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(monthly Newsletter)

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Issue: November-December 2008

The Mission to Reclaim Mission Schools

By Chan Geok Oon & Lim Boon Hock

THE EARLY MISSIONARIES SET up schools in our country not too long after they arrived. They were actually the pioneers in establishing schools in Malaysia. Quite a number of our national leaders were groomed and trained for leadership positions in these once prestigious mission schools where quality education was carried out by dedicated and well-qualified teachers.

A few luminaries of mission schools are Bank Negara Governor Tan Sri Dr Zeti Aziz, Mercy Malaysia president Datuk Dr Jemilah Mahmood, our Prime Minister's wife, Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, and even our Prime Minister Dato' Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had his Form Six education in a mission school in Penang.

We believe good practices and traditions carried out during the early decades of mission schools need to be revived and new ideas tried out. If mission schools have the responsibility of administering and selecting their own principals and teachers, and are able to inculcate high standard of moral values amongst the pupils through good moral and Religious Knowledge classes, and even weekly chapel services for non-Muslims students as done in the past, they may be able to once again produce men and women with high moral standard and calibre for the betterment of Malaysians.

Unfortunately today's mission schools are no longer as effective as it used to be partly because of the shortage of dedicated Christian teachers; and in this regard it has lost its cutting edge.

Bridging the Racial Divide

It is hoped that the Education Ministry in conjunction with mission school boards could look for ways and means to rebuild mission schools to their former standard, if not higher, so that their role in providing quality education to all the races in the country can be enhanced. As a matter of fact, of all the existing local schools in the country, it is the mission schools that still have a good composition of various ethnic groups in their student population. This cannot be said of the Malay religious schools, Chinese schools, Tamil schools or even the national-type schools.

Therefore, mission schools are ideal places to forge inter-cultural communication and racial harmony in a multi-racial society. It has to be communicated to teachers and students alike that if Malaysia is to have a place and a future in a globalised world, it certainly requires full participation, contributions and cooperation of all races.

Polarisation in the Malaysian society will not be to our advantage when we have to face stiff competition in the outside world. Unity within is strength, while racism, disunity, polarisation and strife can only lead to the weakening, decline and destruction of any society. Ultimately, the entire nation spirals downhill and all people groups in the nation suffer as has happened in the case of Afghanistan.

Can mission schools once again model a multi-racial and multi-religious community of loving, caring, Godfearing diligent people where race or religion is never an issue? Where everyone is helping everyone else to progress regardless of race or creed, realising that every human being is worthy of due respect? This is the kind of progressive caring society that will be a blessing to all and is pleasing to God. We believe it is God's desire to bless Malaysia and to see it fulfill its God-given destiny, which is to be a model 'rainbow nation for Asia' and regions beyond.

Mission schools can certainly play a more proactive and effective role in inculcating racial harmony in children from a young age, besides promoting the universal values of compassion, kindness, justice, peace and integrity. Racial pride and hatred should never be encouraged in a multi-racial community. Our young people must be taught from young in homes and school to respect and care for others irrespective of race or creed.

A culture of polarisation, prejudice, mistrust and hatred was unheard of when the mission schools were run by dedicated Christian pioneers and administrators in the early days. Let mission schools bridge the racial divide once again.

Having a Clear Policy

Whatever our misgivings or reservations about mission schools, the fact remains that they were brought into being through the prayers and sacrifices of the godly pioneers and missionaries. These schools have been entrusted to our stewardship, and there is a very real sense in which we will be held accountable.

They Came... They Saw... They Build Mission Schools

The Anglicans were the first to start a mission school in Malaysia. In 1816, Rev. Robert Hutchings opened Penang Free School (Gomez, 2004a). It was later handed over to the government to administer.

Next came the Catholic mission which established the St Xavier's Institution (Secondary) and St Xavier's School (Primary) through the La Salle Brothers in Penang in 1852 (Brown, 1997). Over in Sabah, the Catholics also opened their first primary school in 1883 - St Mary's Primary in Sandakan. Indeed the majority of mission schools we see today are those established by the Catholic mission, for example, Convent Light Street in Penang, St John's Institution in Kuala Lumpur, St Paul's in Seremban, and many more.

