

ASIAN BEACON

YOUR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MAGAZINE

Juwita Suwito

Music Without Borders

Tenors for Christ

**My Guitar, the Gospel
and Globe-trotting**

Why I Love Music

The Music Man

A New Creation

**Memories, Music and
Money**

The Fighter

Asian Beacon: A

Glimpse at the Future

The Music Issue

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CHRISTIANITY IS ONE OF THE MOST MUSICAL OF the major religions. From as early as the book of Exodus, we read of God's people singing to the Lord; all the way through to Revelation, when the saints and angels sing of God's glory to the sound of trumpets. And right in the middle of the Bible is the book of Psalm – a songbook that describes every facet of human emotion: joy, gratitude, fear, anguish, doubt.

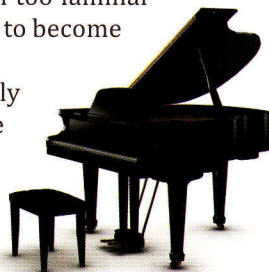
Some of the most moving and enduring music were written by musicians and composers that were enthralled or inspired by their Christian faith. While the form and style have changed over the centuries, Christians today still prolifically write and make music in praise to God. Indeed, music as an expression of our faith has been with us since the earliest days of Christianity.

And so it is with great pleasure that we bring you stories from the world of music. In Malaysia, we are fortunate to have a number of world-class musicians who are Christians, but it was a difficult task to decide whom to feature in this issue. Nonetheless, we are proud to present exclusive interviews with popular personalities of the Malaysian music world, written by some of our best writers. As part of our digital strategy, some of these interviews have also been put up on our revamped website in the form of videos. Head over to www.asianbeacon.org and take a look.

Our cover girl, Juwita, is no stranger to most Malaysians. She has a personality that's as big and generous as her voice. Catch up on her latest projects in *Music Without Borders*. I've been a fan of *Tenors for Christ* since I first saw them perform years ago. (They're also a great bunch of guys to interview.) Read their story on page 10. The Canticle Singers is a choral group that needs no introduction. Interviewing them, we discovered that producing a high-quality choir performance is a lot harder than we thought. Read about it in *The Best for the King*. We spoke with a jazz pianist who's also a music professor at a local university. Want to know what professional musicians really think about the music in church worship? Find out in our juicy interview with *The Music Man*.

Stories of musicians aside, our features section is also chock full of powerful testimonies. How does a professional Muay Thai practitioner square his profession with his faith? Read *The Fighter* to hear his exciting story. Our God is truly a life-transforming God. How else can you explain the stories of criminals, drug abusers and broken, damaged people who completely turn around to become model citizens? *A New Creation* tells just such a story: a hardened young man who's all too familiar with the inside of a jail cell who emerged to become a lawyer and award-winning youth.

The stories in this issue are truly inspiring and powerful, and we hope you enjoy reading them as much as we enjoyed putting the issue together. Have a musical year-end! 🎵



Shi-Lynn

We need your support to keep *Asian Beacon's* ministry going. If you wish to bless us, please go to www.asianbeacon.org and click on the Donate button on the upper right.

EDITORIAL BOARD Ms Mok Shi-Lynn (Editor) editor@asianbeacon.org
Ms Goh Bee Lee (Sub-editor) • Dr Lim Poh Ann • Dr Wong Lock Jam • Ms Goldie Chong

ADVISORS Pas Dr Chew Weng Chee • Rev Loh Soon Choy • Pas Dr Daniel Ho • Mr Eugene Yapp • Mr Wong Young Soon

LEGAL ADVISOR Mr Steven Fung

WRITER Ms Charmain Sim

MARKETING MANAGER Mr Steven Teo steventeo@asianbeacon.org

DIGITAL MANAGER Mr Chan Shiong Gau chan.shiong.gau@asianbeacon.org

ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE Ms Cheng Suet Lai

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

CHAIRMAN Mr Goh Khoon Seng chairman@asianbeacon.org

VICE-CHAIRMAN Dr Wong Lock Jam vicechairman@asianbeacon.org

HON SECRETARY Mr Lee Poay Keong

HON TREASURER Ms Lake Che Ching

COMMITTEE MEMBER Mr William Tan • Ms Charmain Sim • Mr Robert Mah

PUBLISHER

Persaudaraan Asian Beacon Malaysia

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PERSAUDARAAN ASIAN BEACON MALAYSIA

19-C, Jalan SS 22/19, Damansara Jaya,
47400 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: (603) 7725 4109 Fax: (603) 7726 1740 Hp: 012-3931 453
Email: aboffice@asianbeacon.org

SABAH REPRESENTATIVE

Jessie Chong- Email: jessiecl08@gmail.com

SARAWAK REPRESENTATIVE

Jackson Ng- Email: jackson@mastermind.com.my

SINGAPORE REPRESENTATIVE

Adrian Ngooi- Email: ankb74@gmail.com

PERTH REPRESENTATIVE

Tek and Goldie Chong - Email: tekchong@inet.net.au

MELBOURNE REPRESENTATIVE

Ms Lucy Yap, P.O. Box 3113, Wheelers Hill, Melbourne, Vic 31 50
Email: asianbeacon@optusnet.com.au

DESIGN & LAYOUT

Twentyfivecents Creative Solutions

Email: twentyfivecents@gmail.com

Facebook: Twentyfivecents Creative Solutions

PRINTER

Thumbprints UTD SDN BHD

Lot 24 Jalan RP 3, Rawang Perdana, Industrial Estate,
48000 Rawang, Selangor
Tel: (603) 6092 9809 www.thumbprints.com.my

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KEVIN ROHAN THOMAS

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A New Era for Asian Beacon

BY MOK SHI-LYNN

PHOTOS BY KHUSBU DIGITAL VIDEO

It was an evening of praise, thanksgiving and fellowship when around 550 people from across denominations and different parts of the country gathered to celebrate the 45th anniversary of *Asian Beacon*. Held at the JW Marriott Hotel Kuala Lumpur on August 10, the celebration saw a large, joyful crowd of friends and supporters of *Asian Beacon* who came together to give thanks to God for His faithfulness and blessings upon the ministry.

THE EVENING BEGAN WITH an energising worship led by musician Patrick Leong and his band, followed with an opening prayer by *Asian Beacon's* longest serving adviser, Rev Loh Soon Choy. The chairman of *Asian Beacon*, Goh Khoon Seng, then gave his welcome address. Among other things, he explained the unusual seating arrangement where there was no head table, saying that "there are no VIPs before God".

This was followed by some words of encouragement by minister in the Prime Minister's department, Datuk Paul Low. He called on Christians to be more involved in the betterment of the country in all areas, such as government, business, and in the case of *Asian Beacon*, media. Secretary-General of NECF Malaysia, Eugene Yapp, also an adviser to *Asian Beacon*, then gave the prayer of thanksgiving for dinner.

Guests were then enthralled with the beautiful, clear voice of Doreen Tang, a vocalist who worships at PJEFC. She was joined onstage by the three members of Tenors for Christ – Joshua Lee, Tom Tan and Victor Chua. The carefully selected songs presented by such talented classical voices lent an elegant, sumptuous air to the event and left guests clamouring for more.

In its 45 years of publication, there have been numerous people who have shaped *Asian Beacon* and helped make it what it is today. At the 45th anniversary celebration, it was only appropriate that appreciation was shown to the former chairmen and editors of *Asian Beacon*. These faithful leaders were invited onstage and presented with gifts by the current executive committee. The past chairmen included Dr Chong Kwong Tek (the first Malaysian editor and chairman of *Asian Beacon*), Dr

Ong Hwee Keng and the immediate past chairman Teoh Cheng Hock. Past editors were then similarly invited onstage and honoured. They included Goldie Chong, Goh Poh Gaik, Peter Soo, Rev Koh Joo Fung, Goh Bee Lee, Dr Lim Poh Ann, Rev Loh Soon Choy, and immediate past editor Ong Juat Heng.

The five advisers of *Asian Beacon* were also invited onstage and thanked for their support in AB's ministry: Rev Loh Soon Choy, Eugene Yapp, Wong Young Soon, Pr Dr Daniel Ho and Pr Dr Chew Weng Chee. Long-time *Asian Beacon* supporter Dato' George Ting was also honoured.

The highlight of the evening was undoubtedly the launch of *Asian Beacon's* new logo, vision and mission statements. In a gesture filled with symbolism, Dr Chong Kwong Tek who represented the past leadership of *Asian Beacon* handed over a giant pen (a symbol of the literary ministry of AB) to current chairman Goh Khoon Seng. Together, they uncapped the pen to reveal a USB flash drive hidden within – symbolising the digital future of *Asian Beacon*. Goh then inserted

ASIAN BEACON
YOUR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MAGAZINE

Asian Beacon is exceedingly thankful to Joshua San of Integricity Creatives for his labour of love in designing the new logo. From the colour amber to the four arrows pointing both inward and outward and the cross at the centre, the logo is rife with meaning and symbolism. The logo also ingeniously reflects AB Ministries' new vision and four mission statements, while alluding to the bold new direction of the ministry.

the USB drive into its receptacle, triggering a countdown to the debut of the new *Asian Beacon* logo amidst flashing lights and dramatic sound effects.





Goh then presented the new vision of *Asian Beacon Ministries* to the guests, along with the four accompanying mission statements. He also explained the meaning behind the newly launched logo. "The new vision and mission statements reflect the new direction the Lord has led us to. *Asian Beacon Ministries* will collaborate and work closely with churches both large and small, and Christian organisations. In the past, AB was focused purely on its magazine ministry. Moving forward, we have expanded our scope to cover more forms of media, and include a deeper involvement with the Christian community," Goh said.

Guests then enjoyed the final musical performance of the evening by Ed & Pae (Pr Edmund Smith and Paecy Wong). This was followed by a brief message from Rev Wong Kim Kong, Secretary-General of NECF Malaysia for 12 years, who urged the audience to make an example of the life and ministry of the apostle Paul.

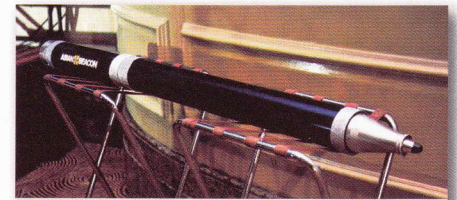
Guests were then invited and challenged to support AB Ministries when Rajen Devadason took the stage. A certified financial planner, columnist

for *Asian Beacon's* finance section and a keen supporter of the ministry, he made an earnest yet humorous call to donate or pledge toward AB. After guests filled in their pledge envelopes, AB advisers Pr Dr Chew Weng Chee and Pr Dr Daniel Ho prayed for God's blessings upon the ministry.

Rajen then came back onstage to facilitate a fundraising auction, during which artist Tommy Chen introduced his painting of a majestic eagle in flight. A portion of the proceeds from the sale will go to *Asian Beacon*.

The evening ended with a prayer of closing and blessing by Dr Chong Kwong Tek. Even though the programme had officially ended, many stayed behind to fellowship with one another and enjoy the ambience of the dazzling venue that was generously sponsored by Dato' Mark Yeoh. Guests also took home goodie bags that were provided by *Asian Beacon* and various sponsors.

Thanks to the grace of God and the many volunteers, helpers and donors who gave whole-heartedly of their time, energy and expertise, the 45th anniversary celebration of *Asian Beacon* was an unequivocal



The Giant Asian Beacon Pen

Some might say that the 'star' of the launch gambit was the 5-foot pen which transformed into a USB drive. It was cleverly conceptualised and constructed by hand by a faithful AB supporter and helper Agnes Lee, and AB's marketing manager Steven Teo. Made of simple, everyday objects, the duo creatively cut, pasted and spray painted to create the different pieces of ballpoint pen, USB drive and USB port, complete with flashing LED lights that were activated using a hidden switch. The pen-cum-thumbdrive was so impressive that it was spontaneously sold during the fundraising auction.



success. More than just a memorable thanksgiving dinner, the event met its objectives of launching *Asian Beacon Ministries*, the new logo, vision and mission, as well as fundraising.

Here's to the next 45 years of AB Ministries working with the Christian community to impact the country and beyond for God's glory. ☪

If you wish to partner with *Asian Beacon* or give us a '45th birthday present', please go to www.asianbeacon.org, email aboffice@asianbeacon.org or call (603) 7725 4109.

Asian Beacon: A Glimpse

In August this year, *Asian Beacon* celebrated its 45th anniversary. At the event, a new vision, new mission statements, new logo and even a new name for the ministry was unveiled (refer to page 7). What do these momentous changes entail, and what are the practical implications of this 'bold new phase' in the ministry of *Asian Beacon*? Chairman of the Executive Committee, Goh Khoon Seng (GKS); Marketing Manager, Steven Teo (ST); Digital Manager, Chan Shiong Gau (CSG) and Editor, Mok Shi-Lynn (MSL) discussed the future direction of and their hopes for *Asian Beacon* (AB). **BY MOK SHI-LYNN**



Goh Khoon Seng, Chairman

WHAT IS AB MINISTRIES AND HOW DID THE IDEA COME ABOUT?

ST: For the last year or so, we have been discussing the idea of *Asian Beacon* being more than just a printed magazine. When we spoke with churches and Christian organisations, we realised that the Christian community in Malaysia needed many other services. The few we identified were design, publication, and social media support. When we moved into the digital arena, AB was blessed with people who were experts in their fields, who helped us redesign our website, create better branding and so on. We learned some lessons and picked up some ideas, and we'd like to share these with the wider Christian community.

In this respect, we might have a division under AB Ministries providing 'outsourced services'. For example, if your church would like to produce a newsletter to keep your members informed, AB Ministries may be able to help you in exchange for financial support.

Another area we are considering is training and conferences. We can either spearhead and organise conferences and seminars, or collaborate with churches and organisations that are bringing in speakers.

GKS: One of the main roles of AB is to be a collaborator with the Christian community – churches large and small. We want to be a resource partner for churches, whatever their needs may be. This is probably a sweeping comment, but in this digital age, many churches in Malaysia have no clue how to handle or make use of digital technology or social media. They'll need help in this area, and I think *Asian Beacon* can fill this role.

And that's how AB Ministries came about. It is a rebranding of *Asian Beacon* with a new name and new logo that reflect the new goals we hope to achieve.

AB IS MOVING BEYOND THE LITERATURE MINISTRY AND INTO MEDIA MINISTRY

CSG: The definition of media with respect to the church ranges from the computer system that projects lyrics, to lighting, audio and photography. So it's not just social media and the web.



Chan Shiong Gau, Digital Manager

In addition to stories and testimonies, AB will be providing a lot of 'how to' articles and videos pertaining to media. For example, how to use mobile phones to make video announcements, how to set up simple lighting, how to avoid the 'shaky hand' effect when filming video, a guide as to what kind of camera to use... those sorts of things. We can set up a resource centre on our website where churches can look for such useful information.

