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FAITH IN ACTION: HOW CAN THE METHODIST CHURCH INFLUENCE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF SINGAPORE?

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of
Religious Studies
program at Selinus University School of Religious Sciences

Faculty of Religious Studies
in fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Religious Studies

2025

Abstract

In my thesis, I examine the social policy within the Methodist Church and its contribution to development in Singapore's pluralistic society. The Singapore government has regulated religious groups to ensure economic development and social stability as well as to render them complementary to wider national interests. The Methodist Church contributes to social development with the awareness of keeping religion and politics separate as a key rule of political engagement in Singapore. My work covers the scope and significance of the Methodist Church's contribution to social development in the country. There involves a study of ways in which the Methodist Church balances its religious duties and social service functions within the state's controls and amidst possible confrontation. I scrutinise how the Methodist Church could reconcile its dual role in which it opposes certain decisions and actions by the state yet symbiotically partner with government agencies in addressing social issues. My thesis questions what role the Methodist Church plays in the social fabric of Singapore and how it might challenge state-imposed boundaries to affect social changes according to its own vision and mission. I ask if the Methodist Church is able to effectively influence Singapore's social policies through evolving a new and better socio-political ethos, for instance, to boost government efforts to enhance racial and religious harmony. Based on the scope and significance of the Methodist Church's contributions to Singapore's nation-building process, there is a need for a comprehensive study about the soft power approach in which it makes use of their religious duties and social service functions within the state's controls and amidst possible confrontation. My research investigates that the Christian community, as an active member of the larger political community, can employ soft power skills to challenge state-imposed boundaries in order to influence Singapore's policies according to its own vision. My work examines the possibilities and implications of the formation of a Christian political party and thus, dispute the Singaporean government's exhortation to the people not to mix religion with politics. Through political representation, Christians in Singapore will have greater opportunities at the legislative level to contribute towards shaping the country's future.

Preface

In the past, I was reluctant to work in research areas that forced me to step outside my comfort zone. However, while working on a PhD thesis, I wanted to research a unique and different topic that challenged me. Collecting data about the Methodist Church and national development is a rather complex area to crack because Singapore is a highly governed state. However, I am delighted to have faced this challenge head-on, which improved my ability to research complex issues more efficiently. Indeed, this experience has helped me grow both professionally and personally. I am grateful for my supervisor Prof Salvatore Fava, whose role was instrumental throughout the research and writing process. He provided excellent guidance and regular feedback, enabling me to enhance my knowledge and polish my work. I also wish to acknowledge family members, parents, and my contacts for their emotional support. I could not have made it this far without their help. I hope you enjoy reading my thesis.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Background

The Methodist Church in Singapore is governed by a set of social principles that are rooted in the teachings of Scripture and in the social teachings of the church. The previous edition of the Methodist Social Principles had been put together in the 1980s and delegates at the General Conference of the Methodist Church accepted the revised edition in 2020.¹ “The main sections of the Social Principles have been re-titled and arranged along the theological idea of Orders of Creation found mainly in the writings of Reformed theologians/ethicists.”² The social principles define the responsibility of the church and accountability of believers. The Methodist Social Principles seek the welfare of Christians as well as that of members of society, regardless of their race or creed and particularly the underprivileged community. “The Methodist Church’s participation in social action in Singapore dates back to 1885, alongside the start of the Methodist missionary ministry” in Singapore.³ In its long history of social concern and making a stance on issues involving Christian principles, the Methodist Church has been prayerful and thoughtful in addressing matters concerning society based on a sound biblical and theological foundation.

In my thesis, I examine specifically the social policy within the Methodist Church and its contribution to development in Singapore's pluralistic society. The government has regulated religious groups to ensure economic development and social stability as well as to render them complementary to wider national interests. The Methodist Church contributes to social development with the awareness of keeping religion and politics separate as a key rule of political engagement in Singapore. My thesis covers the scope and significance of the Methodist Church’s contribution to social development in the country. This is a study of ways in which the Methodist Church

¹ “Introduction to the Methodist Social Principles,” The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 5 November 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/methodist-message/introduction-to-the-methodist-social-principles/>.

² “Introduction to the Methodist Social Principles.”

³ “Social action is integral to Methodism,” The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 5 November 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/social-action-is-integral-to-methodism/>.

balances its religious duties and social service functions within the state's controls and amidst possible confrontation. I scrutinise how the Methodist Church could reconcile its dual role in which it opposes certain decisions and actions by the state yet symbiotically partners with government agencies in addressing social issues. My thesis asks what role the Methodist Church plays in the social fabric of Singapore and how it might challenge state-imposed boundaries to affect social changes according to its own vision and mission.

The present Social Principles of the Methodist Church are comprehensive in covering the spheres including family, economics and politics. Extensive as the principles are in addressing social concerns, the church is only mainly expressing their recognition, belief, support, affirmation and denunciation of matters concerning community life, social well-being and so on. However, there is a need for the Methodist Church to amend its Social Principles to reflect an action-oriented and execution-related set of roles towards the future.⁴ Can the Methodist Church effectively influence Singapore's social policies through evolving a new and better socio-political ethos, for instance, to boost government efforts to enhance racial and religious harmony and to enhance the livelihood of Singaporeans?

This study builds on the foundation of earlier historical and sociological studies and more significantly, contributes to the discussion and research on the construction, narration and representation of Singapore's past through the activities of the Methodist Church. This is important because of Methodism's contributions to the consolidation of Singapore's identity, as well as its creation and expansion coinciding with the nation-building stage, as the hope of church leaderships was to support/complement the government's national development agenda. I aim to contribute research in Methodist social ethos to existing materials that have been presented to provide insights into the initiatives undertaken by the Methodist Church to meet, in particular, the social needs of Singapore. I have chosen to use Singapore as a case study and to probe the activities of the Methodist Church especially during the period in which nation building

⁴ "The Methodist Social Principles," The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 10 May 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/images/mcs/pdf/methodistsg-social-principles-2020.pdf>.

was in progress. There are many outstanding examples of individual as well as collective Christian efforts to improve the welfare of Singaporeans as they were faithfully meeting the spiritual needs through the church. For instance, over the last decade of the twentieth century, the church was seeking to reach the Chinese-speaking community by taking small steps into the community through the setting up of family service centres and community-penetration efforts.⁵

Scholars, theologians and religious proponents have raised questions about the church's limited and cautious involvement in the state affairs of a multiracial, multireligious and multiethnic Singapore. There have been debates on the extent of the government's management of and control over the different religions and their actions in the country. In the context of Singapore showing that it would regulate religion or religious groups, Wee and Clammer note that the state has the legal and political power to exercise control over religion in Singapore, to the extent of using punitive measures.⁶ In my background studies of the role and contributions of churches, I found that they have rendered significant community services. When Singapore was approaching independence, churches – which had provided services that revolved mainly around education, medicine and institutional care for the orphaned or abandoned – took on new opportunities for service such as prison ministry, counseling services and drug rehabilitation.

Singapore's independence through separation from Malaysia in 1965 allowed Christians to concentrate their energies and resources on the island and this was among the factors that led to the unprecedented growth of churches in the years that followed.⁷ “Having been unilaterally cut off from Malaysia in 1965, the new leaders of Singapore had the unenviable task of generating a nation out of a volatile brew of race,

⁵ “Chinese Annual Conference,” *The Methodist Church in Singapore*, accessed 13 October 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/chinese-annual-conference/>.

⁶ Vivienne Wee, “Secular State, Multi-religious Society: The Patterning of Religion in Singapore” (paper presentation, Hua Hin, Thailand, 2-10 May 1989); John Clammer, *The Sociology of Singapore Religion: Studies in Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1991), 11-17.

⁷ Bobby Sng Ewe Kong, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore 1819-2002* (Singapore: Bible Society of Singapore/Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 2003), 247.

religion, and politics,” posits Harvey.⁸ This increasing growth and influence of evangelical Christianity was a mixed bag for the government.⁹ Harvey explains that on the one hand, “conservative and Evangelical Christians served as ballast against more radical Christian groups that challenged the conservative ideology of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP)” – the government could count on Christian support of government censorship of the media and discouragement of Western decadence as well as its crackdown on crime, drugs and corruption.¹⁰

On the other hand, evangelical emphasis on ‘evangelism’ was at times an irritant – zealous evangelism put religious harmony at risk and the profusion of Christian sects and denominations made it difficult for the government to monitor let alone communicate and administer religious policy to the churches.¹¹

According to Singapore's constitution, every person has the right to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it.¹² Every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes, to acquire and own property, and to hold and administer it in accordance with law.¹³ Religious groups also have the right to establish and maintain institutions for the education of children and to provide instruction in their own religion, but there must be no discrimination on the grounds of religion in any law relating to such institutions.¹⁴ However, the legitimate ambit of the Christian religion, like all other religions in Singapore, does not include participation in political causes. It is noted that the PAP, which has dominated Singapore's politics since independence, carefully monitors and controls religions in the state.

Concerned over Singapore's religious groups being influenced by the rise in religious fervour worldwide, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act 1990 (MRHA)

⁸ Thomas Harvey, “Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected: The Demise and Rebirth of the National Council of Churches, Singapore,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 26, no. 4 (2009): 262.

⁹ Harvey, “Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected” 263.

¹⁰ Harvey, “Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected” 263.

¹¹ Harvey, “Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected” 263.

¹² Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, *Singapore Statutes Online* (2021).

¹³ Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, *Singapore Statutes Online*.

¹⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Singapore, *Singapore Statutes Online*.

was enacted to maintain religious harmony and ensure that religion is not exploited for any political or subversive purpose in the country.¹⁵ This supposedly goes against Christians' calling to be evangelists wherever they are, including in the political office as a platform for sharing the gospel. Christians can work to advance justice and public good when they work out a biblical perspective on the state and politics. However, as evident from past incidents, the Singapore government considers acts such as a local pastor's appearance in several YouTube clips deriding the Buddhist and Taoist faiths, and a Christian couple's possession and distribution of seditious publications, as potential threats to Singapore's delicate racial and religious balance.¹⁶

Keeping religion and politics separate is a key rule of political engagement in Singapore. Churches have a responsibility to shape the social and political realities of a nation in a way ensuring that the state remains secular. Therefore, churches and secular institutions need to submit to certain rules of constructive engagement so that they can play cohesive roles in society. The challenge facing the Methodist Church, which has a long history in Singapore, is to retain its ability to speak out when the state takes decisions that are contrary to its theology, for instance capital punishment, which is a legal form of punishment in the country. The Methodist Church's policy frameworks are maneuvered around the state's mechanisms.

Summary Findings

In my thesis, I examine policy frameworks within the Methodist Church in its contribution to social development in Singapore's pluralistic society. Since the early days of Christian missionary activity in Singapore, the Methodist Church has gone on to be influenced by new waves of revival and today, it is arguably more growth-oriented and more inward-focused than in the past. I show that the Methodist Church's policy frameworks form an important part of the Singapore fabric and thus, its members can actively contribute to the social aspect of national development. However, I also show

¹⁵ Maintaining Racial and Religious Harmony, *Ministry of Home Affairs*.

¹⁶ "Singapore denounces pastor for ridiculing Buddhists", *Reuters*, accessed 13 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-religion-idUSTRE6180MY20100209>.

how the Methodist Church can influence the Singapore government's development efforts through evolving a new socio-political ethos in a more effective mode.

CHAPTER 2

Research question, literature review and research methodology

Research Question

How do policy frameworks within The Methodist Church in Singapore affect its ability to influence national development?

Research Methodology

In my thesis, I apply historical research to study the Methodist Church since its early days of Christian missionary work in Singapore. The focus is on its social contribution in tandem with socio-political developments in the country. A preliminary literature review shows the different nation-building phases in Singapore in relation to the history of Christianity and church growth in the country. Emphasis is placed on examining the social policy of The Methodist Church in Singapore. The main sources employed to examine national development in connection with the Methodist Church's social policy have included historical materials and government documents of Singapore as a young nation, records and publications of the Methodist Church as well as relevant books and journal articles on past studies linking state and religion in the context of social development and church contribution. I have accessed Selinus University's resources, online databases and Singapore libraries.

The thesis covers the scope and significance of the Methodist Church's contribution to Singapore's nation-building process and examines the ways in which the Methodist Church balances its religious duties and social service functions within the state's controls and amidst opposition. My research analyses how the Methodist Church could reconcile its dual roles, in which it rejects certain decisions and policies by the state but at the same time, work with government agencies in resolving social issues. The thesis probes the extent of the Methodist Church's capacity to challenge state-imposed boundaries to influence Singapore's social development according to

its own principles. My research investigates the formulation of a new socio-political ethos by the Methodist Church in carrying out its mission within the society as it overcomes government-enforced barriers.

My approach involves a document study that explores Methodism's response to its own official position on church-state relations, historically considered through primary and secondary sources. This research is concerned with how the Methodist Church's contribution to Singapore's social capital was hampered by state regulations, and why a new and more effective approach will benefit the society. I aim to contribute meaningful scholarly research in this aspect and to offer recommendations for the Methodist Church to be of greater service.

Literature Review

National development is of great importance to Singapore, a small and relatively new state.¹⁷ Her short history has been coloured by episodes of racial tensions and social unrest as well as economic recessions. The diversified and universal nature of Christianity has equipped its members to carry out their religious duties and social service functions in an equilibrium that is beneficial within the multiracial and multireligious society of a controlled state like Singapore.¹⁸ National development in Singapore is a conscious effort and a calculated act in which the state is the chief architect. Churches have been an epochal facet of the nation-building process with Singapore's history being linked to that of many – and significantly, the Methodist Church, being the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the country. The people have a sense of belonging to their homeland through the rich heritage of Christian service in its nation-building phases.

Methodism in Singapore began when missionaries, Bishop James Mills Thoburn and Reverend William Fitzjames Oldham, together with Anne Thoburn and Julia Battie, arrived in Singapore on 7 February 1885 and conducted the first

¹⁷ Bilveer Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore: An Introduction* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education (Asia), 2012), 113.

¹⁸ The National Council of Churches of Singapore, *Many Faces, One Faith* (Singapore: NCCS, 2004).

service at short notice on the following day.¹⁹ The first Methodist church in Singapore was formed that year and since then, it has evolved to become Wesley Methodist Church. Over time, other Methodist churches were established in Singapore to serve the different linguistic and ethnic communities.²⁰ After more than 130 years, the Methodists in Singapore today number more than 44,000 members with many others in the community.²¹ The Methodists began setting up schools, providing medical services and establishing publishing work alongside their church-planting mission.²² From Singapore, missionary work expanded to other countries in Southeast Asia.²³

Methodist work in Singapore began as an offshoot of Methodism's India operations.²⁴ William and Marie Oldham, a young aspiring missionary couple on their way back to India after William completed his studies at Boston University, were selected to start Methodist work in Singapore.²⁵ William Oldham headed to Singapore in February 1885 and with funding for the new mission secured, he set to work and formed those who had been drawn in by the evangelistic services into an English-speaking congregation.²⁶ A chance encounter proved pivotal for Methodism's Chinese outreach in Singapore — Oldham was walking with a Chinese friend one day when he saw a sign for the Celestial Reasoning Society, which is a Chinese debate club organised to provide its members with a venue to practise their English.²⁷ Oldham saw this group of educated, English-speaking Chinese as a potential evangelistic target and he asked to join the society, but was instead offered the opportunity to give a speech to them, which he did.²⁸ Methodist missionaries had taken advantage of every opportunity to reach out to any segment of the population.

¹⁹ Vernon Cornelius-Takahama, "Methodism in Singapore," *Singapore Infopedia*, accessed 9 May 2024, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_963_2004-12-30.html.

²⁰ "Methodism in Singapore."

²¹ "Methodist History," *The Methodist Church in Singapore*, accessed 9 May 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/index.php/about-us/heritage-history/wesleyan-heritage>.

²² "Methodist History."

²³ "Methodist History."

