

# GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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## Reformed Baptist Churches in Malaysia: The First Ten Years (1983-1993)

by B. S. Poh

In January 1982 my wife, Goody, and I returned to Malaysia. We had been officially set apart by the Belvidere Road Church, Liverpool, to serve the Lord in our own homeland. While waiting for a job, we worshipped in an independent church on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur.

In June of that year, I began working as a lecturer in the Engineering Faculty of the University of Agriculture in Serdang. After a month of strenuous commuting between Kuala Lumpur and Serdang by bus, we finally moved to Serdang. We worshipped in an independent church nearby, assessing how best we might serve the Lord in the given situation. It became clear that we would have to voluntarily suppress the doctrinal distinctives we held dear to, which we were not prepared to do. Within a few weeks, we had made up our mind that we should found a new church in the then new housing estate where we lived.

### Beginning of a new work

We started weekly Bible studies in our home from the month of August. Our policy from the start was to begin the work from scratch, with no intention of “sheep-stealing”, i.e. attempting to draw believers away from existing churches. A number of Christian students, who normally worshipped in other churches, joined us to benefit from the systematic Bible teaching. Some of them desired to join us when we were ready to constitute as a church a year later. We turned them all away in order to avoid being charged with “sheep-stealing”. On hindsight, we learned that that was a mistake.

The Bible's teaching is that the local church is the custodian of the truth. It is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15) - the pillar to hold the gospel high so that sinners may be drawn to Christ, and the ground, or foundation, of the truth on which the faith of believers may be built. Matthew 28:19-20 shows us the same thing - the gospel must be proclaimed to the world, and believers must be taught the commandments of Christ. That being the case, we must not only evangelise, but also train up believers. We must therefore not be too scrupulous about believers coming to us from other places. We do not steal sheep, but we grow grass. Hungry sheep from elsewhere might come to us, in which case we have no right to drive them away.

The effect of turning away those who wanted to join us meant that we missed out on the opportunity to ground them in the truth. One of them finally joined an extreme charismatic group and began to speak ill of us. All of them were scattered when they graduated. Many of those with whom we maintained contact are today in general evangelical churches or charismatic ones. We have discovered to our disappointment that those who were close to us are today no longer sympathetic to reformed teaching. This has served to convince us of the necessity to concentrate on planting strong gospel churches, building up church members, and preparing them so that wherever they are scattered they may be used to begin other new works.

### Efforts at outreach

Back to the early days in Serdang. We made every effort to bring the gospel to the local families. I would cycle around the housing estate in the evening to get acquainted with those lounging outside their houses after dinner. The *pasar malam* (night market) was fruitful ground to get to know people. One had to be “thick-skinned” and friendly to people; to smile and greet them in a natural way. “Shopping are you?” “*Banyak sekali awak beli!*” (“You have bought so much!”) “How long have

you been in this housing estate?" "Is that your son/daughter?" "How old is he/ she?" "Where exactly do you live?" "Can I drop by to have a cup of tea with you?" We would attend birthdays and visit on festive occasions, remembering to bring appropriate gifts. We organised functions of our own, celebrating birthdays and our wedding anniversary, serving plenty of food and drinks, to which friends were invited. These were often accompanied by a short talk from the Bible. We were able to get to know neighbours well when buying bread from the breadman who came on his motorbike every evening. Through this, one family joined us in the weekly Bible Study.

Each Bible Study ended with a nice supper - red-bean soup one week, green-bean soup the next, black glutinous rice, boiled tapiocca, steamed bananas, etc. on other weeks. We fed our souls on the Bible, and our bellies on the food! Those were hearty occasions when friendship and trust were forged. There were disappointing times when it rained and only one or two persons turned up. We continued with our Bible studies nevertheless.

Very soon, our house was too small to cater for the growing numbers attending the Bible studies. Some twenty people were filling up our small sitting-room. We decided to rent half the top-floor of a double-storey shoplot, for the fee of RM150 per month. We decided also to begin a worship service on Sundays. Chairs, hymn books and Bibles were bought. Curtains had to be made. Everyone was excited as we got the premises ready.

