



## Emergency committee for human rights in Singapore

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GLOBAL MEETING SET FOR SINGAPORE IN JULY 1991:

### WORLD METHODISTS APPEAR TO ENDORSE GOVERNMENT POLICY

#### METHODISTS BREAK ECUMENICAL FELLOWSHIP

Many influential Christian bodies have recommended that international church meetings not be held in Singapore pending an improvement in the human rights situation and the withdrawal by the Singapore Govt of the allegations made against the Christian Conference of Asia. These bodies include the World Council of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia, the National Council of Churches in Korea, the Uniting Church of Australia, the Methodist Church of New Zealand and several other ecumenical bodies in the Asian region. (Resolutions appended.)

The detainees, their families, ex-detainees under restriction orders, justice and peace workers, clergy and many church people in Singapore need the pastoral support of the international Christian fellowship at this time. To appear to lend support to repression of the church by holding a major international conference in Singapore is the last thing they need.

The introduction of the Religious Harmony Bill is the final phase in the attack to undermine the autonomy and independence of the church.

However, the World Methodist Council (WMC) has apparently dismissed these considerations and decided unilaterally to proceed with its World Methodist Conference in Singapore in 1991.

#### SUPPORT FOR WHOM?

There are at least two main ways of understanding this decision. The first is that the WMC thinks it will give valuable support to a beleaguered Singapore Methodist Church by going to Singapore. If true, this is a legitimate and acceptable decision. But there is little evidence that the Methodist Church as an institution has been either supporting the detainees pastorally or opposing the Government's repressive measures. Some individual clergy have been sympathetic but there has been no supportive institutional action. On the contrary, the Methodist Church has withdrawn from the Christian Conference of Asia under Government

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pressure.

Or, perhaps the World Methodist Council may consider itself able to influence the Singapore Government towards less repressive policies simply by its presence there in 1991. However, this would be a serious under-estimation of the political skill and resources of the Government. More likely is that the Government will use the opportunity to convert the global Methodist constituency to its own way of thinking and it may well achieve considerable success in this endeavour. Having enjoyed first-class accommodation, state-of-the-art conference facilities and a consumer's shopping paradise, delegates may depart convinced that such material benefits outweigh the denial of human freedom and justice which, in Singapore, is largely invisible to a visitor.

There is far greater evidence for the second way of understanding this decision: the WMC has been misinformed or has acted on inadequate information.

#### METHODIST COUNCIL MISINFORMED?

It seems more probable that the World Methodist Council is misinformed by its own contacts in Singapore who, undoubtedly, have made their own political accommodation with the Singapore Government. Also, like all major Christian churches in Singapore, the Methodist Church has influential members of the ruling party among its congregation.

There is also the possibility that the WMC has been assured that it can critically discuss or raise any issue within its conference in Singapore and that other viewpoints on the Singapore situation would be welcomed. It is possible that such assurances have been accepted at face value.

#### GOVERNMENT MANIPULATION INEVITABLE

No matter what brave words may be uttered within the conference in 1991, the government-controlled media will use the event to justify government policies. There will be photos of important Methodist leaders meeting with Singaporean Methodist leaders or even Government officials. There may be reports of the concerns Methodists have about apartheid, Third World debt, theological renewal or the greenhouse effect. But, if a critical speech on Singapore is reported at all, it will be placed in a small column, probably with a description of the speaker implying that he/she is not very representative, while the rest of the page will be full of statements and "news" implicitly or explicitly neutralising that statement. There will be many local pastors susceptible to government pressure to make counter statements about foreign church people interfering and not understanding the Singapore situation.

The government may take the opportunity, to repeat in the media the allegations against the detainees to show why the Internal Security Act and the Religious Harmony legislation are necessary. Some unsuspecting delegate might be inveigled into agreeing and this will be splashed across the front page of the Straits Times.

Within the Conference, Singapore speakers may well be disarming in their admission that, like any society, Singapore has its problems. However, it will appear a comparatively minor issue and it will be difficult for the debate to be taken up further. Also, it is hardly polite in the Asian context (or any other) to criticise one's hosts or to pass resolutions criticising their government without their support. Thus any moves in this direction are likely to fail on the floor of the conference or to be misreported in the unlikely event that they succeed.