MSL: Having said that, we're still on the lookout for good stories and testimonies. We invite people to send us their letters and testimonies. We'd like as many churches as possible to share their content and news with us. AB will also list churches' events and

Impulse at the Future

job openings on our website. In fact, this is already being done. The idea is for AB to be the platform or hub that will have all this information to be shared with the Christian community at large.

ST: We are also building a platform whereby newsletters and magazines can be displayed in an 'e-magazine' format. Basically, this is a virtual book on a tablet where a reader can flip pages back and forth. Recent issues of *Asian Beacon* magazine are already available there, and we invite churches and Christian organisations to publish their newsletters there too. This will enable your content to reach a wider audience that is not restricted by your postal mailing list.



Mok Shi-Lynn, Editor

ENGAGING WITH A YOUNGER AUDIENCE

CSG: AB is going to have a primary audience that is in the 20-35 year age group. This number did not come about randomly. Rather, we noticed that this age group constituted about 60% of all our social media and digital platforms users. Hence, we decided that this will be AB's target age group. This group consists of singles, newly married or families with young children. So our content and topics will be geared toward the issues that affect this age group. However, this does not mean we're abandoning the rest of our audience.

MSL: We can still maintain the printed magazine as it is but have the website target a younger audience. The printed magazine can be one arm or division of AB Ministries, and we can launch perhaps a Christian newspaper under another division. And under yet another division, we can have separate magazines like AB Youth or AB Women. That's the beauty and possibility of AB Ministries.

GKS: In other words, AB Ministries accords us a lot of flexibility. It's an open-ended thing... we're not limited to just a magazine anymore. AB Ministries gives us the whole, wide playing field.

ORGANISATIONAL CHANGES SOON TO COME

GKS: Realistically, we need to change the structure of AB. The organisational structure should be one that's led by a CEO, GM or national director, with a proper set-up of administrative support, promotions, IT, fundraising, community liaison team, editorial team, and so on. For AB to really get going in this new era, we need to make that change, perhaps as early as next year (2015). Otherwise, we will be held back.

With regard to finances, it's a chicken-and-egg situation. We definitely need more people, but we can't go on a hiring spree and bring in 10 new people because it's simply not practical. But we need to have sufficient people to implement our new vision, with focus on the digital aspect.

BEING CURRENT AND RELEVANT

GKS: I've said it many times before and I'll say it again: *Asian Beacon* needs to be relevant and current. This is with regard to content (contemporary topics such as nation building, depression and others) as well as platform (placing emphasis on digital instead of the printed copy).

ST: After 45 years, we can't continue to do things the old way. We want a new, young, skilled team, fresh new initiatives, new content, new concepts. We need to grow, to change.

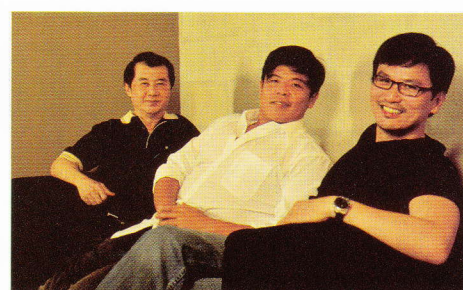
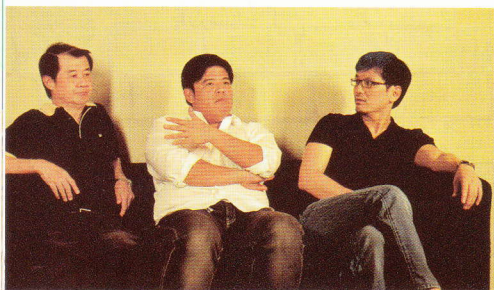


Steven Teo, Marketing Manager

GKS: My vision is that in three years' time, the magazine will be only a small part of *Asian Beacon Ministries*. We want to be known for many other services or products. There are many other things we can do that will become as important and mainstay as the magazine currently is. I think the Lord is leading us to do more than just publish a magazine. We have grown and there is no looking back.

I don't pretend to know much about digital media, but I'm amazed at how God provided the right people to AB to help achieve our new vision. It seems like the Lord has been encouraging and confirming what we hope to do. The introduction to our new vision reads: "... We move into a digital era and expand the scope of our ministry driven by a new vision and mission." And like our new logo symbolises, we look inward at the cross, with Jesus at the centre, and outward to the community with our four new mission statements.

I am very excited about what and where the Lord is leading *Asian Beacon*. We need to overcome our financial issues, but I firmly believe that as we embark into this new era and move cautiously, the Lord will provide each step of the way. Let us reach out and make known His Glory. ✚

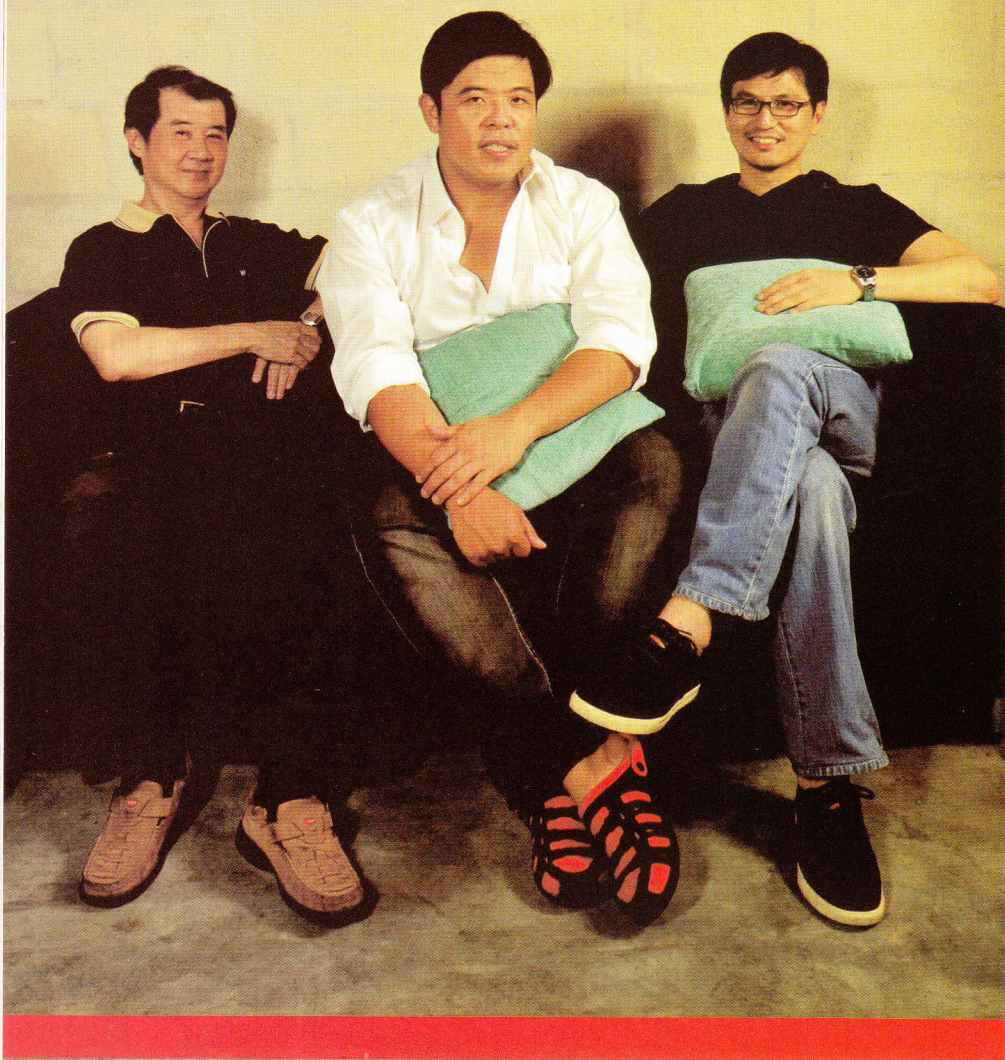


BY TEE I-WEI

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE BY KEVIN ROHAN THOMAS

Interview and shoot location courtesy of Integricity Creatives.

TENORS FOR CHRIST



JOSH AWANG, VICTOR CHUA AND TOM Tan are great friends. One senses a terrific chemistry among them. The continuous back-slapping, ribbing and laughter during the interview meant that they took 15 minutes to answer a single question.

These gentlemen call themselves *Tenors for Christ*, and lend their voices to beautiful covers of the likes of Andrea Bocelli and Josh Groban. A mutual friend suggested that they sing together, and they have been performing as a team since that day of discovery in 2006.

Despite their different backgrounds and personalities, they found themselves drawn together through the music they create. Josh deems it to be 'like finding birds of a feather'. He had been part of a rock band, whilst Victor was more Pop and Broadway, and Tom had been part of a chorale ensemble called The Canticle Singers. It seemed an unlikely partnership that somehow worked.

When on stage, they have each other's backs. Sometimes, even a little too much. "I remember in the early days, when I made a mistake, Tom would actually look at me and do this... (mimes Tom shoving his arm)," laughs Victor. How about anyone else – any other mishaps on stage? Josh admitted that he once sang gibberish when he forgot his lyrics on stage. "The audience probably thought it was Italian," he quips.

SINGING FOR THE SULTAN

They then take me through their most memorable performance, which turns out to be singing for the Sultan of Selangor. Before the performance, they had been told that the Sultan was only going to stay for one or two songs. "So we sang two songs, then, we paused. There was an awkward silence because we were waiting for the Sultan to leave," Josh shares. "We looked at the Sultan, we looked at the emcee, the emcee looked back at us... and then finally the Sultan said, 'Continue!'"

So they sang – and the Sultan stayed

until the end of the show. Their set had consisted of Malay and Spanish songs – among them was Frank Sinatra’s *My Way* in Spanish. “Being Christians, we didn’t quite agree with the message behind Sinatra’s version, which was to do things ‘my way’. So we changed it from *a mi manera* (my way) to *a su manera* (Your way) – saying that we do things God’s way,” Victor explains. He goes on to say that because it was in Spanish, nobody understood – and so they got away with it!

Most of the songs they perform are in the realm of encouraging, uplifting, spiritual songs. Josh confirms that they will not go near Lady Gaga. “We do mostly ballads,” he says. Favourites to perform include *For Always* by Josh Groban and *Because We Believe* by Andrea Bocelli. Josh also attests that “our whole discography is our favourite because we’re too lazy to learn new songs.” When Victor’s dad suggested that they learn new material, they just got someone else to sing with them, and then told him, “We’ve got new flavor.” Even with their supposedly limited repertoire, their performances often leave audiences in awe, as I personally witnessed during their recent performance at *Asian Beacon’s* 45th anniversary celebration.

With the pop-operatic songs that they do, they describe themselves as a group which sings in the vein of Il Divo. Victor adds, “We used to call ourselves the Malaysian version of Il Divo, and since we don’t charge and sometimes organisers pay us very little, we also call ourselves El Cheapo!”

KEEPING FAITHFUL TO GOD AND WORK

Has singing together as a Christian group impacted their faith or spiritual growth in any way? Josh’s witty reply comes first: “Our physical stature is a direct representation of our spiritual health. So, among the three of us... (looks at Tom and Victor, hinting at one another’s body sizes).” They burst into laughter for the nth time.

Victor describes singing as a ministry that “keeps us on our toes”. They incorporate testimonies as well as music when they perform at churches. “I think, just being where God is at work plays a role in helping us to be faithful to the work and our walk with Him. Certainly, being in this group has blessed me.” He further encourages those who are gifted with music to keep on using



The men behind the voices: (from left) Tom Tan, Victor Chua, and Josh Awang.

it “no matter where your spiritual walk is”. He says, “You’ll find that when you are involved in His work, something happens. You experience Him.”

Josh follows with a miracle story: after not being able to sing falsetto for seven years, it suddenly came back to him on stage. He had previously hurt his voice while singing in a rock band. While it has not healed completely, he says that much of it has come back since he started singing with Tenors for Christ.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW THE TENORS?

Because they are so engaging and friendly, one is drawn to their varied personalities. So, what about personal preferences? Who eats the most? Without missing a beat, Josh and Victor point at Tom. More laughter ensues. Tom happily answers that his favourite Malaysian food is *nasi lemak*, and that his *char kuay teow* must be fried with two eggs. Victor likes eggs too, to which Josh quips, “You should do an egg party, Victor. Call it egg-xpensive, egg-xpress yourself...” As for Josh, he goes for *beehoon siam*.

What about hobbies, likes and dislikes? Victor confesses to being a movie buff, to the point of even reading the credits. Tom teases him about it: “Why do you read the credits? What’s so important about the Key Grip guy?” In reply, Victor insists that the Key Grip guy is a Very Important Guy (even though he doesn’t really know what he does, or grips). Josh tells about his postings

on Facebook, an “outlet for my verbal diarrhoea”. Victor helpfully points out that Josh has an opinion on everything under the sun. On the other hand, Tom is into Korean TV series. He’s currently watching *The Third Hospital*. Josh playfully nicknames him the walking encyclopaedia of food and Korean TV shows.

When it comes to dislikes, they are quick to state their shared loathing of poor PA systems. As performers, they wish that organisers and venue operators would understand that a poor PA system can ruin a performance, no matter how good the singer is. They shared about an occasion where poor technology turned their singing into a noisy, garbled racket for the audience at the far end of the hall.

Would they consider putting out an album? The guys admit that they have been thinking about it. They throw some potential album names about, before Victor cheekily announces, “We’ll do an album if *Asian Beacon* readers write in and support the idea.” (Ed: Dear readers, you know what to do.)

Finally, for those who want to start or sing in a Christian group like Tenors for Christ, Victor advises putting aside the ego. “Realise why you’re doing it, and who you’re doing it for,” he concludes in earnestness. 🙏

For enquiries and bookings, please visit the *Tenors for Christ* Facebook page at www.facebook.com/tenors.forchrist



My Guitar, the Gospel! and Globe-trotting

CHEW SUE LEE TALKS TO WELL-KNOWN GUITARIST, BENNY PRASAD.

“HOW CAN ONE expect a six-string guitar to do what a twenty-string guitar does?

It is wrong.” Wise words from Dr. Benny Prasad, a talented guitarist from Bangalore, India, who was commenting on the Asian societal values that place great pressure on children to live up to expectations and be someone they are not.

Benny speaks from experience. He was driven to contemplate suicide due to his family’s expectations for him as an eldest child. His parents, successful individuals working in the Silicon Valley of India, had high hopes for him. But at 16, having failed in his studies and almost all aspects of his young life, he was far from being a model child. As he also suffered from severe asthma, and rheumatoid arthritis due to 14 years of medication, Benny was ready to end his “non-purposeful life”.

