

# The Church as a Multi-racial Community

Bishop Dr Robert Solomon

I was at a combined service recently where I had the joy of giving the benediction in three languages - Mandarin, Tamil, and English. After the service, a member of one of our Peranakan services remarked that I had missed saying the benediction in Malay. Interestingly, the next day I was at a Peranakan service and had the opportunity to give the benediction in Malay. This experience reiterated for me the fact that the church is a multi-lingual and multi-racial community. This is not just a sociological phenomenon, for in order to understand it adequately, we must begin with a theological perspective.

## A Theological Perspective

We begin with the creation account in Genesis where we are introduced to God the Creator who made the heavens, the earth, and all that dwell on earth, including human beings. A constant theme right through Scripture is that it is proper for this Creator God to be worshipped by all people. However, sin entered the human race when Adam and Eve sinned (Gen. 3) and since then, God has been redeeming mankind to Himself.

When God called Abraham to follow Him, He revealed His plan to bless Abraham so that he and his descendents could be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12). Abraham's descendents, the nation of Israel, failed to comprehend this and understood their calling in a distorted way, seeing it as the exclusive privilege of being blessed, without recognising the responsibility of being a blessing to the whole world. Their failure in being separate from the world so that the nations can be led to emulate them in the worship of the one true God resulted in their repeated failure as a nation and the judgement that came upon them. This judgement is seen especially in their exile and in the destruction of Jerusalem, their commercial and religious capital.

A chastised remnant returned to Jerusalem and waited for the promised Messiah. The incarnation of Jesus thus became the hinge of the history of God's redemptive acts in the world. Jesus challenged the thinking of the Jews and pointed their attention to the larger purposes of God. Though he did not travel outside Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, he demolished some ethnic barriers by reaching out to Samaritans and Gentiles, people the Jews considered as outside of God's interest and concern. After His death and resurrection, the Christ who ascended to heaven gave a command to His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (Mt. 28:18-20).

At Pentecost (Acts 2), the Holy Spirit produced a multi-lingual church, speaking in many tongues and yet united in Christ. Paul the apostle was called by God to reach out to the Gentiles with the Gospel. The Acts of the Apostles records for us how God's people at last began reaching out in ever-widening circles to people who were different than they. Paul saw this not as a human or merely sociological phenomenon. He reflects on what God had accomplished on the cross of Christ in Eph. 2, noting that God through Christ had broken the barriers between Jew and Gentile and reconciled them, making them one people. If God is the Father of all, and Christ died for all and brings the estranged members of the human race together, then the Holy Spirit enables such unity to be lived out in daily life. As Christians, no matter what our ethnicity, we have one Spirit and can deeply care for one another with the love that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The Church then is the community of the Spirit, the family of God, and the Body of Christ. As the Body, we are many parts but we all belong to the same Body (1 Cor. 12:12). Our unity has a supernatural source and pattern for it has a Trinitarian basis.<sup>1</sup> Hence we are asked to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3), something that has already been given to us. In our sacramental life, in our baptism and at our Lord's Table, we find our true common identity that transcends our plural identities, shaping them and reconciling them by bringing us to the cross of Christ where we

---

<sup>1</sup> See Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994, p. 151. According to Grenz, "The final goal of the work of the triune God in salvation history is the establishment of the eschatological community..." a community comprising every nation, and "that transcends every human division."

discover the Triune God's "self-donation", the source and model for the common life in the Body of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

It is this consistent view of God's plan for the *ethne* (nations) that leads to the beautiful heavenly vision of seeing every tongue and tribe represented in that great throng of the redeemed (Rev. 7:9). It is this very vision that was the great motivating force for many a missionary enterprise that emerged from the church in history. It was several such initiatives that brought Christianity to the shores of Singapore.

### **The History of the Church in Singapore**

From its beginning, modern Singapore has had a multi-racial flavour. Chinese, Indians, Indonesians, and Malays and many others resided in Singapore, each looking for a better life through trade and commerce. By 1860, there were 50,010 Chinese, 10,906 Malays, 12,967 Indians, and 6,867 people of other ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> Missions to Singapore from the early days took note of the multi-racial reality of Singapore and attempts were made to reach the various ethnic communities. For example, the Presbyterian missionary Benjamin Peach Keasbury did church planting work among two ethnic groups - the Chinese and the Malays. As a result of his efforts, two churches were planted. The Princep Street Presbyterian Church was founded in 1843 as the result of Keasbury's ministry among Malays and his desire to see the establishment of a Malay church. This church, while dedicated to reaching the Malays, was diverse in itself. On the walls of the church today are memorial tablets dedicated to both 19<sup>th</sup> Century Asian and European Christians alike. Likewise, the work among Chinese led to the founding of the Glory Presbyterian church in 1862, the oldest Chinese-speaking church in Singapore.

