preach the gospel, to serve Him. There was no point to live. Also, I did not want to betray my brothers and sisters because the prison guards wanted me to name them. I did not want to be Judas, to betray them. So I decided not to talk, drink and eat, hoping I would die. But even though I did not eat and drink, I did not die for He has other plans.

## **The allegations against you give the impression that the house churches in China are very divided.**

The situation in China is the same as other places. There are denominations. I believe the BTJ vision is from God and no matter how many people oppose it, God's will shall not be hindered. During my time here in Malaysia, I have been really

encouraged by the response from the people to the vision. We don't have to bother about rumours. You see the fruit and you recognise the tree.

### **Do you still keep in contact with the other house church leaders in China?**

In this era, communication is advance. Even while in Malaysia, I'm constantly on the telephone with the leaders. China is no longer closed. Now, if you have a passport and visa, you can leave the country. So every year, they will come out of China and we will meet at some place for one to three weeks to exchange news and to pray. (For security reason, Brother Yun asked that we do not mention the places that they have met thus far.)

### **How many countries have you visited thus far and what has been the response to the BTJ vision from the countries you have visited?**

Not more than 40 countries. The response is good but I would say that it has been most impactful in England. In South-east Asia, the Christians in Philippines have responded very well. One Christian there donated a five-storey building to be used as a training centre for the BTJ mission and right now there are over 80 people from China being trained there.

The response in Singapore has also been very good, even though they did not hear about the vision from me. Some

Christians there went straight to China and found out what the vision was. They have started a BTJ office in Singapore. After coming to Malaysia and seeing the response, I believe that Malaysia will be in the frontline of the BTJ movement because there's unity among your pastors. I know that when I go off, Satan will continue to try to destroy the work. But fear not, nobody can destroy what God has planned.

### **Compared to your life in China where you endured severe hardship, life now must be far more comfortable. What temptations do you face and how do you keep yourself right?**

***“From the fruit, you can know whether the tree is good or bad.”***

The greatest temptation is man's applause. This is why before I preach, I always ask people to give God a clap offering. If God's grace leaves me, there's nothing I can do. About money, I've already decided long ago I won't bother about it. If anybody asks me how much I receive (here in Malaysia), I'll ask him to ask Rev. Wong (NECF's Secretary-General). It's the organisation that invites me to come, so they are in charge of the money. My responsibility is to preach the message.

Another thing, I have decided long ago never to be alone with a woman. But I think the main accusation now is that I claim to be an evangelist. I never said that. But because people have responded to the salvation call through my messages, they call me an evangelist.

Every day, I spend at least two hours with God to hear Him. I don't want to hear my voice, other people's voice or Satan's voice. I want to hear God's voice.

## **NECF Foundation Anniversary**

THE NECF Foundation has chosen Malacca as the venue for its first anniversary celebration to raise awareness of its ministry to the peninsula's southern churches. The foundation will join hands with the Malacca Pastors Fellowship to organise the celebration to be held in May.

Look out for further details in the next issue.

### **NECF To Host Regional Prayer Consultation**

THE NECF Malaysia Prayer Commission will host the third South-East Asia Prayer Consultation in October in Kuala Lumpur. Christians leading in their countries' prayer movements from 11 nations in the region are expected to attend the yearly gathering, which started in 2003 on the initiative of the International Prayer Council. The consultation aims to network the prayer movements in the region and update participants on the prayer efforts in each country.

NECF Prayer Commission Executive Secretary Ann Low said NECF agreed to host the gathering when she attended the 2<sup>nd</sup> consultation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia last November.

In May, the commission will hold the 2nd National Prayer Consultation, also in Kuala Lumpur. This annual event, which started last year, is a gathering of local prayer leaders from all regions throughout Malaysia. They will spend three days beginning May 1 exchanging news and discussing ways to enhance the prayer network within the country.

## **New Members**

We welcome the following into our Fellowship as **Ordinary Members:**

- **Persatuan Persaudaraan Kristian Rumah Victory, Kuala Lumpur**, represented by *Mr Mok Sew Kwong*
- **Triang Christian Church, Pahang**, pastored by *Lim Fong Yock*
- **Sidang Kepenuhan Kristus, Malaysia**, pastored by *Hasin bin Pieh*
- **Jubilee Outreach, Penang**, pastored by *Alfred Phua*
- **Charis Sanctuary AG, Kuala Lumpur**, pastored by *Looi Kok Kim*
- **Calvary Charismatic Centre, Sandakan**, pastored by *James Kwan Kok Fatt*
- **Sanctuary Praise, Rawang**, pastored by *Allan Tan*
- **The Salvation Army, Malaysia**, represented by *Gillian Downer*

We also welcome five people as **Associate Members:** Mr Danil Raut, Pr Chok Fui Lin, Pr Christie Judhisthi s/o Mohadebo, Mr Satyaseelan a/l Seenivasan and Ms Naomi Chee Mee Ching.

# Chinese Commission Formed



From left: Hoong Eng (Executive Secretary), Pr Grace (Prayer), Rev. Foo (Chairperson), Pr Hiew (Vice-Chairman), Rev. Wong (Social Concerns and Rep. of Seremban and Malacca), Elder Lim (East Coast Rep.), and Pr Albert (Southern Rep.).

## COMMISSION LINE-UP

**Chairman:** Rev. Foo Moy Ping (Academic Dean of Jubilee Initiative Malaysia and NECF Council Member)

**Vice-Chairman:** Rev. Hiew Yee Onn (Chinese pastor of New Life Restoration Centre, Petaling Jaya)

**Secretary:** Sis. Ngeh Hoong Eng (NECF Executive Secretary)

**Prayer:** Pr Grace Lee (Chinese pastor FGA Kuala Lumpur)

**Social Concerns and Representative of Seremban and Malacca:** Rev. Paulus Wong Too Tiang (Chinese pastor of Agape Assembly, Seremban and Chinese Language Division Supervisor of Assembly of God Malaysia)

**Representative of Southern Region:** Pr Albert Cheng (Senior Pastor of Full Gospel Church, Johor Baru)

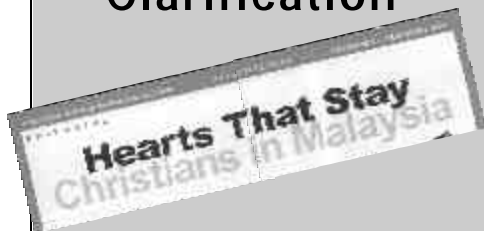
**Representative of East Coast Region:** Bro. Thomas Lim Kok Beng (Elder of Calvary Charismatic Church, Kuantan)

THE NECF Malaysia Chinese Commission has finally been formed with the appointment of six Christian leaders as commission members. The formation will further accelerate the work of uniting, equipping and strengthening Chinese-speaking evangelical churches in Malaysia.

