

HISTORICAL STATEMENT

(Revised 2009)

I. FOUNDATIONS

1. The Methodist Church in Singapore derives its origins and practices from the American Methodist Episcopal Church through the South India Annual Conference in the late 19th century. On 20 November 1884, on James Thoburn's initiative, the Conference, meeting in Hyderabad, appointed William F. Oldham as pioneer missionary to Singapore.¹ It was Thoburn's vision to extend the gospel to Rangoon, Penang and Singapore.



William Oldham

2. The missionary party, comprising Dr and Mrs Thoburn, Mr Oldham and Miss Julie Battie, stopped enroute at Rangoon, where Thoburn had founded the Mission in 1878. By God's grace, sufficient funds were raised here, allowing them to proceed to Singapore.²

3. Unheralded, the party that landed in Singapore on 7 February 1885 was met by Charles Phillips whose invitation to Thoburn and visionary

¹ *Forever Beginning*, One Hundred Years of Methodism in Singapore, ed. Theodore Doraisamy, Singapore. p. 5.

² *Ibid.* p. 5

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experience had led him to meet the ship. Evangelistic meetings at the Town Hall and elsewhere were followed by the first Quarterly Conference of the 'English' church on 23 February. The planting of Methodism on Singapore soil had taken place 'not by might, nor by power, but my Spirit...'³

4. The work of the Mission quickly spread out in a number of related ministries: schools for boys and girls;⁴ a boys' hostel attracting children locally and regionally; a girls' hostel which provided shelter for the homeless; medical work in Chinatown; churches, with vibrant Sunday School programmes and youth activities, in Hokkien, and Cantonese, as well as Baba Malay and Tamil, then Foochow, Hinghwa and Hakka; and Scripture translation and publishing work pioneered by W.E. Shellabear who established the Mission Press.⁵

II. EXPANSION



Malaysia Annual Conference 1902

5. Following the initial success in Singapore, work spread to the main towns in Peninsular Malaya: Penang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur and Malacca. Town churches were twinned with schools which supported the churches. Expansion and growth in Singapore and Malaya graduated the

³ *Ibid.* p. 8

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 9-11.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 28.

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Mission to the Malaysia Annual Conference in February 1902.⁶

6. On 7 January 1936, by authorisation of the 1932 General Conference (USA), 14 Chinese-speaking elders in full connexion, 7 in a retired connexion, together with one deacon, were transferred from the Malaya Annual Conference (a change of name by action of the 1924 General Conference⁷) to form the new Malaysia Chinese Mission Conference.⁸ This was followed by a Memorial to the 1940 General Conference for authorisation to become an Annual Conference.⁹

7. Further afield, with the Spanish-American War barely over, Methodism advanced to the Philippines in 1900 with Thoburn personally leading the way. With financial support, American Missionaries were directed from Singapore to support the work which became the Philippines Mission Conference on 11 March 1905, and the Philippines Annual Conference in March 1908. In 1940, it became a Central Conference,¹⁰ thereby enjoying a certain latitude which enabled greater self-actualisation to take place.

8. Following the Boxer War in China, Methodism in Malaya and Sarawak took on new impetus when Foochow Methodists were settled in Malaya and Sarawak. Several groups reached Sarawak in 1901¹¹ to form a firm base for the work to grow in Sarawak, later to include Iban work in 1937. The formation of the Sarawak Mission in 1947, followed by the Sarawak Provisional Annual Conference in 1952 and the Sarawak Annual Conference in 1960, reflected the vitality of the mission in that territory.¹²

9. Work in Java and West Borneo began in 1905. It was organised as the Netherlands Indies district of the Malaysia Annual Conference in 1907, becoming the Netherlands Indies Mission Conference in 1918. In 1928, it was decided to transfer work in this area to the Dutch Missions¹³.

⁶ Minutes, Malaysia Annual Conference, 1902. p. 16.

⁷ Minutes, Malaya Annual Conference, 1925. p. 9.

⁸ Minutes, Malaya Annual Conference, 1936. p. 24.

⁹ Minutes, Malaysia Chinese Mission Conference, 1939. p. 29. Minutes of the 6th Session of MCMC are missing, and the 1946 Minutes refer to it as 'Malaysia Chinese Annual Conference.'

¹⁰ *Forever Beginning*, p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 42.

¹² *Discipline*, Methodist Church in Singapore (1985). p. 6.

¹³ *Malaysia Message*, Jan. 1928. p.6.

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Thereafter, Methodist work was concentrated in Sumatra which had started sometime in 1906,¹⁴ growing into the Sumatra Mission in 1922, the Sumatra Provisional Annual Conference by 1950, and constituting into the affiliated autonomous Methodist Church in Sumatra in 1964.

III. FROM 'MISSION' TO GENERAL CONFERENCE

10. In 1888, after functioning as a mission outreach of the South India Conference, Methodist work in Singapore, the territories of Peninsular Malaya and the adjacent territory and islands 'in which the Malay language is spoken "became" a **Mission** under the administration of the Missionary Society'. Thus separated from the South India Conference,¹⁵ William F. Oldham was appointed its first Superintendent. In 1893, it became the **Malaysia Mission Conference**,¹⁶ in step with its vigorous growth, and a stage towards becoming the **Malaysia Annual Conference** of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1902 when there was a sufficient number of Conference members to do so.¹⁷ The 1924 session memorialised the General Conference to permit a change of its name to the **Malaya Annual Conference**, taking effect from the 1925 Annual Conference.¹⁸

11. In 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church (USA) entered into a union with The Methodist Episcopal Church South and The Methodist Protestant Church to form **The Methodist Church**.¹⁹ All the Conferences in this region were now a part of this organisation.

