

THE ORIGINS OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN MALAYSIA

John Roxborough, 1990

Introduction

Though in almost any given town in Malaysia the most reliable place for meeting representatives of all the local Churches is the cemetery committee, Malaysian Christians are remarkable for the effectiveness of the ecumenical networks they have created. It is true that relationships are not perfect. Some cannot cope with those who mix in official ecumenical circles, some disdain fellowship with Roman Catholics, others with Pentecostals. Cultural barriers remain a factor and the isolation which readily takes place within language groupings, as with some Chinese speaking churches, has the effect of making significant first hand involvement with Christians of other traditions difficult. It is still all too easy for Christians of all sorts of persuasions to carry on as if they were sufficient unto themselves and as if nobody else existed.

There are basic elements of fellowship building between Christians of different races and language groups which could take place and do not. I have yet to hear of a Tamil pastor being invited to preach to a Chinese speaking congregation or vice versa. The set lines of expectation that Christians in Singapore and America have something to share with us that we need to know, shows a sense of dependency and inferiority which is not compensated for by the assumption that churches in East Malaysia have only to learn from those in the Peninsular. Geographically and ecumenically a change of attitude is needed so that true ecumenical sharing takes place within the country and with our near neighbours.

It is important to see that the question which really needs to be considered is not just that of the formal ecumenical movement as such, though that should not be underestimated, but the issue which confronts every generation of Christians of relationships between those who are both the same and different in matters of faith and practice. We cannot say these differences do not exist, and it is not easy to say with real confidence (rather than just a theological haziness born more of good will than sure judgment) which of them do not matter.

At the same time we recognise things in common which transcend differences great and small and we must bear witness to these as well. The non-Christian world can cope with some aspects of the bewildering range of faith and its expression found in the total Christian community.¹ What is decisive is the attitude of one to the other and whether or not there is a readiness to affirm those who are not the same, and whether there is love even when there is not formal unity. It might be added that love usually demands at least some degree of co-operation. However it is attitudes as much as organisational expressions of unity which either commend the faith or deter people from exploring further for themselves.

The New Testament provides ample evidence that the early church did not find it easy to determine which differences between Christians mattered and which did not and the church in every age has to wrestle with these issues. There are bible

¹. In Ipoh in 1989 there were 40 members of the pastors' fellowship drawn from 18 different denominations and four language groups.

passages which talk about forbearance and tolerance, yet there are others which are very sharp in their rejection of those who teach a different gospel. How do we decide what is a different gospel, and what do we do with cases which do not seem clear cut? Some things may come under diversity of gifts, others under diversity of culture, some come from matters about which Christians may agree to differ, but others come from perversity and sin.

The ancient divisions inherited from centuries past and from other countries are not the only things we need to worry about. New issues continually arise to divide the faithful. Among those who relate together even within a broadly similar theological framework, as with the NECF, there will be those who do not find their relationship easy for a variety of reasons, especially if one group has broken away from another. Here, as in our analysis of historically more distant cases, we need to be aware of the human tendency to dress up differences in theological guise so that we can feel more comfortable justifying our point of view since we have made sure that God is on our side. It also seems more acceptable to say that a quarrel is theological rather than personal, cultural or a struggle for power. It may be. It may be nothing of the kind.

Fellowship within the CCM is likewise only a limited guide to unity. Factors of personality, race, culture, language, geography and aesthetic taste can all make it difficult for Christians to make real to the world that essential unity which is going to make it more likely rather than less likely that others will be attracted to Jesus Christ. It is not uncommon for the like-minded from different churches to come together for ecumenical committees and gatherings, leaving those with serious differences to remain in the fastness of their more limited experience. If it is only those who already pretty much agree who come together ecumenism cannot make a lot of progress.