Methodist mission schools had their beginnings in the 1880s when Rev. William F. Oldham started the Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore on 1st March 1886. Five years later, the Anglo-Chinese School was started in Penang (Ho, 1964).

Mission schools were also established by the Presbyterian Church, the Brethren Church, the Borneo Evangelical Mission and the Seventh Day Adventists.

Currently, there are 227 mission schools in Peninsular Malaysia and 235 in East Malaysia,

Our response needs to be more than just a simplistic 'give them up' or 'take them back from the government'.

Perhaps we can start with a clear articulation of a policy for education in our mission schools. Since the mission schools agreed to be run as government-assisted schools in 1971, they have lost much of their original character and ideals.

In his paper 'Christian Schools in Malaysia' released in 1986, (the late) David Boler outlined three distinct phases through which the mission schools have passed. The first phase, which Boler called the 'Pre-Merdeka Era', was when the Christian missionaries who established the schools also administered them.

Next, came the 'Unified Teaching Service' which was implemented following the Razak Report (KPM, 1956). Here, each school was responsible for selecting its own teachers through its Board of Governors.

The third phase came with the recommendations made by the Aziz Commission (1971) where teachers would now become government servants and their appointment and deployment determined by the Teachers' Service Commission.

Boler's analysis helps us understand better how the Christian ethos and traditions in mission schools have gradually eroded over the years. The loss of this original sense of identity of the mission schools has been so keenly felt that many of the mission authorities have begun rethinking the future of mission schools (Malaysian Lasallian Education Council, 2007).

Realising that there is a gradual deterioration of educational standards in the national schools, the Ministry of Education seems to be more open to new ways of solving problems, and this may provide our mission schools the opportunity to play a more relevant role. Again, with the current policy of teaching Mathematics and Science in English, and a general awareness of the importance of the English language, mission schools may have better opportunities to raise their profile once again if the government gives its full support and encouragement.

Although there have been many calls to 'reclaim' our schools, we need to be clear about just what it is we want to reclaim. Related to that, we need to ask the more basic questions like: What is our vision and mission? What is the underlying philosophy with regards to education in our mission schools?

Even more challenging to each mission authority will be the issue of how our mission schools may adapt to the current socio-political situation, and be sensitive to the contextual realities of our national education system. How, for example, can our vision and mission statements be explicit about maintaining our Christian ethos and traditional values whilst taking into account ethnic and religious sensitivities?

This is an extract from the article, "Reflections on the Education of Children in Malaysia - Some Issues and Challenges, in Particular Relating to Mission Schools". The full article will appear in the NECF Malaysia Forum VI.

making a total of 462. Of these, 338 are primary and 124 are secondary schools (Gomez, 2004c; Pillay, 2003).

For a brief and concise history, and other interesting information about mission schools, check out the series of articles which appeared in The Star (Education) on 4 July, 2004. They may be accessed online from the Malaysian Mission Schools News Archive on the Assunta Alumni website ([the articles](#)).

COOL TO BE A TEACHER

Every school and every concerned citizen is crying out for good teachers but where are they coming from? The good news is - they are in our midst. The hard-to-swallow news is - we have to offer our youths, or at least, strongly encourage them to seriously consider teaching as a vocation.

"Churches must see the teaching profession in the same light as local or overseas missions. Every teacher who is missionminded is God's powerful missionary or youth worker in our schools," says Yap Kok Keong, chairman of the Malayan Christian Schools' Council (MCSC).

To promote teaching as an eternity-bound vocation and mission, the MCSC has produced a booklet and DVD set that will help to change the negative mindset towards the teaching vocation. Every church should get a set and disseminate the information to its congregation, parents and youths.

To get a set, call MCSC at 03-7956 5310 or e-mail Ms Yin Kam Yoke (MCSC Honorary Secretary) at kamyokeyin@yahoo.ie

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