# FAITH-BASED PATHS TO BUSINESS SUCCESS: MALAYSIAN MANIFESTATIONS OF THE EVANGELICAL-NEOLIBERAL NEXUS

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**ASIA-EUROPE INSTITUTE**
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**KUALA LUMPUR**

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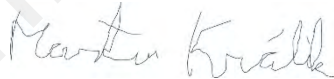

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**FAITH-BASED PATHS TO BUSINESS SUCCESS: MALAYSIAN MANIFESTATIONS OF THE EVANGELICAL-NEOLIBERAL NEXUS**

## ABSTRACT

The thesis profiles a number of evangelical Christian groups which operate in Malaysia's Klang Valley. Some of them have embraced business, financing, investment and real estate undertakings on a significant scale. The objective was to cast new light on how the confluence of evangelical and neoliberal capitalist forces (occurring first in the United States and now transnationally) influenced and at times directly shaped their setting up, development and growth, as well as broader socioeconomic and political positions. In particular, the aim was to map out and analyse the founders' and members' choice of religious affiliation; their personal motivations and the sociological formations they represent; the churches' approach to marketing themselves to the community and other community outreach; and the groups' entry into and participation in business, which has come with its own sets of governance structures and requirements.

Conceptualizations of the dynamics and implications of the rising nexus of neoliberal and evangelical-Christian discourses are a young and underdeveloped field of social research. Despite its relevance to political economy as well as the emerging sub-discipline of sociology of commodification of religion, there is great paucity of literature on the topic. Therefore, fresh empirical data can fill many gaps, especially when it is situated in the context of a developing and multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. This data is presented in the form of case studies, portraying a cross-section of Malaysia's urban evangelical community.

Reflecting the nature of the material, our methodological approach is rooted in detailed empirical inquiry enriched with elements of large-scale social analysis.

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Academics have been in agreement that it is the hallmark of neoliberalism to commoditize all social relations including religion. Drawing on theories of commoditization and on organizational theory, this study examines the paradigm of churches as owners and distributors of “religious goods” targeted at specific segments of consumers. Also outlined here is how this distribution necessarily entails such processes as competition and specialization among groups.

Upon completing archival and interview portions of the data collection, the research effort proceeded to a thematic, explanatory analysis of the main findings, linking fragmentary data to larger assertions and organizing these into coherent case studies. Throughout this process, the analysis was informed by an awareness of the contested nature of this research territory and of the possibility that different views and concepts revealed by the sources may compete and negotiate with each other.

This study traces how the churches’ activities led to the creation of new social spaces, organized around notions of social attachment and belonging that resonate with a society undergoing neoliberal change. Also documented here are the newly porous boundaries between church and corporation; social good and profit; and worshippers and shareholders. Lastly, this study puts forward the emerging picture of a religious economy and discusses its ramifications for interacting with other groups, other religions and with the state.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism, religion, social relations, commodity

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**PERJALANAN BERLANDASKAN KEPERCAYAAN KE ARAH KEJAYAAN DALAM PERNIAGAAN: MANIFESTASI MALAYSIA DALAM NEKSUS EVANGELIS-NEOLIBERAL**

## ABSTRAK

Tesis ini memuatkan usaha gerakan Kristian evangelis yang beroperasi di Lembah Klang, Malaysia. Ada antara mereka yang terlibat dalam kegiatan perniagaan, pembiayaan, pelaburan dan hartanah secara besar-besaran. Objektif tesis adalah untuk menonjolkan perspektif baharu akan sejauh mana pertembungan antara gerakan kapitalis evangelis dan neoliberal (pada mulanya di Amerika Syarikat dan kemudian ke peringkat antarabangsa) mempengaruhi dan pada masa tertentu menentukan pembentukan, pembangunan dan pertumbuhan, serta kedudukan sosioekonomi dan politik secara langsung dengan lebih meluas. Matlamat khusus tesis ini adalah untuk merangka dan menganalisis pilihan afiliasi (gabungan) pengasas agama dan para ahli, motivasi peribadi dan pembentukan sosiologi yang diwakili, pendekatan gereja dalam memasarkan organisasi kepada komuniti dan jangkauan komuniti luar, serta kemasukan dan keterlibatan gerakan ini dalam perniagaan, yang disusuli dengan set struktur dan keperluan tadbir urus yang tersendiri.

Konseptualisasi dinamik dan implikasi berkenaan perkembangan neksus (perhubungan) wacana Kristian evangelis dan neoliberal merupakan sebuah bidang penyelidikan sosial yang baharu dan berkembang dengan perlahan. Meskipun topik ini relevan dengan ekonomi politik serta disiplin ilmu sosiologi berkenaan komodifikasi agama yang semakin bercambah, masih banyak kekurangan dari segi sorotan kajian. Oleh itu, data terbaharu melalui kajian empirikal dapat mengisi jurang tersebut, terutamanya apabila melihat pada konteks masyarakat yang membangun yang berlainan etnik dan


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agama. Kami mengemukakan data dalam bentuk kajian kes, bagi menggambarkan rentetan gerakan komuniti evangelis bandar di Malaysia.

Pendekatan metodologi yang digunakan bertitik tolak daripada penelitian empirical secara terperinci, dimuatkan dengan analisis sosial berskala besar yang sejajar dengan sifat material yang digunakan. Ahli akademik bersetuju bahawa hal ini menjadi titik penentu yang mendorong gerakan neoliberalisme mengkomoditikan semua hubungan sosial termasuklah agama. Daripada teori pengkomoditian dan teori organisasi yang digariskan, kami mengkaji paradigma pihak gereja sebagai pemilik dan penyebar "barangan keagamaan", yang mensasarkan segmen pengguna tertentu. Kami juga menunjukkan sejauh mana cara penyebaran tersebut melibatkan proses persaingan dan pengkhususan dalam kalangan ahli gerakan.

Setelah data dikumpul melalui arkib dan sesi temu bual, usaha penyelidikan diteruskan dengan analisis tematik dan penjelasan berkenaan penemuan utama, dengan menghubungkan data berfragmen dengan kenyataan yang lebih besar lalu diselitkan dalam kajian kes secara koheren. Sepanjang proses ini berlangsung, analisis yang dijalankan diterapkan dengan kesedaran bahawa ruang penyelidikan sering dipertikaikan dan terdapat kemungkinan bahawa pandangan dan konsep yang berlainan disebabkan oleh sumber tertentu boleh bercanggah dan bergandingan antara satu sama lain.

Kami menunjukkan bahawa aktiviti yang dijalankan oleh pihak gereja mewujudkan beberapa ruang sosial yang baharu, dibangunkan atas tanggapan yang meliputi keterikatan sosial dan rasa kekitaan, sejajar dengan masyarakat yang sedang mengalami perubahan neoliberal. Kami juga menemukan sempadan baharu antara pihak gereja dengan syarikat perbadanan secara terbuka baik dari segi sosial mahupun keuntungan, yang melibatkan penganut dan pemegang saham itu sendiri. Akhir sekali,

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kami mengemukakan gambaran terbaru ekonomi keagamaan serta membincangkan kesan daripada interaksi antara gerakan ini dengan gerakan, agama dan negara lain.

**Kata kunci:** neoliberalisme, agama, hubungan sosial, komoditi

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ACT | : | Australian College of Theology |
| ADHD | : | Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder |
| AIM | : | Malaysian Music Industry Awards |
| AOG | : | Assemblies of God |
| C&MA | : | Christian and Missionary Alliance |
| CA | : | Connect Activity |
| CCM | : | Council of Churches of Malaysia |
| CCT | : | Center for Community Transformation Group of Ministries |
| CDU | : | Christian Democratic Union |
| CEF | : | Child Evangelism Fellowship |
| CES | : | Community Excel Services |
| CFM | : | Christian Federation of Malaysia |
| CNBM | : | Citizens Network for a Better Malaysia |
| COC | : | Commissioner of Charities |
| DNC | : | Democratic National Committee |
| DSPN | : | Darjah Setia Pangkuan Negeri |
| DUMC | : | Damansara Utama Methodist Church |
| E.E. | : | Evangelism Explosion |
| EMM | : | Ellel Ministries Malaysia |
| EIC | : | Evangelical-Industrial Complex |
| FBC | : | First Baptist Church |
| FCBC | : | Faith Community Baptist Church |
| FGT | : | Full Gospel Tabernacle |
| FICM | : | Freedom in Christ Ministries International |
| FMB | : | Foreign Mission Board |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| GATT | : | General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade |
| HCA | : | Harvest Christian Assembly |
| HCF | : | Hanoi Christian Fellowship |
| HYA | : | Harvest Young Adults |
| HYF | : | Harvest Young Families |
| IMB | : | International Mission Board |
| IMF | : | International Monetary Fund |
| ISAE | : | Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals |
| JAIS | : | Selangor Islamic Religious Department |
| JPPM/ROS | : | Registrar of Societies Malaysia |
| MAG | : | Mentoring and Accountability Group |
| MBC | : | Malaysia Baptist Convention |
| MBS | : | Malaysia Bible Seminary |
| MBTS | : | Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary |
| MCCBCHST | : | Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism |
| MCPP | : | Missions Candidates Preparation Programmes |
| MGM | : | Malaysian Gospel Music |
| MMK | : | Migrant Ministry Klang |
| NAE | : | National Association of Evangelicals |
| NAR | : | New Apostolic Reformation |
| NECF | : | National Evangelical Christian Fellowship |
| OCF | : | Overseas Christian Fellowship |
| OFBCI | : | Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives |
| OHMSI | : | Oriental Hearts and Mind Study Institute |
| PBC | : | Pantai Baptist Church |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| PDMC | : | Port Dickson Methodist Centre |
| PEMANDU | : | Performance Management and Delivery Unit |
| PRBGC | : | Pasar Road Baptist Gospel Centre |
| PTL | : | Praise The Lord |
| RZIM | : | Ravi Zacharias International Ministries |
| SAMHSA | : | Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration |
| SBC | : | Southern Baptist Convention |
| SSM/CCM | : | Companies Commission of Malaysia |
| TLS | : | Tung Ling Seminary |
| UCC | : | United Church of Christ |
| WTO | : | World Trade Organization |

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1: Problem statement

The opening decades of the 21st century have seen an intensifying debate on the nature and outcomes of the interplay between capitalism, culture and identity. These include explorations of the changing relationship between capitalism and religion. With economic considerations, motivations and vocabulary increasingly permeating every domain of human activity, the phenomenon of "taking religion to the marketplace" has been established as a legitimate and relevant subject of academic enquiry.

One segment that has been particularly productive of new sets of dynamics, meanings and trends arising from this sustained interaction between religion and the market is the Christian evangelical movement. Its dramatic expansion over the past forty years has unfolded against a backdrop of broader social, political and economic developments. These include the proliferation of neoliberal thought and policy – acknowledged to transform identities and modes of social being across the globe – as well as the emergence of a politically and electorally conservative "religious Right". In aggregate, these developments have inspired growing interest among sociologists, anthropologists, historians, political economists and other social scientists.

Nonetheless, until recently the links between what has been generally termed the neoliberal agenda and its role in catalysing the ascendance of the evangelical movement (and vice versa) have been explored only tentatively. Furthermore, the focus of these initial research undertakings has been largely limited to the US religious and political-economic landscape. Where new accounts did become available of the evangelical movement's presence and activities in other, particularly emerging societies, they have typically been descriptive rather than elucidatory in nature.

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In this context of developing societies, Southeast Asia appears to be an ideal ground for studying many aspects of the emerging evangelical-capitalist nexus and its ongoing transnationalization: The region has been for centuries both a receptacle and an active player in the global trade in goods as well as ideas; it has a long history of western colonial and business presence; and throughout history, it has imported, absorbed and localized a number of powerful religious influences, of which the evangelical movement represents but the latest layer in this complex socio-religious terrain. In addition, Southeast Asia's modern-day, decolonized nation states are typically highly heterogeneous, multi-ethnic and multi-religious polities. Therefore, by examining the local manifestations of the evangelical-neoliberal nexus, the degree in which this trend is adapting to, reshaping and in some cases militating against established structures and mechanisms of religious, economic and political power can be scrutinized. Insights can also be derived into its current and future coexistence with other religions which have thrived in this part of the world.

Malaysia, although historically the recipient of many global trends through Singapore as its immediate and highly connected neighbour, has been an attractive target in its own right for global evangelical missionaries: It is a majority-Muslim country located in a predominantly Muslim part of the world;[1] its Chinese minority is not only influential in business but also enjoys linkages to Chinese communities in other countries including China itself; and it has a strong regional concentration of both Chinese population and native Christian population. Beyond religious objectives, Malaysia's geopolitical significance is considerable (Buchanan, 2015).

[1] Many of the evangelical groups who send missionaries to Muslim countries tend to labour under the misconception that the local populace will not have "heard of Jesus". In reality, Muslims do recognize Jesus/Isa [son of Mary/Maryam] as a messenger of God. Both Jesus and Mary are revered in the Islamic tradition.



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In this study, we aim to explore several evangelical Christian groups which have built up sizable presence in Malaysia's Klang Valley.[2] We chose to focus on the Klang Valley (to the exclusion of e.g. East Malaysia where evangelical presence is also significant) because it is the country's main metropolitan area; it has seen dramatic growth in local evangelical church membership in recent years; geographically, it represents a highly compact microcosm, unlike any other in Malaysia, in that a wide variety of churches – from small, community-oriented groups to Singapore-style megachurches – coexist, interact, compete, specialize and seek to differentiate themselves, all within the span of the same shared urban space – thus presenting analysts with a representative and vibrant cross-section of the urban evangelical community; and in physical terms, it facilitates researchers' access to personal visits and face-to-face conversations.

The majority of the groups we researched have embraced business, financing and investment undertakings on a significant scale. Presenting their profiles in the form of case studies, our study casts new light on their roots in, history of and contribution to the confluence of evangelical and capitalist forces, particularly by revisiting their founders' and members' chosen religious affiliations and motivations; the (in many ways) sociological formation these motivations represent, as reflected in and shaped by the churches' marketing messages and community activities; and the groups' entry into and participation in business, which has come with its own sets of governance structures and requirements.

It is worth bearing in mind that Southeast Asia's evangelical story does not date back very long. Evangelical missionaries, literature and beliefs only arrived in a significant way in the late 1970s and 1980s. As with many other developments, Singapore served as the initial point of entry for a variety of groups which had originated in the

[2] Also known as Greater Kuala Lumpur. Named after the Klang river, this area includes the federal territory of Kuala Lumpur and adjoining parts of the state of Selangor. It is home to about 8 million people, i.e. 25% of the country's entire population.

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United States and which would soon thereafter set up presence in the urban centres of Malaysia. Compared with other countries, the absence of near-total dominance by a single state religion or a totalitarian, e.g. Communist, government presented them with relatively few barriers to proselytizing activities. As a result, despite the brief history, and despite rarely generating media attention (with the exception of a handful of high-profile news stories), evangelicals in Malaysia and Singapore are today a vibrant and powerful socioeconomic force.

### 1.2.1: Introducing key concepts: Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism today is recognized as a globally overriding paradigm of social and economic thought. In the past few years it has been variously but in equal measure characterized as an essentially ideological project based on abstract concepts such as free markets (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010); a political project intent on restoring class power (Harvey, 2005); the result of a political opportunity to push for a new economic agenda based on neoliberal assumptions about economic efficiency, reduced state intervention and free markets (Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010); the manifestation of economy as divorced from social relations and politics (Polanyi, 1957); a moral and political enterprise "articulated in the language of economics" that emphasizes the moral benefits of free markets as a necessary condition for free and democratic societies (Mudge, 2008); and – rather boldly – as the ideology of the emergent transnational capitalist class which has planned and constructed an architecture of global governance in response to threats from national capital, from neoconservatives and from the Left (Miller, 2010).

Neoliberalism tends to value market exchange as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs" (Shefner & Harvey, 2007, p. 2). It holds that the social good will be maximized by ramping up the reach and frequency of market transactions and seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. Other scholars have exposed how the

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principles and rhetoric of competition, competitiveness and self-development have not only invaded all spheres of life but have indeed come to occupy the centre of social life (Amable, 2011).

Academics have been in agreement that it is the hallmark of neoliberalism to commodify all social relations, including religion. Drawing on theories of commodification and on organizational theory, this study will analyse instances where the churches in focus engage in social good vs. profit – of church activity transformed into corporate profit; the resulting porous boundary between church and corporation, as well as of church members recast as shareholders and investors. Finally, the study will examine this emerging picture of a "religion-cum-economy" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000) and discuss its ramifications for interacting with other groups, other religions and with the state.

What makes neoliberalism difficult to grasp from an analytical perspective is its inherent tendency to embed itself in, rather than supplant, existing social, economic and institutional landscapes (Cahill, 2014). It is therefore all the more illuminating to explore and document the processes and outcomes of this embeddedness in a developing society such as Malaysia.

**1.2.2: Introducing key concepts: Evangelicalism**

On several occasions in this thesis, we caution against essentializing specific identities. Just as Malaysia's Chinese communities represent a diverse mix of dialect groups, family clans, social strata, mother-tongue affiliations and religious practices, the evangelical Christian identity is likewise far from homogeneous or easily defined.

In its widespread albeit sometimes intuitive usage, "evangelical" is roughly synonymous with "non-mainstream", "non-denominational" and in some contexts even "new urban", in that these descriptions separate it from what is normally referred to as

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mainline Christian denominations. These include the Catholic Church(es) and the historically dominant Protestant groups such as Anglican, Baptist, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian. Commonly defining a movement by what it is not rather than what it is provides an indication of the vast diversity of the "evangelical" label in today's world.

Amidst this diversity, it is useful to consider the commonalities to which all evangelical groups profess to adhere. Typically these involve spiritual conversion through a "born-again" experience; a view of scripture as the ultimate authority; emphasis on Christ's sacrifice as a redeeming force for humanity; and missionary and other social reform activism (Bebbington, 1989).[3] If we take into consideration data from US surveys and combine it with estimates that evangelicals represent between 25% and 50% of total population in many developing countries (e.g. Brazil, Kenya, Uganda), a total count of 500-700 million evangelical adherents worldwide will not appear unrealistic.

Although every Christian faith, from Roman Catholic to Eastern Orthodox schools, is committed to evangelizing and proselytizing efforts, evangelical groups have made missionary activities into one of the cornerstones of their pursuits. The emphasis on fundraising and the corporate muscle the evangelicals have developed have stood them in good stead in these global campaigns. Their missionary work has greatly intensified since the 1970s, with hundreds of groups organizing "church-planting" and other expeditions to every continent in the world.

Evangelization among Malaysia's non-Muslim ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese, has been both systematic and widespread over the past forty years. At present, informal estimates put the number of Chinese evangelical Christians in Malaysia at about

[3] For a more detailed definition, see the National Association of Evangelicals' (NAE) Statement of Faith: www.nae.net/statement-of-faith/

half a million, behind followers of traditional Chinese religion. Nonetheless, evangelical groups have managed to make up for their relatively low penetration, as measured by membership size, through their superb organizational skills and excellent networking, drawing on a pervasive system of cells and other semi-autonomous units. They have also benefited from their concentration in highly affluent, densely populated urban and suburban centres. In addition, they have successfully built coalitions comprising bible colleges, leadership training camps, fellowships (such as Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship), crusades (e.g. Awakening Malaysia), conferences, corporate appointments, missionary exchanges, book and music shops, prayer networks, visits by foreign preachers and other personal and corporate interconnections.

### 1.3: The evangelical-neoliberal nexus finding a home in Asia and Malaysia

In broad contours, the main focus of this study is on the rise and growth of an evangelical-capitalist nexus and its emergence in the developing world including Asia and specifically Malaysia.[4] "Nexus" is a fitting term to use when referring, as we are, to an interplay of two trends and their visible coalescing into a potent socio-political and economic force.

Malaysia presents a special terrain for researchers of religion. In addition to the country's religions and racial diversity, legal and political constraints that are seen as safeguarding national stability have been consistently prioritized over individual rights and freedoms as defined by international standards (Shah & Sani, 2010). Since the early 1980s, amendments to the country's Penal Code have ensured that only Christians are allowed to own a Malay-language copy of the Bible; certain Bahasa Malaysia words have

[4] A nexus is defined as a connection or (helpfully, for the purposes of our study) a series of connections.

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been prohibited from use in Christian worship; and limitations have been imposed on the number and physical attributes of Christian churches (Barr & Govindasamy, 2010).

Furthermore, the space for non-threatening public debate on issues related to outlawed practices such as Islamic apostasy have continued to shrink rapidly. For instance, in April 2019, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) alleged involvement of state agents in the earlier kidnappings and disappearance of several Christian pastors and social activists between 2016 and 2017. This prompted Malaysia's National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) to demand an immediate probe into the enforced disappearances (Danial, 2019).

For the most part, an understanding among scholars of this nexus and how it plays out in developing countries such as Malaysia has barely reached as far as its manifestations. The driving forces and the underlying assumptions and values that have been feeding those forces remain largely unnoticed and unexamined. That is quite remarkable, given that in recent years, the individualist, industrious and materialistic ethos of the evangelical/born-again movement has strongly resonated with large strata of societies across Asia. This has been particularly the case when that ethos has been couched in the spiritual messages of the Prosperity Gospel, i.e. modern teachings that seek to reconcile Christian faith with the pursuit of material wealth. Thus the Prosperity Gospel has not only found a captive audience among Malaysia's non-Muslim middle classes; it has also been perceived as generally congruent with the more established and localized variations of Protestant faith.

As a result, social segments which include but are not limited to Southeast Asia's ethnic Chinese, variously labelled by social scientists as members of a predominantly immigrant, mercantile and entrepreneurial social class, have been profoundly affected: The accessible, pragmatic flavour of commodified Christianity as served up by the

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multitude of evangelical groups in Malaysia – some imported, others homegrown; some dating back to the 1970s, others relatively new – has in many ways transformed the community. It has inspired many to abandon the polytheist beliefs of their ancestors; to adopt English rather than dialects of Chinese as the main tool of communication; to make significant investments – spiritual, emotional and financial – in church undertakings including entrepreneurial projects; to reach out to believers across Malaysia's racial spectrum and across the Asia-Pacific region; to internalize, for the first time in history, the notion of an otherwise Malay/Muslim-dominated Malaysia as their permanent home rather than a temporary sojourn fraught with ambivalence; to take active part in the formal political process, which traditionally they have shunned; and to receive exposure, through their church cell groups, to neoliberal ideas (such as those of Peter Drucker) and use these ideas to mediate and make sense of their collective experience in the 21st century.

Despite the abovementioned constraints, at present evangelical Christianity is believed to be Malaysia's single fastest-growing religious affiliation (Buchanan, 2015). The so-called megachurches the evangelical groups have erected – sprawling urban landmarks accommodating up to 10,000 attendees – are a fitting symbol of the thriving evangelical-capitalist nexus. Hundreds of other, smaller churches have similarly mushroomed, producing many new forms as well as breakaways from larger groups. Some of the region's most prominent business tycoons, controlling entire networks of assets worldwide, have publicly associated themselves with these groups. In consequence, the social, economic and financial clout the movement has built up is now visibly reaching into the political process, on occasion provoking anxiety within other communities. In addition, its newly acquired power and influence have inevitably left its footprint across such segments as news media, professional sports and entertainment. Between these dramatic developments and the scant scholarly work on what has become

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a national issue, it would not be an exaggeration to present the country's evangelical-capitalist story as an "elephant in the room".

### 1.4: Research questions

To guide the research process that underpins this study, the following questions have been formulated:

1. In what ways have the religious groups in the case studies managed to commodify religion and their religious experience? What are the outcomes of these commodification processes? How do they manifest themselves? What are the connecting threads that can be traced across different churches, and what is the degree of diversity and differentiation that can be seen? To what extent has the role of these churches changed in the Malaysian context?

2. Against this background of commodified religion, what are the webs of loyalties, attachments and aspirations that the groups have put forward? Do these extend from the psychological and arguably economic to the political domain? If so, what are the repercussions and resulting prospects for Malaysia's multi-religious and multi-ethnic society?

3. Do these trends support the argument of a growing nexus between evangelical and neoliberal influences? Is it largely replicating developments in the United States, or is it unique to Malaysia, with its own set of economic and political landscapes?

The findings of this study have been organized into a series of case studies, presented in Chapter 5. It is preceded by an examination, in a historical context, of the



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key concepts we have employed in this study – neoliberalism, the evangelical movement and the evangelical-neoliberal nexus (Chapter 2); an overview of existing literature that has explored these concepts and, tentatively at least, their interplay (Chapter 3); and an outline of the research methods we used in data collection and analysis (Chapter 4). A discussion of the findings and how they illuminate our original research questions is captured in Chapter 6, followed by a conclusion – which synthesizes the findings and identifies persistent gaps as well as potential areas for future research – in Chapter 7.

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# CHAPTER 2:

# KEY CONCEPTS IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Malaysian evangelical story would be impossible to sketch without first discussing in detail the United States as the birthplace of the world's major evangelical movements; the point of origin of the 1970s charismatic revival; home to entire media segments sponsored by evangelical groups and the birthplace of the 'televangelist' phenomenon; a market that was the first to see modern religious groups embrace entrepreneurial values in a significant measure; a training ground for worldwide missionary initiatives; and a political and electoral landscape increasingly shaped by the Religious Right in general and evangelical Christianity in particular; as well as the location of the most advanced efforts by scholars to pinpoint and analyse these developments. Indeed, much of the vocabulary that is available to us in discussing the concurrent rise of neoliberalism and evangelicalism has been derived from the American experience.

## 2.1: History of neoliberalism

In its original connotation and usage, the term "neoliberalism" was coined and popularized between the two world wars. A number of German economists at the time reacted against the planned economies of both the emerging Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union. They rejected the totalitarian traits and excesses of both systems which, they believed, had distorted the values of 19$^{th}$-century classical liberalism – a body of thought which had been dealt an additional blow by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Instead, they sought to uphold a renewed set of liberal economic values which could serve as a middle ground or a "third way" between the German and Soviet models

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of full-blown central planning on the one hand and traditional Anglo-Saxon *laissez-faire* on the other.

During these early days, the new paradigm of neoliberalism drew on the collective thought and intellectual support of a broad collective of economists. Among the most influential ones from the 1930s until the early 1950s were economists and legal scholars centred at the University of Freiburg in Germany. They maintained that capitalism required a strong government to create a framework within which the free market could function at its most efficient. Over time, this emphasis on a state-imposed order earned them the label of "ordoliberals", from the Latin *ordo* for order (Bonefeld, 2012). This group included, among others, Walter Eucken, Ludwig Erhard, Franz Böhm, Hans Grossmann-Doerth and Leonhard Miksch, who built on an earlier sensibility and work produced by a generation of economists led by Alexander Rüstow, Wilhelm Röpke and Alfred Müller-Armack. At a 1932 conference organized in Dresden by Germany's leading economics association, *Verein für Socialpolitik* (Social Policy Association), Alexander Rüstow (1885-1963) gave a presentation titled *Freie Wirtschaft, starker Staat* (Free Economy, Strong State), which continues to be recognized as the founding document of neoliberalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). Meanwhile, the actual term "neoliberalism" was officially introduced during the Walter Lippman Colloquium which took place in Paris in 1938.

Unlike classical liberalism, which is hostile to government interference in the marketplace, for ordoliberals the market was far from a "natural" phenomenon that would be best left to its own devices. On the contrary, governments played an important role as guardians of free markets by securing the rule of law. In this vision, the market had to be sustained, guided and supported. In addition to calling for a government-guaranteed order that would allow for optimum functioning of the free market, ordoliberals also

championed antitrust policy and strict monetarism. These principles were at the core of what is often seen as the ordoliberal update on 19th-century liberalism.

During Europe's post-war economic recovery, ordoliberals became closely involved in designing the institutions and mechanisms of the West German social market economy, which in turn was credited with producing the country's 1950s "economic miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*). Ludwig Erhard (1897-1977) was appointed Minister of Economy in the government of the first post-WWII Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967). While he was in office, some price controls were lifted, corporate tax rates were lowered, and social security allowances and pensions increased. With strong competition laws in place, the market was supposed to deliver not only economic growth but also welfare for all.

As many ordoliberal ideas became mainstream by achieving practical application in Germany's economic model, the dominant position that ordoliberals had once enjoyed in shaping the theoretical foundations of neoliberalism began to loosen. Since the 1960s, ordoliberal influence on economics and jurisprudence has significantly diminished. Nonetheless, many German economists today continue to define themselves as Ordoliberals, typically coalescing around the Faculty of Economics at the University of Freiburg and the Ordo journal. More importantly, a number of economists and commentators around the world have argued that 1) ordoliberal assumptions have been so deeply ingrained in modern-day German economics and government, their practitioners are no longer conscious of the fact; and 2) they have, time and again, resurfaced – and resisted challenge – during critical junctures in recent history as Germany adopted a leadership role within the European Union. In this view, ordoliberal

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fingerprints are clearly discernible on the Eurozone's Stability and Growth Pact, agreed on in the late 1990s as a rules-based way of curbing budget deficits.[5]

But let us return to the post-war shaping of the neoliberal edifice. The ideas of Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) and Milton Friedman (1912-2006) reside both inside and outside the frameworks established by ordoliberals: Indeed, their early writings have been widely considered to be rooted in the language of ordoliberalism. Hayek's Austrian School of economic thought had been close to ordoliberals in its thinking (particularly in their shared rejection of deficit spending as a means of stimulating demand) as well as in personal contacts. The new champions of neoliberalism aimed to shift the neoliberal discourse towards the values of self-reliance and private enterprise. In part, this was a response to the success and broader ramifications of the West German economic miracle and its ethos of prosperity through competition and sustained economic growth as the best possible social policy. They posited that it was free markets, undisturbed by state regulation and intervention, which offered the best path to economic development. Works by Hayek and Friedman would greatly hasten the demise of the long-standing Keynesian consensus which dictated that governments could "manage" demand in order to secure full employment (Yergin & Stanislaw, 2002).

In 1947, Hayek was one of the founders of the Mont Pèlerin Society which has since become synonymous with spreading neoliberal ideas. It was also largely through his persona that the epicentre of neoliberal influence at this time moved from Europe to the United States. In 1950, Hayek left the University of London, where he had been Professor of Economics and Statistics, to become Professor of Social and Moral Science

[5] These observations have received strong validation since the onset of the European sovereign debt crisis in 2010. Germany's approach to the euro crisis resolution has led to conflicts with other European countries, arguably because of the fundamentally ordoliberal insistence on opposing debt, deficits and quantitative easing, and on upholding austerity as the answer to the monetary crisis. On a symbolic plane, none other than Chancellor Angela Merkel attended and spoke at the January 2016 anniversary ceremony of the Walter Eucken Institute in Freiburg. The word "ordoliberalism" may be nearly forgotten, but the friction between German and Anglo-Saxon economic views, which Eucken and his disciples set in motion through their adherence to a "third way", is alive and well.

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at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. His appointment was sponsored by external, non-academic institutions such as the William Volker Fund, a charitable foundation whose promotion of free-market ideas since the 1930s had established it as one of the leaders of the US libertarian and conservative movements. In tandem, neoliberal thinkers and their business sponsors helped to found numerous organizations to promote neoliberalism, particularly think tanks and business forums. In some ways mirroring Hayek's nominal shift of discipline from economics to social and even moral science, these "idea centres" represented the emergence of a political project to oppose government intervention in markets, incorporating a number of heterodox theories borrowed from different disciplines (van Horn & Mirowski, 2009).

The macroeconomic picture in the ensuing period of the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the post-war boom built on industrial capitalism and mass production had unequivocally come to an end, gave neoliberal ideas a tremendous boost. The 1971 collapse of the Bretton Woods system of international monetary management put an end to the US dollar's convertibility to gold. The Keynesian model of growth and the consensus between capital and labour on which it was founded gradually broke down. A crucial leap from neoliberal theory to neoliberal practice (Biebricher, 2013) got underway as the values promoted by proponents of neoliberalism made their way from universities and think tanks to policy forums and government agendas.

Against a background of the 1970s' recessions, oil crises, declining investment opportunities and what came to be known as stagflation – high inflation rates combined with economic stagnation – the prolonged crisis came to be seen as a crisis of the entire Fordist-Keynesian economic model. In its place, neoliberal thought assumed centre stage. The tide turned decisively in favour of monetarism which manifested itself in the form of restrictions on money supply and on government expenditure. Policies were drafted that sought to apply market frameworks, competition and commodification across all sectors

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of society (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). These policies culminated in neoliberal doctrines which history has recorded as Thatcherism and Reaganomics. Often described as "dancing on the grave of Keynesianism" (North, 2012) because of the vengeance that governments led by Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) and Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) displayed in dismantling the then prevailing social and economic model, these policy styles have become synonymous with the term "neoliberalism" in its modern-day scope; in fact, the terms have sometimes been used interchangeably.

### 2.1.2: Neoliberalism as a global movement

Neoliberalism was quick to crystallize into a global movement, outgrowing the Anglo-American world. The aftermath of the 1973 coup that removed Chile's left-wing president Salvador Allende and installed a military government headed by General Augusto Pinochet is frequently cited as a textbook case of introducing neoliberalism to policymaking. In other parts of the developing world, structural adjustment programmes implemented by the World Bank, IMF and GATT-WTO brought further market logic and market imperatives to public sectors, thus cementing neoliberalism's position as the dominant political and ideological form of global capitalism.

Meanwhile, Thatcher and Reagan, the two biggest political personalities to consolidate neoliberal policies and leave a lasting legacy, shared a number of characteristics not only in their political and economic outlook but also in their personal backgrounds and communication styles: They both started their climb up the social and political ladders as outsiders coming from small-town, lower-middle-class backgrounds, before marrying into wealth and privilege.[6] As national leaders, they both championed privatization of state assets on an unprecedented scale in order to reduce the influence of government regulation and control. They emphasized five core principles: privatization

[6] Thatcher as a student did earn a place at Oxford. As with several other modern-day British prime ministers, her reaction to the elite school was said to have been an unfavourable one (Lewis, 1984).

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of state-run assets; liberalization of trade in goods and capital investment; monetarist focus on inflation control; deregulation of labour and product markets to reduce "impediments" to business; and marketization of society through public-private partnerships (Hall & Jacques, 1983; Mudge, 2008). In consequence, a culture of competition superseded the culture of service. The "real world" became equated with the world of business, and business attitudes were brought into government. Advocates of Thatcherism and Reaganomics exhorted the government to release the energies of individuals who had been one way or another, by these political leaders' estimation, imprisoned by the state.[7]

The dominant economics of this time has often been described as "supply-side economics": Extending generous tax breaks to the wealthy (who in theory were more likely to save and invest), it was asserted that a cut in tax rates would stimulate output and income, and therefore generate a larger base from which tax revenues could be drawn (Sawyer, 1987). In the 1992 US presidential election debate, this approach earned the derogatory nickname of "trickle-down economics": The lower and middle classes had been made to depend on the largesse of the moneyed elite which would only trickle its way down the social pecking order through consumption and charity (Arndt, 1983).

Structurally, and going beyond ideology, Thatcher and Reagan sought to dismantle the existing hierarchy rather than to be absorbed by it. In many contexts, they embraced what citizenry today might well consider "politics as we know it": Form over substance; use of propaganda; a predilection for shallow yet catchy and memorable sound bites; and carefully stage-managed events. The result was an array of profoundly

[7] In higher education, Thatcherism and Reaganomics produced student debt, vanishing job security, increasing compensation for top administrators, expanding bureaucracy and committee work, corporate management methodologies and intensified competition for ever-shrinking public funding (Kansa, 2014).

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ideological yet far-from-coherent messages delivered with an over-simplified, black-and-white, repetitive clarity (Evans, 2013).

There has been a growing tendency on the part of economists, sociologists and political scientists to view Thatcher and Reagan as executing on, rather than shaping, what was essentially an ideological agenda (Pierson, 1994). In fact, very early on into the two leaders' 1980s policy experiments, some academics proposed to frame these developments as parts of a broad redistribution effort, designed to re-compensate the wealthy for the relative losses they had incurred in the 1960s – a time in history which saw the implementation of a number of taxpayer-sponsored social programmes. Historians have likewise pointed out that many of the key building blocks of the future neoliberal policy architecture had already been in place when Thatcher and Reagan took office. For instance, the Federal Reserve, once known as a bastion of Keynesianism, was taken over by conservative monetarists in 1979, a full year before Reagan's election victory (Sawyer, 1987).

Nonetheless, if ever a strain of public policy deserved the label of "game-changing", Thatcherism and Reaganomics were it. As controversial and derided as the outcomes of their economic strategy may have been, there is no denying that the strategy itself became hegemonic, taking over the discourse and the vocabulary of policymaking across the political spectrum. As a result, the 1990s saw the advent of national US and UK leaders such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair who, despite campaigning on a platform of challenging their predecessors' economic legacy, went on to put in place programmes of "modernization" that largely amounted to infusing social democracy with neoliberal ideas. In Germany, the ruling Social Democrats repeated many of the same patterns charted by Blairism. With hindsight of 20 years, these leaders' collective legacy is widely seen as one of a "second wave of neoliberalization" (Steger & Roy, 2010).

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At the start of the new millennium, many prophesied neoliberalism's doom. Their calls have strengthened in the face of what they consider irrefutable evidence of its self-serving and destructive nature, amply demonstrated by the 2008-2009 global financial crisis. Admittedly, the majority of neoliberal thinkers nowadays may choose not to bill themselves as such. But neoliberal thought as a dominant force in policymaking is clearly here to stay, reinforced by an influential worldwide network of academic as well as policy institutions and think tanks powerful enough to eclipse whatever viable alternatives may emerge. Meanwhile, the ethos of unfettered market and resulting aggressive competition has permeated all aspects of life, from business to education and entertainment (Shefner & Harvey, 2007). In fact, the upshot of the global financial crisis appears to have strengthened, not weakened, neoliberalism and the experts that propagate it. The neoliberal precept has been accepted that the way to rectify market failure such as that witnessed in 2008 is to introduce even more markets and to continue reconstituting state powers that emphasize market processes, privatization and finance.

## 2.2: The evangelical movement

In a case of popular etymology, common but erroneous interpretations of the term "evangelical" point to the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "good news" or "gospel." Experts in linguistics and etymology suggest that the word is derived from Old French *évangélique* and earlier from Late Latin *evangelicus,* meaning "of or pertaining to the gospel" ("Origin and meaning of evangelical," n.d.). In the 16$^{th}$ century, it also served as a label for Protestants, particularly in the German-speaking milieu. From the mid-18$^{th}$ century onward, the word took on the connotation of Protestant trends promoting conversion and emphasizing salvation by faith.

Today's evangelicals are a diverse group which includes Reformed, Holiness, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic and many other traditions. The *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (12th Edition) lists more than 200 Christian

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denominations in 17 broad categories, from "Baptist Churches" to "Community and New Paradigm Churches." However, these delineations are not always clear-cut: For instance, a traditionally Baptist or Anglican church may "go charismatic" as its members opt to incorporate specific evangelical beliefs and rituals into its service and activities. By contrast, new groups may doctrinally retain residual traces of Calvinism, Baptism etc. Some surveys separate Charismatic, Pentecostal and evangelical Christians into stand-alone categories while acceding that these silos are "not mutually exclusive" – a fact readily acknowledged by think tanks and research houses such as the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE). As a result, it has been increasingly difficult to provide a precise definition of evangelicalism.[8]

Throughout their history, the actions of evangelical Christian churches and groups have embodied a response to overwhelming social change, particularly the perceived social, intellectual and spiritual crises afflicting mainstream society (Marsden, 1980). The evangelicals had recognized early on the impossibility of reconciling Christianity with modern science. Instead, they emphasized Bible study and supremacy of scripture as revealed knowledge that could only be engaged by itself and on its own terms (Packer, 1958). In informal and media discourses, this emphasis has in some instances earned them the signifier of "fundamentalist Christian".

Historically, many evangelical groups have differentiated themselves from other groups through disagreements over matters of conscience, such as which day of the week to worship, dietary restrictions, or which translation of the Bible to use, but also over lesser points of doctrine, such as church polity or the manner in which mission activities are organized and funded. In addition, and as with any groups, power struggles and political manoeuvring have also come into play. Underpinning many of these splits has

[8] For instance, on its website, the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF) refers to "evangelicals, charismatics and Pentecostals".



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been the question putting biblical authority into practice: Virtually all evangelical groups profess an inerrancy of scripture, but in practice this belies a multitude of approaches to a better understanding and explicating of faith (Bartkowski, 1996).

As such, many churches reject a “wooden” approach to gospel, instead upholding "verbal inspiration" as part of a truly evangelical doctrine – one whose meanings must not be determined by traditional scholastic, deductive theology (Olson, 1995). Some are keen to explore the gospel’s social dimension. All see the Bible as in some sense authoritative, but each views it in a different light – as an agent, image, symbol, myth or other clusters of meaning. As with most revealed knowledge, the believers perceive a need to go beyond the literal sense of the text and discern its larger significance. But how should they go about that? Should religious texts be the departure points, or are practical examples of “life in this world” more suitable? Doesn’t the scripture’s authority ultimately receive validation from the worshipping community? Should progressive pastors be opposed to expository preaching, i.e. preaching messages found in specific books of the Bible, verse by verse? The many permutations of decoding meaning from texts and encoding it in a fabric that is familiar to the modern-day body of believers have sustained a lively and continued dialogue among evangelicals.

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### 2.3.1: Evangelical movement and the rise of the evangelical-capitalist nexus

Before examining the evangelical history of the past forty years within the neoliberal framework, it is helpful to acknowledge that religious influences informed neoliberalism from its very beginning. As new as the discipline studying “religion in business” is, neoliberal thinking was from the very outset in a deep dialogue with itself regarding the resonance of religious, specifically Christian, values with its objectives and overall project. Particularly for ordoliberals, the pursuit of a well-functioning economic

model never stopped short of a concern with the moral and ethical repercussions of such a model on individuals, communities and society.

One of the major consequences of the Great Depression of the 1930s was to undermine confidence in efficient markets and in the capitalist system. To this day, social and economic historians have struggled to pinpoint with precision the causes of the United States' and other advanced economies' protracted failure to recover from the 1929-1933 downturn. They have acknowledged that only the subsequent war preparations finally served to offset the main effects of the crisis (McElvaine, 1993). In some countries, indicators such as employment and industrial output did not reach their 1929 levels until well into the 1950s. It is therefore unsurprising that in the debate that ensued regarding the nature of modern society, many came to regard proponents of capitalism as apologists for a morally and intellectually bankrupt system (Rothbard, 1972).

Seeking to overcome the legacy of the Depression years and the noxious effects of the Nazi and Communist ideologies, ordoliberal thinkers separated themselves from classical liberals by emphasizing the idea of social justice. "Social security and social justice", wrote Eucken, "are the greatest concerns of our time" ("Of rules and order," 2015). This ordoliberal disposition served to position the entire domain of economics in Germany as a branch of moral philosophy, a view that remains entrenched if not always visible at present  Their overriding concern was that if the state does not take active measures to foster competition, firms with monopoly (or oligopoly) power will emerge. This, they feared, will not only subvert the advantages offered by the market economy, but also possibly undermine good government, since strong economic power can be transformed into political power (Vatiero, 2010).

On top of the anxieties surrounding monopolistic power, ordoliberals were wary of what they saw as the inherently unsocial nature of a competitive market society



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dominated by a self-serving *Homo Economicus.* They perceived a palpable need to transcend this partly innate, partly market-defined human self-interest. What, then, was to be the force that ordoliberal thinkers including Rüstow, Röpke and Müller-Armack looked up to as the "metaphysical glue" (Bonefeld, 2012) that could hold a nation together? According to the ordoliberals, there was more than one answer – and the answers had evolved over time. In the 1920s, Müller-Armack espoused the archetypal myth of the nation/fatherland as the over-arching framework that could bridge the widening divides of class. Later on, in the 1930s, he proposed the national myth of a unity between movement and leader, advocating "total mobilization" (Müller-Armack, 1933). Finally during the post-war period he came to advocate a "re-christianization of our culture as the only realistic means to prevent its imminent collapse" (Müller-Armack, 1981). Economic freedom had to go hand in hand with a responsible use of that freedom, and religion was a likely source of moral authority that could enforce this responsibility.

