



## Anglican National Identity: Theological Education and Ministerial Formation in Multifaith Malaysia

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### ABSTRACT

Malaysia became an independent nation in 1957 and has grown dramatically in prosperity since that time. The main groups in this ethnically diverse nation are Malays (65 per cent) Chinese (26 per cent) and Indians (7.7 per cent). Sixty per cent of the population are Muslim which is the official religion of the nation. Christians represent about 9 per cent of the population and there are 80,000 Anglican members. There has been political pressure against Christians in recent years and there is growing concern about the position of minority religious groups. Anglicans came with the British, though indigenous mission was the work of Indian and Chinese Christians. Theological education is mainly focused on the Seminari Teoloji Malaysia where a holistic curriculum has been developed. A sense of Anglican identity is developing in relation to the context in Malaysia but this has hindered clarity on the nature of the Anglican heritage. The challenges facing the Anglican Church in Malaysia are identified.

**KEYWORDS:** Malaysia, Anglican, theological education, identity, Islam

### *Introduction*

One of the many theological issues which has and will continue to occupy much time and work in the Anglican Communion and its member churches is the question of ecclesiology, particularly the educational mission of the church. In facing its task and carrying out its calling, the Anglican Church should seriously consider its identity and its mission in the context of a twenty-first century Malaysian society that is undergoing phenomenal political, economic and social changes.

The educational mission of the church is part and parcel of the function of the church as *koinonia*, a community to manifest the unity of God in

Christ. Therefore, it forms an integral part of the mission and service of the church. Moreover, theological education and all other ministerial formation programmes are an important part of the educational mission of the church. It is through theological education that the church prepares those who will become pastors, evangelists, catechists, teachers, etc. for the equipping of the saints and for work of ministry (*diakonia*) for building up the body of Christ (*koinonia*).<sup>1</sup> The question arises, however, as to how Malaysian Anglicans are addressing the challenges and opportunities in theological education in a multifaith context. How does the educational mission of the church help in shaping and promoting an Anglican identity? What is the context in which theological education is taking place?

*Malaysia: The Melting Pot*

Malaysia is a secular federation comprising 11 states in the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Labuan. Successive periods of European colonization entered the Malay peninsular beginning with the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch (1641–1824) and finally the British from the nineteenth century up to Malayan Independence in 1957.

The current total population of Malaysia is about 23.27 million<sup>2</sup> with about 75 per cent of them living in Peninsula Malaysia. The most outstanding characteristic of the population is its highly variegated ethnic mix. This feature makes it one of the prime examples of a multi-racial society in the world.

Generally speaking, Malaysians can be classified into two main categories: those with cultural affinities indigenous to the region and to one another, who are known as *bumiputera* (lit. 'sons of the soil'); and the non-*bumiputera* whose cultural affinities lie outside of the region. The *bumiputera* groups, comprising 65.1 per cent of the population, are highly differentiated. There are three broad categories: the aborigines (*orang asli*); Malays; and Malay-related. The non-*bumiputera* groups consist mainly of the Chinese (26.0 per cent) and Indians (7.7 per cent), with much smaller communities made up of Arabs, Sinhalese, Eurasians and Europeans.

1. Judo Poerwowidagdo, *Towards the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities for Theological Education* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), p. 21.

2. Statistics based on Population Distribution and Basic Demographic Characteristics Report: Population and Housing Census 2000. Putrajaya: Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2001. Available at: <http://www.statistics.gov.my/English/PageDemo.htm> (6 November 2001).

Religion is highly correlated with ethnicity and almost all the major religions of the world have substantial representation in this country. At present, Islam is the most widely professed faith with about 60.4 per cent of the total population made up of Muslims. Nearly all Malays are Muslim, along with Tamil, Malayali, Gujarati and Punjabi Muslims, and around 20 per cent of the tribal peoples, thus making Islam the dominant religion. Christians form 9.1 per cent; Hindus 6.3 per cent; Buddhists 19.2 per cent; Confucianists/Taoists/other traditional Chinese religionists 2.6 per cent; Folk/Tribal Animistic Religionists 1.2 per cent and Others 2.1 per cent of the total population.<sup>3</sup>

Malaysia has often been showcased as a unique model of tolerance and accommodation. However, over the last few decades this nation has been undergoing astounding developments politically, socially and economically. Intense intra-Muslim struggles coupled with increased state-mobilized Islamizing efforts have produced disturbing knock-on effects on non-Muslim minorities. Religion is so profoundly interwoven with race, ethnicity, politics and economics that it is impossible to speak of one without touching upon the others. Besides various matters related to the practical living together of different faith communities, there are also serious theological challenges facing Christians living in Malaysia. These include questions of Christian self-identity and self-expression in relation to Islam as well as issues regarding the understanding of the significance of Islam itself.<sup>4</sup>

### *Christianity and the Church in Malaysia*

Christianity in Malaysia is often thought of as the religion of peoples whose ancestors were migrants, whether Portuguese, Dutch, British, Chinese or Indian. However, in East Malaysia it is also the faith of large numbers of tribespeople.