### **Constituting a new church**

Some fifteen to twenty people began to worship regularly with us. The months passed quickly. In the Sunday services, the series of studies on the parables of Christ in Luke was followed by the First Epistle of John. In the weekly Bible studies, the series of evangelistic messages based on the Gospel of Mark was finished. We covered next the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of the local church, and the doctrines of grace. Eight individuals were ready to covenant with the two of us to form a church. Four persons were baptised in preparation for the occasion. The baptism was held in the sea, at Port Dickson, some two hours drive from Serdang. Many others joined us for the joyous occasion, taking the day off for picnic by the beach.

We wrote to the elders of Belvidere Road Church in Liverpool, informing them of our intention to constitute as a church on the 27 of September, 1983, almost exactly a year after we began the first Bible Study in Serdang. On that day itself, we received the following letter from one of the elders, who was also the church secretary:

*"Greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus. Thank you for your letter informing us of the actual constituting of Sri Serdang Church. The Elders have asked me to write to you and assure you of our prayer for you both on 27th September as you constitute, and in the future.*

*We are overwhelmed at the goodness of God to you in bringing the church into being. Our exhortation to you is that 'you will run with patience the race that is set before you, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our salvation'. Rejoice in the fact that come what may, God has promised 'I will never leave you or forsake you'. Unto this great God we commend you.*

*'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you, dear brother Poh, and the church His peace'.*

*I write with great thankfulness and joy. How great is our God."*

That evening, at 8.00pm, those who were constituting together were already seated in the meeting place. We all stood to sing the hymn "Glory be to God the Father". After the opening prayer, I exhorted the brethren from Hebrews 12:1-2, the verse quoted by the elders of Belvidere Road Church. The prospective members next came forward one by one to give brief testimonies. I then led the group to read aloud together, with right hand raised to shoulder level, the church covenant. The individuals

then came forward to sign the membership book to which was affixed a copy of the church covenant. The Lord's Supper followed. We sang the hymn "I know that my Redeemer lives", after which I closed in prayer. A church was born that night!

### **Building up the church**

The church began to attract more people. From the initial twenty people, the worship services began to grow to forty people, and then to sixty people. The Sunday School for children had, at first, to be held in our home because of lack of space. An evangelistic Christmas party was begun, in which were plenty of food and drink, hectic group games, hymn singing, a gospel message, followed by the distribution of Christian books and other gifts. Toward the end of 1984, we moved into the top floor of a three-storey shoplot which had more room and was more centrally located in the housing estate. The initial rental was RM400 per month, a sum which we could just about afford. Most of those who attended our meetings were students from the university. We began to pray for local converts. Friends in other parts of the world prayed with us. The first local convert was baptised in March 1984.

We began sending out teams, each of two or three persons, on motorbikes to do house to house visitation. This was done every Saturday evening, but was later changed to Sunday afternoons. The teams would meet together to be assigned the areas to be visited, after which I would commend them to the Lord in prayer. We would gather again after visitation at the appointed time to present reports, after which we would pray together.

The teams were encouraged to follow up with contacts on other days of the week. The primary purpose was to bring the gospel to the people. There were, however, social implications to the gospel. A job was found for a widow in the slum area. Free tuition was given to the children of a poor family. Another widow, whose husband died in a road accident, had to be accompanied to the law courts. Many other chores were done to minister to the contacts, many of whom had become our close friends. Two families who were contacted from the visitations were converted two years later. Another family was converted after three years of regular Bible studies in their home.

Being a young church with limited resources and man-power, we had to involve every member in some aspects of the church's life. It was our hope that this policy of "100% involvement" would continue as the church grew. Two members returned to Sarawak at the end of 1985. In 1995, they moved to Kuching, where a new preaching point was formed.

### **Training of Members**

Not only must the outreach be strong, the membership of the church must also be built up in the faith. The public ministry of the word was already having an effect upon the lives of individuals, giving them an appetite for more. A "Guided Reading Programme" was drawn up for the members. It consisted of three stages of guided reading of select books. The books were of different sorts, to give balance as well as to maintain interest. The stages were of increasing difficulty. A "Book Review" form was prepared to help the participants. Once a month, the participants would each present a short talk on one book he or she had read. The "Book Review" form was used as the guide. The others present would ask questions at the end of the ten-minute presentation.

