

EDITORIAL

Look out!

Pitfalls Ahead

Most of us can recall at least one instance when a respected Christian leader fell from grace. We remember the pain, the disbelief and the questions. “Why?” “How can a person like this do such a thing?”

Let’s not forget one simple fact. Leaders are busy people and they therefore tend to overlook and neglect their weaknesses. So it’s actually not surprising that when they fall, they fall hard. As the saying goes, “The higher you climb, the harder you fall”.

Wise leaders therefore know their weaknesses, and take concrete steps to manage these “thorns in the flesh”.

Accountability is one major way of managing weaknesses and preventing abuse. Our first accountability is of course to God. We must give an answer to Him everyday and on that last day. But someone who likes to say “it’s between me and God” is in for trouble.

Systems should be set up among men to help curb wrongdoing and abuse. These systems are protective frameworks to prevent us from sinning because no matter how much we think we love God, there are moments when our convictions just fail.

Perhaps some spectacular examples will help us understand this concept better. A well-known case is that of Odysseus in Homer’s Greek epic Iliad. Odysseus

tyed himself to the ship’s mast before sailing past the island of the Sirens so that upon hearing their (the Sirens’) captivating songs, he would not be able to steer the ship towards the island and sink it among the rocks.

An example closer to home would be the pastor who reportedly threw his room key out of the window (to lock himself in) when he sensed an overpowering temptation to go out and do something immoral. These people knew their weaknesses and “burned the bridge” before it was too late. Likewise, accountability systems should be set up early when things are going well.

Accountability systems fall into two main categories – operating systems and accountability groups.

Operating Systems

Christians face a thousand and one different kinds of temptation but some claim that most of these can be grouped under money, power and sex. It is essential that accountability systems are set up around these treacherous waters. The following should be taken as broad guidelines.

- Money: At the minimum, a transparent system of signatories and approval should be set up in a church. The larger the sum to be spent, the more people need to approve it. For really huge

sums, a General Meeting of the congregation should be called.

- Power: The structure of governance differs for different denominations. But ideally, check and balance should be enshrined in the Constitution. However, the pastor should be given enough freedom to work and not have to seek permission for every little thing.

- Sex: A lot can be said here and what is actually put in practice depends on the situation. It’s not for one person to judge another, but each person should do what is reasonable for him or her.

Pastors, especially the men, often have

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It's time to sing 'the Song of the Bow'



By Rev. Eu Hong Seng
Chairman, NECF Malaysia

"Then David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son, and he told them to teach the children of Judah the Song of the Bow,..." (2 Sam. 1:17-18 NKJV)

The words to this elegy are particularly significant and meaningful in this day and age when we increasingly hear of moral failures and fallings of key church leaders around the world and in our land.

There are many godly principles which we can learn from this song, in particular, the attitudes which we should adopt whenever we receive news that a God-anointed leader has fallen.

1) Be Magnanimous

David described Saul as the "beauty of Israel" (2 Sam. 1:19a NKJV), honouring Saul who has fallen.

David's act must sound strange to many of us. Saul had engaged in numerous dishonorable acts besides attempting to spear David, sending troops to kill him (1

Sam. 19), consulting a medium/witch at Endor (1 Sam. 28) and taking his own life and dying in an unceremonious manner (1 Sam. 31).

Despite all his failings, David magnanimously called Saul the "beauty of Israel", choosing to see the good that was in him, and not discredit the one whom God had anointed as Israel's first king.

2) Be Discreet

David admonished his people to,

"Tell it not in Gath

*Proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon –
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,*

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph." – (2 Sam. 1:20 NKJV)

The Philistines and the 'uncircumcised' were foes of the people of Israel, and Gath and Ashkelon were cities of the enemies.

Notwithstanding Saul's mistreatment and ill will towards him, David remained loyal and bore the burden and shame of Saul and Saul's sons' defeat and deaths in the hands of the Philistines.

The sad thing about the incidents of moral failure among Christian leaders is that it is the 'un-fallen' Christians themselves who unashamedly disseminate the unsavoury news (and provide details) of such fallings, so much so that non-Christians are very much aware of the 'rot' in the body of Christ.

We call for discretion to be exercised in such situations; "Tell it not" should be the order of the day.

Not covering the sin and uncovering the shame are not synonymous.

The best form
of graciousness
witnessed today
is "mere silence."

3) Be Gracious

Again, despite all of Saul's misdeeds, and against the grain of common human reaction and tendency, David was extremely gracious towards Saul (and Jonathan) in his words of praise and tribute towards he two. His call to the 'mountains of Gilboa' – to not have dew or rain upon it, and 'may their fields produce no grain, because there the mighty warrior's shield was dishonoured'



A much leaner Rev. Wong.

Repaired and Renewed for the Long Haul

arteries, a problem that was discovered after he returned from Yangon last November where he was speaking at a pastors' conference.

While there, he experienced stomach and chest pains, which a local doctor diagnosed as indigestion. Despite the discomfort, he continued to address the conference the following two days. He was to have gone on to Mandalay to speak at the pastors' conference, but felt he had to return home. Further tests by a consultant cardiologist later revealed the clogged arteries.

As he reflected on the circumstances that led to the surgery, Rev. Wong was thankful for the new lease of life, but realised that it came with "obligation".

"God requires me to be faithful and fervent in my service to Him. He has

given me a renewed vigour to fulfil the new vision of NECF, that is the 'Transforming Nation' agenda which I will share in another occasion in Berita NECF," he said. Through the experience, Rev. Wong also realised the urgency to prepare and mentor the next generation.

Meanwhile, Rev. Wong is resting (an activity that he is still learning) and hopes to return to active duty by end February. However, on the doctor's order, he will have to rearrange his hectic schedule to avoid exerting his heart.

He realised too that the renewed strength and vigour can only be sustained through a strict discipline of a healthy lifestyle comprising a good diet and adequate exercise. "My body is the holy Temple of God. I'd better take good care of it," he said. ■

Overhauled for the long haul – that was Rev. Wong Kim Kong's gleeful and pointed remark after his emergency heart bypass in November. "According to the surgeon, the new arteries will increase my energy level once I'm fully recovered, so I should have more energy to run the race," quipped the NECF Malaysia secretary-general.

The "overhaul" involved a quadruple bypass to replace two fully-clogged

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(2 Sam. 1:21a NCV) – was a show of respect to Saul and Jonathan; a reminder of how good they were.

When someone 'falls', we instinctively have negative thoughts of that person.

However, there is room for us to thank God for the things they had done right; surely not all that they had done in their lifetime had been wrong.

We need to learn from David's graciousness; he describes Saul and Jonathan as "swifter than eagles" and "stronger than Lions" (2 Sam. 1:23b NKJV)

The best form of graciousness witnessed today is "mere silence."

The Webster Dictionary defines "gracious" as being "favorable; kind; benevolent; merciful; disposed to forgive offenses and impart unmerited blessings". Our God is a gracious and merciful God (Nehemiah 9:17 & 31), and so, we also should be towards our brethren.

How can we apply and put to practice the beatitudes of Matthew 5 if we are not able to be gracious to those

in our own household?

Let's say something ...good!

The true state of our heart is revealed in the way we treat the downtrodden, and not in the way we revere dignitaries.

No wonder that later in David's life, he was able to pray "your gentleness has made me great" (2 Sam 22:36b). Here is a man who knows what it means to be gentle, as one having experienced the gentleness of God Himself.