To this fourth generation Christian, Christianity was merely a tradition and not a life-transforming faith. But

God had a greater purpose for him. At the urging of his mother, he attended a youth retreat where God spoke to him and said, “Benny, even though you have been called useless all your life, I need you and I can transform your life and make you a new creation.”

LIFE-CHANGING DISCOVERIES

And indeed God did the miraculous and gave Benny a hope and a purpose. The talented musician of today wasn’t always so. “I was the only non-musical person in the family and only started playing the guitar at 19. I practiced for seven hours every day.” When he finally performed at an open mic event, he discovered that he had a God-given talent.

Not unlike many young believers today, Benny thought that in order to serve God, he had to be a preacher or a pastor. “It was clearly not what I did best,” he says matter-of-factly. He asserts the importance of exploring what God calls us to. “I’m thankful to God that I am able to find a purpose. If you know your calling, you will serve passionately

to the end.”

Upon joining Youth with a Mission (YWAM), he discovered God’s call for him – music evangelism. “Music evangelism has brought me so much joy and fulfillment.”

Similarly, Benny urges parents to allow their children to discover their own calling and gifting, instead of forcing a particular skill on them based on what society thinks is valuable. “Children today are forced to learn the piano, but they don’t enjoy it and give it up as soon as they have completed it.”

He laments that parents today focus heavily on their child’s studies and performance in school at the expense of their character and emotional development. “A child’s life is more than that,” says Benny, who though not a parent, has gained credibility because of his life’s testimony. “Befriend your child – sit down and ask them what challenges they face in school. Check how they are doing emotionally and character-wise, and not just on their academic performance.”

CLOSED DOORS OPEN TO RECORD-SETTING GLOBE-TROTTER

While many Malaysians may not have heard of Benny Prasad, he is in fact a world record holder for having travelled to the most countries in the shortest period of time – 245 nations, including Antarctica, in 6 years, 6 months and 22 days. He never set out to win the world record. It was God who gave him the vision to travel to all the countries in 2010.

Though he was offered citizenship to countries with “better” passports, Benny believed that God could use his Indian passport to open doors for him. When he had difficulties entering Pakistan (the last nation needed for his world record), God miraculously led him to a chance meeting with two Pakistani diplomats in North Korea, which finally led to an official invitation to enter Pakistan.

God proved that with Him, nothing is impossible. He took Benny even to the most closed Muslim nations, allowing him to share his testimony and the work of God in his life. “I never accept an invitation to perform if I am not given a platform to share the Gospel. It is pointless for me to just play music.”

While Benny has performed at major events such as FIFA games, the Olympics, and even at parliaments, he also travelled to and held a concert in the tiny, remote island of Pitcairn, where in 2010, there were only 66 people. “52 people were at the concert, which is 80% of the population, and I was told that mine was the first concert in 200 years!” he marvelled.

It doesn't take a world traveller to know that travelling is a luxury that many cannot afford. However, the principled Benny has never begged nor borrowed. To date, he has never been in debt, nor paid a bribe to gain access even to the most difficult nations. “I want to be a testimony that God is a provider,” he says with great conviction. As a tentmaker, Benny sells his CDs to support himself, and notes appreciatively that he also receives love gifts and anonymous donations.

“I live a simple life,” he shares, “and my need defines my expenses.” Unbelievably, his personal expenses during a 9-month trip to more than 50 nations amounted to only USD500.

Benny chooses to stay with families

so that he can connect with the people and culture of the nations he visits. He does not charge a fee for his concerts. So he is welcome everywhere. Recognising his travels as a journey of faith, he does not solicit for opportunities to perform. Doors are open to him through a growing network of friends and churches. One meeting often leads to another and one opportunity to a host of others.

TOUCHING LIVES

“Ultimately my goal is not to just proclaim a message, but to make an impact in people's lives,” he enthuses. Significantly, he has helped suicidal children with little self-worth find a renewed sense of purpose. Just like he did.

In one of Benny's many personal ‘touch lives’ sessions, a boy told him, “I wish Allah would speak to me the way Jesus speaks to you.” In his wise and loving way he comforted, “You should try, and if you can't, please come talk to me and I will introduce you to Jesus.”

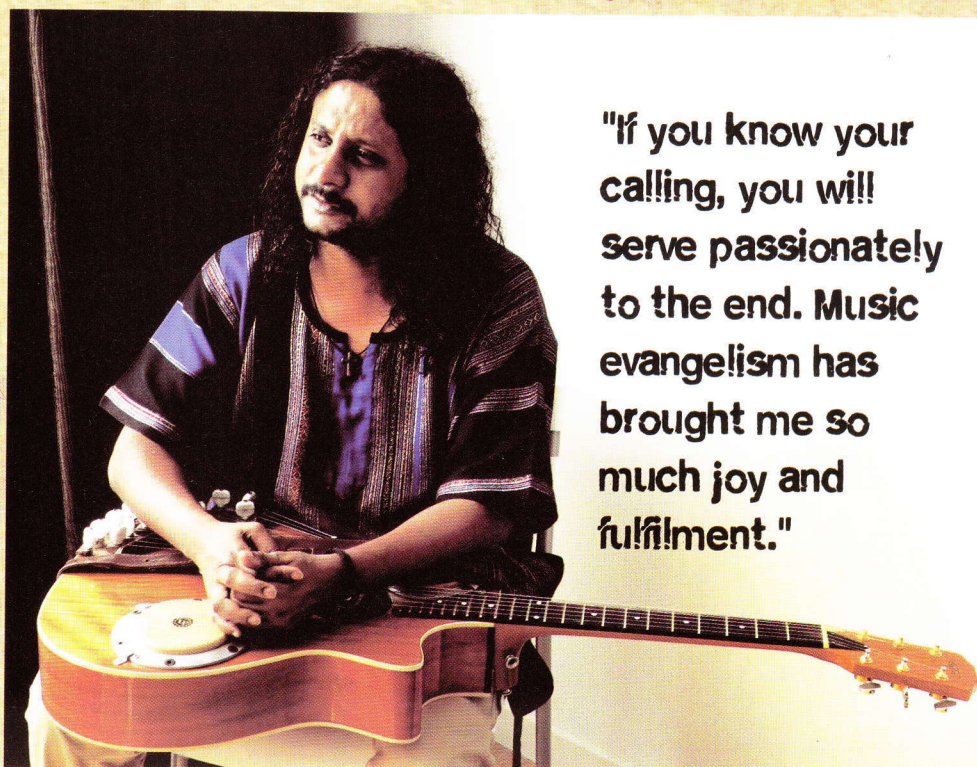
In his latest project to impact and build lives, Benny has begun work on *Chai 316* in Bangalore. *Chai* is Hindi for tea, and *316* of course, points to John 3:16. God has faithfully provided the USD1 million for the visionary project. With a seating capacity of 400, it is expected to be completed in February 2016. It will be a counselling centre for young college

students. The waiters and waitresses will be trained counsellors who will not only serve tea but also engage with the students and share the love of Christ.

According to Benny, there are 808 million young people in India below the age of 35. Especially close to his heart are the ones in Bangalore – the ‘suicide capital’ of India, where 10% of suicides are between the ages of 10 to 14. Many face parental and education pressures like he did. “Counselling centres are not part of the culture in India, and it is difficult for young people to share their problems. I want them to know that they are valuable because they are made in the image of God, not because of how well they do in their studies,” he adds.

Benny has chosen to quit his travels to manage the café and focus on seeing God transform young lives. He yearns for them to know their identity in Christ, so that they can live the life that God has called them to. “If you base your identity on society's expectations, you will never be satisfied. Be a trendsetter for others. Don't be a slave to money, but be a master of it. You only have one life to live, so live it to the full.”

For more information about Benny Prasad and his ministry, visit www.bennyprasad.com; or visit www.chai316.com for updates on his upcoming project and how you can support it.



"If you know your calling, you will serve passionately to the end. Music evangelism has brought me so much joy and fulfilment."

The Best for the King

Since 1992, choral group *The Canticle Singers* (TCS) has embraced a repertoire of music from the religious and secular, the classical and the modern. We sit down with founder-cum-music director Chong Hong Kit and chorus master Brian Cheong to discuss the triumphs and tribulations that are the fair share of running a Christian choir in Malaysia.

BY ONG KAY JEN

HONG KIT, 58, RECALLS A singer who once forgot her cue and locked herself in the dressing room.

"Never lock your door backstage!" he emphasises with passion. "The stage manager kept pounding and pounding on the door. Eventually she turned up, but obviously she couldn't do well because she was so shaken."

All part of a day's work for TCS members, who are, according to its website "a blend of volunteer singers from all walks of life and from an assortment of backgrounds."

"Someone once forgot to go on stage," relates Brian, 28. "The song had already started playing when we had to run up to the dressing room to find him sleeping in a corner!"

"That does happen," he laughs. "We've found people sleeping on the wings of the stage itself. Our singers can

get so tired from the endless rehearsals." From the technical rehearsal till the curtain drops, the act has to be reworked and repeated until perfection, Hong Kit explains.

"During performances, we have a report time of 5.30pm – can you imagine what a rush it is for people who come in after work? So we always advise that our singers sacrifice a half-day leave to rest and come in fully energised before the performance."

SACRIFICE, STANDARDS AND SOUL

Sacrifice is something the ever-evolving membership of TCS is well-acquainted with. The choir puts up annual productions which operate on skin-tight deadlines.

"Sometimes we have to compromise a lot in terms of what we can squeeze out of our singers. There's a lot of pressure,

and these are not professionals. If you squeeze them the wrong way, they'll die," says Hong Kit.

We ask out of curiosity: Are members not paid?

"No," replies Hong Kit, gruffly. "See how poor it is?"

Brian chuckles. "We all really do it for the love of it. When TCS raises money, we donate that to charity."

Their most recent performance, BRAVISSIMO, featured music from *Les Miserables*, *La Boheme*, *The Lion King* and many other well-loved hits. The group had a mere 16 rehearsals before showtime.

"We're strict about attending rehearsals because everyone has to be able to pull their own weight. If, for example, one bass is missing, the entire rehearsal is off-balance because that sound cannot be made up for," explains Brian.

Unlike a musical, it is of utmost importance for a choral performance to sound like one. The biggest challenge, then, is to ensure all voices blend well.

"It's hard to achieve that," Hong Kit explains. "We all have different voices – some a bit thinner, some heavier, some have different accents – it all comes out when you sing in a choir."

COMMITMENT AND DISCIPLINE

Another challenge is finding singers who can commit to such intense training.

"People's attention spans are getting shorter. It's becoming harder to find people with the tenacity to follow through in accomplishing something," says Hong Kit.

"Maybe it's because of how much we have advanced," Brian reflects. "Everything is so instant, so we don't



The Canticle Singers at one of their recent performances.



see the point in longsuffering. We don't want to wait for anything, but the fact is, there's no shortcut in choral singing."

They relate an incident of a young man who came into the group with no training but a fairly nice voice, but had been told by people in his church that he was the Josh Groban of Malaysia.

"There was a solo in one song that he demanded to sing," recalls Hong Kit. "I told him he wasn't ready for it, but he insisted that he was. I said, 'Who are you to say that you are ready?' He was only 17 or 18 years old! If I had said that in school, I would have gotten a slap and my head would have turned 360°," he sighs.

Furthermore, turning to churches for talent is also becoming increasingly futile.

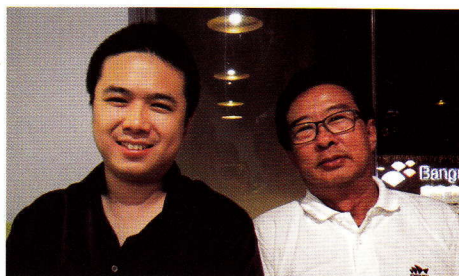
"We know that there are people who can sing, but it's hard to find those willing to commit who are not already taken by other choirs," bemoans Brian.

"Most churches have developed a 'community choir' in the most open sense - anybody who can *leelelala* qualifies," Hong Kit says. "It didn't used to be like that."

Is it a bad thing, then, that we are lowering standards to be more inclusive? Hong Kit doesn't believe the answer is a straightforward No.

"A choir is supposed to be a well-tuned instrument," he emphasises. "Just as you wouldn't simply allow anyone to go up and preach, you have to set a standard for choirs."

"At rehearsals, I like to ask individuals, 'Why are you here this evening?' It's simply not enough to say: 'I like to sing'. Sing in the congregation then - you'd do less damage. But if you want to inspire people, you have to



Brian Cheong and Chong Hong Kit of The Canticle Singers.

"Just as you wouldn't simply allow anyone to go up and preach, it's the same for choirs. You have to set a standard."

have a good, clear voice. Especially in a Christian context, the spoken word is paramount."

Brian adds, "You could be a worship leader, but if you're singing random blabber on stage and nobody knows what you're saying, you've failed the objective: communication."

NO BLEMISHED COWS, PLEASE

However, what ultimately matters the most for the duo is the right heart to serve.

"There are those who do join us and can't exactly sing - but they do have the heart. I'm grateful to have them, as it's easier to guide them although it may take a while," says Brian. "On the other hand, those who do have the skills prefer not to be there."

Hong Kit concurs, noting the apparent lack of discipline in some

church choirs he's visited. With people coming for practices as and when they feel like, he was once asked by a choir member, "Why should *you* know why I cannot come for practice?"

"The audacity," he says, shaking his head. "But this is the attitude we're seeing more and more."

Brian agrees. "It's a strange mentality to see in the church, because you expect people to come in wanting to do what Christians should be doing - serving God."

Hong Kit and Brian observe that this attitude permeates to all levels in church, because almost all service is voluntary. The problem merely sticks out in a choir because of the strict control needed for it to function.

An administrator of a church whose choir he was helping once asked Hong Kit, "Mr. Chong, what will you need to run this choir?"

He replied, only half-jokingly, "I'll require a whiteboard, a marker, a pianist and all their souls."

After all, service to God without the heart is service rendered pointless.

"We don't go to God saying, 'Here, You can have these little vegetables,' which is exactly what Cain did," says Brian.

"If you want to run God's house, you have to run it efficiently," adds Hong Kit. "It's not nice to hear this, but ultimately, don't bring the blemished cow to the altar."

While this climate oftentimes sets both men in despair, they nevertheless strive on with TCS, which has run for 22 years now.

"People call me crazy because I've been in TCS for a decade," says Brian. "But the reason I stay is that firstly, we make good music. Secondly, there are standards that we expect of ourselves. And finally, we ensure we meet these standards, even if we aren't paid for it."

As Hong Kit and Brian faithfully serve God in the music and arts scene in Malaysia, they hope the passion they bring back to their own churches will spark a fire.

"It seems a bit futile at the moment, but isn't everything a work in progress?" says Brian. 🙏

For more about the group, their next performance or even vocal tips, visit their very informative website at www.thecanticlesingers.com.

