

CENTRAL & EASTERN REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

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ALL SAINTS' CHURCH KUALA LUMPUR

THE PLURAL OF DISCIPLE IS CHURCH¹

1. New Malaysia

I have never imagined that I will live to see a new Malaysia even though I have been praying for one. I supposed I might not have sufficient faith then to see what I see today. On the eve of the GE14², my son Joshua asked me about the chances of the opposition party. I told him that given all the negative parameters³, there is very slim chance of the opposition winning. On the polling day, as in other times of General Election, we went to the polling station in the morning and met many neighbours and friends and church members. We hardly slept on the night of the polling day watching the results. It gradually became clear that the opposition was winning but the official results were not out until very late. We knew that many people have been praying since GE12. "It was a miracle; the opposition has won!" exclaimed a message from whatsapp. The rest is history. The whole world was talking about this peaceful miracle with a youngest MP and an oldest Prime Minister elected into the same Parliament.

Before GE14, I have been asked many times by foreigners, "Why are you Malaysians so passive and subdued where your country leaders are so obviously going the wrong way?" I did not know how to answer but only smile. A few times some people went to the street with BERSIH, a peaceful demonstration for clean and fair election. Many people prayed. Some went for dialogues. Some joined politics. Some groups voiced up. Some gave up their past episodes of hurts and willing to team up³ with those who hurt them to pursue a more noble agenda. God, at His own time, manifest His sovereignty in allowing for a new Malaysia through a new spirited coalition which is raw and untested. The impossible became possible – "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."⁴ I am happy that we did not take up violence, for violence will breed violence. What has this new Malaysia taught us?

¹ I am borrowing the title of Alison Morgan's book – Following Jesus. Alison Morgan, Following Jesus – The Plural of Disciple is Church; ReSource UK, TJ International, Cornwall, 2015.

² The 14th Malaysian General Election was held on 9 May 2018.

³ The ruling government, Barisan Nasional, made the following decisions which were clearly trying to make difficult for people to exercise their voting power: the polling day was scheduled on Wednesday; the postal voting which was changed for the first time – many do not have sufficient time to return the voting slip; the last-minute Parliamentary approval of constituent boundary delineation few weeks before Nomination Day; the denial of a few opposition candidates to file their papers on Nomination Day by some Election Commission officers.

⁴ Mark 10:27

2. New Creation

I traced my life and the lives of many believers and realized that there were many miracles. Just like the Prophet Jeremiah⁵, I believe that the Lord knew and has chosen me long before I was formed in my mother's womb. It was in His time that each of us comes forth into the world and was consecrated for His purpose i.e. to be blameless and holy⁶. Our sinful nature was redeemed by Jesus' blood on the Cross and forgiven by His Amazing Love. This new life we live should emulate Paul's confession – "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."⁷ The biggest problem with us is not the understanding and receiving of the knowledge of salvation and redemption but the actual living it out in our daily lives as true disciples of Christ. We have gotten it – the concept – into our head but somehow it did not get down from there to our heart and limbs. We agree fully with Archbishop Justin Welby's recommendation – "[t]he best decision anyone can make at any time in their lives is the decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ."⁸ We, too, agree with many great leaders on the concept of discipleship:⁹

John Inge, Bishop of Worcester – *"as disciples ... shall we be a truly effective part of God's great mission to transform not just individuals but the whole creation of Christ."*

Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool – *"Discipleship is an absolutely central part of our theology and of our Christian practice."*

George Lings, Church Army Research Unit – *"disciple(s) meaning 'apprentices of Jesus, in communities'."*

Martin Breytenbach, Bishop of the Diocese of St Mark the Evangelist, South Africa, and Chair of Growing the Church – *"discipleship is sacrificial, world-changing and wonderfully fulfilling."*

Charles Whitehead, International Catholic author and speaker and Chairman of the Ecumenical International Consultation on World Evangelisation – *"creating disciples is the greatest challenge facing the church today."*

Graham Cray, Bishop and former leader of Fresh Expressions – *"the Church's greatest challenge of our time – discipleship."*

Paul Moore, Archdeacon of Mission development, Diocese of Winchester, and author of 'Making Disciples in Messy Church' – *"making disciples of Christ who live out their faith in daily life should be a priority for every church."*

The question now is – How can we help our church members to behave and live as disciples of Christ? Many of us are still living our lives for ourselves, our ego, our pride, our authority, our name, our wealth, and so on. Where is Christ and what is His position in our lives? We often misinterpret the meaning of one common household plaque – Christ is the Unseen Guest of our Home. We keep Him as our guest forever and have never allowed Him to take leadership to lead

⁵ Jeremiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

⁶ Ephesians 1:4-5 "...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..."