Re-Christianisation was thus perceived to be the only way to avoid another slide into totalitarianism (Hien, 2013). Germans believed that the horrors of the Third Reich had their real origins "in the increasing alienation from God" (Bösch, 2002). The newly formed Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a conservative party, was an outgrowth of this resurgence of Christianity. The Berlin Programme, one of its manifestos, stated that, "From the chaos of guilt and disgrace, in which the deification of a criminal adventure has thrown us, an order with freedom can only evolve if we remember the cultural, ethical and moral force of Christianity" (*"Gründungsaufruf der CDU Berlin,"* 1945).

This idea came even more strongly into the forefront of the neoliberal thinking of the time when it was contrasted with a radically different national myth – the myth of an economic miracle as the founding myth of the new Republic. The ordoliberals were quick to observe that the economic miracle created materialist workers; it did not create satisfied workers. Satisfaction and vitality had to be found elsewhere, primarily in natural

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communities such as family (Röpke, 1998; Röpke & Smith, 1938). These deep cultural and religious underpinnings that are visible in the ordoliberal body of ideas have led some scholars to speak about "quasi-religious Ordoliberalism" (Ptak, 2009).

Additionally, the rise of ordoliberalism owes much to the debate that was ongoing during the mid-20th century in German society between Protestant and Catholic beliefs surrounding the nature of the state and the economy (Hien, 2013). Most members of the Freiburg school were "profoundly influenced Protestant Christians with strong biographical ties to the church" (Manow, 2001) whose writings and overall discourse portrayed a sense of "implicit religiosity" (Mudge, 2008). By contrast, Catholic thinkers favoured the corporatist ideas as displayed in the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* ("Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour," 1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* ("In the 40th Year," 1931), calling for a state and economic model anchored in strong auxiliary organizations and labour unions.

This fact has not been sufficiently acknowledged by academics, who have typically thought of the working class and its socialist structures as the sole proponents of the welfare state, to the exclusion of Catholicism. In reality, Catholic social doctrine called for a correction of the most abhorrent societal effects of the capitalist system. It dictated that Christians had the obligation to help the poor and that social policy could help protect a stable and fair social order. As a result, Germany's social market economy may be legitimately viewed as a compromise between Protestant and Catholic social doctrine, with Reformed Protestantism in particular substantially delaying and restricting modern social policy (van Kersbergen & Manow, 2009).

By the early 1970s, if there were any signs of US evangelicalism taking a political stand, these were mostly rooted in the 19th-century legacy of throwing its support behind the peace movement and women's rights including the right to vote (Balmer, 2014). Even

then they often faced accusations of political meddling and selling out the Gospel: After all, for much of the 20th century, the focus of American evangelicals' lives and activities was inward – on family, church, and community life, and of course on evangelism and missions. Concerns with secular culture and business had been traditionally kept at arm's length (Roels, 1997).

The traditional evangelicals had long warned against political involvement. This collective sensibility had certainly been shaken – although arguably less so than that of Catholics – by US Supreme Court's decisions in watershed cases such as Engel v. Vitale (1962) and Abington School District v. Schempp (1963) which declared school-sponsored prayer and Bible readings unconstitutional, as well as the Court's pro-life vs. pro-choice decision in Roe v. Wade (1973). A great number of religious communities across the United States read these moves as signs of deepening relativism and moral emptiness permeating the nation. But electorally, evangelical Christians had been up until the 1970s seen as relatively apolitical citizens (Liebman & Wuthnow, 1983) with predominantly Democratic partisan orientations (Hunter, 1983). Many had been outspoken advocates of avoiding politics altogether precisely for religious reasons, pointing out that a pious Christian's kingdom was "not of this world".

This can be seen in the social and moral rather than overtly political tone of the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern, drafted by 55 evangelical leaders over the Thanksgiving holiday in 1973. The declaration was primarily a call for reducing racial and economic inequality they saw the nation as plagued with. The document laments the state of affairs in what it describes as an "unjust American society". It goes on to say: "We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services" ("Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern," 1973).

It was this sentiment that propelled a self-confessed evangelical Christian, Jimmy Carter, to the White House in the 1976 presidential election. Carter had been previously the Governor of Georgia but was largely unknown in national politics, a fact immortalized by the dictum “Jimmy Who?”. Carter generated considerable media attention by disclosing details of his spiritual beliefs and using religious-political rhetoric (K. V. Erickson, 1980). He went on to become the nation’s first leader in the modern era to acknowledge openly his born-again and Baptist faith. Scholars have argued over the extent to which this faith influenced Carter’s leadership style, his view of the presidential office and his stance on foreign policy issues. Nonetheless, they agree that Carter’s faith-inspired soul-searching as a president marked a departure from the pragmatic style that had dominated the majority of the 20th-century presidencies.

As improbable as Carter’s candidacy at first appeared to many, his timing was more than propitious: In the immediate aftermath of the Watergate scandal and the end of the Vietnam War, the electorate was as weary as perhaps never before of politics as an amoral “art of the possible” and the “next best”.[9] The earlier presidents had rather too obviously seen the political game as an art of influencing and compromise that did not lend itself to moral absolutes (Berggren & Rae, 2006). Enter Carter, making declarations as disarming as “I will never knowingly lie to the American people”, and “the sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world”. On top of that, Carter did not shy away from playing the rebel: For example, in his famous Law Day speech at the University of Georgia, he quoted form Bob Dylan’s song “Ain’t Gonna Work on Maggie’s Farm No More”. Amidst this widespread excitement, Newsweek declared 1976 “The Year of the Evangelical”. This was doubly significant because 1976 was also the year of the

[9] The Watergate scandal was a major political scandal that occurred in the United States during the early 1970s, following a break-in by five men at the Democratic National Committee (DNC) headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C. on June 17, 1972, and President Richard Nixon's administration's subsequent attempt to cover up its involvement.

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Bicentennial, a time when the country was taking stock of two centuries of independence and reminding itself of its birth as a "Christian nation".

For all the good intentions, Carter's time in office failed to bring about the fulfilment of a socially progressive agenda. Quite the opposite: It saw the coalescing into a movement of what is known to this day as the "Religious Right".[10] As evangelical Christians became agitated by America's growing secularization, they turned their attention outward and became vocal and involved in broader cultural engagements with politics and society. In particular, the issue of tax exemptions claimed by church-affiliated schools that had been set up following the Supreme Court-mandated desegregation, served to galvanize a large number of evangelical preachers. As the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began rescinding these tax exemptions, conservative activists such as the evangelist Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich started to mobilize mainstream evangelical voters politically. With once-moderate leaders replaced by conservatives, the apolitical voter or non-voter gave rise to the "values voter". For their part, the rise of political-action groups, established to mobilize religious conservatives, such as Falwell's Moral Majority (1979) and Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women for America (also 1979)[11] – which paved the way for the setting up later in the 1980s of bodies such as Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition – made it abundantly clear that religion had not nearly conceded its place in the political process. Far from it, it managed to bring the vocabulary and emotion of religious conservatism into the rough-and-tumble world of day-to-day US politics.[12]

Not only were evangelical groups becoming vocal and asserting themselves politically, their growing conservatism came as a throwback that took many social

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[10] We must be careful not to view the terms "evangelicals/evangelicalism" and "Religious Right" as interchangeable: Conservative sections within the US Catholic Church have also been highly influential in shaping America's right-wing religious discourse.

[11] Wife of Tim LaHaye (1926 – 2016); Tim, a fellow evangelical minister, was best known as co-author of the apocalyptic fiction series of 16 novels known as Left Behind.

[12] In 1995, the Christian Coalition had 1.6 million members and 1,600 local chapters.

observers by surprise. After all, the overriding concern of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) was democratization; religion retaining its relevance to modern man in the face of social and technological change; and moving away from literalism.[13] All of this was in direct contrast to the sudden evangelical yearning for a mythical "simpler time" rooted in strict class divisions; in flag-waving 1950s nostalgia; and in the "Christian foundations" to which the nation had to return if it was to be, to borrow from 2017 political parlance, "great again". Just a few generations earlier, the evangelicals pointed out, the Christian worldview, and biblical knowledge in particular, were widely disseminated throughout the culture and were a decisive influence in giving shape to the culture (Schaeffer, 1984). But now, according to theorists of the Christian Right such as Francis Schaeffer, the choice facing America was a simple dichotomy of either a return to Christianity or a takeover by secular humanism and eventually authoritarianism. Schaeffer's "A Christian Manifesto", a 1981 book that Falwell described as "probably the most important piece of literature in America today", stressed the inevitability of an authoritarian takeover if Bible-believing Christians remained indifferent to politics and failed to take a stand (Marsden, 2014).

### 2.3.2: Reagan and the Big Business – Religious Right alliance

As the right-wing momentum grew, Carter was in 1980 denied a second term as President, handing over to Republican candidate and Governor of California Ronald Reagan. Reagan's persona and presidency embody many of the contradictions and paradoxes one strives to reconcile in examining the rise of the evangelical-neoliberal nexus: 13 years older than his predecessor, he was the oldest elected US president up to that time. Whereas Carter had been a champion of military restraint and campaigned to bring attention to the plight of the poor, women and minorities, Reagan advocated military

[13] Two popes – Paul VI and John Paul II –went on record acknowledging the charismatic movement as an "important component of the entire renewal of the Church".



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swagger, favoured tax cuts for the affluent, ridiculed welfare recipients and suggested that homelessness was a choice. On the civil rights front, Reagan had opposed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, as well as the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution (Balmer, 2014).

At first glance, it might seem ironic for the new Religious Right to be credited with playing a major role in the "Reagan Revolution" of 1980: A one-time Hollywood actor who had been divorced and remarried, Reagan never pretended to be much of a churchgoer. The majority of his biographers will agree that Reagan the man had little interest in religion – just as evangelical leaders at the time had limited use for liberal economic theory and had yet to examine properly the structures and purposes of business (Roels, 1997). Even as President, he did not attend church regularly or hold regular White House prayer meetings. Rather, each of the two strange bedfellows went about pursuing their own agenda and saw the new, unlikely coalition of interests as a vehicle for furthering that agenda.

In hindsight, Reagan's ascendance to the country's highest political office was the defining moment of forging a lasting partnership between right-wing forces in religion and in the economy. It was during the Reagan revolution that the presence and growth of a link between neoliberal influences and the evangelical movement became visible even to the uninitiated. The Christian right, suddenly not only widely agitated but politicized for the first time in living memory, was there to be courted – if not as a matter of conviction then certainly as a matter of expedience. The Republican Party, for its part, was looking to reach out to new groups of voters. At the same time, the evangelicals were keen to throw their support behind a party that would lend support to champions of conservative values and project a tough stance in the ongoing Cold War against USSR and its Communist allies (Herzog, 2011).

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And so it was that in the 1980 presidential election campaign, Reagan wooed religious backers including Jerry Falwell and James Robertson with pronouncements such as, "Religious America is awakening, perhaps just in time for the country's sake." He regularly addressed the National Religious Broadcasters Association and the National Association of Evangelicals. In 1981, he proclaimed a National Day of Prayer. He also appeared with evangelist Jim Bakker on the PTL ("Praise The Lord") television network and shared his belief that "We may be the generation that sees Armageddon."[14] It is also worth remembering that the famous speech of March 1983 in which he referred to the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire was addressed to the National Association of Evangelicals (Fitzgerald, 2001). Describing the work of conservatism as an evangelical mission, Reagan's approach has since been characterized as "turning politics into myth and religion" (P. D. Erickson, 1985). Nevertheless, it matched successfully with the American Zeitgeist at a time when a growing majority was clamouring for regulation of society and social norms through "moralized state power" (Brown, 2006).

It may also be useful to consider that Reagan's sweeping reforms have been dubbed a "revolution", and all revolutions are perpetually in search of the "enemy within". Given that by the 1980s, card-carrying Communists had become harder to find on American soil – in stark contrast to the 1950s McCarthy era, fixated upon the Red Menace – the secular and humanist forces in American culture and society suddenly appeared as the perfect candidates to fill this void and mobilize the mainstream political and electoral sensitivity. Tim LaHaye's 1980 book *The Battle for the Mind* was dedicated to "explaining humanism in simple terms, so that the man on the street can both understand its danger and be motivated to oppose it at the place [where] it can be defeated – the ballot box."

[14] In monotheistic/Abrahamic religions, Armageddon is a location, a military battle and a metaphor linked to the end of the world as prophesied in scripture.

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Reagan may not have lived the type of values that would appeal to evangelicals, but he and the carefully crafted publicity machine behind him knew how to speak to and harness these values to the fullest. Chief among them was the notion of "small government". Having been promised by the country's founders to live in a "land of the free", Americans had traditionally been sceptical of taxes levied by a geographically distant seat of administration, and of the interference and political machinations they had come to associate with "Washington". Since WWII, the Federal Government's remit had expanded into areas and responsibilities which, in the people's eyes and memories, had once been the domain of the state and local government, the individual, the family, and the church. Now, against the background of increasing political influence, many evangelicals had grown even more reluctant to see a secular central government as a source of effective solutions to social problems (Roels, 1997). As such, they were a captive audience for Reagan's speeches and other political pronouncements in which he tirelessly attacked "big government".

Reagan's credentials in fighting big government were impressive: His political career had been launched with a single speech delivered 16 years before his election to the presidency. On October 27, 1964, Reagan appeared on national television to cast liberals as fallen angels who had crept into the American paradise of limited government. He attacked housing programmes, Social Security, foreign aid, governmental bureaucracy, and the banning of school prayer. He also likened the Soviets to Satan and concluded his speech by transforming the 1964 election into a battle between good and evil, other crucial moments of which included the exodus of the Jews from Egypt under Moses, Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and the 1776 battle of Concord Bridge (P. D. Erickson, 1985). Armed with a long and illustrious résumé as a spokesman for General Electric and a Hollywood film actor, Reagan the "Great Communicator" became the

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consummate public face of conservatism, peddling conservative values such as anti-intellectualism, common sense, hard work, and faith in God.

In addition, Reagan also had the country's fast-evolving demographic structure on his side: As a result of the sweeping modernization, urbanization and migration processes of the 1960s, many American workers who were at the receiving end of Reagan's campaign speeches had become rootless, often migrating, and attracted to the sense of stability that came with old-time values (Boyarsky, 1968). They felt empowered by Reagan's conviction (echoed by Thatcher in the UK) that individual, domestic virtues – hard work, personal responsibility, prudence, thrift, plain dealing and fiscal discipline – could in fact be used as guiding principles for government (Evans, 2013). By the late 1970s, many Americans actively craved the rhetoric of redemption and renewal. This was evidenced by a surge in the membership of conservative evangelical churches. In addition, the 1970s saw the religious landscape of the United States swept by the Charismatic Movement, with hundreds of churches mushrooming all over the country and many mainline churches adopting charismatic rituals and values.[15] Reagan responded to this demand by preaching, like a pastor would, on national revival and conjuring up a lost golden age of economic strength and military success.

In this context, it was inevitable that Reagan the President would bring his larger-than-life, made-for-media personality to bear on the country's rising movement of the Religious Right, consistently emphasizing religion in his public rhetoric and ceremonial appearances. Throughout his political career, he would place the United States squarely in a vision of divinely ordained progress. His speeches, laden with metaphoric parables

[15] The Charismatic Movement and Pentecostalism are identifiable by their belief in the latter-day outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Many of the members experience what is deemed the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," which is supposedly evidenced by the act of speaking in tongues. These groups tend to bring a great deal of emotionalism and activity to their services, generally allow for the full equality of men and women in the activities of the worship service and focus on the emotional aspects of Christianity.

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and biblical tropes, came to be seen by social critics as expressions of an "ideological religion of conservatism" (P. D. Erickson, 1985). He did not shy away from presenting itself as a mythical hero on par with Moses and Messiah. His use of oratory, drawing on a quintessentially American formula of the homespun, the folksy, the pure, the uncomplicated, the commonsensical rather than intellectual (which is the European domain, and hence not to be trusted), and the emotional rather than rational, proved hugely successful. It tapped skilfully and masterfully into the deepest recesses of America's traditional collective imagination, which had been undermined by the Sixties' counterculture and the scars of the Vietnam War. The dramatic imagery of his stories, underscored by his clever blurring of his projected roles as storyteller-cum-protagonist served to attribute heroic qualities not only to himself but to his audiences as well. Leaving no room whatsoever for ambiguity, Reagan's nearly-embarrassingly "sincere" speeches reduced every issue to its most basic emotional level and presented it as part of an eternal struggle between good and evil (P. D. Erickson, 1985).

Soon enough, the confluence of religious and market-oriented forces advanced to a new stage, one where evangelical groups and churches started to venture into business and producing tangible outcomes.[16] Some of these groups actively sought to weave their religious faith into the fabric of their business. Building on the ethos of older initiatives, e.g. those targeting travelling businessmen in the early twentieth century (the "Bible in the hotel room" phenomenon), they felt comfortable enough to proselytize among their employees, customers and suppliers. A case in point: NASDAQ-listed Covenant Transport, Inc. (www.covenanttransport.com), a company founded in 1986 "on Christian principles". Headquartered in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the truckload carrier was, according to the Parker family who founded it, started "with a promise to God and 25

[16] This development was not wholly without historical precedent: For instance, Barclays Bank has its roots in the Quaker movement of the late 17th century.

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trucks", only to grow into a $750 million enterprise with six subsidiaries and a network of more than 2,700 trucks and 6,700 trailers (Green, 2015). Other businesses have espoused a more subtle "management by values" strategy, promoting concepts such as steward leadership and servanthood. Among these, companies like ServiceMaster and Herman Miller are multi-billion-dollar businesses whose people-centric corporate culture and commitment to sustainability goals have seen them ranked on the lists of America's best employers and most-admired organizations.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw the establishment of evangelical networks targeting business leaders, including so-called "marketplace ministries". Some of these groups received financial backing from nationally recognized business leaders. For example, Mormon hotel executive Willard Marriott was a supporter of televangelist Billy Graham (1918-2018) and his crusades. Other influential families within America's "aristocracy", such as the Pew family and the Hearst estate, had also extended their support to the evangelical movement. During Reagan's first term, a study by left-wing writers Deborah Huntington and Ruth Kaplan went as far as to point to a high degree of interconnections between the evangelical organizations and the ultra-conservative, business-funded lobbying and educational organizations (Huntington & Kaplan, 1981).

At the same time, a number of corporations which historically had been expanding on the back of employing as well as marketing to local, predominantly born-again Christian communities, managed to parallel the advances Reagan's Republicans had made in the political arena across the United States and internationally.[17] In many cases they mirrored the Republicans' macroeconomic policy by rolling back the wage standards

[17] See the Literature Review chapter for a discussion of Wal-Mart's physical expansion during the Reagan years.

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and welfare systems while promoting an evangelical sense of social morality that involved de-unionization of labour.

### 2.3.3: Post Reagan

The political successes achieved during Reagan's presidency by the conservative movement,[18] whose traditionalist faction has been most obviously aligned with Christian fundamentalism and the "New Right" (Diamond, 1995), have stimulated further political-economic expansion of the neoliberal agenda under the tenure of Presidents Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. In most measures, the formula was an unqualified success: By the time the United States ushered in the Bush era, white evangelical Protestants came to be regarded as the single most potent voting bloc in America. The movement's advancement has seen entire large segments of the electorate, e.g. white Southerners, defect to the Republican Party.

George W. Bush's open discussion of his personal faith along with his positions on social issues and his judicial appointments did appeal to and energize conservative evangelicals, particularly at a time when both the presidency and Congress were under Republican control. Whereas in post-war America it had been a no-no to use tax money to fund religion, one of Bush Jr.'s first acts as president, in January 2001, was to issue an executive order setting up the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI), therefore honouring a key campaign promise on domestic policy. OFBCI's remit was to strengthen faith-based and community organizations and expand their capacity to provide federally funded social services. In doing so, the initiative drew on similar "faith-based" programmes and funding legislation Bush Jr. had previously overseen as the governor of Texas.[19] After September 11, 2001, some of the Christian

[18] Conservatism itself is often presented as a medley of intellectual strands which include anticommunism, traditionalism and libertarianism.

[19] For the sake of accuracy, it should be noted that already during the Clinton administration, US Congress applied the Charitable Choice provision to three federal programmes (welfare services, Community Services Block Grants and substance abuse treatment and prevention funding under SAMHSA – Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration). In addition, President Clinton's Department of Housing and Urban Development opened a Center for Community and Interfaith Partnerships.



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policy agenda admittedly had to cede ground to national security and foreign policy considerations. Be that as it may, millions of evangelical voters who had not voted in the 2000 election turned out for George Bush in 2004, precipitating yet another spate of "faith-based initiatives" during his second administration. Concurrently, a new generation of evangelical leaders and lobbyists was reported to have emerged, one with backgrounds in politics rather than religious leadership. Their approach was largely pragmatic, i.e. focused on working alongside legislative staff (Black, 2016).

In the 2008 election, joining John McCain as the Republican Party's Vice-Presidential nominee was Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. Palin had been baptized as a teenager in an Assemblies of God church. During the time she served in public office, she worshipped at several churches including The Church on the Rock (an independent congregation) and the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. The McCain-Palin ticket was widely seen to have energized the US evangelical segment and its political aspirations at a national level. Palin was vocal about her creationist beliefs and garnered even more attention through her steadfast rejection of gun control, abortion under any circumstances (her own teenage daughter brought a pregnancy to term), and domestic benefits for same-sex couples.

Barack Obama's religious affiliation when entering the 2008 campaign was with Chicago's Trinity Union Church of Christ, a member of the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ (UCC). Although predominantly white, UCC had a history of supporting the US civil rights movement. Once installed in office, however, media scrutiny of controversial statements by his one-time mentor at Trinity, Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., led Obama to distance himself from this relationship. In its place, the president cultivated ties with several evangelical pastors (white and black, as the media saw necessary to point out). Although some were seen as conservatives from a theological standpoint, none were aligned with the religious right. Observers described them as "centrists", i.e. not liberal



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on issues like homosexuality but overall, dedicated to community issues and social justice (Goodstein, 2009).

Where the Bushes had thrived on rapport with "values voters" from the Bible Belt,[20] Obama sought to project his particular set of religious values to a broader audience. This was consonant with the Democratic Party's platform of the time and its promise of transcending the labels of the left and right. The Bush-era faith-based office was renamed as the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, although its centres within federal agencies were maintained, to the surprise of many ("President Obama's Faith-Based Initiatives," n.d.). In addition, Obama set up the Advisory Council, a group of 25 religious and humanitarian leaders. Drawing on the assistance of outside experts, the Council was tasked with guiding the government on how to collaborate with faith-based and community-based groups. This was yet another step representing the administration's approach to religion in the 21st century as part of a "greater universe" encompassing civic, humanitarian and environmental considerations.

Nevertheless, Obama's mixed-race parentage, unresolved questions regarding his original birth certificate and, by extension, citizenship, childhood exposure to Islam and, crucially, support for pro-choice abortion policies and same-sex unions largely disqualified him as a credible leader in the eyes of the evangelical community. Seeing the White House illuminated in rainbow colours to mark the Supreme Court's 2015 ruling recognizing same-sex marriage – an issue the Obama administration regarded as one aspect of civil rights – incensed the religious conservatives to a point where they complained about being "kicked around", and about Obama ushering a "post-Christian" era in American politics (Fea, 2018).

[20] Also referred to as "the Beltway" and roughly synonymous with "the South", this term is used to emphasize the social and religious conservatism traditionally associated with this large geographic area of the United States.



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In the most recent, 2016 US presidential election, the first major candidate to announce his bid for the White House was Texas senator Ted Cruz. The venue he chose was the world's largest Christian university – Liberty in Lynchburg, Virginia. Cruz was the son of a pastor; grew up in the Southern Baptist Church; and meshed his political speeches with slogans taken from the Prosperity Gospel. The Religious Right supported Cruz in the Republican presidential primary. Following Donald Trump's primary victory, most of its leaders rallied to his side. The Trump campaign was quick to respond: In addition to appointing conservative pastor Frank Amedia of Touch Heaven Ministries in Ohio as Trump's new "liaison for Christian policy", it formed the Evangelical Executive Advisory Board, which included right-wing figures ranging from former Republican Congresswoman Michele Bachmann to James Dobson, founder of the Christian conservative policy institute Focus on the Family. In June 2016, Trump met with several hundred evangelical leaders in New York City and issued promises to protect religious freedom. Most importantly, according to observers, he discussed his ideas for nominations of Supreme Court justices.

At the time of the election, there were an estimated 90 million evangelicals in the United States. 81% of evangelical voters voted for Trump in the presidential election ("2016 Election exit polls. How the vote has shifted," 2016). Televangelist and Trump's personal minister as well as "spiritual advisor" Paula White of New Destiny Christian Center in Apopka, Florida became the first woman to pray at a presidential inauguration on January 20, 2017, delivering the invocation. White was appointed chair of the Evangelical Advisory Board in the new presidential administration.

Several aspects of Trump's election victory and the evangelical factor at play are strongly reminiscent of Reagan's rise to the highest office in 1980: Despite Donald Trump's tenuous-at-best grasp of Christianity coupled with what his opponents charitably describe as "New York values", the Evangelical/Charismatic voting bloc threw its support

behind him.[21] Rather than carry candidates with actual religious credentials to their name, evangelical voters opted for a politician who they felt had the muscle to push through their right-wing ideological agenda in the echelons of power.

### 2.3.4: Prosperity Gospel

One particular expression of the evangelical-capitalist ethos that took off in a big way towards the late 1990s is what is known as the Prosperity Gospel. Also referred to as Prosperity Theology or Prosperity Teaching, it is a mix of individualist, industrious and materialistic messages couched in spiritual vocabulary. The Prosperity Gospel doctrine portrays Christians as divinely predestined for material and financial well-being and encourages donations to ministries as a way of amplifying one's financial blessing. The Prosperity Gospel represents a radical re-evaluation by segments within the evangelical movement of man's outlook on material possessions and financial prosperity.

For many centuries, established mainline denominations emphasized that their kingdom was "not of this world". Worldly preoccupations, let alone a pursuit of wealth, were universally seen as of secondary importance in the great scheme of society and religion. Bible verses like Matthew 19:23-24 ("I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."), and Matthew 6:24 ("No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."), bring out this stance in unequivocal terms. Quite separate from sympathy for the poor and from economic resentment, hostility toward wealth was primarily a way of expressing trust in God (Schmidt, 1987).

[21] Many commentators, such as Myers (2017), have described Trump as "a biblically illiterate, thrice-married philanderer who models the antithesis of humility and Jesus-like compassion".

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The Prosperity Gospel mindset, where abundance in money is now seen as a sign of divine will and blessing, therefore clearly repudiates poverty and the traditional churches' long-standing rejection of riches amassed in "this world". Whereas for centuries, the rewards of a pious life were to be reaped in the afterlife, more and more of today's believers fully expect to become rich in the present lifetime. Some of the largest religious congregations in the US have been actively encouraging their adherents to engage in risk-taking and to show intense material optimism. By 2006, three of the four largest congregations in the United States were teaching prosperity theology. As a result, these teachings and tenets have been popularized and mainstreamed to a degree where they have spread far outside the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. These include promises of spiritual as well as worldly prosperity; wealth, blessings and the fulfilment of personal potential by both rational and magical means, not unlike the New Age movement.[22]

The poster boys of Prosperity Gospel such as Joel Osteen, Bruce Wilkinson, Kenneth Copeland and many others today preside over veritable media empires, with their books, podcasts and other merchandise which invite the readers and listeners to seek prosperity shifting millions of copies. Nevertheless, the marriage of religious and spiritual values with those of material prosperity and business has in fact at regular time intervals produced a backlash. It has also invited scrutiny from government and media, with several high-profile cases of preachers' lavish lifestyles and spending habits etching themselves indelibly into American popular culture and everyday language. References to Jim & Tammy Faye Bakker, for instance, became the staple of sitcoms and late-night comedy shows.[23]

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[22] Not a religion *per se,* New Age is an eclectic grouping of spiritual teachings and practices which spread through the western world in the 1970s and 1980s. Incorporating many influences from polytheistic traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, New Age emphasizes personal transformation and healing.

[23] Husband-and-wife televangelist duo whose PTL (Praise The Lord) Club, with a TV run from 1974 to 1989, was brought down by revelations of accounting fraud

In 2007, US Republican Senator for Iowa Chuck Grassley, a ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, opened a probe into the finances of six Prosperity Gospel televangelists: Kenneth Copeland Ministries, Creflo Dollar Ministries, Benny Hinn Ministries, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries, Joyce Meyer Ministries, and Paula White Ministries. The probe investigated reports of lavish lifestyles enjoyed by these televangelists, featuring fleets of Rolls Royce cars, palatial mansions, private jets, cosmetic surgery and other expensive items purportedly paid for by television viewers who donated in response to the ministries' encouragement of offerings. Pastor Joyce Meyer was using a $10 million private jet; meanwhile, Pastor Creflo Dollar had been fundraising for a $65 million aircraft. "I'm following up on complaints from the public and news coverage regarding certain practices at six ministries," Grassley said in a statement. He went on to say:

> The allegations involve governing boards that aren't independent and allow generous salaries and housing allowances and amenities such as private jets and Rolls-Royces. I don't want to conclude that there's a problem, but I have an obligation to donors and the taxpayers to find out more. People who donated should have their money spent as intended and in adherence with the tax code. ("Grassley Seeks Information from Six Media-based Ministries," 2007)

The reports provided great investigative fodder to mainstream as well as tabloid newspapers. For example, they uncovered that the charity known as Bishop Eddie Long Ministries Inc. provided its [now deceased] founder with $3 million in salary; a $1.4 million, six-bedroom, nine-bath home sitting on 20 acres of land; and the use of a $350,000 Bentley automobile. In response, Bishop Long sought to diffuse the criticism by saying:

> We're not just a church, we're an international corporation. We're not just a bumbling bunch of preachers who can't talk and all we're doing is baptizing babies. I deal with the White House. I deal with Tony Blair. I deal with presidents around this world. I pastor a multimillion-dollar congregation. You've got to put me on a different scale than the little black preacher sitting over there that's supposed to be just getting by because the people are suffering. (Blake & Narayan, 2017)



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Partly in the light of these highly-publicized controversies, the 2008 and 2009 consultations of the Africa chapter of the Lausanne Theology Working Group concluded that Prosperity Teaching "vastly enriches those who preach it, but leaves multitudes no better off than before"; that "while emphasizing various alleged spiritual or demonic causes of poverty, it gives little or no attention to those causes that are economic and political, including injustice, exploitation, unfair international trade practices, etc."; "it thus tends to victimize the poor by making them feel that their poverty is their own fault (which the Bible does not do), while failing to address and denounce those whose greed inflicts poverty on others (which the Bible does repeatedly)"; and that "some prosperity teaching is not really about helping the poor at all and provides no sustainable answer to the real causes of poverty". Lastly, it pointed out that "popularity is no proof of truth, and people can be deceived in great numbers" ("A Statement On Prosperity Teaching," 2009).

Despite the tensions that are in evidence, the evangelical presence in politics coupled with the emergence of an evangelical-capitalist nexus presents a plausible justification for the continued preponderance of neoliberal values and ideas in the aftermath of the latest global financial crisis. Furthermore, the political response to the crisis has been said to transform neoliberalism in an authoritarian direction (Bonefeld, 2012). This „authoritarian neo-liberalism" is seen as the foundation of a new post-neoliberal capitalist regime (Brand & Wissen, 2013).

**2.4: Evangelicals in Asia**

The First International Congress on World Evangelization was held in 1974. Headed by Billy Graham, the event brought together nearly 3,000 evangelical Christian leaders from 150 countries. The covenant it adopted called for spreading Christian Gospel to "all mankind" and for making disciples in "every nation". In 1989, the Second International Congress on World Evangelization was held in Manila, Philippines. As

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early as the 1970s, US missions had begun to propagate successfully evangelical messages and practices to local gatherings and congregations. One flavour of the evangelical teachings that proved to be particularly fruitful in these missionary efforts was the then-new (originating in the 1960s) Charismatic Movement, an international trend which emphasizes spiritual gifts (*charismata*) believed to be conferred by the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues[24] and healing the sick, as well as other supernatural occurrences like prophesy and miracles. These were phenomena which most Christians throughout history had believed to have been confined to Biblical times.

The Charismatic Movement's teachings – in equal shares influential and controversial – were soon capturing the individual as well as collective imagination and aspirations of local people, particularly the emerging urban middle classes across the region. Initially, the new groups attracted mainly urban professionals, traditionally fraternizing on university campuses and in medical institutions.

In the 1970s, the Charismatic Movement proved to be a vigorous influence on the non-denominational landscape in Singapore and Malaysia. Given that, as we have noted, evangelizing in the general sense of spreading the Gospel is a duty of all Christian churches (Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox...),[25] the evangelicals were at first welcomed as inter-denominational harbingers of a religious "revival". They were noted for their active promotion of prayer-and-fasting campaigns and other initiatives that brought a lot of vigour into the local Christian community. Soon, however, the newcomers' emphasis on trans-denominational evangelism and on sharing spiritual gifts started to pose an open challenge to the mainline churches. Causing alarm to established players, ever more new denominations emerged – a process which has continued to this day – while internal

[24] Speaking in tongues (Latin term: *glossolalia*) often refers to supernatural utterance of foreign human languages, or an "angelic language", or other verbal expression requiring interpretation. Among charismatic and Pentecostal traditions, speaking in tongues was considered evidence of an initial baptism in the Spirit.

[25] It has become a tenet in Christian theology emphasizing ministry, missionary work, evangelism, and baptism.



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tensions within various historic denominations were exacerbated. Some groups abandoned the historic churches and added adjectives to their original names: "Orthodox Methodist Church", "Wesleyan Methodist Church", etc.

The 1980s saw the establishment of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship Malaysia (NECF; www.necf.org.my). According to statements on NECF's website, its formation came on the heels of the social restrictions and repressions imposed by the administration of Prime Minister Mahathir. These involved partial bans placed on the distribution of Malay-language bibles, on public gatherings of five or more people, and on the number of approvals issued to independent churches seeking to set up physical premises. Today, the Evangelical Charismatic Churches of Malaysia network (www.eccmsia.org) includes some 100 churches.

In the mainstream public perception, those evangelical churches in Malaysia's metropolitan area of Klang Valley which are seen as influential – the majority of these are physically clustered in the high-income township of Petaling Jaya – have become synonymous with grandiose facilities developed through large-scale construction and/or land and property acquisition. The perception is fitting not just visually but also conceptually, as the new physical edifices deliberately serve to dissolve boundaries between "church" and "community hall", "convention centre", "performing arts centre" or "professional events venue". Initially and to a certain degree, some of the churches were "pushed" rather than "pulled" onto this path by local government authorities: Through the years, these have shown ambivalence about new churches looking like [typical, e.g. European] churches, i.e. tall buildings which would tower over their surroundings, featuring prominent displays of the cross, etc.

The combined political and financial pressure (to acquire land in affordable locations) has translated into new churches often sprouting up in industrial parks and other



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business areas and adopting the visual characteristics of industrial buildings such as warehouses (i.e. low-rise but covering extensive square footage). These hard-to-overlook structures which are slowly reshaping the urban landscape of a number of suburban locales in Malaysia may be considered as physical manifestations of their founders' single-minded commitment to entrepreneurship and business success. Indeed, for many of the local evangelical groups, fundraising has been in their organizational DNA ever since their humble beginnings in makeshift premises built in then-remote parts of the city back in the 1970s and 1980s.

As in the United States, the growing presence and power of evangelical organizations across Asia has not been without its critics. Church Watch Central (https://churchwatchcentral.com), originally a Facebook group of concerned Australian pastors, leaders and elders from various denominations, today provides a comprehensive online platform which documents the growth, doctrines and activities of many high-profile evangelical groups including Singapore's City Harvest and other churches.[26]

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[26] City Harvest Church is an evangelical megachurch located in Singapore. It attracted huge media attention in 2015 when six of its leaders, including founder Kong Hee, and fund or finance managers were sentenced to jail, having been found guilty of criminal breach of trust and falsification of accounts.

# CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

## 3.1: Paucity of literature on the neoliberal-evangelical nexus

As mentioned, the rapid growth of the evangelical movement has been shaped by responses to specific socio-economic and socio-political trends and events, rather than defined by a coherent and unchanging set of beliefs. In the past few decades, the expansion of evangelical movements has occurred simultaneously with the incursion by neoliberal ideology into practically all domains of social life. Tentatively, scholars have started to point to an emerging nexus between these two developments. They have argued that increasingly, the values, ideas and dissemination tools and strategies employed by the two movements have not only borne similarities, but each has actively served to amplify the effects of the other.

Piecing together case studies of Southeast Asia's evangelical churches means stepping onto an emergent territory where even empirical contributions have been patchy at best. As such, literature that can serve as a direct source of building a conceptual framework for this exercise is scarce. Complicating matters further is the fact that the literature that is indirectly relevant to this exploration – such that there is; typically produced by political economists and sociologists of religion – remains a "mixed bag", containing a wide range of approaches and generalizations that are competing for attention by researchers.

For a social studies researcher, this creates a particularly challenging terrain, with readily available cognitive handles few and far between. Many contextual considerations and factual as well as logical linkages can only be grasped by absorbing non-academic sources such as self-published articles in social media and the blogosphere. Needless to say, these come with their own biases, information attributed to unreliable sources, a tendency to politicize, dramatize and often scandalize current developments, and a whole

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array of other “grey zones” which an academic may struggle to reconcile with credibly obtained data.

### 3.2: Drawing from literature on religion and markets

On the upside, analyses of the complex relationship between religion and the market have been around for decades. Many of today’s scholars continue to cite Karl Polanyi’s book *The Great Transformation* (1944), which introduced the concept of a “double movement”. In this paradigm, religion and the market are dialectical, in that both are affected by the power of the other; and remain in an ambiguous relationship. First, *laissez-faire* reformers seek to "disembed" the economy in order to establish what Polanyi calls a "market society" wherein all things are commodified. Subsequently, marketization results in a push for social protection. Polanyi’s writings assume both market expansion and the enlarging capacity of society to challenge the values expounded by the market (Haddorff, 2000; Polanyi & MacIver, 1957).

Towards the end of the 20th century, economic theory, particularly rational choice theory, started to inform a number of inquiries in this field, cementing the term “religious marketplace” and staking out new directions in empirical research regarding religious participation, social welfare and policy implications. Laurence Iannaccone’s paper on *Religious Markets and the Economics of Religion* (1992) portrayed the modern religious landscape as one where individuals are freely “shopping” for a religion that suits them best, carefully weighing the costs and benefits of their decision:

> We hear much talk these days of “religious markets” and “religious economies”. Religious “consumers” are said to “shop” for churches much as they shop for cars: weighing costs and benefits and seeking the highest return on their spiritual investment. Religious “producers”, the erstwhile clergy, struggle to provide a “commodity” at least as attractive as their competitors’. Religion is advertised and marketed, produced and consumed, demanded and supplied. (Iannaccone, 1992, p. 123)

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W. C. Roof's book *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby-Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (1999) is another seminal work in this category, situating the religious life of post-WWII generations in a dynamic of supply and demand, one that is shaped less by blind faith and more by a quest for personal meaning; Americans are thus recast from "believers" to "seekers".

Today, the term "religious economy" has become a common description of consumer logic in choosing and investing in a particular brand of religion or a religious grouping. At the same time, the preponderance of economics in shaping approaches to religion in a postmodern and commoditizing world has not been without its limitations, and critics. According to Gauthier (2016, p. 2):

> ...the import of concepts and terminology from the field of economics is often done lightly, without further theoretical discussion. What does it mean to say that religion presents itself as in a market, and what is a market? Are 'salvation goods' like any other goods, be it a carpet cleaning service or gold watches? Is consuming a religious text different from consuming a Mars Bar? Such questions have by all means not received the amount of attention they require. More profoundly, can concepts issued from one field translate to another, and specifically to that of religion so easily without a prior epistemological discussion?

In recent years, research that can be subsumed under the rubric of "sociology of religion" has also intensified. Typically, it has placed the touchpoints between religion and the capitalist market in a context of rapid globalization, ongoing dialogue and other interplay between global and local factors and influences. Yet insight gained from the ground up on how these developments play out and manifest in Asia have been in limited supply thus far. According to Graeme Lang's paper on *Challenges for the sociology of religion in Asia* (2004, p. 99):

> The sociology of religion is globalising hesitantly, but still gives little attention to Asia. We need to extend our current debates and our best concepts to Asian societies. The many challenging phenomena include the resurgence of religions, debates and struggles over the political role of religion, the variety of religion/state interactions, and the impact of power on religions and theologies. For such questions, Asia is much more diverse than Europe and North America, and we

> should not shrink from trying to enhance our collective empirical and theoretical competence through study of Asian cases. We need to globalise more deliberately.

In the same vein, François Gauthier's *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Political Economy and Modes of Governance* (2016) hypothesizes that the current transformations affecting religion (both religious institutions and religious phenomena in general) are best understood if cast as integral to the recent shaping of culture by economics (both consumerism and neoliberalism), considered from a global, not only Western, perspective.

### 3.3: Understanding neoliberalism and its relationship with religion

When framing the assumptions and arguments for the current research, it might be tempting to view neoliberalism as well as the growing neoliberal-evangelical nexus as constructs that originated in the United States and have been exported to the rest of the world. Usefully, a number of research volumes challenge such assumptions. Among these, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism. The Collapse of an Economic Order?,* edited by Kean Birch and Vlad Mykhnenko (2010), serves to de-essentialize the neoliberal project as one that has no single point of origin in space and time; necessarily exists only by taking on hybrid forms; and always acts within, and reshapes, existing institutional landscapes. Citing Prasad (2006), they emphasize that every extension of free markets is historically and politically contingent; they also call for more detailed historical and political explorations of neoliberalism.

Presenting cogent analysis on the rise of a neoliberal-conservative and by extension, neoliberal-evangelical nexus in the United States has been a work in progress. Many of the paradigms that have been put forward are little more than juxtapositions; and those that are actually conceptually developed tend to borrow a range of paradigms, which are not always expressed in academic or theoretical language, hoping to capture, one way or another, the dynamics of the emerging nexus.



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Thus, for a number of commentators, neoliberalism provided the conservative movement with the “glue” that could bind together the often-disparate interests of the different conservative factions. It gave impetus to the rise of neoliberal conservatism in the US from the 1970s onwards. According to Wendy Brown’s article titled *American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization* (2006), despite tensions between neoliberalism and conservatism in the US, the former provided the “manure” (perhaps Brown was deliberately facetious in her choice of words) from which the new conservative movement could bloom. An equally clumsy metaphor can be found in William E. Connolly’s paper on *The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine* (2005) which brings out a concept of resonance that draws existential elements into the fabric of political economy. Intuitively, all these parables seek to point to a new agenda aimed at restoring the moral power of state practices in conservative eyes.

Other tentative paradigms that have appeared over the past few years include the notion of capitalism itself becoming imbued with religious overtones and taking on attributes of an instrument of salvation. Much like neoliberalism has extended its overarching social project to bear on new domains including religion, purportedly the millennial reinterpretation of the evangelical tradition has embraced capitalism in this chiliastic light. In their essay *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming* (2000, p. 292), anthropologists Jean and John L. Comaroff scrutinize "the distinctly pragmatic qualities of the messianic, millennial capitalism of the moment: a capitalism that presents itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalized and disempowered.”

The historical aspects and narratives of a “concurrent mainstreaming” of evangelical and free-market values in American society are vividly displayed in Bethany Moreton’s book *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*

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(2009). It chronicles the growing intersections of religion, politics and economics in American society following the Vietnam War. Moreton argues that Wal-Mart's executives were agile in recognizing the economic advantage of weaving specific strands of the region's fundamentalist belief system into their corporate strategy. The term 'hijacking [of pre-existing loyalties]' certainly comes to mind when the reader is shown vignettes of the company's staff working contentedly for low wages, thus prioritizing conservative social issues ahead of policies that would presumably be in their economic self-interest. The book serves up a radically new set of "moral market priorities" that have won over the allegiance of America's "values voters" by tapping into underlying beliefs and assumptions regarding the supremacy of family, the morality of self-reliance and the evangelical justification of free enterprise. What may appear at first look as counter-intuitive and logically disjointed turns out to be a fair reflection of Wal-Mart's corporate strategy, summarized by one of the book's reviewers as "extraordinary capacity to develop cultural solutions for the very crises that its business model produced" (Burgin, 2010, p. 172).

