

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 20 November 2019

Christian Expansionism in Southeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Some Christian churches in Southeast Asia are expanding by establishing overseas branches in other parts of the region and beyond. They do so not only to spread the Gospel but also to overcome perceived demographic limits to Christian growth in their countries.
- Most of these churches are Pentecostal and independent in character. Their overseas branches retain the name of the original church as well as adopt its liturgy, worship style, culture, and aesthetics.
- Another key driver of expansionism is the strong association of spiritual growth with financial and congregational growth. Many of these churches strive for greater expansion and tangible growth because they believe it wins favour and blessings from God.
- These overseas Pentecostal branches may prioritise religious identities over cultural and ethnic identity. They discourage the reconciling of theological teachings with folk practices. Some pastors have also called on congregations to define themselves by their Christian identity instead of their ethnic or cultural identity.
- They are also heightening competition for converts with local churches. Not only do overseas branches reach out to new converts, they are also actively seeking out Christians who may not be completely fulfilled at their current church.

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INTRODUCTION

Christian expansionism in Southeast Asia has generally flown under the radar for several reasons. Firstly, there are demographic limits to the growth of Christianity. With the exception of the Philippines, Christianity is a minority faith in all Southeast Asian countries. In Malaysia, Brunei, and, to some extent, Singapore, the growth of the Christian community is capped by the size of their Chinese communities. These limits may have compelled churches to look beyond their shores. Secondly, with the exception of Singapore and the Philippines, churches and Christian conservatives in the region are less vocal in the public sphere in comparison to their Muslim counterparts. All these have resulted in less attention paid to dynamics within the Christian communities in many parts of the region. Finally, such expansionism has been purposefully undertaken with great discretion in light of the political challenges and sensitivities in Muslim-dominant countries.

Christian expansionism is an important phenomenon because it tests the thresholds of multiculturalism in the region. All Southeast Asian countries either claim to welcome different faiths, or profess tolerance to religious diversity. However, reality often fails to measure up to rhetoric when religious groups are perceived as threats to the dominance or privileged positions of other groups. This expansionism is also important to understand because it requires no small amount of planning, certitude, resources, and organisational know-how to execute. Such commitments of labour and resources only underlines the type of conviction that may come head-to-head with other religious groups which share the same intensity of conviction.

This paper presents some key findings from one-and-a-half years of fieldwork in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. After visiting over 20 independent and Pentecostal churches and interviewing over 20 church leaders, we distil some of the characteristics of one mode of Christian expansionism in Southeast Asia and the possible implications it may bring to these three countries we studied.

CHARACTERISTICS

Unlike solo missionaries of yesteryear who ventured into foreign lands to spread the Gospel, contemporary efforts to spread Christianity have become more organised and concerted. In this paper, we discuss one mode of Christian expansionism undertaken by a growing number of Pentecostal churches that have taken on expansionist characteristics. Some openly reflect their transnational visions in their names. For example, Kingdomcity¹ aims to “bring the kingdom to each city”,² while International Full Gospel Fellowship (IFGF),³ had previously replaced “Indonesia” with “International” to reflect its new mission to “reach out to people at every corner of the world”.⁴

Such expansionist churches share several characteristics. Firstly, they are usually Pentecostal and independent in character, and multi-site⁵ in form. It may begin as a local single-site church which grows and later develops plans for setting up branches within its national boundaries and overseas. Although many of the overseas branches claim to be financially independent, they are not administratively or theologically autonomous; but instead, are overseas extensions of the original church. This church expansion is unlike “church planting”, in which a “planted” or “daughter” church is often expected to develop

its own identity and administration after initial support from the “planting” or “parent” church.

Secondly, the original church provides administrative and theological guidance to its overseas branches. This is crucial because this allows the original church to pass on its DNA to the new overseas branch. In practical terms, this means that the overseas branches would retain the name of the original church as well as adopt its liturgy, worship style, culture, and aesthetics.

Thirdly, selected church leaders would form a small regional team to provide administrative and theological oversight over its overseas branches. In our interviews, we found that pastors in overseas branches were required to report to and seek approval for certain matters from regional pastors, who answer to the senior pastors. Notwithstanding this, the branch pastors we interviewed claimed that such oversight is inclusive rather than restrictive.

Fourthly, the overseas branches follow standardised annual themes and directions set by the regional team. For example, IFGF regional team set four-yearly and annual themes that guide all branches over sermons and activities. From 2018 to 2021, IFGF’s four-year theme is “Greater” while its annual theme for 2019 is “Greater Promise”. This annual theme exhorts all branches to focus sermons on God’s promises and covenant based on the Book of Hebrews. There are also church-wide annual conferences and meetings for branch pastors, leaders, and congregants. These annual conferences are not focused entirely on worship and healing but also on engaging the congregants in panel workshops with transnational guest speakers. In these gatherings, the attendees establish transnational connections and strengthen their sense of transnational unity under one church, as well as align their theological conviction with each other according to the regional team’s direction.

