

Peninsular Malaysia Mission

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Fai Leong began his pastoral ministry in Kuala Lumpur in 1980, after he graduated from Hong Kong Adventist College. At the time of writing, he was the president of the Peninsular Malaysia Mission.

Peninsular Malaysia is the western part of Malaysia, located between Thailand in the North and Singapore in the South with a total land area of 130,590 square kilometers. According to the official census held in 2010, the population in this territory is 22,055,349. In 2015, there were 28 organized churches and 9 companies with a total membership of 5,678 in Peninsular Malaysia Mission.

Origin of the Adventist Work in Peninsular Malaysia

The first Seventh-day Adventist to visit Peninsular Malaysia (historically known as Malaya) is thought to have been Abram La Rue, a literature evangelist who arrived sometime between 1888 and 1903, when he based his ministry in Hong Kong. He was closely followed by a convert from India, H. B. Meyers. Many Adventist books were sold and distributed throughout Peninsular Malaysia in the early 1900s.¹

On May 19, 1905, the General Conference Committee took an action to place Peninsular Malaysia, including the Straits Settlements, under the care of the Australasian Union Conference.² In 1904, the Australasian Union Conference sent G. F. Jones and his wife, together with Robert A. Caldwell, a literature evangelist, to work in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia.³ Caldwell spent about three months in Peninsular Malaysia, most of the time in Penang, in 1905.⁴ In early 1906, G. F. Jones reported that a newly converted Chinese family had moved from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur.⁵ In 1907, F. J. Parkin, another literature evangelist from Australia who was based in Singapore, went to canvass in Penang. While Parkin was in Penang, W. W. Fletcher, an Australian missionary also went to Penang to assist him for a week.⁶ Before the Asiatic Division was created in 1909 and organized in 1910, all missionaries in Southeast Asia were sent from the Australasian Union Conference.⁷

In 1908, Amy Chan Teck Sung, known as Amy Tan Soo Meng after her marriage, was the first native worker from Singapore. Along with her parents and younger brother she canvassed in Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, and Seremban, where there were large Chinese populations. Her father, Chan Thiam Hee, sold Chinese tracts. This was the first time that Chinese Adventist literature was introduced in Peninsular Malaysia.⁸

In 1910, the Asiatic Division was organized by the General Conference with responsibility for the region that included Peninsular Malaysia, although no formal organization yet existed in the territory. In early 1911, Roy P. Montgomery and his wife arrived in Kuala Lumpur from the United States to start a permanent work for the

denomination. They rented a small hall in the southern part of Kuala Lumpur in which they held services twice a week with a good attendance of educated Tamils and a few Chinese who were mostly Catholic.⁹ Later, Mrs. Montgomery studied the Bible in Malay and English with a number of Chinese Nyonyas—straits-born Chinese women.¹⁰

In 1913, A. R. Duckworth, a convert from Singapore, went to Kuala Lumpur with his wife and children to work among the Tamil-speaking community. He was a well-educated Anglo-Indian who was well known both in Singapore and Southern India. After a few months of labor, Duckworth's eldest son and a Tamil man were baptized. These were the first converts among the Tamil people in Kuala Lumpur. In 1914, F. A. Detamore conducted a series of tent meetings and four Tamil-speaking individuals were baptized as a result.¹¹

Organization

The Malaysian Mission, which became the Malaysian Union Mission in 1918, was officially organized on January 4, 1913. Under its administrative umbrella, six local missions were established, including the East Java Mission, the West Java Mission, the Sumatra Mission, the British North Borneo Mission, the Straits Settlements Mission, and the Federated Malay States Mission.¹²

On July 1, 1914, the Federated Malay States Mission was organized with George A. Thompson, a missionary from the United States, as the director, secretary, and treasurer. The mission office was located at 5, Brickfield, Kuala Lumpur. Thompson was assisted by A. R. Duckworth who could speak Malay well. Thus far, most of the baptized members were government servants from the Indian community. Seeing that the majority of the general population was Chinese, work began with them and later proved fruitful.¹³

The first national president was Y. H. Phang. The longest serving president to date was T. K. Chong, who served from 1967 to 1980, a total of 14 years.

Historical Development

For the first ten years, the work in Peninsular Malaysia was mainly among the Tamil-speaking community because they understood English and most of them were government employees. However, very few had the privilege of keeping the Sabbath, despite having applied for Saturday off. As more and more Chinese literature was distributed and the missionaries learned the Chinese language, efforts to communicate among the Chinese population proved fruitful. Chinese was the majority population in Kuala Lumpur and they were less dependent on government positions.¹⁴

Two earnest native workers were added to the mission workforce and they were able to reach the community effectively. Then a piece of land was purchased at Kuala Lumpur on which to erect a church building for worship.¹⁵ During school vacations, the Chinese instructor Phang Nyuk Thin of the Malaysian Training School in

Singapore, came to conduct an evangelistic series in both Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh. In 1919, the first hall effort on the Malay Peninsula was held in the Chinese Hall in Kuala Lumpur targeting the Hakka community. The effort was followed by weekly meetings and house-to-house work.¹⁶

