MISSION SCHOOLS IN MALAYSIA

The Organization Structure of Mission Schools in Malaysia

Mission Authorities
(Christian denominations and Religious Orders - Owners of Mission Schools)

Board of Governors
(Mission Schools owned by Mission Authorities)

Federation of Christian Mission Schools Malaysia

Brief Historical Background

The contribution of Christian Mission Schools to nation-building in Malaysia is incalculable. 424 mission schools are still serving the nation in East and West Malaysia. Most have done so for more than 100 years.

British colonial expansion in the 19th Century opened the way for Christian missionaries and missionary educators to come to Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore to set up educational institutions. The colonialists were primarily interested in imperialistic control, trade and economic exploitation, not education of the natives or immigrants. The initiatives to build schools were largely left to the pioneer missionaries and the congregations that they had established. The missionary pioneers were naturally interested in the transmission of their faith but their overriding concern was for the welfare of the community. Because the gospel has a compelling social concern dimension, beside schools, they also started homes for the poor, orphanages, hospitals, leper settlements and other charitable institutions to meet the needs of the local community they were called to serve.

The English medium schools set up during the colonial era served the purpose of providing civil servants for the colonial establishment. These mission English schools welcomed children of all races, gender and background, especially the poor. They were much sought after by Chinese and Indian parents who saw English, the medium of education then as the avenue to better prospects and job opportunities. However, in the early years, the enrolment of Malay children in Mission Schools was relatively low because these schools were held with a measure of suspicion by the Malay community.

It was Rev. R.S. Hutchings who petitioned for the establishment of Penang Free school in 1816. Although Penang Free School is no longer considered a mission school today, it marked the beginning of the establishment of mission schools in the country. St. Thomas School in Kuching followed in 1848 through the pioneering efforts of Rev. Francis McDougall. St. Xavier
Penang and Light Street Convent, Penang were established in 1852. Since then, many more Mission Schools were set up over the next 120 years. By the time Malaysia was formed, there were about 400 Mission Schools in the country. They continued to grow in number and popularity until the 1970s. The post war years - 1950s to the 1970s were remembered fondly by mission authorities and alumni as the golden period of mission school history.

The development and progress of Mission Schools in Malaysia can be broadly divided into three phases:

The Pre-Independence phase where the missionary pioneers were able to establish Mission School quite freely and administered them on their own.

The second phase had its beginnings with the Razak Report (1956), followed by the United Teaching Service scheme for teachers and the implementation of the Aziz Commission Report recommendations (1971). Some of the Aziz Commission recommendations which would have had a positive result on the development of Mission Schools were not followed up. During this second phase, increasing pressure was exerted on mission schools to conform to the national education system through the implementation of various ministry circulars. During this phase, the impact of the Education Act 1961 affecting mission schools began to be felt with increasing severity, at first in West Malaysia and eventually in Sabah and Sarawak as well. The setting up of mission schools gradually tapered off by the 1970s.

The third phase, from the 1970s to the present day, saw Mission Authorities going through a period of severe testing and disillusionment. Mission Authorities had to struggle incessantly to preserve what remained of the identity, character, academic standards and national building role of their respective mission schools.

The Identity and Character of Mission Schools

The imposing façade of many mission schools we see today makes it difficult for us to imagine that most mission schools began with very small classes housed in little wooden huts or rented backrooms of shop houses. Mission schools all looked different because they owed their development to the missionary pioneers who had come from different denominations and educational background. There were many add-ons to the main buildings through the years as and when the church and the Board of Governors (BOGs) could afford to do so. The common denominators were English as the medium of instruction (until 1976); and the Euro-Christian traditions and understanding of what constituted a school of excellence. Therefore, it is not surprising that they share many common features and characteristics with regard to the culture of the schools. These can ultimately be traced back to their Christian worldview, the value system and the denominational heritage of the missionary founders. The Christian philosophy of education and the value system that undergird Mission Schools are in fact universal in nature. They are in line with the National Philosophy of Education and the Rukun Negara. Some common characteristics:

