PATTERNS OF THE MINISTRY IN METHODISM
IN SINGAPORE AND MALAYSIA*

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Methodism came to Singapore from America by way of Indian Methodism in 1885.¹ In 1889 it came directly under American Methodism, no longer "a tail of the great Indian kite."² It haltingly climbed the constitutional ladder, becoming in turn a Mission Conference in 1893 and an Annual Conference in 1902.³ One conference became many and reached the next stage as the Central Conference in 1950 and finally attained full status as the autonomous Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore (MCIMS) in 1968.

The Discipline (1968) of the MCIMS states that the ministry is derived from the ministry of Christ, is corporate as well as individual, and includes those called and set apart for the specialized ministry of the Word and the Sacraments.⁴ The ministry of the church as a whole as well as its ordained ministry will be discussed in this paper more from the perspective of church polity than ecclesiology. The brief framework in the Discipline permits a wide range of interpretations of the ministry not necessarily productive of ecclesiological discourse. The object of this paper is to identify models, modes, roles, offices and functions heuristically, historically and contextually. These patterns will be italicized as they occur.

Wesleyan Background

The contextualism of John Wesley is seen in his decision to ordain deacons and presbyters; and more significantly consecrating Thomas Coke as a "general superintendent," using the Anglican ordinal and substituting the word "superintendent" for "bishop," furthermore authorizing the con-

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³Ho Seng Ong, Methodist Schools in Malaysia (Petaling, Java: Board of Education, Malaya Annual Conference, 1964), p. 56.

⁴W. F. Oldham, Malaysia — Nature's Wonderland (New York, Cincinnati: Jennings and Graham, 1907), opposite Contents page.

*The Methodist Church in Malaysia and Singapore, Doctrines, Constitution and Discipline, 1968, Articles 301-304, p. 51.
separation of Francis Asbury in America as "general superintendent" by proxy. However, he made it clear that they were intended for service in America, and that he would not ordain any preacher in England because there were Anglican bishops there who had legal jurisdiction in England.\(^6\) He had, however, set the precedent for presbyters or elders ordaining elders and deacons in England. The autonomous Methodist Episcopal Church, inaugurated in 1784, accepted Asbury and Coke as general superintendents and bishops. Bishops alone may ordain ministers in American Methodism. British Methodism did not opt for bishops; however, of Wesley's doctrine of the ministry it is said:

> episkope was of the essence of the Ministry itself . . . any true minister was ordained to act as an overseer in the congregation of Christ's flock, and so any circuit superintendent was as much a bishop as the Anglican bishop of the local diocese.\(^6\)

When missions were formed, British Methodism had a spiritual kinship with them and the overseas churches soon found considerable or complete autonomy, while the strong episcopacy and confident General Conference of American Methodism established stronger organizational ties which persisted longer.\(^7\)

The Wesleyan pattern of itinerancy was transmitted to America. Wesley was among the few evangelicals who "felt that God was prepared to accept such canonical irregularities as their itinerancy and their willingness to preach in the market place and field without episcopal permission."\(^8\) Wesley's revivalist-evangelistic outlook could not be more specific than in:

> What is the end of all ecclesiastical order? Is it not to bring souls from the power of Satan to God; and to build them up in his fear and love? Order then is so far valuable, as it answers these ends; and if it answers them not, it is nothing worth.\(^9\)

### Early American Patterns

Francis Asbury regarded himself first and last as an itinerant circuit rider and missionary. So did the preachers: the terms "preacher" and "missionary" were interchangeable.\(^10\) A recovery of this understanding is essential today. When the population push westwards took place in America, Methodism had a ready-made pioneer structure; and since missions abroad were in many ways in a pioneering context, patterns were ad-

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\(^{8}\) Kent, p. 57.

\(^{9}\) Williams, p. 242.