Considerable granularity and clarity has been achieved in Jason Hackworth's book, *Faith Based: Religious Neoliberalism and the Politics of Welfare in the United States* (2012) which suggests that the success of neoliberalism in American politics depends on its alignment with other powerful political ideas. He argues that American conservative politics are characterized by "religious neoliberalism," an ideational fusion that sanctifies neoliberal arguments with religious justifications offered by evangelical Protestants. In his view, religious neoliberalism advances the agenda of neoliberalism in American politics by linking it to the political power of the Religious Right, while also unifying disparate elements of American evangelicalism in common political purpose. Hackworth leaves no doubt that there are connections between ideas in neoliberalism and ideas in evangelical Protestantism, and that these connections are expressed by political

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actors seeking political gain. In fact, some see the wave of churches embracing neoliberal values as a natural outgrowth of the sizeable territory they have conquered in the past few decades on the political front. According to Schneider (2007, p. 13): "As religious communities embrace the mechanism of globalization, they also stake a claim on it, compete for mastery of it, and sanctify it. In the American context, the same evangelical communities that have built such a strong base of political power have developed a religious discourse in alignment with the neoliberal economics of their political allies."

When it comes to economic gain, empirical studies of the penetration of consumer culture and values into religious organizations have pointed out that the evangelicals' embrace of corporate-style growth strategies has given them a tremendous advantage in the battle for religious market share; and that evangelicalism's theological flexibility affords it the freedom to adapt to contemporary culture (Symonds, Grow, & Cady, 2005). Research that has been completed to date in this space of marketized religion has placed much emphasis on the repackaging of religion in the ideas, messages and other garbs of consumer capitalism. These are employed in order to make religion extra palatable to the modern-day urban member of a capitalist consumer society. They include techniques borrowed from the retail consumer industry, ranging from product franchises through easy payments to membership cards and loyalty schemes.

For its part, the churches' exploitation of instruments of consumer capitalism has in return stimulated change in religious institutions. The mass/retail consumer aspect sometimes overrides other considerations, as researchers emphasize the emergence of "forms of religio-ethno-economic practice which are completely integral to consumer capitalism" (Gauthier, 2016, p. 8). For instance, in their paper *'Dining with the Devil': The Unique Secularization of American Evangelical Churches* (2008), authors J.B. Watson and Walt Scalen describe the influence of corporate business culture on evangelical churches as an "intoxicating appeal". Using the term "McDonaldization" to

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describe the dynamics of the rise of evangelical megachurches, they highlight the movement's four essential principles, which have been borrowed from the corporate sector in general and from modern management gurus like Peter Drucker (1909-2005) in particular.[27] These include (1) quantitative measures of success (worship attendance, revenue, number of new converts); (2) cultural contextualization of the church message; (3) application of modern marketing techniques, often technology-based; and (4) networking with like-minded churches and church leaders. As a result, the movement's leaders believe that churches should be well-managed organizations, pursue organizational excellence, and continuously learn from the business sector.

### 3.4: Neoliberalism in Southeast Asia: Localization and adaptation

A number of research papers have been published in the past few years which speak to specific aspects of neoliberalism's dialogue with local institutional landscapes across Southeast Asia. Thus in *State and social Christianity in post-colonial Singapore* (2010), Daniel Goh maps out the growing appeal since the 1980s of Protestant, particularly US-influenced Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity among Singapore's young, urbanized and English-educated Chinese. He points out that mainstream denominations which have done well include those that embraced charismatic renewal and evangelicalism. He argues that the success of the Pentecostal movement in Singapore can be largely attributed to the movement's contextual framework as a practical tool for tapping into the developmental ethos of the Singapore state.

The paper on *Religion, Business and Contestation in Malaysia and Singapore* by Edmund Terence Gomez, Robert Hunt and John Roxborogh (2015) examines the interactions of religious, economic and political power that have occurred in tandem with the rise to social and business prominence across Southeast Asia of non-denominational

[27] The prevalence of Drucker's visionary leadership concepts, particularly among apostolic churches, has drawn widespread criticism (including by the aforementioned Church Watch Central), culminating in a label, put forward by radio commentator Chris Rosebrough of Fighting for the Faith / Pirate Christian Media, of an "Evangelical Industrial Complex" (EIC).



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Christian as well as Islamic groups. It raises pointed questions about the prospect of the combination of religion and business posing challenges and threats to established centres of power. Citing examples of faith-based groups whose venturing into business set off government scrutiny and bureaucratic interference, the authors emphasize the political significance that comes to the fore when religion interplays with business. In consequence, contestations arise not only with the state but also with older interpretations of religious identity, and with similar movements and groups that find themselves on parallel religious and economic trajectories.

The paper also introduces related research articles such as Terence Chong's *Megachurches in Singapore: The Faith of an Emergent Middle Class* (2015), which outlines three main characteristics that have contributed to the rapid growth of megachurches in Singapore: 1) the churches' appeal to economically-mobile individuals from working and lower-middle class backgrounds; 2) the new churches' avoidance, relative to mainline churches, of confrontation with the state, particularly in areas related to social justice and public morality; and 3) their tendency to infuse spirituality with market logic. In *"Do Business Till He Comes": The Business of Housing God in Singapore Megachurches,* Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth (2015) explore the adoption by new churches of imagery, incentives and instruments borrowed from consumer marketing and branding.

Collectively, these papers address the ways in which non-mainstream religious groups in Malaysia and Singapore have responded to, as well as interacted and contested with, evolving patterns of state control coupled with a growth-oriented national political-economic agenda. Their authors show that although neoliberalism is often seen as independent of cultural properties, Asian societies have consistently produced an environment that is conducive to a holistic interplay of religion, business and society.

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A similar focal point – one of the historically relatively seamless, non-compartmentalized nature of Asia's economic, political and religious life – is visited in *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods* (Kitiarsa, 2007). Contributors to this volume of essays adopt an anthropological and sociological view of contemporary Asian religion in order to explore convergences between markets and religion in Asia. These include locally novel phenomena such as religious institutions embracing material prosperity, largely in keeping with the forces of the global market economy penetrating Asia's cultural and religious spaces. The authors emphasize the historical presence in this region of a "market of faiths" where religions have been for centuries competing with each other. The implications, however, remain ambiguous, much as the use of the term "market", as referred to in the above quote by Gauthier, comes across as fraught with too many connotations to assist in systematic elucidation.

**3.5: Commodity as a useful paradigm**

Available literature does postulate some intriguing if tentative linkages and relationships – mainly ideological, political and socioeconomic – between the emerging global neoliberal order and the evangelical movement. Yet for the most part, it stops short of identifying the factors that truly sustain and perpetuate the evangelical-capitalist relationship. Particularly where actual material and business manifestations of the nexus are concerned, the prevailing instinct among academics is to launch into a descriptive mode, bearing out new testimonies of some of the evangelical teachings' individualistic and consumer ethos. As valid and relevant as it is to examine these parallels, we need to look further if we want to identify paradigms that may account for the evangelical movement's success in reinforcing and reproducing the neoliberal-evangelical nexus.

In particular, we want to explore configurations that emerge at the intersections of neoliberal mechanisms and localized practices. A clearer mapping and understanding of this landscape are important for appreciating the degree in which evangelical groups

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serve to promote and naturalize neoliberal values among local communities. In this perspective, we have seen researchers such as Gauthier (2016) warn against the risks of reducing social phenomena to particular models of the economy. To avoid this reductionist perspective, there have been calls on sociologists of religion to enable a dialectical understanding between social phenomena and economic factors. One approach which may achieve this and which has been promoted increasingly widely as of late is to combine the strengths of political economy with cultural studies of commodity production (Bridge & Smith, 2003).

### 3.6: Southeast Asia's markets and commodities

Interestingly, some pertinent hypotheses in this area can be derived from anthropological work whose direct subject matter deals with commodities in a physical sense of the word, e.g. the production of agricultural commodities in Southeast Asia. *Taking Southeast Asia to Market: Commodities, Nature, and People in the Neoliberal Age* (Nevins & Peluso, 2008), explores both the global dynamics of commodification and its many manifestations and other facets observed across the Southeast Asian region. Although the book's departure points revolve around actual agricultural commodities, its authors manage to extrapolate from these settings and draw conclusions that resonate with global commodification processes which are affecting different segments of human activity. The book restates the argument that 1) the region has reconfigured itself, its politics and its economies in highly complex, often unpredictable ways under this round of neoliberal globalization; and 2) these supposedly ubiquitous and homogenizing forces are mediated by local institutions and actors. It does well to point out that neoliberalism's presence in the region is not necessarily directly linked to colonial rule but has a lot to do with the role of the region's authoritarian states in postcolonial development processes.

*Taking Southeast Asia to Market* is a good example of research into tangible commodity production that goes on to draw out far-reaching theoretical ramifications.



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Quoting from Watts, Cloke, Crang & Goodwin (1999), the authors raise the issue of modern capitalist nations as commodity-producing societies in which almost everything is potentially for sale. The book produces some compelling observations such as: a) the production of neoliberal subjects is not limited to the realm of the purely economic; b) instead, all sorts of subjectivities are involved in enabling new forms of contemporary capitalist accumulation; c) in turn, these have created new types of subjects and actors who build and reinforce identities and practices which are favourable to commoditization. In addition, these processes serve to bring people and places together, blend identities, create new ones, and marginalize others.

In the chapter titled *Worshipping work: Producing commodity producers in contemporary Indonesia,* anthropologist Daromir Rudnyckyj argues that a blend of [agricultural] commodity production and systematic religious influence will not necessarily result in a radical transformation of religious practices into commodified ones. Rather, these projects entail the insertion of religion into a pattern of commodity production that is reconfigured from one defined by the boundaries of the nation to one defined more by transnational connections and neoliberal forms. What is presented as spiritual reform is in fact intended to address changes in the Indonesian economy that resonate with neoliberal transformations e.g. privatization, elimination of tariffs on imported commodities, and eradication of state subsidies. In the author's view, employees at the centre of such initiatives are led by an invisible hand that is simultaneously that of God, the market, and the self. According to Rudnyckyj, the professed efforts to introduce religion into the market have resulted in an insertion of the market within religion.

Rudnyckyj's papers on *Spiritual economies: Islam and neoliberalism in contemporary Indonesia* (2009b) and *Market Islam in Indonesia* (2009a) further conceptualize how economic reform and neoliberal restructuring are conceived of and acted on as matters of religious piety and spiritual virtue. Proponents of spiritual reform

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consider the separation of religious ethics from economic practice as the root of Indonesia's economic crisis: In their minds, this disjunction resulted in rampant corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of discipline at the workplace. The essays analyse efforts to inculcate Islamic ethics in combination with western management knowledge, produce spirituality as an object of intervention, reconfigure work as a form of religious worship, and inculcate an ethic of individual accountability and entrepreneurial responsibility among workers. They also present vignettes of moderate Islamic "spiritual reform" movements which combine business management principles and techniques from popular life-coaching seminars with Muslim practice.

Elsewhere, the late Pattana Kitiarsa (2008) takes a courageous step by proposing that commodification and modernization do not necessarily imply outcomes related to "degraded or damaged" religions. He suggests that religious commodification opened new room for interpretation across religious traditions and societies. In his view, religious commodification as a key sociological concept, a persistently growing field of sociological investigation, and a form of complex religio-cultural phenomena must be understood through its contextualized backgrounds, processes, and implications. This view echoes earlier works such as Colleen McDannell's 1995 book *Material Christianity* which demonstrates that when religious belief and practice becomes mixed with the marketplace, the outcome does not directly lead to the corruption or secularization of religion. She writes: "If we immediately assume that whenever money is exchanged religion is debased, then we will miss the subtle ways that people create and maintain spiritual ideals through the exchange of goods and the construction of spaces" (McDannell, 1998, p. 6).

**3.7: Theories of commoditization**

Although in many contexts, neoliberalism is used as a convenient label, referring to a broad and ongoing global reconfiguration of relations between state, market, society



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and individuals, there is wide consensus that these have been unfolding against a backdrop of intensifying marketization and commoditization. To put it briefly, neoliberalism tends to commoditize all aspects of life. Modern-day commodities, and the logic of something becoming a commodity, are if not synonymous with the outcomes of neoliberal influence then certainly one of its hallmarks. Concurrently, there is an emerging body of research that applies the commodity/commoditization prism to social relations and structures, including religious organizations. This suggests that the commodity discourse can indeed be drawn on as a productive link between neoliberalism and its manifestations in social life including religion.

Therefore on a theoretical level, the trends and arguments presented in this study can be framed using the tools and vocabulary of research on commodities and commoditization processes. Let us consider what makes the category of commodity a suitable organizing principle – one that not only resonates with the topic but, more importantly, can govern the choice of a conceptual framework as well as the ensuing analysis. First, this study will review a few definitions in order to address what social scientists mean by "commodity". With this broadened understanding in mind, the analytical focus is structured to address each of the research questions presented in the Introduction chapter.

Along the way, there will be critical theoretical assertions that need to be examined and internalized in order to appreciate the macro-social aspects of religious commoditization. Macro-analyses of commoditization trends have been commonly anchored in the dynamics of macro-social change taking place amidst rapid globalization. They have sought to explore how practices and understandings of social institutions might be changing in the context of a global, mediated capitalist marketplace (Clark, 2006). Commoditization of religion can then be examined as part of this worldwide social change.

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At the same time, globalization inevitably shifts emphasis to the dialectic between the global and the local. Here, researchers have recognized early on that neoliberal changes in local, national, regional, and global markets are always mediated by place-based histories, landscapes and other structures (Massey, 1999; Ong, 2006). Consequently, commoditization is perceived in a similar light, i.e. as an embodied social and cultural process, highly and inherently contingent, which emerges out of larger social and spatial fabrics. Where societies – and particularly developing societies – typically differ is in the ways commoditization as a special expression of exchange is structured and related to the social system, in the factors that encourage or contain it, in the long-term tendencies for it to expand or stabilize, and in the cultural and ideological premises that suffuse its workings (Kopytoff, 1986).

### 3.7.1: What is, or becomes, a commodity?

At a basic level of mainstream economics, a commodity simply "is". Anything that has a use value as well as an exchange value, i.e. any product or service that can be bought or sold on the open market, and thus is circulated through the economic system, merits the label of "commodity". Commoditization (or commodification) is the process whereby an item becomes a commodity, with a price of its own, and is put on the market (Kopytoff, 1986; Ziolkowski, 2004). According to Kopytoff:

> Commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than an all-or-none state of being. Its expansion takes place in two ways: (a) with respect to each thing, by making it exchangeable for more and more other things, and (b) with respect to the system as a whole, by making more and more different things more widely exchangeable. (1986, p. 73)

Habermas (1991), for instance, analyses at length how the growing needs of commerce in 17th- and 18th-century Europe first gave rise to the traffic in news and eventually established news itself as a commodity. Similarly, the socioeconomic environment of the time made cultural products publicly accessible in reading rooms,



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museums, theatres and concert halls. In consequence, culture acquired the character of something that pretended to exist merely for its own sake and was separate from the reproduction of social life. It took on the life of a consumable object, and finally evolved into a commodity, produced for the market and distributed through it (Habermas, 1991).

Because of its roots in the market dynamics that we experience on a daily basis, and the resulting intuitive definition of what constitutes a commodity, there have been strong economistic tendencies to treat commodities in linear fashion, thus omitting from analysis many of their dynamic, non-linear interrelationships. In reaction to these pressures, commoditization has increasingly come to be seen as a sociocultural and cognitive process: In recent years, social sciences have adopted a broader view of commodities, particularly what they have termed social commodities, as one that encompasses not only products and services but also social relations (Ziolkowski, 2004).

To become a commodity, a product or service or social relation is not only brought into physical being; it has to be recognized and treated as such. What complicates this perception is that not all things in a society are considered "appropriate" to be handled as a commodity; or they may be regarded as a commodity in some situations and not in others; or the same object may be seen as a commodity only by specific segments of society. According to (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 64), "[s]uch shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions". Margaret Radin (1996) pinpoints the defining moment of separating a specific aspect of human experience from the established boundaries of the self or social world. Commodification is then regarded as a type of objectification: It means that a particular aspect of material or social reality (which once simply "was") can now be manipulated at the will of persons.

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Commodities are an economic category but also a social and cultural construct. Resurgent interest in commodities is linked to recent attempts to overcome the constraints posed by the binaries of economy/culture and production/consumption. Commodities and commodification represent a contentious convergence of economic, social, cultural, political and moral concerns. They are defined by cultural frameworks and social contexts. In fact, commodities are said to have a "social life" (Lind & Barham, 2004). By extension, any attempt to understand the commodity situation must address the politics surrounding commodification, that is, the social relations, assumptions and struggles related to meaning and power that create a situation in which a thing is or is not treated as a commodity (Appadurai, 1986).

Indeed, the label of "religious economy" is fitting to this field, as is often the theoretical lens of political economy: As new religious groups continue reproducing, diversifying and differentiating themselves, the processes of commodification that are ongoing within this economy have allowed us to witness the carving out of new segments, markets within markets and niches within niches. Contrary to their perception as limiting and "flattening" the discourse on social issues, the logic of economics and even its language can therefore serve as powerful tools for the social-scientific study of religion (Iannaccone, 1992).

### 3.7.2: Commoditized ethnicity as a theoretical proxy

In the absence of a mature body of theory on commoditization of religion, the processes through which religion in the neoliberal environment has been susceptible to commodification may also be construed and examined by plugging in proxies such as ethnicity. (In this study, we borrow and inspect the concept of commoditized ethnicity solely in order to facilitate the theoretical examination of commodified religion.[28] The

[28] The studies we borrowed from are discussed at length below.

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actual commoditizing pressures and trends that occur within Malaysia's ethnic categories remain outside the purview of this thesis.) As early as the 1970s, researchers argued that religious denominations played a role similar to ethnicity in that "the members of a religious denomination are able to obtain from their religion means of defining who they are and where they stand in a large and complex society" (Greeley, 1972, p. 108).

Research on commoditized ethnicity as completed by the anthropologist team of John L. and Jean Comaroff is particularly illuminating and directly relevant to our topic and its situating in a developing and highly heterogeneous society. The Comaroffs' volume on *Ethnicity, Inc.,* (2009) zooms in on the category of ethnicity in order to analyse what the authors see as rampant commodification of human identity. According to the authors, in parallel with, and not unlike, religion in essence becoming another consumer product for churches and their "customers" to buy and sell, ethnic populations have been remaking themselves in the image of the corporation, while corporations have co-opted ethnic practices to open up new markets and regimes of consumption.

The Comaroffs draw on seminal research by Benedict Anderson – a regular visitor to Malaysia and Southeast Asia – who decades ago brought our attention to the tenuous and in some ways fictitious nature of dominant modern-day social constructs such as ethnicity and nationhood. He called them "imagined communities" – group formations the modern individual is heavily invested in socially, psychologically and emotionally. On closer inspection, that is in itself an extraordinary phenomenon, given that the groups' members only ever get to know and interact with the crushing majority of other members in abstract and illusory ways such as TV news. Things become even more paradoxical in the decolonized world where much of modern nationhood was originally a product of the "logoization" – e.g. the drawing and labelling of political maps and boundaries – brought on by colonial administrations and their efforts, or instincts, to classify, organize and categorize (Anderson, 1991).

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In the postmodern context, the Comaroffs take this argument a step further, revealing how a weakened sense of nationhood, along with social class, have in recent years given way to more direct paradigms of personal identification, including religion:

> As other bases of aggregation – most notably, in a post-Marxian, post-Weberian world, class – are undermined, as they dissolve into empty metaphors, as the social itself seems ever less "real" (cf. Kapferer, 2005), as "the" nation is compromised by heterogeneity and relativism, individual and collective attachments come to inhere in what appear as the unmediated, elemental bases of human life itself: race, religion, gender, sexuality, generation, ethnicity. Which is why there has been a radical intensification of claims, since the last decades of the twentieth century, made in the name of all of these things, and sometimes in constellations of them; claims that frequently transcend and transect national frontiers. (pp. 11-12)

These "elemental" categories, such as ethnicity and religion, the Comaroffs point out, "provide an ever more compelling basis for human connectedness and collective life, often seeming more 'authentic' than the putative horizontal fraternity that underlies liberal citizenship" (p.6). This assertion becomes especially compelling when conceptualizing postmodern religious identity as a deeply personal, as opposed to collective, category. Many non-academic observers have informally, at times casually, described the evangelical identity as one that is about "you" rather than a group or a deity, without giving much thought to how this atomization came about. Arguably, we are from a historical perspective indeed witnessing yet another form of a social and ethical "break" – similar in its effect to the past advent of humanism and later on Protestantism, and one which upholds and focuses on the individual believer and his experience rather than the teachings and the worship of the church.

Given the presence of a strong plurality of "religious markets" in evidence around the world – even in locales where until recently, a single religious tradition was nearly dominant – the logic of commoditization has taken a leap from the ethno-cultural category to the domain of religion and religious practice. Many religious behaviours and practices have been rendered commodities. Not only that: Religious practice in general can be

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credibly viewed as a productive process: It involves a number of inputs including purchased goods. Quite a few religious activities are explicitly marketed as a type of personal investment. The ensuing "religious capital" becomes an important product of religious activity (Iannaccone, 1990). On top of that, religious preferences are seen as primarily adaptive, i.e. they become stronger with consumption (Sherkat, 1997).

### 3.7.3: "Commodity" does imply "saleable goods" and the maximizing of utility

With more and more churches actively drawing on the material culture of consumer capitalism, opportunities for participation in religious organizations and practices have been described as dominated in an ever higher degree by the processes of commodity exchange (Ezzy, 2001). In fact, the pursuit of self-aggrandizement as a significant component of one's spiritual life—though not at the expense of others or through dishonest practices—is perceived to be an entirely legitimate objective (Waldron, 2005). Thus increasingly, the objects and objectifications of these individualized identities may be delivered to the market and consumed by others (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009).

It bears pointing out, however, that "religious goods" are not by definition objects that may be passed from one person to another. Similarly to Weber's culture goods, they are anchored in action, values, emotional dispositions and subjective conditions (Stolz, 2008). The market is, if not in all situations *the* mechanism, then certainly *one* mechanism for producing, exchanging and allocating these religious goods (Stolz, 2008). It is precisely the entrepreneurialism displayed by religious groups in the 21st century, and further augmented by the advent of modern media and digital communications, that has positioned religious goods as a form of supply-side or demand-side commodities. Institutionalization may then transform them from demand-side commodities to supply-side commodities (Pace, 2006).



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Theorists and social commentators agree that making a commodity consumption-ready involves an "easing of access" in an economic but also psychological fashion. Initial access to the "goods" is provided. From there on out, if economies of scale are achieved, they will facilitate this easing of access for an ever-larger public. Psychological easing of access, for its part, requires that the content of the cultural goods be adapted to suit the psychological needs of broad strata of society (Habermas, 1991). Research shows that in vying for their piece of the pie, religious groups are often willing to adjust strategically their message so that it fits with the profile and needs of their target segments (Altglas, 2011).

Meyersohn, in his ruminations on the birth of the leisure industry (Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958), speaks in this context of a "reduction of the entrance requirements". To the degree that culture became a commodity not only in form but also in content, it has been emptied of elements whose appreciation required a certain amount of training—whereby the "accomplished" appropriation once again heightened the appreciative ability itself. This moving of the goal posts by reducing the complexity of cultural goods in tandem with their growing commercialization was not just a matter of standardization: It also involved a preparation of products that made them consumption-ready without stringent presuppositions (Habermas, 1991; Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958).

Of particular import here is Appadurai's (1986) observation that what is often involved – and in religious commodities, very clearly involved, is a minimal agreement bridging two or more contradictory frameworks and not a complete sharing of cultural assumptions. In other words, in a context such as religious practice, a commodity is not – as is often implied or insinuated – plucked from its rightful place, put on a shelf and sold "as is". In reality, a sense of negotiating a contradiction and of linking two disparate environments is inherent in a commodification process. Additionally, the idea of shifting

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social relations which are produced by, as well as productive of, new social commodities (Bestor, 2001), appears to be central to any meaningful inquiry into this topic.

### 3.7.4: Yet commoditization is not always denigrating or reducing in its effects

According to some analyses, the rationalization of those social constructs whose traditional function was to lend meaning, coherence and continuity to collective imaginations and aspirations, often in non-secular contexts, has inevitably led to their "hollowing out". In the United States, critics increasingly acknowledge that all local religious practices have faced pressure to accommodate some of the dominant values, attitudes, and behaviours that characterize American secular life (Watson & Scalen, 2008). At this crossroads of the religious and the secular, the most apparent inner contradictions occur between the churches' theological doctrine and their material, consumer-oriented goals and activities. Underlying these is a sustained tension between an ethos of edifying the self through material prosperity and the widespread – if logically rather antithetical – emphasis on selflessness as exemplified by service, particularly providing social services to vulnerable and marginalized groups in local communities as well as in overseas "hot zones", i.e. territories affected by social deprivation, natural disaster and military conflict.

A number of social critics have been troubled by what they see as commodification of human attributes such as labour, intellect and creativity (Kopytoff, 1986). Their concerns become even more pronounced if one were to view the continued commodification of labour on the one hand and spirituality and religion on the other hand as occurring in tandem. Nonetheless, to present this ongoing process as a "hijacking" would ignore a number of legitimate and well-documented social trends related to modernity and the postmodern world. Modernity has been associated not only with secularization but also with the rise of new religious forms. These are characterized by

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worldliness, de-hierarchization of the human and the divine, self-spirituality, parascientificity, pluralism, and mobility (Lambert, 1999). Worldly and personal rather than traditional preoccupations have taken centre stage. Religions now are compelled "to find the meaning of human destiny in this world - in culture, society, and human personality" in order to fulfil the human vocation (Kitagawa, 1967, p. 60). This largely science-inspired trend of individualization, seeking a measure of cognitive harmony with the modern, 20th-century world, has served to reduce the gap between the human and the divine; the laity and the clergy; the terrestrial and the celestial (Bellah, 1991).

Even where commoditization influences over religion are perceived as intrusive, they are often framed and interpreted as "an inevitable response to the condition of postmodernity and the collapse of traditional sources of ascribed identity and cultural forms". Central to this postmodern condition is the process of de-traditionalization where spirituality and the self are approached in a utilitarian fashion which overrides established, external sources of authority (Waldron, 2005, p. 38). Crucially, commodities are not necessarily portrayed as inherently mundane or profane, in direct opposition to religious sensibility. Rather, and in step with a growing recognition of business and the economy as fundamentally social spaces, they are viewed as a ubiquitous social and cultural phenomenon. Exchange has been not only a universal feature of human social life – it actually resides at its very core (Ekeh, 1974; Homans, 1961; Kapferer, 1976). In fact, most areas of human culture and thought are shaped by market forces. Granted, in today's world, this process typically occurs without society's conscious knowledge or consent, and may ultimately lead to commodification of life itself (Carrette & King, 2005).

Logically, proponents of the argument that commodities and exchange have never been fully divorced from the realm of spirituality and religion have also questioned the idea of compartmentalizing human experience into religious vs. secular silos. Some have pointed out that, for instance, Americans have since the Enlightenment era engaged in an

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enterprise that combines the religious and the secular realms into one world view. America's Puritan legacy, for example, has rejected both the pure forms of other-worldly spirituality and a secular, this-worldly materialism; it attempts to bridge the differences and adopt a "this-worldly spirituality" (Haddorff, 2000; Marty, 1995). In fact, president Reagan's remarkable success in tapping into America's national mythology, rooted in the vocabulary and imagery of 19th-century evangelical Protestantism, has sometimes been attributed to the resonance of his messages with this so-called "American civil religion" (Fitzgerald, 2001).

### 3.7.5: Commoditization enables the marketing of something unique

In order to mobilize the resources that are necessary for marketing religious goods with professional-level quality, churches have sought to establish themselves as full-blown organizations. On the whole, this has not been too difficult: The rapid globalization of society has produced a huge amount of rationalized narratives, facilitating the expansion of organization at every level (Meyer, 2008). The process of rationalization has extended to the realm of all major social institutions, cultural forms and ideologies, including institutions of organized religion (Guinness, 1993). As a result, traditional social forms including previously unlikely structures such as churches have come under pressure to assume "organized actorhood", thereby transforming themselves into organizations. In this system of continuous expansion and empowerment, groups (as well as individuals) possess, or at least aspire to possess, greatly enhanced attributed capacities for economic, political, social, and cultural action (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). Among today's organizations, eagerness to display actorhood often takes precedence over other goals, and may in fact produce assertions of actor identity far from actual actor capability (Meyer, 2008).

New and ever-greater demands are placed on religious organizations as the "do good" space becomes increasingly crowded with other organized actors such as NGOs

and the non-profit sector. Institutional theory shows that part and parcel of being an actor – *any* actor in the expanded and empowered sense of the term – is the pursuit of different forms of a general and universal collective good (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). It is therefore unsurprising that the most rapidly expanding organizational structures in the world may well be the non-governmental and non-profit organizations that serve as distributing agents for various universal goods (which in many cases were once referred to as God, truth and the like), often at the global level (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). At the same time, many observers argue that in the last several decades, secular political activism around the world has largely been replaced by religious activism. They go on to suggest that the minimal governmentality prescribed by neoliberalism has created a void which is all too easily filled by religious movements. Against the bewildering, interwoven complexity of the market system, these groups draw attention to what is immediately and viscerally human (Schneider, 2007).[29]

### 3.7.6: Social movements and the economy of belonging

The process of bringing something to the market, and of participating in that market, creates attachments, and allows the participants to produce as well as consume enactments of their own identity. It is "a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of producing and feeling" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 9).

> ...they hope to find "empowerment." Mark this term. It has little to do with power or politics. What it connotes is access to markets and material benefits. Among ethnic groups, it is frankly associated with finding something essentially their own, something of their essence, to sell. In other words, a brand. (pp. 3-4)

Indeed, the process of branding creates an attachment to a commodity, to both its object-form and to the idea of an association with it (Schaniel & Neale, 1999). Here, the

[29] Malaysian culture wars, as depicted in the news, illustrate this point on a daily basis: The dominant religious authorities show little interest in political and business developments such as corruption. Yet on the aforesaid "immediate" and "visceral" levels they scrutinize more and more areas of private life and interaction, such as women wearing or not wearing headscarves, boys and girls riding motorcycles together, retail establishments selling hog hair paintbrushes or pastries under the problematic name of "hot dog".



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key tension or duality occurs between individual choices and the social, group-defined nature of those choices. On the one hand, believers in modern societies look for individuation, which emphasizes such religious goods as psychological equilibrium, well-being and good health. At the same time, choice, and particularly religious choice, is often a social act, not just a direct manifestation of personal preferences (Sherkat, 1997). People learn new religious preferences through contact with others, or through experience with and information about new goods (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch, 1992).

This is where the prism of rational choice and its metaphor of a believer/seeker as essentially a consumer shopping for a new product (car, religion, whatever) start fraying at the edges: Arguably, religious markets and market decisions do not necessarily comprise freely choosing independent actors and competitive firms. Instead, they are embedded in social relations, fraught with social influences and motivated by social configurations. The value of religious goods is likewise a social construction; as such, it may be difficult to assess by those outside the group (Sherkat, 1997). In other words, religious value is constructed in religious communities. Not entirely unlike what is known as "the network effect", it is through participation and immersion in religious communities that individuals acquire particular religious understandings which give religion value.[30] Furthermore, religious choices are often embedded, situated and socialized through language, class, ethnicity and race (Stolz, 2008).

There is also an element of social aspiration and upward mobility at play. As Habermas (1991) points out, the trickling down of commodities formerly restricted to the higher strata tends to attract greater attention among those strata which, through their style of consumption, are trying to elevate themselves at least symbolically. Today's educated cohorts of population have expanded beyond the needs of many national economies,

[30] A network's value rises in direct proportion to the number of participants in the network.



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including those in the developing world which used to absorb the bulk of their educated elites into the civil service. To an extent these classes, possessing skills and knowledge but not assets, have become maladjusted (Altglas, 2011). As society is no longer able to satisfy expectations of upward social mobility, the once-bold dictum that Gen X, Y or now Z cannot aspire to the living standards enjoyed by their parents has been accepted as a given. A new religious consciousness becomes a form of compensatory strategy: It helps these "lost" middle classes imagine they can narrow the gap between their cultural capital and their social status (Altglas, 2011).

The Comaroffs (2009) weave the notions of elemental, non-mediated identities, marketing, attachment and branding into what they term "the affective economy of belonging". To explore further the practices and institutions that shape this local sense of belonging at a time of dramatic and far-reaching global change, it may be constructive to adopt some of the theoretical concepts surrounding the rise of new social movements, particularly transnational social movements, which have thrived in an environment defined by globalization. In a globalizing world, social movements not only ride the wave of many new global processes; they also help articulate new ways of understanding the nature of global change. Many aspects of social movements have been energized by the opportunities and resources provided by globalization. Crucially and unlike in the past, today's social movements invest a lot more of their attention into international linkages and partnerships rather than making proclamations to the state in their home country (Guidry, Kennedy, & Zald, 2000).

New social movements are subject to transnational dissemination of social, cultural and political trends. Some theorists point to what they perceive as a global erosion of communities coupled with a "local reinvention of belonging". They also describe the cumulative result of new social movements' activities as a "quiet encroachment", because global collective actions initiated by these movements are suddenly taking place in the

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spaces in between major social structures and institutions (Pieterse, 2001). Hamel et al. (2001) go as far as positing that inhabiting "extra-localities", i.e. new spatial constructs existing between the local and the global is now part and parcel of being a modern subject. This is particularly true as the postmodern polity places growing importance on intangible, also described as "post-material" considerations such as freedom, self-expression, belonging, and quality of life (Inglehart, 1997).

There are other manifestations of this postmodern approach which have been mapped out by theorists of social change and which are highly relevant to inquiries into religion as it responds to the pressures of commoditization. For instance, Waldron (2005) points to the trend of marginalized sectors of society breaking free of the assumptions and ideologies that have supported established patterns of social control; new religious movements as spaces where new forms of social relationships can be accommodated, at a time when the structures of the workplace, community and social class are undermined and often disintegrated by rapid transformation; the allure of decoupling religious expression from the constraints of traditionalism and universalist interpretative or ideological structures; and, as outlined above, putting forward religious structures and experiences that ultimately suit the needs of the religious consumer, rather than coerce him to conform to an established ideological and cultural prescription.

### 3.7.7: Commoditized religion as a mediating force

The sociology of religion and globalization has long recognized the role that religion plays as a conditioning or mediating force for social change; a mediating force that negotiates the tension between divergent social values and objectives. In Asia, throughout history, religion along with other domains of social life has been engaged in a lively interaction with social and economic behaviour (D. L. Hall & Ames, 1987; Whiteley & Whiteley, 2007). To start with, religious beliefs have been disseminated throughout this region along established trading routes (Crone, 1987; Hourani, 1991). In

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consequence, religion has never been completely external to the market in regions such as Southeast Asia.

Historians of Christianity in Asia have illustrated how the initial interactions between Asian peoples and Christian tradition served to "frame and make meaningful the economic, political and social changes they experienced because of modernity" (Park & Yoo, 2014). Christian churches arrived together with industrial capitalism as a new manifestation of the colonial enterprise, bringing a new version of western-defined modernity to Asia. Therefore, Christianity in Asia has always served as a mediating factor, allowing individuals and groups to negotiate and make sense of modernity and capitalism. This paradigm may be equally applicable to evangelical ideas and practices as mediating the experience of globalization for members of Asian societies.

Modern-day churches have thus been nurturing the evangelical-capitalist nexus through their natural and, certainly in Asia, long-established function as a mediating force. They help people negotiate and make sense of neoliberalism as the new reality, socializing them into the prevalence of market mechanisms in policymaking and in social life. In this sense, the thinking popularized by evangelical groups is once again the mediator that enables local communities to internalize and anticipate the logic, dynamics and objectives of neoliberalism. What Miller (2012) calls the "distancing" nature of commodities strongly comes into this mix of connecting global trends with local realities, making the neoliberal-cum-religious goods readily transplantable and subsequently available and intelligible outside their originating (i.e. primarily North American) contexts.

### 3.7.8: Some marginal but useful perspectives borrowed from sociology of religion

Some of the cognitive tools which were first put forward by 20th-century sociologists and which saw limited circulation in their own time have recently witnessed significant resurgence, finding new relevance and application in a number of fields

including management theory. What links them from the vantage point of this study is the view of religious movements as created, maintained and conceivably abandoned by people whose actions are anchored in history, i.e. the past as well as the future potential. Among these, Venezuelan-born sociologist of religion Otto Maduro (1945-2013) theorized that all religious phenomena owe their growth to a series of historical, socio-economic, religious, and cultural causes that are independent of the faith or the degree of consciousness of the individual participants. As a result, movements such as evangelicalism will necessarily develop different programmes in different societies (Maduro, 2005).

Meanwhile, sociologist and theologian Peter L. Berger (1929 – 2017) proposed that in modern and postmodern society, people are made to choose their own beliefs. This creates a sense of alienation and a deficit of belonging. Humans therefore construct a shared social reality which includes mediating structures designed to counter this alienation. Human existence in the age of modernity requires that structures like church, neighbourhood, and family help establish a sense of belonging which is rooted in a commitment to values or beliefs. In addition, these structures can serve a role in addressing larger social problems without giving rise to the same sense of alienation that larger society otherwise creates. In this sense, the role of mediating structures in civil society is both private and public (Berger, 2011).

Berger's contemporary Pierre Bourdieu (1930 – 2002) pioneered a view of religion within an organizational context, emphasizing the roles of religious producers and consumers. In his lifetime, Bourdieu witnessed the transformation of a religious landscape once dominated by French Catholic church, acting as a quasi-monopolistic religion that has maintained organic links with the state for several centuries, to a marketplace. In this marketplace, a number of agents compete over particular, shared forms of capital, vying for the attention of the consumer. Church membership can then



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be construed as a form of social capital, of more or less institutionalized relationships. The backing of this collectively owned capital entitles its members to credit (advance, credence), in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu, 1986). This social capital is highly symbolic; it is a form of capital granted to individuals based on their acceptance of a group's beliefs or aims. Crucially, religious capital is an organizationally dispensed capital, guarded and dispensed by religious professionals.

**3.8: Gaps identified in literature**

Overall, there is a considerable lacuna in literature left by the lack of works in neoliberal political economy which would connect neoliberal developments to a broader socioeconomic reality. Zooming in on the topic of neoliberalism and commodified religion, the body of literature (such that there is) we have presented in this chapter likewise contains empirical as well as theoretical gaps that are yet to be addressed by scholarly research. In particular, attempts to systematize academic thought on the emerging evangelical-neoliberal nexus and situate it in the developing world have remained both scarce and descriptive rather than expository. Therefore, persistent gaps remain in research on commodified religion in Asia (where historically, Christianity in general is a relative newcomer, arriving in the footsteps of western colonization and colonial industrialization), the rise and functioning of local neoliberal churches (beyond descriptions of consumer marketing techniques) and the dynamics of churches actively participating in business.

What does emerge from the literature is that, to quote from Pattana Kitiarsa, the sociology of religious commodification in these opening decades of the 21$^{st}$ century provides an alternative avenue for critical explorations of the complex tensions, fragmentations and realignments which are inherent in modern and postmodern life. It also creates opportunities to tackle the global proliferation of non-mainstream faiths and movements at both empirical and conceptual levels, and beyond the established prism of



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modern churches' quest for relevance which leads them into adoption of consumer-capitalist values, vocabulary and practices.

Churches are organizations, and research in organizations is by definition exploratory as well as investigative in nature. Typically, the emphasis is on achieving insights rather than formulating general theoretical statements. Therefore our primary objective will be to fill an empirical gap by documenting the emergence of a nexus between evangelicalism and neoliberalism in Malaysia. To date, no studies have been published on this topic – in fact, there has been no academic study of evangelical churches in Malaysia. Research in this space has only indirectly or intuitively implied the presence of a nexus between the two movements; or has been limited to portraying specific practices, institutions and personalities that populate this social landscape.

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# CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

## 4.1: An empirical approach

In this light, literature that has been directly relevant to building a conceptual framework for this study explores ongoing globalization and the concurrent commodification of different social domains, in American society and across the developing world including Asia. There are additional examples that help draw out the inherent embeddedness of neoliberalism in social, political, historical, geographic, cultural and other local contexts. This lays the foundation for addressing and understanding better the rise of the evangelical-capitalist movement.

Reflecting the nature of the material under analysis, our methodological approach takes the form of detailed empirical inquiry enriched with elements of large-scale social analysis. Mapping out and exploring the manifestations in Malaysia of the growing nexus of neoliberal and evangelical-Christian discourses is a young and underdeveloped field of social research. Therefore fresh empirical data is of great use, particularly data on non-mainstream Christian groups which have been active in the metropolitan area of Klang Valley and have made significant inroads into business. These groups have taken ownership and control over business entities, and in some cases have expanded into overseas markets.

The empirical approach *could* technically lead us to a whole range of potential avenues, such as: Accounts of national transformations (other scholars have attempted these with a view to analysing the evangelical influence on societies in transition such as Brazil, Ghana, Ukraine and other countries); case studies (of churches, their subsidiaries, property ventures etc.); drawing insights from comparative studies (e.g. of commoditizing factors and outcomes across different religions); studying specific institutions and

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policies (especially those related to religious and faith-based initiatives in the public sector and education); or researching new subjectivities, governmentalities and agencies.

We have opted to organize our research output into case studies. The case study format has been proven in social research as a solid cognitive handle, and a productive framework for conducting in-depth investigations of particular groups. Case studies engender a comprehensive and holistic perspective rather than a “snapshot”, typically produced by instruments such as surveys. They accommodate a range of tools applied to a single subject. In addition to allowing for detailed contextual analysis of a pre-determined number of social conditions and their relationships, case studies also reflect a multitude of perspectives. Importantly, this goes a long way in reducing individual bias and/or agenda. Although on the one hand, case study findings may not be easily generalized, they on the other hand provide a sound departure point for exploring common themes in greater detail.

The cases presented in this study seek to profile specific evangelical groups' formation as well as growth and commodification patterns and milestones as reflected in their marketing, fundraising, management, internationalization and other activities. The objective has been to gain insight into their collective histories and organizational development trajectories, as well as their motivations and aspirations with regard to membership, entrepreneurship, church-state relations, interaction with other faith communities, and national-level political agenda.

**4.2: Data sources**

To be relevant, the data collected in this study should provide a strong basis for examining the churches' membership composition as well as broader social expansion in aspects such as target segments (e.g. youth and students; young families; established middle class; up-and-coming middle class; migrant workers; indigenous groups; socially-

disenfranchised and at-risk segments); recruitment processes; core values and key messages; recruits' motivations and propensities (spiritual, networking, health, other); and differentiation points (e.g. prior split from a larger group).

The data points utilized in this study have included public records available from the Companies Commission of Malaysia (*Suruhanjaya Syarikat Malaysia*). This information has shed some light on trends in church-controlled business ventures' capital and ownership structure, investment focus, composition of management teams and acquisitions of business entities and property, as well as, particularly through mission statements, on their key activities as avenues not only for entrepreneurship but also fundraising, recruitment and proselytization.

The company-specific data has been combined with a richness of the churches' marketing materials. Practically all of the churches' websites offer a wealth of multimedia information (text, audio, video) including a back catalogue of sermons made available in several languages and digital formats, links to social media posts and groups, registration forms for upcoming seminars, calls for donations. In some instances, this organization-level data was supplemented with content obtained from publications, guest talks, conference presentations and proceedings.

On a best-effort basis, the emerging information was enriched through face-to-face conversations with church founders, current senior pastors and other leaders of the churches in focus, as well as with additional groups and relevant umbrella organizations (e.g. The Council of Churches of Malaysia).[31] These face-to-face discussions were structured in keeping with standard market research techniques, such as: a) organizing questions in a sequence from the least sensitive / non-threatening to the potentially more

[31] The Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) is an ecumenical fellowship of Churches and Christian organisations in Malaysia. It is one of the three constituent members of the Christian Federation of Malaysia.



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controversial ones; b) putting the interviewees at ease personally before engaging them in an "official", fact-based discussion; c) ensuring the interview had the flow and the feel of an intimate conversation – and indeed a dialogue – rather than a data collection exercise; d) defining a set of (at least intangible) incentives, etc. Realistically, when speaking with some of the pastors who had agreed to be interviewed, the researcher was treated to a standard PowerPoint "marketing presentation", with no room or time left to ask clarifying questions or challenge some of the information points and observations presented. On balance, however, the conversations yielded a fair amount of additional stimulus and materials for evaluating the churches' growth and activities in Malaysia.