⁷ Galatians 2:20 "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

⁸ Alison Morgan, Following Jesus – The Plural of disciple is Church; ReSource UK, TJ International, Cornwall, 2015; p.7.

⁹ Alison Morgan; op.cit.; Introductory messages.

our life and home, including our career and thought. We are living a life where we cannot afford to lose thus cannot accept defeat because some wrong understanding has crept quite some time ago into our belief system which declares defeat is considered bad omen and evil, and Christians are urged and must always claim victory and stay victorious. All these non-beneficial and unhealthy thoughts and beliefs are not compatible with the life of Christ, in fact detrimental to Christians and churches. To them, Paul referred as Carnal Christians who are non-spiritual and self-centred.¹⁰

3. The Call to be Disciples of Christ

Supposedly, each of us is called to be a disciple of Christ but never in the Scripture, we are expected or told to act or live alone, rather always in a community which is called the church. Thus, Alison Morgan is absolutely right to say 'the plural of disciple is the church'.¹¹ Often, our churches think and act as though discipleship is for individual equipping and training. Hence, there are those who are happy and willing to be trained and equipped. Once they have gone through the course or training, they believe they have attained the 'Discipleship-hood' and stop there, self-satisfied. In the diocese, some are taking our AIM¹² course with similar sentiment. Absolutely, it should not be so.

Right at the beginning, Jesus started His ministry by calling and discipling a group of people – the first church. He emphasized strongly to Apostle Peter that 'on this rock, I will build my church...'¹³, in which I believe He was referring to all His disciples i.e. the church. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did not fall upon one person but on everyone in the upper room, the whole community which was the church then. Hence, there is no lone ranger Christian, for all should belong to a community of believers. While the Early Church practiced individual discipling, such as Priscilla and Aquila to Apollos, and Paul to Timothy, their ultimate intention is 'corporate discipling' – where disciples gathered together with a fourfold focus: the apostles' teaching, breaking of bread, fellowship and prayer.¹⁴ Similarly, in the Old Testament, the whole nation of Israel is called to be a disciple 'to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul.'¹⁵ This kind of call to be God's disciple is 'by living as the people of YHWH in the midst of the nations, being faithful to its covenant with him, worshipping him alone, and living by the standards of the Torah.'¹⁶ Apostle Paul wrote that some are called 'to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3: 1-3 "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ..."

¹¹ This sentence is the title of Alison Morgan's book, *Following Jesus – The Plural of Disciple is Church*.

¹² AIM is the Anglican Institute of Ministry with Bishop's Certificate/Diploma of Ministry where Archbishop Moon Hing has created to equip laity since 2017.

¹³ Matthew 16:18 "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

¹⁴ John Kafwanka and Mark Oxbrow (ed.), *Intentional Discipleship and Disciple-Making*, Anglican Consultative Council, London, 2016; pp.25-26.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 10: 12-13.

¹⁶ John Kawanka and Mark Oxbrow (ed.), *op.cit.*; pp.9-11, Chapter 1 – A Biblical Theology of Disciple-Making.

teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'.¹⁷ We tend to interpret and emphasize on the gifts and offices but Apostle Paul's intention, I believe, is on 'equipping the saints' and 'the building up of the body of Christ'. John Oak believed that '[t]he calling and role of lay people must be regarded first of all as a biblical mandate'.¹⁸ Many churches fail to realise the great potential of the laity which is frozen. The sheer size and giftings of the laity will significantly explode the church in witnessing and discipling especially in our rapidly changing society.

I have sent more than 50 clergy and deaconesses to SaRang Community Church, over a period of six years, to learn of their renown Discipleship Training strategy. Unfortunately, upon returning, only a handful was excited and willing to build on what they have learnt. These few churches have seen much growth than previously i.e. before they engaged in the SaRang type Discipleship Training. This is because they engage the laity and train them to be disciple-makers.

4. Good and Faithful Servants

There are at least four aspects of practical discipling we can adopt that are most useful for our churches and especially for our future dioceses. I believe our Lord Jesus will accredit those who intentionally and deliberately assume these five aspects of practical discipling as 'good and faithful servants'. This is the area we are lacking.