- Respect for human dignity and non-racial outlook
- Care and compassion for the poor and weak
- Education which is person-centred and for all
Discipline, perseverance, zeal and hard work
Belief and the dependence on God

These educational objectives are reflected in their school mottos. Some examples of mission school mottos:

- “Aim Higher” (St. Thomas School, Kuching)
- “Labor Omnia Vinci” - Labour Conquers All (La Salle Schools)
- “Fidel et Labore” - Faith and Zeal (St. Paul)
- “What We Do, We Carry Through” (All Saints School, Kota Kinabalu)
- “Ad Veritatem Per Caritatem” - To Truth through Charity (Assunta schools)
- “Ora et Labora” - Pray and Work (Methodist Boys School, KL)
- “Nisi Dominus Frustra” - Without God All is Vanity (Bukit Bintang Schools)
- “Simple Dans Ma Vertu, Forte Dans Devoir” - Simple in virtue, steadfast in duty (Infant Jesus Convent Schools)
- “Faith, Zeal, Excellence” (Sung Siew Secondary School)

The aspirations and values reflected in these mottos, consciously or unconsciously, constituted the informal or ‘hidden’ curriculum of Mission Schools. They expressed themselves in the traditions, practices and activities which were part and parcel of the distinctive character of mission schools. Among these common characteristics:

- School icons, school songs, distinctive badges and school uniforms
- Sports Houses and colours
- Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Boys’ and Girls’ Brigades, Rotary Club, Lions club, Christian Fellowships, Catholic Societies
- Founder’s Day, Chapel service, Religious Knowledge classes for students who intended to take Form Three (when it was still available) or Form Five Bible Knowledge as an exam subject
- Fund raising activities – Special Tuck Shop Day, Walkathon, Job Week
- Annual musical, choral and drama production

In the early years, it was not uncommon for mission schools to be headed by dedicated Religious Catholic Brothers and Religious Catholic Sisters, many of whom left their homeland to establish educational institutions in foreign land. These faithful educators and other Christian pioneers regarded teaching as a special calling and lifelong vocation. They often served in the same institution for 20–40 years. Teachers recruited by Mission Authorities, many of whom were former students, also spent most if not all of their teaching career in the same mission school. This phenomenon of continuous dedicated leadership enabled Mission Schools to establish strong lasting traditions which had an enduring impact on the students who studied in these schools. Students would leave school with a strong sense of caring for others, a resilient and competitive spirit towards life and the perseverance and discipline needed to succeed. Fond memories were left behind in students who get to spend much of their formative years, from primary one right up to form five or upper six in the same school. All these ingredients, to a large extent, accounted for the nostalgia and loyalty of former students felt towards their alma mater.
The Decline and Struggle for Survival of Mission Schools in the 1970s to the 1990s

The cumulative effect resulting from the implementation of the Razak Report; the UTS, the Aziz Commission recommendations, the changing of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia, the change in the prefix to name of missions schools (SRK and SMK), the control in the admission of students and finally, the infusion of Islamisation policies and practices into the national school system, and by extension into mission schools as well, had dire consequences on Mission Schools. They gradually lost their identity, character, vitality and the positive role they played in the community. The resultant litany of woes were many and extremely troubling not only to mission school authorities and Christian community but also to the Malaysian community at large. What are these?

1. Loss of control over almost all areas, and in some cases, even over the use of the school buildings and facilities which they own
2. Changes in the teachers, student population profile from multi-ethnic to increasingly mono-ethnic
3. Lack of funding resulting in out-dated equipment, inability to maintain and upgrade buildings and facilities
4. Deterioration in standard-academic subjects especially English, in school discipline, and in school pride and loyalty
5. Loss of Christian ethos or school traditions and distinctive character
6. Loss of interest of Christian young people in the teaching profession
7. Diminishing teaching and practice of the Christian faith
8. Loss of Christian community support
9. Loss of alumni interest and support
10. Difficult to find active and motivated church or alumni people to be members of BOG

Promises such as the “Principle of Maximum Consultation” in the appointment of head or senior teachers and the allocation of ‘Grants in Aid’ were not fulfilled. Unlike Chinese Government-Aided Schools, mission schools have had no special department in the Ministry or specially appointed officer to look after their affairs. Neither do Mission Authorities have any political influence because they have generally stayed away from any political involvement. Therefore mission schools often became silent victims of educational policies detrimental to their interests which basically had their root cause in political decisions.