²⁴ David W. Scott, "The Malaysia Mission in the Context of Southeast Asian Globalization," in *Mission As Globalization: Methodists in Southeast Asia at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 36.

²⁵ Scott, "The Malaysia Mission in the Context of Southeast Asian Globalization," 37.

²⁶ Scott, "The Malaysia Mission in the Context of Southeast Asian Globalization," 37.

²⁷ Scott, "The Malaysia Mission in the Context of Southeast Asian Globalization," 38.

²⁸ Scott, "The Malaysia Mission in the Context of Southeast Asian Globalization," 38.

It has often been held that missions rode on the coattails of colonialism. Both British and American Methodist missions in Asia ‘came at a time when their respective governments had already muscled their way into the region.’²⁹ According to Oconer, “American Methodism’s first forays into Asia cannot be separated from the fact that they also benefited from the ever-expanding grasp of the British crown and an emerging American commercial empire.”³⁰ Singapore’s separation from Malaysia spurs nation-building efforts that involved the creation of a national identity and this posed a dilemma for the new government because the people must then be united under a common banner.³¹ The government plays a crucial role in promoting a national identity, which involves two main phases – the first started after independence and the second from the late 1980s onwards when it became a top priority of the government. Amaldas points out that the construction of Singaporean national identity was mostly driven by the state.³² Religion has been an important consideration in the construction of Singapore’s national identity – besides the concept of ethnicity, the issue of language and the individual’s perception of belonging.

“Citizens who interpret Singapore’s national identity in a way that contradicts official nation-building efforts might be seen as opposing the country’s leadership,” submits Ortmann.³³ Singapore has an authoritarian approach to civic national identity – based on civic symbols like the constitution or an oath of allegiance – in contrast to an ethnic national identity.³⁴ “Because the state has a short history and a multiethnic population, the debatable existence of a Singapore nation could be considered a distinctly modern and decidedly modern phenomenon,”³⁵ argues Tham, adding that “national identity must supersede religious identity when religious issues of an external

²⁹ Luther J. Oconer, “Methodism in Asia and the Pacific,” in *T&T Clark Companion to Methodism*, ed. Charles Yriyogen Jr. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5-6.

³⁰ Oconer, “Methodism in Asia and the Pacific,” 7.

³¹ Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1995), vii and 37.

³² Marystella Amaldas, “The Management of Globalization in Singapore: Twentieth Century Lessons for the Early Decades of the New Century,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 1, no.3 (2009): 984.

³³ Stephan Ortmann, “Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 28, no. 4 (2009): 23.

³⁴ Ortmann, “Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity,” 25.

³⁵ Ortmann, “Singapore: The Politics of Inventing National Identity,” 25.

provenance threaten harmony”.³⁶ This can be seen from documented cases of arrest, detention and deportation of those who use religion to cause mischief and dissension. In 1987, twenty-two Roman Catholic church and social activists and professionals were accused of being members of a Marxist conspiracy bent on subverting the government by force and replacing it with a Marxist state.³⁷

The Methodist Church in Singapore dictates that “the Christian point of view demands that concentrations of power in government be used responsibly for the well-being of the community” and that “power that is godly must be enabling and liberative and should not be confused with abusive and coercive force.”³⁸ Chia observes that the church has two main tasks in her relation to the state – first, it has been entrusted with a privileged mission as ambassadors of reconciliation.³⁹ “This task in a sense requires the Church to take interest in the socio-political ethos of the society in which she conducts her mission,” he explains.⁴⁰ The second task is intercession – the exhortation to intercede for the government is enunciated in 1 Timothy 2.⁴¹ “This exhortation is seen in the fact that Christians are called to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving for all men, but especially for ‘kings and all those in authority’”.⁴²

Basing its Social Principles on its Wesleyan concern for social as well as personal holiness, the Methodist Church has looked into what is good and what is to be avoided in today’s society.⁴³ The Methodist Church states that it has a special interest in social concerns because of its desire to be obedient to Christ in bringing the whole of life with its activities, possessions, relationships and environment into conformity with the will of God.⁴⁴ Such obedience is exemplified in the life and labour of John Wesley who ministered to the physical, intellectual, spiritual and social needs

³⁶ Tham Seong Chee, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 18.

³⁷ Jagjit Kaur, “Marxist Conspiracy,” accessed 25 September 2021, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1578_2009-10-31.html.

³⁸ “The Methodist Social Principles,” 7.

³⁹ Roland Chia, “Rendering to Caesar: A Theology of Church-State Relations,” *Church and Society in Asia Today* 7, no.2 (2004): 55.

⁴⁰ Chia, “Rendering to Caesar,” 55.

⁴¹ Chia, “Rendering to Caesar,” 57.

⁴² Chia, “Rendering to Caesar,” 57.

⁴³ “The Methodist Social Principles.”

⁴⁴ “The Methodist Social Principles,” 2.

of the people to whom he preached the Gospel of personal redemption and social holiness.⁴⁵

The Singaporean government has harnessed religion as a constructive force in nation building because religion could instill good citizenship, provide a moral anchor as well as encourage productivity, self-reliance, and associational life. Religious organisations in Singapore are expected to look after the moral and social wellbeing of the population rather than their economic or political needs. As Chia highlights, the government has consistently welcomed the contributions of the different faith communities in public debate on issues that affect the larger society.⁴⁶ As such, the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), of which the Methodist Church is a founding member, has made efforts to issue statements, submit papers and participate in numerous discussions with government representatives and religious groups. For instance, the NCCS has supported a statement made by the government to a local pastor about insensitive and offensive comments to followers of the Buddhist and Taoist faiths. The NCCS has been rightfully more vocal and prepared in criticising the society than the government in cases such as the one involving the publication of articles that "make fun of the Lord Jesus Christ" which appeared during the holy season of Lent when Christians remember the sufferings and sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.⁴⁷ In a way, the NCCS could be seen as functioning on behalf of the government.

How much the Methodist Church's policy frameworks are able to influence the government's decisions depends on the how much the state is willing to incorporate religious perspectives and proposals in its undertakings. Or it should be that how much the government can be impacted by religious workings depends on how effectual the Methodist Church is, in making its stance. The Methodist Church is of the view that Christians should engage in the public square as "it has to do with the very heart of

⁴⁵ "The Methodist Social Principles."

⁴⁶ Roland Chia, "Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore," ETHOS Institute for Public Christianity, accessed 1 December 2024, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/preserving-religious-peace-in-multi-religious-singapore/>.

⁴⁷ Robert Solomon, "The Church as a Multi-racial Community," Graduates' Christian Fellowship, accessed 17 August 2024, <http://www.gcf.org.sg/resources/the-church-as-a-multi-racial-community>.

Christian witness" and not something optional.⁴⁸ There has been concern that religion is becoming a private experience without any social implications in an increasingly secular society. In fact, Christianity is opposed to the privatisation of religion because it believes that the God it worships and professes is the Creator and Lord of the world.

Far from being a private religion, local churches have been contributing to the wellbeing of society, providing services such as education and healthcare. According to Oconer, "The social implications of educational and medical work, while qualifying as civilising tools that may have wittingly or unwittingly brought an ethical and benevolent face to the colonialist and imperialist projects of western powers, also helped present Methodism as a social religion – a religion that concerned itself not only to benefit the underprivileged, but also to empower the helpless."⁴⁹ The consequences of empire and colonialism also prepared a ready English-speaking audience for Methodist revival work and this has continued to benefit Methodists towards being a significant contributor to Singaporean society.⁵⁰

In exploring the development that is related to identifying missions as an agent of civilisation, Oconer notes that "this pattern seems to be significant with most Methodist missionaries who went to the region as they wittingly or unwittingly carried with them what they strongly believed to be blessings of western society to supplement their chief objective of bringing the gospel unto the ends of the earth".⁵¹ Methodist medical and educational work let the missionaries lead the people to Christ as well as planted seeds for social transformation in the communities they served.⁵² Education in Singapore involves the Methodist Church to a large extent with a substantial number of missionary schools also belonging to three other major denominations – Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic. Attempts were made to reach the various ethnic communities through the setting up of schools.⁵³ Goh finds that in the era of

⁴⁸ Joshua Woo, "How should Christians engage in the public square?" accessed 10 August 2024, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/how-should-christians-engage-in-the-public-square/>.

⁴⁹ Oconer, "Methodism in Asia and the Pacific," 20.

⁵⁰ Oconer, "Methodism in Asia and the Pacific," 21.

⁵¹ Oconer, "Methodism in Asia and the Pacific," 10.

⁵² Oconer, "Methodism in Asia and the Pacific," 10-11.

⁵³ Robert Solomon, "The Church as a Multi-racial Community," Graduates' Christian Fellowship, accessed 17 August 2024, <http://www.gcf.org.sg/resources/the-church-as-a-multi-racial-community>.

educational modernisation and nation building, the government had consistently recognised the distinctively Christian quality of mission school education and the moral legacy it effectively imparts to its students.⁵⁴

It was the “distinctly Christian Institution” which was well-placed to “provide boys with good moral and good habits”. There was not only a recognition that this distinguished (although this stopped short of an explicit claim that this made mission schools superior) the mission school from others, but also that the Christianising element was inevitable, and an inextricable part of the mission schools' process of moral training.⁵⁵

In modern Singapore, mission and faith-affiliated schools have to comply with government guidelines on how religious instruction and observance can be provided within stipulated parameters. This brings to light the statement by The United Methodist Church (in America) that “the state should not use its authority to promote particular religious beliefs (including atheism), nor should it require prayer or worship in the public schools, but it should leave students free to practice their own religious convictions”.⁵⁶ Churches in Singapore are allowed to run their own schools. As such, the Methodist Church manages approximately 15 schools under two categories – private Methodist schools and government-aided ones.⁵⁷ Schools in Singapore are a closely monitored secular institution. But will the Methodist Church be able to make any difference to the public education system through perhaps informal or ad hoc means in schools? How and for what reasons does the church attempt to carry out this social task? There is also the question of whether Singapore can be considered neutral in matters of religion when it is known to manipulate education as a tool for national development.

Despite its significant contributions towards nation building, local churches' relationship with the government is not always rosy. Religious groups have run afoul

⁵⁴ Robbie B. H. Goh, “Mission Schools in Singapore: Religious Harmony, Social Identities, and the Negotiation of Evangelical Cultures,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 374.

⁵⁵ Goh, “Mission Schools in Singapore,” 374.

⁵⁶ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 139.

⁵⁷ “Methodist Schools,” The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 23 September 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/index.php/ministries/methodist-school/methodist-schools>.

of the Singapore government before. Tan points out that historically, “the MRHA has its genesis in 1986 when the Internal Security Department reported on over-zealous evangelical Christian proselytisation and the impact that it had on religious communities competing for membership”.⁵⁸ When the MRHA was enacted in 1990, it empowers the government to gag religious leaders and practitioners who stray beyond state-imposed social and political boundaries. According to Thio, “Both religionists and non-religionists who exploit religious passions for political gain will have to deal with the framing legislation that gives effect to the ground rules for religion and the political process.”⁵⁹ Such a measure has had an impact on the Methodist Church’s policy frameworks in terms of restriction on influencing the society politically in a general election. To this end, taking a leaf from the writing of Jones, “Methodism should recommit to its calling and acclimate to the new global reality of the world —adapting the Methodist tradition to meet new challenges”.⁶⁰

The Methodist Church’s Social Principles have laid the foundation for building bridges with other religious communities besides the society in Singapore, and this is appreciated by the government because it is important that Singaporeans of different faiths live in harmony. Amidst scientific and technological advancements as well as globalisation, the Methodist Church’s efforts to be more relevant to current social context and to contribute positively to post-modern intellectual and cultural environment will go towards solving modern and emerging problems. The state would see that Methodist traditions and authorities remain credible as they are continually refreshed and renewed in the post-modern environment.

In the 1980s, there were a number of complaints about the aggressive and insensitive evangelistic methods of some Christians and as such, the introduction of the MRHA in 1990 was deemed necessary for the preservation of peaceful relations

⁵⁸ Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, “Keeping God in Place. The Management of Religion in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008).

⁵⁹ Thio Li-Ann, “Between Eden and Armageddon: Navigating 'Religion' and 'Politics' in Singapore,” *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2009): 403.

⁶⁰ Scott Jameson Jones, “Conclusion: The Calling of Methodism,” in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, eds. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker (Tennessee: Seedbed Publishing, 2021), 474.

between religious groups and the prevention of an undesirable alliance between religion and politics.⁶¹ Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remarks that because of the government's active work with religious leaders since the introduction of the MRHA, "we have not needed to invoke the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act for 20 years but it is something which is important to us which we must keep for a long time."⁶² This shows the effectiveness of cooperation between the government and religious groups. However, the state remains very much in control of race and religious matters.

The Singapore government's stance on the relationship between religion and politics is delineated in the Maintenance of Religious Harmony White Paper (MRHWP), which was published in December 1989.⁶³ This document is the precursor to the MRHA that came into effect in March 1992. The MRHWP was issued in the wake of the rise of religiosity in Singapore and worldwide in the 1980s. Back then, the government regarded religion in general as a positive social force that could serve as a bulwark against the perceived threat of Westernisation and the associated trends of excessive individualism and lack of discipline. The government, although secular, was concerned, however, with the social consequences of religiously motivated social action and therefore monitored and sometimes prohibited the activities of religious groups. The authorities feared that religion could sometimes lead to social and implicitly political action or to contention between ethnic groups.

As part of its policy framework, the Methodist Church has to carry out its religious duty to evangelise while maintaining racial and religious harmony in society. Solomon comments that "the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual approach to mission and

⁶¹Roland Chia, "Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore," ETHOS Institute for Public Christianity, accessed 1 December 2024, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/preserving-religious-peace-in-multi-religious-singapore/>.

⁶² "National Day Rally 2009," accessed 13 September 2024, <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loongs-national-day-rally-2009-speech-english&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwiz1Yz-puTzAhWQfH0KHfgxBMEQtwJ6BAgBEAE&usq=AOvVaw18qb0OIko9uKYssl4NaM5v>.

⁶³ "White Paper on the Maintenance of Religious Harmony," Parliament of Singapore, accessed 28 March 2024, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/docs/f4c58265-7da0-11e7-83df-0050568939ad/Cmd.21of1989.pdf.

evangelism in Singapore has resulted in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual church".⁶⁴ The local church is a strategic base from which Christians move out to the structures of society.⁶⁵ This is especially crucial in the Singapore context of preserving racial harmony at all costs. There exists a "do not rock the boat" mentality among some Methodists who fear jeopardising peaceful relations with the state and being blacklisted by the authorities. Such thinking robs the Methodist Church of its vitality as a contributor to social development. When the government allows a church much freedom to decide how best to use its time and resources, the church is more likely to devote more energy towards caring for the community. The Methodist Church applies policy framework in safeguarding its legitimacy and usefulness in the state's view by filling in the gaps of social service delivery.

A common shared understanding among the people during pre-independence Singapore had been rocked with racial riots and this made the people reluctant to openly engage in religious debates. To this end, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has highlighted the government's efforts to keep religion out of the public square to "make it safe for everyone to congregate".⁶⁶ As explained by Goh:

Our schools, our workplaces, our hospitals, our community clubs, for example, are all places where any person can expect to be treated in the same way regardless of his or her religion. Organisations that receive government funding or enjoy double tax deduction donations must similarly ensure that nobody is denied services due to his beliefs, and that no proselytisation occurs without explicit consent.⁶⁷

Christians are perceived as a section of society that needs to be reined in and co-opted to prevent damage to the social fabric, particularly in an avowedly secular context such as Singapore. The government envisages Christians disturbing the social

⁶⁴ Robert Solomon, "The Church as a Multi-racial Community," Graduates' Christian Fellowship, accessed 17 August 2024, <http://www.gcf.org.sg/resources/the-church-as-a-multi-racial-community>.

⁶⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 147.

⁶⁶ "Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at MUIS International Conference on Muslims in Multicultural Societies," Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, accessed 11 October 2024, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/20100721003.htm>.