The Guided Reading Programme was supplanted by the Leadership Training Programme, begun in February 1987. The first batch of five men met with me once a fortnight to discuss assigned readings covering preaching, pastoral care, church discipline, eschatology, covenant theology, Reformed Baptist distinctives, etc.. On completion of the training ten months later, I was taken in by the police. Such was the providential dealings of God! The young church was not going to be left without able leadership.

Many batches of young men had gone through the LTP. There have been many requests for the GRP to be revived. The Ministerial Training Programme was begun in January 1991 to train candidates for the ministry. This was run in conjunction with other Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia.

### **Trials and Triumphs**

There was not one year when there was no baptism. The membership of the church grew to nearly thirty persons in five years. Yes, this was nothing but a mere trickle. Yet, the day of small things must not to be despised! Along the way, discipline had to be exercised to keep the church pure. Those who lapsed and fell into grievous sins had to be excommunicated when they refused to repent.

A number of other Christians and churches became upset with us. Our Calvinism upset the Arminians, and our cessationist position upset the charismatics. The general evangelicals accused us of being too strict and isolationist. Some even labelled us as “fundamentalist” and “dispensational”! At home and from abroad, negative and unhelpful comments were made about us. We continued to labour on inspite of much opposition and misrepresentation. We have over the years the privilege of seeing the fruit of the ministry, which is all that matters to us. A tree is known by its fruit.

Other churches, having the 1689 Confession of Faith as their doctrinal basis, have been founded. All these came about as the direct or indirect fruits of the ministry of the Sri Serdang Church. We could only stand back and sing, “To God be the glory! Great things He has done!”

### **Fulltime ministry**

Our first son, Yeh Han, was born on 18th October 1983, about three weeks after the Sri Serdang Church was constituted. He is thus the measure of the age of the church. Other sons were added to our family. Responsibilities at the university were growing, the church was growing, and our family was growing. I knew that the time had come for me to leave the university. The church, however, was not strong enough financially to support me and my family. An unsuccessful attempt was made to gain money through the publication of a book so that the car loan from the university could be paid up before I left. The Lord provided the money for that through gifts from some friends. Two churches abroad agreed to help support us in the ministry until the church could be self-supporting. On 15th September, 1987, I gave notice to the university of my intention to resign at the end of the year.

I was looking forward to fulltime Christian service when, on 27th October, I was arrested by the police in the well-known “Operation Lalang” for my Christian activities. Tension between the different communities in the nation had been whipped up to dangerous proportions by certain politicians. To diffuse the situation, nearly 200 people were arrested - politicians, academicians, social workers, educationists, environmentalists, and religious workers. I was one of those arrested, although I had never been involved in politics. Thus, I began fulltime service in prison, remaining behind bars for nearly a year.

The church was jolted by my arrest. Three couples left us. After 325 days of detention, I was released. It took a while to reorient myself. My wife and three sons bore the brunt of my incarceration. The church had been most supportive of the family during my absence. Another son was added to our family a year later. We focussed on building up the church, and on planting other churches. The Sri Hartamas Church, which was started in 1986, continued to grow. A new outreach point was started at Subang Jaya in February 1989. Worship services were started there in October 1990. By mid-1990, we became fully self-supporting, so that the partial support from abroad was no longer needed.

In January 1991, I relinquished my pastoral charge over the Sri Serdang Church and began to oversee the Sri Hartamas Church and the Subang Jaya congregation. In May 1991 another elder was appointed in the Sri Hartamas congregation. In September that same year, a visiting speaker from Australia influenced our new elder to his particular view of the eldership, which was different from what our church holds to. The elder became difficult to work with. Tension built up. In September 1993 the church accepted his resignation from eldership. He and his wife left to join another church.

### **Conclusion**

The tenth anniversary of the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia was celebrated without pomp and fanfare. One issue of the Gospel Highway magazine was devoted to the occasion. We were looking ahead to expanding the work of the gospel at home and abroad. We were looking to God to bless our labours for Him.