4) Be Compassionate

When one of God's anointed leaders fall, almost immediately we find articles and news reports expressing sadness over the dimming and demise of one of God's 'bright stars' here on earth. While many such articles and reports convey sorrow and regret of the blow suffered by the body of Christ, I often find the element of weeping missing.

David called upon the nation to "weep over Saul" (2 Sam. 1:24).

Just as there was national mourning and weeping for Saul and true deep declaration of love and grief for Jonathan

(2 Samuel 1:24-27), we the body of Christ should also mourn and weep when one of 'God's generals' falls prey to the trap of sin set by the enemy.

Ecclesiastes reminds us there is, "a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance".

What do we see today? Identification, contrite remorse and weeping or condescending regret?

So often we say what we say "to sell papers" or "to promote our views" rather than to express genuine mourning.

CONCLUSION

There was something about David's heart that was revealed when he commanded the new song to be sung and for the children of Israel to learn the "Song of the Bow".

My prayer is that God would help us set aside 'carnal gut reactions' to unpleasant failings, and emulate David, a man whom God Himself later proclaimed to be a man after His own heart (Acts 13:22). It's a new year ... it's time we learn a new song! ■

Dead Body Battle

By Nga Hock Cheh

Of late religious controversy appears to be a hot topic. Even before the court delivered its decision on the “Lina Joy” and “Moorthy” cases, another dispute over a dead body broke out recently in the case of Rayappan a/l Anthony.

It is ironic that instead of cultivating a life of Godly fear in view of the judgment which one must ultimately face, there has been much misplaced zeal or enthusiasm by certain quarters over the burial rites for the dead body.

To the Christians, the burial rites administered to a deceased’s body carries no real spiritual significance. What is important is that the deceased’s name is written in the Book of Life (Rev 20:15). Jesus remarked to the man who wanted to bury his father first before following Him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:60)

However, we still need to be concerned about the raging dead body battle because it has tarnished the image of Malaysia as a multi-racial, -religious and -cultural country and shaken the fabric of society.

The apparent lack of wisdom in the handling of the matter by certain religious authorities has caused much grief and trauma to the bereaved family and friends of the deceased whose bodies are being battled over.

How it started

During the first 33 years following Malaysia’s independence, there was apparently no reported case of any tussle between the religious authorities and the bereaved family for dead bodies. It was the introduction of the controversial constitutional amendment of Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution in 1988 that gave rise to legal disputes on the jurisdiction of the Civil Court.

The said Article 121(1A) reads: “The courts referred to in Clause (1) shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts”.

The first reported case was in 1991. In *Ng Wan Chan V Majlis Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan & Anor (1991) 3 MLJ 174*, the wife of the deceased successfully applied for a declaration that her late husband was a Buddhist during his lifetime and at the time of his death.

The then learned judge, Justice Eusoff Chin, ruled in that case that the activities of the deceased during his lifetime clearly showed that they did not conform to the conduct that may reasonably be expected of a person who professed and practised the Muslim religion, and that there should be proper proof of repentance by the deceased of his apostasy.

The said decision is sound in law, sagacious in wisdom and consonant with justice. If only the religious authorities had applied the said judicial wisdom with greater vigour and candour, the dead body would in all probability emit less legal odour and controversy.

The applicants in subsequent reported cases were not so fortunate or successful. They include *Md Hakim Lee V Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan, Kuala Lumpur (1998) 1 MLJ 681*, *Delip Kaur V Pegawai Polis Daerah, Balai Polis Daerah Bukit Mertajam & Anor (1992) 1MLJ1*; and *Soon Singh V Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia (PERKIM) Kedah (1994) 1MLJ 690*.

When the December 2005 tsunami struck, thousands of people were killed and their dead bodies hardly received a decent burial. In some cases, entire families were wiped out and there was no living person left to mourn them or undertake their burial. Isn’t it a pity, if not tragic, that our country should allow

the dead body of a convert or purported convert to become a divisive issue?

Ways to ease the battle

In the context of a cosmopolitan country, a major paradigm shift is essential to avoid the creation of unnecessary tension and strife in dealing with the dead body of a convert. In this regard, it is respectfully submitted as follow:

(a) The bereaved family of the deceased should be given the right to decide the burial rites for the deceased.

Common sense will tell that the bereaved family would always want to respect the burial rites desired by the deceased. They should be left to mourn for the loss of their loved one with whatever compassion and support friends, relatives and the authorities could extend to them.

(b) To qualify a convert for a burial according to Muslim rites in a Muslim cemetery, the burden of proving that the deceased was at the time of his death a practising Muslim should rest on the deceased’s next of kin to satisfy the religious authorities.

(c) The religious authorities or organisations should perhaps focus their efforts on nurturing the convert in his new faith while he was alive. Wouldn’t it be more noble and praiseworthy if the efforts by the religious authorities to give the deceased a decent burial according to his new-found faith be confined to a situation where the deceased convert had been rejected by his family members because of his conversion? Instead of tussling over the dead body, wouldn’t it be better to attend to the living?

(d) Would it be appropriate or fair to the other deceased Muslims, who have been true to their faith, to be buried in a Muslim cemetery with a deceased convert who has become an apostate? (And what if that apostate had been consuming “haram” food?) Wouldn’t the

Isn't it a pity, if not tragic, that our country should allow the dead body of a convert or purported convert to become a divisive issue?

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burial of such an “apostate convert” be a mockery of the purported faith imposed upon him?

Conclusion

Freedom of religion in our country is enshrined in Article 11(1) of the Federal Constitution which reads:

“(1) Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and subject to Clause (4) to propagate it.”

As foresight appears to have been made a prisoner of political expediency, hopefully hindsight will swiftly prevail to redeem the erosion of the constitutional terrain caused by the constitutional amendment to Article 121 of the Federal Constitution.

Whilst the august Chamber wrestles with the dynamics of the legislative surgery to be undertaken, the judiciary through the apex Court should engage itself in bold judicial procreativity in the light of the country’s constitutional history encased in the Reid Commission Report and the Cobbold Commission Report.

New Foundation Chairman

Insurance Scheme Promotion Extended

THE NECF Foundation has appointed Chai Cheng Sheng (right photo) as the new chairman. Cheng Sheng, who takes over from founder chairman Davy Woo, has been with the foundation since it launched in 2004.



Meanwhile, the foundation is extending the promotion of its special group insurance scheme. Under the promotion, medical underwriting is waived – meaning, there is no need for medical examination to qualify for the scheme. Underwritten by Great Eastern Life (GE), the scheme is open to all NECF associate members, pastors, full-time workers as well as members worshipping in churches which are members of NECF.

To date, about 1,300 have joined the scheme which insures against natural death, total and permanent disablement, personal accident and critical illness.

Since the launch in Sept 2005, two claims have been paid out while another two are being processed. Those who are interested in the scheme may contact NECF’s Rev. Lai or GE’s Lawrence Liew (019-3382687) / Sharon Chong (012-6596216 or 03-42947673 / 03-42951042).

This bold act will help exorcise the ghost of the dead bodies that seem to haunt and daunt our racial and religious harmony and peace.

The Christian community in our country should increasingly attempt to understand the global events and the

writings on the wall, including those in our country, against the backdrop of Revelations. Before night overtakes, one must labour with greater urgency for the Kingdom of God while there is still light and be grouded in the Word of God to be an overcomer. ■

to meet congregation members of the opposite sex in private. Sometimes, the meetings turn into counselling sessions, which may expose the pastors to vulnerable situations.

What should pastors do in such situation? How do they avoid extra-marital affairs with members of the opposite sex? To avoid these, pastors need to decide ahead the practical steps they ought to take.