Although the total Christian population is about 9 per cent, in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak this rises to about 40 per cent. In Malaysia, there are some 400,000 Roman Catholics, 150,000 Methodists, 80,000 Anglicans, and around 200,000 other Christians, including fast growing Pentecostal and independent neo-charismatic churches.<sup>5</sup> A

3. Statistics for Folk/Tribal Animistic Religionists and Others are based on Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991 (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics, 1991).

4. Cf. Albert Sundararaj Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations: A Malaysian Christian Perspective', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 18.1 (2007) pp. 67–83.

5. Ian Harris, Stuart Mews, Paul Morris and John Shepherd (eds.), *Contemporary Religions: A World Guide* (Harlow: Longman, 1992), p. 439.

study found that there are 4553 Christian churches in the nation, 3113 of which can be considered Evangelical.

With the European colonialists came the first modern Christian missionaries, each with the faith of his homeland.<sup>6</sup> While some individuals were mission-oriented and had the desire to spread their faith more widely, the actions of the Dutch and the British did not extend beyond providing for the religious needs of their own people. A few missionaries began studying Islam and the Malay language seriously. Issues of commitment to the country, contextualization in a multicultural situation, and the realization of the potential contribution to national unity came into focus.

In recent years, Islam as a socio-political force and social context has become of paramount concern for Christians in Malaysia. With the country moving into the realm of societal values and 'Islamizing' institutions, a number of pertinent questions disturb the minds of the religious minorities, including the Christian community.<sup>7</sup> There are a number of concerns that impinge on the life and mission of the church.

The government generally respects non-Muslims' right of worship. But Malaysian Christians have regularly expressed concerns about the marginalization and discrimination of non-Muslim communities as a result of Islamization. State governments carefully control the distribution of land, building of non-Muslim places of worship and the allocation of land for cemeteries. The government has also introduced the Islamic values programme to check on negative secularist tendencies thought to be associated with Western societies.

Christians have also expressed fears that the structure of education is being changed to conform with Islamization. One example is the introduction of Islamic history and civilization courses as compulsory components of university programmes. Besides marginalization and discrimination, Christians are perturbed by specific statements and actions that seem to undermine their position within the country. In 1981, a federal level statute was introduced banning the possession and circulation of the Indonesian-language Bible, *Alkitab*. Furthermore, in April 2003 the Home Ministry banned 35 books, including the *Bup Kudus*, the Bible in the Iban language.

High-handed activities against the Christian community included the torching of church buildings in 2001. In 2005, local authorities demolished a church belonging to the indigenous Orang Asli tribal people following a dispute over the ownership of the land on which the church was built.

6. P.O. Phoon, 'Malaysia-Singapore', in D.E. Hooke (ed.), *The Church in Asia* (Singapore: Moody, 1975), pp. 411-33 (411).

7. Cf. Walters, 'Issues in Christian-Muslim Relations'.

There was also the abuse of Christian symbols in a local by-elections campaign in 2002.

The question of religious conversion and apostasy is often a very controversial issue in many parts of the world. It is even more contentious in Malaysia, where religion, culture and ethnicity are intricately interwoven with each other. What Malaysians have witnessed recently is the self-emasculation of the civil court judges in giving sway to the Shari'a Court and Shari'a law.

In response to the prevailing situation, Christians and other religious minorities have acted, especially over the last three decades, to map out strategies in order to feel secure in working together on issues of common interest. The non-Muslim communities resolved to strengthen their status by becoming creative challenges in society, involved in the mainstream task of nation-building. For instance, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) was founded in 1986 as the government-driven Islamization programme built up steam.

This broad-based alliance comprises the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) and the Roman Catholic Church. CFM represents around 5000 member churches, includes almost all Christian denominations and speaks for about 90 per cent of the Christian population of Malaysia. The Federation is also a member of the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST). The CFM acts on behalf of the Christian community in relations with the government and other religious communities.

#### *The Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia*<sup>8</sup>

Anglicanism came to the Malay Peninsula following the establishment of the British East India Company's administered settlement on Penang island in 1786. There was a growing belief that the British Empire was a means of improving and civilizing the world. As one member of the House of Commons put it: 'In every quarter of the globe we have planted the seeds of freedom, civilisation and Christianity.'<sup>9</sup> This was

8. Cf. Albert Sundararaj Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), pp. 44-47; Diocesan website <http://www.anglicanwestmalaysia.org.my/aboutus.php>. See also Batumalai Sadayandy, *A Bicentenary History of the Anglican Church of the Diocese of West Malaysia (1805-2005)* (Melaka, Malaysia: Diocese of West Malaysia, 2007).