The Music Man

A Dialogue on Music, Culture, and Faith

BY DORCAS LAM

“**T**ie up the hands of the drummer!” That was the first piece of advice Dr. Chan Cheong Jan gave to worship teams in churches.

Unlike Harold Hill (the Broadway music man), Dr. Chan is no con man. Instead, this 45-year-old senior lecturer of music at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) is a genuine and natural entertainer who captivates his listeners first with his cheeky personality, and then with his music. His quick sense of humour sent us roaring with laughter all through the interview.

Born and bred in Seremban, Dr. Chan did not grow up in a musically conditioned home. In fact, his only exposure to music was through his mother who taught music at a Chinese primary school. In spite of this, he discovered a strong inclination towards music at a young age. And since primary school, he knew that he wanted to turn his passion for music into a lifelong pursuit.

His determination to make a career out of his interest in music led him to Japan to complete his first two degrees in music education and composition in western classical music.

But it was only upon accepting the teaching position at UPM that Dr. Chan was initiated into the world of research. Reminiscing his transition from a musician to a researcher, Dr. Chan described his initial reaction: “The first day I started working here [at UPM], they said, ‘You must have your PhD.’ And I said, ‘What is that?’”

MUSIC NEVER HEARD BEFORE

Nevertheless, while conducting research for his third degree, Dr. Chan ventured into the exotic world of ethnomusicology, a field of study that remains largely unexplored here in Malaysia. This father of three boys lit up with childlike excitement and pride as he recounted his 7-hour boat journey into the forests of Pahang just to “find music that no one has ever heard before.”



Dr Chan Cheong Jan: jazz pianist, lecturer, and ethnomusicologist.

Translating ethnomusicology into laymen’s terms for us, Dr. Chan explains that it is the combination of anthropology—the study of human beings—and the study of music. In other words, as an ethnomusicologist, he examines “the relationship between music and humans”, using the music of a people group as an avenue to explore issues of “beliefs, rituals, gender, politics—basically anything that can be decoded from music.” This marriage of music and culture thus awakened Dr. Chan to the greater significance that music bears: music is more than an assorted arrangement of chords; it is also an external representation of a people’s social and cultural identity.

In his search for “the music that no one has ever heard before”, Dr. Chan also uncovered the music that is hidden within his own soul. Dr. Chan specialized in western classical music, but it wasn’t until he came to know Christ and was baptized in 2004 that he gained a fuller and more intimate knowledge of the classical compositions. Because so much of the western musical tradition

was derived and developed from the Judeo-Christian faith, one could not fully appreciate the works of classical composers without having a personal encounter with the Christian faith.

Summarizing the relationship between his faith and his music life, Dr. Chan said, “My faith actually filled up the part that I didn’t know—the very fundamental part about how [these classical compositions] came about”. He went on to add that “the effect of faith reaches beyond my music life. It’s more of the freedom and the sense of release from self-pressure and self-expectations”.

“YOU SUFFER A LOT!”

Yet for a church-going professional musician like Dr. Chan, sitting through the worship session at church may not be as liberating. When asked about his take on attending church worship sessions, Dr. Chan burst out in laughter and, with his fun-loving personality, described his experience in one short exclamation: “You suffer a lot!”

He went on to explain that it is (and

perhaps will always be) very difficult for those who are professionally trained in music both to be on stage and below stage during praise and worship sessions in church. That which sounds perfectly alright to untrained ears may be absolutely disastrous to trained ears like Dr. Chan's.

But due to different levels of personal expectations, this is a frustration that all professionally trained musicians must learn to bear with much patience. As Dr. Chan explained, "What normal people think is fine already, to us, is not acceptable. So if we keep on asking for more, to us, it's only asking for the basics to be done, but to them, we are being too demanding." And it is not always easy for him to point out areas for improvement. Nonetheless, he added, "During worship, I can still clap my hands and sing along. Isn't that good?"

Among other things, Dr. Chan identified the following as some of his pet peeves: overpowering drums, bass played in the wrong key, and unsteady tempo.

MUSIC AND WORSHIP

But more than that, he goes beyond the technical aspects and delves deeper to address the role of music in worship. Many churches today disagree on the type of music used in services, with some favouring traditional hymns and others preferring the more contemporary worship songs. Yet speaking as an ethnomusicologist, Dr. Chan points out that the evaluation of worship music is based more on cultural values rather than denominational or doctrinal differences within the church.

"The situation now is that you cannot tell the denomination of the church during the worship time." And as music is deeply entrenched in culture, making judgments about the appropriateness of any type of music for worship will only trigger an endless debate. "Culture," as Dr. Chan said, "is very troublesome, very sticky; it has multiple identities.

But sometimes, people want to judge music based on black and white; people do not see music as culture." For instance, traditional hymns were originally composed as contemporary folksongs, so that people then could easily sing and remember them. But transposed to the 21st century, these



hymns have now become a part of solemn and sacred worship liturgies. The exact same music can be perceived very differently by people across different cultures and generations, and so the discussion of what is considered to be the right or wrong type of worship music will only send us all on a wild goose chase.

As revealed through ethnomusicology, it is the spirit of a people that resides at the heart of their music. Likewise, it is the attitude of the worshipper that resides at

the heart of worship. Therefore, as Dr. Chan suggested, perhaps it is more productive to be concerned for the audience – the people's response towards what is being presented – rather than the type of music used. After all, it is the heart of worship that truly matters when we come before our Audience of one. ☩

Look out for videos of Dr Chan's exclusive jazz piano performance especially for Asian Beacon! Head to our website at www.asianbeacon.org

Dr. Chan's Top 5 Tips on How to Improve Your Church's Worship Session*:

- 1. Tie the hands of the drummer**
We know you've always wanted to!
- 2. Cover the lower 3 octaves of the piano**
No amateur should be touching them anyway...
- 3. Adjust the monitor speakers**
Because everyone in the team just needs to hear himself and no one else, right?
- 4. Never use a professional sound engineer**
...Unless you want your worship music to be heard 10 miles away.
- 5. Make sure your worship team members are happy**
Because playing music should be fun.

**These tips are based on Dr. Chan's top five pet peeves, and they most definitely represent his cheeky self. So, do heed them with care and take them with a grain of salt!*

COVER STORY

Music without borders

BY CHARMAIN SIM

PHOTOS BY KEVIN ROHAN THOMAS

Interview and shoot location courtesy of
Connexion@Nexus.



JUWITA SUWITO IS AN artiste with a mission. She wants her music to cut across racial, social and religious borders.

"I want songs that can go on air. I want to reach those who might never have the opportunity to step into church. So that has always been my driving force. I hope that people hear my song on radio, and go 'Yes, I connect with that!'"

And she is working really hard to do just that.

BEGINNINGS

Since clinching the Best Local English Album at the AIM (Malaysian Music Industry) Awards in 2005 with her *Brand New World*, Suwito's achievements have been nothing less than impressive. Besides releasing a sophomore album, an EP and several singles, she's performed at numerous events and concerts not only in Malaysia, but also Singapore, Indonesia, Australia and Kenya.

In person, Suwito is exactly who her songs hint her to be – affable, sincere, and eager to connect. Her narration is punctuated with hearty laughter that reveals her generosity and zest for life.

Suwito's venture into the music scene was a natural transition after growing up in a music-filled home.

"It just came along the way, partly because my brother was already in the industry. I used to follow him around and watch from behind the scenes. For me, it was a normal thing, and I never thought of it as a job until later on."

At first, she was doing semi-professional work – backing vocals, jingles, and the like. It was only when a record label from Taiwan approached her that the possibility of a future in music laid before her. Like Abraham, she obeyed God's call and left her family and familiar surroundings. Although the project in Taiwan taught Suwito a lot of things about how the industry works, the label closed down.

When she returned, she got involved in the formation of *Oops! Asia*, but eventually moved on to start her own label, *440 Records*. This name derives from musicians' jargon and an inside joke: "When someone sang or played out of tune, we would shout, 'Oi! 440 lah!,'

meaning, 'Please tune your instrument.' It's 440Hz, the A above middle C which is generally recognised as concert pitch. So since we set 'international quality' as our target, it seemed a pretty apt and catchy name."

BRIDGING WORLDS

Suwito's calling is guided by a two-pronged mission, "I want to produce international quality music with positive messages, and then raise the next generation of people to do the same."

But juggling her role as an artiste in both Christian and secular circles is not always easy.

"I'm known more in the Christian circles, which is not a bad thing. But in the commercial world, you sometimes get stereotyped. People might go, 'Oh, but Juwita only sings in church.' Being stereotyped can block potential opportunities."

It was this question of opportunities that Suwito has been dealing with recently. Sometime in March, she noticed that all her upcoming events were only for the Christian community. Wondering if her relevance as an artiste was being threatened, she went to bed ranting to God about her calling and asking, "What's going on?"

"The next morning, I got a phone call asking, 'Are you interested to perform with David Foster?' I went, 'Of course lah!'"

That was how Suwito found herself singing with David Foster & Friends at the SapuraKencana Petroleum Malaysia Grand Prix Gala & Concert.

"It was scary! I felt like I was going for a major examination. I remember waiting outside the hall with Elvira Arul and Vince Chong. We were panicking, because we got the song list really late, but grinning at the same time. When we finally did our thing, it felt good. We tend to look down on ourselves because we're a small country. So when people who are known internationally say to you, 'Hey, good job!', you go, 'REALLY?' Sometimes you just need the validation that you're not that bad after all. It was a huge confidence booster."

Suwito describes that evening as a reminder of God's sovereignty. "Sometimes I feel like maybe I haven't tried enough. But God's telling me, 'Hey, I can do anything. Chill, I'm still in control.' I mean, who in their wildest

dreams would have thought that I'd sing with David Foster? The more I journey in life, the more I'm learning how God works in mysterious ways."

BRIDGING GENERATIONS

Suwito is not only hard at work reaching people through her songs. God has been opening doors for her and 440 Records to minister through mentoring, especially in East Malaysia. She's always had a soft spot for East Malaysia, but it wasn't until 2011 when God opened the doors to Sabah and Sarawak. 440 Records suddenly had a surge of invitations from East Malaysia, from the likes of SIB, Alpha Malaysia, Gaya Christmas, Hope Malaysia, Curtin University, Basel Church youth, Anglican youth, KK Jazz Festival, Eagles Leadership Conference Sabah, and Talent Quest in Tawau.

"It seemed to be a strategic focus that we never planned! We were at PMM (Pelayanan Muda-Mudi) SIB Sabah's annual conference in 2011 when the idea to mentor young musicians took root and their leadership was more than ready to partner with us – hence the birth of Fortissimo. That was a two-year initiative to mentor aspiring Christian musicians and vocalists in Sabah."

In December 2013, Suwito began to have a burden for Sarawak. Then in God's amazing way, Trinity Methodist Church Kuching indicated interest to partner with 440 Records. Hence the Sarawak initiative – Tribe David – was born, with more focus on worship and inter-denominational intent.

The mentoring programmes have inadvertently provided opportunities for well-known individuals in the music industry to "share their journey as musicians with the younger generation", an exchange that has been beneficial to both the mentors and mentees.

"It's also awesome that Wagner Daniel, our director who leads 440 Records' training projects is East Malaysian. It really helps to have someone who is passionate about the cause and is able to be that bridge in terms of culture, mindset and language."

Another mentoring event launched in June is Vocal Fest, which is based in the Klang Valley. This is where singers and people passionate about singing come to discover more about the industry. 440 Records aims to hold Vocal Fest annually.

"I want to produce international quality music with positive messages, and then raise the next generation of people to do the same."



STAYING GROUNDED

Besides working on the mentoring programmes, Suwito plans to release her new album by the first quarter of 2015. She's also just released a single, *Belle of the Ball*, and will release another in December. She has another item on her to-do list: "I want to write a book before I die! Maybe somewhere along the way, I'll write a book."

The life of an artiste is not always enchanting. A large portion of Suwito's daily schedule involves planning for training and workshops, and preparing for gigs such as rehearsals and logistics arrangements.

"Usually a manager would do that, but I haven't found one. Anybody reading this who's interested?" Suwito asks and laughs.

With a full plate on her hands, it can be tough to stay grounded. But Suwito, who worships at DUMC, says that consistent fellowship with believers is the key. Another person who keeps her grounded is her mother. "She's my biggest encourager. She follows me around, and makes sure I don't leave things behind, which is quite often," Suwito laughs.

Then she says more seriously, "When you're

on stage, it's always helpful to have somebody who knows in general how you sound and normally perform, to be there to give you feedback. For some people it's their boyfriend, husband... but for me it's my mom. She's also the godmother to my band, literally. They look out for her, and she looks out for them."

SETTING STANDARDS

She also highlights the biggest challenge of the age – making one's music stand out in a media-overloaded environment.

"There's so much out there, like YouTube and SoundCloud. Sometimes, I'm looking for an awesome version of a song, but I keep clicking and still find nothing worthy. It's because there's no gatekeeper. In the past, there's way too much gatekeeping, but now *everything* is out there. So, finding that middle ground is important. There still needs to be some quality control. Otherwise, the scary thing for the younger generation is that their benchmark for quality will be lowered. That's what I'm concerned about. It's true that anybody can play, but where do you set your standards?"



"When you're on stage, it's always helpful to have somebody who knows in general how you sound and normally perform, to be there to give you feedback. For some people it's their boyfriend, husband... but for me it's my mom."

It's here that Suwito's relaxed demeanour belies the poise that speaks of her professionalism and conviction in delivering only the best.

"I think the key ingredient is to make sure that your quality is as good, if not better, than what's available elsewhere. Sometimes, when it's a church thing, we tend to lower our expectations. That shouldn't be the case. I think the church should have higher standards, because our God is a creative God, and we're tapped into the original source! Why then should our creativeness be substandard? Why should our quality be less than what we can get out there? So if you're a Christian, don't box yourself up, and make sure you're up to mark."

BEING REAL

Being real is also high priority to Suwito when she writes and sings. But being real doesn't mean there is only license to sing pure gloom.

"I don't want to sing a song about killing myself. There's enough tragedy and heartbreak. One of my favourite songs is *Sad Sad World* by Jamie Cullum. The chorus goes 'Would you help me paint a smile on a sad, sad world?'"

I want to be real, so I do reflect the realities of life, the heartbreak, the tears. But my songs still reflect that there is hope. What you write comes out of who you are and your perspective in life. So, as Christians, no matter how bleak the situation, at the end of the day we still have hope. We know there's something better and there's a reason for all that. Somehow when I write, it just seeps in because it's my worldview. But it's very important to be real, otherwise people don't connect to your songs."

To that Suwito shares about a time when she wasn't feeling particularly positive about a gig. A woman approached her, quoted a line from her song, and said, "That song really spoke to me. Life has been like that for me." Suwito was encouraged.