Every generation in the church has to renew its understanding and its commitment to the task of seeking to improve relationships between different Christian traditions. There are many lessons to be learnt from those who have devoted themselves to these issues in the past, particularly earlier in this present century. Superficial acceptance or rejection of the Ecumenical Movement is alike equally inadequate. Along with the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church, the growth of independent churches in the 'Third World' and the rise of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements the Ecumenical Movement appears to me to be one of the great spiritual developments of the current age.

History of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia.

The Ecumenical Movement in Malaysia and Singapore is commonly traced to the immediate origins of the Malaya Christian Council, formed in 1948, and confined to those churches which have participated in the Council and its successors. However this picture is limited and misleading and it is important to note the earlier roots of the Ecumenical Movement in Malaya and also consider other groupings of Christians which have had important ecumenical functions whether or not they would own the name 'ecumenical' for themselves.

It is important to see the ecumenical movement as wider than just those who are formally involved with those associated in some way or another with the World

Council of Churches or earlier with bodies such as the International Missionary Council and the International Faith and Order Movement which contributed to its formation. Nevertheless this does represent the principal strand in the movement, because in a way which other groups did not, it had as its conscious goal the bringing together of Churches and not just of Christians. At the same time, other groups had important ecumenical *functions* in that they brought Christians of widely differing traditions into contact, friendship and co-operation with one another. People in all groups had the temptation of only bringing together the more or less like minded, albeit from different denominations. However useful for the functioning of inter-church bodies, this is of limited significance for the improvement of understanding and the growth of mutual commitment among those who remain very different.

These observations of course apply fairly generally and not just to Malaysia/Singapore; but in this region there are a number of strands to the growth of ecumenical understanding which also need to be considered. There are the earlier experiences of interaction, conflict and co-operation between the denominations; and there is the fact that however 'young' the church in this region, it has never been cut off from the world church. The movements and organisations of the church world-wide have always had their impact here as elsewhere. The East Asia Christian Conference, later the Christian Conference of Asia, has also had its contribution to the ecumenical experiences and aspirations of church leadership in Malaya and Singapore. Going back further the meetings of world bodies at Tambaram and Jerusalem and Edinburgh have all had their impact here.

Early Ecumenical Experiences

It might be said that the very earliest relationships were reasonably happy as among the traders in Melaka during the fifteenth century Sultanate were Nestorian and Armenian Christians and probably others from South India.

The coming of the Portuguese and then the Dutch occurred in an age where political and religious as well as economic interests were intertwined, and it was not an age of tolerance. The Dutch suppressed Catholicism after 1641 and only relented 60 years later when European politics brought them into an alliance with Portugal.

What is more striking is the developments in the Straits Settlements following the coming of the British. In Britain there were civil disabilities against Catholics until 1829, and around the time that Francis Light was acquiring Penang from the Sultan of Kedah there were riots in London over the possibility that these disabilities might be removed. Before there was any Protestant presence on Penang, Light invited across two French Catholic priests who had established themselves in Kuala Kedah since 1782. From very early on the administration on Penang assisted Catholic Schools as well as Anglican, though it was the Anglicans who had considerable funds expended on their behalf for the building of St George's church.

Again the attitude seems to be one of live and let live. The London Missionary Society had been in Penang since 1815 and expanded its operations to the other Straits Settlements as they developed. The facilities they built for worship in each place were shared with others. There was the expectation in the 1830s that as the Armenian community in Singapore was building a church, so the Protestant community should do likewise. The talk of co-operation led to Presbyterian money

and a Presbyterian patron saint for what became St Andrew's Church and then eventually Cathedral, although the scheme did not survive the sensibilities of an Anglican chaplain who found it difficult to accept that Presbyterianism was a legitimate form of Christianity such as ought to be supported by the government.

Generally the tendency was to affirm differences and respect them rather than feel that there was something intrinsically wrong with having more than one church. If numbers were small one could and should worship together. If numbers increased then those of different traditions were encouraged to build their own places of worship. This was an attitude which could be found in the wider commercial community and is illustrated by contributions for the Armenian Church coming from others in Singapore, not just the Armenians, including some Chinese businessmen.