Accountability Groups

Even a pastor needs a pastor.

The lack of a confessional structure in evangelicalism is perhaps one key factor contributing to the perpetuation of secret sin. Many effective Christian leaders are part of an accountability group. The exact form of such a group depends on many factors.

Accountability is one major way of managing weaknesses and preventing abuse.

But the archetype is a small group (no more than three or four people) that meets regularly for prayer, Bible study, sharing and confession.

Some groups require that a list of pointed questions be asked so as to keep one another in check. Usually, members of accountability groups are peers, so Christian leaders may join up with those of the same “level”. Others look for mentors.

Trust takes time to build but the Bible says: “Therefore confess your sins to each

other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (Jam. 5:16a)

Also: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2) Elsewhere, the Bible talks about the “body life” which is so important. Accountability groups take time and effort, but they are more than worth it.

There are people who are skeptical of accountability groups. They have their reasons – past betrayal of trust, etc.

But since all such reasons can be abused, it seems wiser to believe the Word of God and be patient with the results. There isn’t a single right way to “do accountability”, the point is to just go out and do it. Those who think they are walking closely with God and don’t need accountability should at least consider investing their lives into others, especially the younger leaders.

We Are All Leaders

Accountability is for EVERY Christian because we are all leaders – we are to lead others to Christ. Non-Christians observe our behaviour and attitudes, even if silently. How can we win them to Christ if we are not much better than they?

It’s therefore necessary to check our lives and an excellent way to do it is through the practice of accountability. ■

Merging Issues

– By P. Vijayan, DBA (Aus.)

Real spirituality leads to spiritual formation (or discipleship), which is the process whereby the inmost being (will, heart or spirit) takes on the character of Jesus Christ. The aim of spiritual formation is the transformation of the self and this only happens through the transformation of thought, feeling, social relationships, body and soul.

There is a great deal of disappointment expressed today about the character and effects of Christian people and institutions. Most of the disappointment comes from Christians who find great disparity between the hope for life expressed in the Bible (as exemplified by the lifestyle of Jesus and His disciples) and the actual day-to-day behaviour of today's professing Christians.

Sadly, spirituality in many Christian circles has simply become another dimension of consumerism where Christian 'consumes' services and the 'process of consumption' (that is, being entertained by the worship leader and the pastor) has been perceived as spiritual growth! Dallas Willard¹ calls this the *Great Omission* and argues that such great disparity is due to the assumptions among professing Christians that they can be 'Christians' forever without becoming disciples – that is a Christian practitioner who continuously grows in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2Pe 3:18).

The missing note in evangelical life today is biblical spirituality which is complete obedience to Christ. There is no 'short cut' to spiritual power – one cannot fool God for God looks at the heart, while men look at the outward appearance.

Eddie Gibbs², Brian McLaren³, George Barna⁴, and Peter Wagner⁵ believe the institutional churches in the West will look very different in 25 years from now and possibly several denominations may no longer exist. Gibbs⁶ has argued that our world has

become a global village and lessons learned in one place have an application in another. Churches in Malaysia should learn from such lessons. In the West, for several decades churches have relied on greater sums of money, better techniques, bigger numbers and facilities and more impressive credentials as the means to influence society at large.

Irrespective of size, no pre-packaged 'market driven gospel presentations' or 'seeker sensitive' model has adequately responded to the challenges presented by the current generation. The underlying issue is not the method but the exercise of spiritual discernment.

Any church leader applying any model must be driven by a concern to reach the lost and transform lives rather than simply to fill the church. The ministry model should be fundamentally a missional model and not simply an ecclesiastical one. The only offence that must remain is that of the cross of Christ⁷. The confidence of the witness must be in Christ alone and not in religious institutions or the impregnability of a Christian apologetic.

Any hint that the witness is motivated by a desire to enhance an institution or to convenience the hearer on the superiority of the Christian religion is bound to fail.

Only in so far as Christians are prepared for their lifestyle and deeds to be scrutinised at close quarters by people of other religion will they be in a position to persuade the

unsaved to critique their own assumptions and acknowledge the power of Christ⁸.

Evangelistic and church growth strategies developed out of 'marketing' or 'seeker-sensitive' insights must be handled with care. Such methodologies tend to make the audience sovereign and turn the gospel message into a means of personal fulfilment instead of Christ being supreme.

Jesus was acutely aware of the people's felt needs: feeding the hungry, healing the sick and delivering the oppressed. Yet, it was not the demand of the crowd, the disciples or the authority that determined His agenda.

He restricted Himself to doing the will of the Father. Not all are fed, healed or delivered unless His Father says so! Hence, it is not the customer who determines the agenda of the church but the Lord. His command is to make disciples who will worship the Father in spirit and truth.

In communicating the gospel, our

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Evangelistic and church growth strategies developed out of 'marketing' or 'seeker-sensitive' insights must be handled with care. Such methodologies tend to make the audience sovereign and turn the gospel message into a means of personal fulfilment instead of Christ being supreme.

confidence is not in the effectiveness of our technique but in the inherent power of the gospel message itself (Ro 1:16). Some power-evangelism emphases place too much significance on experience, healing and deliverance, downplaying the power of the Holy Spirit working through the preaching of the Word to reveal the mystery of the gospel. Francis Schaeffer, more than 20 years ago, has decried the adoption of methods that treats experience as the final authority without the preaching of truth based on God's Word⁹.

Measuring results in terms of increased attendance at worship service and other church-related activities creates a premature sense of achievement.

Leaders must always ask who the new people are and where they are coming from. Is the church winning people simply at the expense of other churches that do not have the resources to compete on equal terms in the religious market place?

In any church, small or large, we need to ask what percentage of the congregation is finding support and being held accountable in face-to-face relationships that are essential to discipleship. What percentage is moving from a passive, consumerist-oriented mentality to one of sacrificial and fruitful Christian service?

Congregations that lack a shared memory and relationship are unstable communities and a significant percentage of the members drift from church to church looking for the illusive experience.

The issue is not the size of the congregation but the impact the congregation is making on society. Numbers must not be confused with spiritual vitality. The presence of one does not guarantee the existence of the other¹⁰. "Let each look not to your own interest, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... who emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death – even the death of the cross" (Php 2: 4–7).

Unless and until we are prepared to die to self, we shall never be in a position to live for Christ. The example of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus is a case in point. He had to face the fact that his riches had become an obstacle in his life; refusing to do so, he went away sorrowful (Mt 19:16–30). The considerable assets of the individual became his liability. We need to set our mind on things above, not on things that are on earth (Col 3: 1–4).

In Indonesia, Turkey, Albania and Kosovo, Christians have given help to non-Christians affected by tsunami, earthquake and ethnic cleansing. Because national Christians were prepared to share their lives with others of different culture and religions in their own country, there is a new openness to the story of Jesus.

The gospel of grace delivered by a lifestyle that imitates Christ is the only message with the power to liberate. Churches cannot stand apart from society and invite people to come to them on their terms. Rather, churches must adopt a missional strategy and make true disciples out of the congregations to reach out passionately to the unsaved and communicate in ways that make sense to them.¹¹

(Read the full article in the book, "A Spiritual Healthcheck of the Church in Malaysia". See page 13 for more information.) ■

NOTES

1 Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, Monarch Books, 2006.

2 Eddie Gibbs & Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, Baker Academic 2005.

3 Brain McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan, 2006.

4 George Barna, *Revolution*, Tyndale House, 2005.

5 Peter Wagner, *Changing Church*, Regal, 2004.

6 Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey, *Church Next*, InterVarsity Press, 2005.