9. William Huskisson addressing the House of Commons in 1828, cited by Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 30.

brought about primarily by the establishment abroad of the Church of England which only gradually recognized a spiritual responsibility for the non-white people in the British colonies.

The See of Calcutta provided episcopal supervision for the chaplaincy work on Penang island and the first Anglican Church building, the Church of St George the Martyr, was built and consecrated in 1819. The See of Calcutta extended from India to New Zealand and was thus practically unmanageable. As a result, in 1855, a Diocese of Singapore, Labuan and Sarawak was created by Letters of Patent for the better administration of these outlying areas. The new diocese became a missionary diocese of the Archdiocese of Canterbury. This diocese was further reorganized into the Diocese of Singapore in 1909 with the See located in Singapore.

By 1962, plans were completed for the division of the Diocese of Borneo. The new Diocese of Jesselton (Sabah) including Labuan, came into being on 24 July 1962. The remainder of the Diocese including Brunei was reconstituted as the Diocese of Kuching on the 13 August 1962. On 7 April 1970, the Diocese of West Malaysia was formed to separate this region from Singapore. After 120 years, the Anglican church in South-East Asia was finally positioned to take responsibility for its own mission and growth.

The Anglican Church in Malaya began mainly with a notable bias towards ministering to the exclusive concerns and spiritual needs of the English communities. Northcott is of the opinion that the slow growth of the Anglican Church in West Malaysia to an adult membership of 5023 in 1987 in over 150 years, may be largely accounted for by a lack of indigeneity until very recent times.<sup>10</sup> (The total membership above the age of 12 for 1997 was 8260.)<sup>11</sup> One of the major obstacles to growth was the separate development of expatriate and indigenous ministries. The other was the relationship of dependence between the expatriate and indigenous churches which carried clear racial overtones. Another significant factor was that Malaya was a staging post for mission to China till the early 1950s, rather than a place of mission in its own right.

10. This figure has been computed from estimates of total membership of all baptized persons according to returns to the Synod of the Diocese of West Malaysia, Taiping, August 1987 cited by Michael S. Northcott, 'Two Hundred Years of Anglican Mission', in Robert Hunt, Kam-Hing Lee and John Roxborough (eds.), *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1992).

11. This figure has been computed from details of membership according to the five archdeaconry reports presented at the Synod of the Diocese of West Malaysia, Ipoh, 9–11 September, 1998.

The growth and development of indigenous mission was not the work of expatriate chaplains but rather it was Indian and Chinese Christians who laboured unceasingly for the establishment of local congregations. However, the slow growth of Tamil and Chinese congregations was due to the social distance between the Asian and the European churches. The divisions of society along racial lines were clearly reflected within the church. This was further reinforced by the colonial government's policy of 'divide and rule' which was never challenged by the church.

Anglican mission to Malaya worked on a dependent model of mission. It was a mission from a Church and a nation that was economically and politically stronger. Financial dependence of local congregations on churches in England also inhibited development. This dependency on the 'mother church', though caring and thoughtful, was mostly paternalistic and tended to dominate. The missionaries collaborated with the imperial pretensions of their home country. They thought themselves more civilized and racially superior and took responsibility for the future of their missionary 'audience'. The missionary often thought that he knew best.

After the Japanese invasion in December 1941, British expatriate leadership was removed and the churches were entirely in Asian hands for the first time. It was during the period of the Japanese Occupation and the Second World War from 1941–45 that Asian priests had, through their mutual common suffering, demonstrated an inter-racial spirit and strong leadership qualities. The churches moved quickly to repair their buildings and re-establish their work. The War and the loss of its expatriate leadership precipitated a sense of self-determination among the local Christian community. There was also an urgent need for training Asian leaders for this developing part of the Anglican Church. In 1948, Trinity Theological College was founded in Singapore to train ministers locally for the region. In the same year the Council of Churches of Malaya and Singapore came into being.

When Malaya achieved independence in 1957 the churches began to show more signs of moving from expatriate to local leadership, but despite the flow of students from Trinity Theological College, progress was slow and patchy. With the country's independence, the churches in Malaysia also underwent their own form of nationalization. Foreign missionaries could only have their visas renewed up to a total of ten years. At the same time, relatively few visas were granted to new missionaries. This had the effect of forcing the churches to nurture local leaders. In both East and West Malaysia, Church schools did much to help provide indigenous leadership for the denominations concerned, as well as making a worthwhile contribution to society at large. Today the



Christian Church in Malaysia is largely local in leadership, membership and finance.