\(^{10}\) W. C. Barclay, *Early American Methodism, 1764-1844* (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension, The Methodist Church, 1949), pp. 100-02.
vantageously repeated to some extent. Edwin Orr, an authority on revivals, wrote:

The Methodists were best equipped to meet the challenge of the frontier conditions. All Methodist preachers in the early days were itinerants, moving from place to place within the wider reaches of the circuit. The circuit riders appointed local men as their class leaders, and quarterly conferences recognized any of talent by making them exhorters, from which they proceeded to regular lay preaching or ordination as ministers. Like the Baptists they were men of limited education.11

The pattern of lay preachers and their ascent up the echelon as exhorters, local preachers and ordained ministers was available, although by the time Methodism came to Singapore the requirements for ordination and conference membership had become more stringent. In the latter half of the nineteenth century in America theology and theological education flourished,12 and standards expected of university graduates for ordination were imposed — out of context for Asians. This had the effect of delaying and limiting meaningful participation.

The Self-Supporting Mission Pattern

Methodism in this region owes much to "the remarkable ministry of a very unusual Methodist, William Taylor, who proved to be one of the most versatile evangelists of all time."13 James M. Thoburn, who was to lead the mission to Singapore, and was himself a product of the world-wide 1858 awakening, invited Taylor to conduct campaigns in some Indian cities which resulted in the evolution and experiment of Taylor's self-supporting missions theory. Briefly speaking, Taylor propounded the theory that the ambassador of Christ, like Paul, should earn his keep or be congregation-supported and not be dependent on the missionary society. It was a passion and an obsession with him, as may be seen in his book.14

Taylor urged Thoburn to transfer himself from North India to Calcutta, and have a mission for the English or part-English folk sprinkled in all British possessions in the Far East with whose help to evangelize the Asiatic millions around them.15 Thoburn began a mission in Calcutta which eventually grew and became for several years the self-supporting South India Annual Conference — a remarkable phenomenon.

Thoburn had a Macedonian call to help the Anglo-Burman community in Rangoon. Taylor sent a missionary couple, financed from the

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13 Orr, p. 158.
Transit Fund which he maintained for this purpose, and Thoburn became so convinced about this strategy that he told a colleague that a mission, like Napoleon's army, must get "the sinews of war from converts."\(^{16}\)

Once in Calcutta and Rangoon, the next leap to Singapore was an obvious one to Thoburn, who was described as "Methodism's missionary expansionist par excellence."\(^{17}\) Both he and Oldham expressed the hope that Singapore would see the starting point of missions to regions beyond and in 15 years the Malay Peninsula, Sarawak, Sumatra, Java and Philippines were all attached each with its separate history; and only Sarawak continued in the same area. The pattern of an English-speaking base and self-support fitted the situation in Singapore. The decisive factor was a plea from Charles Phillips, a British ex-Wesleyan, at that time a Presbyterian elder in Singapore. He had "built a chapel at his own expense, in which he himself preached to the humbler Europeans and served their families in several ways."\(^{18}\) The chaplaincy pattern of the Anglicans and of the Presbyterians who had a Chinese Mission from 1881 preceded Methodism.\(^{19}\) Apparently the needs of this "Anglo-Saxon Diaspora," to use Thorburn's phrase, were not adequately served. And it was to serve them that William F. Oldham, a Britisher, born and educated in India, converted in a William Taylor revival campaign, and sent for further studies in America for an educational ministry in India, was appointed.

Thoburn opened the mission in Singapore with a revival-cum-evangelism campaign in the Town Hall complete with camp-evangelism mourners' bench. Out of this company of "the reclaimed and converted" he began a local church with 26 probationers and members. The present-day minimum in spite of present-day house-churches is 32 and the Discipline would have balked rather than helped mission those days. Only three were eligible for lay office but only one turned up for the Quarterly Conference. Thoburn, who cared little for Mission Board policies and long-drawn consultations, kept within the four corners of the Discipline when the matter was covered by law. He proceeded to organize the one member — the redoubtable John Polglase — and got him elected to all offices. This plenipotentiary agreed to find $70 straits currency a month for the Oldhams, and Thoburn left Oldham as pastor of this self-supporting church and mission — a tradition that obtained until the post-war period. Oldham himself advocated a "via media" between "leaning wholly on the missionary society" and "making a fetish of self-support."\(^{20}\) He asked

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\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 114.


