

**THE ROLE OF
LEADERSHIP TRAINING
IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE CHINESE
BRETHREN ASSEMBLY
IN MALAYSIA**

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the
South East Asia Graduate School of Theology
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Theology

by

Lee Mee Onn

Malaysia
April 1994

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE	
THE PERIOD OF THE EXPATRIATE LEADERSHIP (1860-1940)	
1.1 Introduction	8
1.2 The Origins of the Brethren Movement	8
1.3 The Distinctiveness of the Brethren Movement	10
1.4 The Beginning of the Brethren Assembly in Malaysia	13
1.5 The Expatriate Missionaries	15
1.6 The Local Leaders or Workers	21
1.7 The Mission Schools	25
1.8 The Sunday Schools	26
1.9 Conclusion	28
CHAPTER TWO	
THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION LEADERSHIP (1941-1970)	
2.1 Introduction	29
2.2 Japanese Occupation (1941-1945)	30
2.3 British Military Administration, Emergency and Independence (1946-1957)	34
2.4 The Restriction Period (1958-1970)	40
2.5 Conclusion	45

CHAPTER THREE

THE PERIOD OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP (1971-1994)

3.1	Introduction	46
3.2	The Leaders' Conference	46
3.3	The Malaysia Mission Service (M.M.S.)	54
3.4	The Literature Ministry	60
3.5	The Emmaus Bible School (E.B.S.)	62
3.6	Conclusion	65

CHAPTER FOUR

OBSERVATION AND SUGGESTIONS

4.1	Introduction	66
4.2	Observations from the Expatriate Leadership Period	66
4.3	Observations from the Transition Leadership Period	68
4.4	Observations from the Local Leadership Period	70
4.5	Observations from the Survey	72
4.6	Suggestions from the Survey	82
4.7	Conclusion	86

CONCLUSION	88
------------	----

INTRODUCTION

The Christian Brethren Assembly is the second Protestant group to come to Malaysia, the first being the Anglicans in 1819. Its missionary work started in Penang as early as 1860.

As the Brethren Assemblies marked their 134th year of ministry in Malaysia, statistics of established assemblies and outreach centres show 45 Chinese-speaking, 43 English, 5 Tamil and 9 Senoi assemblies. Records indicate that the Brethren Assemblies operated 6 schools and 4 kindergartens but since Independence, the government has gradually taken control of the schools. Statistics regarding the number of Brethren believers are hard to come by but according to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there were about 2,500 Brethren members in Malaysia in 1982.¹ However, when Mr Thiran presented his booklet *The Christian Brethren of Malaysia: Our Heritage* at the English Brethren Leaders' Conference in 1990, he put the figure of all those attending the Christian Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia (both Chinese and English speaking) at approximately 12,000 representing 1.2% of the Christian population in Malaysia.² Mr Thiran expressed the difficulties faced in obtaining accurate data due mainly to the Brethren Assemblies' lack of emphasis on numbers and membership per se. My research³ has led me to conclude that a more conservative, accurate figure would be about 3,600 members attending Sunday worship services in the English-speaking assemblies, 2,900 in the

¹ David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Church and Religion in the Modern World*, (Nairobi:Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 472-6.

² This English Brethren Assemblies Leaders' Conference was organized by Kuantan Chapel and held in Highlands Christian Centre in Cameron Highlands from April 26th - 28th, 1990. Mr Thiran is an elder from Bangsar Gospel Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

³ This figure was obtained through a survey sent to the various Brethren assemblies in Malaysia in March 1994 and through interviews with church leaders.

Chinese-speaking assemblies, 250 Tamil-speaking and 750 Senoi-speaking. [See Appendix A]

Professor Lee Kam Hing made the following challenging remark about Christian Brethren in a book detailing the history of Christianity in Malaysia:

But whichever figure one takes, the Christian Brethren in Malaysia is one of the smaller churches. It has a lower membership than many of the other churches established much later.⁴

Even though some of the Brethren leaders realize and acknowledge this painful fact, not much effort has been made to find out the main factors for the slow growth. Some may presume that the structure of the Brethren Assemblies is the main hindrance to growth. Others tend to think that the lack of good strategies and co-ordination could be the main reason for lack of growth. Some even suggest that the split over doctrinal issues and division caused by the charismatic influence may be the main obstacle to growth.⁵ After eighteen years as a Brethren believer and six years as a full-time worker, my observations lead me to conclude that the main factor for our slow growth is the neglect or lack of leadership training. This has resulted in a shortage of well-trained leaders who can help the assemblies grow. This situation is more obvious in the Chinese Brethren Assemblies. Therefore, this thesis will attempt to prove that leadership training plays the major role in the development and growth of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia.