The commission members, who will serve a two-year term beginning Jan 1,

represent the Chinese-speaking churches in all regions in Peninsular Malaysia except Penang and Ipoh. Suitable representatives for both regions will be appointed in due time. With the support of the six members, the work of mobilising and coordinating NECF's projects, such as the yearly 40-day National Fast and Prayer, will be enhanced.

## Clarification



WE refer to the editorial in Berita NECF, November–December 2004.

The comment made on John Calvin's acts in Geneva, such as engaging spiritual policemen to ensure the people did their devotions, was not meant to deny his greater positive contributions to the Kingdom of God.

It has also been brought to our

attention that Michael Servetus' death sentence was not Calvin's personal decision but that of a 25-member council. In fact, Calvin appealed for beheading as a less painful death (instead of burning at the stake) but his appeal was rejected.

We regret the misrepresentation that may have arisen.

• FROM PAGE 2: LESSONS FROM THE TSUNAMI

- Live with fervent love – exerting your love to the utmost degree, just like an athlete in a race. Seek to demonstrate agape love. Love even your enemies and forgive, because love forgives (vs.8).

- Live showing hospitality without grumbling – show acceptance, love and kindness. Be gentle and sincere. As you have opportunity, do good to all, especially those in the Body of Christ (vs. 9).

- Live using the gifts God has given to you – both natural abilities such as music, art etc. as well as God-given spiritual gifts and abilities such as teaching, preaching, prophecy and other godly graces. Let us serve one another with these gifts (vs. 10–11).

This year, determine to be “Good stewards of the manifold grace of God. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

## CONDOLENCES

NECF Malaysia extends condolences to the family of the late Dr Abraham Peter Tong who went home to the Lord on last Dec 12. Together with nine others, Dr Tong founded the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship Malaysia in 1979 and was the National President from 1988 until his departure.



Dr Tong was credited for the growth of the ministry in Malaysia which grew from a single chapter in Kuala Lumpur to over 100 chapters throughout Malaysia in 25 years.

Dr Tong left behind his wife, Sarah Maureen; daughter Dr Melinda Tong and her husband Dr David Fong, and son Dr David Tong; and two grandchildren Rachel and Joshua.

# Lights Up

## NECF 40-Day National Fast and Prayer

**T**he yearly 40-Day National Fast and Prayer that culminates on the country's independence day (Aug 31), is a key event in the Malaysian evangelical calendar. It is one rare occasion that draws together churches throughout the country – West and East – to do one thing: fast and pray for the nation.

NECF Malaysia started the intercession campaign in 2001 with the conviction that prayers would change the political, social and economic and religious landscape of a nation, according

to NECF Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong.

The campaign kicked off with 40,000 Christians participating and by 2004, it had grown to 90,000 participants. (The figures are based on the sale of the prayer booklets used as devotional guides during the 40-day event.)

The spirited growth within the short four-year period points to a rising prayer movement in the Malaysian Evangelical Church. "The water level of prayer is slowly but surely rising," said Grace Hee, Chairperson of the NECF Prayer Commission. The commission is directly responsible for mobilising the campaign.

And the movement is not confined to the adults – children and youths too seem to be hopping into the intercession bandwagon, judging from the sale of 20,000 children's prayer booklets that first

went on sale last year.

In addition, the yearly fast and prayer movement has gone beyond the evangelical circle, with Christians from the mainline and Roman Catholic churches signing up. Increasingly, Malaysian Christians, irrespective of denominations and theological leanings, are recognising the crucial need to intercede for the country, and the NECF-initiated event provides the platform for them to come together to petition God.

Furthermore, the event is an avenue for Malaysian Christians, who have emigrated or are living overseas, to pray for Malaysia.

As Grace pointed out, "I know all Christians believe in prayer. And the 40-day initiative has given them a season and reason during the year to pray for the nation."

**"...40-day initiative has given them a season and reason during the year to pray for the nation."  
– Grace Hee**



2002 Merdeka Prayer Rally in Kuala Lumpur







**LIGHTS UP:** Church representatives at the first 'Lighting Up Our Nation' Merdeka rally for the Klang Valley region in 2000.

Rev. Wong added, "Unless God intervenes in the establishment of a nation, any human effort will be futile in sustaining peace and harmony."

This year, the commission is targeting at least 100,000 Christians to "flood the season".

**HOW IT BEGAN**

*Lighting Up Our Nation* actually began in the year 2000 when NECF mobilised churches in 14 capital cities to hold combined-church prayer rallies on the eve of Merdeka (Malaysia's independence day).

The event was a memorable one with the telephone link-up from Kuala

denominations gathered for the first time for worship and prayer. Churches also reported breakthroughs in reaching out to their communities when they took on community projects, such as hospital visitations, street clean-ups, feeding the poor, carnivals and fun fairs.

**INTRODUCING THE NATIONAL FAST AND PRAYER**

Spurred by churches' glowing response to the *Lighting Up Our Nation* initiative, and sensing God's direction to strengthen and hasten the intercession movement, NECF decided in 2001 to launch a nationwide 40-day fast and prayer that would lead up to Merdeka Day.

The campaign would be based on Isaiah 58's call to "loose the chains of injustice, untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke."

NECF had hoped that the fast and prayer would make a deep impact on the Malaysian Church, which in turn would impact the country.

And what an impact it has since

Lumpur to a few major cities. Some 100,000 participants listened in to the conversations between Rev. Wong and representatives from the other cities. The experience inspired a wonderful sense of unity, as the churches felt connected as one Church.