The organized outreach in Ipoh began in 1920 when Wan Yun Chong, a Chinese evangelist, started work in the area. After a month of ground work, an evangelistic series was conducted in a hall for the Hakka community in the town. The speaker for the series was Phang Nyuk Thin from Singapore. The average attendance was sixty adults and most of them were farmers who lived five kilometers from town. At the close of the series, seventeen new members were added to the church. Seeing the need for workers in this territory, eight young people were sent to the training school in Singapore to prepare for the ministry.¹⁷

G. C. Leedy replaced G. A. Thompson in early 1922 as the latter went back to the United States for furlough. A commodious place was rented in Ipoh as a meeting place as well as a training center to provide practical instruction to the evangelists, teachers, and officers.¹⁸

On December 12, 1924, a mission clinic opened on Penang Island directed by Dr. J. E. Gardner. The clinic was located in Muntri Street. The ground floor was the consultation room and treatment rooms. The first floor served as the residence for the doctor and his family, which was later converted to a ward for in-patients and residence for staff. The waiting room on the ground floor doubled as a Bible reading room for both workers and others who were interested. The same place was used as a meeting place on Sabbath. As a result of this work, a number of people were baptized and these were later organized into a church. Ng Hong Boon, who was trained for the ministry in Singapore, assisted Gardner in the clinic from its very beginning and became the first pastor of that congregation.¹⁹

The evangelistic work in Penang grew very fast due to the presence of the mission clinic. In 1925, the mission assigned Stephen Pan and his wife, a native evangelist, to Penang to assist Ng Hong Boon. By the end of that year, eighteen people were baptized into the church. Lee Ah Chong, father of Lee Chin Hin—a lifelong worker in Penang Adventist Hospital—was the first Penang native to be baptized into the Adventist faith.²⁰

As the membership in Penang grew, the church decided to move out from the clinic to Northam Road (Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah), and then to Rangoon Road. As the English speaking members increased, the multi-lingual congregation decided to split into two separate congregations in 1932. But they shared the same facilities for their respective worship services. In 1936, they moved to a spacious building with a large compound at 140 Burmah Road (Jalan Burma). The two congregations continued to share the facilities. Realizing the need for a permanent church home, a piece of land nearby was bought some time in 1939 with funds appropriated by the General Conference. Plans were laid for the erection of the church building. Unfortunately, when war broke out in 1941, the project had to be postponed. The building project was resumed in the latter part of 1950, and the church was dedicated on Sabbath, September 15, 1951. This building was used until 1999, when it was replaced

by a larger church along with an adjacent three-level multipurpose building.²¹

Development of Indian Congregations

During the first half of the twentieth century many Tamil Indians migrated to Malaysia. In 1901, the Indian population was 120,000. In 1957, the number had grown to 820,000. By the late 1920s, the evangelistic efforts among the Indian communities changed focus from the elites to the general workers in the rubber plantations and tin mines. The majority of these groups were Tamils and Telugu migrants from Southern India.²²

After G. A. Thompson's departure, fewer Tamil people came to the Tamil-language meetings, in part because they faced great challenges in obtaining Sabbaths off. Those who accepted the faith were forced to return to their home country in order to keep their faith. Secondly, the church had moved its attention to the Chinese community.²³ In 1928, an Indian believer, Brother Nalliah, gave up his work for the government and began work for the Tamils and other Indian people.²⁴

In 1935, a young Tamil, educated in an Adventist school in India, was called to conduct evangelism in Kuala Lumpur, the center of a large Tamil population. Meanwhile, the Adventist message was also making in-roads among the Telugus of the peninsula, who eagerly entered into evangelism—so much so, that a road running through an area of rubber plantations from Teluk Intan (formerly known as Telum Anson) to Bagan Datoh in lower Perak, one of the Federated Malay States, was known as "the Seventh-day Adventist Road."

The mission engaged six Telugu workers to work among the Telugus in Selangor and Perak where most of the rubber plantations and tin mines were found.²⁵ These laborers were strongly supported by the Telugu believers. Despite their lack of education, as Telugu church members moved from estate to estate, or from mine to mine, they witnessed by leading Bible studies or simply reciting Bible passages. As a result of their aggressive efforts, the first church building for the Telugus in Sungai Way was dedicated on June 30, 1935. Because the Peninsular Malaysia school system taught only Tamil, all Telugu-language congregations eventually became Tamil-speaking churches.²⁶

Development of Malay-Speaking Congregations

In Malaysia, the constitution of the country prohibits any proselytizing to the Muslim community. They were protected prior to the independence of the country.²⁷ The mission leaders were warned by the authorities because complaints had gone to them that the Muslims were taking the Bible correspondence courses. A Malay newspaper also reported against the Adventist Church's canvassing and correspondence course activities.²⁸

Prior to independence, people in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore could move freely within this region. In 1924, the church engaged Immanuel Sirigar to evangelize the Batak communities along the West coast of the Federated Malay States.²⁹ By the end of 1956, the Malay-speaking Sidang Advent Hari Ke Tujoh mission was

organized with its headquarters in Singapore to serve Malay-speaking communities in both Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. After Malaysian independence, the Malay-speaking mission was eventually integrated with the Malaya Mission (which replaced the Federated Malay States Mission in 1957)³⁰ in the beginning of 1961.³¹

For almost 20 years, there was no Malay-speaking congregation in the Peninsular Malaysia Mission. In the early 1980s, there were many Adventists from both the Sabah and Sarawak Missions who came to the Peninsula for employment opportunities that led to the formation of a few Malay-speaking congregations.