Upon completing the archival as well as the interview portions of the research, the research effort proceeded to a thematic, explanatory analysis of the main findings, linking the fragmentary data to larger assertions and organizing these into coherent case studies. Throughout this process, the analysis has been informed with an awareness of the contested nature of this research territory and of the possibility that different views and concepts revealed by the sources may compete and negotiate with each other.[32]

### 4.3: Methodological challenges and other constraints

Executing on the original methodological design quickly became a process of learning by doing. Early on, our expectation was to elicit deep insight into the evangelical-neoliberal nexus by compiling publicly accessible information on churches and church-owned companies. We quickly ran into serious impediments, which are described below, and had to adjust our data collection strategy accordingly.

Indeed, many of the constraints encountered when conducting this type of field research tend to be of a practical as well as political nature. These include, for example,

[32] The Malaysian public have on occasion reacted emotionally to selected issues that are linked to the evangelical movement, such as the topic of proselytization among local Muslims. To avoid sensationalizing the study's output, an effort has been made wherever possible to frame and present these issues as inferences rather than as focal points and/or findings.

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a sketchy regulatory framework that is in place with regard to religious organizations and their entrepreneurial ventures. As such, inquiries with the Registrar of Societies Malaysia (*Jabatan Pendaftaran Pertubuhan;* RoS) yielded virtually no output, despite our initial optimism and repeated personal visits to its head office.

Data from the Companies Commission was more copious and much more easily accessible. At the same time, many of the documents were clearly compiled by third parties such as external accountants and advisers who tended to "copy and paste" large sections of the same text from year to year. A careful search was required to sift through what had been written as a matter of formality and to uncover cogent pieces of information related to specific company's business objectives, strategy and growth patterns.

By far the greatest constraint has had to do with the evangelical groups' reluctance to speak with outsiders. In the political atmosphere of recent years, when religion has been likened to "the new race" due to the highly politicized discourse surrounding it – a budding fulcrum of political tension and latent conflict – this is quite understandable, and hardly requires detailed rationalizations.

There are other factors at play. Firstly, business activities are by definition not actively advertised as religious groups' remit; the actors involved have nothing to gain by contributing to greater transparency on the topic. Secondly, Malaysia's prominent evangelical Christian churches have been subjected to considerable negative publicity. Over the past few years they have had a number of accusations levelled at them of engaging in dubious practices such as importing foreign political agendas, receiving illicit funding from the United States, upsetting the country's racial and religious *status quo,* questioning the legitimacy of the elected federal government, proselytizing among Muslims, harbouring businessmen with a shady past, etc. Even those church leaders who



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were forthcoming with information typically insisted on obtaining first a direct personal introduction and a firm endorsement from a mutual close contact. Particularly in regard to non-Malaysian researchers, “walking in” to a church service, unless one was a prospective member, had been expressly discouraged.

In terms of processing the obtained data, there are persistent risks involved of committing a fallacy such as category error when discussing religious phenomena in non-religious terms. These are further heightened in discussing topics related to charismatic religious movements which thrive on “sharing in the spirit” and on the supernatural. Regardless of how their practices may be framed in academic discourse, to their adherents these are simply instances of church members using their spiritual gifts to build each other up and develop each other’s potential. Similarly, the majority of evangelical pastors will point to the “presence of the Holy Spirit”, “divine inspiration”, or “receiving the calling”, rather than any particular combination of socioeconomic, organizational and personal factors, as key source of motivation behind their decision to establish a church and to continue planting new churches.

Lastly, in qualitative research, conceptual clarifications are often complex and difficult. Much depends upon the style, personality and actions of the researcher. My personal background in China studies and cultural studies has on many occasions exerted a pull towards explorations of the identities, values and fundamental, underlying assumptions involved in this field, rather than the more “hard-wired” data on organizations and companies.

**4.4: Conceptual framework**

In the previous sections, we outlined theories surrounding commodities and commodification as underpinning and productively bridging both neoliberal trends in society and their repercussions on social relations and social structures including religious

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organizations. We have established that the expansion of neoliberal influence is necessarily accompanied by intensifying commoditization; that commoditization of social relations, including religion, is reflective of global social change yet also embedded in local practices and institutions; and that religious objects and activities are brought to the market and made available for consumption (Stolz, 2008). Yet, this process is not automatically synonymous with degradation and "cheapening" of the religious experience (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000). In fact, it produces attachments and meanings which culminate in what some describe as an "economy of belonging" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009); and that organized religion may be a particularly vibrant arena for observing these changes.

From this body of theory, we have derived a set of concepts that will serve as departure points for grasping, viewing and analysing the workings of business- and entrepreneurship-focused evangelical churches/organizations in Klang Valley. We hope to apply these handles in a productive and relevant fashion, all the while bearing in mind that,

> It has become commonplace to bespeak the metamorphosis of the modernist polity under the impact of globalization, neoliberalism, empire, whatever. The more difficult question is how precisely to make sense of this unfolding history. And how to do so in such a way as to illuminate the variant species of... ...subjectivity taking shape within it. (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 10)

These caveats should not preclude us from organizing and framing the research around clearly defined problems and contexts, such as:

**a) Easing access to religion by lowering barriers to entry; making religion consumption-ready by adjusting its message; and serving as distribution centres for a set of 'religious goods':** We will attempt to map out the different avenues in which the churches under analysis have disseminated the vocabulary, frameworks and

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methodologies of neoliberal capitalism in general and organizational-cum-corporate management in particular within their day-to-day religious activities, thus informing, energizing, mediating and perpetuating the otherwise elusive and poorly documented evangelical-capitalist nexus. These independent, non-denominational, urban and relatively hierarchy-free evangelical churches are ideally equipped to perform this function. Consciously and actively behaving as modern, 21st-century organizations in every sense of the word, they not only model their structures and operations on the world of business and management theory – they have also become willing and agile participants in for-profit business ventures. Their conduct of business – historically an area shunned by most religious entities – has become an avenue to their continuous expansion and empowerment. While examining the consumer orientation and rhetoric prevalent in these churches' messages, we will pay special attention to those among their practices which have blurred the lines between the categories of not-for-profit and for-profit; community vs. business; faith-based vs. commercial. We will also describe the structures and entities that have shouldered the churches' commitment to consistent growth – in membership, funding, business subsidiaries, physical facilities, and capacity to deliver social services, mainly to marginalized groups.

**b) Building attachment, branding and belonging:** With religion firmly treading on commodity territory, it becomes the churches' mandate to transmit this commoditized character of religion to their membership. The result is often a church identity and self-awareness that is more tangible and emotionally compelling (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009) Value is created; one might say "unlocked"; identities are reshaped; and group consciousness is revitalized. In addition, a mediating force is unleashed, one which helps churchgoers make sense of the ever-intensifying presence and workings of the global neoliberal order in their own local setting. We will attempt to explore these themes by mapping out some of the motivations the church founders as well as members have



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pursued, articulated and realized; piecing together and understanding of how these motivations have contributed towards building the church brand; and what this brand stands for internally and externally.

**c) Contestations and political ramifications:** It might be tantalizingly simple to view the neoliberal-evangelical nexus as something that is transported, or imported, from the United States to Asia in a linear fashion. However, at this point we have accepted that neoliberalism has no "one point of origin", does not in fact diffuse in linear ways, and is always hybrid, i.e. embedded in local structures; and that the US neoliberal-evangelical nexus itself has been heavily contingent upon specificities of American history and politics. The globally diffusive, wave-like nature of large-scale modern social change (Meyer, 2008) – of which the neoliberal-evangelical nexus is one aspect – has placed this diverse range of action by new religious organizations into a space where it has been largely independent of national policy. Particularly in complex, multi-religious societies such as Malaysia, this leads new churches directly onto a path of contestation with the state and with other, especially dominant and state-sanctioned, religions. In addition to the new churches' greatly expanded roles in society, this contestation is further fuelled by their maintaining their own linkages to world society, at organizational as well as individual levels. In this space, i.e. at the macro level of community and society, we will seek to outline how the churches' growth has produced a sense of empowerment that has spilled over to the political and interfaith arenas, thus redefining the nature of the groups' functioning within the broader Malaysian polity.

The resulting framework (Fig. 4.1) provides us with a conceptual model of the evangelical-neoliberal nexus we seek to explore. It allows us to break down the link between neoliberalism and evangelicalism to the concepts of churches and businesses. The churches we analyse have consciously sought to heighten their organizational, fundraising and entrepreneurial attributes. This has been their avenue to perpetuating



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growth; to putting forward an appealing, competitive and distinct basket of "goods" they can distribute to existing as well as prospective members; and to lock in these members and their contributions by way of a powerful mix of consumer marketing and emotional attachment.

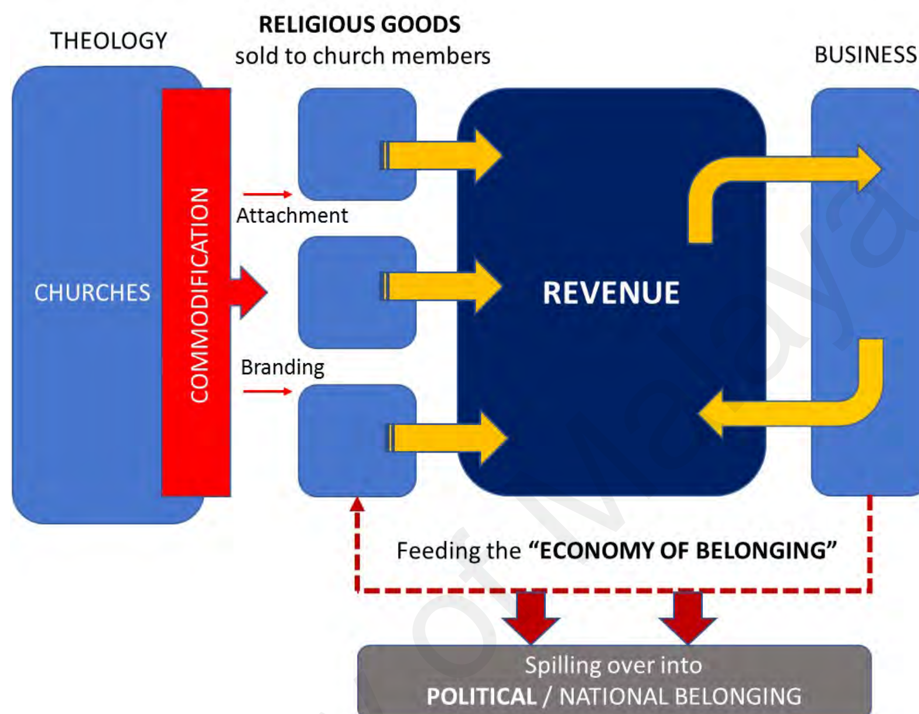


**Figure 4.1: Conceptual framework**

From the churches' perspective, this model captures a classic virtuous cycle: Members who feel attached to the church will raise and contribute more funds. The extra revenue can be channelled to business and property undertakings. Some of the proceeds from these will be earmarked to fund even larger physical premises, higher-quality health, learning, counselling and sports facilities and bigger-budget entertainment productions – in other words, more compelling goods to ensure higher rates of member retention and satisfaction. Clearly, "belonging" is big business, and the modern, entrepreneurial urban church is situated at the fulcrum of that business. Importantly, and as we will illustrate, across churches the resulting sense of belonging has been extended from an emotional and socioeconomic domain to the political space, through an invigorated sense of political engagement and national identity.

In studying the emergence of these churches, their organizational development and commodification processes, we will suppress the instinct to homogenize and essentialize, which has been present in some of the literature. Instead, while exploring variables such as social trends that led to the churches' inception and rapid growth; their founders' and leaders' educational, professional and ethnic background; and trends that are discernible in the churches' doctrine, membership and international linkages, we will actively work to identify the main variations in the enactment of these patterns.

**4.5: Research output: Case studies**

Each of the resulting case studies we have produced portrays a religious group as manifesting a specific brand of the evangelical-neoliberal nexus that has been developing and asserting itself in Malaysia's Klang Valley. They include 1) DUMC, a megachurch which operates a convention centre-style prayer facility named the Dream Centre, attracting a weekly crowd of several thousand; 2) Full Gospel Tabernacle (FGT), a highly influential urban church which hasn't shied away from initiating public discussions on sensitive national social and political issues; 3) First Baptist Church (FBC), a youth-oriented church specialized in apologetics; 4) Raphah Ministries Malaysia, a healing ministry focusing on issues of mental health and well-being; and 5) Harvest Christian Assembly (HCA), an Assemblies of God (AOG) Pentecostal church serving a comparatively smaller community in the town of Klang.

The case study approach we chose demanded that the data we collected be placed in proper contexts; that assumptions underlying our investigation of the Malaysian neoliberal-evangelical nexus do not remain hidden and unexamined, thus potentially clouding our formulation of results; and that we not only report what we see in the field but also organize the phenomena and the causal links between them.

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Narratively and visually, we outlined the main concepts we set out to study, as well as the presumed relationships, events and behaviours playing out among these concepts, in a conceptual framework. We situated it within the overarching model of religion as produced and consumed, demanded and supplied (Iannaccone, 1992). We then applied this framework throughout the research project, including in the discussion of the research findings.

Within this proposed universe, we started with a micro perspective of the specific church / religious group as a building block: We studied individual churches, their founders and histories, and the theological doctrines they propound, particularly with reference to organizational values, management ethos and a broader socio-political outlook. We considered how the churches we selected make religion "consumption-ready" for the postmodern urban Malaysian worshipper; how this casts them in a role of distributors of religious goods; and how these goods are marketed and branded.

Our subsequent focus was on the modalities of the religious goods' consumption – the target consumer cohorts, their typical ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, their collective as well as individual needs, aspirations and insecurities, the attachments and sense of empowerment they have formed through the consumption of commoditized religion, and their resulting propensity to take part in cell groups, raise funds, engage in proselytization work and participate in church-planting activities on behalf of the religious group they have come to identify with.

Where possible, we explored the religious groups' forays into business, such as their acquisitions of existing companies, spinning off units which started out as not-for-profit / social work centres and have since been transformed into commercial entities, and constructing ever-larger physical premises incorporating education, event and entertainment facilities.



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Despite the scarcity of relevant public records, we attempted to document that these actions are commonly underpinned by financial flows of tithes and other member donations to the church, the church's business investments, and the earnings from those investments reinvested e.g. into a church Building Fund, aiming to provide the members with ever more compelling, personalized and dramatic 'goods'.

By way of conceptual synthesis of the framework's components and relationships into a macro perspective, we sought to outline the aggregate outlines of a landscape that may be described – to borrow terms we brought up in the theory and literature overview – as the local manifestation of an evangelical-neoliberal "religion-cum-economy" or, more metaphorically, "economy of belonging". In addition, we touched on some of the specifically Malaysian conditions and antecedents that collectively inform this economy. Although just like neoliberalism itself, the neoliberal-evangelical nexus has in many ways defied precise definitions, arguably it is this economy, which far transcends the objective shape and volume of visible transactions (Kopytoff, 1986) that has been and remains at the heart of the nexus – sustaining and perpetuating it into the future. Lastly, we showed that the churches' role as distributors of religious goods inevitably placed them in the path of competition and increasingly overt conflict with other religious groups.

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# CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDIES

In selecting the five religious groups to be profiled in our case studies, we opted for a diverse cross-section of churches/ministries. This was crucial in order to show that although the processes of religious commodification share an overall logic and show many common threads, they also unfold through a richness of different paths and patterns. This richness is in fact a direct consequence of commodification, as churches find themselves under constant pressure to compete in a crowded marketplace. Therefore, these churches must continually specialize and differentiate their product.

**Table 5.1: List of churches profiled in our case studies**

| Church/ministry | Description | Contact | Address | Date of face-to-face conversation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **DUMC** | Megachurch<br>Dominionist<br>Strong global linkages | Senior Pastor Dato' Dr. Daniel Ho | Dream Centre, 2, Jalan 13/1, Seksyen 13, 46200 Petaling Jaya | 31 October 2014 |
| **Full Gospel Tabernacle (FGT)** | Reproducing church<br>Entrepreneurial<br>Politically vocal | Pastor Ng Wah Lok | Wisma Eagles, 5, Jalan TP 4, Taman Perindustrian Uep, 47620 Subang Jaya | 20 November 2013 |
| **First Baptist Church (FBC)** | Youth-oriented church | Pastor R. Ramachandran, Pastor Mark Tan | 8, Jalan SS 17/1d, Ss 17, 47500 Subang Jaya | 30 June 2017 |
| **Raphah Ministries Malaysia** | Healing ministry | Public seminar | Raphah Centre PJ,<br>Jalan PJU 1A/41B, Pusat Dagangan NZX, 47301 Petaling Jaya | 20 May 2017 |
| **Harvest Christian Assembly (HCA)** | Assemblies of God (AoG) church<br>Small town-based, community-oriented | Pastor Alan Tan | Lot 6934, Berkeley Complex, Jalan Lang, Taman Berkeley, 41150 Klang, Selangor | 10 December 2013 |

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Each case study showcases the commodifying trends discussed in the previous chapters and captured in the conceptual framework. These trends include a democratization of entry to church membership as well as leadership, with a majority of founders and senior pastors coming from technical professions (medicine, law, engineering); making religion 'consumption-ready' by easing access to religious experience, striving for scale and adjusting the message itself to provide a better fit with the target audience; churches establishing themselves as distributors of a specific basket of 'religious goods'; systematically building attachments to and branding for these goods; concurrently engaging in business and investment activities which are financed by members tithing their incomes, fundraising and other contributions; and lastly, linking the outcomes of these activities and processes into an "economy of belonging" (a term borrowed from Jean and John Comaroff); as well as allowing some of this belonging to be channelled into the political domain.

**Table 5.2: 'Religious goods' distributed by each group**

| Group | | Target member segments | 'Religious goods' on offer |
|---|---|---|---|
| **DUMC** | | Professionals<br>University Malaya (UM) and University Malaya Medical Centre (UMCC) staff<br>University students<br>Young families<br>Expatriates | Networking<br>Multimedia productions<br>Pre-school<br>Tuition<br>Counselling<br>Food bank |
| **FGT** | | Managers<br>Professionals<br>College students<br>Young families | Networking<br>Training modules<br>Healing rallies<br>Book and music distribution<br>Music production<br>Minimart<br>Dialysis centre<br>Physical rehabilitation centre |
| **FBC** | | Youth<br>College students | Counselling<br>Youth camps<br>Career talks |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Sunway Medical Centre and Sunway University staff | |
| **Raphah** | | People battling mental health issues, depression, addiction | Counselling<br>Therapy<br>Intercessory prayers |
| **HCA** | | Local community members'<br>Families<br>The elderly | Pre-school<br>Tuition<br>Sports facilities<br>Care home |

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### 5.1: DUMC: A megachurch promoting dominionist values

*"The questions we should be asking, crisply summarized by Peter Drucker, are: 'What is our business?' and 'How's business?'"* (former DUMC Senior Pastor Dr. Daniel K.C. Ho)

#### 5.1.1: Background information

Formerly known as Damansara Utama Methodist Church but now referred to solely by its abbreviated name of "DUMC" (as its physical location is no longer in Damansara but in Section 13, Petaling Jaya), DUMC is a non-denominational evangelical church and one of Klang Valley's best-recognized megachurches.[33] DUMC's goal is to be known as "a church in the community and a church for the community". It seeks to "transform the world by transforming the lives of people". It also aims to be a centre of excellence whose events and celebrations can be highlights in the city's social life (Ho, 2007, pp. 10-12). In this context, DUMC's now-retired Senior Pastor Daniel Ho's favourite quote is Bill Hybels's "The local church is the hope of the world".[34]

In late 1979 and early 1980, 22 members branched out of their mother church, Sungei Way-Subang Methodist Church (SSMC). SSMC had been established in Section 3, Petaling Jaya just a few years earlier, in May 1975. This new, "preaching point" group started the Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC). All founding members were professionals (accountants, dental surgeons, other) or medical students at the University of Malaya (UM). Today, DUMC's members are predominantly middle-class and upper-middle-class urban professionals.

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[33] As briefly explained in section 1.1, a megachurch (sometimes spelled "mega-church") is a typically evangelical Christian church with a very large congregation, whose weekend services usually attract several thousand worshippers. For instance, Singapore's City Harvest Church had a 2017 congregation of more than 16,000, and has used Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre for its religious services. Although the "mega" prefix sounds novel, according to Wikipedia the word "megachurch" was already in use in the mid-19th century.

[34] Bill Hybels is the founding and senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, USA. Willow Creek is known as the quintessential megachurch and one of the most attended churches in America, with average attendance of up to 24,000.

A team of five elders is regularly appointed to provide leadership and oversight for DUMC. Senior Pastor Dr. Daniel K.C. Ho served as one of the church elders for more than 30 years. From 1986 to 1995, he was the founding Secretary General of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF), the umbrella body representing all evangelical churches in Malaysia. He also held the title of Honorary Secretary of Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) and was involved with the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST), a body representing the country's non-Muslims. In addition, he has acted as advisor to several organisations including Malaysia Bible Seminary, Ethics & Research Committee of International Medical University, Orang Asli Economics Cooperative,[35] Family First Foundation Malaysia, Malaysian CARE, Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship Malaysia, Gospel to the Poor and Alpha Malaysia. Pastor Ho has also been an advisor to *Asian Beacon,* a magazine (asianbeacon.org) which has been published since 1969 and has a current estimated readership of 45,000 ("Meeting with Senior Pastor Dr. Daniel Ho", 2014).

There are an additional more than 20 pastors, carrying designations such as Executive Pastor, Equipping Pastor, District Pastor, Worship Pastor, Missions Pastor, Ministry Pastor, Zone Pastor, Church-Planting Pastor and other. Pastor Ho's wife Doris heads the Intercessory & Prayer Ministry. Technical administration of DUMC's facilities and activities is carried out by more than 40 professional managers who perform standard office roles in functions such as media, HR, IT etc.

In June 2016, Pastor Ho stepped down as Senior Pastor upon reaching the age of 65. He handed over the leadership of DUMC to his designated successor, Pastor Chris Kam. Senior Pastor Kam and his wife, Stella Ho are a by-product of the cell group

[35] Orang Asli is a term denoting Malaysia's aboriginal tribes.



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ministry in the Overseas Christian Fellowship (OCF) in Monash University, Clayton, Victoria, Australia. In the Malaysian context, Pastor Ho successfully established himself as a "celebrity pastor": In August 2016, the Penang state government bestowed on him the award of *Darjah Setia Pangkuan Negeri (DSPN)* which carries the title Datuk.

### 5.1.2: Theology: Dominionism a.k.a. the Seven Mountains mandate

The recurring theme of DUMC's activities is one of "Church – Community – Nation". The church is cast in the role of an agent of social transformation, in Malaysia as well as globally. Although not always directly promoted as such, much of its doctrine comes from American evangelical pastors, thinkers and authors who in the US are thought of as proponents of the Seven Mountains movement.[36] The name comes from Isaiah 2:2: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains."

The Seven Mountains philosophy has to do with a vision of Christians retaking seven domains of society where they are considered to have ceded influence, namely: 1) arts and entertainment, 2) business, 3) education, 4) family, 5) government, 6) media and 7) religion. As evangelical political activist, author and self-described "Christian nationalist" David Barton explained to his audience of radio listeners in 2011: "If you can have those seven areas, you can shape and control whatever takes place in nations, continents and even the world" ("King's Dominion?", 2016).

Because of this ambitious socio-political, economic and cultural agenda, the Seven Mountains imperative is also commonly referred to as a "dominionist" school of evangelical Christianity, an outgrowth of dominion theology which aims at "taking dominion" of the earth by controlling civil affairs and all other aspects of society. The

[36] Also known as Seven Domains, Marketplace Ministry or Cultural Mandate

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Seven Mountains doctrine has also drawn influence from the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a theological and spiritual warfare movement initiated by C. Peter Wagner (1930-2016).[37] Over the years, NAR has imported its own distinct set of dreams, visions and other revelations to the Seven Mountains mandate. NAR preaches a Gospel of Power – a pragmatic attempt to bring gospel to transform, restore or awaken cities, cultures, nations and finally the whole world. NAR leaders believe that God will provide "strategic-level spiritual warfare" in the form of new blueprints, vision, DNA, divine strategies or battle plans on how to advance the "Kingdom" on earth and to subject "principalities and powers".

It is noteworthy that NAR has been no stranger to Southeast Asia. It was in Singapore that the International Coalition of Apostolic Leaders (ICAL) was initiated in 1999, at a meeting attended by Peter Wagner who was appointed ICAL's Presiding Apostle for 1999-2010. Simultaneously, Wagner accepted the post of Convening Apostle. These forums went on to help Singapore's now-notorious City Harvest Church formulate a cultural mandate drawing on the Seven Mountains ideology. Subsequently, Peter Wagner and other NAR leaders would return to Singapore on an annual basis, for instance to take part in the City Harvest-organized Festival of Praise in 2006, and to preach at Transformation 2009, an event held at Singapore Expo. They would consistently encourage Singapore's evangelicals and charismatics to take over all the different areas of secular space.

Historically, dominionist messages were dormant in the West for most of the 20th century: The so-called postmillennial sentiment[38] – of making the world a better place

[37] The NAR abbreviation is sometimes meant to stand for New Apostolic Roundtable.
[38] A stream of Christian end-times theology, postmillennialism envisages that the Second Coming will be preceded by the "Millennium", i.e. a Golden Age during which peace, prosperity, righteousness and Christian ethics will prevail. Based on the Seven Mountains theology, the Second Coming will only take place in a world that mirrors the kingdom of God. According to some critics, this idea parallels the New Age teaching that anticipates a cosmic spiritual shift when man becomes a co-redeemer of Planet Earth.

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through efforts aimed at changing social structures and ridding them of evil – evaporated in the aftermath of World War I. It fell victim to widespread collective disillusionment with what had clearly not become a more enlightened society, purged of evil influences. It was not until the mid-1970s that a revival of dominionist thinking got underway. Even then, it was not without its detractors. Dominionist and apostolic teachings are well-known for containing what many see as extra-biblical principles of "strategic-level prayer and spiritual warfare".

In the United States, the often-stated emphasis on "reclaiming" these seven domains of social life, and the underlying focus on this [material] world and this life rather than the next, particularly when couched in vocabulary of spiritual warfare teachings, has often stirred controversy. It particular, it has attracted allegations of disseminating an experience-oriented theology and elements of mysticism. It has also been at times equated with utopian ideologies such as socialism and communism for its effort to "make that which belongs to the afterlife happen here and now (on Earth)" or to "create heaven here on Earth."

Although outwardly, Seven Mountains seeks to change the external structures of society, its tenets overlap with some of the vocabulary, goals, and methods of the Prosperity Gospel as evidenced in other Charismatic and Pentecostal churches. As such, personal transformation is thought of as empowered from the inside out by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In consequence, others may be changed through the influence of those who have been changed. The movement's advocates want Christians to be "the head and not the tail, above and not beneath." As Christians infiltrate and overtake the seven cultural mountains, their righteousness is expected to be blessed with status, power and wealth, thus drawing in more and more believers.

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In the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Texas Senator Ted Cruz was billed a "culture warrior" as he launched a campaign presenting a dominionist vision for America. Not unlike DUMC, Cruz never explicitly used the terms "dominionism" or "Seven Mountains" while campaigning. He never publicly rejected them or distanced himself from them, either.[39] Cruz often talked about his father, travelling evangelist Rafael Cruz (*1939). During a 2012 sermon at New Beginnings Church in Bedford, Texas, Rafael Cruz had described his son's political campaign as a direct fulfilment of biblical prophecy. He told the congregation that God would anoint Christian "kings" to preside over an "end-time transfer of wealth" from the wicked to the righteous. After this sermon, Larry Huch, the pastor of New Beginnings, claimed Cruz's recent election to the US Senate was a sign that he was one of these kings. According to Cruz Senior and Huch, Ted Cruz was anointed by God to help Christians in their effort to "go to the marketplace and occupy the land … and take dominion" over it. According to them, this "end-time transfer of wealth" will relieve Christians of all financial woes, allowing true believers to ascend to a position of political and cultural power in which they can build a Christian civilization. This Christian polity will then set the stage for the Second Coming (Fea, 2016).

### 5.1.3: Commodifying trends

#### 5.1.3.1: Lowering the barriers to entry, for clergy and for members

Pastor Ho comes from a professional background, as well as from a non-Christian family background. He holds a master's degree in electrical engineering from UK, an M.A. from Fuller Theological Seminary, USA and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Asbury Theological Seminary, USA. Before taking up his pastoral position, Pastor

[39] The majority of the presidential candidates either brandished outright evangelical credentials or offered messages specifically targeting the evangelical community. For instance, Donald Trump appealed to followers of the Prosperity Gospel. Marco Rubio, for his part, was believed to appeal to suburban, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class evangelicals, who don't share their fellow evangelicals' taste for televangelists and large-scale Pentecostal prayer meetings.



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Ho worked for several years as an engineering lecturer at UM and TAR College. Pastor Ho was raised as a Buddhist and became Christian at the age of 21. Although he had led DUMC from its earliest history, he did not come on board full-time as senior pastor until 1995. In the process, he gave up his engineering and teaching careers.

In terms of member recruitment, the barriers to entry have been similarly lowered in order to make the DUMC flavour of religion ready for consumption: In a large measure, the long-standing emphasis on multimedia, entertainment-style worship rather than dogma is what fuelled membership growth from 20+ in the early days to the currently estimated 5,000. Megachurches such as DUMC are an epitome of preparing religion for easy, convenient and hassle-free consumption by mass audiences. DUMC's weekend worship services have been described as refreshing and energizing. They often resemble a rock concert, blasting off powerful vocal renditions to an enthusiastic audience. Overall, they are an entertaining way to spend a Sunday morning. For young people in particular, attending church may be a social highlight of the week, an event to look forward to – unlike with mainline churches where a young person will often feel that "Sunday church" is just another item on a list of chores to be taken care of during that week.

The church's list of core values includes striving to be "culturally relevant" (Ho, 2007, p. 17). Therefore music, song and dance have had a central role in its activities from the outset. Music concerts staged by the church are known within the community as big-budget, often branded (e.g. "Loud!") undertakings. They showcase painstakingly choreographed and rehearsed, professional-quality performances by youth volunteers alongside acclaimed celebrities – usually gospel, jazz, R&B and adult contemporary recording artists who enjoy regional following across Southeast Asia, such as Malaysian Idol season 1 winner Jaclyn Victor, 2005 winner of Malaysian Music Industry Awards (AIM) for Best Local English Album Juwita Suwito and other artists.

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To sustain the interest of the young, digitally literate millennial generation, DUMC has also been active in screening the internationally- renowned Alpha Film Series – 30-minute documentary-style film episodes from around the world, designed to address a broadly global and multicultural audience. Although the content that the Alpha episodes cover has been traditional (*Who is Jesus?, How can we have faith?, Why and how do I pray?, How does God guide us?, Who is the Holy Spirit?*), the films often feature inspiring stories and interviews using interactive cinematography, as well as visual illustrations and motion graphics. The interviews and stories typically present a colourful mix of contributors with various backgrounds such as UK TV presenter and Chief Scout Bear Grylls, former English national rugby player Ugo Monye, Hong Kong-based missionary Jackie Pullinger, Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Preacher to the Papal Household Father Raniero Cantalamessa, Oxford University professor of science and religion Alister McGrath, José Henriquez Gonzalez, one of the miners trapped for 69 days at the San José Mine in Chile, and others. The audio-visual content of the Alpha films is meant to be relevant to the needs of a young and diverse audience, as well as visually engaging, emotive, uplifting and epic in scale.

The original Alpha Course, a basic introduction to Christianity as redesigned by an Anglican priest, Reverend Nicky Gumbel, has been used, endorsed and supported by Christian groups representing a range of traditions. A hybrid combination of conservative and charismatic influences, it has nonetheless been described by UK media as "British Christianity's biggest success story". Where the Alpha Course ethos resonates particularly strongly with DUMC's focus and teachings, aside from the charismatic sensibility, is in Rev. Gumbel's theology of "God as a multiplier": "Whatever you give to God, he multiplies" (Gumbel, 2017).

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#### 5.1.3.2: Adjusting and simplifying the message to suit the audience

Quantitative growth has been DUMC's lifeblood from the outset: It is the cell church principles of multiplication or church growth that the now-retired Pastor Ho spent 15 years teaching to fellow pastors and religious leaders from a number of countries. The reason the cell church model has been widely adopted is because the leaders believe that it is the best model for multiplication and growth, especially as and when the church may face persecution someday in the future. According to DUMC, the model has been adopted from Faith Community Baptist Church (FCBC), an evangelical megachurch in Singapore which has been active since 1986. A cell church is more than just a church which contains cells: Its structure and activities firmly revolved around the cell structure, and individual cell leaders hold ranks equivalent to pastors or mentors. Cell groups may also be called home groups, home friendship groups, home care groups, house fellowships or life groups. The specific cell growth methodology which DUMC adopted from Singapore's FCBC is known as G12. It is a pyramidal structure in which 12 individuals each mentor and influence another 12 people, thus setting in motion a cascade of geometric growth. This method was originally developed by Pastor David Yonggi Cho of South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church, an Assemblies of God megachurch which describes itself as the largest congregation in the world. Pastor Cho's approach was later repackaged as G12 and popularized by Colombian charismatic preacher César Castellanos. In his words:

> Train twelve people and reproduce in them the character of Christ which is in you. And if every one of them does the same with another twelve people, and if these, in their turn, do the same with each other, you and your church will experience unprecedented growth. ("Origins of G12", n.d.)

G12 is founded upon the idea that following the examples set by Jesus, every Christian can mentor and lead 12 people in Christian faith. Promoted by FCBC since 2002, G12 is far from a random, catchy-named mathematical model: It is a full-fledged

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global movement. FCBC founder Apostle Lawrence Khong serves as the G12 Regional Coordinator for Asia. In August 2018, FCBC was scheduled to organize a four-day G12 Asia Conference 2018 at Singapore Expo, with Lawrence and his wife Nina Kong appointed as Conference Hosts and Pastor Castellanos himself making appearances throughout, even serving a Sunday worship in Mandarin. According to the event's website (www.g12asiaconference.com):

> The Conference isn't going to be just another church gathering. It will be an encounter with the King of Kings. It will be a time for you to be equipped to serve Him through the G12 Vision. It will be the place where you will be empowered to advance His Kingdom, wherever you have been assigned to. ("G12 Asia Conference", 2019)

Based on online testimonials, proponents of G12 don't just teach, train and promote the system: They well and truly breathe and dream the multitudes. On its UK website, G12 describes its conferences in the following terms:

> The purpose of each of our conferences is to lead every person and church into a supernatural experience with the Holy Spirit. We know that God will transform your heart and life to bring an awakening to your ministry, inspiring you to impact your city through evangelism. You will receive the resources and strategies you need to bring growth to your church. Pastors from the G12 team will share teachings and testimonies of what the vision has done in their lives, with the heart to see God do the same in you. ("The Vision of 12," 2019)

DUMC members are assigned to a cell group which is nearest to their homes in order for them to achieve an impact on their community. "If members prefer to attend a cell group elsewhere, they are allowed the flexibility," Wan-Kuan Ann, a zone leader, explained in a news interview. "The rationale for cell groups to exist within one's *oikos*[40] is so that eventually when DUMC decides to plant new churches, the cell groups in each zone will become part of the local church" (Ng, 2016).

[40] In Greek, *oikos* means "dwelling", "house", "habitation". In a spiritual context, it refers to a person's close circle – the group of people one interacts on a daily basis.

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The underlying formula is one of multiplication, i.e. the more the cell groups engage with the community, the faster they are believed to multiply. Besides meeting for their regular cell meetings, members interact with the local community through shared meals, hospital and home visitations, and other social activities. The cells are said to be imbued with a dual purpose – that of evangelism and that of edification.

The church realizes that the success of each cell group to multiply is heavily contingent on the cell group leaders. Cell group leaders are recognized as playing a key role in the growth of the cell groups. They are provided in-house and on-the-job training so that they can propel the groups into Community and Outreach stages that help the cell groups to multiply. Numerous training programmes are planned for the cell group leaders as well. For example, Lead 2017, a three-day annual conference which was held in June 2017, was advertised as an opportunity for all cell group leaders, as well as leaders from other local churches, to learn from inspirational church leaders from different parts of the world.

The cell structure has had a direct effect on DUMC's membership size. The member base grew from the original 20-plus individuals in 1980 to about 500 by 1993, and 1,000 members by 1999. Today, DUMC has 4,500 members, many of them young professionals, youth, students, office workers, secretaries. Its weekly prayer services have enjoyed a steady attendance of 5,000. An estimated 75% of the church's weekend attendance is made up of cell members, who have been organized into more than 320 cell groups. To be a member of DUMC, one has to be a member of a cell group. According to Senior Pastor Chris Kam, there is no compromise in this matter as cell groups provide the basic building blocks for community identity and involvement.

In the same spirit of growth and multiplication, the vocabulary and imagery of much of DUMC's literature draw heavily on management theory. They reference tenets



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of organizational change and transformational leadership as well as talent management and effective teamwork. The literature quotes from thinkers of management theory such as John Maxwell, Ken Blanchard, Phil Hodges, and Justin Dennison. It pays particular attention to developing and multiplying leaders who will act as culture influencers and cultural architects (Ho, 2007). The School of Leadership and Advanced School of Leadership have partnered with Malaysia Bible Seminary (MBS) to organize courses in theological teaching and training for ministry leaders and pastors. The MBS extension programmes offered at DUMC are Certificate of Ministry (Cert. Min.) and Master of Ministry (M. Min.). Set in a context of ministry, church, mission and marketplace, the programmes include courses such as Workplace Theology and Christian Doctrine for Today ("Equip: Advanced School of Leadership," n.d.). The courses take the form of evening classes which are delivered at DUMC's Dream Centre. In addition, through its Mentoring and Accountability Group (MAG), DUMC's leaders conduct mentoring sessions with some of Malaysia's top CEOs.

#### 5.1.3.3: Building attachment and branding

The tenets of establishing community services in its own nation and bringing love and justice to a needy society are inscribed in DUMC's mission. DUMC defines itself as a values-driven church whose leaders consider identifying core values as one of the most important functions of their leadership. In Pastor Ho's view, leadership must be honest, transparent and accountable, consistently acknowledging and reflecting the presence of God. Similarly, DUMC's ministries are run on the basis of "maximum accountability, greatest effectiveness and minimum control in ministry (Ho, 2007, p. 21). DUMC's focus on community as well as nation-building is captured in the way the church describes its ministries: "Christian life doesn't just exist within the walls of the church but it lives & breathes in our daily life" (Ng, 2016). Therefore, community involvement has been the crux of all of DUMC's activities, and the focus of its many ministries.

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The ministries target a cross-section of society such as children, youth, adults and the elderly. They organize different tracks for singles, engaged couples, married people, parents with young children. In addition, the church runs healing and deliverance ministries, intercessory and prayer ministries, community engagement ministries. For instance, Community Excel Services (CES; www.ces.org.my) works with the urban poor in Kota Damansara. Its Helping Hand Team works with families in need, single parent families, homeless and street people, migrant workers who are jobless, and refugees.

### 5.1.3.4: Distributing DUMC's basket of religious goods

The local community in its broadest sense and regardless of ethnicity has been the cornerstone of DUMC's activities. Therefore the bulk of the church's budget is allocated to community programmes which are run across Petaling Jaya. An incomplete list of DUMC's ministries is presented in Table 5.3.

**Table 5.3: DUMC ministries**

| Target group | Products and services offered | Relevant ministry |
|---|---|---|
| **Schoolchildren** | After-school tuition | Excel Tuition Club |
| **Youth** | Choir, band, choreographed danced group | Resonate |
| | Performing arts | Punctuation |
| | Multimedia, live broadcasting | Dew Crew |
| | Social interaction, networking | NextGen |
| **Young professionals** | Wedding planner | Wedding Planning |
| | Marriage counselling | Marriage |
| **Young families** | Day-care | Tadika Juara Cerdik |
| **Women** | Networking | Women of Worth (WOW) |
| **Professionals** | Counselling | Workplace |
| | Information resources | Library |
| | Mentoring | Men Alive! |
| **Retirees** | Social interaction | Golden Club |
| **Urban poor** | Food bank | Helping Hand |
| **Migrant workers** | Social interaction | Myanmar ministry Nepalese ministry |
| **Homeless** | Counselling | Street (Ministry to the Homeless) |
| **Adults with addiction** | Drug rehabilitation | Breakthrough |

Source: DUMC.my, <accessed March 1, 2018>

DUMC's Food Bank helps about 200 families by providing them with a free food pack on a monthly basis. The ministry is professionally managed and also draws on the

help of 50 volunteers. In addition, DUMC's Poverty Group of Citizens Network offers teaching, guiding and mentoring to the city's poor and low-income segments. These services aim to help selected residents of low-cost flats break out of the cycle of poverty by learning about personal finances, budgeting, finding additional/alternative income streams, being a good worker etc. The group's events involve sharing food and are typically held in Bahasa Malaysia. The church's Jumble Station has enhanced its income by reaching out to businesses such as Nestlé Malaysia and local hypermarkets for donations in cash and kind. The proceeds have been used to sponsor back-to-school and Christmas gatherings for single-parent and other needy families in the community. These programmes are organized along six language groups: Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, Nepalese and Burmese.

### 5.1.4: Generating revenue; business activities

Apostolic and dominionist churches such as DMUC regard business as one of the seven key domains of social life they seek to reclaim. DUMC's members pledge to tithe (i.e. donate 10% of) their monthly paycheques to the church. DUMC maintains that this is its only income; it reports no funds as sourced from external sources. In January 2014 alone, for the church anniversary, members raised a total of RM4.5 million.

Given that the church's income is dependent on the tithes collected, its earning power has a lot to do with its ability to retain its existing church members and attract new ones. The larger the church membership, the greater its earnings. In addition, the church generates extra revenue through advertisements which are shown during its Sunday services. It also draws income from the online sales of books, CDs and other paraphernalia.

The fundamental message that is preached at DUMC and other megachurches – one that is on the whole reflective of the Prosperity Gospel teachings – is that worshippers

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will receive up to a hundredfold return on the individual tithe they have pledged to the church. At the same time, in order to realize this windfall, the believers are cautioned to be generous in their donations. There is less of the time-tested Biblical "ask, and ye shall receive", and more of "give, and ye shall receive". Megachurches around the world go as far as exhorting people to "give themselves out of poverty". The emotional and in some cases traumatic bonds to the church which these acts encourage and go on to foster have proved to be highly effective: There is no shortage of testimonials on megachurches' websites which make statements to the effect of "we often emptied our savings to give to the House of God, knowing that this will be the answer to our financial problems".

But it would be erroneous to suggest that individuals and families who are experiencing financial distress are the primary forces behind the megachurches' potent cash collection machine. On the opposite end of the income spectrum, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, there is the upwardly mobile, business-minded cohort. These are the same comfortably middle-class people who sent Robert Kiyosaki's book *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* (1998) skyrocketing to the top of the bookshops' bestseller lists for years on end.[41]

From a secular perspective, and especially when viewed purely on the strength of its financial health and cash flow management, a megachurch is a finance manager's dream come true. Church members' observations as shared in personal conversations and on online platforms suggest that:

a) Revenue is regularly recurring and strongly predictable, as church members pay their tithes through online money transfers, credit card payments or even Giro mechanisms.

[41] *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by R. Kiyosaki (1998) fired up the success-hungry collective imagination of Southeast Asia's megachurch-goers to such an extent that the title has been directly referenced in church services, sometimes even adapted to "Rich God? Poor God?". This despite the fact that parts of Kiyosaki's purportedly autobiographic account were later debunked as fictitious.