Such churches also emphasise the nurturing of new leaders from within their congregations to ensure clear lines of succession and the sustainability of expansionism. IFGF founded Harvest International Theological Seminary (HITS) in its headquarters in Indonesia. Founded several years after IFGF’s birth, an IFGF pastor told us that HITS was originally set up to send its graduates to establish IFGF churches overseas. Many of the graduates also became IFGF full-time pastors and staff. Kingdomcity also organises regular leadership training courses called Kingdomcity Leadership Academy.

Finally, such churches retain strong links with each other through technology. In Kingdomcity, which has branches in Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Australia among others, the Sunday sermons of senior pastors may be live-streamed to its overseas branches. The messages that are emphasised in the sermons include the church’s mission statement, the urgent need to spread the Gospel, and the wish to bring unbelievers to church. Short and punchy video clips that announce church events, programmes, and global mission projects are screened to reach out to the younger congregation, thus creating a transnational church identity among congregations across borders.

WHY DO CHURCHES EXPAND?

The most common reason given by pastors and church leaders we interviewed for going transnational is the Great Commission. According to the Book of Matthew 28:19-20, the

Great Commission for Christians is to “therefore go and make disciples of all nations”, and is often interpreted by our interviewees as God’s commandment for churches to go beyond their national boundaries and reach out to diverse groups of people. This natural impulse for the church to go beyond its four walls to win souls for Christ cannot be underestimated.

However, in addition to the desire to spread the Gospel, there are several sociological factors to consider. Firstly, some of these churches began their overseas branches to reach out to citizens living overseas only to later grow beyond this community. IFGF in Indonesia had initially established their overseas branches to reach out to Indonesians, many of whom were Chinese Indonesians who had emigrated after the riots of May 1998. However, overseas Indonesians were a limited community, which prompted the church to reach out to local communities living around its overseas branches, as well as establish branches in areas with little or no Indonesian communities, such as Nepal and Pakistan. Later in 2003, IFGF revised its mission to reflect this international outreach and now claims to have 3,000 churches in 35 countries.⁶

Secondly, there are demographic limits to Christian growth in countries like Singapore and especially Malaysia where Christians are almost exclusively ethnic Chinese and Indians. In Malaysia, the Chinese population is forecast to dwindle from 24 per cent of the population in 2013 to 19.6 per cent by 2030.⁷ Having to compete with other religions such as Buddhism and Taoism for Chinese membership, some of these churches have calculated that it would be more fruitful to seek converts overseas. This may have been the case for the Malaysia-originated Kingdomcity. Its founding congregation in KL is approximately 10,000-strong, according to our May 2019 interview with a Kingdomcity branch pastor. However, with its wide-reaching international presence across nine countries, Kingdomcity’s total congregation size triples to over 30,000 congregants.⁸

Thirdly, the strong nexus between spiritual growth and material growth in Pentecostal churches may be another driver of expansionism. For many of the churches we interviewed, spiritual growth and obedience were inextricably tied to tangibles such as financial and congregation growth. This finding is supported by our previous study in Singapore⁹ and was certainly the case for IFGF and Kingdomcity. A 27 year-old Indonesian Chinese pastor from IFGF told us (June 2018) that the main church in Jakarta sets annual targets of growth for its branches, and asserted that: “Every four years at our Global Conference, we set an annual growth target for each branch based on past performance data. At this point, our annual growth target is at 7%.” In addition, a Kingdomcity Kuching branch pastor (May 2019) interviewee who is in his 30s asserted that “Kingdomcity is a church that is pioneering and growing constantly.”

Lastly, having multiple branches gives the main church access to a wider range of financial resources for its operations. Many of the pastors we interviewed were cagey when asked about the financial streams of their churches and claimed that all their overseas branches are financially autonomous. However, the main church manages the contributions from their multiple branches to sustain overseas missions, activities, and other costs. In the case of Kingdomcity, 50 per cent of its annual Miracle Offering collected from each branch goes towards its global mission projects and to the setting up of new Kingdomcity branches elsewhere, while the remaining 50 per cent goes to the local branch’s non-operational expenses.¹⁰ In a Sunday sermon live-streamed from Kuala Lumpur to its Kuching branch in May 2019, its senior pastor encouraged the congregants to give generously to build

“greenhouses over nations” and support global church expansion and the provision of developmental aid to developing countries. As for IFGF, our IFGF pastor interviewee (June 2018) told us that, “IFGF requires its satellite churches to give 20 per cent of their revenue to their headquarters in Jakarta. Of which, IFGF HQ would allocate 4 per cent to WorldHarvest, their global mission projects arm, 2 per cent to support their satellite churches globally, 6 per cent to support their satellite churches in Indonesia, and the remaining 8 per cent to cover the administrative costs to run the IFGF Global office including manpower, as well as material production and distribution costs. All this is officially written in the by-law.”