Churches were also urged to carry out community work and take part in their towns' Merdeka celebrations or parades on Merdeka day.

The 2000 event saw some breakthroughs in church unity in several places where churches from different

made. But first, let's look at the prayer booklets, produced by NECF and written by its Prayer Commission members, which served as a daily devotional guide for the 40-day fasting period.

**PRAYER BOOKLET**

The prayer booklet is an integral part of the 40-day National Fast and Prayer, for besides being a daily devotional guide for the fasting period, it indicates the number of Christians taking part in the event.

The first booklet published in 2001 was a simple 24-page A5 guide with only the Bible references for the day's reading and prayer pointers.

In writing the guide, NECF had to be mindful that Christians from all walks of life and various denominations would be participating in the national campaign. Hence, the booklet had to cater to a wide range of Christians with varied opinions on fasting. Prayer Commission Executive Secretary Ann Low recalled some responses to the commission's proposal on the various types of fast that participants could choose.

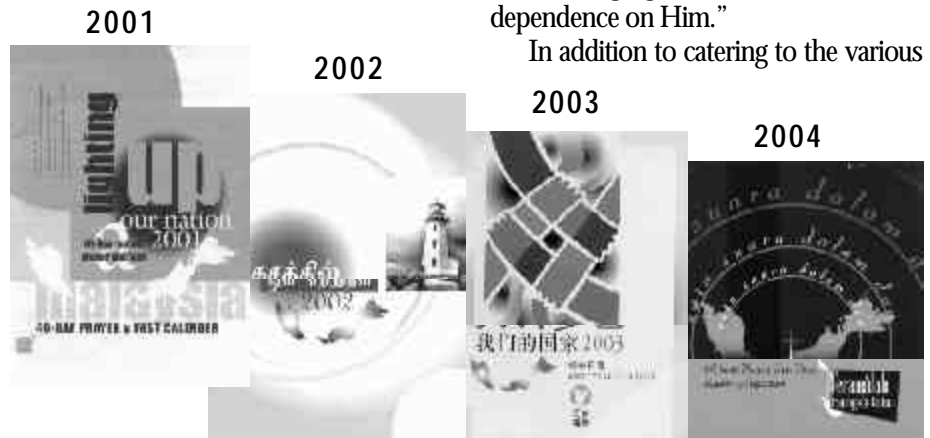
"We listed several types of fast, such as the total fast where the participant abstained completely from solid foods, and the one-meal fast where the day's food intake excluded one meal. We also mentioned the 'Daniel Fast', which ruled out eating meats and other favourite delicacies or favourite foods such as coffee.

"Some people were not happy with our coffee suggestion, which came as a surprise," she laughed. "But on the whole, this first attempt was a good start as it gave us a better understanding of the Church in the different way we approach fasting but ultimately, the goal is the same. That is, fasting and praying are simply coming before God with a humble heart, acknowledging our need of Him and dependence on Him."

In addition to catering to the various



**COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION:** Kuantan Christians helping to clean up the Kuantan beach on Aug 31, 2000.







Illustrations, drawn by children, filled the inside of the children's prayer booklet.



approaches to fasting, NECF also had to consider the different language-speaking Christians. Since a national fast should encompass the whole nation, NECF decided to print the booklets in the four major languages – English, Chinese, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil.

Forty thousand copies of the first prayer booklet rolled off the press and were snapped up within a short period, mainly by NECF member churches, who paid 50 sen per booklet to cover the cost of production.

The following year, NECF started work early on the booklet and the end product was a 60-page guide with additional information on fasting, a weekly theme for more focused praying, space to record the participant's reflection and short meditation notes.

Encouraged by the previous year's good response, NECF increased the quantity of printing to 60,000 copies. This time round, the booklet came with a charity meals-saving paper box for the participant to put in the money saved from his fast (see "Money for Charity").

Once again, the booklet/savings box sets, at RM1 per set, were snapped up by NECF member churches and others, signifying a mounting interest in the

prayer campaign.

In 2003, with more experience at hand, NECF strengthened the contents of the booklet by including a section on praying daily for other countries to reflect NECF's desire to look outwards into the welfare of other countries. This time round, 67,000 sets (booklet and meals-saving box) were sold.

Last year, the figure increased to over 90,000, thanks in part to the new children's edition – published in English, Chinese and Bahasa Melayu – which reached about 20,000 children and teens. Devotional thoughts for the children's version were written by teens aged 12 to 16 years and the booklet was attractively designed to draw the children to the contents.

### MONEY FOR CHARITY

A year after launching the National Fast and Prayer in 2001, NECF added the charity dimension by urging participants to donate the money saved from their fast to charitable organisations. The money was collected by their churches and sent to NECF, who then distributed it to selected Christian and non-Christian organisations, both here and overseas.

Rev. Wong said the idea of donating the money saved from fasting came from Isaiah 58:6-7, "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?"

**CHEERFUL GIVERS:** Some participants brought the money they had saved from fasting to the Klang Valley Merdeka Prayer Rally in 2003. NECF Finance Executive Kathryn Tan (seated)



"Different approaches, same goal." – Ann Low commenting on fasting.

This was followed by God's promise in the next two verses, "Then your light shall break forth like the morning...Then you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am'."

Right from the start, it was agreed that about a quarter of the collection would be given to foreign welfare projects, including those in Muslim countries. Rev. Wong explained that by giving to the needy in other lands, "we will learn to look beyond our own needs."

Furthermore, charity should be extended to those in need, regardless of their race and religion. "By giving to our needy Muslim friends, we hope to defuse the conflict between the Muslim and Christian worlds," he added.

On the average, 265 churches send in their collection yearly to NECF. A cursory glance at the contributing churches shows that many are located in the smaller towns, indicating that the campaign was especially beneficial to small-town churches. Though the amount they gave was smaller compared with the bigger-town churches, "what little they gave came from their big hearts," observed Ann.

To date, about RM1.675 million (as at Dec 16, 2004) has been collected and RM1.014 million has been distributed. The balance will be given out as and when the needs arise.

### ROUND-THE-CLOCK INTERCESSION

Living amidst a technology-powered environment, it was inevitable that the 40-day Fast and Prayer event hit the Internet sooner or later.