7 Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism*, Zondervan, 1995.

8 George Barna, *Think Like Jesus*, Integrity, 2003.

9 John Armstrong, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, Moody Press, 1996.

10 Eddie Gibbs & Ian Coffey *op. cit.*

11 *Ibid.*

Bringing Hope to Malaysian Homes

NECF MALAYSIA is tying up with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) to launch "My Hope Project", a 10-month evangelistic programme targeting homes as the centres for the sharing of the gospel.

Like Matthew, who invited friends into his house to meet Jesus (Luke 5:27–32), the goal of *My Hope Project* is to bring evangelism home – literally by mobilising Christians across the nation to open their homes to friends, relatives, and neighbours and share the gospel with them using a special film featuring Billy Graham and Franklin Graham, and a movie translated into the local language.

The project also provides an effective means of following up with new believers. Response cards, filled out by those who have made decisions, are routed to local pastors for their follow up.

Since the new believers are already friends with the church members who invited them into their homes, they are easily assimilated into local churches.

This project, which first started in Latin America, has spread to Russia, India and Philippines, bringing many first-time commitments to Christ.

In the process, millions of Christians have also been encouraged, trained, and given the opportunity to tell others about the change Christ has made in their lives.

A team of Malaysian pastors went to Philippines to witness the launch of this project last December and returned with much excitement.

The project will kick off in late February and culminate at Christmas.

Plan for Speedy Action

THE floods that unexpectedly struck Johor and Melaka and other states during last Christmas season and then again in early January underscore the pressing need to train and mobilise churches to be ready to respond to disasters immediately.

In many affected areas, especially in Johor, relief groups from other religions were on the spot almost immediately after the first wave of floods with their relief centres all set up because they had their action plan and machinery in place.

The same could not be said for the Malaysian Church in general. It took quite a while before churches realised the gravity of the situation and even then, many were not really sure how to help, except to donate cash.

Churches therefore need to come together to put into place a disaster relief action plan for their communities.

This is not about competition – to see who gets there first. The point is that churches must be ready to respond right away should a disaster strike their community or their neighbouring communities.

As one crisis relief head reflected in the aftermath of the devastating floods: “Relief work in any crisis is all about the *speedy mobilisation* (emphasis added) of rescue teams, and the recent floods in Johor saw the Crisis Relief Squad MCA (CRSM) scrambling into action from day one.” (*The Star, Jan 12*)

CRSM chief Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun added that “an integral and effective communication network” could have enhanced rescue work, especially urgent medical care.

To get churches into the “scrambling into action from day one” mode, NECF Malaysia has proposed an action plan to help victims of natural disasters. The initial plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of three groups.

Local Churches

i) Form a task force to devise a plan for

relief action in preparation of a flood;

ii) Identify roles and responsibility of each church in the areas of, for example, evacuation, providing food, logistics, and distribution of bedding and clothing. To also identify suitable churches to be converted into relief centres;

iii) Mobilise church members to each prepare an emergency pack for family of four for three days. Suggested items to include in the pack are bottled water, toiletries and canned food;

iv) Enlist church members who own four-wheelers and lorries to be ready to transport food, clothing and bedding to victims; and

v) Start a community relief fund for the long haul. For example, if there are 12 churches in the location and each church contributes RM1,000, the task force will have RM12,000 for immediate operations.

NECF Malaysia

i) Bring awareness to local churches on the urgency to reach out to victims of natural disasters such as floods, landslides and earthquakes;

ii) Encourage churches to give generously towards the NECF Community Relief Fund that will be utilised to facilitate churches to carry out relief work; and

iii) Work with Christian relief agencies, primarily CREST, to train and equip churches to carry out disaster relief tasks.

Christian Relief Agencies

i) Train churches on how to handle relief work;

ii) Supervise and coordinate disaster relief operations when necessary;

iii) Work with government and other NGOs to get sponsorships in cash and kind for disaster victims; and

iv) Advise NECF and churches on both short-term and long-term strategies that need to be taken to help disaster-prone communities. ■



NECF's staff, Patrick Cheng and Simon S. Arputha distribution centres and snapped these photos. Clothing services; All ready to give out the mattresses and 1 Segamat, which is run by a church, had to flee to a has been cleaned up.

Quietly busy

THEIR contributions may not have made it to the local press, but churches in the affected flood areas have been busy dispensing aid and easing the woes of the victims.

In **Kota Tinggi, Johor**, where the town was inundated, various churches from nearby Johor Baru mobilised their members to pack and send thousands of food packs to the victims daily. Some also send their members to help victims clean up their houses after the floods had subsided. A Christian drug centre in Kota Tinggi turned its premises into a relief centre and the supervisor and inmates took turns to cook for the victims, with help in cash and kind from churches.

Segamat was one of the worst-hit towns. NECF teamed up with a Kuala Lumpur church, CREST and Charisma Assembly to buy and distribute thousands of mattresses, pillows and food items to 3,000 families. The items were distributed on Jan 20 and 21 from a hardware shop.

Christians from nearby towns and volunteers from a drug rehabilitation centre in Ipoh came out to help unload the goods and distribute the items.

Earlier on, one church elder turned his home into a mini-relief centre to house several of his church members whose houses, cars and properties were damaged. Three social welfare homes



ed to Gemas and Segamat on Jan 20 to check out the relief work there. They visited two m top left: Victims in Gemas collecting their coupons for carpentry or electrical wiring to victims in Segamat; Exhausted volunteers taking a nap; Inmates of this welfare home in mple for refuge when the first wave submerged their centre. As the photo shows, the centre

belonging to another church suffered great damage. Besides household stuff, the homes also lost four vans and several cars. Their total loss amounted to over RM100,000.

Thanks to prior training, **Melaka** churches were quick to respond to the victims. They helped with evacuation, preparing and distributing starter packs, and the aftermath cleaning-up work. They mobilised four teams of volunteers to help clean up several affected homes in two areas “ Melaka Baru and Malim.

Bro. Jerry Lim stressed that the rebuilding of lives for the victims goes on long after the waters have subsided. The cleaning up is often a back-breaking and heart-wrenching task as they sift through their belongings, some which are priceless because of their sentimental value.

In **Gemas, Johor**, First Assembly of God did what it could for the first-wave victims by distributing water, clothes, milk and snacks to the evacuation centres. Subsequently, about 50 unchurched victims later attended their Christmas service.

The church came up with a unique way of helping the victims after the second wave of flood. With the money donated by NECF, it distributed coupons to over 450 families, which entitled them to the much-needed services of either a carpenter or an electrician. Upon completion of the jobs, the carpenter or electrician will present the

coupons to the church for payment.

Other places in Johor affected by the floods included Muar, Batu Pahat and Kluang. The churches there are individually helping the victims.

Meanwhile, NECF Malaysia has given out an initial sum of RM71,000 from its Community Relief Fund to help the flood victims in Segamat and Gemas.

The money was channelled through churches which are involved in relief work there. About RM58,000 was used



to buy beddings for a few thousand victims in Segamat, while the balance was given to Gemas victims.

More donations are coming in from churches and the money will be speedily distributed accordingly. ■

The synergy of working together

Immediately following the December floods in Melaka, a group of pastors and church leaders of churches there met to discuss the plan to help the victims.