The Malayan Christian Schools Council (MCSC)

MCSC the body that looks after mission schools in West Malaysia was registered in 1952. During the pre-Independence era the sense of camaraderie between the senior civil servants in the Ministry of Education and the principals of mission schools who were also the key leaders of their respective mission authorities was very strong and problems were relatively few.

The themes of MCSC’s conferences or seminars is a good indication of the concerns of Mission Authorities during that time. In the years before 2000, most of the seminars and conferences revolved around issues which are mainly for the benefit of teachers and parents; such as “The Christian Educator”, The Christian and Work Ethics”, “School Discipline – the Christian Perspective”. From the late 1990 onwards, the main issue of concern was the future of...
mission schools. The participants consisted of Heads of Churches, BOG members and heads of Mission Schools. The themes were

- “Mission Schools – Meeting the needs of the Nation” (2008)
- “The Future of Christian Mission Schools in Malaysia” (2012),
- “Mission School Aspirations and the National Education Blueprint” FCMSM Symposium (2014)

**Concern for the future of mission schools clearly took centre stage in the 1990s and after.**

MCSC had to reconsider its role and strategies. The issues of concern affected not only Mission Schools but also the wider Christian community. The MCSC/FCMSM realised that they could not afford to stand alone. Collaboration with other like-minded national NGOs such as the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), Teachers Christian Fellowship Malaysia (TCF), Catholics Teachers Association, Malaysia (CTAM), and Scripture Union (SU) was needed for greater effectiveness. This resulted in joint efforts in conferences, training seminars and events such as Bible quizzes, Teachers’ Day Celebrations and consultations on publications on areas of common interests.

The 25-28 October 2000 symposium on the theme “The Future of Mission School” at Awana, Genting Highlands was one such example. It was jointly organised by the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) and MCSC. This symposium brought together, perhaps for the first time, Heads of Churches, key Christian educators and mission school authorities from East and West Malaysia. The participants discussed the role and future of mission schools in the larger context of the direction of education in the country and the role of mission school in particular. The plenary sessions on “The Christian Experience in Education: Origins, Development and Prospects” by Mr. Goh Keat Seng and and “The "Christians in the New Millenium: A Reassessment of our Role, Influence and Impact” by Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, Mr. Phua Seng Tiong and Brother Vincent Corkery were enlightening and thought provoking. At the end eight resolutions were adopted:

1. “We recognise the need and urgency for unity in acting on issues related to our mission schools.
2. We feel the need to appoint ad hoc committees to ensure that the interest of schools are catered for at regional level.
3. We recommend the immediate appointment of a common task force to oversee the establishment of private Christian institutions at all levels and also provide training for Christian teachers and the development of special education for those special needs Priority must be given to pre-school, primary and vocational sectors.
4. We feel the urgency for providing financial support for needy mission schools and therefore suggest that MCSC and CFM explore the possibilities of generating such financial support.
5. In order to avoid further diminution of the Church’s right of ownership and involvement in Mission School, we resolve that steps be taken to ensure that
o All school administrators and teachers understand and support the ideals that mission schools stand for.
o Boards of Governors/Managers actively participate in the affairs and development of the school. Mission Authorities and their representatives make regular visits to the schools.
o Chaplains and counsellors be appointed to assist in the inculcation and nurturing of Christian values and school’s ethos.
o Christian parents participate actively in Parent Teacher Associations.

6. Central to many problems faced currently by Mission Schools is the dearth of suitably qualified and committed Christian teachers. We therefore urged all Churches to encourage parents and young people to view teaching as a vocation and mission.