After independence from British rule, the Diocese was renamed the Diocese of Singapore and Malaya in 1960, thus giving due recognition to the political importance of Malaya. In 1966 Chiu Ban It was appointed the first Malaysian Bishop of Singapore and Malaysia. Ten years later when the dioceses were divided, Rt Revd Roland Koh was enthroned the first Bishop of West Malaysia on 7 April 1970 and it was incorporated by an Act of the Malaysian Parliament. In 1997, the Diocese of West Malaysia had a total membership of 16,417 baptized Anglicans with 66 priests, 19 deaconesses and 13 evangelists.<sup>12</sup> In 1996, the dioceses of Sabah and Kuching had approximately 27,000 and 118,000 members respectively.<sup>13</sup>

The provincial jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury remained till the inauguration of the Province of South-East Asia on 2 February 1996.<sup>14</sup> The new Province not only includes the Dioceses of Kuching, Sabah, Singapore and West Malaysia but also has ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Brunei, Indonesia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Nepal. Altogether these have a population of 450 million consisting of many races, languages, cultures, religions and customs. The formation of the Province indeed ushers in another era in the contextualization of Anglicanism in this region of Asia. The Anglican Church in South-East Asia has evolved into a self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and truly indigenous entity.

### *Theological Education in Malaysia*

Formal seminary education is extremely important for today's church leaders. The Anglican Church, as noted earlier, took an active interest in building up local leadership only after the Japanese occupation of Malaya in the 1940s. Of great significance was the removal of expatriate leadership so that the churches were entirely in Asian hands for the first time. Expatriate churchmen interned in Changi prison (Singapore) now saw very clearly that after the war they and their churches would have to change. They had been insular in their relations with one another and too aloof in their relations with Chinese and Indian Christians.

12. Council of Churches of Malaysia, *Celebrating 50 Years of United Witness and Service: 1947-1997* (Petaling Jaya: CCM, 1997), p. 107.

13. Saphir Athyal (ed.), *Church in Asia Today: Challenges and Opportunities* (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996), p. 265.

14. The Province of the Anglican Church in South-East Asia, *Canons of the Anglican Church in South East Asia* (PAC-SEA, 1st edn, 1998), p. 1.



In 1948, the ecumenical Trinity Theological College (TTC), Singapore was founded to train ministers locally for the region. The formation of TTC was the direct outcome of the expansion of the vision of united witness. As for united service, there was a sustained thrust made in the area of nation-building in the postwar period especially in the field of education.

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The inter-denominational Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (the Theological Seminary of Malaysia, STM) came into existence as a joint Anglican, Evangelical Lutheran and Methodist venture on 6 January 1979. For Anglicans and Evangelical Lutherans this marked a further stage in their co-operation in theological education in Malaysia, which had earlier included the Church Training Centre and Kolej Theoloji Malaysia.

During the short history of STM, the number of students has grown to over 70 at any one time. More than 230 students have since graduated and are now serving in all parts of Malaysia and the Asian region. The accreditation of the seminary by the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) in 1984 was an important milestone. The seminary has a vision to equip 'God's people for ministry and mission'. Its mission is 'to help both full-time workers and lay people to grow in Christian maturity and to train them for ministry and service in and through the Church'.<sup>15</sup>

The aim and purpose of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia is to develop a curriculum that would provide for a holistic training in academic studies, practical and pastoral skills, enrichment of public worship and growth in personal devotion. As such, the overall curriculum consists of spiritual formation, academic studies, field education programme, tutorial system and community life.<sup>16</sup> The aim is to cultivate pastor-teachers who are able to reflect theologically. As theological education is not just about information (passing on of knowledge), or transformation (character and

15. See [http://www.stm.edu.my/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=29](http://www.stm.edu.my/english/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=29)

16. See [http://www.stm.edu.my/english/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=90&Itemid=49](http://www.stm.edu.my/english/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=90&Itemid=49)

spiritual formation), but also enlightening of the mind,<sup>17</sup> STM also offers opportunities for laypeople who are not able to enrol for full-time studies through Theological Education by Extension (TEE) programmes in English, Chinese and Tamil languages.

Ecumenical theological learning is what happens when diverse persons, rooted in their own faith traditions and complex experiences of culture, gender, nationality, race, call and so on, live and train together. Students become open and responsive to the richness of perspectives in the struggle of others, together seeking to know God and to be faithful to God's intention for them in their world. Furthermore, in line with its aim and purpose of developing critical theological reflection in context, among others STM provides courses on Malaysian Society, Christianity and Culture, Introduction to Major World Religions and Interfaith Dialogue. Although ordinands are exposed to ecumenical theological education, there is provision for Anglican teaching and discipline. All Anglican students are required to successfully complete components such as Worship and Liturgy and Anglicanism courses. The Malaysian context itself poses a major challenge for theological education. How far has the seminary been able to respond to this situation? What importance is given to the development of an Anglican identity through theological education and ministerial formation?