In his email report to NECF after the meeting, Bro. Jerry Lim from Melaka detailed an elaborate relief plan “ from mobilising volunteers to help with evacuation, to identifying churches whose premises could be used as relief centres, to mobilising church members to prepare starter packs containing essential items such as food and toiletries, to helping victims clean up their homes.

His report proved just how crucial it is for pastors and church leaders to work together for their communities. Disaster relief work is a mammoth mission. A single church may be overwhelmed with the task, but when churches within a

community pool their resources together, great things are accomplished. Furthermore, the time spent working side by side in times of adversity will go a long way towards cementing inter-church ties.

And with good ties built, churches can quickly spring to action when a disaster strikes, like in the case of Kota Baru. Pr Henderson Wee from Christian Praise Centre, Kota Baru, when reporting about the situation there (which is safe at press time) reported that it was not a problem getting churches to work together because they had established good ties.

In Kuantan, Elder Teng Pooi Kui of Sg Lembing Gospel Centre said churches were “very united and have worked very well in crisis situations before, especially during the 2001 floods.” ■

Entering A New Era

BRIAN McLAREN was listed one of America's 25 most influential evangelicals in Time magazine. In an e-mail interview with LIM SIEW FOONG (NECF Malaysia Executive Secretary for Research), he shares his views on various issues covering emerging trends in the worldwide Christian community and evangelism.

What are the emerging trends that you have observed within the Christian world community? Are they threats to Christians' spiritual health at large and how?

I was in 20 different countries last year, and many more in recent years. Each culture is unique, and each context brings specific challenges and opportunities, but what has struck me most in my travels is the similarity of our struggles around the world. This shouldn't be a surprise since the Christian faith has gone global in three main waves. First, the Catholic wave brought Roman Catholicism from Europe to many parts of the world. The Protestant wave followed, quite often in areas previously evangelised by Catholics. Next came the Pentecostal wave which is still advancing. All these forms of Christianity are Euro-American, while the Protestant forms are more or less modernist.

By modernist I mean that they reflect the values and assumptions and ways of modern Western civilisation – ways of organising information and people; conducting inquiry and argument; educating, motivating, and so on.

What I see happening around the world could be summarised like this: Where pre-modern people are entering the modern world, Christianity is thriving and growing. Where people are living in modernity, Christianity is somewhat stable, or even stagnant. Where modern people are moving into postmodernity, the Church hardly exists.

So that leaves me with two dominant impressions. Firstly, where Christianity is growing most rapidly, it tends to be a form of a pentecostalism associated with modernist American televangelism and megachurch methodologies. This form of Christianity has much to commend it, but it has notable weaknesses. It tends to make converts, not disciples; and to focus on individual salvation, individual health, and personal prosperity, not personal and global transformation. It is often described as an inch deep and a mile wide, with more hype than substance. Many of us fear that the rapid growth will be followed by a rapid descent into nominalism or even secularism – like the seeds in Jesus' parable.

Secondly, as people move from a set of modern assumption to a postmodern mindset (or in some places, such as in parts of Asia, where a modern Western mindset has never been accepted), we have a crisis of evangelism. Do people have to be converted to a modern Western Euro-American mindset before they can become followers of Christ? Or does the Holy

Spirit want to enter people where they are, and begin transforming their lives and cultures from where they are?

These are some of my top concerns – and hopes.

The general perception of the Malaysian Church on the 'emerging church movement' is heavily shaped by Western critiques, and many see you as a staunch proponent or even a controversial voice in such 'movement' (if there is any). Your comments, please. How shall the Malaysian Christian leadership be prepared to respond to such 'movement'?

Yes, it has been unfortunate that some Christians in the West, especially in the US, have taken a combative stance toward the emergent conversation. I find it sad that in defence of "the truth," we can misread, misinterpret, and misjudge others in an untruthful way.

I think that the Malaysian Christian leadership should take a "Berean" approach (Acts 17:11) – to prayerfully engage in conversation and in light of Scripture. They shouldn't see the emergent conversation as a finished "programme" ready for "marketing" but as a conversation in its early stages of formation. They shouldn't see it as another American export, but as a conversation in which they can, if they desire, become active participants. I hope to represent a conversation that is truly global, and a conversation from which Americans have much to learn – perhaps more than anyone.

Please share your idea of ministry and serving. What does it mean by 'missional'?

The simplest way to explain this is to ask another question, "What is the church for?" If the church is primarily for saving individual souls and protecting them until they can be delivered to heaven, that is certainly a noble purpose. But if the church is to be an agent of God's mission – of God's kingdom coming, of His will being done on earth as it is in heaven – that's a very different vision. I don't believe these visions are contradictory, but the second one includes the good elements in the first.

The church exists to form disciples who are agents of the kingdom in every sphere of their lives – family, work, neighbourhood, political, ecological and economic involvement, and so on. Many churches already understand this, but I think this is a special emphasis in the emergent/missional conversation.

It has been observed that church leaders emphasise 'big,' 'wealth' and 'number' as evidence of growth, but there is an increasing number of Christians (particularly the youths) who are seemingly restless and probably lost in church. Faithfully attending cell-groups, Bible study, prayer meeting, or church service may be mere rituals for

some. They become conformists rather than growing spiritually. What you do think?

I think this is a widespread problem globally. People engage in a lot of church activities but don't experience deep transformation. In the end, I believe that the "why" question is more important than the "what" or "how much" questions. Instead of asking: "What activities are you involved in? How much prayer or how many hours per week of Bible study" – attractive questions to the modern mind because they are quantifiable – I think we need to ask: "Why are we here? Why does the church exist? Why do we gather on Sundays? What are the purposes? Then we can ask: How can we best fulfil those purposes? How can we become the kind of people who live for God's mission in our world?"

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" (Frederick Douglass). Jesus is serious about the spiritual wellbeing of children (Matt. 18:6). However, children ministry is generally not prioritised in many churches. Today we see that we may be losing a generation to the enemy. What do you think about this?

I cannot agree more. There are many levels to this problem, but one level relates to this transition from modern to postmodern. In the modern world, we developed approaches to education that were suitable to the world of industrialism.

Education was like a factory – raw material goes on the conveyor belt and is "processed" through a linear process into the finished product. Chairs were lined up in classes and children listened, took notes, and took tests. But in the post-industrial world, all of these methods are up for re-examination. We are free to reflect, for example, on the way Jesus taught.

Our great opportunity, with both children and adults, is to teach what Jesus taught in the manner that He taught.

While committed to carrying out the Great Commission of "go therefore and make disciples of all the nations," the Church today faces great animosity in both the West and the East. The act of evangelising, preaching or social out-reaching has become more sensitive than ever. How should the Church today re-look at the Great Commission?

I've written several books on this deeply important question. If I were to focus on three or four points, here are what they'd be: 1. We need to think in terms of forming lifelong disciples rather than simply counting decisions or conversions. Our call is to disciple making, not decision counting.

2. Disciple formation is a process, not simply an event. Of course, as a process, there are many milestones in discipleship – including important ones like baptism. But one of our

US-based Brian McLaren will discuss the challenges and opportunities facing the 21st century Church at a seminar, "A Quiet Revolution of Hope", on March 3 and 4 in Petaling Jaya. The seminar is organised by *emergent Malaysia* in collaboration with Council of Churches Malaysia Faith & Order Committee, Seminari Theoloji Malaysia and other groups. Closing date for registration is Feb. 28. For more information, contact Laurie Toong (03-7957 1278) or click on www.emergentmalaysia.org



Neighbourliness, hospitality, genuine conversation, appreciative listening, invitation – these are the marks, I believe, of the early church, and they can characterise our churches too.

problems in the conventional approach was that we immediately needed to classify people as "in" or "out." As we emphasise discipleship, this in-out thinking must be modified, enhanced, moderated. For example, if I take an interest in the game of golf or the sport of cricket, when do I say I'm a golfer or a cricket-player? It would seem presumptuous for me to say so the first time I play. But with experience and practice, eventually I begin to see myself as a golfer or cricket-player. How can we make room in our churches for people in this category – what we often call "seekers?"