⁶⁷ "Speech by Mr Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister, at MUIS International Conference on Muslims in Multicultural Societies."

fabric if, for instance, Methodists appear zealous in using social media platforms to promote their church activities in public. Religion is expected to accommodate the state's wishes and accept government policies. As propounded by Thio:

While religious liberty is widely enjoyed in Singapore, at least for the mainstream religious groups, and while religion is afforded a role in public life, ultimately, religion is subordinated to government priorities and imperatives, within a dominant political culture which has been defined as embodying "paternalism, communitarianism, pragmatism and secularism".⁶⁸

The Methodist Church has a duty to study and speak publicly about moral and ethical issues that are faced in the process of social development, yet it is wary of being regarded as an opponent of the state if it becomes too vocal.

The Methodist Church must be more than the moral conscience of the nation as part of its policy frameworks. The Methodist Church can make significant contributions to public life by participating in debates on socio-political issues. This is in line with the government's move welcoming religious groups to make comments in public discussions on topics that include the life sciences, censorship and homosexuality. The government is seen as skillful in mobilising religions and cultures of Singaporeans for the purposes of national development. Tan submits that "through its unique structure, rules and values, religion is a form of communal action through which faith communities can either support or obstruct different types of socio-political and economic interactions in the secular world".⁶⁹ "All this points to a variegated and pragmatic form of secularism – one that seeks to harness the powerful potential of religion while ensuring that the secular always takes precedence over the sacred in political discourse, public policy and governance."⁷⁰ Tan stresses that "while the government acutely recognises the Janus-face of religion, it seeks to harness religion as a constructive force in nation building" and "the government seeks to harness this innate ability of religion to inculcate good citizenship, temper the rough edges of

⁶⁸ Thio Li-Ann, "Control, Co-Optation and Co-Operation: Managing Religious Harmony in Singapore's Multi-Ethnic, Quasi-Secular State," *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 33, no.2 (2005): 253.

⁶⁹ Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, "Keeping God in Place. The Management of Religion in Singapore," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 66.

⁷⁰ Tan, "Keeping God in Place," 66-67.

secular life by providing a moral anchor, and encourage industriousness, self-reliance, and associational life.”⁷¹

While one of the basic rules of governance in Singapore is to keep the state secular, political observers contend that race and religion could never be truly separated from Singapore's political structure. Tan argues that “state and politics in Singapore are insulated from religious institutions and norms, whose de-politicised forms are allowed and at times encouraged to flourish in the community life of a multireligious society as long as inter-religious harmony and public order are maintained”.⁷²

While the secular state prohibits the politicisation of the religious sphere, it also secures its moral authority over a multireligious society by not taking sides, performing a crucial role as a reliably fair and neutral arbiter in the settlement of possible disagreements among religious communities. The state's authority, rather than being derived from or aligned to the divine mandate of a dominant religion, actually depends on its demonstrated equidistance of contentious matters.⁷³

In managing religious pluralism and state objectives, there is no strict separation of religion and state in Singapore.⁷⁴ While the separation of religion and state is not written into Singapore's Constitution, “religion is controlled or limited where it is seen to be a threat to the secularly couched objectives of the state in terms of security and preserving racial and religious harmony, or national policy”.⁷⁵ Tan argues that Singapore's secularism strives to protect religions from state intervention and vice versa, instead of seeking to eliminate religion from the public sphere.⁷⁶ “Yet, the state is deeply involved in, concerned with, and exerts a measured influence over religious

⁷¹ Tan, “Keeping God in Place,” 70-71.

⁷² Kenneth Paul Tan, “Pragmatic Secularism, Civil Religion, and Political Legitimacy in Singapore,” *State and Secularism* (2010): 340.

⁷³ Tan, “Pragmatic Secularism,” 340.

⁷⁴ Thio Li-Ann, “Control, Co-Optation and Co-Operation: Managing Religious Harmony in Singapore's Multi-Ethnic, Quasi-Secular State,” *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 33, no.2 (2005): 252.

⁷⁵ Thio, “Control, Co-Optation and Co-Operation,” 253.

⁷⁶ Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, “Keeping God in Place. The Management of Religion in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 66.

matters," he argues. "It also strives to align the thinking and expectations of the various faith communities on the role that religion can play in Singapore's development."⁷⁷

For most of Singapore's short national history, the government viewed Christianity as good influence in establishing a moral climate that leads to the overall prosperity of society. Singapore has been envisioned to be a dynamic city attracting creative thinkers that in turn would attract more foreign investment. Such creative thinkers, they said, would not be drawn to Singapore unless the city transforms into a more vibrant place. Are the Methodist Church's religious traditions seen as impeding the flow of national progress in an increasingly competitive environment? If so, how should the Methodist Church adapt its policy frameworks to changing times in helping to shape the journey of nationhood? The Methodist Church can actively contribute to discussions and proactively makes recommendations, specifically regarding the social aspect of governance, amidst the evolving climate of public discourse and consensus building.

Singaporeans, of religious or non-religious persuasion, have the right to speak about and influence public policy – "religious values cannot be excluded from public issues as the state cannot determine which convictions and moral judgments may enter public deliberation, which would discriminate between citizens as bearers of opinion".⁷⁸ A fairly young nation like Singapore can benefit from contributions coming from various sectors including the religious domain. The late statesman Lee Kuan Yew remarked that despite Singapore's progress, it is still a "nation in the making" with vulnerabilities.⁷⁹ Nation building is more than just about building the infrastructure – it is also about community building, which is viewed as an area where the Christian community can make a profound impact with its contributions. Overall, Singapore is a secular state, yet it has a vibrantly religious society. The government takes a neutral stance on matters of religion because every major religion is represented in Singapore,

⁷⁷ Tan, "Keeping God in Place," 66.

⁷⁸ Thio Li-Ann, *Religious Pluralism and Civil Society: A Comparative Analysis*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2008), 95.

⁷⁹ Ramesh Subbaraman, "Singapore still a nation in the making," *TODAY* (Singapore), 22 January 2011.

and it recognises the contributions of religious bodies in providing social services as a positive influence in society. Contributions by churches are welcomed and encouraged in Singapore, which is not a welfare state but a meritocratic society.⁸⁰

"The government philosophy towards social welfare consistently involves private sector groups. Religious organisations therefore play an important role in delivering social services as they find a welfare niche," submits Thio.⁸¹ The state facilitates the participation of religious groups in providing social access and cooperates with them through building a legal framework or co-funding social welfare ventures.⁸² There is still a clear distinction between the two institutions – the church is not the government, and the pulpit is not parliament.⁸³ "This, however, does not imply that Christians are not responsible for the social and political life of the society to which they belong. But given the social and political realities, these responsibilities must be discharged in a particular way," affirms Woo.⁸⁴ The Methodist Church can seize the opportunity to make a difference to society as the government is compelled to consider religious beliefs in its national development agenda.

Summary Findings

This chapter covers my research question about the impact of the Methodist Church's policy frameworks on the national development of Singapore. My research methodology involves historical research in studying the Methodist Church's Social Principles in connection with nation-building efforts. A literature review shows that the church carries out its mission and serves the society amidst state controls, and the need for a new, better ethos towards influencing national development.

⁸⁰ Thio Li-Ann, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore: A Compassionate Partnership in Service of Welfare," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7, no.3 (2009b): 37-38.

⁸¹ Thio, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore," 38.

⁸² Thio, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore," 43.

⁸³ "How should Christians engage in the public square?"

⁸⁴ "How should Christians engage in the public square?"

CHAPTER 3

Social Policy of The Methodist Church in Singapore

The Singapore Pledge was written in August 1966 by the late Singapore politician, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, and refined by the late Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, before it was submitted to the Cabinet for approval.⁸⁵ The pledge was written against the backdrop of racial riots in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1969 riots were the only ones encountered in post-independence Singapore because of the spillover of an incident of violence in neighbouring Malaysia. The Singapore Pledge is an oath of allegiance to Singapore and embodies the ideals for building a united Singapore – “We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.”⁸⁶

All history should be written precisely because how else could the various peoples from distinct and disparate backgrounds live together – unless they can see themselves as one nation; and how is that possible if there is no common history? Christianity was a prominent feature in many aspects of Singapore’s pre-independence days. During the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in the Second World War between 1942 and 1945, the general attitude of the forces towards religion was one of respect and tolerance, and “Christians, on the whole, suffered no more than others”.⁸⁷ The War had confronted leaders of churches in Singapore with many harsh realities – the dependence of the mainline denominational churches on Western leadership, the lack of trained Asian pastors and the inability of the major church groups to cooperate in tackling common challenges.⁸⁸ The difficult times had also presented Christians with the challenges of fighting vices – among them, the battle against opium smoking, which was rife among the Chinese. Dr Robert Little, a medical practitioner during the mid-nineteenth century, reported that there must have been at

⁸⁵ Zhi Wei and Kartini Saparudin, “National Pledge,” National Library Board, accessed 20 April 2024, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_84_2004-12-13.html.

⁸⁶ “National pledge.”

⁸⁷ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 86.

⁸⁸ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 93.

least 15,045 opium smokers on the island, or about one-quarter of the population.⁸⁹ The Christian community spoke out against this practice from the beginning because the opium habit had made many people poor and sick.⁹⁰

In 1819, the population on the island was probably no more than 150.⁹¹ The majority of the people were Malays and *orang laut* (sea gypsies) while a handful of Chinese worked the farms growing pepper and gambier. Singapore was later established as the springboard for the expansion of British trade in the East and its trade growth quickly made it a prized colonial possession. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a representative of the British East India Company, arrived in Singapore in 1819 and brought Singapore under British control, transforming it from a fishing village into a metropolis.⁹² Peh points out the achievements of Raffles:

...not only did he planned the layout of the city, he drafted Singapore's constitution and set up a legal system, instructed the magistrates, set up everything from a Land Registry to a Post Office, from protection against fraud to licensing auctioneers, from port regulations to the minimum width of roads, he also set as the crowning piece of this his 'political child', that the port of Singapore is a free port and the trade thereof is open to all ships and vessels of every nation free of duty, equally and alike to all.⁹³

The cooperative character of the different peoples of Singapore coming together held the common aim of making money which de-emphasised communal differences and suspicions. Trade and commerce brought together Singapore's forefathers who were mainly Malays, Chinese and Indians. The cosmopolitan nature of the population in Singapore was ensured from the time that Raffles landed in Singapore, since the migrants who came brought along with them the faiths of their

⁸⁹ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 61.

⁹⁰ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 61.

⁹¹ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 12.

⁹² Heirwin Mohd Nasir, "Sir Stamford Raffles' Career and Contributions to Singapore," accessed 18 April 2024, https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_715_2004-12-15.html.

⁹³ Andrew Peh, "Of Merchants and Missions: A Historical Study of the Impact of British Colonialism on American Methodism in Singapore from 1885 to 1910" (PhD diss., Faculty of Ashbury Theological Seminary, 2009), 37.

home countries and each faith continued to develop along ethnic lines.⁹⁴ For instance, the Malays kept to their Islamic faith and the Chinese were either Buddhists or Taoists. From the early days, Christian missions to Singapore observed the multi-racial make-up of Singapore and made an effort to reach the various ethnic communities. The Christian community manifested a diversity not found in other faiths:

The Christian community is meant to be cross-cultural and multiethnic in character. It cannot be ethnocentric. This theme was first declared by God when he called Abraham to leave his home country in Mesopotamia and journey into a new land. God would not only bless him and his descendents but also, through him, “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3). From the beginning, God’s saving purpose was to be global in character.⁹⁵

Singapore as an entrepot was a centre for British imperialism and became a cosmopolitan centre of cultural transmission and production in the region. News that the British had acquired the island and were setting up a free port spread rapidly. Before long, inhabitants from older settlements like Malacca and Penang, which form a part of Malaysia today, began making their way to Singapore. Junks from as far away as China and Siam (now Thailand) brought traders and shopkeepers. From India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) came convicts to carry out public works and other labour for the plantations. Among those who came were Christians.

Peh points out that, thanks to the efforts of Raffles, “Singapore was acquired through agreements signed between 1819 and 1824 not through use of force but through wit and negotiations” and “Singapore’s better position, precisely mid-way between the Indian Ocean and the South China Seas, soon turned it into the premier Southeast Asian port in a couple of years”.⁹⁶ Thus the British presence in Singapore was very closely related to trade. In terms of religion, some of the Christian believers in China had made their way to the Nanyang or the South Seas and when they arrived in Singapore, they had gone on to contribute to the next stage in the expansion of the church – “virtually all the Chinese-speaking congregations belonging to the Anglican,

⁹⁴ The National Council of Churches of Singapore, *Many Faces, One Faith* (Singapore: 2004), 94-95.

⁹⁵ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 96-97.

⁹⁶ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 61.

Methodist and Presbyterian traditions sprang up from these immigrants”.⁹⁷ But as Peh highlights, “what the Methodist missionaries achieved in the first decade of their arrival exceeded that of the longer established denominations in Singapore” and “the speed of the binding reaction between the Methodist mission and the local population may be attributed principally to the missionary zeal of the Methodists and also the *laissez faire* British administration of the colony”.⁹⁸ In noting that Methodism was not vehemently opposed to British colonialism, Peh explains that the aspects of British administration such as the social vices of alcoholism, opium addiction and gambling and the inordinate reliance on revenue obtained from legalising such vices in the colony⁹⁹ -- that were disconcerting for Christians and particularly Methodists because those aspects impinged directly upon their social principles.

The European presence during the founding of Singapore led to missionary work in the state.¹⁰⁰ Raffles found common cause with Christianity in many areas soon after he had acquired Singapore as a British possession.¹⁰¹ He had given support to the early missionaries to set up schools as he “strongly believed that the inculcation of Christian moral principles through education would lead to an improvement of society”.¹⁰² The most significant part of the Methodist mission in Singapore was its work in the field of education. Peh notes that the colonial concern was to be economically profitable, while “the Methodist concern was for the profit of the people among whom they established their various different ministries; for spiritual nourishment, social concern, medical care and educational mission”.¹⁰³ “For the Methodists, there is a sense of co-operation whenever it was beneficial to the course of the mission. But whenever colonial policies conflicted with their goals, they often sought creative solutions.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 30.

⁹⁷ *Many Faces, One Faith*, 23.

⁹⁸ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 124.

⁹⁹ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 195.

¹⁰⁰ Tong Chee Kiong, “Religious Trends and Issues in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 28-54.

¹⁰¹ The National Council of Churches of Singapore, *Many Faces, One Faith* (Singapore: 2004), 30.

¹⁰² *Many Faces, One Faith*, 31.

¹⁰³ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 222.

¹⁰⁴ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 222.

This is pre-eminently seen in the government's emphasis on the provision of a secular education whose primary concern was the training of clerical officers proficient in English. Undaunted, the Methodists continued to plod on in their educational mission by positioning themselves as eligible for the government's grants-in-aid and yet holding on true to their call to teach the Word in season and out of season by providing religious instruction without the operation hours of the schools.¹⁰⁵

The history and growth of Christianity in Singapore covers three stages – the first, from 1819 to 1930, was one in which Christianity grew slowly. The second period, from 1900 to 1950, was a period where the "seeds of hope" were sown, as immigrants began to settle down and the temporary immigrant mentality was displaced. In the third period of "harvest time", from the 1950s to the 1980s, many new Christian denominations were established in Singapore and new congregations grew among the older denominations as well as para-church organisations.¹⁰⁶ Census data covering the period from 1980 to 1990 found a significant increase in the proportion of Christians in Singapore, drawing new members from the Chinese community and to a smaller extent, the Indian communities.¹⁰⁷ Between 1990 and 2000, Christianity as a religion continued to attract new members, but its rate of growth declined.¹⁰⁸

Singapore's history is linked to a number of churches, which have helped to impart in the people a sense of belonging to their homeland through the rich heritage of Christian service in the nation-building phases. In the post-independent period, DeBernardi traces the history of churches in Singapore and discovers that "new waves of revival originating primarily in North America had enormous impact on English-educated Christians"¹⁰⁹ while Peh notes that English is not limited to native English-speakers even though Methodism in Singapore was first established through the use

¹⁰⁵ Peh, "Of Merchants and Missions," 222.