Should any spirited delegates have ideas about a human rights demonstration, they will discover the Government has contingency plans to contain them and to turn any public actions to its own advantage. It must be assumed that the Internal Security Dept will have the conference under heavy surveillance.

The World Methodist Council has thus left itself wide open to government manipulation and to being used to endorse repressive policies, specifically the detention without trial of church workers and the present legislation to control all religious bodies. The international media or the media in other countries may give a different picture but, within Singapore, the World Methodist Conference will almost inevitably be used as a pro-government rally whether or not its organisers intend it.

The detainees, socially-committed Christians in Singapore and the churches themselves will be left to cope with the continuing repression and the misrepresentation of their situation.

### POLITICAL DETAINEES - SO WHAT?

The implications of the Singapore situation for the global Christian fellowship may not be immediately clear. It is the particular steps the Singapore Government has taken against the church which require an international response. Singapore is leading the way in legislative suppression of the church similar to that previously experienced by the churches in Eastern Europe. Unless the Singapore Government is faced with global pressure to reverse its measures, then other states in Southeast Asia are likely to follow.

Abuse of human rights or the existence of political prisoners are not in themselves necessarily sufficient reason for boycotting Singapore as a conference venue. Almost no Asian country would pass this test. In this regard it is important to note that the National Council of Churches in Korea, a body with years of experience of government human rights abuse, is among the most

forceful in its call for the World Methodist Conference to find another venue. The NCC-K recognises the political significance of the Singapore Government's attack on the church for the Asian church as a whole.

### AMERICAN METHODIST SPEAKS OUT

American Methodist and President of the US National Association of College and University Chaplains, the Rev Dr James Stuart, visited Singapore last September for the habeas corpus hearing of detainee Mr Vincent Cheng. Dr Stuart is at present chaplain to a New Zealand university and thus he represented the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa-New Zealand and the Uniting Church of Australia. In his subsequent report, made prior to the introduction of the "religious harmony" legislation, Dr Stuart recommended that an alternative venue be found for the World Methodist Conference and stated:

#### Implications for the Global Christian Fellowship

It is clear to me from my experience in Singapore and from developments since that the situation there poses a very particular problem for churches and ecumenical bodies elsewhere.

It is not simply a matter of Singapore having political prisoners who are Christian or who have worked with church organisations. Although this is serious enough, the implications go beyond the immediate human rights concerns to questions of the freedom of religion and the universal nature of the church.

Many countries in Asia have prisoners of conscience who are held without trial for indefinite periods. However, Singapore poses a special problem for the global Christian fellowship because of the following factors:

1. The Singapore Government has acted directly against the church, targetting it specifically as the latest institution which has to be crushed in case some critical voice may be effectively raised from within it.
2. The local church leadership of all the denominations has been completely silenced and dare not even care pastorally for those who are victimised by the government.
3. The Government has expelled with impunity the headquarters of the ecumenical council of churches for Asia, the CCA. This has serious implications for other ecumenical bodies and ecumenically-committed denominations. To relate to the Singapore Government or to hold international meetings in Singapore before this matter is resolved is to lend moral support to this expulsion and to the detentions.

By its actions to date, the government has ensured that international ecumenical links have been neutralised or rendered inoperative.

4. The intensity of repression is such that few even dare to pray for the detainees during public worship. It is forbidden to do so at regular Sunday worship and so weekday Masses by the detainees' friends and families are held.

5. In the region, Singapore is taking the lead in suppressing the church. If it is able to do so with impunity and without a worldwide reaction then other countries will also increase their repression. The arrest of the Singapore detainees in 1987 was followed within a few months by similar arrests in Malaysia.

The actions of the Singapore Government are a direct attack on the foundations of the Christian faith: that God's redemptive spirit permeates the whole of creation and that all of human life is the fundamental concern of Christian discipleship. The Christian understanding of justice, peace and the integrity of creation is undermined by such actions and policies.

Unless there is a strong objection from churches around the world and international pastoral support for the detainees and their families, the life and witness of the churches in Southeast Asia may become increasingly subject to government policy. The present silence of the church leadership in Singapore probably signals the duress they are under or perhaps the success of the government in already engendering the kind of leadership which suits it.

### METHODIST VOICES

There are undoubtedly some clergy and lay people in the Singapore Methodist Church who are unhappy with the ISA detentions and the attacks on the church. However, it is unlikely that such people can move into leadership positions or exercise leadership in the present context. In August 1988, the Methodist Church publication "Methodist Message" carried a feature on church-state relations with statements from clergy.

