

INSTANT ASIA

REPORT BY GREG SMITH ON VISIT TO SINGAPORE : October - November 1987

For three weeks during October and November I had the privilege of taking a holiday and visiting a friend in Singapore. We also travelled as tourists to Sumatra in Indonesia, and to Malaysia's National Park. However, in this report I shall concentrate on the urban part of the trip, on Singapore itself and on the conference of the Asia Theological Association on "Theological Education for Urban Ministry in Asia" at which I spent three days. Inevitably such a report is impressionistic, but I have discussed the main themes with Singaporean friends, and at length with Dr. John Clammer, a Christian sociologist at the National University of Singapore who has written extensively on the subject in "Singapore: Ideology, Society & Culture" (Singapore: Chopmen 1985)

1) THE CITY

Singapore is one of the smallest nation states in the world covering an area roughly the same as the Isle of Wight. It is also one of the most urbanised, with over 2.5 million people living in a built up area which covers nearly three quarters of the land available. Since independence in the mid sixties, Singapore has experienced continuous economic growth, and the affluence of the central parts of the city make East London or Liverpool look like the Third World. This economic growth has been astounding given that Singapore has no natural resources except its location and labour force. The prosperity is built on the port, its trade and commercial services, an expanding industrial sector, on tourism, and financial services. The idols of the city are clearly seen in the temples which pierce the skyline, sky scraper bank buildings and towering five star hotels. Unemployment is unheard of, the standard of living is roughly the same as in Eire, but there are wide differences of wealth and income between the propertied and professional classes and the manual workers in manufacturing and service industries.

Housing development has also been a magnificent achievement. Thirty years ago most of the people lived in "kampongs", villages and shanty towns of tin huts, with little in the way of sanitation or public utility supplies. Today over two million are housed in high rise flats built by the Housing Development Board and financed originally through a compulsory savings scheme. Building is still going on, and some of the early blocks of unsuitable or unsafe design are now being replaced. About two thirds of the flats have been sold off to the tenants. High rise living has had its problems, centred around the break up of community and the extended family. But the British horror story of tower blocks is unknown; lifts which break down are generally repaired within two hours of being reported, vandalism and graffiti are hardly ever seen, and the "void deck" on the ground floor (unwalled public space available for formal and informal socialising) helps security and community spirit.

Because of its ethnic diversity Singapore is advertised by the tourist board as "Instant Asia". This is best seen in Singapore's contribution to civilised eating, the hawker centres. These are "food courts" where one can choose between 10 types of Chinese, 3 types of Indian, 3 types of Malay / Indonesian dishes from separate stalls, all at very reasonable prices. Three quarters of the people are Chinese by origin, mainly third or fourth generation settlers with roots in various regions of South & Central China. Originally they spoke a range of different languages. Today as a result of government policy these are being replaced by Mandarin, the pre-revolutionary language of Northern China which belongs to none of them, but is officially the "mother tongue" of all Chinese. The Chinese tend to be economically and politically dominant, although there are many who are clearly working class.

About 10-15% of Singaporeans are of Indian origin, mainly from the South. Tamil is the officially recognised "mother tongue" of Indians, even those who would speak Panjabi at home. Indians can be found at most points on the social status spectrum. Another 10-15% are Malays, the indigenous ethnic group of the region. They speak Malay and are Muslim and tend as a group to be near the bottom of the economic pile. The rest of the population consists of Westerners, mainly as short term residents, and migrant workers, mainly men from Thailand on short term contracts in the construction industry, and Philipino women in domestic service.

Government policy on ethnicity is to deliberately mix the groups in residential areas, to work for equal opportunities in the economy, and to ensure that the ethnic identity and cultural heritage of each of the major groups is preserved. Ethnic group is marked on the identity cards that all Singaporeans must carry, and is monitored in most aspects of social policy. There is a vigorous promotion of the "Singaporean nation", through the media, schools and national service. The notion that Western technology and business methods should coexist with "Asian values" is repeatedly put forward. Thus English medium education has now replaced mother tongue medium at all levels in the schools and colleges. The strategy of building a strong national identity through self conscious pluralism seems to work; at least there have been few overt ethnic confrontations. Most Singaporeans seem very loyal, patriotic and proud of the achievements of their society.