7. Recognising that the preservation of the Christian character of Mission Schools depends on the appointment of committed Christian principals and teachers, we reiterate the vital need to actively pursue the principle of maximum consultation with Government in the appointment of principals of mission schools.

8. We endorse the principle that the school pupil population should reflect the racial composition of the local community. With regard to this, we recommend that in the continuing dialogue with Government, some discretion be requested for mission authorities to admit pupils to mission schools”.

The symposium gave all the participants especially those who were already actively struggling with the many issues facing Mission Schools a “new vision and a new hope for our mission schools”.

These 8 resolutions, unanimously endorsed by all the participants had in many ways guided the activities and voices of MCSC, Mission Schools Councils of Sabah and Sarawak in the next two decades up to the formation of FCMSM. This symposium also marked an important turning point in terms of how Mission Schools in East and West Malaysia worked together to deal with the common problems which they faced.

One major follow-through of the symposium is a dialogue session between the Association of Churches in Sarawak led by its Chairman, Most Rev. Archbishop Datuk Peter Chung and the Special State Cabinet Committee led by YB Tan Sri Datuk Amar George Chan. A paper “The Problems Facing Government Aided Christian Mission Schools” was presented and discussed at length. This was a well-researched paper covering all the key issues and problems faced by the mission schools in Sarawak and Malaysia at that time. The issues addressed and the grievances which were raised at the dialogue with the Sarawak State Cabinet were also the ones discussed during the 2000 CFM-MCSC Symposium.

**The Federation of Christian Mission Schools Malaysia (FCMSM)**

Before the 1990s, MCSC had generally kept a very low profile. It was limited to representing Mission Schools in West Malaysia. There was a great need for Mission School Authorities in the country to speak with one voice. In 2009, with the encouragement and support of YB Tan Sri Bernard Dompok Giluk Dompok, a conference organised by MCSC was held in St John’s Institution which brought together Heads of Churches and mission school leaders from Sabah,
Sarawak and West Malaysia. One major post-conference outcome was the formation of the Federation of Councils of Christian Mission Schools Malaysia (FCCMSM) which was subsequently registered with the Registrar of Societies as FCMSM.

For the first time, mission schools have an official body which can speak on behalf of all the mission schools in the country. Education officials are now more ready to engage with FCMSM on matters of which affect mission schools. At one stage, Datuk Mary Yap, the Chairman of FCMSM became the Deputy Minister of Education. During her tenure in the MOE, FCMSM was able to hold several meetings with senior MOE officials to discuss the problems faced by Mission Schools.

Among the steps taken by MCSC/FCMSM over the last 20 years were publications which addressed several issues of concern-

2. “Ethos, Special Character and Traditions” - to preserve Christian values and heritage, produced in response to “what is so different about mission schools” a query raised by an EPRD official.
3. “Teaching as a Mission and Vocation” and “Called to Teach” to encourage more young people to be teachers.
4. “A Blue Print for Starting a School Christian Fellowship” (in cooperation with SU)
5. “A Study Guide” and other support materials to help SPM Bible Knowledge teachers and students.

Over the years many memoranda were sent to the Director General of Education or the Minister of Education to address the pressing issues faced by Mission Schools. Many follow-up meetings too were held.

One of such memoranda “Memorandum of understanding on Cooperation in Education between The Mission Authorities of Christian Mission Schools in Malaysia and the Ministry of Education of Malaysia” signed by all the Mission Authorities of Sabah, Sarawak and West Malaysia and presented to the Minister of Education in September 2016 was of great significance. Among the issues raised at this meeting was why Mission Schools were not mentioned at all in the final draft of the Education Blue Print - 2013 -2025. It was pointed out to the Minister that Mission Schools should be given due recognition as a distinct category. Upon hearing this, the Minister immediately instructed the Director General to correct this omission. During this meeting, the matter of allowing mission schools to take back possession of their school land and buildings was also brought up. The minister’s advice was should Mission Authorities have such intention, they must give the Ministry adequate time of 5 – 7 years for MOE to relocate the students and deregister the school.