\(^{19}\)John Fleming, "Malaysia," CDCWM, p. 366.

later how the large American church could "preach the gospel to every creature" if they did not support missions, and declared: "Foreign missions is not merely an obligation but a high privilege." At this juncture it seems appropriate to point out that while Thoburn in 1892 propounded autonomy for national churches, Oldham, who was influential in the affairs here until 1916 does not appear to have included this in his agenda. It is not unreasonable to expect a more liberal attitude as it is reported that in the mid-nineteenth century almost every American missionary agency had adopted Rufus Anderson's aim of planting churches that would be "self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating."

**Evangelistic Preaching**

The revival-cum-evangelism strategy employed by Thoburn has been found useful. Among several evangelists who have come to our shores, E. Stanley Jones and John Sung are most outstanding. Several converts and ministers owe their spiritual or ministerial beginning to them. A Stanley Jones campaign aroused enough interest in one Methodist school to start a church. John Sung inspired preaching bands — a model of proclamation and church-planting after revival.

Existentialism and older-day psychology would support the need for a person reaching a point of decision. Often revivals have tended to be cyclic in their effect with the same people committing themselves as though an emotional stirring was periodically necessary. Some have had the effect of encouraging interest in Bible study and prayer. Not only "flying evangelists" but some local ministers have been successful evangelistic preachers. Goh Hood Keng and Chew Hock Hin were the most outstanding in their heyday. They preached for decisions. Most evangelists would agree that preparation of the listener is important. The English evangelist, Thomas Cook, who reported of a campaign in Ceylon "that many were brought to conversion, but with scarcely an exception, every convert had been educated in mission high schools." Not affording the opportunity to make a commitment to Christ may be a disservice to God's plan of salvation.

**Pattern Setting in Context**

Dulles describes five suggestive (not exhaustive) models of the church, namely (1) as Institution, (2) as Mystical Communion, (3) as Sacrament, (4) as Herald and (5) as Servant. Methodism lost out on the sacramental and sacerdotal models to some extent but gained on the activist. From the
1930's churches began having altars, lecterns, candles and the cross instead of the central pulpit. One Asian minister wrote asking if the crucifix would appear next. However, these were interpreted as aids to worship rather than the entry of sacerdotalism, except vaguely. Methodism gained by ecumenical associations; however, the layman was more to be seen in the lectern in Anglican churches than in the Methodist.

The "herald" and "servant" ideas were present, and the following quotations are significant more than the use of these words would suggest. They account for ways in which Methodism developed.

(a) In India a [missionary] pastor of a church is expected to exercise many paternal functions which are seldom exacted from him in America, and which are hardly regarded as belonging to the pastoral office at all. . . . in the city congregation he is none the less both parent and servant not only to many of his own people, but also to many who do not belong to his congregation. 25

(b) Happily, the pastor [Oldham writing of himself] did not consider himself merely a pastor to a small congregation, but rather as a herald to the people. He made it his business, therefore, in every possible way to acquaint himself with his surroundings; he studied the Malay language and the ways of the Chinese and Tamils, and how to approach them. 26

The ministry of Christ on earth was a ministry to others and his mission was designed not to a chosen few but was to be universalistic and we are a Church for others and a mission and ministry for others. The early leaders had a close approximation to Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Church and its ministry or Hans Kung's concept of "an independent, unselfish Christian ministry to human beings in the religions."