Singapore is a parliamentary democracy but Lee Kwan Yu's People's National Party (??? CHECK) has swept the board repeatedly, so there is only one opposition MP. The party makes claims to be socialist, but increasingly policies based on monetarism and privatisation have been brought in. Law and order policies are harsh and effective with high fines for litter or jaywalking, the cane for crimes of violence and hanging for murder and drug trafficking. Most people avoid politics altogether, but those who are involved find they are in trouble if dissent goes beyond certain fixed boundaries. There is still a great fear of communism and recently a "Marxist plot" was discovered and its perpetrators, including a group of Catholic "liberation theologians"

were thrown in jail. Inevitably there is a secret police and political prisoners, yet on the whole Singapore does not appear to be an oppressive police state. A softer form of ideological control coupled with continuous prosperity seems to achieve most of the government's purposes.

2) THE CHURCHES

In this context the Christian churches of Singapore are growing at an ever increasing rate. Perhaps 15-20% of the population would call themselves Christian. All major Western denominations and many local independent groups are represented. However the growth is selective, for while Christians can be found in all the ethnic groups, converts are made almost exclusively among the Chinese, and predominantly among the young, upwardly mobile, English speaking and female sections of society. There is a particular openness where urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional Chinese community has led to loneliness and isolation, and where traditional Chinese values and religious practices seem unable to change enough to meet the aspirations of late twentieth century hi-tech people. Para Church agencies, such as Christian unions in schools and colleges have had remarkable success in their evangelistic ministry. There have also been impressive reports of mass meeting crusades by big name international evangelists.

There are of course problems that arise from such rapid and selective church growth. The front door of the church is open but so is the back, and large numbers of converts fail to grow into committed long term disciples. Much of this I believe is a problem of the structure and theology of the churches in Singapore. In the first place there are problems with buildings. Land is scarce and government policy does not usually favour the church that wishes to erect a new building. When these do go up they tend to be sanctuaries of the mega church variety. Inevitably this favours an understanding of the church as "the place where we go to on a Sunday" rather than the community in which we belong. Believers tend to commute rather than go to a local church. There has been a growth in house groups in recent years, yet strictly speaking these are illegal, since for fear of communist cells a law remains on the statute book prohibiting the gathering in homes of more than half a dozen people. The Presbyterians have got round the building problem with a strategy of shop front centres which are used as kindergartens during the week, and as worship centres on Sunday.

The theology of most of Singapore's Protestant groups is heavily influenced by charismatic and fundamentalist teaching. Undoubtedly this has had benefits in terms of a deepening of simple faith, openness to the Holy Spirit in worship and ministry and in Biblically based theology, spirituality and evangelism. However, problems have arisen because of the "super-spiritual" emphasis, which seems to be particularly attractive to upwardly mobile people coming out of a background of Chinese Buddhism / Taoism / Confucianism / Animism. In the first place charismatic fundamentalism, in the context of mega

churches, tends to produce "truth christians" rather than "love Christians" which leads to repeated and painful splitting of the body. Secondly an individualistic pietism, in a church which is culturally captive to the Mammonism of wider society is the breeding ground for the heresy of prosperity religion. "Name it and claim it" teaching causes pastoral damage when people are not healed, or when they don't get a promotion at work, and is open to manipulation and abuse by self seeking and empire building church leaders.

Above all it lets Christians off the hook in terms of the Biblical imperative to care for and seek justice for the poor. In Singapore there is only a very slow development of Christian social action and urban mission is seen mainly as traditional evangelism. In the given political situation it is obvious that the churches must tread carefully in their approach to mission. But gradually some church leaders are beginning to ask why it is that working class people are not found in church, and to consider their responsibilities to the poor at home and overseas.

3) THE ATA CONFERENCE

From October 28th to November 1st 1987 more than 70 delegates from theological and Bible Colleges all over Asia met to discuss urban ministry. The largest contingents were from Korea, Singapore and the Philipines, although India, Honk Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Australia were also represented. I was the only Western based delegate, although I explained that I lived in a part of overseas Asia known as the London Borough of Newham in a street where 70% of the people are of Indian or Pakistani origin. Denominations ranged from Presbyterian to Pentecostal, but all were solidly evangelical. About a third of the participants were Western Missionaries. Only one woman was in the group!

The conference was run in a fairly formal manner with presentation, usually a word for word reading, of pre-circulated papers. There was a prepared response from a second person and some time for questions after each. Every day there was one group work session, either a Bible study or discussion group. I personally felt the traditional style of the conference was a barrier to its effectiveness. Certainly we no longer do things that way in urban mission in the UK. On the original programme there had been space for visits to urban ministry projects. Sadly these were cancelled, and no explanation was given.