Basically the Christian community divided itself along lines which were in some ways ethnic (Armenian, Scots Presbyterian, English Anglican) in their membership, or in the case of Catholics, their clergy. The bitterness of a long-running Catholic feud over the respective rights of the French missionaries and the Portuguese crown even resulted in their each being allocated separate sections of the Singapore cemetery. Apart from an incident in the 1860s with an Anglican priest who left tracts around the hospital accusing Catholics of being hypocrites - the Governor put a stop to it - Catholic energy was more distracted by other Catholics than by Protestants, though eventually the influx of Methodists with their school building projects stimulated Catholics to do the same, in order to rescue people from the 'seductions of the Methodists.'

In general there was a fair degree of cordial co-operation between Protestants, although the lines of relationship could run in different directions. Presbyterians and Anglicans seemed to have troubles. Once St Andrews was built Presbyterians were left worshipping with the LMS Chapel. No doubt a few saw the hand of God in the fact that lightning rendered St Andrews unusable and the Anglicans had to share with everybody else once again. When the church was eventually rebuilt the Presbyterians asked if they could borrow it for a while as they too were in the process of building something better - what is now Orchard Road Presbyterian Church. The Bishop of Calcutta declined permission. This was all the more embarrassing for local Anglicans as their use of the Cathedral was delayed and for a time they were again sharing facilities with Presbyterians and others.

A joint Chinese mission was launched by the two churches with the unlikely expectation that converts would alternate as to whose baptism they would receive. For a time the exercise was different than either expected as the Chinese church which was developing left en masse to join Bethseda Chapel (Open Brethren) on the issue of believer's baptism. All might not have been lost from this experience however as Bethseda Chapel has been practically unique among Brethren Assemblies in maintaining a formal involvement with the ecumenical movement over many decades.

In the 1880s Anglicans and Presbyterians in Penang also co-operated in the manning and financing of mission work in Province Wellesley. Back in Singapore at this time the Presbyterian missionary Rev J A B Cook complained of Anglicans who would not join in prayer meetings with others, and Methodists who said they were coming to evangelize the poor but who appeared to succeed more with a different

sector of the economic spectrum.² In 1886 there is reference to a Singapore Christian Union which met for prayer, for meetings with visiting missionaries, and to organise a reading room. It also tried to deal with rebaptism by other groups. Two years later there are reports of co-operation in prison visiting.³

Whatever Cook's gripes the Methodists were ecumenically significant in a number of ways and one can perhaps detect a tinge of jealousy concerning their energy, resources and success. The very coming of the Methodist Mission revealed the sort of co-operation which has already been noted among many Protestants when it came to aiding one another. The churches had already been together in a Sailor's Home, the Bible Society and YMCA. The prospect of more workers in the field was usually held to be of more significance than the possibility that there might be competition which would put someone at disadvantage.

The Methodists quickly established a printing press and publishing house, eventually MPH, which still survives in initials at least as part of the Jack Chia empire. They produced the *Malaysia Message* and under the editorship of William Shellabear this provided a thoughtful and thorough commentary on events around the world and in the churches of the region. That region in the beginning included Burma, soon also the Philippines and Sumatra. The *Malaysia Message* gave excellent coverage of the activity of other churches and until just before World War I when Anglicans and Presbyterians started their own regular publications, by bringing everybody's news together did a great deal for inter-church understanding and co-operation.

The World Mission Conference held in Edinburgh in May 1910 proved a watershed for all sorts of ecumenical activity, and although (unlike India and China) Malaya was not represented, its impact, and the impact of the organisations which flowed from it was considerable. In January 1913 John R Mott, the chairman of the Conference and the key figure in the whole movement as it developed, visited Singapore as part of an Asia tour to share the vision of those who had gathered in Edinburgh.⁴ It may surprise some to discover that the main item of the agenda was the conversion of the local people and that the greatest concern was to co-ordinate efforts for this purpose.