"It struck me that though things don't go perfectly like you expected, what matters is somebody is touched. That's what keeps me going." 🙏

To listen to or purchase Juwita's music, or make a booking, head to www.juwitasuwito.com.

SPEAK

Special Pages to Exercise Adolescent Kung-fu

"Music was never meant to be hidden away or kept to oneself."

MUSIC IS AN INTEGRAL PART of life. It is through music that we can appreciate the different rhythms of life.

My name is Christel.

I'm 17 and I love music. I play four main instruments: the guitar, violin, piano, and the ukulele. I've undergone various music examinations for the various instruments and I'm also in the school choir, currently holding the position of Student Conductor. I make occasional solo covers of pop songs on YouTube and on SoundCloud, usually accompanying myself on one of the instruments.

I was raised in a fairly musical family; my mother plays the piano and my father the guitar, and through the various musicals and performances that we've watched as a family, I've learnt to appreciate music as not just a form of art, but as a journey that we take. As such, music is important to me. Without it, life would be so dull.

The school choir that I'm with is the National Junior College Choir. We've been to many overseas competitions and also participated in the biannual Singapore Youth Festival. Notable achievements of our choir include the

WHY I LOVE MUSIC

BY CHRISTEL CHOO



Christel (centre) with her choirmates in their choir gowns.

Gold Award at the Olomouc Choral festival in 2012. We managed to get into the final round where we faced tough competition from the German music schools and the many older, more experienced foreign choirs, but we still emerged victorious when we scored 96/100 for our competition repertoire. We were invited to sing for Leong Yoon Pin's anniversary concert and it was a pretty important event, if I may say so.

THE JOYS OF SINGING IN A CHOIR

Why did I choose to sing in a choir when I could sing fine by myself? Personally, I feel that a choir is a group of singers coming together to share their love for singing, rather than selfishly keeping your voice to yourself. Even if we're not the next superstars, we love to sing together and it's amazing how so many different voices can come together to produce great music. Moreover, there

are some songs or parts that one cannot reach because of the limits to the range of a voice; therefore we have to work together so that the music does not fall apart. Sharing and basking in each other's love of music helps us to grow and bond as a choir, it helps to keep us strong as a unit rather than as strong individual singers. Music was never meant to be hidden away or kept to oneself.

MAKING GOOD MUSIC IS HARD WORK

Even though music is a joy, it also requires hard work. There's no such thing as an overnight session of studying and getting it right the next day. Techniques and skills have to be practiced and groomed over time. As a musician, one has to be able to think critically about different types of music, and ways to improvise different scores of music, and experiment.

Although expectations may be high, I love music enough to go through the hours of hard work for every single practical and theory exam that I take. As the Chinese phrase goes: for a 10-minute performance on stage, 10 years of preparation off stage is needed. It may be tough and the journey may be long, but music is something to be enjoyed and will be worth it in the end.

Christel worships at True Way Presbyterian Church in Singapore and serves through music.



The ukulele is one of many instruments that Christel plays.

“WHICH WAY, LORD”

BY VERONICA WEE

“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey” goes the old hymn. Though it is true, “trust and obey” is not always that easy. It’s simple enough to trust and obey God when He feels clearly present in your life. But when God is silent, nothing could be harder.

Ever since I was about 8, I’ve wanted to be a doctor. And I believed that God wanted me to be a doctor. But nine years later, now that I actually had to apply to medical school, I started to doubt that I heard Him right. For numerous reasons, it seemed like there was no way that my application would even be considered. I prayed and prayed and prayed, begging God to confirm that this was the way I should still go, but nothing happened. God seemed silent.

WHEN GOD SEEMS SILENT

At my wits’ end, I ended up exploding to my parents, “I can’t do this! I can’t hear Him!” How was I supposed to trust and obey God when He wouldn’t tell me what to do?! My father responded by asking me, “What has changed? Between the time when God called you to medicine and now, what has changed?”

Honestly, everything has changed. When I first decided to be a doctor, life was safe and predictable. I was 8 years old and knew nothing about what the profession actually involved. Now, life is a very long series of question marks.

I have been told by countless doctor friends about the long, tiring process to becoming a doctor. Everything has changed – except one thing.

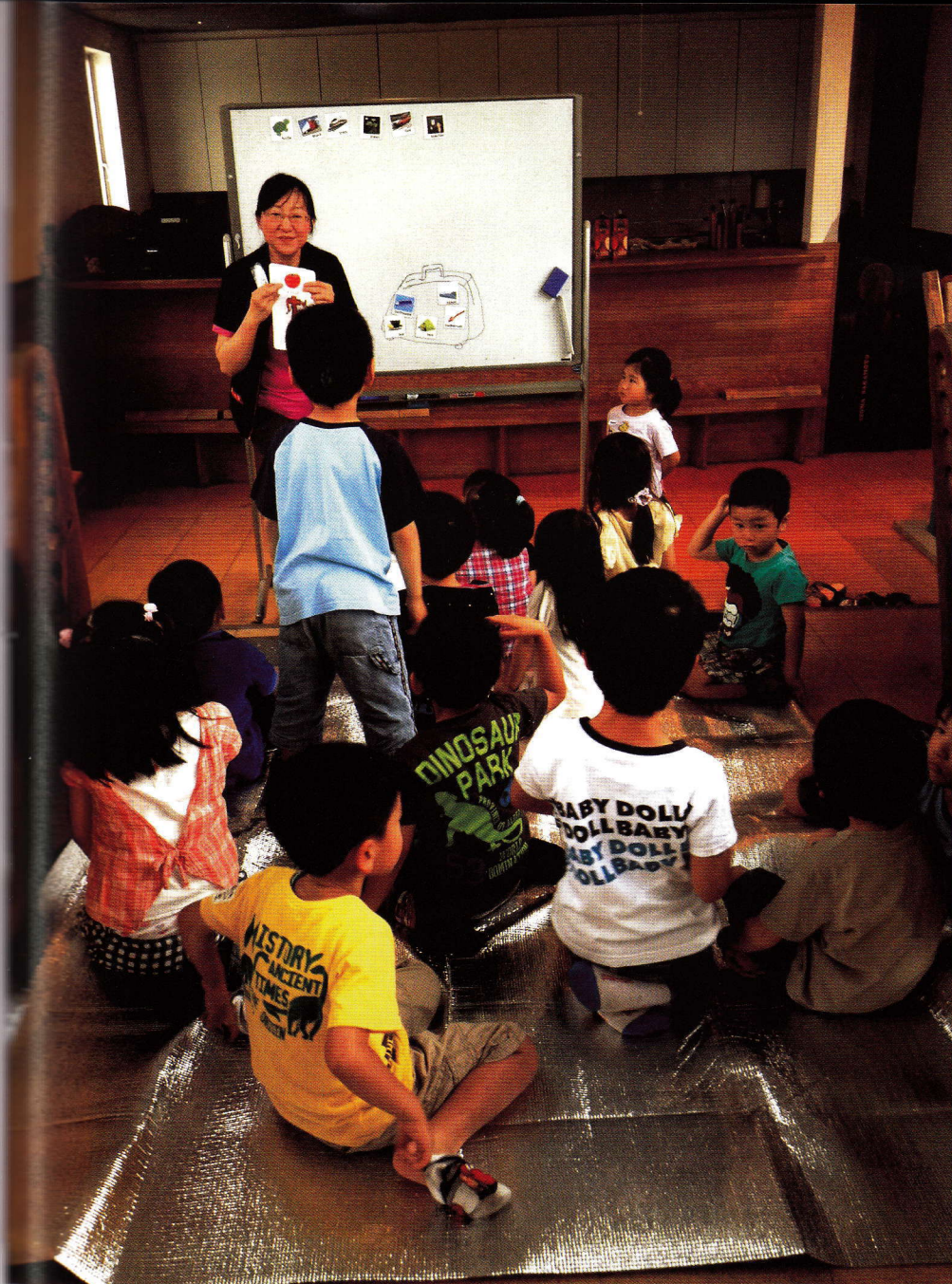
God is eternal, the beginning and the end (Revelation 1:8). He does not change. If He had told me to become a doctor when I was 8, He would tell me the same thing at 17. Nothing has

changed. That was my answer.

Coincidentally (though more like technically, as with God, there are no coincidences), my family was facing a similar situation. Our visa to live in Japan would expire in October this year. My father had cried out to God, asking if we should stay in Japan or return to Singapore. The next morning,



“Despite the uncertainty about staying in Japan, God has given us a full house on Sunday!”



"Our English class ministry has also grown surprisingly fast."

IT IS IN FOLLOWING HIS GUIDANCE THAT YOU TRUST AND OBEY, WHETHER OR NOT YOU CAN HEAR HIM CLEARLY AT THAT MOMENT.

God gave my father Jeremiah 42. The message was clear: stay in Japan.

However, months passed and the visa deadline loomed closer, but we still needed a sponsor for our new visa. My parents were extremely anxious, but just kept on working as if there was no chance we might have to leave. When asked, they simply told our Japanese friends that if God wanted us to stay, He'd give us the visa. As far as they were concerned, God had told

them to stay, and they had to obey Him.

I think that it is when God seems silent that you need to "trust and obey" Him the most. Chances are, God has already given the information we need to make decisions. Sometimes, like in my parents' case, it is a very clear command. Other times, it's not so clear – maybe just a conviction or a stirring in our hearts. Either way, He guides you, but it's up to you to make the decision. It is in following His guidance that you trust and obey, whether or not you can hear Him clearly at that moment.

As with many other things, that is much easier said than done. How can you trust something you can't see or verify? Honestly, I don't know. I still struggle with trusting Him, even when I can hear Him clearly.

CLINGING TO HIS WORD

My parents suggested holding onto God's word, even during the times when you start to doubt. There will always be times when it is difficult to keep trusting God, and it is then that His word becomes most important, regardless of how you receive it. After all, His word is a "lamp for [your] feet, a light on [your] path", and there cannot be a greater need for light than when everything else around us seems dark.

In a similar way, I've tried to remember all the times that God has been faithful to me and all the times His plans have turned out so much better than mine. I keep a journal, though I only write in it occasionally. Retracing my milestones with God reminds me of the truth of Romans 8:28: *"And we know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*

That being said, I'm still terrified of whether I'm on the right path. Every now and then, I get too caught up in the uncertainty around me and break down again. Every now and then, I have to make an effort to remind myself to trust God and just be faithful to Him, as He has been to me. I hate the uncertainty and I wish God could just snap His fingers to make my path clear and straight, but I guess this is just part of my journey to walk closer with God.

The desktop picture on my computer has Psalm 27:13-14: *"I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."* As I've told everyone who's asked me recently, my future is a big question mark – and that scares me half to death. But my future is also in God's hands, where I am safe. I will wait for the Lord – and try to trust and obey Him while I'm at it too. 🍌

Veronica Wee is a 16-year-old missionary kid (MK) serving with her family in Kyoto Prefecture, Japan.

A New Creation

... And I will restore to you the years the locusts have eaten...

BY GOH BEE LEE

DARREN TAN, 35, EMERGED as a law graduate from National University of Singapore (NUS) on July 10, 2013 and was called to the Bar in August this year. Lawyers are aplenty in the little city state. What sets him apart from the rest is the fact that he has spent a big chunk of his life behind bars.

He became the first student with a criminal past to be admitted to the NUS law school. He is the first lawyer who has “such a long string of convictions” to be called to the Bar in squeaky-clean Singapore. Without a precedent, the Attorney General’s Chambers and the Law Society looked hard at his case before deciding to allow the transformed man to hold a practicing certificate.

Darren’s life of crime began at the age of 14. “I spent two years in the Reformatory Training Centre (RTC) for my first offence,” he remembers. He was arrested so many times he has lost count. Sentenced to a total of more than 20 years for repeated offences that included robbery and drug abuse and trafficking, he did an actual period of over 10 years and was given 19 strokes of the cane.

Now, he is finally on the right side of the law – a shining example of how a kind society and a merciful God will give a second chance to anyone humble and brave enough to reach out for it.

Even while serving time, Darren attained the bronze and silver level of Singapore’s National Youth Achievement Award. He was one of those nominated for Ten Outstanding Young Persons by the Singapore Junior Chamber International (JCI) in 2013, earning the Merit Award in the Self-Improvement/Personal Accomplishment Category.



Called to the Bar: Darren on the day he was officially recognised as a practicing lawyer.

In March this year, he was invited by HRH Prince Edward to London to attend the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Foundation’s Young Fellowship Annual Dinner. Having gone through the award programme in such an unusual setting, Darren was asked to offer his views on how it could potentially benefit its youth participants.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

So the familiar story goes – a curious youth, driven by risk-taking, neglected from a tender age by working class parents too busy eking out a living. A latchkey schoolboy, he was allowed to roam the streets by a mother who was a compulsive gambler. Aching for attention, living in a neighbourhood rife with gang and drug activities, the kid invariably joined a street gang and ends up on the highway to crime. By 21, he was so thick in the pit and weakened

by drugs that, he says, “I would have probably died if I wasn’t caught.”

What’s different about Darren’s story is his willingness to come back, down the Hardwork Boulevard, and run his obstacle race – actually more like a marathon – to complete his law degree. It takes grit to come through the finishing line. So when this prodigal son was asked what one trait has stood him up all these years, he says, “I know it is rather oxymoronic, but I will say it’s humility.”

JUNGLE SURVIVAL

Humility is not easy to learn, not especially if you have to survive in a human jungle. Few have qualms about using violence. Right from Reformatory Training days, Darren learned the hard way that only the fittest survive.

“I quickly learnt how to survive – by exercising (to be physically fit), by

“There are too many acts of His Grace for me to state exhaustively. You just have to take my word for it.”

learning to fight (learning boxing), and by wit and diplomacy. You never knew when violence would be visited on you – I saw first-hand the atrocities that one boy could do to another. In a sense, it is sad that boys at that age were robbed of their goodness, whether by choice or circumstances, in the course of the regime,” he reminisces in pain.

According to him, maximum-security prisons are great teachers of human nature. Naked humanity trapped in unhappy close proximity over a prolonged period of time reveals in clear contrast the wickedness and goodness of man.

“Watching how people behaved, particularly those facing the death penalty or serving a life or 30/40-year sentence, was a very depressing eye-opener,” shares Darren.

Imagine coming out of years in maximum security prison, with a good dose of solitary confinement thrown in. Would one have mused over Alanis Morissette’s hit, *Thank You?*

*“Thank you terror
Thank you disillusionment
Thank you frailty
Thank you consequence
Thank you, thank you silence”*

ANGRY WITH GOD

In fact, it was God who already had his hand on Darren’s life. His grandmother was saved from being sold into slavery in China by a priest, who put her on a boat to Singapore. She and her entire family later became Christians.

Darren grew up in the *kampong* with them before he was old enough to go to school. “I was taught that Jesus is my best friend. I have always had a personal relationship with Jesus. But I distanced myself from the Lord as I grew older,” he shares.