4.1 Training of successors

Each of us has to intentionally prepare, train and mentor at least one young successor, like Moses to Joshua, Elijah to Elisha, and Paul to Timothy. This process will require lots of prayer and sometime persuasion. The passing of the baton of leadership begins the moment we take up leadership. The earlier the better. It is more of leadership by example than in the classroom. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, without delay he immediately selected His Twelve and prepared, trained and mentored them one by one and also as a group. We are God's students and we need to foster our students. A good leader is a good follower.

4.2 Discipline of the family

'Discipling means discipline.'¹⁹ This is what we call 'parenting'. Both the Old and New Testament stress much of the importance of the role of elders or leaders in teaching (God's covenantal promises) and discipling (God's law and commandment). Its goal is 'to imitate Christ' or 'Christlikeness' or 'walking in the ways of the Lord' or 'blameless and holy'. The author of the Book of Hebrews reminds us that 'all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been

¹⁷ Ephesians 4: 11-12.

¹⁸ John H. Oak, Called to Awaken the Laity, Christian Focus, Scotland, J. H. Haynes, Sparkford, 2006; Chapter 2 – Rediscovering the Laity, pp.25-28.

¹⁹ John Kafwanka and Mark Oxbrow (ed.), op. cit. pp.9-11.

trained by it'.²⁰ We are God's children and He is our Father. "Neglecting holiness, like neglecting church discipline, results in hard-to-grow disciples."²¹

4.3 Community's worship and life

The centrality of worship is to let God be God. 'The heart of worship is surrender'.²² Once God is given back His rightful place, all things will be in harmony and peaceful. Just like the Israelites, we are shaped in our thinking and practice by the values inculcate in worship which includes praising God, reminder of the goodness and grace of God with thanksgiving, teaching of the Word of God, re-affirmation of belief, covenantal reminders, condemnation of sins, assurance and forgiveness, etc. We should ultimately be reflective of this verse, 'In him we live and move and have our being'.²³ All worships involve sacrifices and obedience. It should occur regularly in large community such as the church, smaller community such as house or cell group and yet small community such as the family.

4.4 The Word of God

The importance of teaching and disseminating the Word of God correctly to the community of disciples is essential and necessary. It is life-giving, life-enriching, life-shaping and life-transforming. It is helpful and useful to translate, explain, and make clear the meaning of the Word read and proclaimed to all those who hear. These days, in some places, the Word of God has been compromised and diluted, all the more we need to hold firm and 'rightly handle' it. There are many weird teachings floating around to lure unsuspecting disciples. There is no short cut in learning the Word of God.

4.5 Slaves of Christ

We are also called to be Slaves of Christ.²⁴ A slave has no right, no freedom and own no property. This means that we, slaves of Christ, are no longer free but our freedom is to serve Christ; no longer owning anything but belonging to the Lordship of Christ; no longer having any rights but only with the right to be disciples of Christ. Few Christians believe that we are really called to be slaves. Some thought that the saying 'slaves of Christ' is a slogan or a branding for this century.

Due to the refusal by church members on face value to accept and live out this calling – slaves of Christ, their discipleship is in jeopardy. Many church problems can also be traced to the stubborn, hard-headed, self-centred attitude where there is no self-denial notion carried out. Such manner and attitude actually kill the church and the individual's zeal and passion to honour Christ. The words of Mother Teresa – 'burn myself completely for Him

²⁰ Hebrews 12: 11.

²¹ Mark E. Dever, *What is a Healthy Church?*, Crossway, Wheaton, 2007; p.108.

²² Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, OMF Literature, Manila, 2003.

²³ Acts 17: 28

²⁴ Romans 6: 11-20.

[Christ] and souls'²⁵ depicts her willingness to submit herself as a slave of Christ. Holiness is rooted in Christian self-denial. Individual holiness is good but church holiness is the best. 'One of the chief spiritual disciplines that build holiness is worship'.²⁶

5. Growth in Discipleship

As we move towards having 3 dioceses in the near future, we should be looking at church growth which is healthy and vibrant. The best way to grow churches is to grow disciples. The best way to grow dioceses is to grow disciples. Because 'the plural of disciple is church'. We must avoid breeding disciples who do not subscribe to work together as a church. For church growth, we must anticipate comprehensive increase in all these five areas. The training of successors ascertains a continuity. The discipline of a family ushers holiness and commitment. Community worship and life enhances sacrifice and obedience. The Word of God ensures truth and integrity. The call to be slaves of Christ activates purity and obedience.

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²⁵ Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa – Come Be My Light*; Ebury Publishing, Random House, UK, 2007; p.53.

²⁶ Graham Tomlin, *The Prodigal Spirit*, Alpha International, London, 2011. p.169.