3. Disciple formation involves a community and requires relationships in real life. It can't remove people to an artificial environment (or "non-environment" – which is what laboratories and traditional classrooms were, in some ways). It must take place on the road, in the home, at work, in conversation.

4. But for any of this to happen, we need, in a sense, to "convert" our Christians from people who tend to isolate in little Christian enclaves and who may judge and even fear non-Christians, so that they become people who, like Jesus, eat meals with "tax collectors and sinners," build relationships with friends and neighbours who are not yet in Christ. C. S. Lewis spoke of the gospel as "a good infection," and we need to get our people out into the general population more – as friends, as neighbours, as lights in darkness and salt in culture – so that our "infection" can gently spread. Coercion, manipulating, threatening – these are the marks of a desperate and unhealthy movement seeking to scare people into compliance. Neighbourliness, hospitality, genuine conversation, appreciative listening, invitation – these are the marks, I believe, of the early church, and they can characterise our churches too.

Obviously, the shape of these characteristics will vary from Kuala Lumpur to Stockholm to Buenos Aires to Seattle to Kampala, but I think more and more of us are realising that it's a new era in evangelism. We've moved beyond the colonial era where Christianity and Western civilisation spread hand in hand. We're entering an era in which the way of Jesus is a truly global community coming together in one Spirit, one mission, one purpose, and one gospel, with the possibility of joining Jesus in His mission of bringing good news to all people. ■

Editor's note: This interview aims to provide our readers a general outlook on the issues affecting the church at large. Brian's views and opinions on some other issues may not necessarily reflect that of NECF Malaysia.

How can the Church embrace Art & the Artist?

By COLIN KIRTON
Artistic Director of Footstool Players
and freelance performing artist

Firstly, the Church needs to *engage its mind* as per 1 Cor. 1:15 with regard to arts and culture. For too long, it has hidden behind its hand-me-down fears, suspicions and prejudices. It has been guilty of giving simplistic answers to complex issues. Specifically, the Church needs to engage its mind in terms of:

(a) *the scriptural foundations for the arts*: To understand what the Scripture has to say about artistic expression and form a theology that is based on biblical truth instead of tradition or prejudice;

(b) *the culture in which it exists*: To understand and weigh cultural artistic expressions in the light of Scriptural truth, and discern with godly wisdom what is and what is not acceptable to God. In this respect, there is a need for consultation among the believers, particularly with artists who have delved into the origins and contexts of these cultural art forms, in order to provide meaningful insight and direction in dealing with these issues.

Secondly, the church needs to *recapture its imagination*. The imagination is the bridge between the heart and the mind, and therefore a conduit for truth about God. God pays high regard for the imagination in His Word through His widespread use of metaphor, imagery, paradox and story. The evil one is just as aware of the power of the imagination, and seeks to usurp it for his own purposes, for the Word warns us that sin begins its life-cycle in the playground of our imaginations (James 1:15). In essence, therefore, the heart of biblical prophecy is God speaking to His people in such a way as to attempt to recapture their sin-tarnished imaginations.

Unfortunately, contemporary culture has been guilty of stripping the imagination, of dulling us into mindless robots that chant the media's mantras. The Church has been no less at fault, firstly in its suspicion of the capacity of the imagination and therefore viewing it as something to be subdued, and secondly through its blatant tendency to *tell* people what to think as opposed to *causing* them to think.

We need to return to a healthy worldview of the imagination and revisit it as one of God's chosen avenues for communicating His truth, especially in art. As for *embracing artists*, we need to see them as artists called by God to the greater sphere of life, and not just the evangelistic church meeting!

Within the Church, if our artistic expression is also an expression of worship, then the total environment and culture of the Church ought to reflect an acceptance and 'friendliness'

towards artistic expression as part of its corporate worship. The Church can include the artist's gifts in the overall life of the church, from its worship to its teaching, outreach and social action. The church's décor, for example, can reflect that 'art-friendly' culture. Towards these ends, artists should be encouraged to serve in the leadership of the church and its ministries.

Also, we need to release our artists to the marketplace. It is of utmost importance that artists entering the marketplace do so with the full support and accountability of their local church body.

The Church however has traditionally been suspicious or fearful of releasing their artists into a "secular" marketplace. Some of these fears may be valid given the fact that the marketplace is not without its pitfalls for those with inadequate spiritual foundation. We certainly do not want them to end up as 'sheep among wolves'.

At the same time, the enemy's camp is the Church's mission territory and therefore the artistic marketplace is a mission field that greatly needs to be reclaimed for God. The artists are its mission agents. If art shapes our culture, then we need to build up a new generation of missionaries who will enter into that culture as God's avant-gardes, influencing it, even revolutionising it, for His kingdom purposes.

As such, the Church can honour, nurture, support and commission the artists and their giftings in the marketplace. This involves:

- Identifying, unlocking and releasing artistic gift within its members;
- Valuing and affirming the artist as an individual, and his/her giftings;
- Training the artist towards excellence in his giftings and obedience to his calling;
- Encouraging and influencing its artists to be salt and light in the marketplace, and as good stewards of their giftings, and not merely practitioners of their art in the context of their churches.

However, it isn't just the Church that has been suspicious of the marketplace. The marketplace has for too long been suspicious of the Church! The presence of artist-Christians in the marketplace who are able to communicate true Christian spirituality can help to eradicate such suspicions, as well as misconceptions and stereotypes. The pagan Cuban artist Raquelin

• SEE NEXT PAGE

Mendieta has said that “*art and spirituality are one and the same; works of art are prayers on the altar of life*”. Certainly, creativity is our spirituality in action, our expression of worship, and we need to rectify the distorted image of our faith, and therefore our God, that many secular artists have.

Yet, it is insufficient for the Church to merely endorse their artists’ entry into the marketplace. As pointed out earlier, the artistic marketplace has more than its fair share of pitfalls. The artist-Christians working in the marketplace needs to have a lifeline to the Church. As with all its missionaries, the Church needs to care for its artists in the frontline of secular culture. It has to provide adequate spiritual foundations and counselling for artists entering the marketplace, and continue to keep them accountable to their calling and steadfast in their discipleship. They need to be supported in prayer, as well as in practical ways. This includes moral support for their craft in the marketplace, for example purchasing artwork, attending concerts and plays, providing venue and resource for exhibiting/promoting their ‘non-religious-themed’ work.

The Church must realise that artists need space – space to create, space to experiment, and space to take risks and even make mistakes. As much as their art, artists are works in progress, and much patience is required to allow the Master Artist to work in and through them. They are often sensitive people whose spirits can be easily crushed, and it is important that the Church extends grace and restorative encouragement in their error rather than adopting an “I told you so” response.

The general attitude towards, and treatment of, artist-Christians in the past has resulted in many casualties – wounded artists who have as a result retreated from their art or retreated from their local churches, or even their faith. In many cases, the scars are deep. They withdraw spiritually and end up lonely and in isolation, becoming reluctant to reveal their vulnerabilities and thus unable to maintain accountability with spiritual mentors.