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b) The return on investment that was promised to members is to be realized by a divine power, as opposed to the church itself. The church collects money but is not liable to pay the returns; it does not issue any deposit certificates or other forms of IOUs to rank-and-file members.

c) High-net-worth individuals are attracted to the church as its messages provide moral justification and blessings to their material wealth, regardless of how it was obtained.

d) Member attrition typically comes from individuals who have failed to realize a significant return on their tithing. This only serves to push the average member's income bracket further up. The richer the church-member, the higher the church's tithe per member. Customer quality is thus continually enhanced, rather than eroded by "wannabes"' as is the case in most retail businesses.

e) "Your seed must be planted in good ground", a message frequently heard at megachurches – has been an effective weapon in staving off competition from smaller churches. Members are constantly reminded that in order to secure healthy returns on their investment, they are well-advised to inject that money into a strong bank, not a weak bank. The megachurch obviously bills itself as that "bank", providing the highest yield and the best track record, including the presence of wealthy members. Nonetheless, some members may in fact be moved to donate money to where they perceive genuine need, such as to smaller churches that are short on resources.

f) In services-oriented business hubs such as Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, the megachurch serves as a uniquely conducive environment for business networking. It is also a rich hunting ground for these cities' many property and insurance agents who would otherwise have to rely on an old and depleted pool of extended family and former secondary school classmates to fulfil their monthly sales quota.

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g) Megachurches like DUMC have systematically targeted young people. This is a population segment whose income is projected to rise for decades to come, thus further accelerating the church's earnings growth. Young worshippers are also regularly reminded that "you may be poor today, but you will not be poor all your life".

h) In addition, young members represent a vibrant group of highly motivated and loyal employees or volunteers who will work for little money with great passion. Many of them will feel they have grown up in the church; possibly met their life partners in the church. The sheer amount of time, effort and personal sacrifice they have invested into their congregation means that – as has been illustrated during Singapore's City Harvest Church criminal investigation – even amidst serious allegations of corruption, fraud and other malfeasance within the church, members will be unlikely to cast off the ties that bind them to the home church; if anything, the young people who have identified with the church all their lives will likely rally to its support and resort to psychological denial if need be. For mainstream retail businesses, this type of cast-iron customer loyalty (the worse the business performance, the stronger the outpouring of customers' affection and support) is virtually unimaginable.

i) Lastly, despite the commercial nature of many of their operations and the subsequent blurring of the divides between not-for-profit and for-profit, churches enjoy considerable tax benefits by virtue of their organizational structure, proclaimed self-funded status and the non-disclosure agreements they enter into when engaging third parties in large commercial transactions such as indirect investments.[42]

DUMC's trademark growth formulas have been successfully applied among various local communities, including Orang Asli settlements as well as Malaysian students returning from overseas, especially Australia. For many years, the overseas

[42] For instance, in 2010 when City Harvest acquired a S$310 million stake in Suntec Convention Centre, the Commissioner of Charities (COC) sought clarifications on the transaction. The church stated it was under a non-disclosure agreement which required the details of the transaction to remain confidential. However, City Harvest eventually disclosed details of the deal upon request by the COC as well as Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA).

students had a poor track record of integrating first into a local church in Australia, and then facing the same problem in reverse upon their return to Malaysia. DUMC's cell groups have sought to provide a sense of fellowship to these returning students – an act that has often proved to attract an additional number of families to the church.

### 5.1.5: Setting up an economy of belonging

In the early days, DUMC occupied the first floor of a four-storey shop lot not far from The Ship restaurant in Damansara Utama before expanding into two adjacent shop lots in 1988. In 1993, it relocated to Taman Mayang, to premises that could accommodate 500 people. In 1999, it moved to the former Ruby Cinema in SEA Park, with a capacity of 1,000. By 2018, DUMC had 4,500 members. Inaugurated on September 2, 2007, DUMC's Dream Centre facility has been a manifestation of Pastor Ho's long-standing vision of a "dream church" which he put forward in his 2007 brochure *The Dream Church: The Leap Forward:*

> The dream church is to be located on a 25-acre piece of land. It will have a high-tech sanctuary to seat 5,000 people, an orchestra pit with [a] revolving stage for performances, many halls and meeting rooms of different kinds of sizes, multimedia production facilities, video and sound recording rooms, offices, library, bookshop, reading rooms, counselling rooms, prayer rooms, prayer chalets and [a] 24-hour prayer atrium, gymnasium and sports facilities, daily café with [a] live band, weekend cafeteria, enough car parking facilities within, etc. It will also have outdoor sports facilities.
>
> It will have facilities to serve the needs of the community like the physically and intellectually challenged, the elderly, the substance abusers, street people and ex-prisoners, etc. It will have a place to rehabilitate substance abusers and those going through the programme could help with the upkeep of the facilities as well as serve as cooks and waiters in the cafeteria with appropriate training.
>
> During weekdays, the facilities will be used to offer education to children ranging from kindergarten to secondary school. I have a vision to start a college and a university one day. It will also have facilities to offer music, speech and drama lessons and training in sports and games for the community. The church will offer free tuition in English and some other subjects in order to connect with the people in the community.

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> The sports facilities and café with live band is opened to the public. This will enable the church to have a connecting point with the community. It is only when people are comfortable in using the facilities will they be comfortable in stepping into the church. The church must be seen as a place to serve and meet the needs of the community. (Ho, 2007, pp. 49-50)

The Dream Centre's tagline is *Where dreams come alive.* In the words of Pastor Ho, this involves an element of contrition whereby individuals recognize their wrongs and seek to revisit and actualize their broken dreams.

DUMC the church and DUMC's Dream Centre as a community centre are essentially one and the same, in theological as well as physical terms. Similarly, some of DUMC's Council Members also serve as company directors in Dream Centre Enterprise Sdn Bhd. This is a corporate entity that was formed in 2000 under the name of Ninety Percent Sdn Bhd; the name was changed in 2007. Dream Centre Enterprise's principal activities include property investment and property management. Its main place of business is registered as Section 13, Petaling Jaya; the office address is in Jalan Indrahana 2, off Jalan Kuchai Lama. As at December 31, 2014, the company held registered capital amounting to RM500,000. It owned a building worth just over RM18 million as well as long-term leasehold land worth RM17.6 million. Its consolidated balance sheet for 2015 shows total assets of RM36.3 million (including property, plants and equipment worth RM33.2 million). Its total operating revenue was RM2.5 million.

The ambiguous character of the Dream Centre's church-cum-community facility-cum-convention-centre has on occasion landed it in controversy. In 2011, a Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ) official issued a statement that "when DUMC submitted an application for an approval for the building premises, it stated that its purpose was for the use of a community hall" ("'No Approval To Operate As A Church'," 2011). Although the issue was eventually contained and prevented from escalating, the news did expose

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some cracks in the regulatory and reporting frameworks that govern new urban churches in Malaysia.

DUMC originally planned to complete Phase II of the Dream Centre by February 2014, at a cost of RM50 million. Perhaps as a consequence of the earlier controversy, at present the church has yet to obtain approvals from the relevant government agencies. (The construction of the much bigger Calvary Convention Centre, by Calvary Church, with a budget of RM200 million, was approved by former Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.) DUMC's leadership has also expressed the desire to expand DUMC beyond Klang Valley. For its first external branch, it chose the city of Ipoh in the state of Perak, pointing to a dearth of job opportunities since the collapse of the local tin industry in the 1980s; the prevalence of polytheistic beliefs and superstition among the city's ageing population; and last but not least, Ipoh's seedy reputation as a home to many night-life establishments (Low, 2014). Since February 2014, bimonthly weekend events have been held under DUMC's auspices in the main hall of Ipoh's YMCA, attracting audiences of 100-300.

Company directors of Dream Centre Enterprise Sdn Bhd, each of whom hold 100,000 shares in the company, include Wong Cheng Mung (*1946), whose other business occupation is as Managing Director in Elid Security Electronics Pte Ltd; Ling Khoon Chin (*1951), dental surgeon; Kam Teck Wang (*1960), engineer; Ho Kang Chan (*1951), company director; Datuk Kee Sue Sing (*1950), company director and former Director-General of the Department of Chemistry within the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.

Meanwhile, a separate entity, Dream Centre Sdn Bhd, was incorporated in May 2007. Although this firm has been filing documents with the Companies Commission

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every year, as of 2015 it had yet to commence operations. Two directors, both based in Subang Jaya, hold one share in the company each.

### 5.1.6: Political ramifications

In its literature, DUMC often mentions work in the community and nation (and nations); and making an impact on the nation. Pastor Ho in particular has been renowned for his firm stance that Christians should influence and make an impact on society. He has never shied away from commenting on socio-economic and political issues in Malaysia, addressing groups on the importance of civil and community engagement and on Christian participation in society in general. He believes that a strong Church is needed to hold the leaders, businesspeople, economists and politicians accountable. He is also heartened that Christian civil participation has grown in the last decade, fuelled in part by higher education, understanding, theological knowledge and holistic teaching. In his view, Christians must be political but non-partisan. Christians who spiritualise everything will become irrelevant, in his opinion. Christianity, he emphasizes, bears great relevance to reality in terms of addressing the pains and struggles of life and the exploitations of humanity. Therefore, the Church should not merely address spiritual needs to the neglect of the other aspects of life. According to Pastor Ho:

> It is crucial for Christians to get involved in nation building because of the theological understanding of who God is.
>
> We must get involved at every level of society as much as possible, as far as possible, as deep as possible.
>
> The church is and must get political. Not everything is politics, but everything is political.
>
> You speak out because of issues, not to take sides! In fact, when you speak out, you are really seeking the good of the country, showing concern for the people and future generations of the country.
>
> We have a responsibility here (on Earth). We must think and teach holistically. Home in heaven is another thing.

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> [The church] is not content in just being a good church or even a great megachurch. To build a megachurch is a small thing to God. No, we are here for others, for people and for the world as William Temple once rightly remarked, "The church is the only society on earth that exists for the benefit of her non-members." (Ho, 2007, pp. 12-13)
>
> Pastor Ho's vision for DUMC has been to be "a church that never sleeps"; to be "an apostolic church that is always on the move and on the march"; and to "retain a laser-like focus on transformational ministry" (Ho, 2007, pp. 6-9). Politics is one of the domains of social life that DUMC seeks to "reclaim back to God": "I believe that when these domains are restored back to the Lord then the Church would have moved into the mainstream of human culture bringing its contribution and influence to bear at every level of society." (Ho, 2007, p. 12)

DUMC also considers it as its job to strengthen leadership of the nation by "preventing corruption and decay in society"; it calls on political parties and the greater civil society to recognize the need to plant the seeds of public disclosure and accountability in the political and public organizations; and it exhorts the people to hold the leaders answerable for the disclosure of information and issues that concern public interest and public funds, so that the leaders will not be distracted by struggles for power and wealth and forget about the welfare and interests of the people who elected them (Ho, 2007). The church publications also talk about transforming an individual's workplace as key to asserting its norms in society. Pastor Ho has urged Christians to join civil groups and form strategic alliances across the religious divide and declared that he is proud of his colleagues who have attended the *Bersih* series of rallies for electoral reform and against corruption which took place in Kuala Lumpur between 2007 and 2016.[43]

According to interviews with church leaders, there have been occasions where groups of up to 30 national-level politicians including deputy government ministers attended DUMC's Sunday services. Idris Jala (former Minister without Portfolio in the Prime Minister's Department and chief executive officer of the Performance Management

[43] Launched in 2006, *Bersih* or Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections (bersih.org), is an NGO-run movement seeking to reform Malaysia's electoral system and remove from it the long-standing legacy of interference and manipulation by federal government.

and Delivery Unit – PEMANDU) [44] as well as a number of foreign ambassadors have also paid visits. DAP MPs such as Hannah Yeoh, who was Speaker of the state assembly in the state of Selangor between 2013 and 2018 and presently a deputy minister in the federal government, and others have likewise made regular appearances at DUMC. During our conversation which took place on October 31, 2014, Pastor Ho has used these opportunities to engage them in discussions on "truth, justice and righteousness"; "starting with the church to capture the hearts of the people"; "offering a vision and passion for life and living"; "being impeccable in conduct"; "leading a life of integrity"; and "seeking out a personal encounter with Jesus to drive a personal transformation".

Regarding Hannah Yeoh's 2014 autobiographic volume, *Becoming Hannah: A Personal Journey,* which was endorsed by a number of leaders within the local evangelical community, Pastor Ho commented:

> Outlined here is clarity, simplicity, commitment and sacrifice of an exemplary Malaysian, a Christian who seeks to fight with her deep faith, impeccable character and profound courage to secure, by God's strength and with much prayer, a better future for all Malaysians. There is great hope for Malaysia if many more Hannahs could be replicated in politics. (Yeoh, 2014)

In his conversations with political leaders, Pastor Ho has emphasized a view of politics as the highest form of public service (as opposed to the instinct to secure "contacts and contracts"); the need to recognize the commitment and the opportunity cost which come with this view; and a vision of a better nation and a more progressive society. Throughout, Pastor Ho likes to quote parables taken from world history, such as William Wilberforce's vision of the abolition of slavery. He weaves together elements and topics

[44] A veteran Shell executive, Idris Jala (*1958) is a Christian native of Sarawak (East Malaysia). He is one of the few non-Malay and non-Muslim professionals to have been appointed head of a Malaysian government-linked corporation (GLC). A devout member of Kuala Lumpur's Borneo Evangelical Church (SIB), he has publicly attributed his business accomplishments to "the discipline of prayer and action". Malaysian evangelicals consider his credentials to be impeccable (as early as age 15, he was involved in a semi-mythical charismatic revival within his once-headhunting aboriginal tribe of the Kelabits). Jala's role in the government cabinet was perceived by many as primarily that of a spokesman and envoy for the country's Christian community.

of economics, politics, history and sociology in order to show the relevance of Christian faith to all aspects of life and society in the 21st century.

DUMC's sermons also regularly include talks on "Vision for Malaysia". In May 2014, the Dream Centre held a talk by Citizens Network for a Better Malaysia (CNBM) on the topic of "Re-drawing of the electoral boundaries – what can you do". The talk focused on creating awareness of the electoral constituency delineation process and contributing to a fairer electoral process in Malaysia (2014). DUMC newsletters frequently lament the rise of extremism and intolerance in Malaysian society, calling for moderation, reason and respect for other communities.

On occasion, DUMC's political teachings have led some of the US-based global dominionist leaders to weigh in on issues related to Malaysia's domestic politics. Thus, an article on DUMC's website, titled "The Leap Forward: Transformation of Society", quotes Cindy Jacobs, one of the principal elders of the Seven Mountains theology, as not just making a statement but offering an actual prophesy in 2012: "The Lord says East Malaysia, I am giving you a key to unlock the destiny of a nation. I am making you my hinge, that will open or close a destiny says God. Fast and Pray now! ("The Leap Forward: Transformation of Society," 2012, p. 6)"

More recently, DUMC's sermons have addressed a number of social ills. Among them, a December 2016 sermon discussed the findings of an Al Jazeera TV exclusive investigation into Malaysia's illicit baby trade, where new-born infants are reportedly sold at prices ranging from US$1,500 to US$2,500 (Gooch, 2016). DUMC called on its members to pray against this illicit trade; to pray that the people involved be brought to justice; that legal means of adoption become more accessible; and that law enforcement be better coordinated by the relevant authorities.

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#### 5.1.6.1: Proselytization

DUMC's mission statement talks about the need to evangelize Klang Valley and to send missionaries to unreached people groups worldwide. DUMC not only views evangelism as one of the lifelines of the church, on par in importance with faith and prayer: It aims to train people in evangelism – be it personal, group or "servant" evangelism (the last term is borrowed from Steve Sjogren's 1993 book *Conspiracy of Kindness*). The church leadership, partly drawing on Christian groups' experience in western countries, is that "if the church does not evangelize it will soon fossilize" (Ho, 2007, p. 52). Its core values also state that "lost people matter to God and they ought to matter to the church" (Ho, 2007, p. 17).

> It is not enough to be a good witness for the Lord or to win some to Christ. More than these, it is to see the place where God has put us in transformed to the glory of God. Such is the audacious goal I would like the people in the dream church to be imbued with. (Ho, 2007, p. 53)

DUMC's evangelist activities target a diversity of environments (neighbourhoods, the marketplace, places of study) through an equally diverse range of media including literature, audio-visual content and songs and drama. Outreach programmes are similarly centred on sports, music and drama. Trained members are encouraged to spread the church's message to whoever they meet and wherever they go; to pray for opportunities but also to seize every opportunity that presents itself.

DUMC has actively targeted migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly the 150,000-strong community of Myanmar workers. Every Tuesday at midnight there is a Myanmar Celebration. (Most of the workers only finish work around 11PM). DUMC volunteers to fetch them from their homes of workplaces between 10:30PM and 11:45PM and send them back to their hostels by 2:00AM-3:00AM. Starting with 30 youths in November 2010, the group has grown to a congregation of nearly 500, representing all ages. In addition, DUMC has established missions in Hong Kong, Cambodia, Thailand



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and Nepal, as well as appointed missionaries with a regional remit (Indochina, East Asia). In Cambodia, it runs a Cambodia Mission & Services Centre (CMS Centre). The 2014 missions calendar included Cambodia, Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam and Sarawak (with a focus on Iban and Penan aboriginal communities).

DUMC's mission arm is named CrossFields; it works to enlist, equip and empower individuals for missionary assignments overseas. CrossFields runs four levels of Missions Candidates Preparation Programmes (MCPP). Level Four is designed, with pastoral endorsement, for full-time missionaries. Additionally, there are mission-related activities organized throughout the year. For DUMC members who have completed Level 1 of MCPP and have been attending a cell group, DUMC Missions Department organizes mission trips, mission weekends and mission conferences. On a November 2013 mission to Myanmar, a five-member team from DUMC evangelized at village outreaches, visited an orphanage, taught and preached in several local churches on Sunday, and took part in a Gospel Music Festival attended by 20,000 people. Money raised by church members is also used on a regular basis to contribute to charitable and humanitarian projects across every continent in the world, including Muslim-majority countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Egypt.

Aside from its overseas proselytizing efforts, DUMC, like several other prominent evangelical churches that are active in Malaysia's main metropolitan areas, has faced allegations of proselytizing to local Malay Muslims. This has been not just a perennial political hot potato, but a highly divisive issue, as the practice is considered illegal and in fact unconstitutional in Malaysia. In one of these instances, on August 3, 2011, the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) raided the premises of DUMC's Dream Centre where a thanksgiving dinner was held. JAIS accused the event organiser, an NGO called *Harapan Komuniti,* of proselytization when it found 12 Muslims among those present. *Harapan Komuniti* has denied the allegation. Meanwhile, the Malaysian AIDS

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Council came out to clarify that the event was merely a fundraising dinner for the AIDS support group. Commenting on the raid by JAIS officers, the then Senior Pastor Ho was adamant that the event was purely “social in nature”, focusing on “helping the unfortunates” (“It was a JAIS intrusion,” 2011).

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## 5.2: Full Gospel Tabernacle (FGT): An entrepreneurial, reproducing church

*"Pastors, go equip your people and many will arise and call you blessed."* (Voon Yuen Woh, Pastor, Full Gospel Tabernacle; Chairman, Evangelical Explosion Malaysia)

Located in an industrial park in Subang Jaya, Full Gospel Tabernacle (FGT) is a non-denominational evangelical church. In Malaysia, it is generally recognized as one of Klang Valley's most dynamic and influential urban churches, as well as one of the best-endowed ones in terms of funding and facilities. It has also captured news headlines due to the social and political discussion forums it hosted over the past few years.

### 5.2.1: Background information

Historically, FGT in Subang Jaya is an expression of the Charismatic Movement that swept Malaysia and Singapore starting in the mid-1970s. It was established as an independent church by 30 founding members in February 1981, at a shop lot located in Section SS2 of Petaling Jaya. In keeping with the values and messages of Full Gospel, from the outset its focus has been on actualizing for its members the Pentecostal experience with an emphasis on miracles and other workings that Full Gospel attributes to the Holy Spirit. FGT's website records the church's founding as follows:

> A group of young men and women, armed with mah-jong paper, a guitar, and a strong desire to obey God, held the first FGT service in the home of Pastor Eu Hong Seng and his wife, Yapp Gaik Sim. Everyone sat on the floor of the living room, sang worship songs off hand-written mah-jong paper and listened to the preaching of their young leaders… …In the midst of humble beginnings, one could see that a spiritual identity was already gradually forming in the group – a pioneering spirit. That same pioneering spirit has remained with FGT to this very day. ("Welcome to Full Gospel Tabernacle! Who We Are: The Beginning," n.d.)

Evangelical churches that grew out of the Charismatic Movement have been the backbone of worldwide proselytization activity. Likewise for FGT, whose mission statement is "Go, make disciples", evangelical activity has been a cornerstone of FGT's work since its inception. Through youth camps, retreats in Cameron Highlands and music

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events, it has targeted young working adults, students, adolescents and children. Before setting up today's premises in Subang Jaya, from 1995 to 2002 the church's physical base was at KDU College, surrounded by a sizable student body at the private school's purpose-built campus, one of the first of its kind in Malaysia. At the time, many of the students at KDU faced considerable difficulty in making regular trips from Petaling Jaya to Kuala Lumpur to attend church gatherings ("Meeting with FGT Pastor Ng Wah Lok", 2013).

Ethnically, FGT's membership has been about 90% urban Chinese. The majority come from family backgrounds of practising what is often termed Chinese religion, i.e. an eclectic and in a large measure syncretic mix of religious as well as philosophical Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, enriched with elements of popular lore and superstition such as "kitchen gods". Conversations on this topic conducted with FGT's pastors have thrown up observations such as, "Malaysia's ethnic minorities are shifting away from polytheism"; "a more educated younger generation finds little meaning in practices such as superstition or animism"; and "modern urbanites are seeking an understanding of God; looking for answers through a process of structured learning".

### 5.2.2: Theology: The Full Gospel movement

The Full Gospel movement originated in 19$^{th}$-century North America and has been broadly synonymous with labels such as "Charismatic", "Pentecostal", and "Apostolic Faith". The term "Full Gospel" was coined by Reverend A.B. Simpson (1843-1919), founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA). A native of Canada, Simpson led a number of Presbyterian churches in central and northeast USA. In 1881, after claiming a miraculous healing, he resigned from his Presbyterian pastorate and requested baptism by immersion in a Baptist church. He went on to found C&MA as a non-denominational congregation committed to divine healing, spiritual gifts, missionary



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evangelism and overseas missions (Nienkirchen, 2010). Simpson's theology is also known as the Fourfold Gospel, alternatively referred to as the Foursquare Gospel or Foursquare Church (a term frequently invoked by FGT). It is related to what it regards as four of Christ's attributes: Saviour, Sanctifier, Healer and Soon-Coming King. Meanwhile, the word "tabernacle" can denote any house of worship, especially one designed for a large congregation. More specifically, it may refer to the portable sanctuary used by Biblical Israelites while wandering in the desert after their Exodus from Egypt.[45]

The majority of Christians view the miracles presented in the Bible as occurring during this particular period, a time when in their minds, God was most forceful in proving his influence. By contrast, Full Gospel Christians have sought a return to the doctrines and power of the Apostolic Age.[46] As all Charismatics, they believe that even today, the Christian Holy Spirit continues to perform all the functions ascribed to him in the New Testament Gospels, i.e. healing, giving the gift of tongues, performing miracles, etc. They regard the act of speaking in tongues as initial physical evidence of a person's baptism of the Holy Spirit. According to this doctrine, all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and all believers should be baptized by immersion [in water].

Organizationally, the Full Gospel movement in the United States is the outcome of a schism: It separated from the Assemblies of God in 1956 over doctrinal disagreements and went on to form its own distinct denomination. Full Gospel Tabernacle for its part considers itself an offshoot of Full Gospel Assembly churches. As of today, it has 10 local chapters and dozens of overseas chapters.

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[45] In recent years, some commentators have become critical of what they see as a trend on the part of the evangelical movement to appropriate to their churches the Biblical passages and promises related to Israel. Similarly, allusions to words and symbols such as "tabernacle" may be viewed as having had symbolic significance to the [modern-day] nation of Israel before they were "misappropriated" by evangelical groups for their own use. For instance, Jeanne Whittaker, Founder and Guardian of a company named The Tabernacle Experience acknowledges a 1996 tour of Israel as a source of inspiration behind her setting up the company.

[46] The period of the Twelve Apostles in early Christianity (first century CE)

### 5.2.3: Commodifying trends

#### 5.2.3.1: Lowering the barriers to entry, for clergy and for members

Whereas traditional, mainline Christian churches are headed by formal clergy who have completed tertiary academic degrees in religion, evangelical churches are typically run by secularly-trained professionals.[47] Particularly in the Pentecostal tradition, with its emphasis on miracles and healing rather than dogma, it has been admissible, certainly in the early days, for pastors to have no formal training in pastoral work. In fact, when a church, e.g. a Methodist church, declares itself to be charismatic, it is permissible for it to operate without a full-time, ordained pastor or reverend to oversee its activities.

FGT's church leaders have followed a similar path, as most of them come from secular academic and professional backgrounds. Over time, one by one the church elders exited from their lucrative non-church employment. Pastor Ng Wah Lok, for instance, graduated with a Master's degree in Engineering from University Malaya in 1988. He also holds a Master of Theology degree from University of Wales, Bangor. Pastor Ng became a Christian at the age of 14 in 1974 and underwent adult baptism at the age of 20 in 1980. He began his secular career in 1984, working as an engineer with the Soon Seng Group before accepting an appointment to the position of Senior General Manager of Malaysia Steel Works (KL) Berhad, a public company listed on Bursa Malaysia. He left his secular job in 1999.

FGT acknowledges that even as its founders had stepped down from their worldly jobs in industry and finance, they retained the knowledge and experience necessary for managing land and acquiring real estate. Nonetheless, its oft-repeated stories of how its early as well as continued growth was financed tend to emphasize the element of miracles occurring on a financial plane, and of members' "total sacrifice" to the church and its

[47] Evangelical Christians use the term 'mainline' to refer to non-evangelical, i.e. established denominational Christian churches, be it the Catholic Church or the historically dominant Protestant churches such as Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran etc.

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purpose. This constitutes a powerful component of the church's official history and storytelling until the present.

What FGT describes as the start of exponential growth in its membership base dates back to 1986 when Reverend Dr. Eu Hong Seng, a CPA by training, resigned from a senior management position with a finance company and joined the church on a full-time basis. Eu was installed as Senior Pastor by Arden Burrell, then Superintendent of the Assemblies of God in New South Wales, Australia. Eu Hong Seng is regarded as one of Malaysia's major evangelical leaders. He currently also serves as Chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) as well as Chairman of the country's National Evangelical Christian Federation (NECF). Other FGT pastors have followed the same path. Pastor Voon Yuen Woh's last role before committing himself to FGT full time was as Financial Controller in the Arab Malaysian Banking Group. Pastor Goh Hock Huat used to work as manager with Credit Corporation (Malaysia) Berhad.

From an organizational standpoint, FGT considers its member cells and care groups to be the life of the church. Many of the cells' and care groups' activities focus on acquiring and disseminating skills including life skills; and on discovering one's life potential.

#### 5.2.3.2: Adjusting and simplifying the message to suit the audience

True to its origin as a church catering to university students and young adults, today's FGT runs a 365 Students Ministry and a 365 Campus Ministry. Both are targeting students in institutions of higher learning. The ministries have been active in setting up connection groups on university and college campuses. In addition, their reach has successfully extended – partly through the provision of transport services – to nearby student accommodation facilities located around Cyberjaya, Bandar Sunway, Puchong



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and Kota Damansara. This is consistent with FGT's marketing tagline of The Church You Can Call Home.

FGT's Young Adult Care Cells work with those young people who have finished school or colleges and university and are in the process of entering a career as teachers, accountants, businessmen, engineers or IT professionals, as well with couples who have young children. These care cells meet in homes across Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya and Puchong. They organize special events such as bowling tournaments, badminton and table tennis sessions, treasure hunts, family days and seminars on topics of interest to young adults. Similar but stand-alone care cells focus on working adults and families with older children. Recent college and university graduates are also encouraged to apply for one-year graduate internship programmes, promoted as modules that train and release future leaders of churches and the community.

**5.2.3.3: Building attachment and branding**

Alongside ministries, FGT runs other full-fledged institutions that provide not only theological education but also practical ministry training, specifically designed for lay workers of churches and Christian organizations. They offer a variety of courses, ranging from 12-week school-of-ministry certificates to doctoral programmes. These structures, which have been instrumental in training laypeople to be effective in their church outreach, include the Tung Ling Seminary (TLS; www.tungling.org). Established in Singapore in 1978 as a charismatic and inter-denominational short-term Bible school, Tung Ling in Mandarin stands for Eastern Mountain. The founding pioneers believed that God will train many workers in this Eastern Mountain and send them to the mission field. Tung Ling developed its original curriculum with assistance from Faith Bible College of New Zealand. In 1993, a branch of the Seminary opened in Malaysia. In addition to directors nominated by FGT, TLS's board also includes representatives of the local Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches. Pastor Ng Wah Lok has been the Principal of

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Tung Ling Seminary since 1999. More recently, TLS Malaysia has started to offer master's and doctoral programmes in collaboration with Mattersey Hall, United Kingdom, a large Pentecostal Bible College. TLS has also expanded its reach to conduct courses and Bible school sessions in India and the Philippines.

In addition to his responsibilities as FGT pastor, Rev. Voon Yuen Woh has been the Chairman of Malaysia's National Committee of Evangelism Explosion (E.E.; http://eemalaysia.net). E.E. describes itself as a training organization and an equipping ministry, training Gen X and Gen Y in interactive, story-driven, "authentic learning" techniques that are designed to help them share the Gospel. These include DVD viewing, discussion in small groups, and role play ("What is XEE?," n.d.). E.E.'s corporate entity, E.E. Friendship (Malaysia) Bhd was incorporated in 2000 as a company limited by guarantee with no share capital. According to its Memorandum of Association, the company's objectives include "to hold and organize meetings, conventions and seminars for the social, mental and spiritual well-being and development of members of the community; to organize training courses; to conduct organized education and training trips, conferences, seminars, workshops, camps and training programmes in the area of serving, caring and ministry skills based on biblical principles (*Memorandum of Association*, 2000). E.E. Friendship Bhd was also established as a mechanism for soliciting contributions (through personal or written appeals) in the form of donations, grants, loans, legacy, subscriptions or otherwise; it can do so in its capacity as principal, trustee, agent or otherwise; alone or in collaboration with other companies.

E.E. training sessions are followed, on a separate day, by Connect Activity (CA) which emphasizes building friendships within the framework of trainer-trainee interaction. As an E.E. staff shared with the Evangelical Explosion International website in 2012:



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> I was also once worried about not being able to share the gospel to strangers, but now I am able to see that strangers are also people that need Jesus. And strangers only stay as strangers until you say your first hello. In Romans 10:15 it says, “And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Voon, 2012)

E.E. tools and methodologies are regularly updated. Its pastors seek to “isolate the core principles” that make E.E. effective, such as on-the-job training. Overall, the cost of designing and redesigning E.E.’s worldwide “product” (as E.E. International, active since 1962, refers to its teaching concepts and modules), which incorporates input and feedback from experts in mass media communication and advertising, runs into millions of US dollars ("What is XEE?,", n.d.).

In targeting young and technology-savvy individuals in affluent urban settings, FGT has made good use of the Internet and social media. Members often coordinate their cells’ activities through Facebook; share comments with notable guests and religious service attendees via Twitter; and interact using other platforms as well.

In addition to growing the membership base at its main church in Subang Jaya, for the past 30 years FGT has also been committed to setting up new, satellite and daughter churches around Klang Valley and elsewhere in Malaysia, as well as in other countries. This initiative was originally inspired by a 1988 visit to churches in the United States. During this trip, Pastor Eu and his wife came across the concept of church planting and found it to be consonant with FGT’s own vision. Soon afterwards, FGT established churches in Kuala Lumpur and Kepong, followed in 1990 by a facility in Seremban, FGT’s first daughter church outside Klang Valley. In the course of the 1990s, FGT planted additional churches in Sri Damansara, Melaka and Kota Kinabalu. On top of English-language services, the church’s growing local presence and national network necessitated the rise of Mandarin, Tamil and Bahasa Malaysia (for East Malaysians) ministries. Internationally, FGT has set up more than 100 churches in India, Philippines,

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the UK, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar and Bhutan, and has plans to expand into more countries.

#### 5.2.3.4: Distributing FGT's basket of religious goods

Underpinning FGT's pastoral as well as evangelical workings is an efficient, richly structured and professionally run administrative engine of leadership training camps, fellowships, study groups, crusades, conferences, corporate appointments, missionary exchanges, book and music shops, prayer networks, visiting foreign preachers, and other personal and corporate interconnections. Business and management themes, vocabulary and imagery permeate the day-to-day mechanics of how FGT pastors, members, staff and interns go about spreading the church's message and values. As a result, activities linked to sharing the Gospel take on overtones that are more than reminiscent of sales force training: Engaging the prospective client, giving a memorable presentation on the value proposition, fielding questions, diffusing objections etc.

In the health and healing space, FGT organizes training courses and Evangelistic Healing Rallies whose focus is on faith-based healing of the sick through the laying of hands and other forms of miraculous healing. Having attended basic training, in some cases more than once, participants then progress to advanced training. Some of the advanced training sessions hosted by FGT are organized under the auspices of the Elijah Challenge (www.theelijahchallenge.org). The stated objective is to increase the members' confidence and effectiveness in healing. Advanced training is also designed to give participants the tools and techniques that are necessary to conduct basic training sessions for other believers.

Music performances and musical output have been an important conduit for delivering FGT's messages to children and youth, which historically have been the church's prime target groups. In the words of a current member:

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> I was a teenager when I first came to FGT 28 years ago, so I literally 'grew up' here. On my very first Sunday Service, God spoke to me through the music played on the keyboard saying, "This is the Church I want you to belong". That morning, I made the decision to belong to FGT. ("Growing Up in FGT | fgt2u", 2016)

Pastor Ng Wah Lok has been an internationally noted Gospel songwriter who has written more than 100 songs since 1981. Some of his earliest songs were composed during inaugural FGT annual camps in Cameron Highlands, when he himself was 22 years old. Since then, Pastor Ng has released three Gospel albums: "Every Time I Pray", "Shining Stars" and "Messiah King". His signature song "Every Time I Pray" written in 1981 has been covered by Mandarin recording artists in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. One of his songs in the album "Messiah King", titled "Harvest of the Fields" was co-written with Australian lyricist Barbara Tipper, and went on to win the Australian Gospel Award 2004 in the Best Hymn category. Some of his songs from that album, such as "Every Time I Pray", "Approved in Every Way" and "How I love to worship" can be commonly heard nowadays in many Malaysian churches.

In 2001, Pastor Ng established his website www.tabernaclemusic.net, dedicated to promoting local Gospel music and training those in the worship ministry. The website has published numerous articles on music, worship, song-writing and the development of Gospel music in Malaysia. Pastor Ng conducts music and worship seminars regularly and has held the role of Vice-President of Malaysian Gospel Music (MGM), a fellowship of Christian artists, musicians, songwriters, producers, and "anyone associated with Gospel music in Malaysia". MGM was set up to "advance and raise the standard of Gospel music in Malaysia and to create a platform for Malaysian Christian artistes to make an impact in churches, culture and community" ("Tabernacle Music - Malaysian Gospel Music - MGM - Mission Statement", 2011). In addition to producing albums and song books, MGM organizes annual events and conducts workshops and seminars to teach and



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encourage local churches (especially worship leaders) to use local songs in their worship services.

In 2011, FGT at its premises in Wisma Eagles hosted an event called MGM Nite to mark the launch of Malaysia's first Christian worship compilation music album, Adore, and to recognize those who had made contributions to the gospel music scene in Malaysia ("First worship compilation album launched," 2011). The three-hour evening programme was attended by an audience of 1,500 and featured performances by dozens of bands and recording artists including "Malaysia's Elvis" HT Long, an active evangelist who performs at hundreds of churches, evangelical rallies and charity concerts across Malaysia and Singapore. A special presentation took place on the historical journey of gospel music in Malaysia. Singers, songwriters and bands that had made significant contributions to the Malaysian gospel music scene were certificates of recognition. Among the certificates presented were "A Lifetime Achievement Award" and "Most Impactful Male and Female Artist Award."

The emphasis that FGT has placed on original music writing and recording has been a powerful factor in cementing its standing among young people and students. These individuals gather for praise services that are often structured around gospel music and evangelical rock. In the increasingly competitive landscape of Subang Jaya's evangelical churches, Pastor Ng represents a specialist whose skill set is difficult to replicate.

**5.2.4: Generating revenue; business activities**

With a doctrinal focus on evangelizing and missionary work, and the strong business credentials of its pastoral leaders, growth has always been at the top of FGT's agenda. The church has never been contented merely with looking after the spiritual needs of a fixed-size religious congregation and the surrounding community. Instead, the question that has been paramount in the leaders' minds, and continues to be raised in the



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church's newsletters and other printed and online materials, is: "Lord, what's next?..." To use terminology that is common within the evangelical movement worldwide, FGT may be considered a "reproducing base church". FGT's leadership consciously cultivates a reputation as a church that has been continually and regularly outgrowing its structures and facilities – a process that is expected to continue well into the future. From the original 30 founders, membership has now grown to more than 1,000.

In the previous case study on DUMC, we discussed the principle of multiplication. Spiritual multiplication is a key concern for the E.E. ministry as well: "Multiplication is the key component, not just winning people to the Lord one by one (i.e. through addition)" ("What is XEE?," n.d.). E.E. talks about "equipping the saints", or a "principle of spiritual multiplication", whereby not only the pastor but every believer in the congregation is tasked and equipped with sharing his or her faith: "God's calling for the pastor is not merely for him to do the work of service but for him to train his people so that the people themselves can find their own fulfilment in their own work of service" ("What is XEE?," n.d.):

> The first benefit of equipping the saints is that more gets done. Two pairs of hands are better than one pair. As the church body grows numerically, the number of outside networks increases. If these believers are equipped to share their faith, to minister into this network, more people will be touched with the gospel. If however they are not equipped, then each of these believers will have to call for the pastor to do the work. This often results in delays and misses out on 'striking while the iron is hot'.

True to its growth focus and the milestones FGT has consistently set for itself in terms of outgrowing its current premises and facilities, it remained at its original shop lot location at Section SS2 in Petaling Jaya for five years. A move to premises set up by combining five shop lots in Damansara Jaya (where it remained from 1986 to 1995) precipitated a move to KDU College and finally its present-day location at Subang Jaya.

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The narrative of extreme sacrifice and financial miracles entered a new chapter in the late 1990s, during the time of the Asian financial crisis. This time FGT's then 300 members were tasked with raising RM1.3 million for a plot of industrial land that had been identified as suitable in 1994, and another RM7 million for a new building and community centre to be constructed on this land. FGT went on to acquire more land, and in 2012 completed the construction of Wisma Eagles 2. The new building houses a youth centre, a dialysis centre, a physiotherapy centre, a badminton court and a restaurant. Thus it represents an entire array of products and services the church can provide to its current and prospective members – networking and social interaction; healthcare facilities for people whose severe health condition likely prevents them from obtaining an insurance plan and receiving quality care; places for sports and recreation, etc. For the recipients, it means having a safe space for their social activities; church-branded and therefore affordable and psychologically non-threatening health services; and ultimately a sense of attachment and belonging which comes from overcoming their sense of social isolation and economic deprivation.

Throughout the time when it was beset by financial challenges, FGT's leadership emphasized that the majority of the church members are average, working-class individuals, and there are no multi-millionaires attending the church. Instead, FGT's pastors "praise God that the next generation of church members also have the chance to make their lives a 'living sacrifice' for God". In an endorsement of Australian preacher Terry Appel's book *Father's Financial Favour: From Poverty to Generosity,* FGT pastors wrote:

> This powerful book reminds us that the church at large has yet to fully understand all the biblical principles on finance. It will challenge you to mature as a son, and to enter into the abundance that God has in store for everyone who is willing to work through the minefields of poverty and idolatry. ("Resources | Christian Life Centre", 2014)

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In 1981, FGT was registered as a company with the Companies Commission Malaysia (CCM) under the name of FGT Berhad. At the time, all of its founding/trustee directors were church pastors based in Petaling Jaya. They included Khoo Yew Hong (quantity surveyor; resigned in 1992), Eu Hong Seng (accountant / executive director; resigned as trustee director in 1997), Goh Hock Huat (credit officer / collection manager; appointed as trustee director in 1990), Voon Yuen Woh (financial controller; appointed as trustee director in 2012) and Ng Teng Beng (computer programmer and administrator). Yong Guan Soon was appointed ordinary director in 2012.

FGT Berhad's history has been free of major schisms. Throughout the group's existence, the majority of the directors who formally resigned were later on or immediately reappointed. As of the latest annual report, there are four Trustee Directors (Goh Hock Huat, Voon Yuen Who, Eu Hong Seng, Ng Wah Lok) and one Ordinary Director (Yong Guan Soon). None of them hold other directorships.

According to documents filed with CCM, FGT Berhad's revenue has been mainly restricted to offerings from members and is therefore not liable to taxation. In addition to offerings from members, the company's revenues are derived from rental received, income from running convention centres, managing seminars, sales of goods, physiotherapy services and sundry provisions. Every year, any surplus recorded in the Income & Expenditure Account is transferred to the General Fund. The surplus is ascertained after charging directors' remuneration, rental of premises (which can be substantial), other fees and depreciations.

FGT Berhad has been engaged in three kinds of business activities: a) operating activities which are largely synonymous with collecting offerings from members; b) investing activities, which include acquisition of investments, purchase and sale of fixed assets, and placement of fixed deposits; and c) financing activities which cover

fundraising performed through pledges as well as funds received by the church's Building fund and Missions fund (Fig.2).

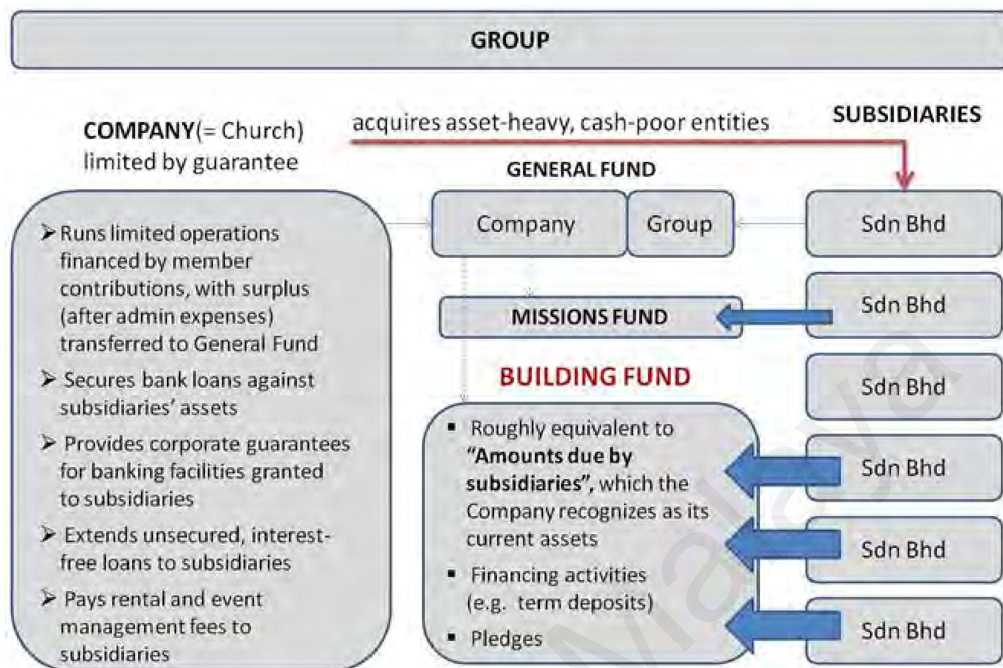


**Figure 5.1: FGT Berhad's structure**
Derived from FGT Bhd annual reports filed with Companies Commission Malaysia

Although modern-day non-denominational urban churches see themselves as financed solely by member donations, the accounting nature of their fundraising and operations is usually more complex and layered. To start with, to prevent dilution of ownership, FGT Berhad has capped the number of its "members" (in this context, the word means "shareholder" rather than "congregation member") at about 500. There is a fixed hierarchy in place involving trustee members (i.e. directors), fellow members, associate members and junior members. Money donated by members (a few hundred thousand Malaysian Ringgit annually) is considered the Company's revenue or turnover. The bulk of it covers director salaries and rental costs. As mentioned, with limited expenditure, any surplus that has been recorded is transferred to the company's General Fund.

