

The indigenisation of megachurch Christianity: Jesus is Lord in the Philippines

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THE JESUS IS LORD (JIL) Movement is one of the biggest independent megachurches in the Philippines and has even been described as one of the fastest growing churches in the world. It claims four million members in the Philippines and 55 other countries.

In 2013 JIL celebrated its 35th anniversary at the open-air grounds of the Luneta Grandstand in Manila. With an estimated 20,000 in attendance, the event adopted the theme 'Revolution of Righteousness', which organisers have explained in two ways. On one hand, the revolution pertains to a spiritual transformation that individuals have to undergo for the sake of salvation. Clearly, this idea cannot be detached from JIL's evangelical ethos. On the other hand, as far as JIL is concerned, such an idea has implications too on the way it sees Philippine society. Speaking at the anniversary, Bro. Eddie Villanueva, founder and senior pastor, emphasised that "the triumph of justice and righteousness must prevail, because, the Bible says, justice and righteousness are the foundations of God's throne." The anniversary's theme neatly defines JIL and its social location as an evangelical church in contemporary Philippines. It has clearly repackaged itself as a force in Philippine society, from an emerging Charismatic church in the 1970s, to a religious entity with political leverage and ambitions today.

What is interesting about JIL is that throughout its history, it has maintained a particularly Filipino identity that differentiates it from many other megachurches in the Philippines, while also sharing architectural and cultural features with their counterparts in the US and Asia. In view of its leadership structure, presence around the world, style of worship, and political ambitions, JIL has a strong Filipino sense that marks it as an indigenised form of the megachurch phenomenon. It is precisely this indigenisation that shows how JIL is a unique case of doing megachurch today. So while it is evangelical and charismatic and thus shares theological positions with many other conservative churches in the West, JIL is also an example of how world Christianity is enriched through its localisation in many parts of Asia.

The indigenisation of megachurch Christianity, insofar as JIL is concerned, takes shape in three respects. First, it is mainly catered for the working class, which predominantly constitutes the population of the Philippines. Helpful in making this assertion is the church's assertive use of the Filipino language and the production of local worship songs, some of which have also become mainstream within evangelical Christianity in the country. It is also fast expanding among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Second, its indigenisation lies in its organisational structure. Its leadership is very Filipino and it does not hold itself accountable to any international

evangelical organisation. It has its own ways of training its leaders and organising its local communities. The fact that it is independent from American-affiliated denominations renders JIL an essentially indigenous Christian church. Such independence allows its leaders and members to "bring their message to bear on the culture in which they resided".¹ Finally, JIL sees itself as a prophetic movement to shape the future of the Filipino nation. The Philippines is imagined by its leaders as a nation belonging to Christ. While this conviction is fundamentally spiritual, it is also highly political.

The transformation of political structures is possible through the moral transformation of those in public service. If religious leaders themselves are called upon by God to run for office, run they do. JIL is part of the Philippines for Jesus Movement and Bangon Pilipinas (Arise Philippines) Movement. Brother Eddie himself ran for president at least twice.

JIL demonstrates that megachurch Christianity is not a homogeneous phenomenon that is often associated with a growing middle-class and its accompanying theological and political conservatism. While there are megachurches that clearly fulfil these expectations in the Philippines and the rest of Southeast Asia, JIL presents itself as an alternative precisely because of its indigenized identity. In this sense, it is part of a wider story concerning the unfolding of Christianity in the global South. In other words, indigenization is how a megachurch sees itself first and foremost as an embodiment of Filipino Christianity that at the same time adds to the already rich tapestry of Asian Christianities. What is interesting is that while it may be theologically conservative as a charismatic and evangelical entity, JIL has offered itself as an alternative in other respects. It caters for the working class Filipino when many other megachurches have proven their success by affiliating with the burgeoning affluent and cosmopolitan segment of the population. JIL too has presented itself as a political alternative that instead of simply supporting a set of winnable candidates, has fielded its own under the impression that what is more important for society is moral renewal.

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Reference

- 1 Shenk, W. 2005. "Contextual theology: The last frontier", in Sanneh, L. & J. Carpenter (eds.) 2005. *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World*. Oxford and NY: Oxford University Press, p.207.

Reaching the city of Kuala Lumpur and beyond: being a Pentecostal megachurch in Malaysia

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PENTECOSTALISM IS SAID to have arrived in Malaysia in the 1930s and its domestic growth has been consistent with the global charismatic movement of the 1970s. Pentecostal churches have flourished among 'those from the margins of society', but have also increasingly resonated with the middle and upper classes. In Malaysia, the political marginalisation of the ethnic Chinese has seen Pentecostalism become a vehicle for the consolidation of the Chinese identity as a modern, individualised subject in the Malaysian state.