On the other hand, pride is an issue that many artists struggle with, and there can often be reluctance on their part to seek such accountability.

The local church needs to initiate dialogue with its artists in order to understand them as unique individuals – their temperament, aspirations and struggles – and to foster a mutual respect for each other that would facilitate a healthy relationship that promotes that much-needed accountability.

Of course, ideally, who can comprehend the situation of the artist better than another artist? Therefore it is also important that the artist-Christian in the marketplace actively seek out like-minded artists from the Christian community who will be able to provide mentorship both in terms of developing practical skills and providing spiritual anchors. Preferably, more experienced artist-Christians should be seeking out younger colleagues in the marketplace in order to invest in and impact their lives (2 Timothy 2:2).

The networking of artist-Christians in the marketplace will

help reinforce accountability (Ecclesiastes 4:12) and provide fellowship and a springboard for sharing ideas and encouraging one another.

What words of encouragement do you have for young people who are gifted in arts and who desire to pursue art making as vocation?

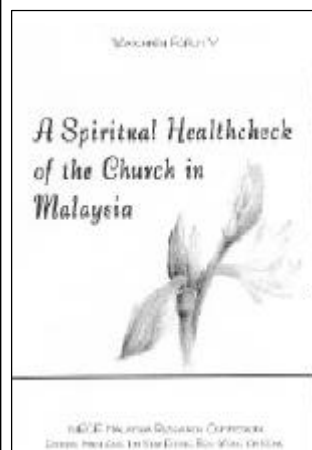
Firstly, *love God above everything else*. Jesus said it. It’s the greatest command and the reference point for the whole of life. Your making of art has to flow out of your love for God and its natural corollary of loving others. If you love your art more than you love God, you are worshipping the created rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25).

Secondly, *get yourself grounded in His Word*. If you don’t get good scriptural foundation for why you do what you do, you’ll be easily swept by every false doctrine in relation to your calling and artistic expression. Trust me, these come not just from the world, but also sadly, from within the church! A book I would recommend for every person wanting to pursue arts as a vocation is *Imagine: A Vision for Christians and the Arts* by Steve Turner, who among other things, provides a broad scope of Scripture and its impact on how we “do art”.

Thirdly, *strive for excellence*. Excellence is an attribute of God, and we must reflect that in our art. Beware you don’t confuse it with perfectionism, which affects many artists. Perfectionism is pride in another guise. Perfectionism is self-directed; excellence is God-directed.

Fourthly, *just do it!* If God has gifted and called you to do art as vocation, trust Him to lead you into a fulfilling career. Forget what others say about getting a ‘real job’. Don’t let the critics rattle you. Be prepared for being misunderstood by Christians who may want to pigeonhole you into only certain ways of expressing yourself artistically, and non-Christians who may be suspicious of your motivations for art or the creative choices you make. There will be discouraging times, but persevere knowing that this is how God has wired you and how He has called you to be His ambassador. There is nothing more fulfilling than being right at the centre of God’s purposes for you. ■

NEW BOOK ON CURRENT ISSUES



WHAT are the current issues that the Malaysian Church is grappling with? Find out from this book published by the NECF Malaysia Research Commission. The book – the fifth in the commission’s Watchmen Forum series – covers topics ranging from spirituality to Christian education to the environment. It is priced at RM12 and available at the NECF office.

Current Concerns for your prayers

Devastating floods

BARELY three weeks after the first wave of floods rolled over Johor, Melaka and Pahang in December, the rains fell again in January. This time around, the water levels rose higher, causing more than 100,000 residents in Johor alone to flee to relief centres. The heavy rainfall has also flooded parts of Sabah and Selangor and forced thousands to evacuate.

Many have blamed the unusually heavy rains on the change of climate due to man's irresponsible acts of deforestation and overdevelopment, which have caused a rise in the earth's temperature. Climate expert Associate Prof Dr Fredolin Tangang had said the rising temperature of the Indian Ocean brought about by a series of events starting with the melting of ice in Greenland, could have caused the unusual and severe weather conditions in South-East Asia (*The Star, Jan 21*).

Whatever the reasons are, let us go to our God – the Lord of the heavens – to stretch out His mighty hand. Pray also:

- For good coordination among government agencies and other NGOs as they work together to bring relief and aid to the victims;
- For the aid – whether cash or kind – to reach the victims directly without any hindrance;
- For the authority to wisely use the funds set aside to help the victims and that they will be restrained from acting corruptly;
- Against the expected rise in dengue, malaria and any other diseases in the affected areas;
- For the rebuilding of lives in the aftermath of the floods, that Malaysians and the Government will generously extend help to the victims to enable them to recover quickly; and
- For churches to work together to bring comfort and practical help to the many victims in their communities. ■

Teen sex crimes on the rise

SEX crimes are on the rise among teens as police statistics revealed that one in every 10 rapes this year was committed by schoolboys (*The Star, Dec 11, 2006*).

Data from the Malaysia's Police College science studies unit showed that of the 1,833 rape cases reported from the nine months to September last year in the country, 216 offenders were below the age of 18.

Young offenders also accounted for 5 percent of murder cases out of a total of 473 cases to date, 15 percent of 1,669 rioting cases and 3 percent of 113,939 cases for theft, including vehicle theft and house-breaking.

The data revealed that young offenders also accounted for 6 percent of 15,038 drug trafficking and possession offences, during the period.

Juvenile crimes rose to 8,671 in January-September 2006 from 6,611 during the same time last year.

Police College science studies unit head assistant commissioner Amar Singh said children becoming involved in crime was a worrying sign and that more attention should be given to school children who often played truant. While there was no direct correlation between the truancy and crime, it could lead to drug abuse, addiction and crime.

Pray for parents to realise the gravity of their responsibilities to bring up their children to be responsible adults and conscientious citizens. ■

Divorce Rate Up

THE divorce rate has reached a worrying stage in the country and there is nothing the Government can do to reduce the number (*The Star, Dec 13, 2006*).

That was the dismal picture painted by Women, Family and Community Development Ministry parliamentary secretary Datin Paduka Chew Mei Fun who said it would be impossible for the

Government to lower the number of divorce cases to a satisfactory level.

"Families face greater challenges from various aspects these days due to a hectic lifestyle as well as financial constraints.

"The National Family Development and Community Board had drawn up a module for pre-marriage courses," she said.

Continue to pray for the Church and for Christians to be a good role model of strong, loving marriages to the community. ■

Rejected by family

ONLY 5% of former drug addicts who leave drug rehabilitation centres have family members willing to take them in, Deputy Internal Security Minister Datuk Mohamed Johari Baharum said (*The Star, Nov 28, 2006*).

The rest have to find their own way home and back into society and many are shunned. Only about 10% of the inmates at the centres received visits from family members.

Pray for our Christian brethren involved in the ministry of rehabilitating drug addicts. Pray that Christ's love in them will touch the hearts of those they are ministering to and assure them of our Heavenly Father's love for them even if their family members reject them. ■

Malaysia is 50

MALAYSIA celebrates its 50th year of independence this year., and to make it a memorable year, the Government has lined up elaborate programmes to inspire pride, loyalty and devotion to the country.

As a young nation, we wrestle with growing pains that sometimes threaten to overwhelm us. Discontentment, disenchantment and the fear of rising racial and religious extremism are driving many to leave the country for supposedly greener pastures. Pray for ourselves – for hearts that stay faithful to God, and eyes that are fixed on Him, no matter what our circumstances are. ■

LOVE TERENGGANU

TERENGGANU will be bathed in prayer all through this year under the “Love Terengganu” project initiated by the NECF Malaysia Prayer Commission.