In 1856, the Residency Chaplain of the Anglican Church, the Rev. William Humphrey, felt a similar burden for the Asian population, especially for the Chinese and Tamil-speaking population. In that year, the Anglican Church organised St. Andrew's Church Mission as its mission to Asians. Straight away, two Asian catechists were appointed, one to work

---

<sup>2</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> *Singapore Year Book 1994*, Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts.

among the Chinese and the other among Indians. In 1875, under the influential leadership of Rev. William Henry Gomes, a chapel was built at Stamford road to serve as a base for the growing work. The gospel was preached in this chapel every weekend in a variety of languages – Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hylam, Tamil and Malay. This was to serve as the base for future Anglican vernacular work.

In the same spirit, the Methodists began their missionary work in Singapore in the closing stages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by focusing work among the Chinese, Tamil, and the Malay-speaking Straits-born Chinese or the Peranakan. Thus James Thoburn, an American missionary who came from India, established a Tamil church in 1887 besides establishing an English-speaking Church (Wesley Methodist Church) in 1885, the year that Methodist work began in Singapore. A Chinese Church was established in 1889 which became the Telok Ayer Methodist Church while the work among the Peranakan resulted in the Kampong Kapur Methodist Church. The multi-racial aspect of the mission work in Singapore was apparent from the beginning. Just 16 days after the arrival of the missionaries on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1885, the first ever quarterly conference was held with 26 members and probationers, among them “Eurasians, a few Tamils and, one Chinese”.<sup>4</sup>

In conjunction with the church planting work was the emphasis given to educational mission and the setting up of schools. The first two schools set up in Singapore by the Methodists were the Anglo-Chinese School begun at Amoy Street in 1886 for the sons of influential Chinese gentlemen and as an extension of outreach among the Chinese, and a Tamil girl’s school in Serangoon in 1887 that became the Methodist Girls’ School.

The determination of the missionaries in reaching out to the various linguistic and ethnic groups was demonstrated by the fact that many of them were able to use the vernacular languages in their ministries and in some cases very fluently. Besides Thoburn, William Oldham and Amilia Pykett were fluent in Tamil while Dr West, Dr Leuring and Rev G F Pykett were conversant in Hokkien. Dr Leuring also knew Foochow while

---

<sup>4</sup> Theodore R. Doraisamy ed., *Forever Beginning, One Hundred Years of Methodism in Singapore* (Singapore: Craft Print, 1985).

William Horley could preach effectively in Hakka. Methodist missionaries Shellabear and Sophia Blackmore both spoke Malay.<sup>5</sup>

In its desire to reach every racial and language group, the church in Singapore was able to reflect the rich multi-ethnic tapestry. In his description of an Assembly of God chapel, Cecil Jackson, a Pentecostal missionary brings this out very well:

From 1933 – 1937 the Assembly of God Chapel at 486 Serangoon Road grew gradually by `families' rather than with individuals as in the modern day. There were Americans, Anglo Indians, Britishers, Baba Chinese, Ceylon-Tamils, Chinese, Dutch, Eurasians, Indonesians, Indians, Malayans, Singhalese and others. The 'family' influence also manifested in the church life, so that when one member of the church was physically unwell, spiritually low, personally in need or even absent, the church as one larger family responded immediately. This caring communion was a gift from God.<sup>6</sup>

In post-independent Singapore, this multi-racial approach to evangelism and church life has continued. In 1976 when the Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore divided into its national components, each retained its ethnic, racial and linguistic conferences. Hence the Methodist Church in Singapore was established as an autonomous church with three annual conferences - the English-speaking Trinity Annual Conference, the Chinese Annual Conference, and the Emmanuel Tamil Annual Conference. The three conferences are united and work together under the General Conference.

The churches in Singapore had at times combined their efforts in multi-ethnic evangelistic outreach. For instance, in 1978, the Billy Graham Crusade was a major evangelistic event held at the National Stadium that brought together the efforts and resources of almost all the Protestant churches in Singapore. The message went out not only in English but in several other languages in an attempt to reach out to the many races in Singapore. English and Mandarin were heard from the pulpit while

---

<sup>5</sup> Bobby E. K. Sng, *In His Good Time*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 1993), p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Hokkien, Cantonese, Tamil, and Malay were heard through the 8000 sets of earphones made available during the crusade.

Likewise, the 1986 Luis Palau Love Singapore Mission was a combined effort that also had a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic outreach with messages being simultaneously translated into Mandarin and other Chinese dialects, Peranakan Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, Tamil, Tagalog, Thai, Japanese, and Korean. The last few languages in the list indicate an attempt to also reach out to foreigners in Singapore, whether expatriates or foreign workers.