**Answering Felt Needs**

Oldham described his educational work as "providing for a want which was felt, and in the supplying of which he was nobly helped." 27

Oldham’s deep and enlightened view of mission and missions will engage the writer in another work; however, it need be said that he held a high evangelical faith with a strong humanitarian impulse. He said in one of his lectures at the Syracuse University in 1913:

The very genius of Christianity is missionary. Not dependent upon a text or a chapter, its whole conception of God is of the Universal Father, its whole conception of the kingdom that into it shall come — from East, West, North and South. 28

Pursuant on felt needs, a network of schools and boarding schools for boys made possible the supporting of numberless teacher-missionaries. A

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27Ibid., p. 44.
bevy of European women workers helped the single women missionaries and deaconesses who visited brothels to rescue women and also some homes to ameliorate the lot of slave-servant girls. Prophetic preaching was directed against opium and gambling by Oldham and William E. Horley especially. Dr. Chen Su Lan waged a war against legalized opium and prostitution from 1930 to 1957. Colporteurs and catechists became Methodist exhorters and local preachers. Joseph of Ipoh and Khoo Chiang Bee of Singapore did outstanding work — the former helped Methodists to contact the Sengoi, and Khoo, later ordained, served the Bible Society travelling even up to Papau and New Guinea. Chinese Bible Women have carried on a continuous and fruitful ministry in Chinese churches. Women preachers were ordained in the Chinese conferences, the first one being Lim Swee Beng in 1955. There have been ministries to the paupers, lepers, mentally ill and prisoners, dependent largely on volunteers like Khoo Siaw Hua and Andrew Lee. Although numerically the centrifugal patterns identified happen to be considerable, the membership-centered responsibilities have absorbed ministerial energies. This calls for the congregational understanding of their calling to serve and also the pastoral ministry of lay-enablement.

**Linguistic Channels**

From the beginning Oldham appreciated that the work would have to be canalized according to the linguistic streams. He organized missions within the mission. He found open doors for a Tamil prison ministry and he used his knowledge of Tamil to advantage. Within a few months a Tamil catechist was invited from Rangoon to do Tamil school and evangelistic work as part of the Tamil Mission. Dr. B. West was assisted by an ex-Anglican and another ex-Presbyterian catechist in a Chinese medical and evangelistic mission, comity not being at a high premium. The Malay Mission was headed up by Alexander Fox, a Eurasian local preacher and later by Shellabear, who was missionary, preacher, scholar, Bible translator and publisher. He had a high regard and Christian concern for the Malays. This work proved useful to the Straits Chinese community who at one time formed a district. There was also an English City Mission led by John Polglase. The language streams developed distinctly if not altogether separately. In 1968 there were five conferences — two Chinese, one English, one Iban and one Tamil. Each conference is headed by a president, resulting in an autonomy within the autonomous church. By legislation only nationals have been eligible for the episcopacy and presidency from 1968. Many initiatives have been seen within conferences never experienced before. The truism that inspired the formation of the Tamil Conference, that only Tamils can preach to the Tamil-speaking,

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holds good for all linguistic groups. Oldham in 1913 had the vision of a pooling of the spiritual gifts of one group and the practical abilities of another. Today the linguistic and cultural diversity is greater and the opportunity for rich artistic, linguistic, theological and evangelistic expressions limitless. Experience of projects undertaken by unilingual ecumenical groups indicates that linguistic ecumenicity may be a useful pattern to adopt in our context.

Tentmaking and Professional Ministries

This has been a controversial issue and one that has aroused much discussion in theological circles after the experiment of worker-priests in France. Locally Oldham set the pattern as a tutor incidentally appreciating the extra income30 then as a teacher-missionary recruiting a large number of teacher-missionaries. In 1890 J. C. Floyd, who came to relieve Oldham as mission superintendent, said: "School work pays. Without this school [The Anglo-Chinese School, Singapore] we would have been without a mission."31 In 1941 a Mission Board secretary attributed the "success" of Methodism to schools. He said: "Methodism began its ministry in Singapore organizing schools at least as early as its organized churches."32 One missionary pointed out pejoratively that between 1900 and 1940 nearly 90 percent of the missionary personnel and the majority of the national workers gave the major part of their time to education work.33 Apart from the debatable theological and theoretical considerations, Oldham's explanation in 1907 held good for many decades.