LOCAL CONGREGATIONS AND CULTURAL IMPACT

Although many of these churches claim to reconcile the Gospel with local cultures, this does not generally go beyond translating sermons to local languages. They may however be disruptive to the practice of local cultures and ethnic identity. This is because they usually discourage the reconciling of theological or doctrinal beliefs with folk practices and urge the congregation to prioritise a sense of regional church unity over local ethnic kinship.

Many of the pastors we interviewed did not approve of their flock performing folk or cultural rituals that have a spiritual dimension or involve the worship of other gods. Our interviewees observed that although each individual has their own journey in their faith, their churches strongly discourage them from practicing any cultural or folk tradition that have depictions of spirits or other gods. Furthermore, in the Kingdomcity Singapore branch at Capitol Theatre, we observed in one sermon (11 October 2018) titled “Pressing the Reset Button” under their “Excess Baggage” series a pastor exhorting the congregants to define themselves by their “kingdom” and not their ethnic identity; suggesting the importance of a shared Christian identity over a local cultural one. Overtime this may lead to a stronger and more coherent regional Christian identity in which believers may have greater affinity for their regional Christian counterparts than their non-Christian countrymen. In such cases, an individual’s religious identity may become more meaningful and relevant than his or her national identity.

Christian expansionism into urban centres like Singapore, Surabaya, Jakarta, Kuching, and Perth is also increasing competition with local churches. A Kingdomcity branch pastor in Kuching admitted to us that other churches in the east Malaysian state seemed antagonistic towards Kingdomcity as the latter had increased its own membership by attracting young members from other churches rather than converting unbelievers. This is aggravated by the fact that the pool of younger Sarawakians is shrinking as young people emigrate to larger cities such as Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Melbourne for better opportunities.

Finally, this church expansionism seeks to meet the needs of local Christians which local churches may have failed to address. In addition to reaching out to new converts overseas who require longer periods of mentorship and pastoral care, these churches also actively seek out Christians who may not be completely fulfilled at their current church. In Kingdomcity Singapore, for example, one of its leaders who was in her early 30s noted that its main aim is, in fact, to reach out to young people with Christian backgrounds who have left their parents’ church. As a result, its Singapore branch consists mainly of young Singaporean Christians who have left their parents’ churches to seek better personal spiritual

growth. Such overseas branches also serve as regional nodes. The Kingdomcity Singapore branch also serves young Singaporeans who have returned from Australia and cannot readjust to their family church. As with any foreign product entering a domestic market, these overseas church branches offer more variety for consumers.

CONCLUSION

While Christian expansionism in Southeast Asia may have slipped under the radar it is certainly not a new phenomenon. With churches establishing branches in multiple countries, Christian expansionism has taken on a more organised and corporate mode than the conventional form of evangelisation. They not only spread the Gospel, but also export their organisational identity, characteristics, and theological orientation. Multiple motivations may account for the transnational expansion of such churches, be they spiritual obedience or for sociological reasons. Nevertheless, the collective financial contributions from their multiple branches have undoubtedly sustained the operations of the churches and their expansionist vision. This form of expansionism may be problematic, however, as the arrival of foreign newcomer churches with their fixed set of worldviews may be disruptive to the local setting. They are less likely to be syncretic, and also present competition to local churches because they are often open to welcoming Christians from other churches into their fold. How such dynamics and intra-community politics will pan out remains to be seen.

¹ Kingdomcity was founded in Kuala Lumpur. However, their leaders claim that they do not treat KL as its headquarters and spend an equal amount of attention and time travelling to all its campuses globally.

² <https://kingdomcity.com/speakers/>

³ IFGF began as a fellowship group of Indonesian students in the US. It made Jakarta its headquarters when its founder relocated back to Jakarta.

⁴ <http://www.ifgf.org/our-journey/>

⁵ A multi-site church has multiple branches in more than one location. These branches answer to one main church leadership body.

⁶ <http://www.ifgf.org/find-church/>

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/falling-malaysian-chinese-population-worrying-analysts>

⁸ <https://kingdomcity.com/about/>

⁹ Chong, Terence and Hui, Yew-Foong. 2013. *Different Under God: A Survey of Church-going Protestants in Singapore*. Singapore: ISEAS

¹⁰ <https://kingdomcity.com/miracleoffering/causes/>

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by:</p> <p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
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