Although there is not a lot of evidence of this intention being followed up, the interim committee which was charged with the task of work towards this together with the formation of an Advisory Council and the calling of a further conference⁵ included the Anglican Bishops, the Methodist Shellabear and a representative of Bethsaida Chapel, W D Ashdown. Nevertheless the focus of interest was highly significant as it remained through to Merdeka an issue which

². J A B Cook correspondence with H M Matheson, Foreign Missions Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1883-1885. Quoted by A C Herron, A history of the Protestant Christian Churches in West Malaysia and Singapore, unpublished mss, 1977, p.175.

³. Ibid., p.176.

⁴. *The Continuation Committee Conferences in Asia, 1912-1913. A brief account of the conferences together with their findings and lists of members*, Chairman of the Continuation Committee, New York, 1913. *Records of a conference held at Singapore, S.S. on January 21st, 22nd, & 23rd, 1913, together with the papers presented at the conference*. Continuation Committee of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, 1910. 'Dr John R Mott at Singapore,' *Malaysia Message*, 22(5-6), Feb-Mar 1913, p.39f.

⁵. *The Continuation Committee Conferences in Asia, 1912-1913*, *ibid.*, p.180.

from time to time helped bring together those who were foundation members of the Council of Churches.

These interactions were primarily, though not exclusively, among expatriate clergy and they came together as individuals more than as formal representatives of their denominations. This is hardly surprising, but should be noted all the same because the difficulty of altering this situation as the church developed left the task of establishing a commitment to things ecumenical which was church based and genuinely local till much later in the story. Malaya did not have the situation which developed in India whereby in 1919 Indian Christian leaders met (with hardly any missionaries present) to begin the process which eventually led nearly 40 years later to the formation of the Church of South India. Nor do we see what happened in China whereby in the name of nationalism there was a rejection of Western denominationalism. In Malaya the existence of different Christian churches was not seen to be a problem, though the need and the benefits of co-operation were beginning to be noted.

However it was still all too easy for misunderstandings to arise. R D Whitehorn, the Presbyterian minister of St Andrews Kuala Lumpur in the mid 1920s, was of SCM background and of broad sympathies, yet his editorials in the July and November issues of the *St Andrew's Outlook* resulted in a concerned letter from the Bishop of Singapore. Fergusson-Davie was anxious to meet to straighten things out, but felt that the editorials tended

to stir up bitterness against the Church of England and I think this is to be depreciated. Personally I have always tried to take the opposite line. We differ (You yourselves have shown by your actions how deeply you feel we differ), but I do not think that any good can come from antagonism being stirred up. ... it is very disturbing to me at the end of 17 years work out here in which I have done what I could to help spiritually members of other Christian bodies, and have many good friends among clergy of all bodies.⁶

Internationally the 1920s was a time when the three strands of the international Ecumenical Movement as it developed took shape. The specific missionary concern and vision which was behind Edinburgh 1910 was expressed through the International Missionary Council. Those deeply moved by their experience of Christian unity at Edinburgh who realised that somewhere along the line the serious theological differences dividing the churches had to be addressed came together in the Faith and Order movement.

Those who valued continued practical co-operation, especially in addressing the social needs of the European world after World War I, formed the Life and Work movement. Although there was considerable overlap in leadership - Mott appeared practically everywhere - the differences were not insignificant. The IMC took more interest in the 'younger churches' of Africa and Asia, but they were scarcely represented in the other two groupings. Life and Work held that 'Doctrine divides, action unites.' They may not have been wrong; Life and Work did not find it easy to

⁶. Bishop of Singapore to R D Whitehorn 8 December 1926. Whitehorn family papers, Cambridge.

proceed when the agenda specifically included all those items about which people acknowledged they disagreed.