Sometimes it is deemed more effective to reach out to particular groups in a more focused way. Besides evangelistic events meant to reach out to English speaking Singaporeans (which in itself is often a multi-ethnic experience involving Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and other groups), regular evangelistic programmes are also organised to reach out to particular language and cultural groups. Hence, the annual Chinese New Year Concert is jointly organised by the Chinese-speaking churches using well-known Chinese Christian artistes. Indian Churches have also organised events seeking to reach out to the Tamil speaking population. Among the Indians, the first north Indian Church was planted in the late 1980s while the first Telugu congregation now worships regularly at Short Street Tamil Methodist Church.

The large influx of foreign workers and expatriates into Singapore in the 1980s has resulted in this group forming 20% of the population in Singapore. It is not surprising that churches have sought to reach out to this group. Services catering to their needs have sprung up in many churches. Some parachurch organisations have also become particular focal points for outreach to specific groups and have recruited staff to lead in these ministries.

The regular church services have also seen an increasing number of expatriates attending and participating in church life. These would include, for example, professionals and workers from China, India, Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia and a host of other nations. This has further enriched the church in Singapore and brought in new resources as well as strengthened the resolve to reach out to the different ethnic groups in the country and beyond.

Some churches have crossed linguistic and ethnic boundaries to do this. For instance, while traditionally Chinese-speaking churches started English services, partly to retain the English-speaking children of their

members in church, traditionally English-speaking churches have also started services in Mandarin and dialects to cater to the Chinese-speaking parents of their members who are being reached out with the gospel. In addition, some churches have started ministries in other languages and among other ethnic groups simply because of obvious needs that they could not ignore. Examples are two churches in Little India, the Chinese (and English) speaking Foochow Methodist Church and the English (and Peranakan) speaking Kampong Kapor Methodist Church. Both have seen the throngs of Indian foreign workers around their church premises and have started Tamil services to cater to them, though they had little experience in Tamil ministry to begin with.

The multi-ethnic, multi-lingual approach in mission and evangelism done in Singapore has resulted in a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic church. The census in 2000 showed that Christians comprised 14.6% of the population. Among the Chinese, 16.5% were Christians, while 12.1% of Indians were Christians. The figures for the other groups include 0.02% for Malays and 68.4% for the other races.

The greatest inroad of Christianity in recent decades has been among the Chinese while the smallest impact has been among the Malays. Less than 100 active Malay Christians are known.<sup>7</sup> This in part depends on how closely or tightly ethnic and religious identities are interwoven. This is the strongest for the Malays. It is assumed that to be Malay is to be Muslim. The statistics reinforce this notion since almost all Malays (99.6%) are Muslims. The Chinese and Indians reflect a more plural situation in terms of religion. 53.6% of Chinese are Buddhists while another 10.8% are Taoists. Among the Indians, 55.4% are Hindus and a further 25.6% are Muslims. The Chinese have shown the greatest plurality and therefore the least resistance to conversions to Christianity while the Malays have shown the greatest resistance. The Indians have shown fairly strong resistance as they represent two major religious groups that are quite close-knit. The majority Hindus have often associated being Indian to being Hindu and together with the Muslims would consider conversions negatively. Among the Chinese, Taoists were in the majority until recent decades. Group cohesion and identity were not strong features among them and they lost their numbers to Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism has become the

---

<sup>7</sup> Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 21<sup>st</sup> Century edn (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001).

fastest growing religion in Singapore and seems poised to become the majority religion among the Chinese. Whether this would produce stronger resistance to conversions as seen among the Malays and Indians is yet to be seen.

This brings us to an important point: how closely a religion is associated with a particular ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity. In a television programme produced last year to encourage racial and religious harmony, each major ethnic group was represented by a religion in terms of the visual images used. The Chinese were represented by Buddhism, the Malays by Islam, the Indians by Hinduism, and the Eurasians by Christianity. This is hardly an accurate picture of the actual situation in Singapore. In another programme, Christianity was entirely left out as the ethnic groups highlighted were the Chinese, Malays, and Indians. In that case, the Christians were not identified with any of the ethnic groups.

While this has caused concern among Christians, it also has a silver lining. It does point to the fact that the church is multi-ethnic. While the other religious communities tend to be monoethnic (except perhaps for the Muslims who though are mainly Malays have also an Indian component; it must also be said that the Buddhists do have small minorities such as Sri Lankans and Indochinese communities) it is in the church that one can most clearly see a spread of different races. In the government's recent attempts to bring about greater racial and religious harmony, the church can provide an interesting and useful model in this regard.