Another significant meeting was with the officials of the Education Planning and Research Division (EPRD) which resulted in (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bilangan 1 tahun 2013) affirming the principle of “maximum consultation” and the right of mission schools to maintain their special character. Besides Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bilangan 1 tahun 2013, meetings between
FCMSM and MOE also yielded 4 other professional circulars which dealt with matters of concern to Mission Schools.

1. *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 1/2010* on the maximum limit of subjects that can be taken by candidates for the SPM Exam
2. *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 2/2011* on the setting up of non-Islamic society in Government and Government-Aided Schools
3. *Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 4/2011* on the teaching of Bible Knowledge after school hours in Government and Government-Aided Schools. This was followed later by a letter to formally allow the annual SPM Bible Knowledge quizzes to be held at regional and national level
4. *Surat Pekeling Ikhtisas Bil 1/2011* on the allocation of 10% quota to the discretion of BOGs for admission into ‘controlled schools’

Mission Schools continue to be faced many problems even with these circulars in place because officials at district or state level or even uncooperative school principals interpret them to suit their own bias. New barriers were also created which frustrates the intent and spirit of these circulars. It appears as if the concessions given by one hand were taken away by another. The problem-solving processes were further complicated by the fact that ministry officials do not remain in the same posts for long because of retirement or promotion. As such, consistent implementation is an on-going challenge.

The work of looking after the affairs of mission schools has gone beyond what volunteers can handle. A FCMSM secretariat was set up in 2017 to coordinate the activities of Mission Schools. In the last 12 years, annual allocations from the Government for the maintenance and upgrading of mission schools were credited in the BOG account. This requires a great deal of understanding, coordination and monitoring. The establishment of the Secretariat was very timely. The FCMSM secretariat headed by the General Secretary has enabled many mission school matters to be attended to quickly and efficiently, especially matters that require consultation and coordination among Mission Authorities of Sabah, Sarawak and West Malaysia.

These allocations were indeed much needed and much appreciated by Mission Authorities as Mission Schools, especially those in rural areas were in a sorry state of disrepair. The fact that these allocations are credited into the BOG account has enabled BOGs to be much more present and engaged in the school. There is now a new awareness and appreciation of the role of BOGS in Mission Schools.

**Future Prospects and the Aspirations of Mission Schools Today**

Given the realities and problems that mission schools face today and more than likely will continue to do so in the future, how should Mission Authorities respond? The future of Mission Schools has been the subject of much heart searching and debate since the 1990s. Have mission schools outlived their usefulness? Should they take a bow and exit from the education system? Should Mission Authorities just confine their focus on religious education
of the young and leave “secular” education to the government? After all, unlike in the past the government is more than capable of providing education for all. Going into the future, how long can mission schools hold on as a separate category nominally labelled as “Government-Aided Schools”?

The fact that the Government desires to have one integrated education system for public schools in the country is no longer in doubt. The present Government is mono-ethnic and Muslim dominated. Islamisation programmes will continue to be infused into the formal and informal curriculum. The teacher and student profile in mission schools have also become increasingly mono-ethnic. Such trends will be very difficult to reverse and ultimately there will be no rational reason for Mission Authorities to hold out with regard to mission school becoming more and more Islamic in character. Under such circumstances, a continuing Christian presence in Mission Schools will no longer be justifiable or viable.

It is possible that in the eyes of MOE, mission schools today are no longer significant players in the national education system as compared to what they were in the past. Out of the 10,223 Government and Government aided primary and secondary schools in the country only 424 are mission schools with a total enrolment of 197,000 which is only about 4.1% of the total enrolment of 4,772,995 students. Compare this to the situation shortly before World War II when mission schools accounted for about 75% of English medium schools and about 78% of the total enrolment. Furthermore, not all mission schools are sited on freehold land. The leased land that many mission schools are sited on will eventually expire or may even be acquired by the authorities under the Land Acquisition Act.