In the case of Malaya, it was Life and Work which first acted as a catalyst to keep bringing the churches together. In Kuala Lumpur in 1925-26 there were monthly meetings of representatives of the Church of England, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church and Brethren. The Presbyterian reported that they met with the aim of 'getting a common mind as possible on questions arising in Christian work and in the social life in the town and district' and 'exploring together the way towards re-union, on the line suggested by the World Conference of Faith and Order, some of whose questionnaires we have gathered.'⁷ Apparently 'this group proposed to create a Christian Council of Malaya which would demonstrate both to Christians and to non-Christians that in spite of the differences, the denominations were working together to build a universal Church of Christ.'⁸

A talk by Mrs Whitehorn given in about 1928, obviously refers to the same group. She noted that 'There has been formed a Selangor Christian Conference, a body of ministers and representative laymen of all denominations.' Anne Johnson's history of Orchard Road Presbyterian Church refers to similar meetings in Singapore:

The discussions on church reunion had been mainly confined to the European ministers. The Rev Moore Anderson emphasised the need for Asians as well as European participants in these talks. In January 1926, there was a meeting in Singapore to meet Dr J R Mott to consider the preparations needed for the next World Conference of Church leaders.⁹ The proceedings were conducted in English. At this meeting the Hon Ong Siong Siang had stated that Christian forces in Malaya should draw closer together not only in preparing for the Conference, but to give a more united and effective witness for Christ. Although both European men and women attended this meeting, there was only one Chinese (Ong Siong Siang) and one Indian present.¹⁰

In 1933 Bishop Roberts convened meetings in connection with a visit of Laurence Browne¹¹ who was given a brief to re-examine the situation of the Church with respect to the Malays. The group of church leaders involved formed the Malayan Committee of Reference and Counsel whose activities started to increase significantly in the period immediately before World War II reached Malaya. There was also a visit of Visser't Hooft, then of the World Student Christian Federation,

⁷. *St Andrew's Outlook*, 45, February 1926, p.6. Quoted by A Johnson, *The Burning Bush*, Dawn Publications, Singapore, 1988, p.56.

⁸. *Ibid.*

⁹. *Addresses and papers of John R Mott, vol. 6, Selected papers and addresses*, Association Press, New York, 1947, mentions Singapore on Mott's itinerary for 26-28 January 1926, but gives no further details, p.515f. There is a brief mention in C Howard Hopkins, *John R Mott, 1865-1955*, Eerdmans, 1979, p.650.

¹⁰. Johnson, *ibid.*, p.57.

¹¹. Browne's report was published as *Christianity and the Malays*, SPG/SPCK, 1936.

who boosted efforts by the Presbyterian missionary T C Gibson to form a Christian Union at the Raffles Institution and Medical College.¹²

This Committee of Reference and Council received further impetus from the meeting of the International Missionary Council held in Tambaram near Madras in 1938 which was attended by six from Singapore and two from Malacca.¹³ Afterwards meetings were held which brought together the various Christian bodies for joint evangelistic work.¹⁴

In January 1940 the secretary, the Presbyterian T Campbell Gibson, wrote to William Paton (1886-1943), joint secretary of the International Missionary Council, and reported that the Committee 'had begun to consider extending the scope ... and developing into something like a National Christian Council' though he said that he did not think 'the Bishop of Singapore likes that name being given to anything in which the Romans are not included.'¹⁵ Gibson noted that he had got hold of 'copies of the constitutions of the Chinese and Indian Councils' and that there was talk of forming other committees in the larger towns. The difficulties of language were recognised, 'Most of the Tamils could probably do the work in English, but some of the Chinese who ought to be in a National Council do not know that language.'¹⁶

Paton was very active in encouraging the formation of national councils of churches. Just after he began as secretary of the IMC in 1927 there were 23 Christian councils in different parts of the world, and this had increased to 26 by 1938 and 30 by 1948.¹⁷ The formation of a council in Malaya has to be seen in this context as well as in that of moves to form a World Council of Churches which were well in hand until halted by the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

Gibson wrote to Paton again on 26 January 1940 and commented further.