12. By the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, the Methodist presence in Southeast Asia had been securely established in Singapore, Malaya, Sarawak, Sumatra and Burma. However, with the surrender of Singapore in February 1942, local leaders took over the administration of the Church under trying circumstances.²⁰ When hostilities ended in 1945, a period of physical and psychological

¹⁴ *Forever Beginning*, p. 43-44; Minutes, Malaysia Annual Conference, 1907. p. 22.

¹⁵ *Discipline*, Methodist Church in Singapore (1985), p. 5.

¹⁶ *Forever Beginning*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Minutes, Malaysia Annual Conference, 1902. p. 16.

¹⁸ Minutes, Malaysia Annual Conference, 1924. p. 32.

¹⁹ Declaration of Union, in *Doctrines and Discipline* of The Methodist Church, 1939. p. 11.

²⁰ *Forever Beginning*, p. 81.

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reconstruction began. A new era had dawned.

13. In nearly all the territories of this area, Methodist work had become Annual Conferences: the Malaya Annual Conference, the Malaysia Chinese Annual Conference, the Sumatra Provisional Annual Conference and the Burma Annual Conference. By common consent, they were constituted as the **Southeastern Asia Central Conference** in 1950.²¹ This arrangement permitted a certain latitude in decision-making at a time when the winds of political change all over Southeast Asia required a review of the mission and structure of the Church.

14. Political circumstances in Sumatra and Burma made it expedient for the Sumatra Conference to become an affiliated autonomous Methodist Church in 1964. The Burma Conference followed in 1965, leaving the Annual Conferences in Malaysia and Singapore to operate by themselves. With the political independence of Malaysia in 1957, and Singapore in 1965, there was a 'consciousness that the Church should determine its own life'.²² In the meantime, The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren in the United States had merged to form **The United Methodist Church** on 23 April 1968.²³

15. In Malaysia and Singapore, autonomy from the United Methodist Church was achieved, following an agreement of all the constituent Annual Conferences. Application was made to, and an Enabling Act passed by, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church to constitute the affiliated **Autonomous Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore**. The Constituting Conference was organised on 8 August 1968 and adopted its own *Constitution and Discipline*. This was modelled on the prevailing Methodist Constitution and Discipline which had always determined the doctrines, structures and usages in current use, but now edited and revised to meet local requirements. Yap Kim Hao was elected first local Bishop of the Autonomous Methodist Church, and was consecrated on 18 August.²⁴ Bishop Yap was re-elected in 1972 but resigned in 1973 to assume ecumenical responsibilities. Theodore Doraisany was elected to fill the

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 106.

²² *Discipline*, (1985), *op.cit.*, p. 7.

²³ *United Methodist Discipline* (1992): Historical Statement (online ed.)

²⁴ *Discipline*, (1985), *op.cit.*, p. 6-7.

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episcopal vacancy and retired in 1976 as the last bishop of the Autonomous Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore.

16. The process to restructure the Church to serve each of the two nations, Singapore and Malaysia, was the logical outcome of the movement to 'autonomy'. The Restructure Committee, appointed by the 1972 General Conference, studied and presented appropriate structures and legislation to the constituent Annual Conferences for a consensus in 1974 and 1975.²⁵



Restructuring talks

17. **The Methodist Church in Singapore** came into being when the General Conference met in Kuala Lumpur in December 1976 and passed an Enabling Act for the component Annual Conferences to constitute the two Methodist Churches in Malaysia and Singapore on 4 and 8 December 1976 respectively.²⁶

18. The Methodist Church in Singapore began functioning in December 1976, and comprised the Chinese Annual Conference, the Emmanuel Tamil Annual Conference and the Trinity Annual Conference. Each was headed by a President, one of whom, Kao Jih Chung, was elected and consecrated Bishop.²⁷ Bishop Kao was re-elected in 1980 and served until his retirement in 1984. Ho Chee Sin was elected to succeed him as bishop in 1984 and re-elected in 1988 and 1992. However, the arrangement by which the bishop also served as an Annual Conference President was modified at

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 8.

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the 1988 General Conference. The Discipline was amended²⁸ to re-define the role of the bishop. Elected from among the elders of the three Annual Conferences, henceforth the elder elected would serve exclusively as episcopal head. Following the revised Disciplinary provisions, the 1992 General Conference re-elected Bishop Ho Chee Sin to serve exclusively in this position. He stepped down as bishop in 1996 after serving the maximum three episcopal terms allowed. This was followed, in 1996, by the election of Wong Kiam Thau. Bishop Wong retired in 2000, and was succeeded by Robert Solomon (elected 2000, re-elected 2004 and 2008). Bishop Solomon retired in 2012. He was succeeded by Wee Boon Hup (elected 2012, retired 2016). The incumbent, Bishop Chong Chin Chung, was elected in 2016.

19. In looking back at the history of the Methodist Church in Singapore, we rejoice and give thanks to God Almighty for the ‘great things He hath done,’ for the opportunities and resources to carry out His mission in this land, and lands afar, to bring good news of salvation to those who hunger and thirst for the bread and water of life, to share His love with the uncared for, the poor, the infirm and those that bear all manner of suffering, and for the challenges of the new millennium. We pray that His Spirit will prevail as the source of our hope and inspiration.

²⁸ *Journal*, 1988 General Conference, p. 39