The most interesting elements of the programme were six case studies from Asian cities. Factory Evangelism in Taiwan by Tsai Kuo-Shan told of industrial missionaries bringing a contextualised gospel to the rural migrants who are the labour power of the Asian economic boom. Neglected in the past by the churches, exploited by their employers such workers are now responding to the Good News. The tension for evangelical industrial mission is around whether to stand up with the workers in struggle against their employers and thus perhaps to lose rights of access to the workplace.

The second case study by Godofredo Eding was the story of a rescue mission to drug addicts and prostitutes in Metro Manila set in context by a useful analysis of the problems. Two case studies concentrated on lay / grass roots training. In Indonesia an evening Bible Institute in several major cities provides "systematic theological and practical training" for over 500 lay people each year. Typically they are involved in the leadership or evangelism of local churches or workplace fellowship groups. In Singapore a new programme of training for grass roots working class Christians has been launched on the model of courses in Hong Kong. There is a strong emphasis on group learning, fieldwork placements, innovative methods of adult education, and language and literacy tuition for students who have little formal education. British members of EUTP would probably feel at home there (if they could speak Chinese!).

The final two case studies were on Singapore. John Clammer presented an overview of the city and the place of the church (summarised above). James Wong, an Anglican minister, spoke about his experience in planting house-churches and advocated this as the key method for reaching the masses living in tower block estates.

In contrast to the case studies I found most of the theological papers somewhat disappointing. There was a lot of talk of contextualisation in the Asian context but the overall impression is that the evangelical churches in the region are in ideological captivity to the West. Almost all of the theologians in the group had degrees from Fuller or Wheaton (two were LBC). In fact one raison d'être of the ATA is to provide accreditation for Asian Bible College courses so that their graduates can go overseas to do post graduate work. The Koreans in particular were totally conservative if not positively reactionary in their thinking. The Philipinos in contrast, having lived through a "Christian revolution" were much more holistic, ecumenically minded and radical in their thinking. Yet, overall there was a strong individualistic pietistic flavour to the discussions with a deep suspicion of anything smacking of communism, and of the World Council of Churches. The term "liberation theology" was rejected out of hand and I was the only person there with enough courage (or naivety) to suggest that we might have something to learn from what Latin American Christians are saying.

By far the best theological paper was that of David Lim, a young man from Manila who presented a thoroughly Biblical and thoroughly radical theology of the city which would be familiar to those who have sat at the feet of Ray Bakke. I hope we will be able to reprint this paper in City Cries and have obtained permission to do so. Jun Vencer's paper on the "Nature & Mission of the Urban Church" would also find a welcome in the ECUM networks. Bong Ro from Taiwan presented an overview of urban mission which had nine pages on Western cities and only three on Asia. Both the level of its understanding and the lack of local material underline how much thinking remains to be done by Asian urban mission strategists.

The ATA hopes to produce a book based on the proceedings of the conference. Meanwhile a declaration was drafted seeking to summarise

the agreed position of participants at the conference. This seemed to me to be at least as far back as Lausanne 1974 with a strong emphasis that the primary aim of mission is "the urgent task of proclaiming the grace of our Lord Jesus to sinners". Of course the Gospel is "to be lived out visibly in our churches and society" by people who are not just "converts but mature disciples in the fellowship of believers". Social action was seen as "our horizontal concern for humanity through community service". Still a dualistic view of the church and the world and no sign here that the Kingdom of God might be bursting into the world ahead of us Christians. The declaration ended with a commitment from the community of theological educators to put more emphasis on urban theology, practical training, and the equipping of lay people for ministry, but stopped short of the radical reversal of theological education patterns which many of us believe is necessary in Britain.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FOR THE UK?

I don't want to sound too negative about a visit which was personally very enjoyable and enlightening or about Christians with whom I enjoyed good fellowship and stimulating exchange of ideas. Nor do I want to sound imperialistic about how much they have to learn from us in the UK. I think rather that the unease I felt was because most of the people I met were academic theologians trained in the Western tradition which has already failed to make much impact on Western cities. With these people in key leadership positions and given the socio-economic conditions in Asia it will be a long time before the urban evangelical churches there become a church of and for the poor.

However, there is a positive side from which we can learn. This comes in the stories of the practitioners of urban mission, from the grass roots churches in many Asian cities, from the thinkers who are working with the Bible to produce contextualised theology in their city. And of course there is the fact that in many of the cities of Asia in the midst of urban turmoil and exploitation, people of simple Christian faith keep on praying, caring and evangelising, and the church keeps growing.

NB. If anyone wants to read any of the papers from the conference I can arrange to send copies for the cost of xeroxing plus postage.