The Company has opted for a “company limited by guarantee” structure, which is typically used by non-profits. Therefore one might expect that its accounts will present a straightforward picture of “this is how much money we raised last year” and “this is where we spent it”. The reality is vastly more complex, presenting an intricate web of for-profit, Pte Ltd subsidiaries linked to the ostensibly not-for-profit mother company through shareholdings, loans and guarantees as well as mutual payments, rental agreements, services provisioning and other considerations.

Technically, all of FGT Berhad’s subsidiaries operate in a segment that may be described as “meetings/seminars/training”, thus supporting the church’s vision and fundamental objectives. For example, FGT Properties Sdn Bhd’s nature of business is “to lease, purchase or otherwise acquire premises to be run as convention centres” ("Credit Report: FGT Properties Sri Damansara Sdn Bhd," 2016). There are some exceptions – for example, the very first subsidiary FGT Berhad acquired in the 1990s was Budget Motels Sdn Bhd, a serviced apartment operator. The subsidiary companies serve a variety of roles, not all of which have been clearly defined. In the early days, the mother company would provide its subsidiaries with loans described as “unsecured, interest-free and payable at call”. Then in recent years, the mother entity has sometimes been cast in the role of a client or buyer: For instance, it has sourced, at a cost, rental and seminar management services from some of its subsidiaries.

Post-2000, the emphasis has been on leveraging newly acquired companies’ fixed assets. Thus in 2001, FGT acquired, at a cost of RM1 million, Eagles Convention Centre Sdn Bhd whose fixed assets were valued at RM5.5 million. In 2002, its RM2 acquisition of FGT Properties (Seremban) Sdn Bhd involved fixed assets worth RM336,826. In 2002, the Group secured a 15-year, RM5 million term loan. According to the annual report, the term loan was secured by a fixed legal charge on the subsidiary company’s freehold land and building, assignment of rental proceeds, corporate guarantee by holding company and



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joint and several guarantees by the directors of the subsidiary company. Throughout, FGT Berhad has maintained a lean, asset-light balance sheet, with virtually all fixed assets held by subsidiaries. FGT's subsidiaries are listed in Table 5.4.

**Table 5.4: FGT Berhad's subsidiary companies**

| Name | Principal activities | Equity interest (2014) | CCM registration no.* |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Budget Motels Sdn Bhd** | Collecting rentals from company's properties | 100% | 209639-P |
| **Eagles Convention Centre Sdn Bhd** | Rental of facilities, organizer of conventions, seminars | 100% | 196479-U |
| **FGT Properties (Seremban) Sdn Bhd** | Acquisition or leasing of premises to be run as convention centres | 100% | 393151-K |
| **FGT Properties (KL) Sdn Bhd** | Acquisition or leasing of premises to be run as convention centres | 100% | 664174-W |
| **FGT Properties (Sri Damansara) Sdn Bhd** | Rental of facilities, organizer of conventions, seminars | 100% | 0772169-A |
| **FGT Properties (Sabah) Sdn Bhd** | Dormant | 100% | 0686766-M |
| **Caremart Sdn Bhd** | Retailer and merchant of general provisions | 100% | 833683-P |
| **Eagles Physio Sdn Bhd** | Operating a physiotherapy centre | 66.67% | 1012791-H |

Although FGT Berhad has been engaged in a range of operating, investment and financing activities, the volume of its Building Fund has consistently correlated with the value of the company's current assets described as "Amount due by subsidiaries". In 2004, the Building Fund stood at RM12.3 million, against RM13.7 million of amounts due by subsidiaries. As at December 31, 2014, the Building Fund has held assets valued at RM25.7 million.

### 5.2.5: Setting up an economy of belonging

The visions and principles propounded by the 19th-century founders of the Full Gospel movement are adapted in easy-to-remember, alliterative manner and couched in management speak. Thus the "fourfold" vision, as presented on FGT's website, becomes:

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> EMBRACE believers in the fellowship of a well-shepherded family church.
> EQUIP believers for the harvest fields through mentoring and training.
> ESTABLISH disciples unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.
> EXTEND God's Kingdom by prayerful evangelism and church planting. ("Welcome to Full Gospel Tabernacle! Who We Are: The Beginning," n.d.)

The alliterations might be amusing if they were not quite as pervasive. On FGT's website, members are exhorted to "Be a Member; be Mature; be a Minister; be Missional". The church's class V101 Discovering Church Membership covers four areas: Salvation, Statements, Strategy and Structure. Meanwhile, the V302 Leadership Training Program, "designed for all who wish to grow in leadership or be involved in serving God in FGT", covers the "5S's of leadership: Self-Development, Shepherding, Skills Development, the Spirit Man and the Servant's Role."

Much like FGT's communications with existing and prospective members use a language that speaks the urban consumer, its weekly sermons have embraced the vocabulary of self-help literature: They present topics such as dealing with difficult times, handling money, maintaining healthy relationships, dealing with peer pressure, raising children and other issues faced by the urban, working middle-class individuals and their families. In March 2017, FGT played host to a Workers' Conference, with workshops dedicated to topics such as: 1) Effective time management; 2) Effective Bible study; 3) Effective soul winning; 4) Effective people management; 5) Effective testimonies; 6) Effective parenting; 7) Effective caring; and 8) Effective study methods. Being "highly effective" is clearly a prized attribute, and a connecting thread that weaves through many of the church's messages, articles and other written materials.

In recent years, several of FGT's initiatives which once started out as charitable or humanitarian projects, designed to meet the needs of low-income earners in the community, have been expanded or hived off. Once platforms for extending the church's charity, recognizing the financial nature of many low-income individuals' needs, and

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addressing the "practical aspects of good deeds in a community", they now legally operate as stand-alone business subsidiaries, and have been registered with CCM as Sdn Bhd entities. Among these, CAREmart started off as a community grocery store, originally set up to "reduce the food bill of needy families", regardless of religion and race, by subsidizing the prices of basic food items and other household necessities for those in need. Its promotional tagline was "they used to pay RM300 a month; now they only need to spend RM200". In 2008, CAREmart was registered as CAREmart Sdn Bhd. It continues to solicit for donations, as well as encourage church members and other volunteers to assist its operations by buying their groceries from CAREmart; "blessing" friends and family with CAREmart gift vouchers of RM10, RM20 or RM50; making contributions to CAREmart's Social Fund, which is now used to purchase groceries for those in dire need; volunteering their time to help with the store's operations (arranging stock, cleaning items, checking expiry dates); volunteering to help with stock-taking (performed every six months); helping with deliveries on weekdays; being a part of volunteer teams which pay visits to needy families, providing encouragement, emotional counselling and practical help on a monthly basis or as necessary; volunteering for an afternoon once in every two months to help CAREmart workers on Sundays. Once portrayed as the "discount *kedai runcit*",[48] the "new" Caremart bills itself as a "retailer and merchant of general provisions".

Similarly, Eagles Physio and Eagles Dialysis Centre (EDC), running alongside each other, were established in 2012-2013 as "faith-motivated community projects", providing treatment on a non-profit basis to the community, irrespective of race and religion. Eagles Physio offers physiotherapy and rehabilitative services in pain management, neurorehabilitation, musculo-skeletal injury management and occupational injury management. EDC's mandate has been to serve end-stage kidney failure patients

[48] Malay for "retail store"



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from lower-income groups, some suffering from hepatitis B and hepatitis C, by providing them with affordable haemodialysis treatment ("Eagles Dialysis Centre," 2015). Today, Eagles Physio operates as Eagles Physio Sdn Bhd; EDC is run as EDC Berhad. Both entities welcome one-time financial contributions as well as pledges of monthly donations by cheque or credit card.

### 5.2.6: Political ramifications

Ever since FGT's inception, the church's activities, messages and communications have been reaching out not only to the local congregation but also, at least on a symbolic level, to the entire nation. Elaborating on the depiction of a river in its logo, FGT's website states:

> The river represents REVIVAL. For years we have been seeing streams of renewal across our nation. The blessing of God has been evident for some time within many renewed churches. Streams are flowing into rivers, and soon we will see the great River Revival in our Land. We are praying for this to come to pass. This River speaks of our desire for breakthroughs in our nation. ("Welcome to Full Gospel Tabernacle! Who We Are: The Beginning," n.d.)

As far back as 2001, FGT would participate in nationwide initiatives promoted by the NECF. Jotting down his observations from that year's Merdeka Prayer Rally, Pastor Ng had the following to say:

> I have been attending the Merdeka Prayer Rallies organized by NECF for many years. The prayer rallies have been held yearly across the country on the eve of Merdeka, August 30th. To me, it is one of the most significant meetings in the nation. It is a gathering of Christians from all churches to pray for the nation. ... The Pastor's Prayer Shield was launched several months ago. The NECF also launched a 40-day prayer and fast prior to the Merdeka Prayer Rally. This launch caught the attention of many pastors who adopted the 40-day fast for their own churches. So there was build-up of the intensity of prayer. When I reached the PGRM hall on August 30th, 2001, I was pleasantly surprised by the number of people attending. It was close to 2000 people. The people had come for a full 4½-hour prayer meeting. ... But what really spoke to me that night was the dance presentation. For this prayer rally, the dance was not a celebration but a prophetic dance on "The weight of God's glory coming down on our nation". When I saw it, the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, "This is possible if my people would bow their knees and pray for their nation". ... I left the prayer rally ... rather pleased by the improvement of the prayer climate in the Klang Valley. I would like to

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> encourage those involved in launching the Pastor's Prayer Shield and the 40-day prayer and fast to carry on the great work God has called them to do, which is to bring Malaysian Christians to pray for their country. ("The prayer climate in the Klang Valley is improving," 2001)

He signed his testimony as "Ng Wah Lok, a silent observer who loves Malaysia".

In this context, the church has played the role of a political base and a platform for disseminating views and opinions on nation-building, inter-community and interfaith relations, the electoral process and other political issues that are likely to capture the collective imagination of its urban church members. Shortly before Malaysia's 13th general election of May 2013, several churches including FGT went as far as to move their traditional day of weekly service from Sunday to Saturday, in a gesture aimed at encouraging their flock to take part in the election (as well as to travel to their hometowns if need be).

FGT also organized the 2014 Christmas Hi-Tea on behalf of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM). In addition to Hannah Yeoh, politicians who attended the event included the then Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, Selangor Mentri Besar Azmin Ali, Selangor executive council member and Bukit Lanjan assemblywoman Elizabeth Wong, Member of Parliament for Batu, Kuala Lumpur Tian Chua as well as leaders from different faiths. CFM president and FGT pastor Rev. Dr Eu Yong Seng called on all Malaysians to unite and foster good ties. His sentiments were shared by Muhyiddin who said Malaysians needed to ensure the country continues to be a peaceful place ("FT and S'gor Christmas celebrations draw Malaysians of all races," 2014).

In recent years, Hannah Yeoh, Speaker of the Selangor State Assembly from 2013 to 2018, has visited services as well as discussion events at FGT, and shared her encouragement though communication platforms such as Twitter. In March 2017, fellow

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Selangor state assemblywoman (for Damansara Utama) and DAP's Social Media Strategist Yeo Bee Yin[49] delivered a workshop at FGT on "Serving God in Politics", as part of NECF's National Youth Convention.

Many of Yeoh's statements, actions and appearances have effectively blurred the line between public office and religious faith, making her the poster person for a radical Christian evangelist movement. Members of Subang Jaya City Council (MPSJ) have likewise acknowledged through social media that some of their council decisions have been made in church. On several occasions, Yeoh's actions have invited speculation and accusations regarding the use of state resources to further a relatively narrow (by national standards) evangelical-Christian political agenda. On her website www.hannahyeoh.com, Yeoh presents herself as passionate about nation-building and seeking to inspire the church to play an active role in transforming its community and nation. Likewise, the tagline on her now-discontinued blog, http://hannahyeoh.blogspot.my/, reads, "Righteousness exalts a nation". Her profile on Twitter, where she has been exceedingly active, says she "Lives for God". And in one of her tweets, Yeoh wrote that, "Christians will not retaliate. We believe in loving even those who hate us. That is the way of the cross. There, I said it."

**5.2.6.1: Proselytization**

In January 2010, Rev. Dr. Eu Hong Seng issued and published on FGT's website a 10-page article titled "Why I use 'Allah'" (Eu, 2010). The article presents what the writer calls "ten salient facts and reasons" for opposing restrictions on the use of the word by Malaysian Christians. It acknowledges that "every true and faithful follower will want to share their faith, and Muslims are no exception". It goes on to call for "no coercion, no bullying, no media misrepresentation, no *scrambling* [emphasis Eu's] the minds of our

[49] In July 2018, Yeo was appointed Minister of Energy, Technology, Science, Climate Change and Environment.

children and no re-writing of Scriptures!". The interfaith row over the use of the word "Allah" has its roots in laws from the 1980s limiting non-Muslim use of the Arabic term. In a 2014 ruling, Malaysia's Federal Court declined to hear an appeal by the Catholic Church, maintained that the Home Ministry had been correct in barring the use of "Allah" in the Catholic weekly Herald, and declared that the word was not integral to the Christian faith.

This was not FGT's only run-in with the guardians of the country's majority faith. Before the 2013 general election, in November 2012 FGT was the venue of a well-attended forum titled "Islamic state? Which vision? Whose responsibility?". Panellists at the forum organized by the Oriental Hearts and Mind Study Institute (OHMSI) included Nurul Izzah Anwar, Member of Parliament for Lembah Pantai and daughter of Malaysia's then *de facto* opposition and Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) leader Anwar Ibrahim. Nurul Izzah's off-the-cuff statement, given in reply to a question from the audience regarding freedom of religion for Malaysia's non-Muslims vs. Muslims, was immediately seized upon by the press and some of the Islamic enforcement authorities, and linked to the issue of apostasy in Islam (Ruban, 2012). She was widely vilified and accused of spreading liberal and pluralistic teachings. In the weeks that followed, public figures including the Sultan of Selangor were drawn into the fray and urged to issue comments.

In addition, FGT's Wisma Eagles facility has played host to other events attracting evangelicals from all of Klang Valley, such as National Prayer Rally and Global Day of Prayer ("Pray globally, gather locally"), featuring an array of influential international speakers and receiving regular news coverage in national dailies such as *The Star* newspaper. The church's leadership has occasionally also issued comments on political developments overseas. For example, in July 2015, Eu Hong Seng authored a statement, published on FGT's website, declaring that "the evangelical community of churches both

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in Malaysia and worldwide alike are saddened by the Supreme Court decision on 26th June 2015 to legalize same-sex marriages in the US" (Eu, 2015). Through its faith healing seminars, FGT has partnered with The Elijah Challenge Ministry from the United States (www.theelijahchallenge.org), a missionary organization targeting "non-Christian, Gospel-resistant Third-World nations". Missionaries trained and dispatched by The Elijah Challenge were active in Indonesia between 1978 and 1987, before they were expelled by the Indonesian government. An October 2015 launch of "Thinkers' Club" seminar, held at FGT's Wisma Eagles, and representing a joint initiative by NECF's Leadership Commission and Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, focused on Islamization as one of the key areas or faith matters which according to the organizers were of growing concern, particularly with a view towards raising the young generation's leaders ("Calendar of Events," 2015).

In December 2015, speaking in his capacity as CFM Chairman, Eu Hong Seng issued press statements criticizing public forums on the topic of proselytization, such as a panel organized in 2015 by University Teknologi Mara (UiTM). He said such events were a threat to national security, and an attempt to demonize Malaysia's religious minorities. "Let the allegations be supported with proper research and concrete evidence, not wild anecdotes and unverified assertions," he said in a statement (The Star Online, 2015).

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### 5.3: First Baptist Church (FBC): Reaching out to youth through apologetics

*"Satisfaction sucks because it never gets contented."* (FBC Youth Pastor Mark Tan)

#### 5.3.1: Background information

FBC's early history is marked by a schism: The church shares a heritage with Pantai Baptist Church (PBC). The origins of these two independent Baptist churches date back to 1950s efforts by missionaries from the Foreign Mission Board (FMB; now known as the International Mission Board, IMB), an initiative of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in the United States. Interestingly, the first Baptist ministries to be opened in Kuala Lumpur operated in the Cantonese dialect. English-language congregations soon followed suit. A year after, in 1951, FMB missionary Jessie Green arrived in Kuala Lumpur and opened the Pasar Road Baptist Gospel Centre (PRBGC) along with an English Training Union.

A few years later, together with a group of her fellow missionaries, Green founded a gospel centre and Baptist clinic at Jalan Dispensary, Petaling Jaya Old Town. From this gospel outreach, FBC was established as Klang Valley's first English-speaking Baptist church. Subsequently in 1957, First Baptist Church of Petaling Jaya was organised with 24 charter members. Glen Martin, an FMB missionary, was elected to serve as its first pastor. Over the next two decades, a significant amount of outreach and church-planting activities led to the founding of Baptist chapels in Klang, Damansara Heights, and Subang Jaya (at the time, this particular church was known as Subang Jaya Baptist Church).

In the mid-1980s, precipitated by continued growth, debates ensued about the church's governance structure. Involving the entire membership body in all meetings and day-to-day decisions has clearly become unsustainable. Although FBC had been cautioned about moving away from its congregational form of governance, it was proposed that the church polity be restructured with a Council as the highest authority in



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the church. In the middle of these tectonic shifts in 1987, the advent of the Charismatic Movement split the church and more than a half of its members left. Those who chose to stay behind sought to rebuild what they saw as a more Baptist form of governance and practice. The charismatic wave affected not only membership but also a number of its ministries, including for instance the majority of the Sunday school teaching team. In 1990, the original Subang Jaya Baptist Church was deregistered as a society. The following year, the Subang centre (as opposed to the Pantai centre) became FBC.

Today, this history is acknowledged on PBC's (but not FBC's) website. Many of those who participated in the split continue to feel perplexed, and express reservations over why "people who loved the Lord could not worship Him together in the same sanctuary". FBC's own website makes no mention of this history, suggesting that the topic continues to be a contentious one for many former as well as current leaders and members.

The modern-day FBC describes its guiding principle as "servant leadership", with a leadership paradigm based on the New Testament model of elders and deacons. A Council of Elders is responsible for preaching, biblical education and overall spiritual oversight. The Church Board comprises deacons who are tasked with administering the church through various ministries and programmes. Pastors are either elders or deacons. Beyond this group there is a wider group of deacons who act as ministry leaders, Life Group leaders of the church and other nominated leaders. Together with the Church Board they form the Assembly of Leaders which is the review body of the church and provides check and balance as well as a pool of leaders who can rotate into the Church Board.

The FBC Council of Elders which has been installed for a five-year term from 2017 to 2022 includes Dr. Peter Ng Eng Pin (Elder and Chairman of the Board) who is a lay preacher and consultant urological surgeon with Ramsay Sime Derby Health Care in

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Subang Jaya; Arnold Lim Say Han (Associate Elder), a UK-trained architect and owner of Sayhan Lim Architect studio; Lee Yee Dian (Associate Elder), a Japan-trained electrical engineer and Vice President and Member of the Board of the Malaysian Association of Creativity & Innovation (*Yayasan Inovasi Malaysia*); and Richard Ng Cheng Hoe (Honorary Elder).

The Assembly of Elders, which is currently in place for a three-year term (2017 – 2020), involves 46 members who make decisions on issues affecting the church's overall vision. FBC's board members include Tan Swee Peng, consultant neurologist at the Sime Darby Medical Centre and Sunway Medical Centre, and co-founder of *Rumahku* orphanage; Chuah Choo Chiang, Senior Director of Communications at PGA Tour; and others.

FBC has been a member of the Malaysia Baptist Convention (MBC), which was founded in Penang in 1953. In recent years, FBC member Dr. Sim Quan Seng has been appointed to the MBC's steering committee overseeing the construction of the proposed Wisma Baptist which is to house MBC's headquarters as well as Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary's (MBTS) Klang Valley campus ("Meeting with FBC Pastors R. Ramachandran and Mark Tan", 2017).

### 5.3.2: Theology: Christian apologetics

Apologetics is a field of inquiry that explores and propounds historical, evidential and reasoned arguments which serve to defend Christianity from objections. As opposed to a simple proclamation of the gospel, the task of apologetics, derived from the Greek word *apologia*, which means "defence", involves refuting objections levelled against the Christian faith (defensive apologetics) and/or providing a positive case for its acceptance (offensive apologetics). Both approaches trace their roots to philosophical sources such as Greek stoicism, scepticism and Epicureanism. Over the past few years,

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these writings and teachings have found new resonance among those exploring the topics of meaning and life purpose, as well as death and dying, as more and more social observers point to an "end of an empire" as the defining Zeitgeist of our time.

FBC's current Youth Pastor Mark Tan is a 2011 graduate of Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang, where he obtained a bachelor's degree in theology, pastoral studies, pastoral counselling and specialized ministries. He subsequently attended courses in Christian philosophy and apologetics organized by RZIM Academy (Ravi Zacharias International Ministries) in Kuala Lumpur.

### 5.3.3: Commodifying trends

#### 5.3.3.1: Lowering the barriers to entry, for clergy and for members

From the outset, community and social work have been the lynchpin of FBC's activities, as well as the engine driving much of the church's growth. Heading FBC's social work activities at present is Pastor R. Ramachandran. Raised as Hindu in a family of Jaffna Tamil origin and moving between Malaysia and Sri Lanka while growing up, he completed his university studies in the UK and married an English spouse of Anglican faith. Increasingly sceptical about what he saw as the idol worship of his parents' religion, and partly influenced by a sibling who had converted from Hinduism to Christianity, he became a Christian in 1991. A few years into his retirement, Pastor Rama became involved with FBC's social work and pastoral care, rather than preaching. Since then, he has been in charge of social work initiatives such as setting up homes for street children and the destitute urban poor, organizing hospital visits and other activities. It also organizes prayer services for migrant workers, which are conducted in Tagalog, Tamil and Nepali languages.

Urban youth is of particular importance to FBC as one of its main target segments. Unlike many other churches, which seek to effect "life transformation" among young



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members within their congregation primarily through typical youth activities, borrowing heavily from the themes of mass-culture entertainment, FBC has drawn on its well-developed in-house expertise in Christian philosophy, particularly apologetics. While maintaining a sharp focus on the scripture as the authoritative basis of any action, in working with young adults FBC aims to lead by persuasion as much as exhortation.

#### 5.3.3.2: Adjusting and simplifying the message to suit the audience

At present, FBC runs 10 life groups which gather once or twice a week for praise and worship, Bible study, sharing of testimonies, and praying for each other's needs. The church has also organized a chapter of Boys' Brigade, described as the oldest uniformed youth movement in the world (established in Glasgow, Scotland in 1883) and promoting among young boys "the habits of Obedience, Reverence, Discipline, Self-respect and all that tends towards a true Christian manliness." Organized into three age groups under the motto of Sure and Steadfast, the Brigade meets on most Saturday afternoons. In addition, building on the Montessori curriculum,[50] FBC's education department has also put in place a Sunday school, a vacation bible school, a pre-school ministry, a toddlers' play group, a special-teens ministry for youths with autism, ADHD and dyspraxia, and a Salt of Subang (SOS) youth group, as well as a *Karis* fellowship for senior citizens (active since 1985).[51]

A great deal of FBC's youth engagement has been in the RZIM mould: Considered to be a defender of traditional evangelicalism, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries sponsors dozens of itinerant preachers and apologists; puts on conferences for Christian leaders; and holds forums on college campuses. Its projects are informed with awareness that although millennial urban youth may want to cultivate a religious faith

[50] The Montessori Method of education, developed by Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori (1880-1952), is a child-centred educational approach based on scientific observations of children from birth to adulthood. Montessori's method has been used for over 100 years in many parts of the world.

[51] *Karis* is Greek for "grace, kindness".

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and participate in a church, they will often have difficulty accepting Christian claims at face value. For this unique cohort of individuals who have grown up surrounded by digital technologies and other scientific platforms, it is crucial to demonstrate the compatibility of faith, reason and science; to show faith as going beyond reason, rather than against reason; and to help them understand its justifications and implications. To date, these methods have been widely reflected in FBC's sermons and other messages.

FBC's youth discussions embrace modern methodologies such as checklists of observations and non-conformances. Frequently, they touch on otherwise risqué topics such as the death of Playboy magazine founder Hugh Hefner and place them in sensitive and thought-provoking contexts. Tertiary-education students in particular are more than ever exposed to, and sometimes struggle to weave meaning out of, the proliferation of alternative information sources facilitated through access to digital technologies. They also face a dearth of employment opportunities and a culture of lifetime debt. They are failing to find answers in postmodern thought and are seeking personal and spiritual enrichment. Consciously or unconsciously, they are drawn to immutable, fundamental values.

On the surface, many may perceive the concept of reason to be in direct opposition to faith. Nonetheless, apologetics is a not a new field, and neither are persuading and debating on the validity of the gospel. In fact, there are numerous biblical instances of reasoned arguments employed in the ministry of Christ himself, such as in his didactic dialogues with Pharisees, Sadducees and disciples. In many instances, the reader will find objections to be rationally answered, underlying assumptions uncovered with well-placed questions, and miraculous signs given as evidence for his claims.

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#### 5.3.3.3: Building attachment and branding

With young audiences, FBC Pastor Mark Tan addresses questions such as, "How can I be sure that God exists?"; "Doesn't science disprove God?"; "How can I believe in a good God when there is so much evil in this world?", etc. He believes that in the pluralistic context of a society like Malaysia, the evangelical spiritual warfare requires a lot more than taking part in prayer walks around the neighbourhood. The church needs more informed, likable and winsome ambassadors who have the tools and the capability to tackle contemporary challenges in a biblically faithful and culturally relevant manner.

In his work, Pastor Tan draws on resources produced by international, celebrity-status Christian pastors and authors such as Reasonable Faith by William Lane Craig (www.reasonablefaith.org), Professor of Philosophy at Houston Baptist University and author of books including *The Kalam Cosmological Argument; Foreknowledge and Human Freedom; Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology;* and *God, Time and Eternity.* Got Questions Ministries (www.gotquestions.org) is another resource – a conservative, evangelical, fundamental, and non-denominational para-church ministry which provides "biblical, applicable, and timely answers to spiritually related questions through an internet presence". Craig Hazen, Director of Christian Apologetics at Biola University, lectures on topics such as Christianity among the world religions, evidence for the resurrection, responding to the cults, why God allows evil, effective evangelism, the reliability of scripture, objective morality, and eschatological visions and answers.

#### 5.3.3.4: Distributing FBC's basket of religious goods

On a practical plane and recognizing that "God is not only interested in Sunday church activities but in every aspect of our lives", student career talks especially are an attractive value proposition: With the Malaysian economy variously described as stagnant, trapped in the middle-income bracket and facing competition from more

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dynamic countries in other parts of Asia, full-time entry-level jobs in Kuala Lumpur and other urban centres have become a prized possession. As a result, practical guidance and advice to first-time jobseekers are bound to generate a strong sense of attachment to the church. On FBC's part, it is also a sound investment: Having received a leg up in their early careers, once church members have established themselves in their professional fields they will be keen to give back to the church – all the more so as there is limited tradition in Malaysia of alumni/ae giving back to their old *alma mater.* In February 2016 FBC organized an IMPACT Career Talk. The event was catered especially for those who were in the process of entering tertiary education and grappling with all the big decisions facing them. The programme included institutional booths as well as talks by nine different professionals in various fields (business, medicine, law, graphics design, IT, accounting, music and events management, architecture and education), all described as committed and faithful Christians.

### 5.3.4: Generating revenue; business activities

Similarly to DUMC, FBC has invested significant resources into running Alpha, Beta and Gamma discipleships as popularized by Nicky Gumbel, originally in the UK but now completed by an estimated 17 million people worldwide, in up to 50 languages. FBC has billed the courses as an opportunity "to ask the big questions of life in a relaxed, friendly and fun environment". Its own Alpha courses typically stick to the global format, assembling on Wednesday nights over dinner, screening video presentations by Nicky Gumbel on the topic of the day, allowing for extensive group discussions and Q&A, followed by more questions and conversations, assisted by a team of church helpers, during supper. The course's completion culminates in a weekend getaway and an end-of-course celebration dinner.

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A follow-up programme to Alpha, the Beta discipleship has three components: The Dinner, attended by church members; The Talk, which covers key areas of starting out in Christian life based on a study of the book of Philippians in the New Testament; and lastly, The Group Discussion, which is designed to give participants the opportunity to ask questions and share their views. The topics that are visited over the course of the eight-week module include Introduction to the Bible & Why/How to do Quiet Time; New Heart; New Purpose; New Attitude; New Responsibilities; New Friendships and Confidence; New Ambitions; and New Resources and Generosity. The Gamma discipleship track is a series of biblical book studies, targeted at participants who seek to learn how to read and understand scripture. It follows a similar pattern of weekly meetings combining dinner, teaching and worship, group discussion and supper.

Described as contemplative, Alpha is an opportunity to explore life and the Christian faith in a friendly, open and informal environment. Alpha has been recognized as the fastest-growing ecumenical evangelization program in history. Critics have pointed out that the Alpha course eschews actual preaching the Gospel. Frequent mention is made of God's love but not his wrath. There is discussion of man's wrongdoings, but the word "sin" has been reported to be studiously avoided, thus giving the Alpha theology a pronounced politically correct flavour. Similarly, friendship and companionship with God is elevated and exalted above forgiveness as the pathway to human happiness.

The Alpha course is a good representation of FBC's brand of commodified religion: It lowers barriers to entry for Malaysians with a secular outlook as well as those coming from polytheist backgrounds. It makes religion ready for consumption by packaging it into a friendly product – largely devoid of heavyweight moral choices and reminiscent of self-help literature and videos – and presenting it in a catchy multimedia format. Thus the Alpha course is a strong fit with FBC's long-term focus on the youth, as evidenced by the church's life groups which work with many segments of youth, from

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pre-schoolers through autistic and other special-needs teens to students at colleges and universities.

### 5.3.5: Setting up an economy of belonging

FBC's home state of Selangor is the most diverse state in Malaysia in terms of age, ethnicity and background, partly due to the migration of youths from other states. On top of that, many of its urban millennials have shown a consistent dislike for race politics and other old formulas of governance. Nevertheless, they still grapple with universal youth issues such as the preoccupation with one's own life and the occasionally unhealthy ways of comparing one's life to that of others; peer pressure, need for acceptance and recognition; struggling with trying to please God, please self and please others; coming to terms with failure and suffering, and other areas of introspection.

Raised in Malaysia's multicultural and multi-religious urban environment, and interacting on a daily basis with relatives subscribing to traditional Chinese religion and other polytheistic faiths, young people often seek to make sense of Christian claims in relation to other religions, especially the Buddhist-Taoist tradition. In this context, the apologetic ministry aims to bring them to a cultural and intellectual space where the communication of the gospel makes plausible sense. Additionally, apologetics provides access to the types of thought ammunition that are necessary to engage thinkers of all worldviews on an intellectual level through events such as seminars, conferences, forums and debates.

### 5.3.6: Political ramifications

In face-to-face discussions, Pastor Mark Tan commented that in recent years, the Selangor state government, concerned about a spate of youth mental health issues and suicides, has been calling on churches to assist proactively in working with young people. Correspondingly, churches that are active in Selangor have been given unprecedented



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access to private colleges and universities. Arguably, the “state” which has facilitated FBC’s access to young people in institutions of tertiary education has been largely synonymous with the abovementioned politician and fellow Subang Jaya resident Hannah Yeoh. Yeoh has been actively targeting young voters and organizing regular meet-your-MP events in her home constituency of Subang Jaya.

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### 5.4: Raphah Ministries Malaysia: A healing ministry

*"The wounds in the inner man – the spirit and soul (mind, emotion and will) – are just as real and disabling and broken bones."* (Raphah website)

#### 5.4.1: Background information

Raphah Ministries Malaysia is a non-denominational Christian healing and discipleship ministry (as opposed to a full-fledged church). Using a motto "Healing hearts, rebuilding lives", it provides prayer counselling, preaching, faith healing and spiritual deliverance. It operates a Raphah Centre in Petaling Jaya and a Raphah Centre Ipoh. The word *Raphah* is a Hebrew term borrowed from the Torah; it refers to God's healing ("Freedom from Addiction", 2017).

Raphah Ministries describes itself as Bible-based (i.e. engaged in teaching and training that is biblical in content and approach); spirit-filled (providing and empowering healing prayer); holistic and integrative (serving up comprehensive, integrative ministry to the whole person); and relational (offering a sensitive personal touch which is focused on the individual).

Raphah Ministries has its beginnings in an informal local prayer support group. It grew out of the desire of its members to establish a training and ministry centre where believers could receive teaching, be equipped and empowered to serve in healing and discipleship. The ministry was conceived by eight friends (predominantly females) who were alumni of the Ellel Ministries International School of Evangelism, Healing and Discipleship in the UK (ellel.org). They first met between 1993 and 1994 to intercede on behalf of Ellel Ministries' work. In the course of their monthly support meetings, the founders came up with the idea to set up a ministry in Malaysia similar to that of Ellel



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Ministries.[52] Nine years later, in 2003, Raphah Ministries was incorporated under the name of Life Rebuilders (M) Sdn Bhd and established its first centre in Petaling Jaya. In 2009, a Raphah Centre with its own management team was established in Ipoh, Perak.

In December 2010, Raphah's founding members handed over the PJ centre's leadership and management to a new team. Simultaneously, they settled into new roles, providing spiritual oversight over the new ministry as part of a five-member Raphah Council. Today's Raphah Centre PJ, located within the NZX Commercial Centre at Ara Jaya, is served by volunteers and a management team comprising members from different congregations.

In terms of asserting and developing its presence in Malaysia, Raphah may be regarded as a niche player: Although inner healing is acknowledged and well-known in other countries, it is not yet widely recognized yet in the local context. The market for faith healing is still to be properly educated, and indeed created, so that the public has a better understanding of the delineations between healing, religious deliverance, spiritual warfare and physical or medicinal healing. Thus far, establishing a clear separation of psychological issues from spiritual domains has been a work in progress. In this emerging market, Raphah Ministries and Elijah House have been the dominant actors.[53] At present, both have been running courses pertaining to inner healing and prayer counselling.

### 5.4.2: Theology: Faith healing

Raphah Ministries is a current member of the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship of Malaysia (NECF). The ministry acknowledges that healing, even when

[52] The work of Ellel Ministries officially began in the UK in 1986. Today, the group operates centres in 20 countries including Australia, India and Singapore. Established in April 2010, Ellel Ministries Malaysia (EMM; ellel.org.my), a part of Ellel Ministries International, is headquartered in Kuala Lumpur and runs centres in Penang and Kota Kinabalu. Peter Horrobin, Founder and International Director of Ellel Ministries, helped establish Ellel Singapore 2005. He has been a frequent visitor to Malaysia (as recently as September 2017).

[53] A branch of the worldwide Elijah House Ministries founded in the United States in 1974, the inter-denominational and evangelical Elijah House Malaysia Prayer Ministry School was set up in Ara Damansara in 2001.



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framed as the sharing of God's gifts of healing, should not be performed in isolation. Instead, it should represent a form of religious discipleship (i.e. accepting as well as spreading the doctrine), and therefore relate in various ways to other areas of church activities such as pastoral care and spiritual development. In a broader perspective, healing may be viewed as requiring ecumenical cooperation, particularly at local level, and encompassing community issues, justice and equality issues and ethical matters, and even issues of international scope.

The thrust of Raphah Centres' activities would be impossible to define without considering first the complex, multi-faceted understanding the ministry has promoted of the concepts of health, healing and well-being. Fundamentally, the purport of any religious practice and experience could be described as healing in its broadest and deepest sense. In the Christian context, the concepts of health and healing have been largely predicated upon the possibility of encompassing and restoring "the total good" of a person, in a comprehensive and holistic sense; of bringing order into a person's life where there has been disorder. Seen through the prism of religious faith, disease is associated with humanity's "fall", and indeed with the Original Sin, thus fitting into what Raphah has labelled as the "sin – sickness – disease model". With this scope in mind, a healing ministry aims to bring about not only healing but also physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wholeness, and arguably also "holiness". It disseminates a message of abundant life, filled with meaning and purpose: "Healing: progress towards health and wholeness. The process through which the individual develops a physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political and social state of well-being, in harmony with God, with others and with the environment" (*A Time to Heal Handbook. The Development of Good Practice in the Healing Ministry*, 2013).

Pastor Vincent Lau is one of Raphah Ministries' founders. He is an ordained Anglican minister. Prior to taking up his position with Raphah Ministries in 2003, he

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spent 13 years serving as Vicar of St. Gabriel's Church in Kuala Lumpur, a part of the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia. Rev. Lau received his initial theological training at the Discipleship Training Centre in Singapore before pursuing his Bachelor of Theology at the Malaysia Theological Seminary in Seremban. He then read for his Master's degree in Theology with the Australian College of Theology (ACT) in Sydney. Rev. Lau has been driven by a vision of Christian believers as the salt and light of God in this world. He has been involved in the training of prayer counsellors since 1993. He is married to his Raphah co-pastor JayZee Cheah; they have a son. According to Pastor Lau:

> Dysfunction, whether spiritual or psychological, is often due to wrong choices. A Christian must be prepared to deal with the roots of many unresolved issues that lock him in the past and prevent him from moving forward. To receive healing, he needs to obey God and realign himself to his will. Only then can he embrace his God-given identity and purpose. ("Finding Inner Peace," n.d.)

**5.4.3: Commodifying trends**

**5.4.3.1: Lowering the barriers to entry, for clergy and for members**

Pastor JayZee has been Raphah's Coordinator for Training, as well as the training team's principal teacher and facilitator. A graduate of University Malaya and the Institute of Education, Singapore, she briefly worked as secondary school teacher at Raffles Institution in Singapore before completing theological studies at the Discipleship Training Centre and entering full-time Christian ministry. An alumna of Ellel Ministries UK, she has been involved in prayer counselling and teaching, as well as in training believers in prayer counselling, healing and discipleship since 1993. Pastor JayZee is the author of a healing self-help book, *Untangling the Cobwebs of the Soul: Breaking Free from the Snare of Destructive Emotions* (2004). Her other publications include *Divine Healing and Wholeness: The Sin-Sickness-Disease Connection and The Holy Land,* and *Jerusalem from Abraham to Independence: A Short History and Pilgrim's Guide.*

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The self-help genre is in itself indicative of Rapha's commodified version of religion, despite the ministry's self-description as Bible-based. (In some contexts, "faith-based" might be a more appropriate label.) Publications such as Pastor JayZee's books aim to ease the consumption of religion by shifting the focus from biblical study and exegesis to exploring emotions and mental states; giving religious worship a teleological "health & wealth" focus; and serving as primary tools for proselytization as well as for generating revenue.

Raphah's position of working alongside doctors reflects a process of commodification of medical treatment by lowering barriers to entry not only for patients but also for practitioners; repacking religion as healing, counselling and psychotherapy. Additionally, whenever signs of healing have materialized, creating a sense of attachment and belonging will occur nearly automatically: Recipients of these goods and benefits will often share testimonials and raise generous donations.

#### 5.4.3.2: Adjusting and simplifying the message to suit the audience

Raphah characterizes its remit as "equipping believers to fulfil their given calling"; working towards spiritual, emotional healing and restoration for individuals; training people to engage in prayer ministry, learning and putting ministry into practice; providing a safe setting for building relationships; building a biblical foundation for "Christ-centred inner healing" (sanctification and transformation); giving students the opportunity to experience personal healing through small-group ministry with their peers, and to teach, model and provide opportunities to practice ministry with one another. To date, Raphah has trained a number of facilitators, conducted training seminars and ministered in different parts of Malaysia.

Members of the Raphah Council and leaders of Raphah Ministries maintain that their focus is not on numbers, but rather on helping set Christians free from the effects of



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dysfunction and its manifestations. The leaders think of their holistic healing ministry as a facilitating role, and are open to invitations from other churches to conduct workshops and seminars on inner healing, as well as to equip pastoral teams with the tools that are necessary to help "wounded" individuals of faith to reconnect with God and to live their lives to their fullest potential ("History of Raphah Ministries," n.d.).

#### 5.4.3.3: Building attachment and branding

In 2013, Raphah Ministries promulgated a declaration named The Raphah Ministries Rule of Life. It is a set of statements describing emotionally and spiritually healthy practices and disciplines that are meant to be embraced across the ministry. These include daily devotions such as praise and worship; reading the scripture; prayer as well as listening to religious worship and service; weekly practices of church and cell commitment; Sabbath rest; and spiritual retreats focusing on readings in revealed texts and knowledge. On a monthly basis, the Rule encourages the practice of silence and solitude, stillness and simplicity, and healthy recreation. Finally, adherents to the Rule are exhorted to perform frequently the good practice of taking care of and nurturing the body; performing exercise and receiving adequate rest; and setting aside sufficient time to be spent with family and friends.

Those seeking help from Raphah Ministries are first encouraged to attend its monthly healing services at the PJ centre. These services are held in what the ministry describes as a "non-church environment", provide focused teaching on healing and discipleship, and offer individuals opportunities to receive prayer for healing, which may not be available in their own churches.

Raphah has utilized a range of internationally developed resources and training tools, using these commodity vehicles to proselytize as well as propagate and monetize its teachings. These include materials designed by Freedom in Christ Ministries

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International (FICM). In 2004, a US-UK team of two best-selling preachers and seminary ministers specializing in the topic of spiritual freedom, Neil T. Anderson and Steve Goss, co-wrote *The Freedom In Christ: Discipleship Course-Leaders Guide* course book and DVD; initially just for the UK where it was used by over 4,000 churches. Over the years, FICM has grown into a veritable franchise, publishing books, workbooks, DVDs, online courses and other training vehicles.

In addition, FICM has rolled out a Community Freedom Ministries University, complete with an e-learning portal to be followed by what the creators call face-to-face practicum. More recently, new extensions of FICM have come on the market, including The Grace Course and Freedom in Christ For Young People. Raphah pastors view the course, which has now been available worldwide and translated into a dozen languages, as a strategic resource for equipping their ministry.[54]

There are other international franchises Raphah Ministries has endorsed, such as Emotionally Healthy Spirituality (www.emotionallyhealthy.org). Originally produced as a book by Peter Scazzero, founder of New Life Fellowship Church in Queens, New York City, it inspired Raphah pastors and activists to engage in a year-long study of its ideas and concepts. Scazzero is also the author of *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* and *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (2015). Following a similar pattern as FICM, the book series has spawned a franchise which today includes The Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Course and The Emotionally Healthy Relationships Course. It sells training modules, discipleship kits, podcasts, webinars and other training modules and merchandise.

[54] In May 2018, the worldwide FICM community, representing more than 40 countries, assembled in Kuala Lumpur for its international family meeting, held once every four years. Organized at Subang Hotel and Convention Centre, the event included five days of presentations, activities and excursions around KL and Selangor.



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#### 5.4.3.4: Distributing Raphah's basket of religious goods

The ministry's services typically incorporate a short worship, a biblical word of exhortation, followed by prayer for all present. Those who require prayer for special needs are invited to come forward, whereupon ministry team members pray for them individually. In spite of generally striving to dismantle the unrealistic impression of on-the-spot healing, Raphah does assert that there have been some individuals who were actually "healed" in the course of these services.

It is this underlying "sharing in the spirit" – purportedly expressed through encouragement, consolation from love, compassion and sympathy – that represents a direct link between Raphah's healing remit and the ministry's evangelical and charismatic values and beliefs. Raphah points out that ideally, the way this link is reinforced in its day-to-day activities should be theologically sound, responsible, loving and leading individuals to a closer relationship with God. In public imagination, faith healing has been most readily associated with "miracles", i.e. with healing taking place instantly or rapidly. The evangelical and especially charismatic churches' emphasis on the supernatural and on miracles may have cemented this general perception (sometimes referred to as "a weird and wacky picture of healing") even further. Nonetheless, the majority of healing ministries including Raphah recognize that in most cases, healing is a gradual process, and that bringing deep restoration to health at more than one level may take a considerable amount of time. According to Raphah pastors:

> Many adults continue to nurse past wounds and hurts which have yet to find resolution or go through a healing process. As a result, there are countless Christians who have been disabled through all manner or struggles and conflicts... ...They are 'hanging in there', silently fighting disappointments, failures, broken relationships, depression, rejection, suicidal thoughts, sexual sin, betrayal gilt, condemnation, and the list goes on.
>
> God can heal and restore. But it takes His people to rise to the occasion and match need with His healing power. If those who are in pain and suffering do not find the help they need from the people of God, they will inevitably turn to other sources and other means for help; often with disastrous consequences.