I think he [the Bishop] is quite keen on a co-operative organization which would cover the whole country and include as many as possible of the non-Roman "bodies". I believe he is really anxious to co-operate, especially since Madras. It seems to me better to use the name which is used in all the other countries, and he may be persuaded to accept it, but in any case I am confident that we shall more and more be able to do a good deal together. We have already done things that are worth while, including a series of evangelistic

¹². URC Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 48/12/8, English Presbyterian Mission, Annual report 1933.

¹³. The eight were Mrs C V Davies, YWCA, Singapore; T C Gibson, Presbyterian, Singapore; Huang Y Y, Chinese Assistant Inspector of Schools, Melaka; Rev Lau E S, Geylang Methodist; Bishop E F Lee, Methodist; Bishop B C Roberts, Anglican; P W Tambyah, teacher, Melaka, and Rev S M Thevathasan, Senior Master, ACS Singapore and District Evangelist. *The world mission of the church. Findings and recommendations of the International Missionary Council, Tambaram, Madras, India, December 12th to 29th, 1938*, IMC, London and New York, 1939, p.160.

¹⁴. URC Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 48/12/15, English Presbyterian Mission, Annual report February 9 1939.

¹⁵. T Campbell Gibson to W Paton, 22 January 1940, IMC 26.5.115(2), Malaysia. International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva.

¹⁶. Ibid.

¹⁷. Fey, H E. *The ecumenical advance. A history of the Ecumenical Movement volume 2, 1948-1968*, SPCK, 1970, p.95.

meetings for young people at which the Bishop was one of the speakers and which were taken part in by Salvation Army and Plymouth Brethren as well as Presbyterians and Methodists. This enterprise was so successful that we unanimously agreed to try and make it at least an annual event.¹⁸

As well as confirming the importance of international gatherings, particularly Madras 1938, Gibson's correspondence reveals that the Committee of Reference and Counsel also functioned to arrange comity agreements. The Presbyterians had just begun a new work in Kelantan and the Malayan Christian Committee has agreed to recognise that State as a sphere of the Presbyterian Church or Chinese Church, which means that none of the other Churches will come in to compete with us.¹⁹

In early 1941 a new Anglican bishop of Singapore was in the process of appointment and there was Presbyterian concern as to how he would fit in with the further development of ecumenical co-operation. On 20 March 1941 R D Whitehorn, by this time at Westminster College Cambridge, wrote to Paton

I see it announced that the Ven J L Wilson, Archdeacon of Hong Kong has been appointed Bishop of Singapore. Do you know him, or know about him? In view of our Presbyterian work in Malaya I should be very glad to learn what sort of chap our folk there will have to deal with.²⁰

Paton was able to reassure Whitehorn probably in the same terms he wrote to someone else that Wilson would be a considerable strength to the movement for Christian co-operation in Malaya.²¹ Whitehorn's acknowledgement spoke of wanting full co-operation extending to common use of church buildings in outlying places in European work.²² Paton also wrote to Wilson himself noting that his predecessor had been thoroughly friendly ... but he did prove rather sticky at some points.' He described the American bishops as 'rather prominent' and 'a little sensitive about Anglicanism.' Naturally the Presbyterians were 'a good crowd!'²³

At the beginning of June Gibson wrote to Paton just after his return to Singapore using the letter head : 'Malayan Christian Committee of Reference and Counsel (in which the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches, "Bethesda"

¹⁸. T Campbell Gibson to W Paton, 26 January 1940, IMC 26.5.115(2), Malaysia. International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva. Gibson was on leave in Edinburgh at the time of this correspondence just prior to his return to Singapore.

¹⁹. Ibid.

²⁰. IMC 26.5.115(7), Malaysia. Malayan Christian Council correspondence 1941-1949, International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva.

²¹. Paton to Rev T W Douglas James [Presbyterian Church of England], 86 Tavistock Place London. IMC 26.5.115(7), Malaysia. Malayan Christian Council correspondence 1941-1949, International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva.

