

# GOSPEL HIGHWAY

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## Reformed Baptist Churches in Malaysia: The Past Fifteen Years (1994-2008)

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Come September 2008 the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia would be twenty-five years old. Of course, this does not mean that all the congregations were founded at the same time. And it does not mean that all the congregations have continued to exist. An account of the founding of the first few congregations was given during the tenth anniversary, in 1993. Those were exhilarating years of growth and blessing. The next fifteen years consisted of roughly three phases - those of continuing growth, of developing problems, and of painful re-alignment.

### **Five years of continuing growth (1994-1998)**

The years 1994-1998 were heady days of church planting throughout Malaysia. Preaching points were established, a number of which were constituted not long after. The aim was to plant a Reformed Baptist church in each main town in the country, which in turn would fan out to the smaller towns and villages. We looked upon ourselves as pioneers in a largely pagan land. By having a church in each main town, church members would have somewhere to worship when they travelled or wherever they settled.

A new preaching point would be placed under the supervision of the nearest constituted church, whose pastor would visit regularly to preach. Our close interaction with some pastors of other denominations were also blessed of the Lord. They had been attending the annual Reformed Ministers' Conference and the once-in-two-months Ministers' Fraternal so that, with time, they became convinced of the Reformed Baptist distinctives. One was from an evangelical church. Another was from a Brethren church. Another was from a Methodist church. Yet another was from a General Baptist church. Two of them left their denominations to join us in establishing new churches, due to their newly found theological convictions. Two others turned their churches into Reformed Baptist ones after spending extended time teaching and convincing their members. We were also setting our eyes on planting churches in neighbouring Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia.

By the end of this period, there were fourteen congregations in Malaysia and Singapore and seven fulltime pastors, each in his respective church. The pastors and leading men of the churches continued to meet in the once-in-two-months Ministers' Fraternal. A Missionary Support Fund was started, administered by the Sri Hartamas Church, to which all the churches voluntarily contributed. This Fund was intended for the support of native pastors overseas, and local pastors in pioneering situations. In 1993, we came to know of Reformed pastors in Sri Lanka. We began contributing funds to one church for the purchase of a motorbike, and for the construction of the church building. I visited the country in 1996 with another pastor, after which we began supporting a man in Sri Lanka who was planting a new church. In 1995, I came to know a pastor in Myanmar, whom I visited in January 1996. This was the beginning of a string of visits to the country, which led to more contacts, and opportunities to preach and conduct seminars on specific topics. We began supporting two men to plant new churches. These visits, and the accompanying opportunities, were not without their problems. It was a time of learning for us, as we sought to apply biblical principles of missions.

The Sri Hartamas Church, of which I was the pastor, had had to move because the landlord of the rented shophouse we were meeting in decided to increase the monthly rental by over 200%. We borrowed a slot of time on Sunday for worship at the premises of our daughter congregation in Subang Jaya,

while other meetings were held in a flat. The Subang Jaya congregation had begun as an off-shoot of the Sri Hartamas Church in October 1990. In 1998 we purchased a corner terrace house at Damansara Utama and renovated it as a meeting place for the Sri Hartamas Church. My family moved from Serdang to live in that house, with the view of moving to another house later. On 9 September 1999, the church began meeting in the new premises and became known as the Damansara Church (Reformed Baptist). Our family was to move from the church premises to another house nearby in August 2002. We looked upon the move of the church to its own premises as a step of progress in gospel work. We had been meeting in rented premises for so long. All the other congregations throughout Malaysia were also meeting in rented premises until about that time, when a few of them began to purchase properties of their own. Moreover, the new location of the church appeared ideal for outreach because it is densely populated and has many colleges teeming with both local and foreign students.

We thought progress and growth would continue as opportunities opened up when, in reality, problems were brewing. Dissension within the fellowship of pastors in Malaysia began to emerge.

### **Five years of developing problems (1999-2003)**

Local growth in the number of Reformed Baptist congregations, coupled with growing opportunities overseas had meant the need to coordinate the overall work. I had been used of God in founding the various congregations in the country, in training up pastors, and in helping men of other denominations clarify their own doctrinal stand. It was natural that I became the Coordinator of the overall work, covering the nation and abroad. From very early, I intentionally attempted to train up and expose other men to the various facets of gospel work. One pastor was assigned to be in charge of the welfare of the work in Sri Lanka, and another was assigned to do the same for Myanmar. The one in charge would travel to the country at least once a year - to assess, advise, and teach. He would be accompanied by a different local pastor each time, so that these other pastors had the opportunity of being personally involved. The recommendations of the one in charge of the particular country would often be decisive in the decisions of the Fraternal.