Launched on Jan 5 in Kuala Terengganu, the project will see local churches hosting prayer teams mobilised and sent by the commission from outside the state. Various teams will travel throughout the state for on-site intercession.

Over 100 representatives from seven churches attended the launch, during which a leader from each church shared the challenges and issues they faced in the prayer ministries of their churches. The leaders expressed their gratitude to the prayer teams from the Klang Valley



which have taken turns to go to Terengganu. Indeed, the teams have encouraged the churches there to continue faithfully in their ministries.

As a result, several churches in Kuala Terengganu have been meeting monthly for combined church meetings since 2002 and these gatherings have strengthened inter-church ties. ■

New Administrator



NECF Malaysia has appointed Simon S. Arputham (right pix) as the Administrator. Simon trained and worked in the Accounts sector before entering full-time service in 1994. He has served in Malaysian Care for nearly nine years in the Finance, Community and Church Relations ministries. Simon recently tied the knot with Caroline Suganthi, and they worship at Metro Tabernacle, Kuala Lumpur. ■



The winners (from left to right) – Janice Yap (2nd runner up), Lim Chee Peng (People’s Favourite Award), Diana Wee (1st runner up & Most Competitive Award), Pr Ng Wah Lok (chief judge) and Peter Khor (champion).

Competition unearths songwriting talent among Malaysian Christians

THE Malaysia Revival Songwriting Contest (MRSC) entered its second year in 2006 with about 100 entries from Malaysians residing locally and abroad. Three entries were finally chosen last Dec 3, and Ipoh-born Peter Khor struck the winning note with his song, “Don’t Stay That Way”.

The first and second runners-up were Diana Wee (with her song *In Awe*) and Janice Yap (*Practitioner*) respectively. Diana, who is currently pursuing her Masters in Clinical Psychology, also clinched *The Most Competitive Award*.

Some 600 people from the Klang Valley participated in

the SMS voting for *The People’s Favourite Award* and Lim Chee Peng of Alor Star won with his composition and rendition of *Glorious Joy*.

MRSC was first held in 2005 by Star Maker Enterprise to promote the development and nurturing of Malaysian-born Christian musicians and songwriters.

For MRSC 2006, the panel of judges was led by Pr Ng Wah Lok and included Lucy Loo, Dr Yap Chen Sing, Pr Grace Lee, Kelvin Tan, Charles Oh, Suraj Raj and Amelia Tan.

The final 19 songs were woven into a 60-minute musical drama entitled “Rizuan” which was staged on the final night to the delight of the audience. Starmaker is now planning to stage the drama at The Actor’s Studio.

MRSC 2007 is now opened and the deadline for submission of songs (in English, Bahasa and Chinese) is May 31. For more information, check out its website www.starmaker.com.my ■

New Members

NECF MALAYSIA welcomes another two churches as **Ordinary Members:**

- **Victorious Kingdom of God**, pastored by *A. Alexander*
- **Petra Reformed Evangelical Church**, pastored by *Lam Thin Weng*

NECF also welcomes four people as **Associate Members:** Elder David Tan, Aaron Raj, Kuek Chee Ying and K.J. John a/l John Kuruvilla.

Note: Miracle, Signs & Wonder – an Ordinary Member – should read Miracle, Signs & Wonders Fellowship.

FOR YOUR PRAYERS



NORTH KOREA The South Korean Church has declared 2007 a year of prayer for North Korea, reports *Release International* (RI). In a meeting on Jan 13 at Seoul's Olympic Stadium on the centenary of the Pyongyang Great Revival, an audience of 15,000 people heard prominent South Korean and international leaders urge Christians worldwide to focus prayers on North Korea throughout this year.

RI is one of the many organisations supporting the initiative.

Rev. Choi Hee Boum, Executive Secretary of the Christian Council of Korea, read out a forceful proclamation, as the culmination of a week-long series of meetings at the stadium. "We recollect how, 100 years ago, North Korea was mightily touched and transformed by God and how the Gospel flourished so greatly in Pyongyang that it was called the Jerusalem of the East," he said.

"Today we stand deeply saddened that North Korea is in great spiritual darkness and crisis."

In just 100 years, Pyongyang's reputation has been turned on its head. Today it brutally suppresses Christians, enforces idolatry of political leaders and bans the Gospel totally. The proclamation comes amid reports from the World Bible Translation Centre that a North Korean evangelist has been executed – simply for distributing New Testaments.

Pray fervently that 2007 really would be the year that sees an end to the spiritual darkness which shrouds North Korea – and commit to pray regularly for this.

Pray for the family and friends of the executed evangelist. Pray for God's comfort and peace on them, knowing that to be absent in this natural body is to be present with the Lord. Pray too that Christians in North Korea will entrust themselves to Christ and preach the gospel without fear and hesitation. ■

VIETNAM The authorities have launched a fresh attack on the Mennonite church in Ho Chi Minh City – straight after Vietnam was allowed to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Police resumed their harassment of Rev. Nguyen Hong Quang's church on Jan 9, after a brief respite during talks to establish Vietnam's international respectability.

Officers broke up an early-morning prayer meeting, arrested 17 people and yet again demolished part of the church and the Quang family's home.

RI sources report that senior officials apparently prevented local authorities from harassing the Mennonites as the international community trained its spotlight on Vietnam. Once Vietnam had been allowed to join the WTO late last year, Ho Chi Minh City police wanted to 'get even' with Pr Quang, according to Compass Direct.

Praise God for the resilience and determination of Pr Quang and his church in the face of continued harassment. Pray for God's healing and comfort over the congregation of the Mennonite Church and that our Vietnamese brethren remain strong. ■

SRI LANKA The toll of Christians and their leaders caught up in the violence which threatens to engulf Sri Lanka is rising daily. Believers are getting caught in the crossfire between warring Tamil and Sinhalese communities. They are the deliberate target of Buddhist militants trying to suppress Christianity.

In Jaffna in the north-east, the paramilitary, Tamil rebels and government security forces have all been blamed for the rising number of extra-judicial killings and disappearances.

Remember our suffering brethren in Sri Lanka. Pray for God's comfort and

peace on the many who have lost loved ones and properties.

Pray for God's sovereignty on the country, and that the political leaders would not allow Sri Lanka to slide further into civil war. ■

IRAQ The war in Iraq, soon to enter its fifth year, has become a costly setback for Christianity in that troubled land (*Christianity Today*, February 2007 editorial). Though Iraq has been associated with biblical and Christian history for 5,000 years, the risk remains high that the current short-term disaster will become a long-term catastrophe.

At least two broad strategies must be employed to prevent that, *Christianity Today* proposes. The first is pursuit of religious freedom for Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq, a crucial missing link in peacemaking regionally and internationally. Robust freedom to believe must not be lost amid strategies for a military victory.

Since 2003, church bombings, kidnappings of clergy, rape and murder of Christians, and other violence have taken a sickening toll. UN officials recently labelled the flight of refugees from Iraq as a "steady, silent exodus."

Secondly, the Western Church must commit fresh resources to the Assyrian church. After major conflict ended in 2003, relief and mission agencies quickly set up projects nationwide. In the years since, all but 10 mission leaders have pulled out because no one could guarantee their safety. This withdrawal has usually been a wise decision.

Pray for Christian ministry and church leaders – and those who financially and prayerfully support such ministries – to reengage with Iraq, despite the obvious risks. Pray for God to sustain the Iraqi Church and for Christ's healing presence in the torn society. ■