Dr D. Campbell Wyckoff defines the role of leadership training as follows:

Leadership training is basically making the nature and mission of the church clear, establishing the functions of leadership in light of the

⁴ Professor Lee Kam Hing is the head of the History Department in University Malaya. He worships and serves in Bangsar Gospel Centre. He has great interest in Brethren History and is co-editor, with Dr Robert Hunt and Dr John W. Roxborough, of the book entitled *Christians in Malaysia - A Denominational History* published by Pelanduk (M) Sdn. Bhd. in 1992. This remark is from his article "The Christian Brethren" pp. 108-109.

⁵ These opinions were obtained from personal interaction and interviews with some of the Chinese Brethren leaders.

nature and mission of the church, and selecting and educating persons to know those functions well and perform them skillfully.⁶

The leadership training I am referring to will cover a wide range from discipleship training to theological training, from tent-making ministry to full-time ministry and lay leadership to pastoral leadership. There are many church growth studies that emphasize lay leadership as the key to church growth. Dr James Wong did a similar study on some of the churches in Singapore in 1973. He concluded that one of the main secrets of church growth is the development of lay leadership.⁷

In fact, one of the distinctive features of the Brethren Assemblies is the emphasis on lay leadership based on the priesthood of all the believers.⁸ The question we now encounter is why is it that the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia did not grow as fast as they should? Could it be due to the fact that although we have many lay leaders, there are very few trained leaders ?

In order to ascertain that the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia suffered slow comparative growth, we need to compare its growth with the Chinese Methodist Church and the Chinese Baptist Church. Both the Brethren and Methodist movements share some similarities, even way back to their history in Britain. One such similarity is the emphasis on lay ministry. The Methodist started ministry work in Malaysia in 1885, 25 years after the Brethren assemblies. However, the Chinese Methodist Church in West Malaysia has grown into one of the largest Chinese churches in Malaysia, with 14,000 members.⁹ Recent statistics

⁶ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Leadership for Church Education*, (Chicago, Moody Bible Institute, 1972) p. 345. The author quoted from D. Campbell Wyckoff, *The Gospel and Christian Education*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 165.

⁷ James Wong Y.K., Singapore: *The Church in the Midst of Social Change*, (Singapore Church Growth Study Centre, 1973), pp. 143- 57.

⁸ The Brethren developed this doctrine based on 1 Peter 2:9-10 with the intention of turning away from one-man ministry to all-men ministry.

show that it has grown from less than 5,000 members in 1936 to about 13,000 members in 1991. Its membership has almost doubled within the last 15 years (1976 - 1991). The chart (Appendix D) also shows that the number of full-time pastors has increased from 31 in 1936 to 81 in 1991. In the same manner, the number of new churches and preaching points has risen from 46 in 1936 to 125 in 1991. One of the obvious factors contributing to the Chinese Methodist Church's growth overtaking that of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies is its constant emphasis on leadership training. As early as the 1890's, one of its missionaries, Sophia Blackmore inaugurated courses in Singapore for training women in the Bible. Another effort undertaken was the establishment of a college for pastors in Penang under the leadership of Dr West in 1898. The schools were merged in 1941 to become the Malaya Methodist Theological College. After the war the college reopened, becoming the nucleus of the Trinity Theological College three years later. It was then a joint effort with the Anglicans and Presbyterians.¹⁰ Another training centre for Methodist pastors and leaders is the Seminari Theoloji Malaysia established in 1979.