One pastor had been showing a bad spirit in our Fraternal by occasional outbursts of sharp words against me. I overlooked most of these incidents but had had to admonish him in private, and also in the presence of witnesses, occasionally. It became clear that he was not accepting the admonitions well, for he would return to justify himself each time, and even raise other petty issues against me. This was all done in private, so that others in the Fraternal were not aware of what was happening. I had attempted to maintain an eirenic spirit, to overlook small matters, and to keep the peace and unity of the fellowship. Unbeknown to me, this man began to call for a separate Fraternal, leaving me out. Occasionally, the meetings of these men would become known to me in a providential manner but I tried to overlook this, thinking that it was their right to meet on extra occasions. If they were fostering closer fellowship with one another, what was wrong?

It became known to me a good two years later that negative things were being said about me, with not a single man among them having the courage or discernment to put a stop to that. No wonder, I began to encounter problems in my relationship with some of the other men in the fellowship. Some of our church members who interacted with that particular pastor more than other members soon became disaffected with me. They were to leave the church later, after the breakup of the Ministers' Fraternal. That pastor had been in touch with a respected pastor overseas, and receiving advice from him based on his one-sided input. Other pastors in the fellowship were emboldened to contradict me, often in the most unreasonable ways, and over the pettiest of issues. One issue that I knew could be a matter of contention was my attempt to bring the fellowship of churches to a rules-based association. As the number of churches grew, there would be a greater likelihood of differences of opinion and conviction held by the men. As such, it was thought best that an association of churches based on simple rules be formed to govern our fellowship. I was not going to press the issue too hard, and was prepared to allow time for the matter to be resolved, or even to be dropped. However, in the process of discussing the matter, personal attacks were levelled at me such that we were soon discussing the problems they had with me. When confronted with the matter publicly in the meeting, none had anything substantial to say against me.

Another meeting was called a couple of months later to resolve issues once and for all. The spirit of the meeting turned sour, and one pastor who had had a problem with me, which I thought was long resolved, insinuated negatively against my character. With a smug and triumphant grin on his face, he initiated a round of handshake which ended the meeting, giving me no chance to refute his insinuation or to defend myself. The Fraternal was dissolved thus which in effect broke up the fellowship of the churches, while leaving the last insinuation of the pastor hanging over my head. Those men continued their tense and agitated discussion over the internet. They attempted to draw me into the controversy, which I firmly desisted. They attempted to draw the leading men in our church into the controversy, but I advised them against responding. The controversy spiralled out of control, so that those men soon had serious disagreements between themselves. But the damage could not be contained immediately. Slander and gossip were spread about me and the two congregations of which I am the pastor. Those who left the church joined the fray to slander and gossip against us, and attempted to draw away other members of the church. They met to form another church, with the support of one of the dissenting pastors. I discovered later that that pastor had also written negative things about me to individuals overseas.

The breakup of the fellowship of churches took place on 2 April 2002. The consequent problems manifested in the two years following. The adverse effects lingered on for a long while.

### **Five years of painful re-alignment (2004-2008)**

Following the breakup of the churches, we struggled to maintain the ministry of the word. There was tension in our two congregations, which began to ease only after the last of the disgruntled members left. However, their attempts to draw away other members caused us considerable anguish. The reduction in the numbers in church affected the various ministries in terms of attendance, manpower, and finance. The support of missions abroad continued to be borne by the Missionary Support Fund, which remained under our administration after it was turned down by the other churches that broke away. Of the three preaching points that remained under our supervision, we had to close down two. We discontinued the publication of the Gospel Highway magazine, and only revived it in the electronic version later, in 2007. Meanwhile, gossip and slander against me and our churches continued to circulate. The words that came back to us were that I was acting like a pope, narrow-minded, unforgiving, immoral, lacking love, unwise in the spending of church funds, not willing to listen to others, etc. The churches under my care were supposed to be “full of problems”. I was being painted as a monster!

On the personal level, I had never been hurt more badly, nor my service to God harmed worse. It was the final straw in a series of setbacks that I had been experiencing. In 1996, a self-appointed spokesman of the Reformed community in Sri Lanka circulated a nasty letter against me. In 1997, a group of Reformed Baptist pastors in America wrote a book to counter my book, “The Keys of the Kingdom”. Their book was most upsetting because it misrepresented my views and engaged in personal diatribe. I struggled over whether to respond to that book, and finally did so by a series of three articles in the Gospel Highway magazine. In February 1998, my father who had been critically ill for two years finally passed away without coming to faith in the Lord. I was about to emerge from grief over his death when the next blow struck.