In 2004, it went on-line with the introduction of *Praying Round-the-Clock* (PRC) on the NECF website, with a sign-up format allowing Christians to log in their prayer time slots and the towns they wished to pray for. Alternatively, they could e-mail their choices to NECF or sign up manually through their churches.

**Chinese-speaking participants show their love for the nation at the Klang Valley Chinese Merdeka Rally in 2003.**



PRC, a 24-hour intercession programme throughout the 40-day fasting season, has its Scriptural basis on Jesus' parable in Luke 18 – men ought always to pray and not lose heart – and Leviticus 24 – the fire on the altar “must not go out”.

The programme focuses on praying for towns and regions throughout Malaysia with the hope that this would help change the spiritual, social, economic and political landscapes of the locales.

A total of 257 towns were listed in the website for prayer. The first attempt drew over 1,500 people who prayed over the towns within the four regions (Central, East Coast, Northern and Southern) in West and East Malaysia.

### **MERDEKA PRAYER RALLY**

The combined-churches prayer rallies are



**Flags are an important part of the Merdeka prayer rallies. Below pix shows NECF staff-members at the prayer rally preparing the *jalur gemilang* for distribution to participants. With flags raised (above pix), participants would shout “Merdeka, Jesus is Lord” at the stroke of midnight.**



the climax of forty days of fast and prayer, a once-a-year occasion for churches of different denominations to celebrate together God's goodness to the nation and intercede for the rulers and leaders of our land.

They are held in cities throughout the country, usually on Merdeka eve, though some places have held the rallies in the midst of the fasting season to accommodate their churches' schedule.

Usually, the pastors fellowships of the towns organise the rallies, guided by a standard programme prepared by NECF. Where there is no pastors fellowship in the town, NECF would organise the rallies with help from the representatives from various churches there.

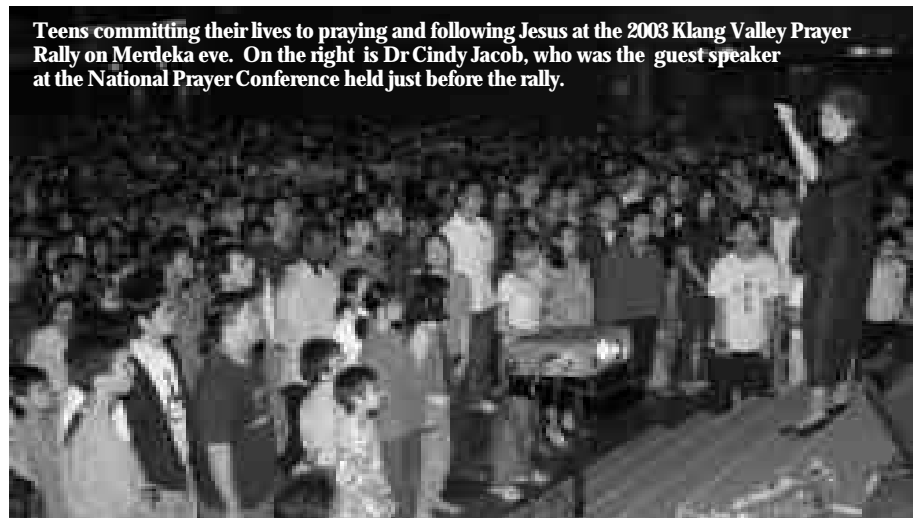
More than just an occasion for churches in the same location to come together for prayer, the Merdeka prayer rallies have become a unifying point for the churches.

In some towns, the prayer rallies were the first occasions where churches in the towns assembled for worship and prayer. Banting and Batu Pahat were two such towns. The rallies therefore represented a breakthrough in church unity.



**In recognition of the evangelicals' effort in promoting nation welfare during the Merdeka season, the Government in 2003 started sending its representatives to the Klang Valley Merdeka Prayer Rally. Above pix shows the then Minister of Energy, Communications and Multimedia Datuk Amar Leo Moggie reading a message from Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at the 2003 rally, while left pix shows Ministers in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili and Tan Sri Bernard Dompok (2nd and 3rd from left respectively) at last year's rally.**

**Teens committing their lives to praying and following Jesus at the 2003 Klang Valley Prayer Rally on Merdeka eve. On the right is Dr Cindy Jacob, who was the guest speaker at the National Prayer Conference held just before the rally.**



## **BEACON OF LIGHT**



THE churches' increasing willingness to consider the *Lighting Up Our Nation* programme as a necessary event in their yearly calendar has been a big boost for all who have laboured in the ministry of intercession.

The spillover effect is the growing church unity that is demonstrated in the Merdeka prayer rallies. In addition, the programme has stirred many Malaysian Christians to have a greater passion and love towards the country, and instilled in them a more prayerful attitude for the nation.



# Waves of Support for Tsunami Victims

God for the excellent spirit of Christian love and cooperation (among the churches). My prayer would be for the Church of Christ to rise up to this occasion to be involved in the lives of the affected villages, sharing the kindness and love of God with no strings attached.”

Over in Sungei Petani, Kedah, the pastors fellowship met on Jan 12 and decided to pool resources together to further help the victims in Kuala Muda. Earlier, individual churches visited the relief centres on their own and distributed food, clothings and cash. Trinity Baptist Church distributed food aid to victims with the support of NECF, which contributed over RM1,700 to encourage the church in its relief effort.

Charismatic Christian Assembly (CCC) members visited the disaster area at least seven times and has thus far given out over RM8,000 in cash and kind to some 50 families. The church's elder, Dr Sunny Tneoh, said that besides cash, they gave the families cooking utensils and gas cylinders so that they could cook for Hari Raya Haji.

He added that his church has committed to visit the families monthly for the next 12 months, and are also raising funds to help the fishermen repair their damaged boats.