Rev WEE Boon Hup (Asst Pastor, Wesley Methodist Church) stated:

"There is one danger - the church may be lulled into a state of complacent trust in the state achieving the same ends that it condones whatever shortcomings committed as inconsequential compared with other achievements of the state. It is precisely in such an environment that the church's role as a critic of state policies is as important as its supportive role."

Rev Dr KANG Ho Soon (Pastor, Paya Lebar Methodist Church) stated:

"Just as a sovereign nation must uphold the principle of self-determination, the Church, in order to maintain its integrity as the Church of Jesus Christ, must protect itself from those who seek to control it. The Church's mission and action must proceed from its conviction and confession of faith that "Jesus Christ is Lord". The first Christians sacrificed their lives because of this confession. This simple but all-embracing creed has become a creed for all Christians down through the ages."

### GOVERNMENT THEOLOGY

However, it would appear that the guiding theology of the Methodist Church is now to be stated by the government. Senior Minister of State for Education, Dr TAY Eng Soon, said in January that "Christians, and not the Church, should get involved in politics". While the Church had views on morality, ethics and justice, the way to present them to political leaders was to avoid public posturing and forming pressure groups. "To do so is to participate in partisan politics and this invites counter-blows and is unproductive. Rather, it should convey its views quietly and calmly and through private channels." (Straits Times Weekly, 17 February 1990.) Translated, this statement means that the church as an institution has no social or prophetic role in society but may act merely as an advisor to the existing power structure. Further it is a threat that if the church tries to influence public affairs by taking public positions, then it can expect retaliation from the Government. The events of recent years testify that this is no idle threat. Dr Tay, an elder in the Methodist Church, was speaking "as a church member and not a member of the Government".

## METHODIST CREDIBILITY

Whatever theological generalities are uttered by Methodist Church leaders or politicians, the continuing detention without trial of ecumenical hostage Vincent Cheng and civil rights lawyer Teo Soh Lung and the tightening legislative noose around the churches is the reality against which the credibility of the faith of the Methodist Church will be judged.

### RESOLUTIONS

#### WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Central Committee Resolution, Hanover, 1988:

"The expulsion of the Christian Conference of Asia from Singapore by the Singapore Government at the end of 1987, in addition to infringing blatantly the rights of the ecumenical body, reflects a pattern of violation of human rights which should be of special concern to the churches.

The expulsion of CCA from Singapore has raised four larger issues which should cause profound concern to the churches. Firstly, the functioning and participation in organisations of churches and other religious bodies are part of religious liberty including the freedom of association that goes with it. Curtailment of such rights is of particular concern to the ecumenical movement.

Secondly, the government's actions raises again the serious theological question of the churches' understanding of and response to the critical realities of church-state relations.

Thirdly, the Singapore government's expulsion of CCA followed the detention without trial under harsh security laws of social and community workers; among them were several who are church related.

Fourthly, the government action also was a deliberate attempt to denigrate the ecumenical organisation by falsely linking it to "subversive movements" and "plots".

The General Secretary of the WCC in a letter to the General Secretary of the CCA strongly criticised the action of the Singapore government against an ecumenical organisation on the basis of false accusations. "Both because of the support of the WCC to the CCA in its activities and because of its own understanding of the mission of the church the WCC rejects the allegations of the Singapore government."

#### [THEREFORE]

The Central Committee of the WCC, meeting in Hanover, Federal Republic of Germany, in August 1988,

1. strongly protests against the action of the Singapore government in expelling the Christian Conference of Asia from Singapore;
2. calls the attention of member churches to new disturbing trends regarding religious liberty and human rights in several Asian countries;
3. asks the General Secretary to convey to the governments of the countries the concerns expressed in this statement and seek opportunities along with the CCA and the churches in the region to explain to them the nature and functioning of ecumenical bodies;
4. affirms its support to the CCA, national councils and member churches in Asia in their efforts to promote human rights and work for justice as part of their witness in obedience to the gospel;
5. AS A SYMBOLIC ACTION IN SUPPORT OF CCA, RECOMMENDS THAT CHURCHES AND THEIR RELATED AGENCIES SERIOUSLY CONSIDER ABSTAINING FROM USING SINGAPORE AIRLINES AND FROM HOLDING ECUMENICAL MEETINGS IN SINGAPORE UNTIL
  - a) there is a guarantee from the Singapore government that all accredited delegates are allowed to enter the country;
  - b) there is a guarantee of freedom of the press in Singapore.
6. asks the General Secretary to monitor carefully the developments, to take appropriate actions in consultation with the CCA, national councils and member churches and take steps for new ecumenical strategies in response to the challenges of the new situation."

## CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA

The CCA is the ecumenical council of the major Asian churches (more than 100 member churches and councils in approximately 20 countries). Subsequent to its deregistration and expulsion from Singapore, the CCA was plainly unable to hold any meetings there again and its staff are still unable to visit Singapore. Therefore, CCA's resolutions do not deal directly with the holding of meetings in Singapore. However, CCA has expressed its opposition to the World Methodist Council proceeding with its conference in Singapore.

CCA's stand is made clear by the following resolution passed at the CCA Executive Committee Meeting, Manila, September 1988:

## "WHEREAS:

the Singapore government made unwarranted and unsubstantiated allegations against the Christian Conference of Asia and in pursuance thereof arbitrarily closed down the offices of the CCA in Singapore on 30th December, 1987;

the Singapore Government also detained during last year a number of church related workers as well as others; some of them still continue to be held in detention under Singapore's Internal Security Act;

the Emergency Committee Meeting of the CCA held in Hong Kong in April, 1988 debated and considered at length the Singapore situation and in pursuance thereof took a decision to address an open letter to the member Churches of CCA...

IT IS NOW THEREFORE RESOLVED THAT CCA SHOULD HENCEFORTH:

- instruct its staff not to travel on Singapore Airlines;
- inform all participants coming for CCA Seminars, Workshops, Consultations, exposure programmes, visitations and meetings that CCA will not pay for travel on Singapore Airlines;
- urge its member Churches, National Councils, fraternal organisations, related agencies and partner Churches to initiate similar action against Singapore Airlines;

- that such symbolic action should continue till the Singapore government withdraws its uncalled for and unwarranted allegations against CCA;

- releases the persons presently detained under the Internal Security Act."

## NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN KOREA

In protest at the Singapore government's expulsion of the Christian Conference of Asia in 1987, the NCCK Executive Committee on 18 November 1989 unanimously adopted a set of resolutions as follows:

- 1) To ask the World Council of Churches to notify all participants of the WCC/JPIC World Convocation not to use Singapore Airlines for their travel to Seoul in March 1990;
- 2) To recommend to member churches and related ecumenical bodies not to use Singapore Airlines when they host international gatherings in Seoul;
- 3) To recommend the same action when member churches send delegates to international meetings abroad;
- 4) To notify these resolutions to the Singapore government and Singapore Airlines;
- 5) TO SEND A LETTER TO THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL EXPRESSING REGRET OVER ITS DECISION TO HOLD ITS GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN SINGAPORE.

## METHODIST CHURCH OF NEW ZEALAND

At its Annual Conference in 1989, the Methodist Church of New Zealand passed the following resolution:

7. (a) This Conference, noting the recent and ongoing human rights violations by the Singapore Government and the recommendations of the Christian Conference of Asia, receives with regret the news that the next World Methodist Conference will be held in Singapore. It calls on the World Methodist Council, through its Social & International Affairs Committee, to set up a Working Group to monitor the Singapore situation and consult with the Christian Conference of Asia and World Council of Churches and to make an interim report no later than September 1990.
- (b) That a small work group be set up by the Council for Mission Unit 4 (Christchurch) in consultation with the CCA-NZ International Affairs Desk (which is associated with the Catholic J.P.D. Commission) to:
- i) provide pastoral support for the detainees and their families as part of global Christian concern.
  - ii) work throughout New Zealand for the immediate release of the detainees, (in particular Mr Vincent Cheng and Ms Teo Soh Lung) and the ending of harassment, intimidation and imprisonment without trial of church workers, Trade Unionists, university personnel, lawyers and other groups of people who work for an open and just democracy in Singapore. It affirms that Christians who are involved in such work for justice, witness to Gospel priorities and that "the Church is required to bear witness to governments that they hold their mandate and their power from God above". (CCA News Mar/Apr 1988)"