Is there any meaningful purpose for Mission Authorities to hang on to their mission schools and all the more so when their contribution to education and nation building in the country have largely gone unappreciated. Instead of working alongside Mission Authorities to raise the standard of education in the country, MOE seems to hinder the healthy progress of mission schools at every turn.

**FCMSM - 10 Year Strategic Plan**

Far from giving up, Mission Authorities are planning for the future. With the encouragement of Archbishop Julian Leow, FCMSM organised a special planning retreat for key leaders to work on a ten-year strategic plan for the future (2019 – 2028). Several initiatives were proposed and four steering committees set up to work on follow-up action.

1. To encourage Bible literacy for mission school students and young people
2. To encourage more Christian young people to take up teaching as a calling and vocation
3. To set up teaching training facilities to train teachers for public and private schools
4. To strengthen Board of Governors/Managers in mission schools; to set up private mission schools or international schools or vocation centres by mission authorities on their own or in partnership with others
5. To set up private mission schools or International Schools by Mission Authorities on their own or in partnership with others

Each of these initiatives will face its own challenges. Many mission schools are situated on prime land in urban centres. They have great potential and should be better utilized to meet current needs. Mission Authorities are seeking other avenues for continuing involvement in education such as turning Mission Schools into special needs schools for those who are unable to follow academic courses and would otherwise drop out of the current government school system. Vocational or trade schools or even as sports training centres are being considered.

The initiative to set up private schools either by Mission Authorities themselves or in partnership with other private entities has been going on for quite some time. The Methodist and Catholic education authorities have had a fairly long history of setting up private schools, initially for students who dropped out of school in the days when promotion in government schools was not automatic. These schools have been remodelled as private schools or international schools which offer education to a wider range of students. Such schools have modern facilities, good teachers and are well managed. They are an alternative choice for parents who are not comfortable with the situation in Government schools. However, setting up private or international schools is an extremely costly enterprise. Even if an International school licence can be obtained, the investment needed to establish such schools is prohibitive. Partnership with private entities is also not the answer as private businesses are driven by commercial rather than charitable considerations. Only the well-off will be able afford the fees charged by private or International Schools which will exclude children from B40 and marginalised families. This is at odds with the traditional objective of Mission Schools which is for all, especially the poor. There are no easy answers to these dilemma.

The Desire and Will to Press On

Mission Authorities have decided to press on regardless. The nexus between Christian faith and education is inseparable. Mission Authorities believe that the Christian worldview with its accompanying value system of honesty, discipline, hard work, compassion for the weak, and respect for all is an integral component of good education. The standard of education, including academic standards will rise toward excellence and the nation will benefit from the contribution of Christian mission schools as it had done in the past if the ethos and character of Mission Schools were allowed to flourish. Additionally, Mission Authorities have to be good stewards of the legacy left behind by the missionary pioneers and the countless dedicated educators whose sacrifice went in to build the schools. Mission Authorities therefore purposed to press on with faith and hope even in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulties. They believe the future, though uncertain, is ultimately in God’s hands.

Conclusion

Since the formation of FCMSM much momentum has been built up and there is a strong sense of common purpose among all 25 mission authorities who own the Mission Schools. Given
the changing education landscape and the uncertain political scenario, the coordinating and guardian roles of FCMSM are all the more crucial. Mission authorities must be alert to changes and opportunities in education. Action which are detrimental to the well-being of Mission Schools taken by education authorities must be responded to speedily and with coordinated effort. How the circulars are interpreted or applied by one headmaster or one district official may eventually spread and affect other Mission Schools in the country as well. The predominant sentiment is - Mission Authorities will trust God and continue to work with the Government for the good of the country and be “salt and light” to future generations.

Federation of Christian Mission Schools, Malaysia
16 April 2021

APPENDIX

Mission Authorities in Malaysia

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Note: 25 Mission Authorities: Sabah 6, Sarawak 6, Semananjung Malaysia 13
424 Mission Schools (SK+SMK 369, SJKT 3, SJKC 38, SMJK 14)
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