## NECF Tsunami Fund Update

Collection as at Jan 26 – RM235,852  
NECF will continue to receive donations on behalf of its partners who are working in the affected places. Please send your donation to:

NECF Malaysia  
32, Jalan SS2/103,  
47400 Petaling Jaya  
Selangor



**Pulau Betong fishermen hope to get back to sea soon once their boats are repaired, thanks in part to the cash gift from Penang churches under the Love Penang Network group and Penang Pastors Fellowship headed respectively by Pr Koe Choon Huan (front row, far right) and Pr Andrew Chong (back row, far left).**

IN response to the Tsunami catastrophe, NECF Malaysia contributed a total of RM136,000 to four separate groups coordinating relief work in their regions.

The Sri Lanka Evangelical Alliance and Indonesia Evangelical Alliance each received an initial sum of RM38,000. NECF is considering giving more as it awaits reports from its two counterparts on the progress of relief work in their regions.

Locally, RM50,000 was distributed to victims in Penang, Kedah and Perlis. The amount was handed over to NECF's official representative, Rev. Lim Soon Hock, who is coordinating relief work with the various aid organisations and churches. Rev. Lim is senior pastor of Georgetown Baptist Church and also an NECF council member. NECF also handed RM10,000 to CREST (Crisis Relief Services and Training).

Meanwhile, northern churches are pooling their resources together to help

the victims. The *Love Penang Network* (LPN) together with the Penang Pastors Fellowship (PPF) immediately established a fund to help the affected ones in Penang island.

Both PPF and LPN comprise some 50 churches from various denominations. On Jan 6, the representatives visited Pulau Betong in Balik Pulau and distributed RM60,000 to 40 fishermen whose boats were destroyed in the incident.

LPN has also suggested to churches to “adopt” villages for better follow-up and “holistic” support. “I believe the churches here will cooperate to make this a reality in the near future,” said LPN chairman Pr Koe Choon Huan. He added that currently, two churches are working together to visit the affected families in one village, while a few churches are working on another village.

Because of the help rendered, many homes have been opened for visits and counselling. Pr Koe commented, “I thank



**Left pix: Trinity Baptist Church members donated food items to the Kuala Muda relief centre in Sg Petani, Kedah. Their donations were received by volunteers manning the centre.**



**Right pix: Members from Charismatic Christian Assembly with some of the affected families after one of their visits.**

# Early Christmas Cheer for the Needy

CHRISTMAS came early last year to 51 local charitable organisations throughout the country when they received cheques totalling RM360,000 from NECF Malaysia. At a simple ceremony at the NECF office last November, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Maximus Ongkili gave away the cheques on behalf of NECF to representatives of the organisations run by Christians and other religious groups.

The money was part of the over half a million ringgit raised at the 2003 NECF 40-Day National Fast and Prayer, an annual drive organised by NECF in conjunction with Merdeka Day to mobilise Christians to fast and pray for the country's welfare.

NECF had earlier given RM100,000 from the 2003 collection to the Darfur Children's Fund while another RM20,000 was given to the Haiti Children's Home.

Before giving out the cheques, Dr Ongkili thanked NECF for partnering the government in caring for the poor and needy of society. At a press conference after the ceremony, NECF Secretary-General Rev. Wong Kim Kong said the focus of giving for the 2004 collection would be education and social development. He explained that contributions would be made to schools, especially those in rural areas, that require funds for building repairs or facilities, and projects that promote community development.

However, NECF will continue to allocate a quarter of the yearly collection to foreign welfare projects, particularly those in Muslim countries.

By giving to the needy in other lands, "we will learn to look beyond our own



**Datuk Dr Ongkili presenting a cheque to a representative while Rev. Wong looks on. On the far left is Datuk Dr Lim Thuan Seng, Bukit Gasing MP.**

needs," Rev. Wong said. Charity should be extended to those in need, irrespective of their religion or race, he added. "We also hope that our contributions to our Muslim friends will help to defuse the conflict between the Christian and Muslim worlds," he said.

## New Cup for Tea Affair

ABOUT 150 people attended last December NECF Thanksgiving Tea (Klang Valley region), jointly organised by the NECF Prayer and Research commissions. The yearly gathering was initiated by the NECF Prayer Commission in 2001 as an occasion for Christians involved in the ministry of intercession to gather for reflection and thanksgiving.

Last year, the Prayer Commission felt that the partnership of the Research Commission would make the occasion more beneficial to participants. At the gathering, Research Commission chairman Steven Wong explained that knowledge of current issues would lead to more specific and accurate intercession.

Research Executive Secretary Lim Siew Foong then presented a short talk on religious liberty in Malaysia. She touched on the various state laws that restrict the propagation of religions and the difficulty civil courts are encountering in exercising impartiality when hearing conversion cases. Siew Foong highlighted several current court cases that relate to the individuals' rights to practise the religions of their choices, such as the Lina Joy case.

Participants then gathered in small groups to pray over the various issues raised. The meeting concluded with a time of fellowship over traditional Malaysian tea-time snacks. One participant shared, "It's so easy to forget that all we have come from the Lord. This Thanksgiving Tea is a reminder to express our heartfelt gratitude to the Lord."

A week after the Klang Valley tea gathering, the Kuantan pastors fellowship held its own Thanksgiving Tea attended by some 70 people from seven churches. The gathering was in line with NECF's plan to make the yearly NECF Thanksgiving Tea a regional affair outside of the Klang Valley. Prayer Executive Secretary Ann Low and Siew Foong were at the Kuantan gathering to share what God had been doing the whole year.

## Drunk Before Dawn Dazzles Crowd

IN the early 1900s, Borneo was a mysterious land, a huge island in the South China Sea, alive with stories of wild men, headhunters and the White Rajahs. It was against this backdrop that the story of SIB began, and *Drunk before Dawn, The Musical* was set.

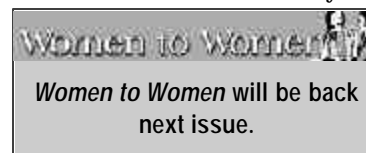


The musical, produced by SIB KL in celebration of its 10th anniversary, was a showcase of young Malaysian talents, with composers, orchestrator, playwright and lyricists, all aged below 25. The musical was staged to standing ovations at four performances last December to over 4000 people.

But more than a glamorous display of vocal and musical talents, drama prowess and special effects, the musical was a celebration of the fortitude of Christian brotherhood, a powerful testimony of a group of people moving constantly in a unified direction, fulfilling their destiny and His purpose, resonating God's grace and mercies at every turn.