“I was very angry with God during my second imprisonment. I refused to speak to Him or read His Word.” Darren then got into a fight with a friend who had betrayed him, thus landing him with the 8-year sentence. For that, he was thrown into solitary confinement designed to break down recalcitrant souls. A single, bright yellow light bounced off the shiny black walls all the time, rendering the occupant of the cell in a constant daze.

SET FREE

The experience broke him and brought him back to God.

He remembers, “I felt an intense

sense of insignificance. I was utterly disgusted with human nature and so tired of living. I felt that life was so cheap. I looked back at my life and I saw no meaning in my entire existence, that if I had disappeared there and then from the surface of the earth, no one would even care.”

But deep inside, Darren knew Jesus cared. He had known all along. So he surrendered himself back to God. They had a long overdue heart-to-heart talk.

“I am really nothing without you, I want to turn my life around, but what can I do?”

The Lord asked me, “What do you want to be?”

Half in jest and half taunting Him, I said, “If You are indeed so great, You can make me a lawyer.”

I felt a strange peace in my heart after that. It was as if God was saying, “That’s not too difficult for Me.”

Darren was set free from the torment of the soul. How beautifully Ps 146:7b,8 says it: “*The Lord sets prisoners free... He lifts up those who are bowed down.*”

FALLING AGAIN

However, for drug offenders, going clean is more often than not a miracle. One’s religious fervour in prison is seldom a good indicator of one’s ability to transform his life post-incarceration. Darren was still shaky after his release, when another slip-up led to a third imprisonment.

“I was devastated. I felt I could never get up on my feet again. I had tasted His goodness, but like a dog returning to its vomit, I yet again let Him, myself and everyone close to me down. I had seen the light and was looking forward to a victorious life but now I was back in prison. My dreams were shattered. I lost all hope and faith.”

But God did not give him up. Yet again, He lovingly picked him up and set him on the road to recovery. There was no turning back. Since then, he has walked every step of the way by His grace. God has to keep reminding him



Transformed life: leaving his bleak past behind, Darren’s achievements through God’s grace were publicly recognised when he was named one of the most outstanding youths.

that it has nothing to do with merit. Understanding the grace of God has been the anchor of his life.

He went back to school in prison. A surprisingly good student in his younger days despite staying away from school a lot, Darren plunged back with a vengeance into his books. Living with a dictionary in one hand and a grammar book in the other, he had to re-learn his disused English. Amazingly, he went on to ace his A-levels: he scored four A's and a B, including an A1 for General Paper. He was still in prison when he applied for law school.

One imagines spending the best years of youth in prison, taking physical punishment through drug abuse and corporal punishment, he must have undergone much mental, physical and emotional trauma. How does one deal with such horrific scars? His answer, simple and heartfelt, was this: I've been restored by God and given a new lease of life.

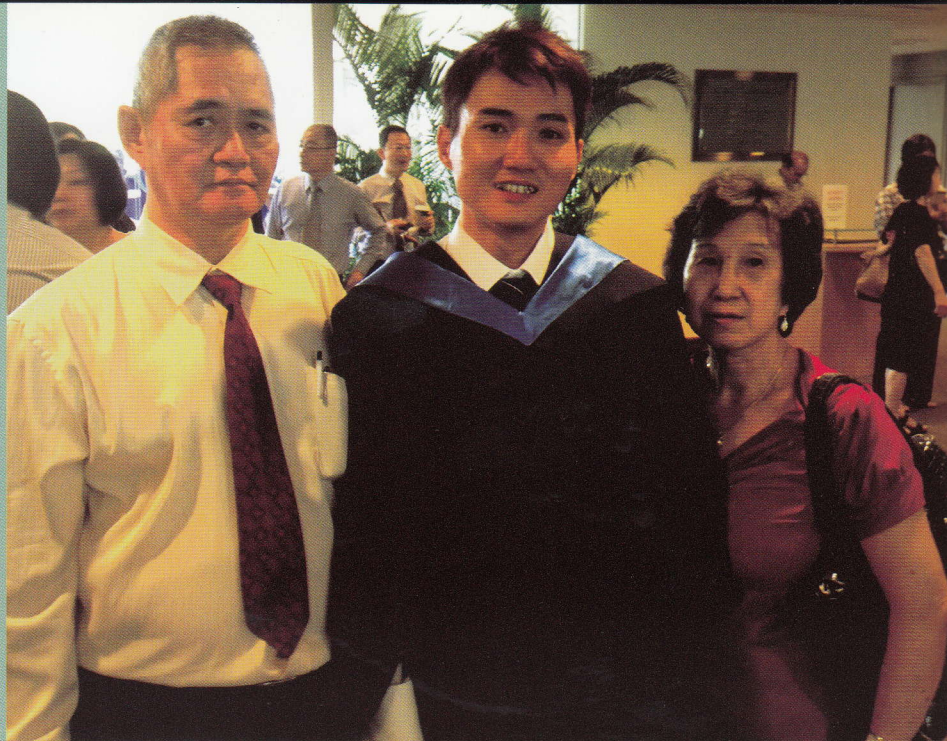
ARE YOU FROM CHINA?

To the young man, the hardest part of prison life was knowing that the world outside goes on without you, that when you return to that world, most things would have changed, and you can do nothing about it.

When the prison gates opened for Darren, he was already two weeks late for law school term. He was thrown unceremoniously into the deep end, a dated student in a high-tech school system.

"The first few months after my release were particularly trying. I felt so lost in school. I didn't have a laptop or even textbooks. I must have been the only person in my class to use pen and paper!"

Sporting a weird hairstyle and wearing clothes from a long-forgotten era, he was, on a few occasions, asked, "Have you just come from China as an exchange student?" Every day, during breaks, I would go to the Botanic Gardens, which is beside my school, and sit alone in the park. I didn't make any friends as I was conscious of my background."



Darren studied even while in prison, and earned his law degree from the prestigious National University of Singapore.

Not only was Darren socially disconnected, he was often out of the loop as to what was going on in school since most communications were through emails. He had to borrow a computer from a friend just to get his course notes and submit assignments.

He remembers one particularly depressing incident that really made him want to give up altogether. Unaware of a last-minute change of venue for a class, he panicked upon entering an empty classroom!

"I began to search all the classrooms, starting from the first level. Then, the sole of one of my shoes came off. I was wearing a pair of four-year old sneakers. As I dragged the sole along and continued my search, I tried to convince myself that no one was looking at me. I thought I should just give up everything and go home, except I didn't even have money to take a taxi home! What kept me going on days like that was only the promise of God that He would deliver me out of all trials," he shares.

Among Darren's trials was the continual juggling between studies and work. His to-do list always seemed endless. By God's grace, his prison officer went the extra mile to help him get the Yellow Ribbon Bursary to fund his law school fees. Other angels were sent to secure a laptop for his studies.

PAYBACK TIME

Today, after his work in a law firm, a much wiser Darren spends precious

free time helping, mentoring and playing football with youths at risk. He and former inmate Kim Whye Kee, an artist, have set up an outreach initiative – *Beacon of Life*, based in Taman Jurong, to guide such youths. Besides this, he is also involved in reaching out to new prison inmates, giving support to their families and supporting Yellow Ribbon projects. He also has fingers in socially upbuilding projects such as *Architects of Life*, *Movementor Consultancy*, and has been appointed to the National Youth Council.

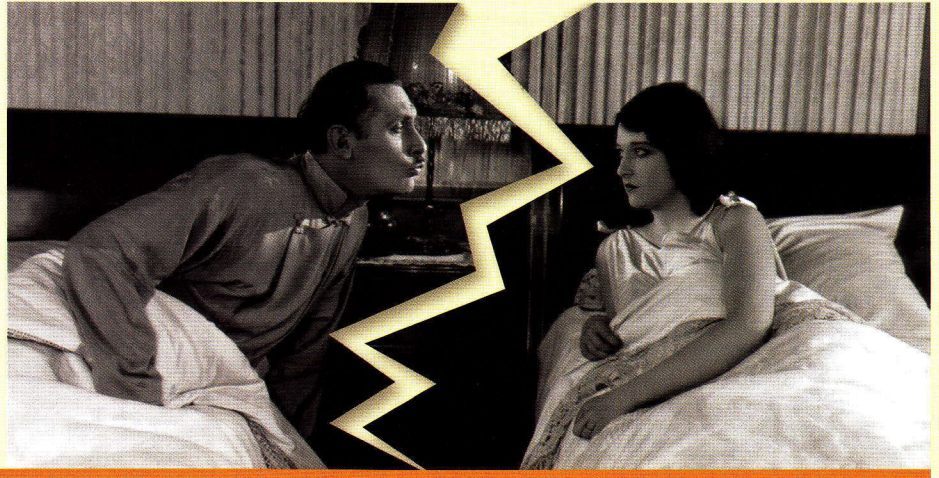
"I think it's mostly that I've been helped that much that I want to give back to society as well," he says. "I've been given a lot of chances, some of which I was undeserving of, and I'm really thankful." Asked who some of those were who helped him back on his feet, Darren says, "I am indebted to so many people at every step of my transformational journey, it is almost impossible to name them all."

"All the way, there are too many mighty acts of His grace for me to state exhaustively. You just have to take my word for it," he concludes.

We are inspired and glad to hear Darren's story. Imagine what heaven feels. Luke 15:10 says: "I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

He now worships at New Creation Church, aptly so, being God's new creation, one of His countless splendid works. 🙏

WE DID IT GOD'S WAY



BY LINCOLN WEE

BOTH OF US WERE OVERSEAS law students in UK but in different universities and in different towns. We were planning to get married so we went to see our pastor who required us to attend a marriage preparation course with him.

When we arrived for our first appointment, his first question to me was, "Where does she stay when she comes to visit you?" It seemed like such an obvious answer, so I simply replied, "With me." This was how it was with students. We stayed in each other's rooms because it did not seem logical or cost-effective to stay in a hotel or bed-and-breakfast.

HONOUR GOD

However, the pastor's response left us dumbstruck. He asked us, "Do you think this is a good testimony? To live together before marriage?" He explained that if we wanted to be married in church, before God and declaring to everyone that we were Christians blessed by God and seeking to honour holy matrimony, then "would living together out of wedlock be honouring God?"

He then said that he would not continue the discussion till we went off and gave serious consideration to his question. He left us with a simple statement: "God honours those who honour Him. Go read 1 Samuel 2."

We were stunned. Our first reaction was to grumble about how

"Because we had been living a poor testimony, we decided to make changes and somehow declare our error to our flatmates."

unreasonable his request was. Why should we spend the extra cost and suffer inconvenience? Did he think we were 'living in sin'? How dare he!

We then started planning for possible alternatives. Although our first choice was to be married in this church where I felt a sense of belonging, we could approach our local parish church. In England, the local parish church is obliged to marry anyone living in their parish, whether the couple are members of the church or not, whether they are Anglican or not. And where I lived, the local parish church was a beautiful 300-year old bluestone building. It would look so beautiful in our wedding photographs.

However, this didn't seem right. Because we wanted our marriage to honour God, we wanted to start our lives together with God's blessing. What if what the pastor was requiring of us was from God?


HE WILL HONOUR YOU

After much discussion, we prayed and asked God if He would send us trusted counsel. Then we decided to call my fiancée's good friend, a mature Christian who was in another county, for advice. At the time we called her

(this was before mobile telephones), she was not at home. Her mother answered the phone. "We just wanted to ask her advice about something..." we explained. The friend's mother replied, "I don't know what your issue is but let me just say this: if you honour God, He will honour you."

The message could not have been clearer.

Because we had been living a poor testimony, we decided to make changes and somehow declare our error to our flatmates. So we called a meeting in our flat to tell them what our pastor said, and that we agreed not to live together any more before the wedding. One quiet fellow who was doing his post-doctoral thesis spoke up after listening to us: "No problem. I'll let her stay in my room and I'll go and stay with my girlfriend. I'm not a Christian; I don't have to follow your rules. I respect that you are trying to live according to your conscience."

And that's how we had our wedding in the church officiated by our pastor. God indeed honours those who honour Him. 

Lincoln and his family are in Japan as missionaries sent by Barker Rd. Methodist Church, Singapore.

The Fighter

BY CHARMAIN SIM

“AT THE END OF THE DAY, GOD WON’T ASK ME, ‘HOW MANY FIGHTS HAVE YOU WON?’ BUT ‘HOW MANY PEOPLE DID YOU BRING ALONG?’”

AS FAR AS FIRST IMPRESSIONS go, Brandon Ng is an unassuming young man. A polite handshake, a glance your way, and you take him to be another shy 19-year-old.

But all assumptions go out the door when you watch him deftly move around the boxing ring before delivering kicks and punches that send his opponent stumbling.

Ng is a mild-mannered young Singaporean, but he’s also a professional Muay Thai fighter.

Muay Thai is a martial art form that originated from Thailand. While most other martial arts use only hands and feet, Muay Thai engages the elbows and shins as well, thus earning the epithet ‘The art of eight limbs’. Because of its techniques, Muay Thai is one of the most powerful forms of martial art.

PURSuing HIS PASSION

The young Ng has been training in Muay Thai for five years, ever since he watched YouTube videos of the sport and sneaked fights in the school’s bathroom. His antics were discovered by his school counsellor Justin Mui, who then asked Ng why he liked Muay Thai so much.

“Because it’s beautiful,” was Ng’s simple reply.

One thing led to another, and Ng began to train with a Thai who set up a gym in Singapore. Muay Thai became a pursuit of passion until he was 17, when his trainer asked him to participate at Lumpinee Stadium in Bangkok, the place for exponents to be seen.

“I didn’t know if he was serious or joking, but I just said yes.”

Serious his trainer was. So in 2010, Ng found himself in his first professional fight with zero experience.

“It’s not done that way,” Ng refers to his inexperience. “You usually need, like, 50 fights before even considering going professional. My trainer said, ‘You cannot lose! The first fight is the most important!’ I was being thrown to the sharks.”

The underdog surprised everyone including himself when he won that fight. That win marked the beginning of Ng’s journey as one of few Singaporeans who fight in Thailand – and fight well. It’s not just anyone who can contend against the locals, and get away with it. So far, Ng has won seven out of 13 tournaments.

Ng’s next fight will be in Singapore. It’ll be the first time he’s competing in his own country, where rules are slightly different.

“Unlike in Thailand, where the sport is so integral to its culture, people here think Muay Thai is a cool thing. We post Instagram pictures and wear T-shirts with slogans. But for the serious fighter, it’s not just a cool thing. It isn’t easy.”

Some people wonder why he’s not getting a ‘proper job’ but Ng, a part-time Muay Thai trainer, continues to train by himself while keeping in touch with his trainer who’s since returned to Thailand. When I ask about injuries, he points to a scar at his left eyebrow. “The rest are only scratches.”