¹⁰⁶ Tong, "Religious Trends and Issues in Singapore," 35-36.

¹⁰⁷ Tong, "Religious Trends and Issues in Singapore," 37.

¹⁰⁸ Tong, "Religious Trends and Issues in Singapore," 38.

¹⁰⁹ Jean DeBernardi, "Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 119.

of English.¹¹⁰ “The work was to grow in importance especially among the Chinese and Indian immigrants, the Malay-speaking indigenous population as well as the Straits-born Chinese,” explains Peh.¹¹¹ Shaped by American Christianity, Singaporean Christianity is mainly conservative and Evangelical. “In recent decades Singaporean Christians have founded a number of popular independent churches, including several growth-oriented mega-churches with enormous Sunday meetings that break into cell groups during the week,” observes DeBernardi.¹¹²

In 1885, American Methodism first arrived in Singapore and its missionaries, who were operating under British colonial powers, “envisioned as their primary call spreading Scriptural holiness across the lands of Singapore and Malaysia and found the means through an emphasis on ministries”.¹¹³ Peh highlights that the predominantly immigrant population, particularly the Straits Chinese, perceived and cherished the possibilities of acquiring the English language and attaining a Western education without necessarily assimilating a western culture and the Christian faith.¹¹⁴ Peh notes that the British presence in Singapore had paved the way for the subsequent arrival of the American Methodist Mission as Britain was only interested in using Singapore as a stepping-stone in forcing open trade with China.¹¹⁵ “In the grand scheme of British imperialism, Singapore was but an afterthought,” he remarks.¹¹⁶ As Peh explains:

The focus on China accounted for the lack of funding and perhaps also the lack of interest for British Methodism to establish a work in Singapore. Enamoured by the possibilities in China, British Methodism did not seize the opportunity of rooting Methodism in Singapore. The door was left ajar and was later opened by the American Methodist missionaries.¹¹⁷

The history of Singapore involves one influential man, Lee Kuan Yew, the first

¹¹⁰ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 89.

¹¹¹ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 89.

¹¹² DeBernardi, “Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia,” 120.

¹¹³ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 242.

¹¹⁴ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 242.

¹¹⁵ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 227-228.

¹¹⁶ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 228.

¹¹⁷ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 231.

Prime Minister of Singapore, who led the country for three decades. Burska shows that Lee's cabinet, which came to power after separation from Malaysia in 1965 over ideological conflict, was wary of earlier ethnic conflicts and feared the influence of communist China and the aspirations of the Malaysian leaders concerning Singapore.¹¹⁸ Therefore, they decided to impose an accelerated process of nation building and this process was facilitated by the catastrophic Cultural Revolution in China (1966-76), which cooled down the inclinations of some pro-Chinese elements in Singaporean society.¹¹⁹ Thus, from almost the very beginning of Singapore's independence, the policy of the state was shaped by the ethnic composition of the population.¹²⁰ This is why the Methodist Church has a section called 'The Sphere of Community Life' under its Social Principles to cater to promote multi-religious understanding and multi-racial harmony.

Lee took action against the sectors of the Chinese society with pro-communist sympathies and removed representatives of other options from the political arena.¹²¹ The leading People's Action Party (PAP) could be seen as imposing an authoritarian system. While encouraging the new national identity of Singaporeans, Burska explains that the government implemented many measures to cut the Huaren (people of Chinese ethnicity) from their original roots. Switzerland was brought in as an example of a country where, although the majority of the population spoke German, they did not feel any links with Germany.¹²² Similarly, it was underlined that the common language bond with China should not lead to identification with the People's Republic of China.¹²³ "It was in this spirit that the whole society was re-educated, from primary schools up to universities, with many other instruments of education being implemented, including military service or community centres and the offices of members of parliament."¹²⁴

After independence, the ruling political party became the key entity that used

¹¹⁸ Zuzanna Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy - An Analysis of Strategy in the Case of Singapore," *Asia and Pacific Studies* 4 (2007): 103.

¹¹⁹ Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

¹²⁰ Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

¹²¹ Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

¹²² Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

¹²³ Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

¹²⁴ Burska, "Melting Pot Vs. Nation Building Policy," 104.

nation-building strategies such as policies and programmes to create a sense of national identity among the largely immigrant population. The immigrants' histories and cultures had to be curtailed, and their previous attachments surrendered in order to build a shared Singapore history and destiny. In January 1991, a 'White Paper on Shared Values' comprising five core values was presented to Parliament.¹²⁵ The Shared Values are: Nation before community and society before self; Family as the basic unit of society; Community support and respect for the individual; Consensus, not conflict; and Racial and religious harmony.¹²⁶ The basis for developing this Singapore identity was to identify key common values that all racial groups and faiths could subscribe to and live by. Outside of these Shared Values, each community can practice its own values as long as they are not in conflict with national ones. The document emphasised the nation and community in three out of its five values, with an emphasis on the secularity of the state and its religious neutrality. Religious organisations should be supporters of government neutrality in matters of religion, as they should be in favour of doing everything reasonable to reduce the risk that the state will interfere with their religious institutions.

As part of the community, religious bodies are regarded as a voice of conscience to the nation. Their social involvement in production and policing of morality in Singapore is welcomed by the government. However, religious groups do not have a platform for moral regulation in the country because the secular state in Singapore does not allow religious groups to dictate, regulate or shape morality in the public sphere.¹²⁷ That is why they seek to influence morality through voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs).

Current state practice uses VWOs to offer a variety of social services, ranging from family, youth and child counselling, drug rehabilitation, and family and sexuality education. This is because VWOs are expected to perform such social services with a 'heart and passion', not merely as routine provision. A large

¹²⁵ "White Paper on Shared Values," National Archives of Singapore, accessed 5 April 2024, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/government_records/record-details/a472b486-7aea-11e7-83df-0050568939ad.

¹²⁶ "White Paper on Shared Values."

¹²⁷ Mathew Mathews, "Christianity in Singapore: The Voice of Moral Conscience to the State," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24, no. 1 (2009b): 55.

proportion of VWOs at the local level are linked with Christian based social service providers and outnumber VWOs linked to other faith groups. While the Christian based agencies do not engage in proselytisation – this is carefully enforced by both the state and public – they still manage to engage in moral regulation activities.¹²⁸

In recent years, the conservative Christian population has been concerned about the state's increased tolerance of, for instance, homosexuality and gambling. The Singapore government has always viewed traditional family values and conservative expressions of sexuality as compatible with nation building.¹²⁹ As such, the government's announcements that homosexuals would be employed in sensitive positions within the civil service and that it intended to build a casino sent shockwaves through the Christian community.¹³⁰ The reaction of Christians to the state's loosening of previously cherished moral boundaries – including the repeal of Section 377A that criminalises sex between men – can be managed within new ethos of engagement with the state as the Methodist Church become pro-active and assume a decision-making role in the socio-political arena.

Aside from being a moral beacon, Christians have also been contributing towards caring for the sick and infirm. All over the world, “Christian doctors and nurses pioneered mission outreach by introducing to the local people Western-type medical care and institutions”.¹³¹ They might have been seen as practising Western imperialism but Christians have always considered the provision of medical services as a form of social services. The ministries of evangelism and healing have gone hand in hand, with “the Christian concern for the sick firmly rooted in the life and ministry of Jesus – the Great Physician”.¹³² Christian-based contributions in Singapore have been well received partly because of the close moral fit between churches and the values

¹²⁸ Mathews, “Christianity in Singapore,” 55.

¹²⁹ Michael Hill and Lian Kwen Fee, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹³⁰ “Strengthening our inner environment”, *Methodist Message*, accessed 13 October 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/methodist-message/strengthening-our-inner-environment/>.

¹³¹ *Many Faces, One Faith*.

¹³² *Many Faces, One Faith*.

promoted by the state. The organisation structure of the Methodist Church provides the framework for the diverse areas of missions, social action and equipping, led and enabled by the Holy Spirit. Establishing not just churches, the Methodist Church has also set up a pre-school ministry, holistic schools, outreach programmes, a columbarium, a school of music, a women's society of Christian service, a social enterprise with wholly-owned subsidiaries and others. There are shortcomings even as the Methodist Church strives to be diverse and inclusive to engage in developments taking place in Singapore and in the world. It is essential for Methodists to change with time and be relevant to the current context in order to revitalise traditions as set out in its Social Principles through ways that connect with contemporary congregations and the younger generation. The Methodist Church can also be a better "partner" in terms of contribution to social development if it becomes a more influencing force through cooperation with a government agency or an official channel.

When Singapore approached independence, the Christian community – which had provided services that revolved mainly around education, medicine and institutional care for the orphaned or abandoned – took on new opportunities for service such as prison ministry, counseling service and drug rehabilitation. Churches like the Methodist Church have expanded or ameliorated their offering of social services as they face new challenges and confront new issues within the society in which they conduct their Christian mission. The Methodist Church has persevered with its ways of serving the society through continuous social contributions amidst state controls and sometimes, public misgivings.¹³³ But unlike in the past, Singaporean society today is experiencing upward economic mobility and while there are many affluent citizens, there are also emerging pockets of people who are less fortunate. As such, the Methodist Church can focus on helping the government to bridge the gap between above-average families and those who are struggling to make ends meet by providing job-matching and career-switching services. In a rapidly developing country like Singapore and amidst globalisation, the Methodist Church has to adapt its mission amidst constant changes, and to adopt a new ethos of serving modern society based

¹³³ "Singapore megachurch leaders hit a sour note in pop music fraud case", *Reuters*, accessed 13 October 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-church-idUKKCN0SF0DW20151021>.

on its rich history, present demands and future challenges. Going forward, the Methodist Church would do well to focus on elevating its services to cover new grounds such as in the medical and healthcare field for the prevention, treatment and education of conditions like heart diseases.

A nation cannot be built without education. It is a pivotal pathway to any nation-building enterprise and thus, the development of education is highly important. Hill and Lian note that “it is a potent instrument of nation building partly because it straddles the symbolic and instrumental dimensions and partly because education has the potential to transform one generation into sharing a common destiny.”¹³⁴ In multi-ethnic societies like Singapore, language policy is a critical issue. Lee submits that “schools are important sites of social and cultural reproduction but more importantly, schools in Singapore are secular institutions closely monitored by the state.”¹³⁵ In the history of both the nation building and elite formation in Singapore, the education system is an institution that has had much impact on the lives and outlook of ordinary Singaporeans and “most generations of Singaporeans living today have passed through the post-independent education system as their primary point of socialisation”.¹³⁶

The history of education in Singapore naturally involves Christians. Solomon points out that “missions to Singapore from the early days took note of the multi-racial reality of Singapore and attempts were made to reach the various ethnic communities”.¹³⁷ He adds that the church planting work was given equal emphasis as educational mission and the setting up of schools.¹³⁸ The first two schools set up in Singapore by the Methodists were the Anglo-Chinese School, which began at Amoy Street in 1886, and a Tamil girls’ school in Serangoon in 1887 that became the Methodist Girls’ School.¹³⁹ According to Peh, “the Methodist Church, which actively

¹³⁴ Hill and Lian, *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*, 4.

¹³⁵ Allen Lee, *The Advancement of Christ’s “Kingdom” in Two Cities: A Comparative Study of State-religion Relations in Singapore and Malaysia* (University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2010).

¹³⁶ Michael Barr and Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008), 112.

¹³⁷ Bishop Robert Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community” (unpublished manuscript, Singapore, 2004).

¹³⁸ Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community.”

¹³⁹ Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community.”

encouraged indigenous leadership, further lent a voice to the colonised through the provision of the necessary empowerment through education and their study drew the conclusion that Methodist education gave the Straits Chinese a sense of empowerment even though they remained subordinates in the colonial society of Singapore.”¹⁴⁰

Besides schools that are developed and administered by the government, and those that are advised and supervised by the state, DeBernardi notes that Christian-run schools like those run by the Methodist Church are regarded as being among Singapore's best primary and secondary schools.¹⁴¹ According to Goh, “the government’s attitude to mission schools in the era of educational modernisation and nation building consistently recognises the distinctively “Christian” quality of mission school education and the moral legacy they effectively impart to their students.”¹⁴²

It was the “distinctly Christian Institution” which was well-placed to “provide boys with good moral and good habits”. There was not only a recognition that this distinguished (although this stopped short of an explicit claim that this made mission schools superior) the mission school from others, but also that the Christianising element was inevitable, and an inextricable part of the mission schools’ process of moral training.¹⁴³

After national independence, governments took over the management of the earlier mission schools.¹⁴⁴

Besides education, the Methodist Church has been involved in many areas such as developing, managing and investing in social enterprises through its arm, Methodist Co-operative Society, in caring for the society.¹⁴⁵ The Methodist Co-operative Society had encountered challenges amidst the rising operational and manpower costs as well

¹⁴⁰ Peh, “Of Merchants and Missions,” 235.

¹⁴¹ DeBernardi, “Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia,” 122.

¹⁴² Robbie B. H. Goh, “Mission Schools in Singapore: Religious Harmony, Social Identities, and the Negotiation of Evangelical Cultures,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 374.

¹⁴³ Goh, “Mission Schools in Singapore,” 374.

¹⁴⁴ Yung H., “South-east Asian Protestantism to the Present Day,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism*, eds. Alister E. McGrath & Darren C. Marks (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 207.

¹⁴⁵ “Introduction,” Methodist Co-operative Society Ltd, accessed 2 September 2024, <https://www.methodistcoop.org.sg/about-mcsl>.

as lower gross margins in its social mission to serve others even as it expanded to reach more beneficiaries with affordable food catering, bereavement, medical and property services.¹⁴⁶ Another arm of the Methodist Church – the Methodist Missions Society, which acts as a catalyst and conduit for missions in the Methodist Church – “puts the notion of society into missions, in the sense of conceiving of missions as a societal business, and engaging a wider society (than merely the full-time missionaries) into that business”.¹⁴⁷ Further to that, the Bible Society of Singapore recognised the need to increase Bible literacy and it established a Scriptures Publishing Centre to provide a wide range of Christian resources and literature along with Bibles to help people better engage, understand and apply God’s Word to their lives.¹⁴⁸ All these are in accordance with the Methodist Church’s Social Principles.

Summary Findings

This chapter traces the history of Singapore since British colonialism and the history of Christianity and church growth in the country, specifically the long history of Methodism. Discussion focuses on the roles of religious organisations in relation to the state’s nation-building goals and strategies. The Methodist Church has been contributing its vast range of social services amidst state controls and government intervention in a multi-racial and multi-religious country.

¹⁴⁶ Methodist Co-operative Society Ltd, *Annual Report August 2005 – July 2006* (Singapore: Methodist Co-operative Society Ltd), 2.

¹⁴⁷ Robbie B. H. Goh, *Blessed to be a Blessing: The Methodist Missions Society Singapore* (Singapore: Methodist Missions Society, 2014), 140.

¹⁴⁸ *Sending Out God’s Light and Truth: A Pictorial History of the Bible Mission in Singapore* (Singapore: The Bible Society of Singapore, 2017), 95.

CHAPTER 4

Social Engagement and a New Ethos

Christians in Singapore have effectively used their church networks as fora for discussing issues pertaining to Christian unity and mission. The ecumenical movement has given rise to a more holistic understanding of witness, evangelism and social involvement. The Malayan Christian Council, which was established in 1948 to promote Christian unity among the churches and Christian organisations in Malaya and Singapore, was succeeded in 1961 by the Council of Churches of Malaysia and Singapore.¹⁴⁹ Later, in view of Malaysia and Singapore having separated and become independent sovereign nations, it was considered desirable to have separate Councils of Churches for each nation and, therefore, the National Council of Christian Churches was duly constituted in Singapore in July 1974 to carry on and fulfill the vision and aspirations of the founders.¹⁵⁰

The ecumenical fellowship of churches and Christian organisations in Singapore shows its impact on church development, particularly the aspect of social policy. The Methodist Church's Social Principles has a section that touches on building a world community.¹⁵¹ The church is part of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS), which is a body bringing together the major Christian denominations and churches in the country.¹⁵² Focusing on the NCCS, Harvey considers the ways in which the role and nature of ecumenical engagement in Singapore transformed as the impetus for ecclesial unity, social and political engagement shifted from a project and concern of foreign missionaries to that of Singaporean church leaders.¹⁵³ The idea of a national council of churches at a time

¹⁴⁹ "History," National Council of Churches of Singapore, accessed 30 March 2024, <http://www.nccs.org.sg/NCCS/History.html>.