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> The Raphah model is patterned after Christ who preached, healed and delivered... ...We want to rebuild individuals, couples and families; to reclaim the generations, to heal hearts, and rebuild lives and relationships... ...Everyone coming to Christ needs cleansing and restoration before progressing further. ("Finding Inner Peace," n.d.)

Individuals who have approached Raphah but are showing signs of a deeper affliction are instructed to seek further help, and may be encouraged to attend the church's monthly seminars in order to "understand what may be missing from his or her understanding of the Christian life", i.e. "understanding, accepting and obeying God's truth". In cases where a believer perceives that he or she needs urgent help, a preliminary interview with Raphah representatives may be arranged. During the interview, a prayer counsellor will assess the situation and determine whether it is within the ministry's capacity to help this particular person – and if so, what nature and extent of help can be reasonably expected. Individuals who have reported a chronic problem may be referred for psychological or psychiatric evaluation. As such, the ministry is careful not to discount or overlook the presence of genetic or other somatic conditions.

Although the approach to every counselee is different, according to Raphah there is an underlying need to recognize the reality and the power of the spiritual realm. Raphah Ministries also recognizes that the association between psychological strongholds [of affliction or intrusion] and demonization is not invariably or automatically established.

### 5.4.4: Generating revenue; business activities

Since its inception, Raphah Ministries' structure has allowed it to operate as an event management firm as well as a fundraising engine. Raphah has been registered with the Companies Commission Malaysia as Raphah Berhad, a company limited by guarantee and not having share capital. Raphah Berhad was incorporated in June 2011, taking over from Life Rebuilders (M) Sdn Bhd, which had been registered in 2000. According to its memorandum of association, Raphah Berhad was established with the purpose to conduct

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counselling, training, seminars, workshops, practices, conferences, programmes, ministry and other activities. Raphah's twin centres in PJ and Ipoh solicit donations and partnership gifts from "churches, associates, friends and others". These can be sent to the centres' respective bank accounts. As a company, Raphah Berhad accords itself the power to receive gifts, moveable or pecuniary, which may or may not be subject to a trust. In terms of collecting donations, the memorandum of association specifies that this is to be based on personal appeals, and "only as may from time to time be deemed expedient" for the purpose of eliciting contributions to company funds in the form of donations, grants, loans, legacy, subscriptions or otherwise.

In another sign of commodification, Raphah has blurred the boundaries not only between faith-based ministry and professional outfit but also (in its products) between charitable and commercial, not-for-profit and for-profit: The ministries' focus on areas such as healing, counselling, mental health and community services creates natural overlaps with social services and with the medical and caring professions. In addition and similarly to what we have documented in the previous case studies, its activities have been evolving and taking on a commercial character. Raphah's all-day seminars charge admission fees including additional fees for late registration. The vocabulary that is used to describe and advertise the seminars' topics is not overtly religious: For example, topics may include "understanding and overcoming depression", "understanding and overcoming rejection" and such. Meanwhile, attendance fees for the 2014 edition of Raphah's Residential School of Prayer Counselling and Healing Ministry amounted to RM2,350.- per person.

### 5.4.5: Setting up an economy of belonging

The corporate sales force, train-the-trainer model we have seen in the previous case studies has likewise been in place at Raphah Ministries. On top of counselling those in need, Raphah has actively emphasized training and equipping people so that they may

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work with others more effectively through healing ministry teams and intercessory prayer networks. In addition to the annual Raphah Ministries Leaders Retreat – at times held at the Port Dickson Methodist Centre (PDMC), Raphah also runs a two-week Residential School of Prayer Counselling and Healing Ministry. Over an intense 12-day programme, participants are taken through biblical teaching, resources, tools, and practical lessons in order to understand, diagnose, and minister healing into the roots and causes of major personal, spiritual, mental, and emotional issues and problems. According to Raphah's marketing materials, the school is targeted at pastors, elders and leaders of congregations; heads of departments and ministries; mission directors and field supervisors; missionaries and missionary candidates; teachers, trainers and prayer leaders; as well as social workers, counsellors and caregivers. The school's learning modules typically cover topics such as spiritual realms; exposing the occult realm; demonization; honouring godly sex and sexuality; achieving freedom from generational curses and iniquity; facing up to anxieties, fears and phobias; handling loss and grief; ministry case diagnosis and management; and other themes.

Equally reflective of its pragmatic, commodified focus on "delivering the goods" is Raphah's occasional venturing into non-Christian thought such as yoga, mysticism and territories best characterized as New Age spirituality. Typically this has had to do with promoting community- and public health-minded initiatives such as holistic health, radical healing, grassroots shifts in healthcare, and "empty hospitals" (which militates against its own dictum of working alongside doctors). For instance, Raphah has endorsed works by Kelly Brogan, a New York-based holistic women's health psychiatrist who is also a Kundalini Yoga teacher. Brogan is the author of the NY Times-bestselling books *A Mind of Your Own: The Truth About Depression* (2016) and *How Women Can Heal Their Bodies to Reclaim Their Lives* (2016). Her website (kellybroganmd.com) features patients whose mental health histories have "defied conventional medical dogma".

Brogan's franchise is a course named Vital Mind Reset. Other celebrity "scientists and spiritual teachers" endorsed by Raphah, for example through its promotion of the recent documentary called Heal, include Deepak Chopra, Anita Moorjani, Marianne Williamson and others. "Heal" came out under the tagline, "Change your mind. Change your body. Change your life."[55]

### 5.4.6: Political ramifications

Raphah Ministries' doctrines and programmes have exhibited an indirectly political nature, through their nation-building focus. In its publications, Raphah often talks about the development of new ways of being, within the individual person but sometimes also in a societal context. Raphah sees its mission as reaching out to individuals, communities, and also the nation through "healing hearts and rebuilding lives".

#### 5.4.6.1: Proselytization

In addition to Malaysia, Raphah Ministries has established a vibrant presence in the Philippines. Raphah Philippines, also known as Raphah Life Rebuilders Philippines, Inc., has been registered as an NGO-cum-community centre. In partnership with various Christian organizations and churches, Raphah Philippines has run counselling centres several urban areas including those serviced by its local partner, Center for Community Transformation Group of Ministries (CCT; www.cct.org.ph).[56]

In 2015, Raphah Ministries Malaysia held an inaugural Modular School of Prayer Counselling and Healing Ministry in Bacolod City in Central Philippines. A total of 50 participants completed three modules of equipping in the foundations, principles, skills

[55] Released in October 2017, director Kelly Noonan's "Heal" documentary has been advertised as "a scientific and spiritual journey where we discover that our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions have a huge impact on our health and ability to heal".

[56] The CCT Group is composed of 15 ministries that reach out to street families, children, youth, micro-entrepreneurs, farmers, fishermen, factory workers, informal workers, tribes people, overseas Filipino workers, and the communities at large.



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and tools used in prayer counselling and healing ministry. During the same year, Raphah's chief pastors Lau and Cheah were invited by the Regional Training Director of the Philippines Public Safety College, National Police Training Institute (Region 6), to conduct a two-day seminar on spiritual healing and counselling. The seminar was conducted as part of a Public Safety Junior Leadership Course for Non-Commissioned Officers. The focus was on biblical tenets as relating to the officers' personal lives. In particular, the Raphah pastors urged the participants to avoid unwittingly misusing their authority and power as police officers because of unresolved issues, wounds and hurts in their own backgrounds.

Underscoring its operational dynamics of a business franchise, and unlike the other churches have portrayed in these case studies, Raphah has internationalized, by expanding into the ASEAN region. In addition to its activities in the Philippines, between July 2013 and August 2014 Raphah Ministries undertook four teaching missions to Hanoi, Vietnam, in partnership with the Hanoi Christian Fellowship (HCF), an unofficial fellowship of pastors and leaders from different denominations in the Hanoi area.[57] By 2015, Raphah Ministries viewed its commitment to HCF as completed, and refocused its efforts on invitations it had received to train and equip pastors in Ho Chi Minh City in South Vietnam.

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[57] HCF has had a rocky relationship with Vietnam's ruling Communist authorities. In press statements, the government has referred to the group as a "merger of Protestant sects" which has been organizing "illegal activities", in some instances culminating in its leaders' detention by the police.

### 5.5: Harvest Christian Assembly (HCA): Growing with the community

*"We are lighting the homes in Klang, one at a time."* (HCA Senior Pastor Alan Tan)

#### 5.5.1: Background information

HCA's history in Malaysia began with the post-war activities of Assemblies of God (AOG) missionaries who arrived in what was then Malaya in the 1950s and typically worked with children and youth. Founded in the United States in 1914, Assemblies of God represents the world's largest Pentecostal denomination and the fourth-largest international Christian group of denominations in the world. It has been active in more than 200 countries and territories. As a Pentecostal fellowship, Assemblies of God believes in baptism with the Holy Spirit and in speaking in tongues as its evidence. Assemblies of God Malaysia (www.ag.org.my) traces its origins to Assemblies of God of Malaya and Singapore, which established a presence in Singapore in 1957. AOG Malaysia considers itself as a cooperative Pentecostal fellowship. Among its core values and activities, it pays special attention to church planting, both domestically and overseas.

In the 1960s, the AOG missionary wave in Malaysia gave way to local people's taking initiative as church leaders. They organized Bible seminars, particularly at the former Glad Tidings centre in Jalan Gasing in Petaling Jaya. The 1970s and 1980s saw the establishment and growth of a large number of new churches (some estimates put it at between 300 and 400). Many of these churches originated as student groups and have since grown and matured together with their members.

In 1996, HCA was established by a group of about 25 people in Value Inn hotel and later on in a rented shophouse in Klang, the former capital of the Malaysian state of Selangor (2010 population: 240,000), located 40 km southwest of Kuala Lumpur. In 1998, it relocated to a two-lot shophouse in Bandar Baru Klang (Klang Newtown), a modern township 2 km away from Klang's town centre. HCA continued to grow

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throughout the late-1990s Asian financial crisis and added a Chinese-language service in 1997, followed by a Tamil service in 2000. Today the church has an estimated 750 members – not a huge congregation by AOG standards yet well established in the community it serves.

Formerly registered as a society, at present HCA represents a denomination within Assemblies of God (AOG); it has also been a member of NECF. In addition, HCA participates in activities and discussions organized by inter-denominational groups such as, at national level, Kingdom of God Malaysia (KOG), a Christian group of about 20 churches seeking to mutually encourage smaller churches; and internationally, International Christian Leadership Connection (ICLC), an apostolic organization headquartered in Shawnee, Oklahoma, United States which seeks to produce local, regional and international apostolic teams who will through mutual agreement relate to other apostolic teams.

**5.5.2: Theology: Assemblies of God**

AOG church leaders are expected to be not only strategically focused but actually supernaturally gifted. AOG has expressly propounded a vision of “Spirit-filled churches and believers exercising the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit” and moving in supernatural dimensions in every aspect of personal, church and communal life ("Our Core Doctrines," 1995). Aside from an eight-member Council of Elders, an 11-member Board of Directors is elected for a three-year term.

HCA’s Senior Pastor Rev. Alan Tan is an ordained minister with AOG Malaysia. He has been in ministry since 1982. After graduating from Bible College of Malaysia, he served in his home church, Grace Assembly of God Pandamaran, in Klang district, for a year. The following year, he moved to First Assembly of God Kota Bharu in the state of Kelantan where he served as a pastor from 1983 to 1988. He returned to serve as an

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Assistant Pastor in Klang from 198 to 1996. Pastor Alan then pioneered Harvest Christian Assembly, Klang in August 1996. In an interview with him DATE, Pastor Alan describes his role as a mainly spiritual one, as opposed to an operational one.

Pastor James Gen has held the role of Associate Pastor and Assistant to Senior Pastor Alan Tan since 2012. He has also acted, since 2007, as Pastor of Hosanna Praise Assembly, a fellow AOG church based in Klang's Bukit Tinggi. Pastor Gen has completed theology courses at Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Malaysia Bible Seminary and London Bible College.

In terms of cultivating direct, church-to-church contacts, alongside Hosanna Praise Assembly in Klang, HCA has maintained partnerships with Harvest Generation Church in Subang Jaya (founded in 2006), Sanctuary Praise New Church in PJ (founded at Bandar Country Homes Rawang in 2003) and, drawing on Pastor Tan's past tenure in Kelantan, with First Assembly of God Church Kota Bharu ("Meeting with HCA Pastor Alan Tan", 2013).

### 5.5.3: Commodifying trends

#### 5.5.3.1: Lowering the barriers to entry, for clergy and for members

Reflecting the ethnic and wider demographic make-up of the local communities residing in Klang and Bandar Baru Klang, HCA also employs two Tamil pastors, a Mandarin pastor, a Youth and Young People's Pastor, a "Teenedge" Coordinator, and a Worship Team Coordinator. Other leadership roles within HCA's Management Committee include Principal of Harvest Home-School, Kindergarten Principal, Administrator and Building Maintenance Manager, who are assisted by a number of administrative staff.

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The majority of HCA's leaders have trained as doctors, lawyers and managers. HCA's management committee has firmly believed in and propagated John C. Maxwell's dictum, "everything rises and falls on leadership." [58] Indeed, the style of leadership the church has perpetuated has been heavily inspired by business leadership and thought leadership popularized by 20th-century gurus including former GE boss Jack Welch and "emotional intelligence" advocate Daniel Goleman.

HCA's structure and activities mirror closely the "AOG blueprint", i.e. the overarching set of values and principles embodied by AOG. Since its inception, it has been active and expanding its operations in the areas of leadership (specifically – empowering leadership, functional structures, need-oriented evangelism, inspiring worship services, gift-oriented ministries, holistic small groups, passionate spirituality and loving relationships); youth (organizing a vibrant, relevant and growing contemporary youth ministry overseen by a dedicated youth pastor); children (running a progressive children's ministry, managed by a children's pastor, focusing on character development, spiritual formation and experiential knowledge of biblical scripture as well as what HCA perceives as the power of the Holy Spirit); church planting (nationally as well as overseas), facilities (which are expected to serve the community effectively); and social concern which addresses social dislocation and fringe segments of society (through a commitment to "winning the lost").

#### 5.5.3.2: Adjusting and simplifying the message to suit the audience

As we saw in the previous case studies, life at HCA is organized around home cells, i.e. groups of 10 to 12 people meeting on a bi-weekly basis at members' homes. Much like DUMC, HCA's leadership considers home cells to be "not an optional extra, but a vital part of church life". Their activities include praise and worship, studying the

[58] John C. Maxwell (*1947) is an American pastor and best-selling author of *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader.*

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scripture, praying for the church's goals and ministering to the needs of individuals, sometimes through social work.

In terms of the group dynamics involved, HCA strongly believes that the cells are a powerful vehicle for effective reaching out and sharing with individuals, which may not always be achievable inside the physical church building. It encourages believers to relate to one another in a personal way, to encourage one another in their spiritual pursuits and to reach out to those who are not attending church. Home cells are also instrumental in drumming up support for the church's evangelism, community services and missions.

The AOG blueprint for church growth, which we discussed above, extends to strategy, primarily in four aspects: a) spiritual strategy – dependence on the Holy Spirit, emphasis on prayer and fasting, and other aspects of Pentecostal faith; b) equipping strategy – Bible schools and extension programmes, conferences and rallies, and leadership retreats; c) operational strategy – vision, grassroots, regional leaders; and d) financial strategy – budget commitment in fulfilling the vision, implementation, providing tools to districts and divisions ("Our Core Doctrines," 1995). The workings of HCA's home cells, and their objectives of membership multiplication, have similarly emphasized the concepts of equipping cell members with tools, much like a corporate sales force.

#### 5.5.3.3: Building attachment and branding

HCA's Harvest Men ministry challenges its members "to grow deeper in intellect, emotion and in spirit", and "to stay sexually pure". Its activities include prayer and intercession, witnessing i.e. proselytizing to other individuals, and breakfast fellowship, but also physical exercise which includes badminton, table tennis and morning walks and/or jogging. Its female counterpart, Harvest Women, defines itself as empowering women through practical, emotional and moral support. It aims to serve as space for

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women to share their testimonies or passages from the Bible. It invites women speakers to give talks and seminars on parenting skills and other family- and health-related topics. It holds weekly prayer meetings, social events and outings, as well as visits to sick and lonely members of the church and community.

Harvest Young Families (HYF) targets young people starting out in careers and raising children. In addition to gatherings, outings and related activities, it organizes fellowship sessions for Bible studies and Sunday services. Meanwhile, the Harvest Young Adults (HYA) ministry, set up in 2009, is organized in keeping with the motto "for young people, by young people". HYA assembles fortnightly on Fridays and has been drawing audiences of about 60 individuals on an average night. It incorporates home-cell groups catering to high-school students, college and university students and working adults. The ministry is in charge of Christmas and Easter entertainment as well as relationship seminars serving the purposes of evangelism.

Children aged four to 12 meet on Sunday mornings in the church's multi-purpose hall. These activities are followed by Bible lessons. Working in partnership with parents, HCA has been developing this ministry by use of materials produced by the Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF).[59] Additionally, every child is given a copy of the Wonder Devotional Book which is published by CEF's Good News Club ministry under the slogan of "God *wants* to spend time with just you" and consists of 360 devotions designed to cover a full calendar year.

#### 5.5.3.4: Distributing FBC's basket of religious goods

Branching out into social work has been a key focus for HCA. In this domain, the church has been running a range of social welfare programmes which include children's

[59] Established in 1937, the Child Evangelism Fellowship (www.cefonline.com) is an international, inter-denominational, born-again Christian non-profit organization focused on evangelism among children which is conducted, with parents' permission, in schools, homes, community centres, churches and apartment complexes. Headquartered in Warrenton, Missouri, USA, CEF currently has 2,900 missionaries stationed overseas.

homes as well as drug rehabilitation centres, Klang General Hospital visitation teams and a food bank providing monthly provisions to about 40 needy families within the community. Church leaders have emphasized that the main thrust of engaging the local community needs to be aimed at getting to know individual families, and that networking as a means of soliciting donations to the church is of secondary importance. According to Pastor Tan, "a strategy to grow our church may or may not have an impact on our community. In contrast, an intentional plan to impact our community will highly likely help our church to grow".

In allocating premises to learning and education programmes, HCA has consciously followed in the footsteps of local Christian educators from other denominations: Klang has been home to Wesley Methodist, La Salle and other schools, some dating back to the 1940s. With support from parents, HCA has since 2011 conducted a Harvest Home-School programme leading up to, through its Harvest Academy component, Cambridge IGCSE O-levels. The programme emphasizes academic results as well as self-confidence and Christian character values. As such, it incorporates Bible studies, weekly chapel services and end-of-year youth camps. In 2014, the inaugural sports day was held at Klang Stadium. The school has also organized a Toastmasters training module to improve students' skills in public speaking.

The Home-School programme has experienced rapid growth, attracting students from other communities such as Shah Alam and Kepong. By mid-2014, its seven classes had reached full enrolment and the school started placing prospective students on a waiting list before adding more classes in the following year. The first batch of students graduated in the academic year of 2014/2015. Meanwhile, the church-run Little Harvest Kindergarten and Day-Care Centre have been equipped with facilities such as science centre, language lab, computer lab, arts and crafts centre, music and movement studio, baking kitchen, water play, sand play and life skills workshops.

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HCA has also committed resources to areas such as faith healing, sometimes in collaboration with other churches and apostolic preachers. These activities are aimed at helping church and community members overcome physical, emotional, spiritual and learning-related disorders. Most recently, the topics of healing, deliverance, impartation (i.e. giving and receiving spiritual gifts) and prophetic worship were featured in Engage: A Prophetic Breakthrough Seminar. HCA organized the seminar in November 2017, in partnership with Jonathan Suppaya, a Christian leader within the Apostolic and Prophetic Movement, co-founder and Senior Pastor of Jesus Lives Church in Singapore which has been a part of the Jesus Lives International Network. Other speakers who have delivered seminars at HCA include international Full Gospel Business trainer Anbu Balan from Bangalore, India. The prophetic gifts and practices these partners and guest speakers explore have to do with the understanding and practice of dreams, visions, seeing in the spirit (i.e. perceiving spiritual realms) and a call to prophetic intercession. HCA seminars also address more mainstream health issues including aging and living with cancer.

Despite its long-standing focus on reaching out to youth, HCA has for the most part eschewed the dazzling, big-budget, high-production-value spectacles that have become the staple of evangelical megachurches around the world and in Malaysia. The August 2014 edition of its newsletter quotes from Charles Spurgeon's commentary on the concept of unction (anointing with the spirit), stating that:

> Unction is a thing which you cannot manufacture, and its counterfeits are worse than worthless. It contrasts eloquence and persuasive skill with conviction and repentance; dressing to reach one's audience with trendy clothes and hipness; points out the relative value of technology and multimedia... ...In many churches today, lack of anointing creates a vacuum which is filled with screaming, falling and other forms of religious theatre.[60]

[60] Charles Spurgeon was a 19th-century English Particular Baptist preacher, known as the "Prince of Preachers". His ideas remain influential among many Christian denominations today.

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On the global stage, AOG has in mainstream consciousness and in the media managed to build up a considerable entertainment footprint. Over the past several decades, North American AOG communities have raised a number of celebrities such as Elvis Presley, The Osmonds, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and more recently Jonas Brothers and Katy Perry. In its own playground, HCA has modestly upheld this tradition of encouraging in-house talent through small-scale anniversary concerts, festive musical performances and Christmas carolling around the city of Klang. It has also organized specialized seminars dedicated to areas such as training for vocal health and vocal performance. This tradition of home-grown talent has been reflected in the make-up of its member base which includes professional singers such as balladeer Frankie Tan; the "Elvis Presley of Malaysia" – singer and Elvis impersonator Alex Wong who "shares the Gospel through Elvis Presley's music" and other entertainment professionals (LifelineIntlMin, 2011).[61]

### 5.5.4: Generating revenue; business activities

At the beginning of the year, HCA approves an operations budget. Financial prudence is essential: the purchase of the Berkeley Complex structure was financed through a bank loan, at considerable monthly payments. Electricity bills alone run into five digits during most months. Compounding the importance of fiscal discipline, teaching staff at HCA's learning centres have been independent of the church, thus generating significant expenses in the form of salaries and other expenditure.

As in other non-denominational churches, HCA members practice voluntary tithing, donating a fixed share of their monthly income to the church via cheques payable to HCA or direct deposits to its bank account. Some members provide additional

[61] Incidentally also once raised in an AOG church community in Klang, Guy Sebastian (*1981) went on to become the winner of the inaugural 2003 edition of talent reality TV show Australian Idol and a multi-platinum-selling singer-songwriter ("Guy Sebastian," n.d.). Since then, he has become an ambassador for World Vision Australia, the Australian chapter of World Vision Partnership led by World Vision International – an evangelical Christian humanitarian aid, development and advocacy organization.

offerings, outside the tithing arrangement, thus contributing money to the church's special funds such as the building fund and the missions fund.

When it comes to business activities as such, HCA has been cautious about following the megachurch model of prioritizing perpetual growth above all else and falling into the pattern of doing business for the sake of business.[62] In HCA pastors' assessment, the presence and activities of megachurches worldwide and in Malaysia have on occasion proved to be a divisive topic, often generating resistance from other Christians rather than non-Christians. By contrast, Pastor Tan maintains that HCA's business has been directly related to church activities. The focus is on things HCA can do well such as learning and running pre-school and home-school activities. Similarly, all of HCA's facilities were built to attract and serve the youth. Moreover, the church strives to ensure that the facilities are in use throughout the week.

Nevertheless, as documented in the previous case studies, venturing into non-traditional, albeit community-focused facilities and services typically results in a blurring of the dividing lines between not-for-profit and for-profit, be it through a conscious adaptation of strategy or the inner logic and requirements confronting an organization running operations of a commercial nature. As such, HCA's swimming pool has been open to the public, but this has been done through a leasing agreement with a third-party operator. Similarly, the in-house school programmes have attracted enrolment from among local non-Christian (largely Buddhist and Hindu) communities. This practice has subtly but inevitably underscored some of the supply-and-demand elements that are present in HCA's education products, as opposed to the original intent of reaching out through social work. Over time, the logic of hiving off community programmes as commercial entities is likely to assert itself. This has already been the case with some of

[62] Nonetheless, its publicly stated views of the megachurch model have been largely conciliatory, going as far as to argue that the sprawling megachurch convention centres were primarily erected as a means to an end, i.e. as an instrument to entice young members to participate in church services.



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the church-run facilities including the kindergarten which are now run as outright commercial companies (owned by the church), pay taxes and are subject to external audits.

HCA's latest initiative named D'Home is set to follow a similar pattern. It has tapped into the issue of providing affordable care to Malaysia's rapidly aging population (Nathan, 2018). Ostensibly the intent behind the construction of D'Home has been to "take in aging and dependent residents who need care, support and supervision". Once it has entered the marketplace, however, it is liable to be exposed to marketplace dictates and to modify its operational objectives and outcomes accordingly. That HCA recognizes and seeks to accommodate this progression is evident, for instance, from its labelling of Berkeley Complex regular rooftop events as "hybrid": With entry tickets usually sold at RM50.- a head, these events mix together elements of social reunion, networking, school graduation and other social functions with charity. At the same time, organizers of these "hybrid events" set up booths which market and sell a range of products to event participants.

### 5.5.5: Setting up an economy of belonging

HCA leadership believes in working out the church's identity and gifts and matching them to the needs of the community ("it's not about what we want, but what our calling is"). It aims to make the church relevant and visibly present in the neighbourhood by constantly connecting and communicating. "Breaking barriers" is a popular theme in HCA's sermons and newsletters. Consequently, HCA's services, cell group sessions and prayer meetings are conducted in a variety of languages including English, Tamil, Chinese and Vietnamese.

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Among some of the segments of the local community, HCA membership has gained a degree of recognition as a contributing vehicle of social mobility. As Pastor Tan shared during our conversation:

> Especially among the local Indian community, we try to reach out to single-parent families and families affected by alcoholism and other problems. Once they have seen the change in their family members, they will bring their friends and relatives and introduce them to our church. As of late, we have also been attracting Indian professionals.

Fundamentally, this practice reflects HCA's broader outlook and its long-standing commitment to community. In HCA's July 2014 newsletter, Pastor Tan commented:

> Some churches refuse to look like the community and reach out to new residents, especially if these were ranked lower or higher on the socioeconomic ladder. As a result, the congregation became an island of middle-class members in a sea of lower-class or upper-class residents. When a church loses its passion to reach the lost, the congregation begins to die. Inward focus can lead to arguments about what members want. This leads to shorter pastoral tenure, with some churches going through seven pastors in their final ten years of existence.

Reflecting this long-standing commitment to diversity, HCA has also participated in programmes run by Migrant Ministry Klang (MMK; www.mmkmalaysia.org), targeting refugees from Myanmar and Nepal.

In 2008, partly inspired by discussions held at HCA Leaders' Camp in Benum Hill in Raub, Pahang, Pastor Tan started searching for a bigger facility to house HCA and its activities. His property scouting zoomed in on the multi-storey industrial Berkeley Complex, a dilapidated property listed at RM16 million. Prior to getting abandoned for several years, it had housed a supermarket followed by a restaurant and finally a spa and health centre. After some negotiations, HCA approved the purchase of the building at an extraordinary general meeting held in September 2009. The sales & purchase agreement was signed three months later.

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The first service at the renovated facility was conducted in July 2011. A dedication ceremony took place before Christmas 2011, celebrating the transformation of HCA's physical premises "...from almost nothing to what it is today"; and the miracle of "the impossible" having been made possible. The congregation thinks of the building as a bridge to the community, in keeping with the new physical structure's symbolism of "from survival to revival and now relevance". In addition to providing a place of worship, the Berkeley Complex has been designed to serve as "a place of healing and restoration"; a place of "fun and learning" for young people; a place that allows HCA members to be "the salt and light to this city"; and a focal point of other social service activities such as tuition sessions organized for the local community.

**5.5.6: Political ramifications**

Although HCA considers the nation's moral values and overall spiritual climate as more important than the political situation or the government of the day, its members have also been conducting what they term strategic prayers. These involve areas such as the health and conscience of national leaders, health of the national economy, health of family institutions such as marriage and parenting, and the overall mindset of society, expressed in domains including corporate culture, education system, entertainment and media.

Observing a rise in the church members' political awareness, Pastor Tan is nonetheless cautious about the prospect of Malaysia's Christian communities acquiring the scale of influence that is necessary to reshape the country's political culture and institutions:

> There is certainly a sea change underway. Ten years ago, Malaysian middle classes had little interest in politics. GE 2013 showed us that this is no longer the case. Among Christian youth, they are generally well-educated and able to form opinions. But in terms of voter power, this phenomenon may be confined to East Malaysia for the foreseeable future.

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#### 5.5.6.1: Proselytization

HCA's overall approach to proselytization has been an outward-looking but organic one, largely focused on building upon its members' existing contacts and relationships. In the words of Pastor Tan, "In a fast-changing society, the method of sharing the gospel can change. But the message remains the same. Our duty remains the same. The mandate remains the same."

This emphasis on social outreach means that membership has grown mostly by virtue of current members roping in their friends and relatives: "We have found the 'handing out flyers in the mall' method of outreach quite counterproductive... ...It just doesn't sit well with religion as a deeply personal matter."

HCA leaders regularly impart on the congregation the importance of what they see as the *oikos* groups – namely family, neighbourhood, and place of employment. Building relationships within these circles is seen as critical: "We need to build rapport with them because they are our prospects." As a result, articles in HCA's flyers and newsletter encourage readers to "...zero in on at least 3-5 souls you want to convert by year end. Pray earnestly and daily for these few. Show genuine friendship, plan to have regular contact with them."

In terms of attracting new members without an existing connection to HCA, the most effective method has been to work with homogenous groups of society, learn how to be relevant to their needs and build deep relationships with them. Given HCA's physical remove from Klang Valley's major urban centres of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, the non-Muslim cohorts in its local community continue to be strongly influenced by traditional polytheistic religions, rituals and superstition, even within the young generation. This provides HCA with ample ground in focusing its proselytization

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activities, aiming systematically to "harvest" new members. To quote from a current HCA member's testimony:

> I was raised in a family that practices a mix of Taoism, ancestral and deity worship, especially the god of mercy a.k.a. Guanyin. I grew up comfortably in this belief and was proud to be a Taoist. Occasionally I even visited the fortune-telling master to look into my yearly fortune and offered yearly "protection" money to avoid misfortune. Yes, I bribed the gods for protection! I believed in karma and was fearful of being reincarnated as an insect in my next life. (J. W. Tan, 2017)

Although it is largely a neighbourhood, local-community-oriented church, HCA has not shied away from missionary activities. Domestically, it has been delivering "goods and encouragement" to Orang Asli settlements in the Gua Musang area of southern Kelantan. On the international stage, HCA's missions have set their sights on the ASEAN market whose populous Buddhist cohorts they view as "a huge harvest field". To that end, HCA has organized financial and training assistance for church groups around the region, mostly India, Myanmar and Vietnam where locally run Bible seminars are often non-existent.

**5.6: Concluding note on case studies**

The five case studies we have presented in this chapter as results of our research represent a cross-section of the different shapes and manifestations of Malaysia's evangelical-neoliberal nexus: A mega-church; a reproducing church; a youth-oriented church; a healing ministry; and a local community-focused church. Despite their outward diversity, we showed each of them to promote and distribute a specific variety of commodified religion; to provide products and services that are tailor-made to the current needs of Malaysia's middle classes but also marginalized segments; to use these religious goods as instruments of proselytization and member retention as well as fundraising; to venture into commercial and entrepreneurial activities which are often spin-offs from earlier, charitable/not-for-profit community initiatives; to leverage on their founders'

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business acumen in the way they develop their church brand; and to draw on a carefully crafted value proposition in how they instil a sense of attachment and belonging in their members – who are both a captive market and a source of future funding and growth.

A detailed analysis of the findings is presented in the next chapter (Chapter 6: Discussion).

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# CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

The previous chapter synthesized the research output into case studies. The cases drew on the disciplines of political economy and organizational behaviour, with additional insights derived from cultural studies of commodity production and sociology of commodification of religion. Overall, the methods we adopted proved productive and illuminating. They signalled a way of knowing we have followed in our treatment of the research findings.

## 6.1: Brief summary of research findings

The cross-section of religious groups selected and profiled as case studies allowed for the showcasing of both the diversity and common attributes of evangelical Christian space, as well as how these churches have evolved in the Malaysian context, specifically in the metropolitan centre of Klang Valley. Our findings suggest that despite the existing legal and political constraints that have been in place in relation to Christian proselytizing, as well as to the physical growth (in number and in size) of Christian places of worship, the groups studied have successfully, although in varying degrees, commodified their particular flavour of religion and the religious experience they offer.

In Malaysia, a diverse society with entrenched ethnic and religious divisions, commodified religion has emerged as a safety zone for members of non-Malay/non-Muslim minority groups. It has naturally enticed them to transfer their individual and collective loyalty from ambivalent nationhood to dynamic and exciting membership in a new, urban, entrepreneurial church.

Government-imposed limitations have so far presented few obstacles to these churches' efforts in fundraising, investment and entrepreneurship. In fact, in some respects the limitations appear to have spurred rather than hamstrung the churches' physical expansion and growth. For instance, long-standing pressure from authorities to

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concentrate the construction of new church premises in industrial areas and to house these premises in low-rise, unprepossessing, warehouse-type structures has given rise to the church-cum-community hall-cum-convention centre. These facilities have become both synonymous with and conducive of the evangelical movement's democratic urban ethos.

The modern churches-cum-social-activities-centres have served as a focal point for community outreach and for distributing their unique brand of sleek and branded 'religious goods' – be they material, social, psychological, medicinal or emotional. The goods are marketed to specific segments of religious consumers including youth, students, young professionals, families, middle classes and migrant workers as well as those on the margins of mainstream society. The church groups, programmes and initiatives appeal to the postmodern urban worshipper/consumer who is faced with an ever-greater choice of religious messages and venues. Therefore, the churches seek to compete, specialize and differentiate themselves by continually investing in new facilities, experiences and social services. At the same time, in the stagnant Malaysian economy and fractured social and political landscape, the worshipper/consumer has increasingly suffered not only from society's atomization but also from a personal experience of downward mobility. As a result, the commodified church has asserted itself particularly well in areas which are facing their own commodifying pressures, such as in education, health services and care for the elderly. Overall, the social fabric of urban alienation has been a tremendously fertile ground for the growth-focused church.

Over the past decade, the resulting sense of belonging the churches instilled in their members has grown to encompass not only the socioeconomic but also the political domain. Catalysed by successive parliamentary election campaigns, movements for electoral reform and anti-corruption narratives, Malaysia's evangelical segment has emerged as a vibrant and powerful player in the country's national political arena.

Throughout, the churches – typically founded by industry professionals rather than clerics – have operated as business organizations and have continually strived to enhance their corporate nature: So much so that to be a church member has become synonymous with joining the organization's sales force and upholding its strong emphasis on training and "equipping." Indeed, this growth agenda of combining personal action, loyalty and attachment with corporate-style, quantitative strategy exemplifies particularly well the nature of Malaysia's rising neoliberal-evangelical nexus.

Let us now discuss the research findings in terms of the conceptual framework we put forward in the methodology chapter (Fig. 3.1).

### 6.2: Churches as distributors of commodified 'religious goods'

In a social and religious landscape marked by pervasive commodification, the churches we studied have positioned themselves as distributors of 'religious goods'. They have successfully seized upon socioeconomic problems created by the expanding neoliberal system. In particular, the neoliberal emphasis on private ownership and profitability has brought about severe reduction in job security and in the availability and accessibility of public services. This trend has been further exacerbated by the worldwide collapse of prices for Malaysia's commodities and the government's staggering levels of public debt. Thus the consumers of the churches' goods include a growing pool of downwardly mobile members of the once thriving middle class; students and young professionals who struggle to gain entry into full-time employment; and all manner of disenfranchised, socially and economically vulnerable groups. Collectively, through their unfulfilled aspirations and their financial contributions, they are drawn ever deeper into one or another variety of the 'economy of belonging' fashioned by their urban church.

In the grand scheme of the neoliberal order, the churches' standing is not without irony: It was the neoliberal concepts they subscribed to that enabled their transformation



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into modern organizations, fundraising machines and entrepreneurial entities. And it was the same neoliberal change that plunged large strata of society into social, economic and psychological insecurity and distress. It is these individuals who have been anxious to consume the myriad goods on offer by the evangelical groups, and in return get pulled into and consumed by the churches' economy of belonging. To answer DUMC's favourite question, borrowed from Peter Drucker, of "How's business?" – business is very good. In fact, it has been thriving, as the neoliberal church cushions and compensates for the outcomes of a social system which created the church in the first place.[63]

The mix of goods on offer as documented here is tangible as well as intangible: it may be symbolic (music, events, multimedia shows), spiritual (prayer, blessings, intercession, healing), psychological (membership in a cell group, a sense of community) or practical (school tuition, food pack, transport, medical treatment). It mirrors the notion that commodification facilitates material as well as symbolic exchanges, and indeed upholds exchangeability as a socially relevant feature (Appadurai, 1986). At the most vulnerable end of the social spectrum, these goods involve psychological and to some extent material coping mechanisms for those affected by socioeconomic hardship caused by illness, bereavement, addiction and domestic violence.

Through carefully crafted marketing initiatives, churches have readily embraced the tools and techniques normally associated with consumer markets. These include adopting the methods of market segmentation as well as establishing target groups and niches of religious products. The process reflects the needs of specific consumer segments which are then offered a particular, often tailor-made type of merchandise.

[63] This pattern may be counter-intuitive but it is not wholly uncommon: In our literature review, we touched on Wal-Mart gaining recognition for addressing the social issues it created. Similarly, much of the agenda set forth by the current Malaysian cabinet of Mahathir Mohamad has to do with rectifying the policies of his first tenure of 1981-2003.



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The commodification process also lowers the barriers to consumption, such as the level of qualification needed to take part in religious services. In fact, making religion consumption-ready goes as far as simplifying established religious and scriptural tenets. For instance, messages conveyed e.g. by the Alpha Course – quite ubiquitous among the evangelical groups we analysed – promote nearly solely the "feel-good" aspects of religion and play down such concepts (presumably less palatable to the churchgoer-cum-consumer) as evil and sin. This approach to spreading the gospel can be described as pragmatic and experiential, rather than proclamatory or doctrinal. In theological terms, the focus has shifted away from the sacred and onto works carried out by men, albeit presumably in-filled by the Spirit. The churches we profiled have shown a solid grasp of applying this "power evangelism" method in modern contexts, thus successfully reaching out to Malaysia's Generations X and Y.

In all churches, what was observed was that the entry requirements were similarly democratized by their founders and leaders: The majority of them originally came from not just laity in a Protestant sense, but from actual neoliberal as opposed to theological backgrounds, i.e. from business and the professions (engineering, accounting, finance, medicine, dentistry). The skill sets they brought with them – sales, marketing, finance, accounting etc. – were logically suited to this study's paradigm (which clearly is not just a metaphor) of a church as selling and distributing 'goods'. Preaching becomes practical and delivers a message that is clear, plain and accessible, rather than hectoring. Worship is dynamic and celebratory, making use of music and giving believers space for individual expression. Reflecting the rise of technology-powered communications and society's obsession with digital gadgets, the dry and inhospitable written word has yielded ground to the spoken word and electronic image. The ability to use mass communication media effectively becomes a question of life or death for modern religious groups. Church leaders understand that culture responds much more readily to lifestyle than to doctrine,



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and that today's pluralistic culture offers no shortage of alternatives, both religious and secular.

In particular, the Prosperity Gospel and its focus on "health and wealth" is shared by virtually all the groups we examined. It provides a good illustration of commodification separating an aspect from the boundaries of the self, or traditional social life, and manipulating it at will. Thus, a person's health, for instance, is no longer viewed as an objective state or expression of the physical self; even within the spiritual realm, it is not just a manifestation of divine blessing, either: Rather, it becomes an object of intense individual as well as collective manipulation such as counselling, meditation, visualization, intercession, group prayer, seeking healing through miracles, and in some contexts financial donations as a perceived means of "giving oneself out of [illness, disturbance, poverty]". The mental relief and psychosomatic healing which are aggressively sought after through these activities constitute one type of religious or salvation goods.

In addition to deploying marketing strategies in the way religious goods are distributed, the churches also use marketing to bring resources *into* the church. The 'goods' are, by definition, not just given away: They are sold and exchanged. The believer's sacrifice has been monetized in the form of tithing. In a neoliberal economy, donating money is seen as the highest level of commitment. It has substituted the "old-fashioned", physical and self-flagellating forms of sacrifice encouraged by traditional churches. Receiving tithes from every member on top of financial pledges, donations and offerings in cash or kind has allowed the more business-minded churches to build up sizable treasure chests, typically earmarked as Building Fund, Missions Fund and General Fund. The cash accumulated in building funds then propels the church to strive for the construction of ever-grander church, convention and activity structures in the mould of DUMC's Dream Centre.



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When consumption of the religious goods on offer has fulfilled needs and allayed anxieties, it naturally produces in the churchgoers a sense of attachment. What might otherwise take the form of psychological and emotional bonding tends to, in the context of commodified religion, manifest as branding. Just like loyal consumers partaking of and interacting with a commercial brand, church members look to the brand for unique, essential and empowering attributes and effects. For the churches' part, it is important to communicate continually their brands' authenticity, renewal and health – the state where all of the brand's attributes, physical as well as symbolic, contribute to its personality and market appeal. Building a powerful brand has been a cornerstone of the "economy of belonging" this study set out to illustrate.

This is why DUMC continued to call itself DUMC even after relocating from Damansara. What was at stake was more than a name; it was about the power of the brand. Therefore, the brand was not to be tinkered with. As with consumer brands, church brands have sought to attain the position of a status symbol. The impressive physical facilities described here, the quality and renown of the in-house schooling, the hosting of public discussion forums, the visits by prominent political, business, sports and entertainment personalities, the compelling social media presence – all these factors contribute to the brand's equity and status.

### 6.3: Church members as consumers of religious goods

Among the groups profiled, the target segments of religious goods' consumers ranged from national political leaders and other notables; to upwardly-mobile middle-class and lower-middle-class workers; college youth and young families; and extending all the way to migrant workers (legal as well as illegal), the urban poor (single parents, retirees, the bereaved, the sick, individuals overcoming alcohol and drug addiction) and other cohorts. In reaching out to some of these social strata, the churches have been

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responding to a plethora of social predicaments that are specific if not exclusive to the Malaysian polity.

Our literature review posited that around the world, commodified religion has thrived in conditions of fragile nationhood. As nation states become more imagined than real, many of the loyalties they traditionally inspired are transferred to more immediate, directly personal domains such as religion. Moreover, the general and cultural models which shape societies are increasingly global in character (Meyer et al., 1997). As noted in the theoretical discussion, commodification is also surrounded by political relations, assumptions and struggles. In Malaysia, the majority of evangelical church members have been recruited from the country's Chinese and Indian minority ethnic groups. Because of long-standing affirmative action policies, instituted in the early 1970s, which favour the Malay-Muslim majority, these groups have for generations shared an innate sense of alienation from mainstream institutions and narratives and from the government apparatus. Attachment to an evangelical group therefore automatically fills a vacuum by replacing this deep-seated feeling of marginality and ambivalence about one's place in society.

In addition, Malaysia's history of extensive labour migration from China and India means that the evangelical teachings' individualistic and consumerist ethos speaks to the collective memory of the country's traditionally mercantile Chinese and Indian communities. It upholds the way they have for several generations defined achievement and social status in their adopted homeland, i.e. largely in terms of entrepreneurial success and accumulation of assets.

Across the board, the churches have been compensating for the reduced availability of public services which stems from rising costs, budget cuts and privatization programmes. These neoliberal liberalization reforms have often been a departure from

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earlier national development policy programmes. At the micro levels of communities, groups, families and individuals, the goods bestowed by commoditized religion appear to be compensating for the new forms of social inequality and insecurity that are products of the advancing neoliberal restructuring.