THE TOUGHEST FIGHT OF ALL

Ng discusses Muay Thai matter-of-factly, but when he talks about godly things, suddenly his enthusiasm peaks. He readily admits that he’s not always been a faithful follower of Christ.

“I accepted Christ at 9, but there was no evident change in my life. Muay Thai used to be my only passion. But now my focus is on God.”

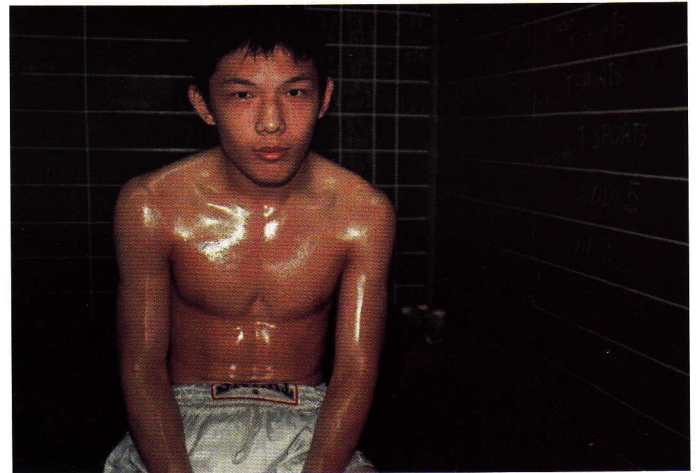
The change of heart was sparked by Jesus’ question to his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” None but Peter said, ‘Thou art the Son of the living God.’ Jesus then said, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Peter, for this is not revealed to you but through the Father.’ From that verse, I realised that everybody can claim to know Him, but not everybody *really* knows him.”

Since then, Ng has embarked on a passionate pursuit of knowing God. He is a very different Brandon Ng today.

Justin Mui, his counsellor and friend for years, testifies, “He used to be full of himself, with lots of ‘trash talking’ and never took anyone or anything in life seriously. Now, maturity-wise, I cite an example: what he has achieved definitely puts him as the top Muay Thai fighter in Singapore, but few in Singapore actually know this. He prefers it this way because the fame might get to his head. He is committed to taking his spiritual life seriously and that includes making some tough personal choices and sacrifices.”

For Ng, overcoming tough challenges is nothing new. So it is insightful when he declares the hardest fight to be the war between flesh and spirit.

“Overcoming sins is harder than Muay Thai. It’s a forever fight. For a



physical fight, you go into a ring, fight, then leave the fight behind. But sin is always in you. The day the fight ends is the day you die."

A drastic change Ng has had is in understanding God's role in his life. Mui explains, "He has grown from the 'God bless me, give me what I want' mentality to recognising that what he does is for God's glory."

Ng intersperses our conversation with one Bible verse after another. Impressed, I asked him if he memorises the Word, to which he denies. "When the Word speaks to you, you just remember it."

Ng has also changed his previously careless approach with girls, and is persistent in sharing the gospel with his mom, who's a staunch Taoist.

"Last time, I used to talk only about Muay Thai. But now, my mom asks 'Why must you relate everything back to God?' She scolds me for always telling her about Christ, but I say I love her, that's why I tell her."

A CHANGE OF HEART

While Ng still enjoys Muay Thai, he now holds a different hope for the future and entrusts it to God.

"Maybe I'll keep doing Muay Thai until I retire. Maybe not. It all depends on God's will."

Ng acknowledges that God's hand has been in his life throughout, even in his success in Muay Thai. When an article attributed his success to luck and the "law of attraction", he was disappointed. He wants to let others know that he is where he is only

because of God. He wants to tell others how God has changed his heart.

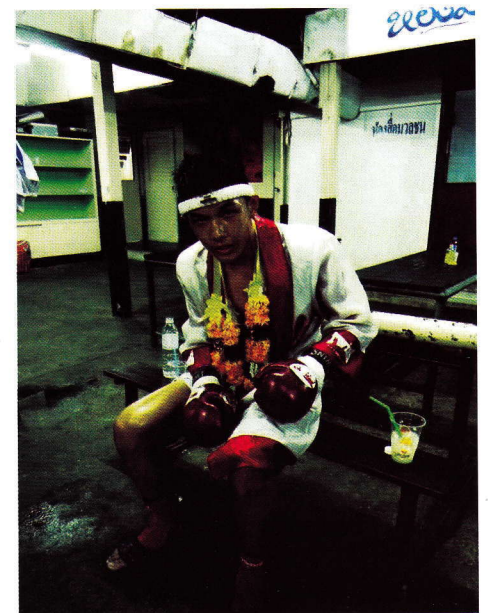
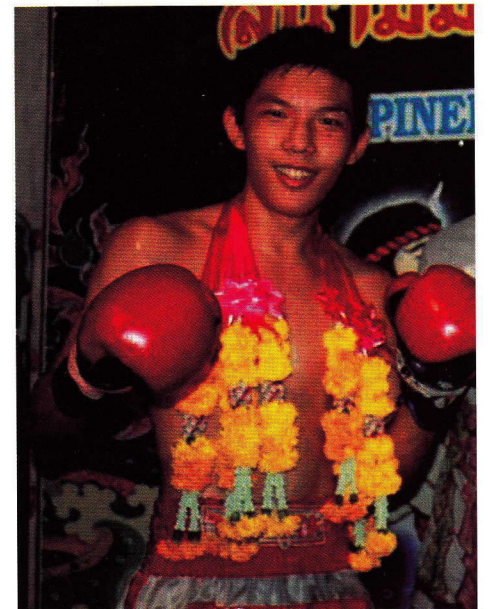
"At the end of the day, God won't ask me, 'How many fights have you won?' But 'How many people did you bring along?' Muay Thai used to be my identity. It was my idol, in a way. But no more. My identity is in God now."

I walk away from the interview intrigued. Fights and Christianity don't seem to go together, but that doesn't mean that God is not as real to a fighter as to anyone else with a 'safe' vocation. But then again, Paul did liken the Christian life to a fight when he wrote, "I have fought the good fight."

Being a fighter has given Ng a unique approach to his spiritual journey. Muay Thai has helped instil the humility, discipline and respect needed to live a life sold out on God. The journey may be long for a young man like Ng, but he is willing and committed. He puts a level of reality to the passage:

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it to subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

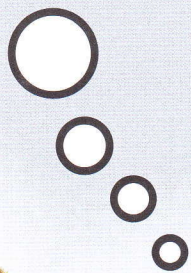
There is something we may yet learn from this Christian fighter - in every sense of the word. ☸



CAN WE CHANGE OURSELVES?



The dilemma of personal transformation: Can a leopard change its spots?



BY DR LIM POH ANN

WHY DO SOME BELIEVERS make remarkable strides in their spiritual walk within a short period while others remain stuck in the rut despite having embraced the faith for decades?

By all accounts, in-depth and lasting change – which involves our character, affections and will – is difficult to attain. The transformation we desire is not one that is akin to a chameleon changing its colour to blend with the environment. A believer can be a Goody Two-Shoes on Sundays in church and be no different from anyone in the world on weekdays.

Is God the author of personal growth and transformation? What about the role of human determination and effort?

Once a believer places his trust in the finished work of Christ, change begins. His 'spirit man' becomes entirely new (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Holy Spirit also convicts the believer of his sins and shortcomings. Gradually, the fruit of the Spirit becomes manifest (Galatians 5:22-23).

"So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

DOING OUR PART

However, **personal responsibility** also has a crucial role in effecting change for the better. Paul exhorts us: *“Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.”* (Philippians 2:12b-13)

Sometimes we think that being transformed by the Spirit means that our mind is either passive or plays only a minor role. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Since thoughts determine character, destiny and worldview, it's important to **renew our minds** with the unchanging Word of God. *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”* (Romans 12:2)

Central to our understanding of personal transformation is the fact we are **sinners**. Though sin has lost its stranglehold in our lives, no one can claim that they are free from sin after conversion (1 John 1:8).

“Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin? Can a leopard take away its spots? Neither can you start doing good, for you have always done evil.” (Jeremiah 13:23)

WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

The Christian walk is a **moment-by-moment** experience whereby we have the choice whether to serve the spirit or flesh – as opposed to a ‘once and for all’ experience of victory.

As long as we choose to walk by the spirit, lay our selfish desires at the foot of the cross, we will win the battle against the flesh. *“Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”* (Romans 8:5)

In practical terms, what does **walking by the Spirit** (Galatians 5:16) mean? It may mean one or more of the following: drawing near to God; being exposed to people and situations where God is glorified; praying in the Spirit; listening to uplifting messages; worshipping God; having fellowship with believers.

Sometimes, God uses good company and role models to change us. Indeed, there is much truth in this statement by author and speaker, Charlie Jones: “You will be the same person in five years as you are today except for the **people** you meet and the **books** you read.”

Apollos was an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately. Since he was humble and open to correction, he continued to bless many believers through his teaching (Acts 18:18ff).

The apostle Paul, while spending the last lap of his life in prison, reminded Timothy to bring along his books and parchments (2 Timothy 4:13).

Not discounting the work of the Holy Spirit, the company we keep and the books we read – including the Bible – are powerful tools in personal transformation.

THE ROLE OF ADVERSITY IN TRANSFORMATION

Undoubtedly, **adversity** is another unique tool which God uses to mould our character. Some “hard nuts” only crack up when confronted with terminal illness, such as cancer, and the prospect of dying prematurely.

How God dealt with Joseph is highly instructive. Joseph had a dream that he would be great – that his family members would come and bow down to him. But far from travelling down Easy Street, he was thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers and later sold off to slave traders.

Then he was imprisoned, being falsely accused of trying to sleep with Potiphar's wife – whereas it was the latter who tried to seduce him. While in prison, God was with him and caused everything he did to succeed (Genesis 39:23).

Joseph maintained a positive attitude through thick and thin. He

believed God was with him through it all. And, because of his faith, he moved from pit to prison to the pinnacle of power in Egypt. Finally, he rose to the position of governor of Egypt, second in rank to Pharaoh.

After interpreting Pharaoh's dream that seven years of famine would follow seven years of plenty, he ordered that storehouses be built to stockpile grain. When famine struck, his brothers came to Egypt to buy grain. As a mark of respect, they bowed down to him. Thus Joseph's dream was finally fulfilled against seemingly impossible odds.

From the life of Joseph, we learn that God uses adversity to transform us and expand our vision, that we might be able to fulfill our potential for His

glory. The process of growing into maturity is long and arduous. It involves learning to persevere through our trials and doubts, and arriving at a place of unshakeable faith.

God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later, however, it produces

a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:10b-11)

Just as the spots of a leopard resist change, personal transformation is a difficult process. But nothing is impossible with God through the Word and Spirit. God may employ books, people and trials to change us so that we become mature. As we work out our faith, renew our minds, die to the flesh and walk in the Spirit, genuine transformation is attainable. ☞

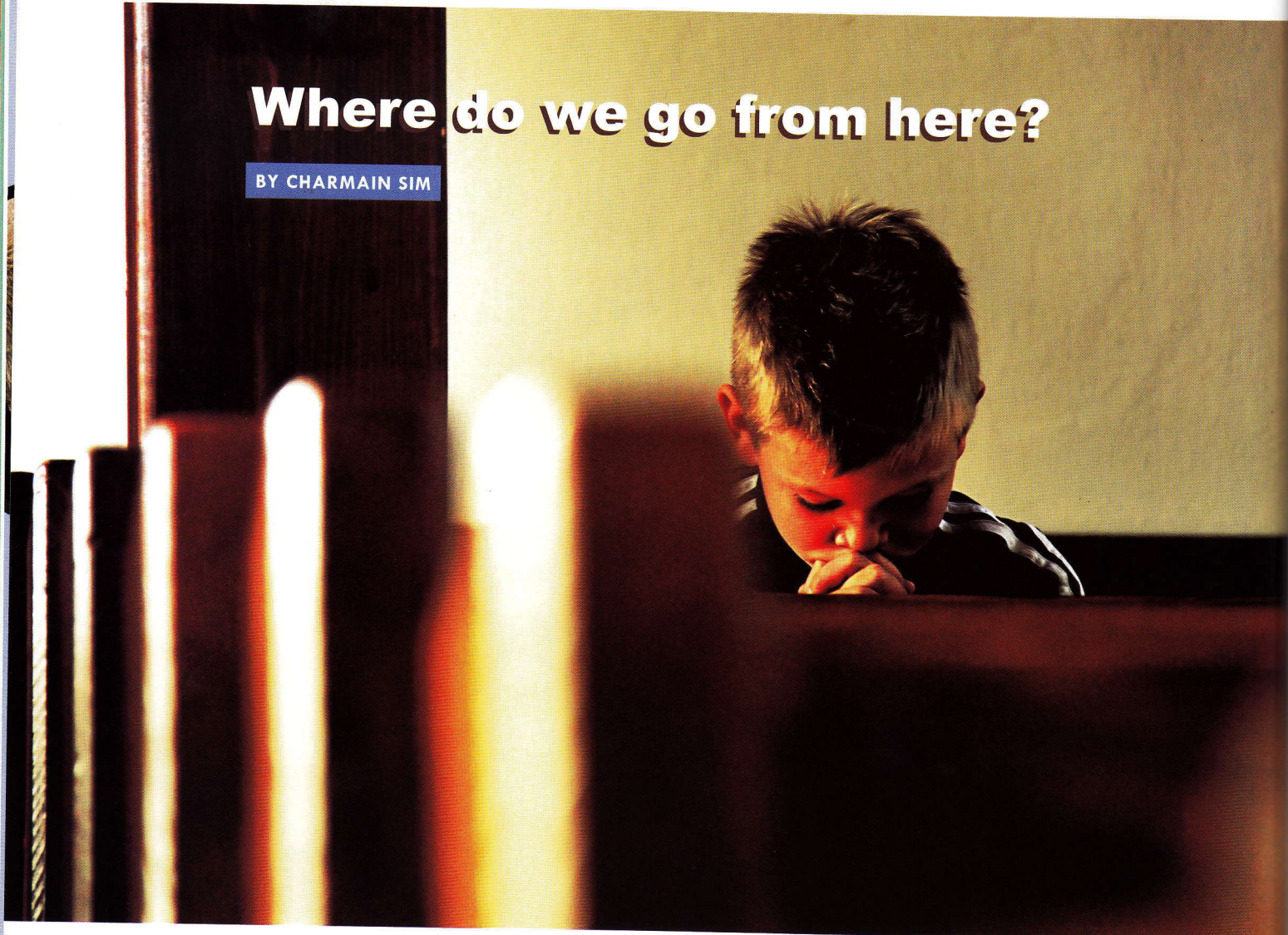
Not discounting the work of the Holy Spirit, the company we keep and the books we read – including the Bible – are powerful tools in personal transformation.