The Chinese Baptist Church is closer to the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in terms of its structure and doctrine. Even though the Chinese Baptist Church only started its ministry in Malaysia in 1938,¹¹ its membership has grown to 3,000 strong. The Baptists are

⁹ These figures are taken from the *55th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine (1936-1991)*, Chinese Annual Conference, Methodist Church in Malaysia, November, 1992. pp. 227-9.

¹⁰ See Hwa Yung, "The Methodist Church" in *Christianity in Malaysia - A Denominational History*, (Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publication, 1992), pp. 164-5. Also Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time : The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819 -1978*, (Singapore: Graduates Christian Fellowship, 1980), pp 206-7.

¹¹ Mrs Oh Hock Teck (nee Tan Siu Noi) started this work in Alor Setar. After World War II, Southern Baptist missionaries arrived to render assistance. See Hwang, Wei-Tjang, "The Baptist Church in West Malaysia" in *Christianity in Malaysia : An Denominational History*, pp. 244-5.

well-known for their leadership training in the form of Christian education. They started the Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang as early as 1954. All this contributed to the strong leadership which has brought forth their rapid growth. However, according to Mr Hwang Wei-Tjang's evaluation, some Baptist churches did not grow as rapidly as the others due to their lack of strong leadership.¹²

This study will look at the history of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies and analyse its leadership through the different periods of time to observe the role of leadership training in the development of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia. Thus, this study will show that the role of leadership training has become the main factor affecting the growth of the assemblies.

In Chapter One, a brief historical background and the distinctiveness of the Brethren Movement in Britain will be given. A short description of the beginnings of the Brethren movement in Malaysia will also be included. Special attention will be given to the missionaries who were actively involved in the Chinese ministry. We are interested to know how they trained the local believers for leadership positions. The mission school and Sunday School ministry will be another area of interest. This chapter covers a long period from 1860 to 1940. This is the period where the expatriate missionaries played the major role in the leadership of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies.

Chapter Two will cover the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War to 1970 where Malaysian law restricted the entry of foreign missionaries. This can well be described as the period of transition in leadership from the expatriate missionaries to the local believers. In reality this transition began when the western missionaries were detained in the

¹² Hwang, Wei-Tjang, "The Baptist Church in West Malaysia", *Christianity in Malaysia - A Denominational History*, pp. 248-9.

Changi concentration camp during the Japanese Occupation. The local Christians had no choice but were forced to assume the leadership role throughout this critical period. After the independence of Malaya in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, the Government's immigration policies gradually restricted the activities of foreign missionaries in this country.

We will investigate how all these events have elevated leadership training to a more prominent role.

More discussion on local leadership development will be considered in Chapter Three.

It is interesting to see that the Chinese Brethren Assemblies began to realize the importance of leadership training in 1974. This was the year that the first Chinese Assemblies Leaders' Conference was held. However, due to the split over the issue of leavened and unleavened bread, this conference was not held again for eight years. It was reorganized by the Cameron Highlands Gospel Hall in 1982 as the Chinese Assemblies Leaders' Conference for Northern Peninsula. Since then, it has been held on alternate years. Throughout the years, a fair attention was given to leadership training. As a result, the Malaysia Missionary Service was formed to promote some short-term training. It has recently developed into the Emmaus Bible School in Kajang. It is encouraging to see that the Chinese Brethren are now more open to theological training. A good number of brothers and sisters who dedicated their lives to serve the Lord full-time were trained in theological seminaries. More training camps were organized during this period. All these developments have contributed to the growth of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies. Nevertheless, this growth is still comparatively slow. Therefore, more emphasis will be given in the following chapter to better organized and systematic leadership training.

The final chapter will present some observation from the above studies. This will be substantiated by some surveys, questionnaires and personal interviews. I will try to make

suggestions for leadership training. Hopefully, this will provide some practical help for the future development of the Chinese Brethren Assemblies in Malaysia.

As someone who is within the Brethren Movement and assembly, I have no intention of disregarding the contributions of our past leaders especially the expatriate missionaries. High tribute should be given for their faithfulness in evangelism. It will now be a challenge for us to emphasize leadership training so that we are able to move on and experience greater growth. It is always my prayer that:

Under His direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly, and each part in its own special way helps the other parts, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.¹³

¹³ Ephesians 4:16.