There is sometimes a disposition to question the utility of so wide an educational agency in so small a Mission. But it should be remembered that these teaching missionaries would not be in the field at all were it not for the schools.34

By the same token the Tamil churches and circuits would not have had pastoral leadership for several decades but for the teacher-pastor. The school question is a complex one and has to be dealt with separately. The justification, that the school supported missionaries and pastors, was an argument used to satisfy utilitarian-minded critics. With Oldham education was primarily a field of service. Today there is more of a recognition of mission as "presence" and "witness," which generally was not even vaguely appreciated by its critics. Ho Seng Ong paid a tribute to the ministers' contribution to the schools.35 A tribute is due also to the

30Oldham, India, p. 230.
31Missionary Report, 1890, p. 223.
32Report of the Executive Secretary, The Methodist Church, p. 130.
34Oldham, Malaysia, p. 46.
35Ho Seng Ong, Methodist Schools, pp. 93-126.
Asian full-time pastor and his family who endured great privation and humiliation without the security of the Mission Board or the school prior to the system of joint congregation and conference responsibility which now prevails in almost all conferences.

The Chinese churches have had fully supported pastors as many of their congregations have had businessmen in their membership. Their proverbial generosity is acknowledged by Thoburn, who wrote: "I have never heard of an instance of equal liberality towards missionary work on the part of non-Christian natives, either in India or China."36 The Tamils generally had a shifting or floating population, and after the war both English and Tamil churches had a good number of professional people who were willing to pay the minister a professional wage; American missionary-giving increased up to about 1964; expatriates had to give way to local leadership in schools and the social and political picture changed. The Iban Conference, however, suffered severe hardship with Mission Board cutback. Their circumstances demand, according to a Theological School principal, a tentmaking ministry.

Macquarrie, discussing the subject, suggests that the crucial point regarding both types is their ultimate concern about the kingdom of God.37 The undeniable fact, however, is the actual need at certain stages at different times and the present need to consider the concepts of an auxiliary and greatly enlarged ministry not only from the utilitarian but also from the point of view of the input into the church and the outreach into the world in a continuing dialogue with the world and the world of work.

One avenue for the laity in Methodism has been the local ministry — ordained deacons and elders who are not entitled to an appointment or position in the administrative hierarchy but who may join later in life, taking a less stringent course of studies. A goodly number have served in this way, especially after the Pacific War. In rare cases a lay local preacher has been appointed pastor with permission to administer sacraments in his own church. All this has helped to blur the great divide and keep the challenge of the priesthood of the whole people of God before the people. It has been reported that a laity awakening is taking place in a small conference, witnessing about twenty lay persons including professionals committing themselves for ministerial studies and voluntary service. In spite of Methodist flexibility some graduates of schools not recognized by Methodists have chosen missionary work in non-denominational evangelical groups. As the *ekklesia* is wider than the institutional church, this interflow between the institutional and non-institutional may be all to the good in fulfilling God’s mission.

37*The Expository Times*, 1976, p. 150.
An Authentic Ministry

It may be fitting to conclude with some thoughts on authenticity. This is essential as the Methodist ministry has been too activist. An authentic ministry is concerned less with function than with the essential character or, to quote Macquarrie, the ontological view. He suggests the consideration of vocation or a special kind of election continuous with the election of all the faithful, the formation of the priestly character throughout life and regard for the kingdom as the overarching and ultimate concern.\(^{38}\) A living, intimate and responsible relation with God-in-Christ in whose ministry we participate is the *sine qua non* of an authentic ministry. A once-for-all decision for life is made in keeping with Romans 12:1. The ministry is a full life commitment.