#### *Development of an 'Anglican' Identity*

Our identity as human beings is our conviction that we are part of the meaning of things. Identity contains a dynamic of stability and change; sameness and development; continuity and adaptation. Identity operates in a world of symbols which aids in the formation of the person. In Asian culture, individuals find their identity not in what they do, but in relation to their social network, namely extended family, clan or tribe. This also includes the church community.

Identity is formed through many sources, but what part does our Christian profession, our baptism, membership of a church, participation in its activities and theological education play in this formation? The ultimate factor in constructing our personal identity is the relationship to Christ and through him to God the creator and to the church.

Is it possible to speak of a single identity for Anglicanism even within one diocese? There are two ways of looking at the question. First, there is the theological question: is there a distinct Anglican version of Christianity, and if so what is essential to it? Through historical research there is the

17. Ezra Kok, 'Enlightening the Mind', *Berita STM* 24.1 (March 2007), p. 1.

need to look at the unfolding of the Anglican tradition in Malaysia. Second, there is the sociological question: are there recognizable characteristics that are common to all the manifold expressions of the Anglican tradition in West Malaysia today? This is largely a descriptive, phenomenological and comparative study of the outward identifying marks of the church. What are some of the most significant ways in which we as Anglicans realize our identity?

Anglican identity is developing and diversifying. The realization and embodiment of Anglican identity is most clearly seen and felt in worship with the centrality of Scripture. The desire for God which is at the heart of worship and the Bible is what unites Anglicans locally and globally. The tradition of worship has now developed in so many ways around the diocese. Yet the bond of love for Christ—Word and sacrament—draws us together as a family. Careful attentiveness to worship and Scripture shapes our living. This is well expressed in one of the objectives of the Diocese: ‘We will work together to engage in worship—to maintain our distinctive Anglican character while allowing for creative expressions of congregational worship.’<sup>18</sup>

Besides word and sacrament, another feature of Anglican identity is the characteristic form of Church order. The Anglican Church has always existed in a context of rival ways of ordering the Church. On the one hand, it has refused an authoritarian solution, where there is one central authority. On the other hand, it has resisted the sort of diversity in which everyone is free to do according to their own interpretation and conscience, and no one is ultimately accountable to anyone else. Anglicanism has characteristically tried to hold these tendencies in tension and has developed good order. It is an order which combines freedom of Christian conscience with mutual accountability. In doing so Anglicans believe themselves to be in continuity with the New Testament and the early Church.

Anglicanism is very much concerned to relate the Gospel to life in the world. Anglicanism is naturally deeply interwoven in the world. As such it is usually a struggle to interpret the Bible for a particular context or situation. And that explains the reason why the Anglican Church is shaped in ways appropriate to life in different places. Anglicans must be careful, not only to discern what is right, but to find ways of making the Gospel effective in the life of the world. Our proclamation of the Gospel cannot be separated from what we do in ordinary life, especially how we act for justice and human welfare. This engenders the concern for relations with Islam and other religions and a strong concern for ecumenicity and unity with other Christians.

18. Cf. <http://www.anglicanwestmalaysia.org.my/aboutus.php#obj>

*Contemporary Challenges to Anglican Identity*

One of the main challenges facing the worldwide Anglican Church is its lack of an explicitly stated self-understanding of what it means to be Anglican and what it means to recognize others as Anglican and live in interdependent, mutually accountable communion with one another as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

In the Malaysian context, socio-political changes; problems of living in a multiracial and multireligious society in which Islam is the official and dominant religion; difficulties of responding in appropriate ways to the movements and ideas of the worldwide Anglican community as well as the need for each generation to rediscover God's purpose for them in this place, all make large demands from which there is no escape. But in Church History such challenges to people of faith are nothing new.

*'Potted Plant'*

Historically, Christianity is linked to Malaysia's former colonial rulers: the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British. Consequently, by and large the Anglican Church in Malaysia is still considered a Western vestige and outside the mainstream of the nation's life and development. The greatest challenge of the church here is to develop a Malaysian identity. The Anglican Church, with a recorded history of more than two hundred years is still very much a 'Church in Malaysia' and not a 'Malaysian church'.