Calvary Church is a Pentecostal church based in the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Established in 1960 as a mission church, it is the largest Assembly of God (AOG) church in Malaysia. However, the Second Malaysia Plan in the early 1970s restricted the stay of foreign missionaries to no longer than ten years, resulting in the appointment of Prince and Petrina Guneratnam as Calvary's first Malaysian senior pastors in 1972; positions they hold up to the present time.

Calvary Church's congregation comprise middle and upper middle-class ethnic Chinese, with a demographic profile that is predominantly made up of middle-aged and baby-boomer cohorts. Diversity among the church is evident with the presence of ethnic Indian members, while newer members include transnational workers like Filipinos, Nigerians, Cambodians and Dutch. As of 2014, the church had sixteen ministries that catered to all segments of its congregation. Cell groups are an essential building block for the church structure and are held in highly urban areas in Kuala Lumpur. The church conducts services in English, Chinese and Bahasa Malaysia. Operating in multiracial, multiethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, Calvary Church caters to and facilitates this diversity. Broadly though, the church views itself as having a higher calling and takes its role in nation-building seriously.

According to estimates Calvary Church has a congregation of 3000 members and its latest venue – the Calvary Convention Centre – is claimed to be the largest in South-east Asia with a seating capacity of 5000. According to the church's website, it is dedicated to the pursuit of "holistic activities", and the convention centre was built as a "non-profit project". The church regards 'holistic activities' to mean conventions, banquets, seminars, musicals, creative art productions, educational and vocational training, in addition to spiritual development that "aim to develop our nation's young, and people of all ages and from all walks of life into useful and exemplary citizens of Malaysia". It is noteworthy that the Pentecostal church blurs the distinction between sacred and secular, and frames its new venue and itself as a contribution to the project of nation-building. In engaging with notions of nationhood and community-building, the church is thus able to indigenise itself and exude a non-threatening image to the rest of the non-Christian communities.

Embedded in Malaysia's multicultural but increasingly Islamic-dominant setting, Pentecostal churches like Calvary Church offer non-Malay Muslims resources that enable believers to position and re-script their identities in ways that provide a sense of empowerment and personal transformation in alignment with middle class aspirations. The megachurch's ability to justify the possession of wealth and well-being as a symbol of God's favour, which can be contributed back to community and nation building, has made it popular with the Malaysian Chinese middle-class.

Pentecostalism is known to be adaptable to the local culture in which it is located. While it is important to recognise this adaptability, it is equally important to refrain from the tendency to homogenise Pentecostal churches based on common traits. Asian Pentecostalism, for example, has been argued to be recognisable as a global faith yet specific to locality with clear indigenous characteristics, while politically and historically different from 'Western' or 'American' models. Calvary Church in Kuala Lumpur is certainly evidence of this. It has grown over the years by capitalising on its transnational origins and network while operating under a locally sensitive religious environment by incorporating theologies (both religious and organisational) that have been meaningful to its middle-class ethnic Chinese and Indian congregation.

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Below: Calvary Church in Kuala Lumpur (www.calvary.org.my).



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throughout the sermons and worship appeals to the Youtube appetite for the fast paced pastiche of words, sounds, and melodies of a younger generation. Gigantic screens beam the lyrics of songs or verses, and even vows to God for the worshippers to recite. The KKR service is "Karaoke Christianity" en masse.²

If such features are characteristic of Pentecostal megachurches around the world, what then are the more local qualities of Indonesian Pentecostal megachurches? Following the attacks against churches in 1996 and 1998, more ethnic minorities have gravitated towards larger events and congregations for collective healing and sense of security. The collective healing worship services appear to be particularly attractive to psychologically injured Christians, many of whom are keenly aware of their pre-carious existence in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. Churches located in malls or commercial buildings protected by guards and without obvious symbols of Christianity are now preferred over scattered neighborhood churches that risk closure for not possessing a legal permit or may be vulnerable to attacks. Big numbers in big halls of saved Indonesian souls are vital signs of self-empowerment and (divine) justification of their presence in the ever-more self-consciously spiritual, if not strictly Islamic, Indonesia.

Against this backdrop of Indonesian Pentecostal ethnic minority complex, my chapter examines the traumatizing life experiences of the Chinese-Canadian-Indonesian pastor Philip Mantofa. I pay attention to his programmes of worship such as 'A Trip to Hell, Army of God', and 'Asia for Jesus', and the GMS church's logic of counting souls. From there I shall discuss the international connections of the Indonesian Christian KKR, which form part of the global Christian network of which GMS is an increasingly important part.

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References

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- 2 Twitchell, J.B. 2004. *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld*. Simon and Schuster, p.84.