### **Challenges Ahead**

We have seen how the church is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual reality, both theologically and historically. In Singapore the church is one place where people of different races and religions have lived and worked together. The church is truly a multi-racial community and therefore the ideas of racial harmony and a multi-racial society are not foreign to Christians. With its experience, the church has contributed to racial harmony and thus the process of nation building in Singapore. The challenge is to continue this contribution at a time when there is an increasingly felt need for racial and religious harmony in Singapore. The church's habit of reaching out to people of all races and religions with the

gospel and providing education and acts of mercy and compassion through its various institutions and ministries must continue in the constructive way that has existed thus far.

Christianity is a minority religion on most counts. It is a minority religion, not only nationally but also in each major ethnic group - Chinese, Malays, and Indians. It is possible that the majority religions in each group will become even more closely identified ethnically and that the church will be left out in this process. Worse still, the church may be seen as "foreign" to all the ethnic groups or associated with the West. To avoid this, the church must do a few things.

First, the church must work hard in avoiding being labelled a western religion. Globalisation processes do not help. Though the centre of gravity of global Christianity, in terms of numbers, shifted in the 1980s from the western world to the non-western world, the forms of Christianity are still dominated by western influences. The songs we sing, our worship styles, the books we read, the speakers we flock to hear, all still come largely from the West. We must work harder in truly expressing our multi-ethnicity by finding appropriate forms that show multi-ethnicity rather than be swallowed by global forms of western Christianity.

Second, in becoming more Asian, the church must celebrate its multi-ethnicity and take care of its own minorities. The minorities in church often suffer the disadvantages of being small. In an age that celebrates mega-churches and well-resourced ministries, the needs of the less well-endowed parts of the church must be taken care of. Otherwise we face our own globalisation process whereby dominant forms take over and equally important minority forms and ministries are lost.<sup>8</sup> A minority group in church may not be able to afford staff or church buildings to do its ministry as effectively as others. It must be helped if we are to retain and further develop our multi-lingual and multi-ethnic life.

Third, the church can use its multi-ethnic composition and life to contribute further to the nation's efforts to bring about greater racial harmony. Appreciation of cultural and racial diversity can be done not only in the larger society but more so in church since we have many different groups in our churches already. Deep and lasting friendships

---

<sup>8</sup> See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 72-79 for his insightful discussion on the dynamics of exclusion that can be practised through such processes as assimilation, abandonment as so on.

across the races can be achieved in the church and be a model to be emulated.

The inspiration for such steps to be taken would be where we began - a biblical perspective of God's acts in our world. God has not changed His plans for mankind. In His mind and heart, all peoples are included. It is very illuminating to read in scripture a verse such as Isaiah 19:25. "The Lord Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance." Though Egypt and Assyria in the Old Testament were considered arch enemies of Israel, the people of God, God's final word to them and deeper intent for them is one of blessing and inclusion into His family. In this passage, God is claiming all peoples to Himself and declaring that they are His.

Against this divine declaration, the sinful nature of man has created sinful structures in society and boundaries of conflict and hatred, including ethnic ones. Several years ago, the then Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, made an astute observation and remarked that while there is relative peace and calm among the ethnic communities in Singapore, he had doubts about how deep it went. He felt that matters of race had to do with gut feelings which are embedded deep within us and that in certain circumstances they can explode. He had no illusions about this matter and felt that the only solution was to keep things under control. The question still remains: Can people of different races be bonded deeply?

The answer lies in the Gospel and what it does to our ultimate identities. The Gospel of Christ redemptively brings together people with different ethnic and national loyalties and identities by uniting them in a common and ultimate identity and allegiance. When we are baptised we are given a common identity as children of the true and triune God. We become members of one Body, the Body of Christ. It is this unity that allows for the rich diversity in the God-created world to exist in the Church, without conflict and chaos. Without this unity located and centred in the one God and Father of all, one Lord, and one Spirit, and expressed in the one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one Body (Eph. 4:4-6), there is no hope for the rich diversity of races to be brought together into real and abiding community, and no hope for the disappearance of the enmity, hatred, violence, and prejudices that often characterise inter-ethnic relations.

God brings us together from every tribe and tongue into one family, united by an identity and allegiance that transcend our ethnic and other penultimate identities. As Paul describes in Eph. 2, the cross of Christ then becomes our peace, filling every interstitial space between peoples, thus bringing about reconciliation and richness.<sup>9</sup>

It is this truth that fires our imagination to reach beyond our comfort zones and that has led the church in mission to reach out without discrimination so that the church becomes what the world ought to be, where all races have a God-given place. The churches in Singapore have shown signs of doing this as they reach out in mission to other people groups with the love of God. This *missio dei* or the mission of God must continue to shape and transform us. The experience of the church in Singapore, though not perfect in this regard, nevertheless does show glimpses of what God has in mind.

***Dr Robert Solomon*** is Bishop of the Methodist Church in Singapore

---

<sup>9</sup> See Ellen T. Charry, "Christian Jews and the Law," *Modern Theology*, 11(2, 1995), p. 190.