Thus, one of the key areas of concern is the movement towards a truly 'Malaysianized' Church whose character would be distinctly Malaysian and whose loyalty to the nation and the people is unquestionable. And so the bishop of the Diocese of West Malaysia, Ng Moon Hing laments saying:

issues like women's ordination, lay presidency, homosexuality, HIV/AIDS, global warming, terrorism, etc. are plaguing us and our society daily ... nothing substantial has come out from the local Christian arena ... Almost all the thinking and theologising comes from the West. Where are the Asian theologians or Malaysian theologians? We are like fire-fighters, only active when there is a fire.<sup>19</sup>

One of the fundamental problems that has consistently plagued the Anglican Church can be expressed using D.T. Niles' image of a 'potted

19. Ng Moon Hing, 'Presidential Address', Diocesan Synod, Diocese of West Malaysia, St Mark's Church Butterworth and Pearl View Hotel, Prai, 23–25 August 2007, p. 5.

plant'.<sup>20</sup> It has been transported without being transplanted. In Malaysia, Anglicanism needs to be rooted in the cultural soil of the land. It is still viewed by many Malaysians as a foreign importation and imposition. This sentiment has been strengthened with the rise of nationalism and the resurgence of other religions. The challenge remains for the churches to relate themselves more fully to the local soil – to get down to the rice-roots level of Asian civilization.

### *Responding to Islam*

National independence in 1957 brought with it a Federal Constitution which declared Islam as the official religion. Practically, this involved considerable adjustment on the part of the Church, a process still going on today. Coupled with Islamic resurgence over the last three decades, this has led to a number of serious church-state tensions.

Given the extent to which Islam has dominated public discourse about the shape of Malaysian society, one would expect this to be the most important aspect of the context in which Malaysian Christians do theology. Yet the day-to-day activities of ministry are often focused more on the immediate culture of the Christian or potential convert than on national political and social concerns. Malaysian Christian responses to Islam are both constrained and coloured by these other contextual concerns.<sup>21</sup> Theologians, more busy defending the doctrine and practice of the Anglican tradition, have little opportunity to formulate theological approaches to Islam.<sup>22</sup> Christians need to put more serious effort in understanding Islam and the other Asian religions.

### *Nation-building*

The other problem is that Christians, generally, have tended towards a ghetto mentality among themselves. One of the observations is that the Christian community has been more like glue than leaven. The Anglican Church has been preoccupied with its own existence and organization, and correspondingly she has lagged behind in prophetic concern for the social relevance and outreach of the gospel into the mainstream task of nation building. Part of the reason for this isolation from national life has been a minority consciousness among many Christians, with an accom-

20. Cf. D.T. Niles, as quoted in Chandra Devanesen, *The Cross is Lifted* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 11.

21. Robert Hunt, 'Christian Theological Reflection and Education in the Muslim Societies of Malaysia and Indonesia', *Studies in World Christianity* 3.2 (1997), pp. 202-25 (212).

22. Hunt, 'Christian Theological Reflection', p. 213.

panying sense of security (and perhaps superiority) achieved by insulating themselves against involvement.

A related issue has been the pietistic heritage, which does not take social struggles seriously. In many instances, it has been a lack neither of courage nor of conviction. Rather, lack of understanding and knowledge about the dynamics of social change and the development of new forms of witness and service. This has kept Christians from responsible participation in the social problems inherent in contemporary Malaysian society.

#### *Mission and Service*

There is also the challenge of new approaches to mission and service. Traditionally, the churches in Malaysia have pioneered in a great many ways: the school system, girls' education, welfare among the aborigines of the highlands; agricultural training for the Ibans in Sarawak; hospitals, clinics, schools for the blind, and so on. Now these forms of service are recognized as the responsibility and duty of the state. Though the churches do play a part in these spheres, they are no longer the main agents.

#### *Inculturation of Worship*

Mission takes the local context seriously and believes that the 'good news' of Jesus Christ is universally true but locally expressed. Until some decades ago Anglicans all over the world were worshipping in very much the same way using identical liturgical forms. Common liturgical practice was believed to be the glue of the Anglican Communion — that a people who worshipped together stayed together. To some extent, it gave Anglicans a sense of common identity. However, it has never been true that there has been complete uniformity.

The most potent force pulling Anglican forms of worship away from uniformity is the differences between cultures even within one diocese. Christians have been challenged to encounter and express their faith in the words and ideas of their own culture. After the Japanese Occupation and national independence, the Anglican Church in this land has tended to move away from colonial interest. The Church has begun the process of inculturating outside the 'English'. Inculturation of worship continues to be encouraged while retaining the universal Anglican liturgical norms.

#### *Theological Controversy*

Generally, theological controversy in Malaysia has been stimulated by issues introduced from outside, especially the West. These controversies are conditioned by the indigenous environment and the particular needs of the local churches, and thus demands a contextually sensitive response. Sometimes, however, efforts to formulate indigenous responses to these

issues and movements have distracted the church from considering the larger socio-political and cultural context.