The Southeast Asia Union Mission operates a 250-bed hospital in Penang that was established in 1924. This hospital is well known to the communities in the Northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. A mission primary school, Teh Sin School, was established in 1929 and was later closed at the end of 1964 due to government policy.

Evolution of Peninsular Malaysia Mission

1914-1956	Malay States Mission under Malayan Union Mission. The territory of this mission did not include Johore State and Malacca State until the dissolution of Singapore Mission in 1932.
1957- 1972	Malaya Mission (Seventh-day Adventist Mission of Malaya) under Southeast Asia Union Mission.
1973- 1987	West Malaysia-Singapore Mission under Southeast Asia Union Mission
1988-	Peninsular Malaysia Mission under Southeast Asia Union Mission. The change was caused by the formation of Singapore Adventist Mission.

Mission Office Addresses Over the Years

1914 – 1915	5, Brickfield Road, Kuala Lumpur
1916 – 1922	14, Scott Road, Kuala Lumpur
1923 – 1925	1, Parry Road, Kuala Lumpur
1926 – 1928	5, Treacher Road, Kuala Lumpur
1929 – 1937	83, Bukit Bintang Road, Kuala Lumpur
1938 – 1957	140, Bukit Bintang Road, Kuala Lumpur
1958 – 1996	166, Bukit Bintang Road, Kuala Lumpur
1997 –	Unit 22-1, Block A, Kuchai Business Centre, Kuala Lumpur

Comparison of Population with Membership

Year	Territory Population	Church Membership
1915	2,649,970	12
1925	3,690,000	180
1935	4,347,704	704
1945	5,095,520	859
1955	6,244,968	1,299
1965	9,382,435	2,346
1975	10,967,328	3,483
1985	15,570,000	4,910
1995	16,034,040	3,684
2005	20,725,000	4,331
2015	23,669,067	5,596

There was a leap in church membership from 1925 to 1935 attributed to the ministry of the hospital in Penang.³² The decline in growth from 1935 to 1945 was the result of the Second World War. The decreased church membership in 1995 was the result of the division of the West Malaysia-Singapore Mission into the Peninsular Malaysia Mission and the Singapore Mission.

Challenges and Outlook for the Future

About 61% of Malaysians are Muslim and there are stringent laws against any attempt to reach out to them. In the last ten years, the religious intolerance in this region has escalated, which makes evangelistic efforts even more difficult. Securing a lawful place for worship is another challenge. Only 9 percent of the population is Christian. Therefore only 30 percent of the population is open to traditional evangelism.

Church growth in the Peninsular Malaysia Mission has always been an ever-evolving process. The key to mission growth between 1914 and 1948 was literature evangelism, which took the Gospel to every existing town in the region and was followed up with Bible study groups. From 1948 to 1980, the key to mission growth was the Bible Correspondence School based in Singapore. Local congregations followed up with all the graduates from the Bible Correspondence School and a few new congregations were formed due to the ministry of the school. After 1980, the effectiveness of this ministry regressed and it was closed in 2005. Pathfinder youth ministry also contributed to church growth in this mission from the 1950s to 2000. There are many former Pathfinders among the current leaders of the mission, as well as, the local churches.

As of 2018, the Peninsular Malaysia Mission has a steady annual growth rate of 2 percent. As the mission continues to fulfill its purpose, there are many lessons from the past to help shape new evangelism strategies: (1) Using the literature to reach every family. (2) Encourage total member involvement, particularly in their respective places of employment. (3) Medical ministry to meet people's health needs. (4) Using media to replace the Bible Correspondence School. (5) To rekindle the missionary spirit of the youth programs.

Chronology of Presidents

G. A. Thompson (1914–1922); G. C. Leedy (1923–1928); F. F. Pratt (1930–1930); L. B. Mershon (1931–1932); W. W. R. Lake (1933–1938); D. S. Kime (1939–1939); J. M. Nerness (1940–1942); Y. H. Phang (1947–1955); T. C. Chin (1956–1963); S. J. Lee (1964–1967); T. K. Chong (1967–1980); Joshua Mok (1981–1985); H. T. Leoh (1986–1997); C. Y. Phoon (1998 January to June); Joshua Mok (1998 July to December); Francis Lajanim (1999–2005); Fai Leong (2006–2017); Meng Cheng Tan (2018–).

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