¹⁵⁰ "History."

¹⁵¹ "The Methodist Social Principles," The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 1 August 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/images/mcs/pdf/methodistsg-social-principles-2020.pdf>.

¹⁵² "The Methodist Social Principles."

¹⁵³ Thomas Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected: The Demise and Rebirth of the National Council of Churches, Singapore," *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 26, no. 4 (2009): 258-268.

when no nation existed physically or ideologically in Malaya or Singapore in the past, notes Harvey, had put the 'cart before the horse'.¹⁵⁴

In 1948, the vision of a national council in Singapore and Malaysia had coincided by design with the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as both organisations were cut from the same institutional and theological fabric. Institutionally, national councils were being established in the developing world to strengthen the identity and independence of missionary-founded churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and they were to be tied into the international ecumenical movement through representation at the WCC.¹⁵⁵ Accordingly, "national councils were to end Western colonial hegemony over non-Western national churches even as the WCC would bring an end to the rancor and division of denominationalism".¹⁵⁶ By focusing on nation building, international and ecumenical unity was fostered through addressing the actual needs of various national churches.¹⁵⁷

Singapore was cut off from Malaysia in 1965 and new Singaporean leaders had to build a nation that balanced race, religion, and politics with the rise of Evangelical Christianity.¹⁵⁸ Harvey explains that on the one hand, "conservative and Evangelical Christians served as ballast against more radical Christian groups that challenged the conservative ideology of the Singapore ruling political party". The government could count on Christian support of government censorship of the media and discouragement of Western decadence as well as its crackdown on crime, drugs and corruption.¹⁵⁹ On the other hand, he points out, "the Evangelical emphasis on evangelism became annoying – zealous evangelism put religious harmony at risk and the profusion of Christian sects and denominations made it difficult for the government to manage local churches".¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁴ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 260.

¹⁵⁵ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 260.

¹⁵⁶ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 260-261.

¹⁵⁷ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 261.

¹⁵⁸ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 262-263.

¹⁵⁹ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 263.

¹⁶⁰ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 263.

Under the NCCS, the Methodist Church – “as a responsible Christian community which is also interested in the socio-economic and moral well-being of the wider society” – has been vocal on certain issues.¹⁶¹ For instance, the NCCS had spoken against the building of a casino in Singapore:

...it is desirable to hold fast to the good values and virtues which our society has nurtured and taught through the efforts of the various faith communities, associations, clans, and educational institutions, often with the support of our government's policies. Our concern is that these hard-earned values and virtues like thrift, industry, generosity, and fairness, should not be unravelled by projects or policies which could subvert them and thus impoverish our society instead of enhancing it.¹⁶²

While the NCCS has expressed concern over certain national policies, it has also voiced support, at least in part, for selected government positions.¹⁶³ Bishop Dr Robert Solomon, who was the vice-president of NCCS, remarked in May 2009:

The NCCS supports the stand of the government. The majority of Singaporeans, including Christians and people of other faiths hold to the traditional heterosexual family values that the government has promised to preserve in our society. This is important if we want to maintain harmony and confidence in our society. The government has also stated that lobbying against this position is not going to change its policy. I think the message calls for people to accept this position and not push lifestyles or values that will only cause strong reactions and disrupt the harmony in our society.¹⁶⁴

Weiss notes that the government's efforts to shift its stance toward gays and lesbians – for several reasons including manpower needs – have sparked rights claims in two directions: first, from or on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered

¹⁶¹ “Casino,” National Council of Churches of Singapore, accessed 21 June 2024, <https://nccs.org.sg/2010/12/casinos/>.

¹⁶² “Casino.”

¹⁶³ Vanessa Lim, “Religious groups support Government's move to protect definition of marriage in Constitution as it repeals 377A,” *Channel NewsAsia*, accessed 13 October 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/section-377a-repeal-gay-sex-marriage-constitution-religious-groups-reactions-2891396>.

¹⁶⁴ Solomon, “Reply to Media Query on DPM's Statement.”

Singaporeans; and second, from Christians (and to a less vocal extent, Muslims) demanding the state maintain standards of morality and family values.¹⁶⁵ Unwilling to move beyond largely symbolic gestures, and chastened by Evangelical backlash, “the government soon cut short a brief efflorescence of gay visibility and activism”.¹⁶⁶ The activism in a sense has pushed back the government’s plan not so much because the authorities fear religious opposition but they did not wish to rock the boat any further.

In asserting its position against same-sex marriage in accordance with its Social Principles, the Methodist Church is keeping abreast with developments in upholding its stance. In relation to the issue of homosexuality, Solomon argues that Christians should not be singled out, as the majority of Singaporeans, regardless of race or religion, have a common conservative view.¹⁶⁷

It is more an issue between the majority of Singaporeans and a minority with different views rather than between the church and others. More so than this is the fact that churches have been actively involved in providing community services and sharing their resources in providing for the wellbeing of our fellow citizens and nation.¹⁶⁸

As an emphasis on the majority and a common view can easily silence and marginalise other voices, the Methodist Church should be on the side of the marginalised, giving them voice, rather than associating with the dominant power base.

There are other bigger developments that have shaped Christian responses to issues. In particular, the Methodist Church has commented on news about a self-radicalised Singaporean Christian in a planned terror attack on Singapore.¹⁶⁹ Following a series of airline hijackings and suicide attacks committed by militants associated with the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda against targets in the United States, DeBernardi posits that as a result of the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, “the Singapore

¹⁶⁵ Meredith L. Weiss, “Diversity, Rights, and Rigidity in Singapore,” *North Carolina Journal of International Law and Commercial Regulation* XXXVI (2011): 638.

¹⁶⁶ Weiss, “Diversity, Rights, and Rigidity in Singapore,” 638.

¹⁶⁷ Solomon, “Reply to Media Query on DPM's Statement.”

¹⁶⁸ Solomon, “Reply to Media Query on DPM's Statement.”

¹⁶⁹ “MCS Statement on a Self-Radicalised Singaporean Christian,” The Methodist Church in Singapore, accessed 25 July 2024, <https://www.methodist.org.sg/index.php/what-s-happening/649-nccs-statement-on-a-radicalized-singaporean-christian>.

government's efforts to promote awareness of and sensitivity to issues regarding religious harmony have led many Christian leaders to become aware of the potential problems that insensitive evangelism can cause".¹⁷⁰ The impact of ecumenical efforts can be seen through the NCCS's role as an institutional bridge, providing a unified voice for the Christian community to express and engage the government on various challenges facing Singapore.¹⁷¹ At the same time, the government has a ready sounding board to voice its own concerns towards religious zealots amidst national development priorities. The NCCS has been given a new lease of life as an organisational umbrella under which the churches could join in common action.¹⁷²

In a post-colonial symbiotic relationship between the Methodist Church and the Singapore government, the church has a mission as an ambassador of reconciliation, and this requires it to take interest in the socio-political ethos of the society in which it conducts its mission. In addition, the church has the task of exhortation to intercede for the government, involving Christians to offer supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving for all, especially those in positions of power. Lee dwells on the notion of "Christians having dual citizenship as something that is not new but has been recognised as a key idea in understanding how Christians negotiate their social identity".¹⁷³ For a Christian to "balance his or her religious duty to evangelise on the one hand, and.... civic duty to preserve religious harmony on the other" is a tough act and thus, there is a corresponding need to find ways to allow Christians to evangelise while doing their part to maintain religious harmony, which is an integral part of the Singapore society.¹⁷⁴

In order to pursue their own religious agenda while avoiding the state's fury, local churches adopt an impression management strategy by presenting themselves

¹⁷⁰ Jean DeBernardi, "Global Christian Culture and the Antioch of Asia," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 137.

¹⁷¹ Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 263.

¹⁷² Harvey, "Ecumenical Engagement Resurrected," 263.

¹⁷³ Allan Lee, "The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities: A Comparative Study of State-religion Relations in Singapore and Malaysia," *University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy* (2010): 143.

¹⁷⁴ Lee, "The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities," 143.

as communities of good citizens¹⁷⁵ and employing strategies that leverage on community service to “save the city”.¹⁷⁶ However, Lee notes, “such strategies operate within the realm of the civil society and reveal little about a restricted and highly politicised space such as the school”¹⁷⁷ while Tham stresses that “religion, as it were, has to accommodate the claims of the state as a first charge”.¹⁷⁸ While religious leaders may be converted to the idea of inter-religious harmony, Tham highlights that in “their daily administrations they have to ensure that their adherents remain faithful and loyal to their chosen religious faith” and “thus, the questions of conversion, proselytisation and religious renunciation need to be addressed”.¹⁷⁹ He comments that it is “the laws of the state which now provide the sacred canopy of religious influences and impulses under which society functions and religion operates” – religious organisations, therefore, have to take into account the wishes of the state and toe the line in national policy matters.¹⁸⁰

Religious groups have clashed with the Singapore government in the past. In 1972, for instance, the Jehovah's Witness sect was made unlawful because of its moral objections to military service, which is compulsory for most males in Singapore. In 1987, several activists and clergy connected with the Catholic Church were arrested over an alleged Marxist coup plot. The government subsequently instituted religious harmony laws in the early 1990s that made it illegal to incite religious hatred or use religious activities for political purpose. Large churches have also come into conflict with the government over their expansion plans. The government sought to curb such enterprise by restricting the religious use of commercial property. There are fears of a public backlash as a result of churches investing in properties and stamping a Christian identity on these spaces. Other fault lines include gambling and homosexuality, in

¹⁷⁵ Mathew Mathews, “Accommodation Relationships: The Church and State in Singapore,” in *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, eds. Julius Bautista and Francis K. G. Lim (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009a), 184-200.

¹⁷⁶ Mathew Mathews, “Saving the City through Good Works: Christian Involvement in Social Services,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008b), 524-553.

¹⁷⁷ Lee, “The Advancement of Christ's “Kingdom” in Two Cities,” 145.

¹⁷⁸ Tham Seong Chee, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 22.

¹⁷⁹ Tham, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” 22.

¹⁸⁰ Tham, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” 25.

which gay-rights groups have said they believe Singapore is drifting toward a more lenient view of homosexuality and Christian groups have rejected that.¹⁸¹

In Singapore, the policy and governance affecting religion also impact matters of race to a certain extent as both are often very closely intertwined.¹⁸² “Within this climate of the conflation of racial and religious identities, close racial-religious governance, and the emphasis of the boundaries and definitions between religions under the aegis of religious harmony, Christianity in Singapore occupies a peculiar position,” observes Goh.¹⁸³ He discusses this at two levels – the ideological/doctrinal, to do with Christianity's Evangelical monotheism; and the structural/cultural, to do with Christianity's origins, affiliations and institutional forms and processes.¹⁸⁴ He argues that “Christianity in Singapore could be seen as readily submitting to state-imposed constraints in order not only to establish flourishing areas of ministry in Singapore, but also to do so in ways that insert them into a re-invented role within core national values”.¹⁸⁵ Christianity preserves its Evangelical identity while taking part in secular activities, but churches in the country still remain under the state's control and they are without much power to influence society.

Religion is not a problem that needs to be managed by a higher authority or any policy. Instead, according to Poon, “it is the basis on which a society can draw on the life experience and wisdom tradition of all peoples toward building an ordered society that expresses truth, justice and love in tangible ways”.¹⁸⁶ Methodists can help change lives and empower communities — helping vulnerable families to improve their self-esteem and wellbeing through social care, for instance. The Methodist Welfare Services has been supporting disadvantaged and distressed families and the organisation can do more through greater partnership with government agencies in

¹⁸¹ Melody Zaccheus, “Church groups says they do not support repeal of 377A,” *Straits Times* (Singapore), 14 September 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/national-council-of-churches-of-singapore-says-it-does-not-support-repeal-of-377a>.

¹⁸² Robbie B. H. Goh, “Christian Identities in Singapore: Religion, Race and Culture between State Controls and Transnational Flows,” *Journal of Cultural Geography* 26, no. 1 (2009): 1-23.

¹⁸³ Goh, “Christian Identities in Singapore,” 1-23.

¹⁸⁴ Goh, “Christian Identities in Singapore,” 1-23.

¹⁸⁵ Goh, “Christian Identities in Singapore,” 1-23.

¹⁸⁶ Poon, “Introduction,” 14.

post-Covid-19 pandemic times. As Singapore sees an increasing number of foreign workers on its soil, the Methodist Church can also help Singaporeans to match its great reliance on them with their attitude and treatment of these workers, some of whom have to endure poor living conditions in dormitories. There is an opportunity to model a different way for the society to show hospitality to the very people who make Singapore's progress possible.

Singapore has to manage a post-pandemic economic recovery amidst challenges such as cost-of-living pressures as it strives to reinvent itself to maintain its place in the world.¹⁸⁷ According to D Cunha, "Managing these social and cultural changes would involve giving greater participation to the populace, in order to nurture a sense of identity and commitment, which, in turn, would help to strengthen social and civic institutions and, thereby, assist in nation building."¹⁸⁸ As Singapore modernises, "the government began to seriously tackle problems relating to the rapidly changing value systems and the influence of new lifestyles as many of these changes are considered intolerably harmful to the city-state's national aspirations and development goals".¹⁸⁹

Any new ethos by the Methodist Church needs to have relevance in twenty-first century Singapore in order to reach out to society. While the church's Social Principles are based on the Methodist tradition, its reaction to issues in society needs to go beyond acknowledging issues of concern and more than just denouncing certain matters such as surrogacy. The act of accepting and supporting wealth acquisition, for instance, will require asserting influence against the exploitation of cheap labour and encouraging the use of sustainable resources. In the provision of healthcare, for example, the Methodist Church can do much more than just affirming the government's medical resources and advising the masses against leading an unhealthy lifestyle. The church can consider setting up its own low-cost hospital that caters to poor patients. In addition, besides stating that it does not subscribe to any form of gambling as a

¹⁸⁷ Derek da Cunha, *Singapore in the New Millennium: Challenges Facing the City-State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 200.

¹⁸⁸ Da Cunha, *Singapore in the New Millennium*, 200.

¹⁸⁹ Da Cunha, *Singapore in the New Millennium*, 200.

menace to society, the Methodist can also conduct anti-gambling campaigns that impact the public directly.

Through altering its approach to public policies, the Methodist Church might realise that preserving societal morality has given way to protecting individual conscience — a signal of the waning support for conservative Christian views on gay rights, as opposed to the right to religious freedom. Methodism can operate under new conditions in new spaces, not to be an empire church or celebrate its own accomplishments but to cast a wider net in reaching the needy in society such as helping broken families to be whole again. Tham points out that in religious and cultural matters, “Singapore has very much left the management of both to their respective adherents except on issues of state interest”.¹⁹⁰ What the state has done is to ensure that “no religious groups are involved in politics” and that “religious organisations not stray beyond the bounds of educational, social and charitable work”.¹⁹¹ While one of the basic rules of governance in Singapore is to keep the state secular, political observers have said that race and religion could never be truly separated from Singapore's political structure.

The Methodist Church has a legitimate role in the formulation of the national ethos, but it has to be anchored within Singapore's constitutional foundations and historical background, informing the state while balancing its Christian missions that include evangelism. In an age of modernity and globalisation, the persistence of religious ideas, practices and institutions remains a key feature of local and global politics.¹⁹² “Whether religion has a legitimate role in public policy will continue to be a pressing matter, as issues of social morality continue to emerge,” Thio comments, adding that “this would give rise to tensions between religious organisations and their members who want their views to count and those with competing agendas”.¹⁹³ The chief issue is how the state should relate to religion, whether the sacred and secular

¹⁹⁰ Tham, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” 17.