Today, SIB has gone beyond the shores of Borneo. In just under 10 years, SIB planted 35 churches in Peninsular Malaysia with SIB KL as the sole English-speaking congregation.

At the church's anniversary dinner attended by 2000 people, its senior pastor, Dr Chew Weng Chee, challenged those present to press on and take the next decade with a renewed passion.



**T**he Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines "a crony" as "a close friend; companion; close associate (noun)". In the business world, there are further implications to the words 'crony' and 'cronyism'. The latter, in particular, is taken to include the cosy and often corrupt connections between politicians and businesses.

Linkages between business and government or business and politics are frowned upon because of the basic premise that such intertwined relationships lead to unfair trade practices and biased awards of contracts. It is no longer know-how (meritocracy) that dictates the recipient of the lucrative business contracts but know-who (cronyism) who wins the day.

Against the background of globalisation and international investment, it cannot be denied that Asian business practices, cultures and values are very much alive. Before a judgment call is made – that is cronyism is bad and Asian businesses and politicians need to get their house in order – it would be opportune to understand Asian culture and then later derive a biblical perspective on ethics and cronyism.

The root of cronyism is not economics but politics – more specifically, loyalty to the ruling elite. This goes back to the days when royalty offered favours to certain segments of the citizenry. Perhaps it is this sheep-like loyalty that has turned many businessmen into servile cronies.

This "kowtow" disease, however, brings many economic advantages. Licenses that may normally take months or years, or even refused, can be miraculously processed with clinical efficiency if the right politician or high government official is known. Loan officers can be transformed into the most generous and accommodating bankers if the right name is dropped.

On a more practical level, this servility is expressed in the form of gift giving to the ruling elite (note the distinction with bribes!). These can represent appreciation or a desire to reciprocate for mutual benefit. Some say that cronies may even deliver. Privatised superhighways, breathtaking airports, glittering towers of office blocks, monuments to a nation's greatness, may all be done by so-called

# Cronies or Buddies?

By Cheong Seng Gee

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*"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference."*

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cronies.

## **Guanxi**

In order to be successful in the Asian business context, a crony or tycoon (used interchangeably here) must be a recognised master of the art of *guanxi* (personal relationships).

A case in point is the venerable Li Ka-shing, whose network of connections was reported as incomparable by Asiaweek. He became a folk hero of sorts in his hometown of Chaozhou in southern China, for his generous donation in building a university. He was said to have shared breakfast congee with Jiang Zemin, the (then) premier of China.

When Jiang went to Hong Kong, first, for the 1997 handover from the British, and then for the opening of Chek Lap Kok airport, he stayed at Li's hotel both times. This was said to be a special honour and privilege accorded to Li. Also, Li's partner in developing Beijing commercial complexes was reported to be Tung Chee-hwa, a long-time friend before becoming the chief executive of Hong Kong.

Would tapping such ties to facilitate the making of business be any different from either cronyism/corruption?

Interestingly enough, it was a European Parliament report on post-1997 Hong Kong, which cited the "undue and dominant influence" of some local tycoons and said that Li's family businesses "account for between one-quarter and one-third of stock market capitalisation."

At one point, the (former) Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir himself jokingly said that all cronies were his "friends".

The big questions that arise are: (a) Is there a distinction between *guanxi* and cronyism? (b) Should one be tolerated or encouraged and the other frowned upon? (c) What is the difference between doing business among friends who are trusted,

honest and reliable thus having unfair advantages versus offering business contracts on an open bidding basis?

## **Gifts or bribes?**

It is important to think as a Christian within a background of Asian cultural norms and practices. Otherwise, we might be guilty of 'throwing the baby with the bathwater'.

Relationships in our culture are often, though not exclusively, built on the giving of gifts. But how do we draw the dividing line between a bribe and a gift that is given in appreciation and/or to cement a relationship?

Think of the wedding dowry, which are gifts of money or goods given to the family of the bride or groom. These gifts seal the relationship between the two families although excesses and punitive demands have resulted in financial hardships and debts.

Another example is the close family ties in Asian societies, which often results in charges of nepotism, whether in large conglomerates or small and medium size ones. Yet, there may be overwhelming reasons for so-called nepotism. What if family members are capable and professionally qualified? Moreover, an Asian Christian may be condemned in eyes of the community if he or she fails to "take care" of his or her family members.

The West is no exception. We can think of Rupert Murdoch and his son trailblazing in the business corporation of News Corporation Ltd.

## **Christian Response**

Alec Hill states the following marketplace principles from Colossians:

- The emphasis on the Lordship of Christ over all aspects of life
- Paul's concept of Christians being

“in Christ” has direct bearing upon how believers should behave in the work and business environment

- Business should not bear a lower moral standard from the church or personal holiness and
- The kingdom of Christ is already rooted in this world.

What Hill emphasises is that the marketplace provides a visible arena where believers can tangibly demonstrate what being “in Christ” means. The seedy side of business – for example, greed, manipulation and cronyism – provides Christians with a stark backdrop against which their values of service and community must shine. To do otherwise would be to don the old dark nature and admit defeat.

At the same time, we should avoid dual-moral standards whereby marketplace morals are lower than church morals just because the former are the ‘real world’. Hence, we should avoid the philosophy espoused by the businessman Dan Drew: “Sentiment is all right up in that part of the city where your home is. But downtown, no. Down there, the dog that snaps the quickest gets the bone.”

### **External pressures, inner inadequacies**

Christians should also not underestimate the overpowering effects of external pressures. Richard Foster identifies the pressures as “money, sex and power” or the triple sins.<sup>5</sup> The evil one tempted the Lord Jesus Christ during the 40 days in the wilderness with the same pressures (Matt. 4: 1–11). We only ignore these to our detriment.

The prosperity gospel and the health and wealth theology serve to warn us of the dangerous and pervasive effects on our entire being in the form of temptations and compromises. If our theology is not right, then we easily succumb to these temptations and great will be our fall.