²². Whitehorn to Paton, 22 March 1941, IMC 26.5.115(7), Malaysia. Malayan Christian Council correspondence 1941-1949, International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva. Whitehorn also advocated co-operative work among the Malays.

²³. W Paton to Wilson, 21 March 1941, IMC 26.5.115(7), Malaysia. Malayan Christian Council correspondence 1941-1949, International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva.

and the Salvation Army co-operate.)' He hoped that Wilson would 'be able to help with organizing a National Christian Council,' though it seemed that others were fairly content with their present arrangement at that time. Although 'the Committee is doing a great deal of work' nothing had been done in his absence to work towards a more formal structure.²⁴

A letter at Christmas, when the Japanese were advancing steadily down the Peninsular bears quoting at length.

I have continued to act as secretary of the Malayan Committee of Reference and Counsel. Our membership has been increased by the ... Assistant Chaplain General, Far East, and the minister of the Dutch Protestant congregation. As usual we organize meetings in connection with the universal week of prayer. In April we again held a series of evangelistic meetings for young people in the large Victoria Memorial Hall. On Good Friday we held a united service in the grounds of the Cathedral which was broadcast. ...

Each member of the Committee wrote one article in a series on "What my religion means to me" published in one of the local Sunday newspapers. We have spent some time in discussing the work of ministers in connection with the air raids and made a joint appeal through the Churches for volunteers for the Medical Auxiliary Services. A retreat for the members was conducted by Archdeacon Graham White in his private chapel. We also arranged for the second Sunday in Advent being observed through Malaya as a Bible Sunday. Lastly we have agreed on the aim of bringing into existence a National Christian Council of Malaya.²⁵

This is clear evidence that the origins of the MCC lie before the Japanese occupation even though it was not formally set up until January 1948.

Singapore fell on 15 February 1942 and for 13 months Bishop Wilson was allowed to continue his ministry. In June he was instrumental in forming a Federation of Christian Churches in Malaya with the consent of a Japanese Christian, Lt Ogawa who was the Japanese Director of Religion and Education.²⁶ As well as the Welfare Committee which was to have been expected, the Federation also had a Union Committee. Wilson wrote

²⁴. T C Gibson to W Paton, 9 June 1941, IMC 26.5.115(2). Malaysia. Rev T Campbell Gibson. International Missionary Council Archives, WCC, Geneva.

²⁵. CBMS, Asia Committee no.1. Letter from T C Gibson 25 December 1941. School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Microfiche, CBMS, Asia Committee 1, STM library.

²⁶. D D Cheliah, 'The growth of unity among the churches in Malaya,' *International Review of Mission*, 37(148), October 1948, p.424.

There are few subjects which have taken up so much of my thoughts and prayers in the last ten years as the subject of union. ... Our aim is a universal church in Malaya, not uniformity of worship but a united faith, and an agreed order of ministry. One of the steps to such a goal is a Federation of Christian churches.²⁷

The Federation covered just about everybody except the Roman Catholics. It tended to be stronger on the Indian side as the Chinese were more at risk from Japanese attention. The Anglican D D Cheliah was President and Wilson was chairman of the union committee which met regularly. The Federation lasted until March 1943 when the Japanese disbanded all except the welfare committee and interned the Bishop in Changi. It was left to united choir services in the Cathedral to provide the main focus of joint Christian activity.

This also is an important background to the ecumenical experience of the expatriate church leaders in Changi prison. Their planning for a National Council of Churches was no more than a further confirmation of a process which was well in hand. The new step was the decision to form a theological seminary to serve all the churches.

After the War there were many other things to be done. Cheliah was sent to the Whitby meeting of the International Missionary Council in July 1947 maintaining the international links which had already been important. In January 1948 the inaugural meeting of the Malayan Christian Council finally took place.

²⁷. R McKay, *John Leonard Wilson, Confessor of the Faith*, Hodder, 1973, p.23.