¹⁹¹ Tham, “Religious Influences and Impulses Impacting Singapore,” 17.

¹⁹² Thio Li-ann, “Religion in the Public Sphere of Singapore: Wall of Division or Public Square?” in *Religious Pluralism and Civil Society: A Comparative Analysis*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2008), 97.

¹⁹³ Thio, “Religion in the Public Sphere of Singapore,” 97.

should exist in exclusive jurisdictions divided by a “wall of separation”, or whether a post-modern architectural metaphor like the “public square” is more apt, as this connotes the public spaces in national life.¹⁹⁴

The people’s attention is directed to their shared spaces and common lives in the public square to make things work socially. “Engagement is part of the process of maintaining peace, while alienation of religious communities from public life is divisive and undermines the nurturing of a shared citizenship,” Thio propounds.¹⁹⁵ As part of its new ethos, the Methodist Church can help communities thrive in the public square, tackling social issues ranging from high costs of living and climate change to racial harmony and cultural cohesion. The new ethos should aim to make a lasting impact so that people, places and communities have renewed opportunities to flourish. The government, policymakers and business owners are not the only ones that are able to change the status quo. As a strong organisation, the Methodist Church has the means to re-examine public policies with the goal of changing prejudices, practices and programmes. For example, while Methodists hold on to their position that a marriage is between a man and a woman, it should respect the dignity of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community.

In a rapidly changing global village that presents an increasingly sophisticated array of issues, *The Methodist Message*, the magazine of the Methodist Church, has stated concerns that Methodists might forget their rich Wesleyan heritage and are not kept abreast of developments in world Methodism.¹⁹⁶ Central to the overall Methodist mission is the need to embrace a worldview shaped by the Word — a worldview that is thoroughly biblical as well as forward-looking for the twenty-first century and beyond.¹⁹⁷

At this critical turning point of Methodist history, we need to paint the landscape

¹⁹⁴ Thio, “Religion in the Public Sphere of Singapore,” 98.

¹⁹⁵ Thio, “Religion in the Public Sphere of Singapore,” 98.

¹⁹⁶ The Methodist Church, *2000 Official Journal, General Conference, Seventh Session 25-29 September 2000 & 6-8 December 2000* (Singapore: The Methodist Church in Singapore), 118.

¹⁹⁷ Bill T. Arnold, “Embracing A World View Shaped by The Word,” in *The Next Methodism: Theological, Social, and Missional Foundations for Global Methodism*, eds. Kenneth J. Collins and Ryan N. Danker (Tennessee: Seedbed Publishing, 2021), 94.

of the Bible's worldview in broad strokes and vivid colors, so that we might ourselves be formed by its vision, informed by its truth, and transformed by its gracious potential. Only then will the next Methodism be up to the task of offering a glimpse through a window-like worldview into the blessed reality made possible by the grace of God.¹⁹⁸

“What went wrong in the old Methodism is precisely what has gone wrong every time the church has veered from its central mission. The old Methodism got lost in a non-biblical worldview,” argues Arnold.¹⁹⁹ The Methodist Church’s Social Policy is “rooted in the teachings of the Bible and guided by Christian tradition” but its brush with humanism threatens to relocate its fundamental tenets into the ideas of individualism and progress, which are now under the control of man rather than God. There is a need for Christian convictions to increasingly shape its participation in culture by offering a new way of thinking, seeing and doing in its social creed, instead of letting culture shape its policy. As a community of believers, the church is made up of individuals who should cultivate and practise virtues of the Christian faith that not only guide the country’s moral vision but also contribute significant prosperity to the people.

Summary Findings

The Methodist Church is part of the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) and this connection serves as an avenue for Methodists to deal with the government and help to carry out the objectives of its Social Principles in serving the society. As the Methodist Church confronts the constraints imposed on religious groups by the government, it needs to come up with new ethos in being a more influential force in reaching out to society in a rapidly changing world.

¹⁹⁸ Arnold, “Embracing A World View Shaped By The Word,” 94-95.

¹⁹⁹ Arnold, “Embracing A World View Shaped By The Word,” 101.

CHAPTER 5

Methodism and Politics

For most of Singapore's short national history, the government viewed Christianity as a good influence in establishing a moral climate that lends to the overall prosperity of society. However, that view has begun to shift as key political and cultural leaders argued that prudish mores hinder economic prosperity. They have envisioned Singapore to be a dynamic city attracting creative thinkers that in turn would attract more foreign investment. Such creative thinkers, they said, would not be drawn to Singapore unless the city transforms into a more vibrant place. Are religious traditions impeding the flow of national progress in an increasingly competitive environment? How then should Christianity adapt to changing times in helping to shape the journey of nationhood? Scholars advocate that the church actively contributes in discussions and proactively makes recommendations amidst the evolving climate of public discourse and consensus building.

Perhaps no issue has marked the turn of the Christian millennium more deeply than the relation of religion to politics. What is the place of religion in politics? As Safran points out, it is a reflection of the extent of free choice of expression and the matrix around which a national culture and identity develop.²⁰⁰ Many generations ago, religion and politics were inseparable; indeed, the state was, more often than not, a secular manifestation of the dominant faith. Many rulers of antiquity have argued that they derived their authority and legitimacy from God, not from the people they ruled, and justified their absolute power on the basis of their divine right to rule. The Jewish nation and, subsequently, the Jewish state, were based on a contract with God, made through Moses, that committed them to obey revealed law; similarly, the Greek state's security and prosperity depended upon the grace of the various gods.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ William Safran, "Introduction," in *The Secular and the Sacred: Nation, Religion and Politics*, ed. William Safran (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 1.

²⁰¹ Safran, "Introduction," 1.

Singapore is a secular state, yet it has a vibrantly religious society. The government practises a model of secularism that is limited and accommodationist. The government maintains a neutral position on matters of religion – it does not act as arbiter on religious orthodoxy – which is an important principle because every major religion is represented in Singapore. The government has recognised the contributions of religious bodies to promoting social welfare by providing social services as a positive factor in society.

Local churches' contributions are welcomed and encouraged because Singapore is not a welfare state. Singapore is a meritocratic society, where government policies emphasise rationality and economic efficiency, such that redistribution of wealth is not an economic policy imperative, given the primacy accorded to strong economic growth, equality of opportunity, individual self-reliance and charitable virtues.²⁰² "The government philosophy towards social welfare consistently involves private sector groups. Religious organisations therefore play an important role in delivering social services as they find a welfare niche," submits Thio.²⁰³ She comments that the state affirms the role of religion in modern public life by facilitating the participation of religious groups in providing social access and cooperating with them through building a legal framework or co-funding social welfare ventures.²⁰⁴ This, she adds, promotes the civic virtues of charity and volunteerism, which transcend ethnic boundaries, as well as bolsters the social capital of trust – which is a crucial component of the unwritten constitution in promoting social harmony, safeguarding human dignity, and focusing attention on what serves the common good.²⁰⁵ However, religious groups are discouraged from being involved in political causes such as endorsing political parties, given religion's mobilising power.

In a survey of church-going Protestants including the Methodists in Singapore, Chong and Foong focus on the phenomenal growth of the megachurch and find that while megachurch respondents are as likely as respondents from mainline and

²⁰² Thio Li-ann, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore: A Compassionate Partnership in Service of Welfare," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7, no.3 (2009b): 37-38.

²⁰³ Thio, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore," 38.

²⁰⁴ Thio, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore," 43.

²⁰⁵ Thio, "The Cooperation of Religion and State in Singapore," 43.

independent churches to allow their Christian values to influence their views on public policies, they are less likely to view the moral character of public policy in Singapore with concern, and are also less likely to support intervening in public policy matters through the public sphere.²⁰⁶ The Methodist Church can go further in negotiating a greater role of imparting religious perspectives to shape public policy. A growing Christian population in Singapore may warrant an entry into the arena of civil society to fulfill a clarion call to be moral beacons amidst the demands of globalisation that has forced the government to become more tolerant of liberal lifestyle values. Moral conservatives would face the challenge from liberals and progressives who are also seeking to sway public discourse and policy decisions.

The separation between secular politics and religious traditions is seen as an unnatural condition of modernity.²⁰⁷ As Goh argues, “the separation is merely a punctuated, meandering, changing, and well-traversed frontline in a discursive struggle fought in the terrain of the post-colonial public sphere over the defining telos of the nation and ethos of the state”.²⁰⁸ It is a struggle that seems to have no end, only ceasefires, he contends.²⁰⁹ The Singapore government's position on the relationship between religion and politics is delineated in the MRHWP, which was published as the precursor to the MRHA. The MRHWP, concurs Chia, provides a balanced and helpful guide to the relationship between religion and politics in a pluralistic democracy.²¹⁰ The MRHWP proposes the rigorous separation of religion and politics as a means to ensure the peaceful co-existence of the different faith communities in Singapore. The document cautions religious leaders or members of religious groups against using religion to promote a particular political party or cause. It also prohibits politicians from using the church, mosque or temple to mobilise support for their political campaigns. The document further advises religious leaders to express their views cautiously.

²⁰⁶ Terence Chong and Hui Yew-Foong, *Different Under God: A Survey of Church-going Protestants in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013), 13-14.

²⁰⁷ Daniel P. S. Goh, “State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore,” *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 25, no.1 (2010).

²⁰⁸ Goh, “State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore,” 85-86.

²⁰⁹ Goh, “State and Social Christianity in Post-Colonial Singapore,” 86.

²¹⁰ Roland Chia, “Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore,” ETHOS Institute for Public Christianity, accessed 1 December 2024, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/preserving-religious-peace-in-multi-religious-singapore/>.

Archbishops, muftis, abbots and pastors should not use their religious authority to mobilise opposition against the government and its policies.

Paragraph 22 expresses the essence of the MRHWP when it states that “Members of religious groups may, of course, participate in the democratic political process as individual citizens. They may campaign for or against the government or any political party. But they must not do so as leaders of their religious constituency.”²¹¹ The document states that the model of the relationship between religion and politics it proposes is “a matter of convention” and that in reality no such separation is possible – “It is neither possible nor desirable to compartmentalise completely the minds of voters into secular and religious halves, and ensure that only the secular mind influences his voting behaviour”.²¹²

"The model presented by the MRHWP is consistent with the doctrine of the separation of church and state which acknowledges that God has given each institution its specific role to play in society," remarks Chia.²¹³ This understanding is based on Romans 13, which teaches that the state has divine sanction to punish evildoers and maintain civic order in society. Romans 13:1 reads: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (KJV). Paul is teaching that Christians must still submit to the government despite its ungodliness. However, some Christians reject this teaching, believing that those who fully submit to God are of a different Kingdom and are not subject to earthly government in any way. Christians do not have to blindly agree with all that the government does but rather, in a democratic republic like Singapore, they should have an opportunity express their opinions on matters of governing as well as to participate in the governmental process.

The church is called to be God's prophetic witness in the world, Chia asserts.²¹⁴ A clear distinction between the two institutions is therefore underscored – the church

²¹¹ “Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore.”

²¹² “Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore.”

²¹³ “Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore.”

²¹⁴ “Preserving religious peace in multi-religious Singapore.”

is not the government, and the pulpit is not parliament. "This, however, does not imply that Christians are not responsible for the social and political life of the society to which they belong. But given the social and political realities, these responsibilities must be discharged in a particular way," affirms Chia. The MRHWP, he submits, provides a balanced and helpful guide to the relationship between religion and politics in a pluralistic democracy like Singapore. "Thus, although clarifications on some points must indeed be sought and nuances explored, Christians in my view should have no difficulties endorsing the broad principles enshrined in it," argues Chia. Religion is confined to the private space in Singapore. In what way can the Methodist Church make a difference to the political life of society as more Singaporeans want the government to consider religious beliefs when making policy?

The Methodist Church can contribute to the political life of society by advancing justice and promoting the common good. But in order to do so, the church must sometimes question the established order and refuse to endorse or sanctify policies and traditions that are not in harmony with God's will. These are all aspects of the prophetic role of Christians in society – it must reject the temptation to show favour to any particular socio-economic class; it must be free from the fetters of any given culture and the prevailing norms and conventions of society. Tan points out that religious understanding and appreciation are of utmost importance in multireligious Singapore, warning that it is increasingly difficult for Singaporeans to confine religion to the private space in a rapidly changing world.²¹⁵

Every Christian citizen who lives in a democracy has at the very least a minimal obligation to be well-informed and to vote for candidates and policies that are most consistent with biblical principles, proffers Grudem.²¹⁶ "The opportunity to help select the kind of government we will have is a stewardship that God entrusts to citizens in a democracy, a stewardship that we should not neglect or fail to appreciate," he submits.

²¹⁵ Charlene Tan, "From Moral Values to Citizenship Education: The Teaching of Religion in Singapore Schools," in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Ah Eng Lai (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 335.

²¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, Wayne, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 2010).

This means that Christians are responsible to learn enough about important issues to be able to vote intelligently. Grudem comments:

...Christians should also seriously consider whether God is calling them to do more – perhaps to sacrifice a significant portion of their time, effort, or money to help influence the government of the nation for good. I think Christians should support the candidate who best represents moral and political values consistent with biblical teaching, no matter what his or her religious background or convictions.²¹⁷

Christians play an indirect role in being involved in politics by voting at national and local elections. The Methodist Church has the resources to influence Singapore's political climate and the kind of stand that they make at the ballot boxes. The Methodists can seek political participation and representation as they unite to challenge the government's separation of religion and the state. The PAP government has been in power since 1965. It is vital to highlight that many of those who voted for the PAP in the 2011 polls are from the 'baby boomer' generation, a bumper crop of babies born between 1945 and 1964 who came of age in the nation-building years of independent Singapore.²¹⁸ The baby boomers grew up with Lee Kuan Yew as the prime minister, and participated in the transformation of Singapore from Third World to First. Election after election, a majority consistently voted for the PAP. Due to the heterogeneous character of Singapore, issues relating to race and religion are among election hot buttons. "There is always the real risk of inter-ethnic tension boiling over as different ethnic groups live in close quarters," observes Singh.²¹⁹ However, the 2011 general election campaign was largely devoid of any major issue relating to race and religion, he observes.²²⁰ Out of 24 new candidates introduced by the PAP prior to the 2011 general election, 50 per cent of them declared themselves to be Christian or

²¹⁷ Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*.

²¹⁸ Cai Haoxiang, "General Election 2011: Who are the voters?" The Straits Times, accessed 5 May 2024, https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/st_general-election-2011-who-are-the-voters_020411.pdf?sfvrsn=ab88710a_2.

²¹⁹ Bilveer Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore: An Introduction* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill Education (Asia), 2012), 217.

²²⁰ Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 222.

Catholic. Christian voters in Singapore might cast their ballots differently if there exists a Christian political party in the country.

In the 2011 general election, the Internet proved to be an important rallying point for socio-political campaigns for the opposition parties and for members of the public to air their views.²²¹ The elections were different from others in the past in terms of the pervasive use of the new media – with blogs, Twitter, Facebook, The Online Citizen and Temasek Review representing a very powerful alternative to the largely state-controlled mainstream media.²²² Within a multi-cultural, multi-religious, “wired” society such as Singapore, Kluver points out that the use of the Internet for religious purposes has potentially important implications for inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, policy making and education.²²³ He finds that the main purpose of a website for most religious organisations was information dissemination about their organisations and their religious faiths, as well as keeping the community informed of activities organised by their institutions.²²⁴ “Several, especially Protestant Christians, believed that their websites had helped draw attention to their places of worship to an international audience, and had attracted foreigners and tourists,” he adds.²²⁵

Kluver also finds that most Singaporeans and Singaporean religious leaders would support somewhat more stringent monitoring and oversight of the Internet where religious issues are involved.²²⁶ However, his survey could not ascertain if the government should take on that role. Singapore's regulatory code governing the Internet states that information which may be potentially damaging to religious and racial harmony is specifically banned from being published on-line, as it is off-line. While it is necessary to have some form of censorship or control over religious material available on-line to avoid any misrepresentation of religions, the Methodist Church should make use of the Internet to do more than teach about its faith, encourage

²²¹ Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 218.