It is in this context that we are to be keenly aware of our inner spiritual inadequacies and our seeming lack of spiritual resources. We have to remember that sin is a pervasive corrupting power in our human nature and must be recognised as such. Because of its

corrupting influence, the whole human nature gets tainted and we easily succumb to it whether we are evangelical or liberal, charismatic or orthodox. It is in these struggles that we need to humble ourselves in order to seek out sufficient pastoral help in the so often lonely battles in the marketplace.

Pastoral help in the form of a spiritual or prayer network accountability groups would certainly be helpful as it involves us in dialogue, counselling and prayer. Only then are we much better prepared to deal with ethical issues of cronyism and the powers that be.

Rev. Hwa Yung advocates for an Incarnational Model in developing a theology of social engagement. This model is rooted in the way Jesus relate to the world, that is Jesus *identifies* with the world; is *separated* from the ideologies that rule it; and assures its *transformation*

**“...the marketplace provides a visible arena where believers can tangibly demonstrate what being ‘in Christ’ means. The seedy side of business – for example, greed, manipulation and cronyism – provides Christians with a stark backdrop against which their values of service and community must shine.”**

by His death, resurrection, and second coming (note the bold italics). Hwa Yung outlines some key guidelines that can be helpful in dealing with the issue of cronyism and unfair trade practices. Among them are:

- All forms of active corruption and cronyism (my addition here) should be absolutely prohibited, e.g. outright lies and dishonesty in procuring lucrative business contracts, defective products, outright exploitation of workers, bribing in order to gain unfair business advantage and shoddy workmanship which endangers lives.

- Avoid as much as possible any form of passive acceptance of cronyism. This may smack of compromise for those who are used to seeing things in clear contrast. While God’s moral demands are absolute, a certain degree of accommodation to human weaknesses may be necessary, for example in both Old and New Testaments, there is accommodation to polygamy, slavery and the Roman taxation system. There is recognition in the Bible that not everything

can be changed overnight.

On this side of heaven, we sometimes have to accept realities: until Christ returns, corruption and cronyism will continue in one form or other. This is where we need to learn to pray this prayer: “*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.*”

### **Conclusion: The “Mustard Seed” Effect**

A good lesson from history is perhaps the story of Lord Wilberforce and his Clapham sect. After 43 long and arduous years of persevering in the British parliament, they finally succeeded in abolishing slavery.

One may argue that these achievements were built upon the spiritual and moral foundations laid by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Evangelical Revival in Britain. It

does not lessen their accomplishments in any way. Rather, their lives pose a fundamental challenge to Christians worldwide until today.

Do we dare to ask God for grace to enable us to stand firm against the temptations of money, sex and power (cronyism included)?

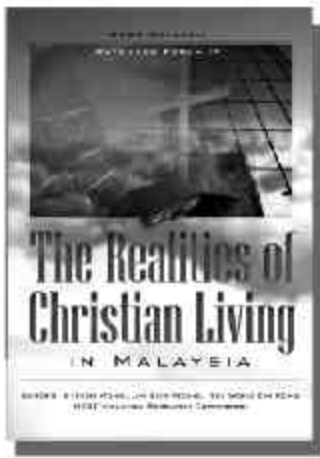
We need to have a holistic worldview and a theology of social engagement together with spiritual and moral authority to effect the transformation. In today’s Asian context, do we want to take for granted as Asian Christians to form lobby groups against cronyism or even challenge the unscrupulous corporate governance?

Let us remember that the Kingdom of God works like a mustard seed, humble in its beginnings but mighty in its conclusion.

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This is an excerpt from the article entitled “Cronyism in Asia: A Vocational Response”, which is available in the just-released *Forum IV* (see next page). The writer is a member of the NECF Malaysia Research Commission.





BY STEVEN WONG

As Christians, do we think too little? Or do we think too much? If we are indeed thinkers, then are we only thinkers, or, also people of action? Is fasting and prayer the final answer to the moral wickedness and corruption of our times? Or is it the surrendering of ourselves in order to enable the answers to prayer to be worked out through us? Ought we to be a 'sleeping Jesus', calm and confident in the storms of adversity in life, or an 'angry Jesus' who acts clearly and unambiguously against oppressors and unjust 'moneychangers' in the world? How do we decide what to be and when? Is the Kingdom of God still to be ushered in or is it already here?

Christians are divided on every one of these questions and have been for centuries. Not only do our worldviews differ, but we have often shown a tendency to defend them fiercely, gracelessly and, at times, unrighteously. We seek to be 'salt and light' to a tasteless and darkened world but end up many times being anything but. It does not help that relatively few of us today know much Church history. In our ignorance, we deprive ourselves of a valuable body of knowledge to help us understand the past, walk in present repentance and humility and make godly choices for the future.

Biblical standards and teachings are absolute and eternal, but much of how we think and act is not; they are shaped by the political, economic, social and cultural circumstances of our times. By emphasising some parts of Scripture and downplaying others, we are, wittingly or unwittingly, relativising it. The things that we accept or reject thus often really amount to nothing more than what our environment, needs and interests dictate.

# Recovering Biblical Direction for Present Issues

Thus, we need constantly to cross-check our assumptions and norms against the unchanging Word of God. We need the whole counsel of God.

Given this, there is really little ground to be doctrinally or theologically arrogant, superior and condemning. We would do well to remember Paul's reminder that, for now, we "see but a poor reflection as in a mirror" and can only "know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12). We would do well also to note that the unity of the Church is not founded on the supremacy of a doctrine but of love and service to Almighty God. God, in His omniscience and sovereignty, has used, is using, and will use those of practically every stripe and inclination to accomplish His good purposes in restoring this fallen world.

The NECF Malaysia Research Commission is dedicated to helping recover biblical direction, meaning and applications to issues of life. From the latest Harry Potter movie offerings to breakthroughs in genetic engineering and stem cell research, there are myriad concerns that Christians face. It should be obvious from the foregoing that we cannot and, indeed, do not, consider ours to be the final word on the matter. Nevertheless, however flawed and disjointed, we believe that the process of quiet reflection and (quite often heated) discussion by members – themselves quite diverse – produces what are comparatively fair and balanced viewpoints. These, we hope, can be useful references for Christians who are struggling with the very same issues in their lives.