As a result, I lost faith in men, and became so disheartened that I was tempted to leave the ministry. It was a tremendous struggle to preach and teach in church, and also in the annual church camp and youth camp, which I had to handle myself now. The annual Reformed Ministers’ Conference continued, with only a few men in attendance in the year that the breakup of the fellowship of churches happened. There was an attempt on the part of those who broke away to organise a rival conference with the same name, held at nearly the same time, and with invitations extended to our regular attendees. The foreign pastor who had been advising these men continued to meddle in our affairs by calling upon our friends abroad to boycott us and to isolate me. I had the impression that these men would not be satisfied until they saw me thoroughly humiliated, broken in spirit, and dead.

The Lord was gracious, however. I was able to persevere on, albeit with a limp. The stage came when I was no longer bothered about what others said or thought about me. I fought the temptation to withdraw and isolate myself, and instead placed myself at God’s disposal. I decided to leave my

reputation with God, and to focus on His work. The members of the church who remained were most supportive. We suffered together and stood by one another. Friends from without our church also stood by us. One family flew in from abroad, just to spend a few days with us. Out of the blue, a long-time friend called from Indonesia by telephone, which led to a chain of opportunities for ministry in that country. The tsunami occurred in December 2004, which providentially led to our involvement in relief efforts in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka. That led to the re-establishment of fellowship with a pastor in Sri Lanka who had been anxious to contact us ever since we severed ties with the other men there. Also, fellowship with a long-time friend in Nepal was re-established, leading to opportunities of service there. Our involvement with a church in Hong Kong developed during this period, which brought my family no small comfort. At the local level, the Lord gave unexpected increase in numbers in our two congregations.

In May 2008, our church began supporting a member and his wife in fulltime ministry. He takes the evening services in the Subang Jaya congregation, and the services in Damansara Church as well whenever I have to travel. He is understudying till the end of the year, after which he will be considered for fulltime ministry in the Subang Jaya congregation. Apart from this significant development, we have had encouragement from the baptism of one or two individuals every year. Our church website ([www.rbcm.net](http://www.rbcm.net)) and the Gospel Highway e-magazine ([www.ghmag.net](http://www.ghmag.net)) have been well visited, which is another encouragement.

I have resolutely refused to peer over my shoulders to see what or how the other churches are doing. At the peak of the tension between the pastors, I was stunned to discover that one of the men was so implacable and vindictive, another was so contentious and combative, another was so petty and small-hearted, and another was such a worldly heckler. While all of them may claim agreement with the truths of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith, not all of them are passionate about upholding those truths. While one or two of them may appear to share the same doctrine and practice as we do, we do not share the same spirit. The churches that I desire to found, under God, are those that uphold the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and practise radical discipleship with quiet passion, compassion, love, and humility.

### **Conclusion**

The question has been asked me, Is there any possibility of reconciliation between the estranged churches? Humanly, it seems impossible. Despite being the victim of what I regard as unjustified, unfair, and wicked treatment from the individuals concerned, I have learned to forgive them from my heart. By God's grace, I do not harbour anger and bitterness against them anymore. On their part, they will not benefit from my forgiveness until they acknowledge the wrongs they have done to me, to our churches, and to the Reformed Baptist cause in Malaysia. They will need to make voluntary restitution by writing to all whom they have spoken or written to, to take back the words they have uttered against me. They will need to seek my forgiveness in the presence of witnesses. In short, there must be true repentance.

I do not subscribe to the mistaken notion that when there is genuine reconciliation, we should work together like what we did before. The unhappy experiences have revealed a fundamental difference in personality, character, and spirit between us. I do not claim perfection in myself and in all that I have done, but I have always held to the principle that I would rather let wrong be done to me than I to others. To my knowledge, all personal wrongs I have done to others have been sorted out in a biblical manner. When forgiveness has been sought and voluntary restitution made to the best of my ability, the case is closed. There seems to be no reciprocal spirit in the others.

The three phases that we have gone through in the past fifteen years bring us to this juncture when we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia. Our trials have left us chastened. God's mercy has left us amazed with thankfulness. We are being blessed with more work than we can handle. The home calling of two servants of God close to me - one in Indonesia and the other in Singapore - has kept me sober-minded. My days are numbered and I desire to remain in faithful service of the Lord to the end. By human reckoning, we have accomplished so little compared to the great need of the gospel everywhere. As a church, we surrender ourselves to the Lord.

“LORD, *it is* nothing for You to help, whether with many or with those who have no power; help us, O LORD our God, for we rest on You, and in Your name we go against this multitude. O LORD, You *are* our God; do not let man prevail against You (2 Chron. 14:11)!”

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