The minister of the Word must be faithful to the ministry of the Gospel. Karl Barth, when asked if the serpent actually spoke to God, replied, “We would rather inquire what the serpent said.” One must be true to the Message and certainly to creedal statements in the Word of God as in Philippians 2:6-11. In 1952 an article by John C. Bennet appeared in the *Malaysia Message*, the Methodist paper. He spoke of the need of “a surer grasp of the uniqueness of the Christian gospel” and said:

> Much of the contemporary missionary work was originally inspired by a type of theology that had lost to some degree this sense of the uniqueness and irreplaceable character of Christianity. . . . Twenty years ago my own conception of Christianity would have provided little basis for missionary evangelism.\(^{39}\)

Theologies need to be put through a kerygmatic sieve. They should be studied for God’s Word, if it comes through. They are worthy of use only if they can be pressed into the service of the soul and of society. Non-English congregations will not endure for long any minister who domesticates faith to the dictates of non-faith theologies. Adequacy should not be sacrificed for relevance. Hans Kung spoke of “constants” and “variables” in the ministry. It is true of theology as well.

A theological teacher answering to Bennett’s description managed to denigrate to gospels of every miraculous element. A student anticipating him denied the resurrection and in honor the teacher said that there he drew the line. The modernist of the 1930’s bent low to accommodate science and when science took a humbler stance he could not unbend. How blessed are those who refuse to believe their doubts and propagate them! Moltmann’s phrase regarding the church may be applied to the ministry. It must be Christologically founded (e.g. Matt. 16:16) and eschatologically directed (I Cor. 10:11).

Autonomy was sought among other things for an indigenous character and expression, for a better missional outlook, for new forms of

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\(^{38}\)Ibid., p. 151.

ministry, community and comity suited to the local situation. However, these things have not come about in a hurry. There has been preoccupation with structures — mainly to have two churches along geo-political lines. Some adaptations concern leadership — having conference presidents with greater administrative responsibilities releasing the bishop for a greater measure of spiritual leadership. It cannot be denied that linguistic heterogeneity did not play a part in protracted talks though the process helped in developing sensitivity to cultural differences and realities. The unity in Christ amid diversities without denying them is part of the authentic Christian life and ministry.

The authentic ministry must be a liberated ministry. An academic has written about “the captive mind in the Asian context” and attributes it largely to “western dominance over the rest of the world.” He recognizes that the “problem is not to avoid the western world of learning but to assimilate it in a selective and constructive manner.” *Methodist leaders were writing about indigenous leadership for several decades, some of their advocates being Y. S. David, S. S. Pakianathan, D. H. Yap, E. S. Lau, Ho Seng Ong, Dr. Chen Su Lan, Milton David, S. M. Thevathasan, H. H. Berckman and the present writer. Copplestone writes of conditions up to 1919 and of two or more decades following:

The Malaysian mission, which was slow in overcoming the difficulties involved in raising up a trained and stable Asian ministry, had a structure that offered almost no opportunity to Asian ministers to move into places of influence in determining the progress of the movement in which they labored, but always under the dominance of American missionaries.*

Liberation of mind and spirit even under autonomy has to be worked at. As some liberation theologians point out, liberation is often followed by dominance by the stronger of the weaker. Authentic ministry must guard against the denial of autonomy on the grounds of financial power, status, majorities and the contextual temptations that require not contextual but supernatural or divine help.

The authentic ministry is a servant ministry. It is a ministry shared within the ministry of one who said, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).” The ransom part is often forgotten in quotations. D. T. Niles in *The Preacher’s Calling to be Servant* has expanded on the theme. Methodists, it is said, have sung their theology more than written it. Wesley wrote:

Constrained by Jesus’ love to live
The Servants of Mankind.

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The authentic minister is the servant of the suffering servant of the Lord. The costly and sacrificial character of Christ’s ministry in which ours is hidden will determine not only the functions but also how they are carried out by the ministry of the whole church. All churches today recognize the servant-model as the one thing needful for their own redemption and in its attainment find their authentic existence.