There are a number of factors compelling the Anglican Church in Malaysia to look to its identity. One of them is the uncertainty over authority of the Anglican Church on reforms like ordination of women to the priesthood. The other is a conservative backlash against liberal theological opinions. The issue of human sexuality, for instance, has created widespread tensions not only between Provinces in the Anglican Communion but also within Provinces, dioceses and even parishes. The strength of conservative feeling about the identity of authentic Christianity as being 'Biblical Christianity' cannot be over-emphasized. To a conservative Anglican it is the key issue. But what is alarming about the current crisis is the failure to engage in dialogue. If Anglicanism is to maintain a global community, dialogue on an agreed transparent basis is essential.

However, such questioning raises another and perhaps more controversial issue. Is the real question about authority rather than sexuality? It is not just about authority of interpretation of Holy Scripture, but authority to be 'in communion' among diverse and autonomous Provinces. In recent years the Anglican Church in West Malaysia has been grappling afresh with these challenges and a host of related issues in a constructive and promising fashion. The problems have not been resolved, but significant advances have been made.

### *The Way Forward*

The educational mandate of the Church is the building up of God's people for God's mission and ministry within God's world. A theologically educated person is someone who has acquired the skill of reading the world, reading and interpreting the world in the context and framework of Christian belief and Christian worship. That means that a theologically educated person is not someone who simply knows a great deal about the Bible or history of doctrine but somebody who is able to engage in some quite risky and innovative interpretation. The following are some pointers regarding future direction of theological education and ministerial formation in the Anglican Church in West Malaysia.

The Anglican Church needs to rely on a faith and spirituality that resonates with local sensibilities and addresses local challenges without losing its identity.<sup>23</sup> The Christian community must devise comprehensive educational plans to nurture its faith based on Christian principles of

23. Cf. Kam-Weng Ng, *Challenging Public Ideals*, Occasional Paper published by Kairos Research Centre, n.d.



socialization and moral development and responsible neighbourliness. Furthermore, Christian faith must demonstrate its ability to integrate new advancement in knowledge to express Christianity as a way of life if it is to be thoughtful and adequate for the challenges of globalization and modern life.

Over the last few decades South-East Asia has experienced relatively rapid economic growth. This feature has increased the affluence and vigour of the Christian churches, thus expressing itself in mission outreach work. Theological schools are therefore under pressure to become training centres for mission work rather than centres for theological reflection and action. The time has come for the Anglican Church in the two-thirds world to initiate and take responsibility for theological formation and education programmes. By doing this the Church will remain faithful to God's call as salt and light to the communities and nation, and contribute effectively and meaningfully to theological reflection in the Anglican Communion. Anglicans should be encouraged to develop postgraduate levels of research, theological education and leadership training.

We need to seriously consider research on how to develop pastoral strategies in order to sustain a church operating in a multifaith context with a predominantly Islamic polity. The Christian community should take interfaith dialogue, particularly Muslim-Christian relations, seriously. Christians should carry out research into Islamic issues and engage in intellectual discourse with Islamic scholars and intellectuals. They should also be encouraged and challenged by other Christians, especially those living in predominantly Islamic contexts, who have succeeded in demonstrating a faith that is intellectually vigorous and fully integrated with all aspects of life. Part of the seminary training should include placements where students are exposed to different religious contexts. Furthermore, when doing systematic theology, ordinands need to reflect and ask questions that are posed for Christian theology by other faiths, instead of raising classical questions similar to the ones posed in the sixteenth century. They may be studying interfaith relations but they are not integrating it with their theology.

Theology must be contextualized into the setting of the audience in order to be relevant.<sup>24</sup> Anglicans need to commit themselves to the contextualization of theological education. There has to be a more integrated curriculum approach in which contextualization shapes every aspect of the curriculum and syllabus. There should also be ongoing dialogue between the different contextual theologies in Asia and other parts of the

24. Elaine Becker, 'Theological Education at the Crossroad', *Christian Education Journal*, 3.1 (1999), pp. 49-53 (50).

world. There must be commitment to a careful analysis and clarification of the relationship between the particular and the universal, the local and the global, and the personal and the public.

Anglicans must be challenged to see nation-building as the area in which God is at work through the Holy Spirit. Christians are no longer transient immigrants in the nation. They belong here, and they need to 'break the pot' and relate the gospel where they are. This means the presence and obedience of Christian laypeople in the many-sided activities of the nation's life working towards the common good. Christians need to be conscientized to come out of their shells and exercise a more caring attitude to issues of national interest and take their rightful place as the salt and light in society. Anglican Christians need to take the justice aspect of Kingdom work more seriously. The concern for justice is both political and economic, as well as a social one.

Christians need a spirituality that holds in creative balance the earthly necessity of good citizenship without compromising their Christian identity and witness. Besides the need to learn how to be responsible citizens, Anglicans must formulate a comprehensive framework for engagement with society. This calls for an accurate sociological reading of trends and tensions in our society coupled with a hermeneutically conscious reading of the Bible to guide the social praxis of the church. The witness of the church and its social praxis must be informed by an awareness of the interaction between divine ideals and human values throughout history. We must hermeneutically retrieve lessons from concrete historical models from Christian history to ensure our ability to meet the challenge of an all-embracing and historically inspired religious vision of society.