²²² Singh, *Politics and Governance in Singapore*, 235.

²²³ Randolph Kluver, “The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 435.

²²⁴ Kluver, “The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore,” 449.

²²⁵ Kluver, “The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore,” 450.

²²⁶ Kluver, “The Internet and Religious Harmony in Singapore,” 452.

believers as well as advertise goods and services relating to Christianity. The church can also utilise the Internet, for example, to gather their members' feedback about nation-building matters and post it on social networking sites, or to publish their own information in response to government projects or socio-economic issues that affect the community.

Instead of standing apart from the political process, the Methodist Church can be at the centre of a political community and not on the periphery. During election campaigns, a group of politically savvy Methodists could have pressured the Singapore government to make policy changes for the betterment of society or mount campaigns to advocate causes. For example, a moral concern for many people is in the area of film censorship. Christians in Singapore can stand four-square with the government in its fight against morally debilitating forces by drawing on the technological advances in their witness for the Gospel and their desire to live as God's people in a world that is rapidly changing. Is politics an area where Christians can also serve the people and contribute to national development? If we look at Jesus Christ, we will see that in His day, He had challenged the Roman Empire – the world's most powerful government at that time – by announcing that the Kingdom of God is the new government. The official religion of the day was Emperor worship but Jesus stated that God, and not Caesar (the Emperor), had all the authority in heaven and earth. Jesus did not tell His disciples to get involved in politics because Rome was not a democratic country.

Christians in Singapore have already established plenty of missions including orphanages, schools and hospitals. Methodist Church leaders can accomplish more by running for office in order to place themselves in positions of authority to conduct greater work for the society. As a Christian political party generally seeks to apply Christian principles to public policy, the most ostensible cause for the setting up of such a party could be attributed to a reaction against prevailing policies by the government. But if the application of Christian principles in policy debates go against the Singapore government's pragmatism, it would be difficult for the Christian political party to convince certain voters. The success lies in the formation of such a party that will not be considered an opposition to the PAP government. While it will face

challenges from the political establishment as well as the Christian community itself and the electorate who are largely non-Christian, the Methodist Church will leverage on its legacy to transform its scope and extent of contributions towards the nation and beyond.

On an extended front, Singapore maintains diplomatic relations with many countries and is cognisant of the need to not make military power the basis of its foreign policy. In accordance with its stance on maintaining friendly relations with other countries, Singapore advocates non-coercive power projection and leverages on its historical associations with Christianity in diplomacy. Christianity's potential utility in foreign policy is derived to a large extent from the manner in which the faith has been around way before Singapore achieved independence from the British in 1963.

Since the early days of Christian missionary activity in the country, Christians have gone on to be influenced by new waves of revival. The revival had a decidedly internationalist outlook, and focused on crossing extant sectarian and geographical boundaries. The expansion and influence of local churches have produced important outcomes in society and impacted the process of nation building. It is the missionary movement that had helped the formation of many national Christian councils at an early stage. The growing network of churches under the National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS) has given the country significance as the regional headquarters of many international Christian associations, which follow their secular counterparts in choosing Singapore for its stability, strategic location and religious tolerance.

Churches and Christian organisations practise restricted and guarded involvement in the state affairs of Singapore, amidst the government's management of and control over religious actions in the country. Singapore regulates religion or religious groups in order to ensure economic development and social stability as well as to render them complementary to wider national interests. However, it is arguable whether the Methodist Church can exercise their influence by extending the notion of soft power as an accountability mechanism. It is known that religious soft power has been characterised as either denying or reinforcing the legitimacy of the world system

by either repudiating or affirming the foundational norms, values, and institutions on which it is based.²²⁷

The established transnational network for Christianity and the vital role played by the faith in the lives of millions across the world, is what gives it potential for Singapore's foreign policy. The strong presence and importance of the religion in the region, coupled with its image as a peaceful religion makes it ideal for soft power diplomacy. The Methodist Church has the ability to influence national development efforts through evolving new ethos as an effective mode. In pushing through government-enforced barriers, the church should observe socio-political ethos of the society in which it conducts its mission, rather than just focusing on biblical principles in running its ministry.

Local religious actors might have the resources to influence foreign policy and international relations by convincing the government to implement programmes and projects that favour their values, norms and beliefs. They may also seek to build transnational networks to further their goals. Soft power — that which produces outcomes through argumentative, spiritual persuasion and co-optation through ideas²²⁸ — can be employed by churches and Christian organisations to demonstrate a political concern for various issues. This might go a long way in strengthening Singapore's relations with other countries, and helping it further down the path of its regional and global power ambitions.

It is worth advocating that the Methodist Church use soft power to influence foreign policy by encouraging policymakers to incorporate religious beliefs, norms and values into specific foreign policies, with the result that its foreign policy takes on religious characteristics. Methodists, who form one of the major religious populations

²²⁷ Thomas Banchoff, *Religious pluralism, globalization, and world politics* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Jonathan Fox, "Integrating religion into international relations theory," in *Routledge handbook of religion and politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and foreign policy," in *Routledge handbook of religion and politics*, ed. Jeffrey Haynes (New York: Routledge, 2009).

²²⁸ Joseph S. Jr. Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Public Affairs, 2004).

in Singapore, have a responsibility to shape the social and political realities of the nation. The contention centres on whether both religious actors and secular institutions can submit to certain rules of constructive engagement so that they can complement each other in pursuit of national interests and objectives.

The Methodist Church is compelled to put the nation's interests and well-being above its own evangelistic responsibilities and mission priorities in such a racially diverse society. While the church's role is religious in the first place, it should also function more effectively in helping to regulate the affairs of the community in Singapore. The ministry of the church carries various social implications and influence on society that depends on the confines and potential of its participation.

The Methodist Church could strengthen their standing in society by complementing as well as challenging the government's development efforts through the application of appropriate social-political ethos, which is the code of values that are founded on moral and ethical as well as on spiritual premises. The church could play a greater role in matching the government's efforts in nation building on homeground and beyond – of which the ways include fostering closer ties with the grassroots peoples, understanding their problems, and seeking solutions for them. The Methodists could be engaged in peaceful religious activism under certain circumstances that may call for that.

Summary Findings

I draw reference to the work of foremost historian of American Methodism, Russell Richey, who provides a good understanding of the potentials and limitations of denominations.²²⁹ His essays discuss how much denominations and denominationalism have changed, how resilient they have proven to be, how significant these structures of religious belonging have been in providing order and direction to the American society.²³⁰

²²⁹ Russell E. Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained* (United States: Cascade Books, 2013).

²³⁰ Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained*.

In finding new structural expression and institutional bearing, I would echo Richey's work in my own research on Singapore Methodism that the past obsession of Methodism has ceased to be evangelism and become missions and education at the local level.²³¹ However, denominational Christianity does not have to be doomed and it can transition into a new chapter in its history to involve a soft power approach towards influencing government policies.²³² It does not have to be a grim situation for the Methodist Church in Singapore as it can transform its workings to focus on applying soft power approach towards helping to steer government policies.

The denomination, according to Richey, is a "creature of modernity, a social form emerging with and closely akin to the political party, the free press, and free enterprise".²³³ In Singapore, the Methodist Church might find a new purpose and overcome any decline by engaging in policy formulation with the government on matters including justice, corruption prevention, healthcare, safety and security, and whatever else that is morally important. The future vitality of the Methodist Church can be built through exercising religious soft power in dealing with national and even global issues such as migration, climate change and social inequality.

²³¹ Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained*.

²³² Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained*.

²³³ Richey, *Denominationalism Illustrated and Explained*, 956-957.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the Christian community enjoys freedom of worship and the comforts of life, there is an increasing tendency towards a faith that is individualistic and disengaged from societal needs. As Christianity in Singapore progressively matures, the Methodist Church is poised to revise its policy and refine its mechanism towards engaging society and contributing to national development. The Methodist Church is known as a denomination involved with people's lives, despite a shift away from its original concern with problems such as alcohol and gambling towards current broader matters of social and economic justice as well as any other matters that concern people's lives. Taken together with issues such as abortion and homosexuality, this shift indicates a focus on engaging more with society and in a political manner. Its social principles, which have been revised to take into consideration new issues and developments over the years, need to be further revised to optimise its contribution in areas such as social movements of the new era.

“Methodists have adapted to their surrounding culture, merging their attitudes with the common assumptions of their societies” and “they have repeatedly proved a creative element in the societies they have inhabited, adapting existing forms of behaviour and establishing entirely novel ones”.²³⁴ Given the link between social and political matters, the Methodist Church is on a threshold to evolve a new ethos as guidance for its members about the interaction of church and politics. This will enable and equip them to exert a strong ethical influence upon the state, supporting policies and programmes deemed to be just, and opposing policies and programmes that are unjust. The Methodists, in the cause of advocacy and activism, may seek to do so in a manner that does not demean others but promotes civil discourse, even if detractors fail to behave in an equally civil manner.

²³⁴ David W. Bebbington, “Methodism and Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 731.

Most works on religion in Singapore have dealt with its importance as “cultural ballast”, exercising a huge amount of influence on Singaporeans.²³⁵ In general, its recognisable roles are as a “constructive force in nation-building,” due to its “innate ability” to “inculcate good citizenship”, and as a “moral anchor” in society.²³⁶ Religions are seldom the cause of conflict but using religion as a tool for political mileage often ends in conflict and violence. Christians have increasingly engaged in debates over issues of public morality. Chong highlights that in Singapore, “evangelicals were less concerned with issues like poverty or social injustice because they were part of the new middle class who were reaping the benefits of global capital and the status quo”.²³⁷

Two decades of strong economic growth had made poverty and human suffering less obvious and thus these became less of a spiritual priority. Instead, many turned their spiritual attention and energies towards public morality issues which centred on the social consequences of becoming an affluent and ‘westernised’ city.²³⁸

Religion is a powerful tool and the church itself is a political entity, a community of people sharing a common life with a distinctive form determined by a distinctive ethos. A church as established as the Methodist Church in a highly developed country like Singapore has the potential to engage politics in furthering its ethos. Solomon points out that the church is one place where people of different races and religions have lived and worked together.²³⁹ The church is a multi-racial community and therefore the ideas of racial harmony and a multi-racial society are not foreign to Christians. Missionaries in Singapore had encountered various nationalities of different races and ever since then, the church has contributed to racial harmony and thus the development of Singapore.²⁴⁰ According to Solomon, “the church’s habit of reaching out to people of all races and religions with the Gospel as well as providing education

²³⁵ Allan Lee, *The Advancement of Christ’s “Kingdom” in Two Cities: A Comparative Study of State-religion Relations in Singapore and Malaysia* (University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2010).

²³⁶ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ’s “Kingdom” in Two Cities*, 144-145.

²³⁷ Terence Chong, “Christian Evangelicals and Public Morality in Singapore,” *ISEAS Perspective* 7 (2014): 7.

²³⁸ Chong, “Christian Evangelicals and Public Morality in Singapore,” 7.

²³⁹ Bishop Robert Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community” (unpublished manuscript, Singapore, 2004).

²⁴⁰ Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community.”

plus acts of mercy and compassion through its institutions and ministries must continue in the constructive way that has existed thus far” – at a time when there is an increasing need for racial and religious harmony in Singapore.²⁴¹ The Methodist Church’s new ethos would have to uphold and safeguard racial and religious harmony in the country as this component is a heavyweight issue for the government. Therefore, the church’s involvement in promoting cooperation among the races will augur well for several reasons including for its ethos.

Singapore has enjoyed racial and religious harmony since its independence in 1965 – with tremendous care, effort and pre-emptive prudence invested in nurturing Singapore’s multi-racial framework.²⁴² Singapore has seen rapid urbanisation and modernisation and despite this, Tan argues, the country has not become more secular.²⁴³ “Instead, there is now a belated but growing religious sector within Singaporean civil society that seeks to participate in the public policy discourse, and which draws on their individual religious value systems to inform their choices in the public realm,” he adds.²⁴⁴ The Internet and other modes of communication have made the transnational element of religion more visible and the management of religion more challenging, as the government has thus spared no effort in seeking to strengthen Singapore’s social cohesion and ensuring that good sense religious harmony prevail and are enhanced.²⁴⁵

In Singapore, a centralised state exercises greater control over political space and closely manages the implementation of policies, hence religions have been politicised and have to abide by these rules.²⁴⁶ Lee propounds that how a religious group adapts and presents itself depends on how politicised it is – “the more politicised religion is in society, the more the organisation has to be seen as secular in order to

²⁴¹ Solomon, “The Church as a Multi-Racial Community.”

²⁴² Eugene Tan Kheng Boon, “Keeping God in Place. The Management of Religion in Singapore,” in *Religious Diversity in Singapore*, ed. Lai Ah Eng (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), 55.

²⁴³ Tan, “Keeping God in Place,” 61.

²⁴⁴ Tan, “Keeping God in Place,” 61.

²⁴⁵ Tan, “Keeping God in Place,” 61.

²⁴⁶ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ’s “Kingdom” in Two Cities*, 147.

stay relevant".²⁴⁷ Lee shows that two important historical developments and features have repercussions on the management of religions in Singapore.²⁴⁸

First, the rapid growth of Christianity in the country in the late 1980s that had significant impact on state policies regarding proselytisation, which contributed to the state politicisation of religion; second, the centralised state apparatus that allows for a closer watch and management of issues pertaining to religion.²⁴⁹ Lee explains:

The rapid growth of Christianity in the late 1980s due to a disproportionate number of converts led to the view that the religious harmony of the nation was challenged. This disparate growth was regarded as a potential source of inter-religious tension as it was perceived to contribute indirectly to religious intolerance. This trend of conversion was construed as a shift among religious groups from tolerance to zealous faith and prompted the state to intervene through legislative means. As such, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act implemented in 1990 served to protect this and signaled the separation of state and religion – although it was widely recognised as a response to disconnect religious involvement in the political arena.²⁵⁰

In developing a new ethos within the political realm, the Methodist Church should be aware of the concept of critical patriotism – which means that an individual Christian's loyalty to the nation cannot be blind and mindless, but it must be a loyalty that is shaped by theological integrity and moral judgement as the proper posture that a church should take regarding nationalism and national development. As church-state relations become more visible in the modern world, there arise problems, tensions and conflicts that lead to safeguards against the impingement of religion on the societal political system and vice-versa. In the globalised world, religion has much to do with central issues of modern life such as physical and mental health and thus, the Methodist Church will need to deal with the revolutionary nature of religions such as promoting new worldviews and challenging existing elites.

²⁴⁷ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities*, 153.

²⁴⁸ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities*.

²⁴⁹ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities*, 146.

²⁵⁰ Lee, *The Advancement of Christ's "Kingdom" in Two Cities*, 146-147.

McCleary posits that permitting any and all religions to be practised instead of showing preference for one religion over others, and the lack of state intervention creates an open market in which religious groups engage in rational discussion about religious beliefs, thus creating an atmosphere of “good temper and moderation”.²⁵¹ McCleary explains: “Where there is a state monopoly on religion or oligopoly among religions, one will find zealotry and the imposition of ideas on the public. Where there is an open market for religion and freedom of speech, one will find moderation and reason.”²⁵² According to Robertson, “A pressure to connect religious and state domains in the modern world, regardless of the degree to which there is formal, constitutional separation, arises from the fact that increasingly we face the problem of the plurality of cultures and faiths at the global level.”²⁵³

Christians in Singapore have been a driving force in nation building especially in the early years of independence in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were not indispensable to the nation's success. “While nation building and Christian conviction do not always go hand-in-hand, Christians were an established community with strong infrastructure and global connection that the government could harness to give Singapore a competitive edge”²⁵⁴ – for instance, through the Methodist Church’s close ties with the United Methodist Church in the United States. Poon elaborates:

... some Christians in Singapore have interpreted their social and political responsibility in ways that did not fit readily to government policies. Social activism and religious revivalism from the late 1960s to the 1980s have raised huge public concern. Christians too have struck independent paths on government policies, especially on matters that conflict with Christian morals.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Rachel M. McCleary, “Religion and Economic Development,” *Policy Review* 148 (2009): 1.