This trend is indicative of deeper economic malaise as Malaysia's once-burgeoning middle classes find themselves on a path of downward mobility. The country has been for many years caught in a middle-income trap, unable to emulate the high economic value-add of other Asian economies such as Korea, Taiwan and Singapore. The collapse of commodity prices since 2014, coupled with steep currency devaluation, has led successive Malaysian governments to introduce new goods and services taxes and to remove subsidies and price caps on essential household goods. Coupled with the already limited social protection nets, this trend has greatly exacerbated previous levels of urban deprivation.

At present, Malaysia's university graduates are facing three times the reported national unemployment rate; a property market that caters almost exclusively to luxury and international buyer segments; and the creeping emergence of a "gig economy" – short-term work which fills a gap yet disqualifies its participants from eligibility for housing loans, car ownership, quality healthcare and long-term social insurance. These young professionals may not be in need of miracles to stay afloat, but they do seek out spiritual tools to reconcile their aspirations with the realities of the domestic economy and job market.

The prevalent insecurity among this segment of alienated urbanites seems to be psychological. It is the lack of sound prospects that inspires them to search for coherence and meaning as well as a sense of community, especially as these may no longer be available in the family, school or in the workplace. Meanwhile, in practical terms, modern

churches actively cultivate rapport with stressed-out urbanites, providing "the stuff" that caters to people's main daily preoccupations, such as free parking, WiFi access and a Starbucks-style coffee shop. These are duly referenced and promoted on the churches' websites, giving the church and its activities a user-friendly, hip-and-happening veneer of celebrating material choice, consumption and convenience. Reviews of local churches on social media include comments such as:

> Had an awesome worship night there… Cool place. Clean. Ample parking. Nice
>
> Very big and spacious church with convenient parking and friendly people
>
> They have a good cafe for simple lunch
>
> On a practical note, the cafe here serves up really good home-style breakfast and lunch dishes, at reasonable prices
>
> Their Vision Centre has recently won an architectural design award
>
> My grievance is that Sunday morning main service in the Auditorium can get uncomfortably cold.

Our case studies have shown that nearly all urban churches have ventured into education services. Students at all levels – from preschool to university – are nearly ideal consumers of goods provided by religious groups, occupy as they do the racially-sensitive, politicized and hotly contested space of Malaysian education. Education is where the government has, since the 1970s, sought to centralize its control over curricula, language of instruction, school principal appointments, teacher training and other key issues. Concurrently, the national school system has ceded vast territory to private players including independent and international schools, home schools and tuition centres. By now, the entire field of Malaysian education has been thoroughly commodified, and churches have skilfully staked out their position in this commodified space. Providing quality staff and facilities for teaching, learning and exam preparation has been a sure-fire way to attract interest from within urban communities. With the decline in the quality

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of public education as well as the escalating costs of private learning, what these churches offer parents and students is the highly sought-after offering (indeed, a prized commodity) of affordable education.

There are other, psychological aspects at play that make students a great source of a church's "harvest": Religious groups target students as they usually come from out of state or from abroad. The churches play on their loneliness in the new environment and provide them with a sense of belonging to a community. In addition, the student body and young graduates are a "stepping-stone" that enables churches to gain a foothold among the professional class of tomorrow.

For Malaysia's migrant workers, whose number (of legally as well as illegally employed individuals) most estimates place at close to five or six million, urban evangelical groups provide a social but also physical space (and in many cases, transportation) to gather, interact and bond with their countrymen. It goes a long way to compensate for the many privations they are subjected to in their everyday life – from confiscated passports to 80-hour work weeks and woefully inadequate housing. In the church, young migrant workers from Nepal, Myanmar and other countries have an opportunity to feel if not outright accepted then at least visible, whereas outside the church, mainstream society dictates that they be invisible. Taking part in church activities helps them restore a measure a personal dignity and reinvent their self-image. It naturally builds attachments and belonging in individuals who otherwise don't "belong".

Among the higher echelons of society such as business tycoons, membership in an evangelical group provides a host of benefits. These include public recognition that it is acceptable to serve God *and* accumulate wealth; considerable media exposure which may extend a business group's campaigns in marketing and in corporate social responsibility; and a space for fraternizing with industry and political leaders. Members

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of some of Malaysia's most powerful and connected business clans such as the Yeoh family of YTL conglomerate's owners have made appearances at several of the churches in our cross-section. For many middle-class church members, church activities are an additional networking and business development platform (what better place for an insurance agent, for instance, to identify new sales prospects?). The sheer presence of billionaire tycoons at a church service or event then reinforces the perception of religion as directly linked to business elites and business success.

The tycoons themselves have leveraged their evangelical faith to participate in transnational business networks. MUI Group's Khoo Kay Peng, for instance, has been a personal friend and business associate of US televangelist Pat Robertson (Studwell, 2007). YTL's Francis Yeoh – whose six siblings are likewise all evangelicals – has publicly attributed his business achievements to his religious faith (C. C. Tan, 2017). Analysts have also pointed out that in the eyes of Malaysia's political leadership, the tycoons' religious beliefs are generally tolerated whereas social and political views are not (Studwell, 2007).

Another potent nucleus for the country's socio-political struggles in recent years has been corruption. As many low-trust, high-context, high-power-distance cultures do, Malaysia Inc. has for decades made significant allowances for cronyism and nepotism. In the 2010s, however, government corruption reached a level widely described as kleptocracy. The resulting institutional paralysis led many urban Malaysians to wonder if what they were witnessing was the emergence of a failed state. Starting with the run-up to the 2013 parliamentary election, many became mobilized to demand political and electoral change, often using their church as a platform to disseminate views. This was a stark departure from established practice, both for the churches involved and for the ethnic Chinese minority. The churches had long been apolitical. The Chinese community

had, ever since the 1969 racial riots, studiously avoided any semblance of conflict with the country's political leadership. [64]

In catering to an atomized and alienated urban social fabric, there is great emphasis on individual experience including its postmodern, deeply personal overtones. Evangelicals have been considered flag-bearers of the postmodern. They have found all the appropriate resources they needed in postmodernism and have easily adjusted to the new demands of postmodern society. This is in stark contrast to the traditional, mainline denominations which committed themselves to modernity: As such, in Southeast Asia that old "Protestant Age" is synonymous with British colonial rule (from which the traditional churches derived political and social privilege), and the advent of capitalism, mass immigration and large-scale industrialization – developments which today have been confined to history books.

Postmodern culture also dictates the churches' style of worship and the messages seen to be disseminated by them. The underlying paradigm shift is one from reason to experience. The boundaries are fluid and the tone popular, determined by social and psychological needs and moods of the day. Many of these trends are a reflection of spiritual and cultural changes going on outside Christianity: Some church leaders have encouraged the use of methods that border on therapy and magic (Schultze & Woods, 2008). Indeed, in our case study on Raphah Ministries, we showed how disseminating popular materials on healing is likely to steer biblical ministries towards topics such as yoga, New Age and esoteric teachings. Instead of demanding an intense moralism which might generate many prohibitions or proscriptions, churches like DUMC have

[64] The racially motivated violence that flared up in Kuala Lumpur on May 13, 1969 became a catalyst for sweeping political and economic changes. Chief among them were the pro-Malay New Economic Policy (NEP) as well as initiatives aimed at dismantling the remaining vestiges of the colonial order such as the use of English in education and other parts of the public arena. As a result, today the country's civil service is widely estimated to be about 95% Malay.

encouraged personal loyalty to charismatic (in the Weberian sense) leaders such as DUMC's former Senior Pastor Daniel Ho.

The large churches-cum-activity-centres the groups profiled here have constructed are fulfilling several functions: On the one hand, their sheer physical capacity serves as an instrument to ease the access to their messages, rituals, services and other practices to an ever-wider cross-section of the local public. On the other hand, the sophisticated facilities and multimedia equipment these signature properties provide are also a platform for easing the prospective and new members' emotional access to the church's beliefs and activities. Singing, dance and drama performances tap into and actively borrow from trends in mainstream entertainment in order to project a vibrant, youthful and fun image and vibe, thus "hooking in" segments such as teenagers, college students and young adults.

One might concede that this is a holistic approach to human needs, seeking the attainment of blessings, success and prosperity not just in the eternal life but also in this world, on this plane, in the here and now. It many aspects, it mirrors the external reality of "spiritual living in a secular world" (Fernando, 2002). The Malaysian churches studied here certainly fit the bill of what Waldron (2005) described when he wrote (p.45):

> A religion based in the institutions and ideology of market exchange and socio-cultural formations of popular consumer culture is intrinsically shaped and oriented by its relationship to the broader context of cultural commodification. Consequently, the embracing of consumerist eclecticism does not simply free [religion] from authoritarian political structures, kinship systems of familial control or hierarchical traditionalism. On the contrary, a religious system based in the process of market exchange is intensely shaped by the values, priorities and ideological configuration of the secular institutions of the broader society within which it is founded.

By and large, these are the social lives and struggles of the commodified religious goods described in this study. By distributing these products, religious groups tap into the



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consumer's deepening need (deepening because the neoliberal state has abdicated or cut down on its social responsibility); instil a sense of material, psychological and emotional attachment; and provide a place in the economy of belonging – a term we have consistently sought to operationalize and illustrate in our research. Unsurprisingly, consumption of these goods frequently serves as a pathway to proselytization: Underlying and unifying the otherwise diverse and distinct sets of goods – from professional networking sessions through after-school and tuition activities to social gatherings for displaced individuals – is the way the majority of evangelical groups navigate "pain points" and webs of fraught social relations.

Once they partook of religious goods, non-members and prospective members will inevitably find themselves invested in the church on a number of levels: They have been welcomed and acknowledged by a pastor or a senior church member; participated in social interactions with peers (who will have prayed for them); possibly received material or other practical aid; and made to feel in no uncertain terms that "this is your home; we have the resources to help you". Earlier in this chapter, we suggested that from the churches' perspective, the economy of belonging is a virtuous, self-perpetuating cycle: More members raise more donations; in turn, these will produce higher-quality goods to entice even more new members. From a proselytization point of view, that economy may be likened to a vortex: Through a series of cues and signals, it exerts an irresistible pull (conscious and unconscious) on the church member-to-be.

These dynamics may also help explain the limited fallout among Malaysian evangelical churchgoers of the highly publicized corruption and embezzlement scandals surrounding, for instance, Singapore's City Harvest Church. Those who have spent years of their lives tithing their income, fundraising and volunteering their time will not have the resulting sense of belonging prised from them easily. If anything – and as Singapore news stories bear out – the perception of outside interference and criticism is likely to

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strengthen, not weaken, one's psychological and emotional bonds with the church (Woods, 2015).

**6.4: What happens when churches go into business?**

The commodification of the sacred and the concurrent development of consumer-oriented products and services have had a profound effect on the religious groups' values, vocabulary and imagery. In many contexts, the commercialized nature of church operations will produce transformative effects on the churches' goals, motives, methods, income distribution, and governance components. In spite of their relatively flat organizational structure, the churches we profiled are far from informal, spontaneous groupings of believers. Rather, they are composed of intricate structures; webs and networks of ministries, study groups, care groups and other teams (some, admittedly, fairly autonomous and self-organizing); learning and leadership platforms; and other organizational building blocks.

Operationally, this has transformed the majority of local evangelical groups into well-oiled corporate, training and fundraising machines. It is obvious from the data collected that the churches profiled are run as complex organizations of ministries, cell groups, study groups, outreach units and other entities, supported by extensive and professionalized administrative staff. The leaders of the churches studied all agree that having a "well-run church" is a cherished and strategic objective. With the overall emphasis on efficiency and quality in delivering the goods, a high degree of church professionalization is inevitable. The process is greatly eased by many of the founding and senior pastors' – who often style themselves as celebrity CEOs – aforesaid neoliberal backgrounds in engineering, accounting, legal, medical, dental etc. As cited from Schofer & Meyer (2005), this professionalization drive is both an expression of and a strong impetus to pursuing greatly enhanced capacities for social, economic, political and cultural action.

A church may be incorporated as a company limited by guarantee, which is a classic model for registering a not-for-profit organization. However, the church may then go on to acquire a number of "standard", for-profit companies, whose structure is typically one of a private limited company (Sdn Bhd). Following the same logic, some of the church-run social services and community projects which started out as charitable initiatives are later spun off and likewise become stand-alone, for-profit, Sdn Bhd entities. These are dramatic illustrations of the neoliberal-evangelical nexus, as religious groups tread on new territory. In the process, they blur and/or dismantle the established delineations between charitable and commercial; non-profit and for-profit; a church (even in its "organizational" incarnation of heightened actorhood) and a Pte Ltd business entity.

Proceeds from the churches' business activities and business subsidiaries are reinvested into the church, e.g. to finance the construction of a new building. That in turn will enable the church to strengthen the scope, variety and appeal of the religious goods to be distributed to members. Bigger premises, especially if complete with a convention centre, will become a venue for more intricate entertainment events, bigger-budget community fairs and higher-calibre visiting speakers and other guests. In total, these will greatly ramp up the church's brand recognition and equity and enhance the members' sense of attachment and belonging to the church. We have seen these dynamics play out with nearly all the groups in our case studies, down to HCA Klang as the smallest among the churches we observed. DUMC's proposed Dream Centre II had to be shelved precisely because its scope of "city within a city" touched a nerve with the country's (otherwise mostly oblivious) central government.

Crucially, the consumption of religious goods described above does not stop then and there, with dispensing spiritual succour. On the contrary, the consumer/buyer automatically becomes a seller, a transmitter of the product and the message within his or her network. The entire paradigm of a church then closely resembles a business network;

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a training organization; possibly even a pyramid-shaped multi-level marketing (MLM) outfit (Fig.3).

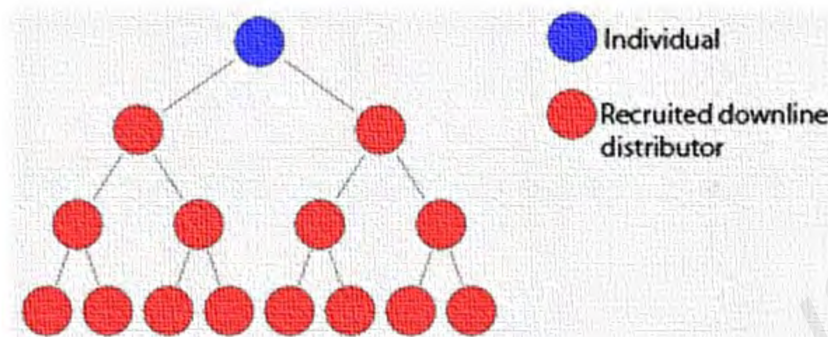


**Figure 6.1: The 'buyer becomes seller' growth formula in a neoliberal church**

Source: Wikipedia

Although Malaysian society at large has viewed the MLM dynamic in generally fraught and ambivalent terms, there is no evidence in the case studies that church members struggle with this dynamic and its popular connotations. Much like members of actual MLM mechanisms, they largely stand to gain – in stature, influence and by virtue of securing extra resources for the church collective – by bringing a chunk of their personal network into the group. It is also worth mentioning that today's secularized version of MLM has its historical roots in 1950s United States, among Protestant Christian networks linked to prosperity theology (Luca, 2011).

With the ecosystem of belonging in place, this mechanism of self-reproduction becomes the lifeblood that keeps the neoliberal church in business. This is what FGT's Chairman in our case study was referring to when he encouraged pastors to "go and *equip* your people". This is what, on a more intimate scale, HCA's concept of *oikos* (and, for that matter, "harvest") stands for: A sales quota. Whether one's target is the workplace in a large office or the *oikos* network of 3-5 friends and family members, the underpinning mechanism is identical. The intimate integration of faith and work, faith and study, faith

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and business are areas where the modern evangelical groups and their members have genuinely come into their own. In place of rigorous, exegetic learning, they prefer to focus on practical training and "equipping" in what they term "evangelism". The vocabulary and stated values most commonly associated with business and management run through every aspect of this training.

"Equipping" is about giving church members the standard ammunition of a corporate sales force – i.e. the tools they need for scouting, prospecting, approaching, handling objections. Thus, members receive training in identifying suitable prospects; reaching out to them through appropriate, high-success-rate communication avenues and channels; presenting concisely the church's "value proposition" and "selling points"; using visuals and other elements, which are often akin to neuro-linguistic programming, to capture the prospective buyers' imagination; quoting off-hand from scripts and stock phrases in order to dispel objections and overcome doubt; and finally, closing the "deal" and getting the new candidate to "sign on the dotted line".

In varying measures, the groups we examined have displayed a neoliberal emphasis on corporate self-regulation: As such, the church operates through a network of cells, ministries and fellowships; the more units participate in this network, the higher the network's value. Within the network, commodified religious discourse has been established as a management and sales tool, aimed at attracting, recruiting and retaining new members. Models adopted from management theory are constantly morphed into catchy and easy-to-remember dictums and slogans. Particularly when interacting with large churches such as DUMC and FGT whose leaders came from industry and/or have been US-educated, one is frequently exposed to quotes from business leadership gurus. Some pastors may be said to quote Peter Drucker as earnestly as they quote the Scripture. It implies that running a successful church is largely equivalent to running a successful business. By the same logic, some of the theological concepts and teachings propounded

by early, 19th-century evangelical leaders are similarly tweaked to take on the semblance of modern-day business mantras.

Indeed, the churches have been eager to embrace not only ever-growing sets of organizational roles but also the latest corporate management theories, growth models and leadership concepts. They have taken on an entrepreneurial as well as an increasingly corporate style in the commodification, production and distribution of their goods. Efficiency – of the way members spend their time; share the message of the Gospel with friends, acquaintances and colleagues; contribute to and participate in proselytizing work and missions – is exalted as a cardinal virtue.

This is where the evangelical dictum, popular and oft quoted in Malaysia, of "*be* the church, not *go* to the church" comes into full force. The case studies show that entrepreneurial churches encourage their members to treat the marketplace as a ministry.[65] They want members to "get out there" and exert influence ("intercede strategically") on their family, neighbourhood, community, profession, and place of work – and not just on specific occasions but continually, at every opportunity, throughout the week. In HCA's newsletters, for instance, members are reminded to show "genuine friendship" to individuals who essentially constitute their sales quota for attracting new members into the fold.

Commodification also means that practices become codified and routinized (Shamir, 2005). Churches like HCA which belong to the Assemblies of God (AOG) movement, for instance, are given a standard AOG template for "how to" organize, manage and grow the church. Church-planting activities that many evangelical groups engage in tend to follow similar standardized patterns and procedures, domestically as

[65] "Marketplace as ministry" is itself a somewhat euphemistic synonym which replaced the older and more aggressive term "church growth movement".

well as when expanding overseas. A church is then established as an export commodity that replicates itself internationally. As discussed in the case studies, this replication has taken on a complex scientific yet also symbolically and emotionally charged nature: The "multiplication" patterns involved are studied, transmitted, discussed at global conferences and indeed "dreamed" and celebrated in their own right.

Observing the activities of the groups profiled, it quickly becomes obvious that they fit Watson & Scalen's (2008) general definition of the church growth agenda, in each of its four main principles (quantitative measures of success, cultural contextualization of messages, modern, often tech-based marketing, networking with other churches). These dynamics reveal that the combination of bottom-up, personal action with top-down, corporate strategy, has been emblematic of the neoliberal-evangelical partnership. This is where the vocabulary and values of neoliberalism and the evangelical movement coalesce – or, as outlined in the literature review, resonate, amplify, mix and react with each other for mutual benefit, all the while energizing and reproducing a mix of social relations that favour and facilitate commoditization.

**6.5: Diversity and competition**

It must be noted that despite these shared characteristics, the churches as portrayed in our case studies exhibit a great deal of diversity. In general terms, the crowded and competitive religious marketplace in affluent urban locales such as Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya and Kuala Lumpur demands different types of efforts from a variety of players who are keen to maintain or gain their share of the market. From a conceptual viewpoint, commodification, as discussed here, entails various degrees of negotiating and bridging disparate social components, spaces and meanings. In consequence, there is a multitude of patterns that emerge through these processes. Also, the churches' origins in the anything-goes 1970s arguably sowed many of the seeds of permanent tension between the institutional and the charismatic.

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From a commodification perspective, the churches' initially raw and radical outlook and their emphasis on empowering laity and turning professionals into pastors removed many obstacles to setting up new groups. It is one aspect of the reduction of entrance requirements (Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958) – a wholesale shifting of the goalposts to relax or even remove the traditional churches' demands, previously placed on worshippers as well as on clergy. As a result, practically any individual who felt inspired and "compelled by the spirit" to do so was able to set up his or her own church. This is precisely what occurred in the churches studied here. On top of that, the founders' reported motivations were spiritual, but what they knew best revolved around organization, growth, investment, management, marketing and sales. Thus a pattern was firmly put in place where in building their new church, they would recreate many aspects of their old business company or professional practice.

In our sample, even a celebrity preacher such as DUMC's Pastor Ho started out as an electrical engineer. FGT's leaders likewise came from engineering and accounting. Meanwhile, FBC's leadership has had strong linkages with the nearby township built by the private conglomerate of Sunway, including with the Sunway Medical Centre. A lifelong "career pastor" role, such as that of HCA's Senior Pastor Rev. Alan Tan who graduated from a Bible college, may be seen as a departure from the norm rather than a standard personal trajectory of an evangelical leader.

Churches vary in their focus and membership composition not only in terms of their clientele (professionals vs. college students vs. young families; English- vs. Chinese-speaking), but also in terms of the goods they provide (e.g. networking opportunities vs. entertainment vs. physical healing), as well as in how these commodified goods are monetized. With churches positioned as distributors of religious goods, conflicts over control of this distribution, and over control of the laity, are inevitable. As a result,

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Malaysia has seen its fair share of church splits, with breakaway groups removing key preachers, staff and other resources from their mother unit (e.g. FBC vs. PBC; DUMC vs. SSMC). Church members have walked out over liberal shifts in theology, dissatisfaction with organizational frameworks, hierarchy and bureaucracy, and declining membership – but underlying many of these splits was control over funds and assets. In their quest to show God's approval as having been bestowed on their particular group, some elders took steps to initiate divisions and establish their own congregations.

Although as a rule, the churches we have profiled don't discuss or comment on the details of these schisms, history (particularly American history) serves up some good examples of what a split within a church typically entails. For instance, the agonizing conflict which tore apart Northern and Southern Methodists in the run-up to the US Civil War is described as follows: "In much modern historiography, [the] stress on ideological confrontation has tended to obscure or neglect the material concerns that each of the great church schisms aroused, notably over the disposal of property and the control of funds" (Carwardine, 1993, p. 195). After the fracture, "money matters infected the wound" (Carwardine, 1993, p. 210).

We can argue that within the logic of the neoliberal system, breakaways are not only persistent, they become unavoidable: The totalizing influence of neoliberalism compels churches as producers of religious goods to come up with ever-more compelling goods. This is similar to the cultural production argument Fredric Jameson made in his *Postmodernism or The cultural logic of late capitalism* (1991). In addition, the temptation to "own" the virtuous cycle that raises more and more funds and builds ever-larger premises will often prove too hard to resist. Essentially, in the religious marketplace, a schism is a form of market entry: The schismatic church is confident that there are profitable opportunities to address and that the cost of entry is relatively low (Beard, Ekelund Jr., Ford, & Tollison, 2014).

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Having dismantled the old church's established economy of belonging, breakaways must differentiate themselves, re-commodify their own set of products and put forward new belongings. In order to achieve that, the breakaway group may lay claim to doctrinally more radical teachings; to a more transparent governance structure; to drawing on support from locally and internationally renowned preachers and notables, etc.

In addition, as commodification makes an increasing array of religious goods exchangeable, it serves to intensify competition among established groups. Therefore, some churches will set about creating new narratives that compete against other forms of their own religion. The ambiguities we mapped out in the Introduction chapter with regard to interpreting revealed knowledge and scripture, for instance (all groups profess adhering to the literal word of the Bible, but few agree on what this approach entails and how it can ensure the teachings' relevance), certainly open the field to a wide plurality of views, tenets and out-of-bounds markers. Exacerbating the competitive factor is the above-mentioned modern garb of churches as organizations, and the individualist and psycho-emotional goods they peddle: This puts them in direct path of other players including non-religious (environmental, feminist, counter-cultural) institutions promising the same goods of psychological liberation.

The issue of competition is one of the main contradictions that work to undermine the evangelical-neoliberal economy. We have shown that churches have become increasingly adroit at locking their members into an appealing ecosystem that exudes belonging. And yet the mushrooming of new churches in Klang Valley has continued more or less unabated to this day. From the churches' "cost of sale" standpoint, there are "too many" churches, since every church wants to operate in conditions where the average cost of membership is declining (Beard et al., 2014).

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For churchgoers, more churches mean believers can find a better fit for their needs. It indicates that despite the powerful vortex that consumers of religious goods get pulled into by "their" church, they remain well and truly consumers: Their attachment to a unique brand notwithstanding, many will exercise their freedom to shop around. In a near-saturated market for religious goods, instead of taking part in church schisms it is much easier to make an individual choice. The marketing term is "switching": Once in every few years, church members may transfer their loyalty to another brand if a better deal comes along – much as they would when it comes to car ownership, a frequent flyer programme or a mobile operator. To treat churchgoers as consumers, play into their personal self-interest and then expect undying loyalty is inherently unsustainable. To an extent, the churches' obsession with growth, equipping and sales quotas belies this inner contradiction and serves to compensate for member attrition.

As in the business arena itself, the arrival of multinationals who have access to a global resource and knowledge base often serves to upstage homegrown players. This study shows how the AOG worldwide template, for instance, allows new entities to start up and hit the ground running in any part of world. This contributes to a continuous evolution of Malaysia's evangelical landscape where in successive waves, pioneers are cast aside and new entrants take over. To cite one example out of many, Glad Tidings Church PJ now sits next door to Glad Tidings Assembly of God, with the latter demonstrably enjoying more traction and following on the internet and on social media. Similarly, Raphah Ministries, originally modelled upon Ellel Ministries in the UK, has now found itself competing – in the same physical neighbourhood, no less – with Ellel's Malaysia subsidiary.

Growth in the number of new churches has led to competition and fragmentation – but also specialization. Churches set about looking for niches and other ways to differentiate their particular brand of the religious goods. In the process, novel ways have

emerged to monetize the products of this innovation: From playing the guitar and singing at 1970s youth camps, FGT's pastors have gone on to write, record, produce, market and sell their songs on CDs around the world, as well as to set up music programmes at local Bible study colleges. Healing ministries, capitalizing on the growing incidence of mental disorders, have developed their activities into professional-grade counselling and psychiatric services. They also run workshops, seminars and other events for the public while charging registration fees. Across the board, what started off as simple practices of spiritual guidance and community outreach has been spun off into for-profit business entities in their own right.

As with all forces of fragmentation, the atomization of Malaysia's evangelical-neoliberal landscape has been matched by an equally strong push towards consolidation: Megachurches such as DUMC have eschewed the proliferation of small communities and networks in favour of setting up large-size convention centres. Within the paradigm, what has been identified are religious goods and their producers and consumers, DUMC's Dream Centre has established itself as the quintessential auditorium, a "supermarket" where religious products, or their ingredients, are on display for all to help themselves (Silveira, 1996). It has long been observed that Malaysia's shopping malls – free from the heat, pollution and petty crime that plague the outdoors – are reconceptualized town squares where middle-class families spend much of their free time. Against this backdrop, the megachurch-cum-supermarket is a handy neoliberal reinvention of a church-cum-shopping-mall.

The arrival and rise to prominence of new players necessarily contributes to the displacement of established institutions. Thus a logic of conflict is born between the newcomers and the establishment. Those who have entered the conflict and lost will sometimes have no choice but to move on and create their own new structures. As competition in the marketplace intensifies, churches logically seek to differentiate

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themselves, often adopting the rhetoric of novelty and transformation, and sometimes denouncing other groups. There is an incessant process in place of power struggle, rejuvenation and redefinition. The established actors who occupy a central position will strive to maintain their own grip on power over the community and its access to the religious economy. Yet it is the newcomers who tend to originate on the margins and the periphery that contribute much creativity and fresh blood.

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# CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

## 7.1: Malaysia's evangelical-neoliberal nexus: A synthesis

The fact that all of the religious groups in the case studies have successfully commodified their own brand of religion points to the presence of an emerging evangelical-neoliberal nexus. Religion has been commodified just like other social relations in the neoliberal order. For religious groups to remain operational, they have to invest heavily in marketing and branding, to engage in aggressive fundraising and to enter directly into business. Their proselytization and growth have taken the form and dynamics of a corporate salesforce. The economy of belonging the churches have aimed to establish is fuelled by money. Increasingly, the belonging has had direct repercussions for nationhood and the country's political process.

This concluding chapter synthesizes this study's findings into a coherent picture of the Malaysian version of the neoliberal-evangelical nexus. The nexus is presented as locally embedded; continually evolving; and productive not only of commodification and practices that are favourable to commodification, but of a wide range of contestations as well.

## 7.2: The nexus has embedded itself in Malaysia's existing socioeconomic landscapes and institutions

The findings confirm that the "market of faiths" paradigm as put forward in the Asian context by Kitiarsa (2008) is a multi-faceted but accurate and stimulating one. What the case studies also bear out is that unlike in the western world, in Southeast Asia a person's religious life has never been completely separate from his or her professional and business roles. Therefore, the trend of non-denominational churches expanding into entrepreneurship requires a lesser degree of sublimation than in other societies.

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The evangelical groups profiled here were shown to be a locally embedded movement. Their commodifying social influence has been stimulated by historical and social conditions that are specific, and in some respects unique, to Malaysian society and its circumstances. They key actors have been shown to be dynamic yet entrenched in wider configurations which are anchored in local history and practice. This set of conditions did not materialize overnight; neither was it imported wholesale from the United States or Singapore. The Malaysians who established, shaped and joined the entities presented here were making sense of and responding to large-scale social, economic and political change.

Despite the global, pervasive nature of neoliberalism and its workings, this change has been unfolding in contexts that are often dissimilar from other societies which have seen the rise of an evangelical-neoliberal nexus. For instance, in Brazil, today heavily influenced by Pentecostalism, the spread of evangelical influences was facilitated by internal migration, especially of rural populations to the cities. By comparison, Malaysia's ethnic minorities have been concentrated in urban centres for centuries. Whereas in many emerging markets, evangelical conglomerates rose to prominence on the strength of mass media including televangelism, this is not in evidence in the Malaysian landscape: Given the existing media restrictions, Malaysia's evangelicals have not seen a case for bringing their proselytization efforts to the radio, television or the press. Instead, their focus has been on personal, family and workplace networks.

Historically, the period of the 1970s, which marked a powerful influx of evangelical and particularly charismatic influences into Malaysia, is particularly significant: It represents a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization, as well as the New Economic Policy (NEP) and the concurrent wholesale transformation of the country's civil service, education system and public sector into newly defined segments.

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Among the country's ethnic minorities, this period produced a shift from traditional polytheistic practices to Christianity as a monotheistic faith. Thus, in a large measure, the domestication and acculturation of the evangelical message in Malaysia has occurred by way of rejecting polytheistic beliefs and practices. This accounts for some of the "convert's zeal" among several of the church leaders analysed here who had been raised in a Buddhist-Taoist or Hindu environment and did not embrace their new faith until early adulthood or later. The radical departure not only from their earlier way of life but also (and, in the Asian context, much more significantly) from their family's tradition greatly energized, rather than problematized, their commitment to the new faith (Hoskins, 2018).

**7.3: Urban dislocation feeds the churches' economy of belonging**

At a fundamental level, what is described in this study is a post-Millennium repackaging of Christianity for Malaysians living in a neoliberal era. The evangelical groups have legitimated the neoliberal agenda by endorsing its programme of private enterprise and self-reliance. The nexus they have formed with forces of capitalism and neoliberalism has been embedded in the country's economic system. The neoliberal project has commodified religion and recast churches as distributors of religious goods. As such, the churches' entry into business becomes inevitable. Without it, the religion-cum-economy they participate in would collapse, and the churches themselves would become irrelevant.

At the grassroot level of urban churchgoers, what has drawn Malaysian urban dwellers to new churches has a lot to do with the alienation and dislocation wrought by neoliberal change. This is the paradox at the heart of the nexus. The churches have endorsed a neoliberal agenda. At the same time, cushioning the impact of that agenda within the community has become one of the main engines of their fast growth. The



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commodified church has been both a product of the neoliberal social order and a key actor in mitigating the symptoms of that order's socioeconomic dislocation.

All around the Klang Valley, many of today's churches fondly and nearly ritually recall their beginnings as a time of great miracles and a copious distribution of charismatic gifts. Over time, this radicalism and sense of anarchy have been put aside. During the oil boom years of the 1980s and 1990s, when Malaysia's middle classes growing in numbers and in affluence, the fulfilment of one's "life potential" became a central theme in evangelical teachings. In the 21st century, the churches have had to switch into new gears. Increasingly, the religious goods they distribute have come to compensate for the inequalities and insecurities stemming from the expanding neoliberal order and the attendant reduction of state-sponsored social services and support mechanisms. The nexus has continued to discard old characteristics and assimilate new ones as it seeks to survive and expand. It has consciously adapted and incorporated new models with new characteristics while reinterpreting and de-emphasizing old ones.

### 7.4: Reproducing the nexus: The church-cum-organization and political actor

The economy of belonging presented here, which underpins and perpetuates the nexus, is likewise contingent upon growth – growth in church funding and membership as well as growth in the national economy. This is the same type of unstoppable and in many ways self-serving growth that critics regard as a central malaise of globalized capitalism in its neoliberal version ("should the growth ever stop, the whole system will come crashing down"). Much like financial capitalism in the 21st century, growth – in membership, funding, investment, size of facilities – has been at the centre of the evangelical churches' agenda. It is the *sine qua non* of the evangelical church-cum-organization, which is never static and never content with what has been achieved as of this moment. Instead, the church always has its sights fixed on the future. It seeks out new milestones in all its pursuits. Even in communion with the divine, it inevitably raises the

question: "What's next?" The emphasis on church growth goes hand in hand with disseminating messages and values of personal growth and self-help.

The transnationalization of the neoliberal-evangelical nexus from North America to Southeast Asia has been equally dynamic and complex. The major evangelical players in Malaysia have enjoyed strong and multi-layered linkages with organizations in the United States. There are deep-seated histories and networks of relationships to draw on. As shown in DUMC's linkages with New Apostolic Reformation (NAR; see p.61), Malaysian players – often through their interactions with Singapore partners – not only adopt but in fact co-create global doctrines and agendas. Collectively, these developments paint a picture of a vibrant worldwide marketplace for evangelical thought, one which is just as globalized and multi-polar as today's world of international business and commerce.

In terms of waging cultural wars with liberals, Malaysian evangelicals do not *need* to be up in arms over the Religious Right's traditional issues of choice such as LGBT, abortions etc. The country's majority has long been waging that war for them. Hot-button personal morality topics like LGBT, for example, have been cemented as a social taboo that the media but also academia rarely dare to broach. The outcome is that the "moral majority" is already in place, with or without evangelical support.

As the millennial generation starts taking over the leadership of social institutions, including churches, it tends to propound its own distinct set of values. Typically, these have represented a shift away from the materialism of the Prosperity Gospel and towards pro-social agendas including economic stewardship, good works, social justice and championing of civil society (Pally, 2011). Nonetheless, and in keeping with the logic of commodification, in Malaysia, it is likely that these responses will ultimately serve to

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localize and reproduce, rather than neutralize, the structures and processes associated with global neoliberalism.

### 7.5: Implications: Explosive contestations and a new sense of nationhood

Commoditization of social relations, in this case using the conduit of religion, leads to pressures and shifts in hierarchical social arrangements along various axes of difference (e.g. race, class, rural/urban, nation). Although rarely acknowledged at this stage, the neoliberal-evangelical nexus that has emerged is set to challenge Malaysia's long-standing social contract and redefine many aspects of the nation's fabric.

The nexus poses threats to established centres of power. The inherently expansionist, growth-focused nature of the movement, coupled with its openly stated ambition to influence all domains of public life, and its oft-articulated commitment to shaping the social and political discourse at a national and international, rather than just local or community level – all of these dynamics and trends are bound to produce dramatic and unforeseen future outcomes.

Firstly, the evangelical community has become an active part of the political discourse and indeed the political system. This is a stark departure from just a few years ago when evangelical groups were inward-looking and disinterested in secular concerns such as elections and politics. Today, they have increasingly galvanized their members to become involved in politics and in the electoral process. The momentum they created within the space of a few short years has been nothing short of dramatic. Following Malaysia's 14$^{th}$ General Election in May 2018, two of the evangelical "poster girls" mentioned in the case studies have assumed positions in the federal government cabinet, as Deputy Minister (Hannah Yeoh) and Minister (Yeo Bee Yin). The evangelical "clout" is not only growing; it is no longer hidden from view.

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The fact that leading pastors in the more prominent urban non-denominational churches have also taken up roles with the country's umbrella Christian and/or ecumenical organizations has on a regular basis placed them centre-stage in the political arena. On the pages of magazines such as the DUMC-influenced *Asian Beacon*, they have commented on what they perceive as growing persecution and prayed for allowing Malaysian Christians to enjoy full freedom and to orchestrate a national revival.

Secondly, the evangelical groups' politicization has produced a shift in the mindset of the entire Malaysian Chinese community. Ever since the introduction in the 1970s of the New Economic Policy, the dominant pattern has been one of emigration. The community has encouraged young people to look overseas for opportunities in tertiary studies and employment.[66] "Don't come back", was typical parental advice. Today, the same community seeks instead to maintain its distinctive presence in Malaysia, citing nation-building visions of a developed and progressive society. In the context of post-independence history, this unprecedented political involvement and social action by Chinese Malaysians amount to a veritable sea change. The former "migrants" and "sojourners", once deeply ambivalent about their place and future in Malaysia, have now internalized the image and mandate of themselves as "the salt of the Earth". NECF Malaysia lists social action among its principal aims and objectives. It even runs a Nation-Building Committee. The theme for NECF Malaysia's nation-building agenda has been one of Transforming the Nation through the Local Church.

These developments have taken place at a time when the religious sensitivities of Malaysia's ethno-religious majority have been equally elevated and the space for inter-community and interfaith dialogue has been shrinking rather than broadening. As a result, "sharing" one's faith in as deliberate and organized a fashion as many leading evangelical

[66] Estimates put the size of Malaysian diaspora between 700,000 and 1 million, of which a substantial portion are ethnic-Chinese skilled professionals.



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churches have undertaken to do is a deeply fraught proposition. It makes the spectre of proselytization among Muslims come uncomfortably alive. The protracted controversy stemming from MP Nurul Izzah's participation in an FGT-hosted discussion roundtable is a good illustration of how quickly a statement uttered in a Malaysian interfaith setting can and will become seen as incendiary.

In this charged atmosphere, slogans such as "Take Subang for Jesus", "Take the City [= KL] for Jesus", "Take Johor for Jesus" and even an audacious "Malaysia for Jesus" — were bound to rattle the country's thus far mostly-disinterested non-Christian majority. Especially as they came on the heels of disputes over the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims and other controversies. In 2017, the Centre for Human Rights Research and Advocacy (Centhra) made public comments regarding evangelicalism in general and dominionism in particular. Centhra came to see these social developments as posing viable threats to Malaysia's religious stability, and invited DAP's leadership to make public its position on the issue (Kamarul, 2017).

Thirdly, and illustrating the movement's rapid transnationalization, Malaysian evangelicals have openly embraced the notions and symbols of "Christian Zionism". Propelled by a sense of kinship – as they are themselves part of a diaspora – they have inserted themselves into the Zionist narrative of "God's chosen people [who have been exiled]". A principal of the Malaysia Theological Seminary (STM) has been quoted as saying: "We may not be wanted, we may be treated like *pendatang*,[67] but God has called us to be a blessing" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 114). In this mythical narrative, the ethnic Chinese – in China, Malaysia and elsewhere – are the ones who will "take the gospel back to Jerusalem and evangelize all nations on the way". As far-fetched as these visions may

[67] Malay for "immigrant"



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be, there is no denying that Malaysia's neighbour Singapore has long been a microcosm of such events, and overall a major Christian conversion success story in recent history.

Once again, there has been backlash. 2017 saw a spate of attempts by local Christian groups to hold events billed as "Jerusalem's Jubilee", proposed to take place around the 50$^{th}$ anniversary of the Six-Day War whose outcome saw Israel annexing the Palestinian West Bank including East Jerusalem. Amidst much controversy aired in the media, the majority of the events was cancelled under government pressure.

From a financial and fiscal perspective, the sheer amount of currency that changes hands within modern churches may not go unnoticed by central authorities. With high-profile cases of US and Singapore evangelical pastors accused of breach of trust, the government will be keen to understand better the financial flows that occur in this wealth-focused community. Increasingly, the public profile of prominent Malaysian evangelical groups is becoming defined in terms of ostentatious church-cum-event halls, built at a high cost. The RM200 million convention centre built in Bukit Jalil by the Calvary Church was quick to earn the displeasure of some Malaysians who have interpreted its magnitude as an affront to the country's religious *status quo*.

**7.6: Study limitations and future research directions**

Thus far, academia as well as policy-making bodies have displayed little grasp, let alone anticipation, of the rising religious-capitalist nexus and its ramifications for Southeast Asia's complex societies. As a result, a great deal of theoretical exploration remains to be performed in contextualizing the presence and activities of Asia's non-mainstream religious groups. The continued and concurrent global expansion of neoliberalism and the evangelical movement calls for deeper enquiry into how societies in Asia negotiate and interpret these developments and their cumulative social impact.

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Examining the neoliberal-evangelical nexus opens up a plethora of future directions that researchers may consider – particularly given the intricate and contingent nature of the nexus; the relative absence of its point of origin; its emergent and ongoing nature; its simultaneous transnationalization across much of the developing world; its intrinsic embeddedness in local histories, economies and socio-political landscapes; and the manner in which it has acted to renegotiate a number of global-vs.-local dynamics and processes.

Outside the scope of this study, we aim to continue exploring configurations that emerge at the intersections of neoliberal mechanisms and localized practices. A clearer mapping and understanding of this landscape are important for appreciating the degree in which evangelical groups serve to promote and naturalize neoliberal values among local communities. As illustrated here, sustaining the nexus requires not only commoditization, but also creating practices – and shifts in social relations - that are favourable to commoditization. These processes serve to bring people and places together, blend identities, create new ones, and marginalize others. The church-vs.-state contestations in particular have been an increasingly fruitful field of inquiry. There has been heightened interest among academics in analysing the effects of religious groups introducing elements of secular organization and administration into their operations – not only at present but throughout history.

Furthermore, our study's findings call for a continued and more systematic exploration of modern churches as distributors of religious goods within the community. For instance, in producing this research there was a considerable degree of difficulty to be negotiated in getting beyond individual churches' standard marketing messages and exploring their deeper collective motivations and aspirations. Future research work will do well to counterbalance this official, top-down narrative with a variety of informal, bottom-up perspectives shaped by churches' rank-and-file members.



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In the Asian context, it will be interesting to anticipate a body of indigenous thought and literature on local manifestations of the neoliberal-evangelical nexus. Indeed, the importance of contextualizing social trends in the circumstances of developing countries has been often overlooked, resulting in significant issues connected with relevance/irrelevance of scholastic thought to local environments. For researchers of Chinese diaspora, the rapid growth of a segment that is culturally Chinese but religiously Christian and linguistically increasingly English-speaking is bound to shake up many an established narrative of "what it is to be Chinese" in post-Millennium Southeast Asia.

In fact, over the past few years a number of Malaysian evangelical pastors have begun articulating a biblical approach to Chinese traditions and beliefs. Their aim is to formulate a practical set of guidelines so that Malaysian Chinese Christians may productively balance the demands of their faith with those of their family history and heritage. In practical terms, what is foreseen is Christian alternatives to practices observed during major Chinese festivals as well as weddings, funerals and other social events, traditionally connected with polytheist beliefs such as geomancy and ancestral worship (Quah, 2018).

For the time being, however, researchers need to be conscious of the novelty of the enquiry as well as the political sensitivities that have been present not only in the evangelical groups' relations with the broader society but in Malaysia's interfaith dialogue in general. Therefore, "non-threatening" and trust-building continue to be the name of the game as far as eliciting valid information and insight from primary sources is concerned.

We hope that an empirical yet theoretically-informed exploration of this topic in the context of Malaysia – not only as a developing country but also as a multi-religious

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and multi-ethnic society undergoing rapid socioeconomic change – may stimulate this line of inquiry within an Asian as well as a global context.

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