The 11 essays in this volume revolve around the theme of the realities of Christian living in Malaysia. The first three are held together by a common thread – that of addressing practical issues. They

touch on the knowledge-based economy, education and vocation, and cronyism. (If the topics in this volume seem rather eclectic, this is because the interests of the Research Commission members are so.) This reading is likely to be of interest to those about to enter or who have just entered the workforce.

This is followed by four essays in the area of social concerns. They include the widespread practice of *feng shui*, media and culture, entertainment and youth and earthkeeping. These are of importance not only to believers in general but pastors and church leaders. The final four essays cover matters of religious liberty, politics, Christian intercultural communication and apologetics. Christians in Malaysia are uniquely blessed but the environment also poses special constraints and challenges. These have to be understood by all in order to discharge our duties as both Christians and citizens. Also included are selected statements and reports that have been issued in the past two years to address issues of global and national concern, and of those to the Malaysian churches.

Christians can take two approaches in the matters raised. They can ignore them and thus run the risk of being ignorant or they can engage them and open themselves to the possibility of being engaging. Of the two, we obviously prefer the latter route. Our deliberations are meant not only to add to the miniscule storehouse of Christian knowledge in Malaysia; they are also meant to instigate action. We also work closely with the NECF Prayer Commission, believing strategic and knowledgeable intercession to be the key to changing this world of which we are God's stewards.

After all the intellectual cogitation and discourse are over, it is only by prostrating ourselves as supplicants before God that we will find true peace and fulfilment. – *Steven Wong is the Chairman of the NECF Research Commission*



**Doing The Right Thing**, published by Kairos Research Centre, is priced at RM15 each and not RM10 as stated in our previous issue.



# FOR YOUR PRAYERS

## TSUNAMI-HIT COUNTRIES

THE death toll has surpassed 280,000 as bodies continued to be recovered one month after the catastrophe. In Indonesia, which leads with over 228,000 deaths, the president has ordered a halt to counting corpses; instead workers are to focus on collecting data on refugees and those who are in hospital, and finding the missing.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami, caused by a submarine earthquake off Sumatra, travelled as far as and caused damage to East African countries including Kenya, Seychelles, Somalia, Tanzania and Madagascar. The Asian countries affected are Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand and Malaysia. Two-thirds of Maldives was flooded as a result. Scientists said the earthquake was so powerful that it tilted the earth on its axis. The devastation was so great that according to reports from Banda Aceh, Sumatra, it could take a month to collect all the bodies in the area for burial.

Meanwhile, there are fears of human traffickers kidnapping orphaned children from refugee camps and selling them for cheap labour or the sex trade. The children also face sexual harassment at the camps. Praise God for the welfare groups that have raised these issues and pray for firm action to be taken to protect the children and women against the wicked.

In the midst of such great sufferings, our God is ever-present with those who are hurting. His compassion is demonstrated through the thousands of aid workers and the donations of concerned people. Pray for the newly formed association of the churches and Christian organisations in the affected countries as they channel money and aid to the victims so that the Christian witness will be a testimony of Christ's love. Pray for the coordination, wisdom and strategy in the ministry of love.

Pray that this catastrophe will cause people to think about eternity and seek for the life that will never perish. Pray for God's love to be manifested through the love and compassion of His servants in

those countries that have thus far been hostile to the good news.

Pray also for effective, well-coordinated efforts by governments and international relief agencies so that aid will quickly reach the suffering. There has been an outpouring of sympathy from all over the world. Support is being raised via television and other media. Pray that all the money raised will actually get to the victims quickly. Pray against corruption on the part of irresponsible parties.

Continue to pray against any outbreak of diseases. Finally, pray for those ministering to the emotional needs of the victims. There will be long-term effects of this tragedy. Pray for emotional restoration.

## THE WEST

EUROPEAN countries and Western nations in general are turning from their historic Christian roots and accepting a secularism opposed to religious thinking. It is now more difficult for Christians to freely express their faith and for Christian ministers to preach from the Bible without being criticised, fined, sued or even sent to prison.

In many post-Christian countries, persecution may soon be a stark reality as a Christian religious majority gradually becomes an unwelcome minority. While Christian cultural traditions may still be accepted, the moral and spiritual values are rejected as intolerant and old-fashioned. Modern-day attacks on believers take many subtle forms in the face of a growing aggressive and intolerant secularism. This is especially obvious at all levels of education.

Christians in the West need to be aware of the coming danger and prepare for it. The imperative is a true spiritual revival. Pray for: God to bring true repentance to the once-Christian and now-backslidden nations of the West; the churches in the West to stand firm for the Lord and godly values; and Christians to be strengthened by the Lord to speak God's truth even when persecuted.

## BHUTAN

THE reclusive Himalayan nation of Bhutan, between India and Tibet, is an unassuming stronghold of repression of Christians. Though Bhutan promotes peace and harmony in lifestyle and culture it is systematically trying to marginalise, if not eliminate Christianity. Government and Buddhist authorities denounce Christianity as a threat to national culture and religion.

Harassed and persecuted, Bhutan's Christian tiny minority faces constant challenges such as public beatings, employment discrimination, and refusal of basic utilities, business licences, identity cards, and even schooling. Most Christians worship secretly, fearing government reprisal.

Please pray for Bhutanese Christians amidst circumstances that test their faith, and that the light of the gospel will illumine the authorities, the monarchy, and Buddhist leaders. Pray for strength, encouragement, and wisdom to undergird Bhutan's Christian community, asking that God will meet their daily needs; and for increased entrance by and openness to the gospel message, especially among the youths, some of whom are discontented with an agrarian way of life and desire a more materialistic lifestyle.

## ERITREA

CONTINUE to uphold our Eritrean brethren in prayer. On Dec 31, 2004, 60 Christians from the Rema Charismatic Church in Asmara were arrested while celebrating the New Year in a pastor's home. Over 400 Christians from the 'illegal' minority churches are imprisoned in Eritrea simply for their commitment to follow Jesus.

Other believers are in solitary confinement and many more of all ages suffer detention in overcrowded metal shipping containers rife with infectious diseases. Believers are tortured to try to make them renounce their faith. Eritrean authorities keep denying that any religious minorities are persecuted. Please pray for Eritrea and its suffering Church.