²⁵² McCleary, “Religion and Economic Development,” 1-2.

²⁵³ Roland Robertson, “General Considerations in the Study of Contemporary Church-State Relationships,” in *Church-State Relations: Tensions and Transitions*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Roland Robertson (New York: Routledge, 2017), 15.

²⁵⁴ Michael N. C. Poon, “Introduction,” in *Engaging Society: The Christian in Tomorrow's Singapore*, ed. Michael Poon (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2013), 2.

²⁵⁵ Poon, “Introduction,” 2.

Noting that Singapore Christianity has grown partly due to the nation's socio-economic development, Goh argues that "the consistent climate of civil order and religious freedom in Singapore since independence have been instrumental in the growth of Christianity, and Singapore's churches have grown in resources in line with the country's overall growth".²⁵⁶ What will be the priorities and direction for Christians to approach public witness and social responsibility in a prosperous and stable nation? For Christians, engaging society is about communicating truth and grace as these help Christians to clarify the place of religion in politics.²⁵⁷ "The technological culture in today's world is engrossed with power, without which nations and peoples cannot compete in a fiercely competitive age. Power, however, needs to find its source and bearing in love and truth; otherwise, it can be destructive to social life," Poon cautions.²⁵⁸ Does engaging society have a wider aim than to protect the freedom of religious groups in practising their faith? Religious communities need to engage society in public matters because they believe their traditions can offer some solutions to problems affecting the masses such as the Methodist Church's impact on and contributions to social movements, education and healthcare.²⁵⁹

In terms of politics, "Methodist thinking about politics typically took place as a by-product of engagement with 'concrete' issues such as slavery, war and peace, the birth of a welfare state and state education policy," expounds Plant.²⁶⁰ John Wesley established most of the patterns in subsequent Methodist political thinking²⁶¹, although the place of Methodism in politics proper is an ambiguous one.²⁶² Wesley believed that "religious liberty and social order were both basic to political life but these dual commitments were held together in a state of tension."²⁶³ According to Plant, "Wesley

²⁵⁶ Robbie B. H. Goh, *Blessed to be a Blessing: The Methodist Missions Society Singapore* (Singapore: Methodist Missions Society, 2014), 11.

²⁵⁷ Poon, "Introduction," 9.

²⁵⁸ Poon, "Introduction," 9.

²⁵⁹ Poon, "Introduction," 10.

²⁶⁰ Stephen Plant, 'Methodism and Politics,' in *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism*, ed. William Gibson, Peter Forsaith and Martin Wellings (New York: Routledge, 2016), 520.

²⁶¹ Plant, "Methodism and Politics", 521.

²⁶² William J. Abraham, 'The Impact of Methodism,' in *Methodism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 84.

²⁶³ Plant, "Methodism and Politics", 523.

enjoined upon Methodists the importance of keeping out of politics but also gave to them a Gospel with profound social – and therefore political – consequences”.²⁶⁴

As part of engaging the masses in Singapore today, the Methodists need to devise a new ethos that engages with politics because politics matters.²⁶⁵ Individual Methodists can reflect on political issues in the light of their faith and take action such as engaging with public policy debates. Himes argues that, "For Christians, politics does not matter as much as religion matters, but to say something is not the most important hardly results in concluding that it is unimportant. Politics matters because people matter; each individual human being matters as a child of God for those of the Christian faith."²⁶⁶ He submits that "the Christian church's spiritual mission is also a mission with political overtones because the spiritual and the political meet in the human person, and the church must defend the dignity of the person".²⁶⁷ "Likewise the essential criterion for any political regime, system, program, or policy is the welfare of the human person. Precisely because the spiritual and the political converge at the intersection of the human person, there can be no indifference to the political realm on the part of church members."²⁶⁸

The Methodist tradition has encouraged diversity of judgement in the political arena but did not deploy the church for routine engagement in political specifics. It is very difficult in the modern world to ignore the presence of religion in public affairs and that is because "virtually on a daily basis, the media provide instances demonstrating that the people, institutions, and ideas that make up the religious sphere have a continuing and important relevance to the political realm".²⁶⁹ As Moyser explains:

Whether it is at the local, national or international level; whether it involves ordinary citizens, activists or major leaders; whether it concerns legislative institutions, pressure groups or competing political parties and ideologies;

²⁶⁴ Plant, "Methodism and Politics", 525.

²⁶⁵ Kenneth R. Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order: Conflict, Cooptation, and Cooperation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013).

²⁶⁶ Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order*, 4.

²⁶⁷ Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order*, 5.

²⁶⁸ Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order*, 5.

²⁶⁹ George Moyser, "Politics and Religion in the Modern World: An Overview," in *Politics and Religion in the Modern World*, ed. George Moyser (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1-27.

whether it is the First World of liberal democracy, the Second World of state socialism, the Third World of developing countries or the Fourth World of abject poverty, religion and politics relate.²⁷⁰

As secularisation or modernisation have not marginalised religion in the modern world to the extent of it ceasing to have much relevance to politics or politics to religion, Methodist political influence can gain momentum in Singapore through direct collaborations between the Methodist Church and the government.²⁷¹ The Methodist Church is “supporting policies and programmes which are just and compassionate and opposing policies and programmes which are not”²⁷² in exerting moral influence on the state — an opportunity in the political sphere for the church to engage the authorities in public service towards the well-being of society.

The Methodist Church can build bridges with political institutions, for example, through organising a delegation to party conferences. As state policies would usually have a direct impact on the people’s wellbeing, the Methodist Church can be part of a government body that is involved in public consultation and use this channel to reach out to the masses. In the case of the Methodist Church using politics to drive its new ethos, it has to “venture beyond religion functioning as a mechanism of social control, a rival to the welfare state and a brake to modernisation”.²⁷³ The multi-religious nature of Singapore’s society means that the relationship between religions and the state is intricate. Noting that ethnic and religious pluralism could impede on the development of a cohesive/collective society, Steiner posits that “ethnic/religious tensions and conflicts are at the centre of politics in the process of nation building”.²⁷⁴

Steiner describes this approach as “pragmatic with a tolerantly neutral stance” and “occasional patronage of certain religious institutions or occasional action to

²⁷⁰ Moyser, “Politics and Religion in the Modern World,” 1.

²⁷¹ Moyser, “Politics and Religion in the Modern World,” 2.

²⁷² “The Methodist Social Principles.”

²⁷³ Safran, “Introduction,” 1-12.

²⁷⁴ Kerstin Steiner, “Religion and Politics in Singapore - Matters of National Identity and Security? A Case Study of the Muslim Minority in a Secular State,” *Osaka University Law Review* 58 (2011): 107-134.

control religious excess where necessary".²⁷⁵ This pragmatism is coupled with a deep-rooted fear that religious sentiments could be politicised thereby threatening the country's political, social and economic stability, with the origin of this fear being traced back to the early nation-building phase when racial-religious conflicts were dominating national politics.²⁷⁶ Thus, the Singaporean government tries to shape the influence of race and religion in a manner that is attuned with its overarching political objectives.²⁷⁷

There has been separation of church and state in Singapore, but there has not been a separation of church and politics. "There are as yet no visible links between faith-based groups and political parties. However, without platforms for direct political engagement, evangelicals have been known to deploy other strategies of engagement, namely, the use of legal and secular arguments, moral panic, and civil society activism," submits Chong.²⁷⁸ Christians would do well to be realistic, civil and practical in their public square engagement as the public square is very different from imposing strict religious values — it is about Christians tuning their senses into a frequency that sees the world as a landscape that God can transform.

In such an engagement, the Methodist Church would benefit from actively responding to numerous significant issues – an approach that has won the trust of the Singapore government. "In a religious milieu like ours, where Christians are a significant and visible minority, it is imperative that an organisation like the Council, which represents a significant segment of Protestant and Orthodox churches here, continue to deepen that trust," notes Chia.²⁷⁹ Leaders in the past decade have guided the council in doing its work with much success.

These leaders not only knew the churches (and Christianity) in Singapore well, they also had a keen understanding of our multi-religious context and the way in which the government here operates. These are the non-negotiable requisites for meaningful and constructive Christian engagement in a country like Singapore, with its unique confluence of religious diversity, a vocal and

²⁷⁵ Steiner, "Religion and Politics in Singapore," 108-109.

²⁷⁶ Steiner, "Religion and Politics in Singapore," 109.

²⁷⁷ Steiner, "Religion and Politics in Singapore," 111.

²⁷⁸ Chong, "Christian Evangelicals and Public Morality in Singapore," 8.

²⁷⁹ Chia, "Religion and Politics in Singapore," 9-23.

sometimes virulent minority of secularists, and a government that is at once secular and pragmatic, but never totally dismissive of religious views and sentiments.²⁸⁰

As the cultural and political situation in Singapore continues to evolve, the Methodist Church should adopt the stance that religious views are not confined to the private sphere but that they have a place in public debates besides through the media channel. One of the benefits of public debates is that it encourages Christians to engage with the issues raised in these events, formulate their own response and use this experience to make their own witness more effective. The Methodist Church should not be excluded or exclude itself from public debates because it will be seen as a rejection of democracy, an alienation of a significant portion of the population, and being ignorant to the positive or valid contribution Methodism has had on society with its long history in the state.

The Methodist heritage lights the way for the church to make a strong and meaningful contribution in its mission in society. Specifically, congregations who hear social justice-themed sermons in their places of worship can be inspired to work for policies that support their vision of the public good and make them more likely to engage in political activism. Churches avoid discussing political issues that their communities are facing for fear that disagreement will lead to division and therefore are missing opportunities to connect their faith with political challenges in their midst. As a Methodist preacher, Rev Lawrence Chua, highlights: “It is the time and season to prepare the nations to carry on the great race of the Kingdom. It is time of transition to the local leadership to carry the torch and the baton to the next leg of the race.”²⁸¹

I would recommend that the Methodist Church press the “unmute” button in managing how the Christian faith affects its approach to political issues such as the high costs of living in Singapore. In tying together the aspects of scripture, tradition and experience, Methodist leaders can rearticulate and reinterpret matters of socio-

²⁸⁰ Chia, “Religion and Politics in Singapore,” 9-23.
Wings of Grace: Proclaiming 25 Years of God’s Wondrous Works, ed. Juliette Arulrajah (Singapore: Methodist Missions Society, 2017), 164.

economic and political affairs in light of reality and based on concrete values found in the Christian faith. While members should be politically informed citizens who actively participate in voting, they do not have to affiliate with or support any political party or party candidate in order to advocate for the less fortunate or to oppose racism, for instance. When everything is being politicised in the world today, the Methodist political involvement will give it a power of influence to bring a foreseeable remedy to the nation's problems. The Methodists have an option to participate in politics that can mean activities associated with institutions and organisations, which are usually connected to the state or are dedicated to affecting the laws and policies of the state. By engaging in politics, Methodists can navigate these institutions and organisations to engage in politics in a Christian way.

More than 130 years later, the same Methodist pioneer spirit of outreach continues in Singapore, transforming hundreds of thousands of lives through addressing and meeting the real-life needs of communities. As the world sees new and more problems such as climate change and food insecurity, the Methodist Church needs to equip their leaders for the manifold ministries in impacting society through social enterprise such as the setting up of bereavement services and wedding planning services. In view of challenges such as those posed by the aging society in Singapore and information technology that alters ways of communication, the Methodist Church can continue to exhort its members to bless others in various spheres regardless of race and culture through its new ethos.

Summary Findings

The Methodist Church's social doctrine is based on the common good that every individual — regardless of race, gender, age or economic status — has the responsibility to promote the welfare of the community. It is pointed out that John Wesley has asserted that one who loves God would bear practical fruit in his or her life, and the Methodist Church is "reaching out to build interpersonal relationships and interactions with the community, naturally providing practical opportunities for Christians to demonstrate our views and positions with regard to current events and

issues”.²⁸² In serving the common good of society, there have been many interpretations of this idea but the agreement is that “human beings are given an uncommon dignity that distinguishes them from the rest of God’s creation” and “because God by His grace has bestowed dignity on every human being, this quality is not dependent on any human attribute or accomplishment”.²⁸³

My proposed new ethos takes into account a progressive Singapore society and a highly developed nation since the days of British colonialism and Methodist missionary work to better serve the common good of society. The ethos will further advance the church’s social principles beyond acknowledging and deploring social issues. As much as the Methodist Church has been adapting to national development and becoming more extensive in offering its social services, they can also exercise political influence in engaging more effectively with society. The new ethos aims to improve church-state relations towards giving the Methodist Church political clout in contributing towards a modern society that sees new and pressing problems.

²⁸² “Social action is integral to Methodism.”

²⁸³ “For the Common Good,” ETHOS Institute™ for Public Christianity, accessed 3 November 2024, <https://ethosinstitute.sg/about-ethos/about-ethos/>.

Appendix A



Figure 1: John Wesley, Father of Methodism

Appendix B

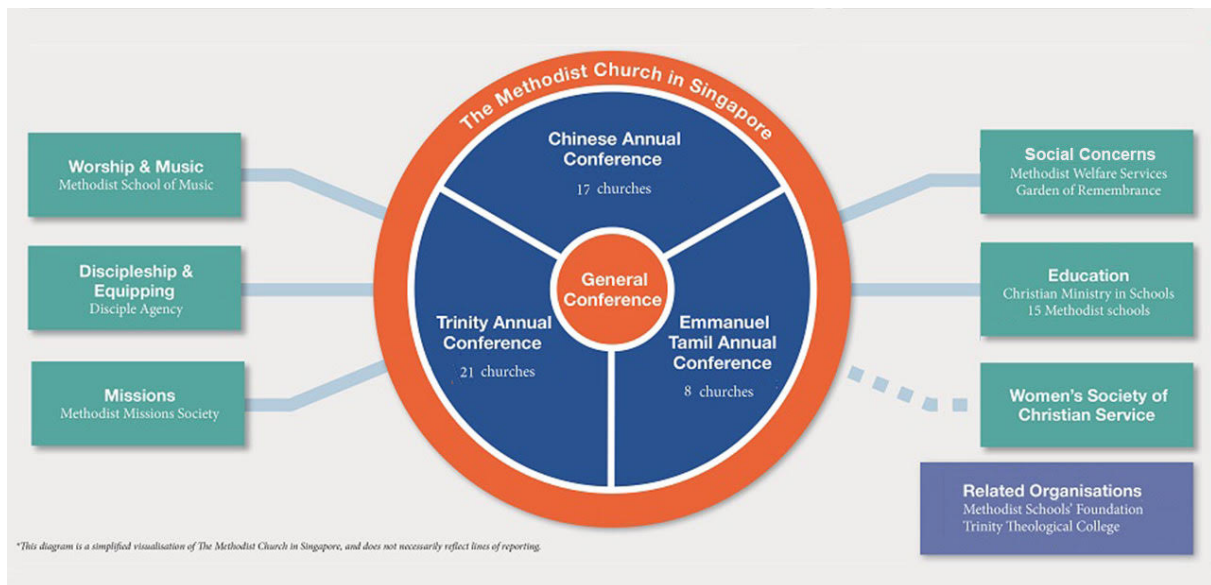


Figure 2: The General Conference is the highest body in The Methodist Church in Singapore

Appendix C



Figure 3: In 1886, the first Methodist school, Anglo-Chinese School, was started by Bishop William Fitzjames Oldham in Singapore, with 13 students

Appendix D



Figure 4: Sir Stamford Raffles' arrival in 1819 marked the turning point in Singapore's history and the arrival of the Christian faith

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