Ecology is now clearly on the international Anglican agenda. Anglicans need to understand that stewardship is a far wider principle than the narrow financial aspect. In Asian society there is a greater concern for creation-centred spirituality which sees creation as sacred and makes no distinction between the sacred and the secular. Christians are called to acknowledge that God is Lord of all and we are the stewards of God's holy creation.

The Christian Church is a serving church. Christians should actively engage and interact with people of other religious traditions through genuine social concern and community involvement. Anglicans being a minority Christian community, need to develop a social and public philosophy that is broad enough to attract and mobilize both Christians and others to work together in promoting social justice and freedom in a democratic and equitable society. The foremost contribution of the Christian community to public life is to demonstrate a Christian love

that is capable of embracing all social groups regardless of cultural and religious differences. Christian ideals must be backed by Christian love in order to be credible. Christians are to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless – to care for the physical needs of those around them, without regard to how they may respond to the gospel.

Anglicans need to identify resources and establish networks. This task encompasses identifying and recommending ways in which either new networks could be established or existing networks of theological institutions could be strengthened. This could also include the exchange of students and scholars with other parts of the Anglican Communion.

The Anglican Church should endeavour to shed the 'Anglo' image and develop comprehensive guidelines and principles for liturgical renewal and revision. The whole body of worshippers should be listened to and consulted on what and how they want to express their belief before God. Efforts should be made to recognize and study liturgical inculturation which has already taken place, formally and informally, in the previous generations, as liturgies have been created, transmitted and used. Anglicans should be bold enough to experiment in order to create richness, variety and beauty in their worship.

The parish church is the ideal environment for shaping, training, and giving leaders a philosophy of ministry. Seminaries are excellent sources of biblical and theological training. Ideally, the seminary and church should work together to develop leaders. This sort of partnership between theological school and churches provides better theological instruction for leaders while they remain connected to the church. The overall aim of pastoral training should be the integration of theology with practical skills for ministry.

Post-ordination training and education should be given greater emphasis. If possible, a newly ordained deacon should be placed with an experienced senior priest for at least a year. This will give ample hands-on experience and exposure to ministry and ministerial formation. The diocese could also provide in-service seminars in order that the newly ordained deacons and priests will be able to identify their potential for specialized areas of ministry and vocation.

Although formal seminary education is important and necessary, both laypeople and the clergy need nurturing and a deep orientation to life-long learning.<sup>25</sup> In other words, there is a need to equip them to read and think critically as they process the steady stream of new information that is pertinent to effectiveness in leadership.

25. Cf. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2005/002/10.105.html>

There needs to be much more attention given to Anglican spiritual formation and development of personal character. Prayer and devotional practices are often treated as add-ons to the real work of intellectual formation. Theological education consisted mainly of the academic study of religion. There is a lack of grounding of theological curricula in authentic spirituality. Spirituality should not be just an add-on to theological education but the matrix in which and out of which all Christian theology is and needs to be done.

### *Conclusion*

Theological education begins with people's actual context – religious, social, political – and builds on the experience and knowledge they bring. Ecumenical education and training breaks through the barriers we build between us – of race, gender, sexuality, culture, religion, class, politics, economics etc. – and enables difference to become a resource for learning.

Anglicans in Malaysia are faced with a theological and ecclesiological agenda shaped in part by the predominant Islamic context. It is fruitful and more meaningful to approach Islam as the context of Christian life. The way theology is conveyed and studied cannot be separated from life. Theological education and seminary training is bound to life. It is necessary for life and therefore one's identity. It provides the means by which the relationship between God and humanity can be best articulated. Theological education, because it is nurtured and sustained by the Holy Spirit, is life giving and life forming.

The main objective of theological education, therefore, has to be transformation and not just transmission. Transmission, which can be compared to the banking concept, implies that knowledge comes from external sources and authority figures. In education as transformation, learning is motivated and directed by the learner. The creation and development of knowledge is through a dynamic interaction between teachers, learners and multiple resources of all kinds. Teaching and learning functions become interchangeable. Unlike education as transmission where the learners acquire a greater quantity of information, education as transformation results in a qualitative change in the learners and their contexts.

Nurturing of an Anglican identity in and through theological education should be one that is holistic in fashion. Theological education, in its formal setting, must therefore be 'concerned with informing, forming and transforming the character, values, abilities, and thought of all its participants including its students, faculty, staff, administration [and the Church]'.<sup>26</sup>

26. Phil Howard, 'Theological Education: Perspectives from the Literature', *Christian Education Journal*, 3.1 (1999), pp. 9-27 (24).