Dr Lim Poh Ann is a medical practitioner. He was the former editor of *Asian Beacon* magazine (December 2008 – October 2011). He can be reached at his blog, *Porridge for the Soul: limpohann.blogspot.com*

Where do we go from here?

BY CHARMAIN SIM



ALL TOO SOON, WE ARE nearing the end of another year. For the most part of 2014, we have been occupied with daily obligations – work, traffic, family, friends, chores and errands, and the occasional emergency. Along the way, though, the world has been hit by one international crisis after another, much like a row of falling dominoes. Civil war in Ukraine, conflict between Israel and Gaza, Ebola outbreak in Western Africa, and the takeover of Iraqi lands by the Islamic State (ISIS) – doesn't it all seem morbid?

Then, the crises hit closer to home. Need there be any more explanation of the missing Flight MH370 and the downed Flight MH17? No matter how many times we talked about it, no words were sufficient to describe

The one thing that does not change like shifting shadows is Christ.

the grief and helplessness we felt as a nation. Directly or indirectly, loss was real to us.

Right now, we are still grieving. But as this year ends and another approaches, there is the danger of this tumultuous season slowly fading, with time, into a sad nostalgic memory. I can't help but wonder if there's more to this. I can't help asking – Where do we go from here?

Frankly, after much contemplation, I still do not have the complete answer,

for it is too far and wide an issue to deal with. What I do have are three lessons we can learn, put in the form of questions.

1 WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

Months on, we are no closer to the truth behind MH370's disappearance, nor to MH17's end. What we have instead are conspiracy theories, false reports, and blame games. In our need to make sense of the mystery, we latch onto whatever comes our way that appears the least bit logical.

But while we experience emotional turmoil, we should make a conscious effort to uphold the truth. The "Share" button should be clicked with hesitancy. In an overly-informed world, there is need to filter what we read and hear, and not simply be swayed by public opinion or sentimentalism.

Ask 'What can I make of this in the light of God's revealed Word?'

More importantly, as purveyors of the truth, we must learn to balance the facts alongside the truth of the Word. It is no small admonition when Paul called us to *"Be diligent to present yourself approved unto God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15).

Ask 'What can I make of this in the light of God's revealed Word?'

The story of Job has always been a reference point to help us deal with pain and loss. It is interesting to note that through his suffering, Job was in constant search for truth. At the beginning, he refused to curse God because he knew the truth of God's character. Later, his three friends were quick to point fingers, specifically at Job. But Job knew that he was not at fault. Instead, he persisted for the truth.

2 WHERE IS GRACE?

After learning the facts and understanding the Word, head knowledge is not enough. In eagerness to share, the temptation of speaking rashly is real. Many have made comments on the crises that were insensitive, self-righteous and sometimes downright rude. Yes, perhaps there is a glimmer of truth in the point being made, but what purpose does it serve when your words hurt people and turn them away from listening?

Several passages in the Bible exhort us to speak the truth in love, such as Colossians 4:6: *"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone"* and Ephesians 4:29: *"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."*

When we speak the truth, we should ask ourselves: Am I saying this to prove my intelligence and

my 'rightness'? Or am I speaking to comfort and encourage others? As we communicate, may our intent be sincere and along the lines of *"direct[ing] hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ"* (2 Thessalonians 3:5).

3 WHO IS MY HOPE?

Moving forward will take time. Sometimes, we don't even feel like moving on, because it's too painful. More so, in the times when our questions and doubts remain unanswered, such as the case of the planes, we see no point in moving on.

It is then when one truth can guide how we move on and respond to future trials – the constancy of God. Let us not forget Who holds our hand. Even though things still don't make sense, God says:

"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed." (Isaiah 54:10)

May we be mindful in guarding truth, speaking grace, and extending hope.

It is much like the story of Peter walking on water. It's a storm out there. Trials and tragedies churn around us, and ominously threaten to drown us, but the one thing that does not change like shifting shadows is Christ. With Christ as our Rock, our Immoveable Foundation, we have the courage to keep living.

Furthermore, as Christians, besides carrying the banner of truth, we are also ambassadors of the Prince of Peace. As His ambassadors, let us spur each other on in sharing the Hope of Jesus to the lost and the mourning.

WATCHMEN AND INTERCESSORS

You may then ask: Why is it important to be vigilant in truth, grace and hope? Why should I care?

Simply put, because of the urgency of the times. Romans 13:11-14 describes it well, and more:

"And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."

As the Church, the echo that rings in our ears clearer than ever is Jesus' word to the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* (Matthew 26:41)

With natural disasters, wars and rumours of wars stirring across the world, it is imperative that the watchmen Jesus calls for are active engagers of the world in order to proclaim the Kingdom of Christ.

From there, it is a given that we should pray all the more – but not aimlessly, nor only for our own cares. Remember Job? His story ended with this: *"And the Lord restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends"* (Job 42:10). Even in his suffering, Job didn't pray for himself, but drew his focus outward. In response, God blessed his compassionate and forgiving heart twofold.

So let us translate our understanding of the times and truth into earnest intercession for the nation and the world. Let us follow in the footsteps of our Lord, the Mediator between God and man, who sits at the right hand even now making intercession for us.

As the hand of the clock continues to tick away to 2015 and beyond, may we be mindful in guarding truth, speaking grace, and extending hope. May we passionately take up the call as engaging watchmen and intercessors. ✚

How should Christians view the occult?

BY DR CHONG KWONG TEK



In 1994, I was in a mission team invited by the bishop of the Bangladesh Methodist church to minister to his national pastoral conference in Dhaka. One evening we were conducting a prayer workshop for the students of the Bible seminary when suddenly there was a blood-curdling scream! A female student was screaming and running all over the classroom. It took four burly men great effort to hold down her slim body. We discerned that she was demonised and began to cast out the evil spirits in her. After about 20 minutes of prayer, the struggling girl suddenly became limp. She opened her eyes and looked greatly embarrassed. She became her usual shy self. I found out later that she came from a family of idol worshippers. This was my first encounter with a demonised person.

OCCULT: FACT OR FICTION ¹

In this day of modern medical and psychological sciences, do people still believe in demonisation? Surprisingly, even in this age of mind-boggling space exploration and nano-biotechnology, more people are believing and practicing the occult and witchcraft.

In 1951, the British Parliament repealed the 1735 Witchcraft Act. Instead of putting to rest the superstitious belief in witchcraft, this move legalised it. It resulted in a proliferation of witch covens and satanic worship. This is evidenced by the phenomenal volume of media coverage and literature available on the subject.

While some liberal Bible scholars take pride to demythologize the super-natural contents of the Bible, occult practitioners are gaining more followers. And this is not only in the third world countries but also in the highly sophisticated nations. Certain celebrities proudly declare their belief in the occult.

WHAT IS THE OCCULT?

It is defined as hidden, secret, related to the supernatural, mystical or magical. This encompasses a large number of activities and beliefs. Generally occult practices can be classified as:

- 'Recreational': fortune-telling with astrology, horoscope, ouija board and palm reading, Halloween celebration, yoga meditation and some martial art practices.

- Alternative medicine therapies: *qi gong* healing, mediums, talismans, etc.
- Religious practices: New Age rites, Satan worship, animal worship

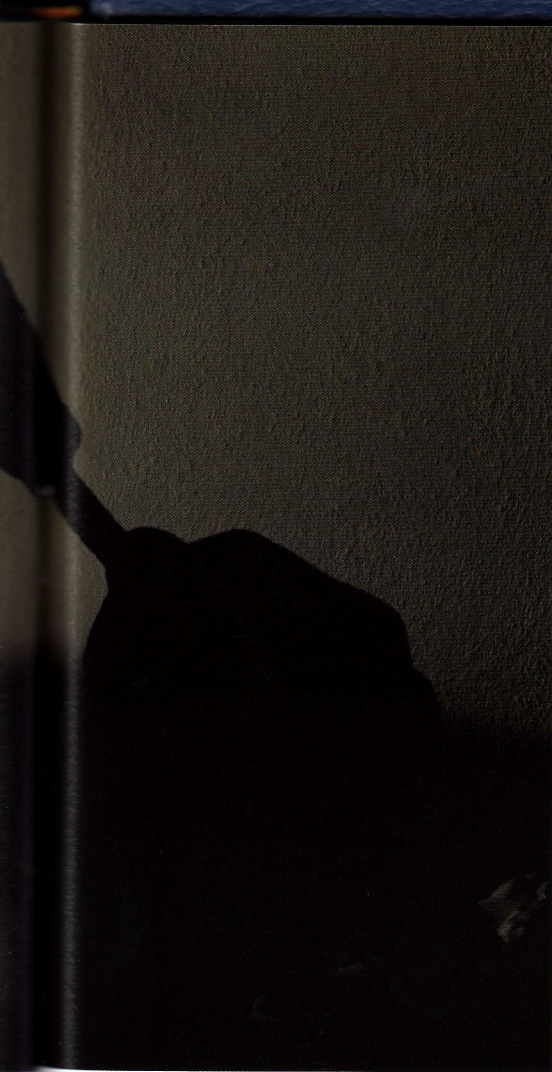
SHOULD WE TAKE IT SERIOUSLY? ²

Some anthropologists, psychologists and psychiatrists try to seek answers to supernatural phenomena in sociological, psychodynamic or psychiatric terms. There are also people who think of practitioners of occult and witchcraft as sham or con artists. We also need to hear from persons with first-hand experience that show that some occult phenomena are real.

Mr Goh was once the most famous chief temple medium in Teluk Anson, Malaysia. His daughter became a Christian and was a staff member in a Christian organisation. Through her and her siblings' patient witnessing, their father became a Christian and closed down his temple.

She had closely observed her father for many years and had many heart-to-heart talks with him. This is what she found out:

"When my father went into a trance, he was not faking the manifestations. His body was taken over by the spirit



of the temple god called Tua Peh Kong, the chief deity. His voice became harsh, military and commanding; he could do unusual things like walk over red hot burning coals, and had extraordinary physical strength. We saw him healing terminal illnesses, barren wombs, demon possessions and mental disorders. However, not all were healed of their physical ailments. His ritual included drinking water that contained his burnt talisman. Sometimes, but not always, he gave out accurate lottery numbers. Several temple devotees had become rich from his predictions."

NOT HARMLESS

Some Christians regard fortune-telling and palm readings as harmless entertainment. Some use yoga for stress relief. For whatever reasons, often these innocent forays into the realm of the occult may eventually lead to something destructive.

Tam*, a civil engineer, told me that when he was working with the Public Works Department, he encountered an unexpected problem when he was on a building project. All his drill shafts broke during his soil testing explorations. His work was delayed

Innocent forays into the realm of the occult may eventually lead to something destructive.

so his foreman advised, "Sir, you have incurred the wrath of the local spirit. Make an offering." Tam did. To his surprise, subsequent drillings went on smoothly.

However, this simple act caused him to continue making more offerings to more gods, including Indian, Chinese, Malay and Thai divinities. His fear of offending the gods compelled him to worship them all. When we visited his house, there were literally hundreds of idols which he had 'invited over' as his guests. Thankfully, he was eventually set free from his fear when he turned to worship the greatest God of them all – Jesus Christ.

BIBLICAL TEACHING

The Bible has a lot to say about the occult and witchcraft. Jesus Christ while on earth dealt with Satan on many occasions. Luke, a well-educated historian-physician documented these events in meticulous detail in the two books he wrote in the New Testament: the Gospel of Luke and Acts. With great accuracy, he provided perfect case histories of Jesus' miracle healings and deliverance from demons.³

Note the following Biblical facts:

- Satan is real. He was an angel who rebelled against God. He and his army of rebellious angels were expelled from Heaven. (Ezekiel 28:11-19)
- Severe warning is given against involvement with other gods:
"When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, be very careful not to imitate the detestable customs of the nations living there. For example, never sacrifice your son or daughter as a burnt offering. And do not let your people practice fortune-telling, or use sorcery, or interpret omens, or engage in witchcraft, or cast spells, or function as mediums or psychics, or call forth the spirits of the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord....." (Deut. 18:9-12)
- Jesus warned about associating with Satan. (John 8:44)
- Satan has some power on earth but

God has conquered him. The demons are all under the authority of God.

- Christians are delegated with power and authority over the demons. (Eph. 1:19)

CHRISTIANS, DISSOCIATE YOURSELVES

"Demon Possession"⁴ is a collection of papers presented in a symposium sponsored by the British Medical Society. Many of the authors who took part in the symposium were not only trained in Bible schools but have done postgraduate studies in anthropology, psychology and human social sciences. They affirmed their personal belief in the reality of demons and documented their personal encounters with raw satanic power.

It is important for believers not to have dealings with the occult. To live the full, abundant life of a child of God, we need to disassociate from any extra-Christian spiritual forces. As first generation Christians, we often have some involvement with our Asian traditional deities. We need to ask Jesus to free us from the connection with these dark forces. With the power and authority given to us we can cut off all unwholesome ties with these gods and demons. No matter how powerful they are, Jesus Christ overcomes them all. ✚

*Not his real name

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Dr Kwong Tek Chong worked as a General Practitioner in Melaka. He has worked in mental hospitals in Hong Kong and Perth and has planted three churches in Perth. He often goes on short term mission trips.

IN THE DAYS LEADING UP TO my writing this column, I've been depressed. I heard from my current pastor Reverend Benjamin Yeoh, senior pastor of Agape Community Church in Seremban, that Pastor Robert Suppiah of Malacca had passed away. Pastor Suppiah had been my pastor, friend and mentor in Bethel Church, Malacca from 1978 to 1982.

This *Asian Beacon* column is dedicated to his life, ministry and legacy.

Pastor Suppiah was musical. When I was in my mid-teens and his three children were much younger, he told me he wanted to leave, as a legacy, an electric guitar to each of them: Christine, Daniel and David. When it was time for me to leave Bethel Church for my A Levels at Davies's College, London, there were one or two other church members also leaving Malaysia. At our final Sunday service, Pastor Suppiah picked up his guitar, strummed, and in his strong, melodious voice began a medley dedicated to us!

We stayed in touch intermittently but we only reconnected about eight years ago when my wife Rachel's uncle, Norman Lourds, and I drove to Malacca to have lunch with him. Pastor Suppiah's circumstances had changed; he was pastoring a tiny independent church and working in a hotel in Malacca to earn money to help some of his church members with their basic essentials! We stayed in touch and I helped him out with some cash each time I knew he had a need. It wasn't much but I am glad I did what I could to repay the man who was most responsible for helping me through my earliest years as a question-riddled born-again Christian.

Before my father died on April 4, 2008 at the Malacca General Hospital, Pastor Suppiah visited and prayed for him. After my father's passing, Pastor Suppiah helped out in so many ways I am not even going to try to list them. Then, on July 6, 2008 when I put together a memorial service, Pastor Suppiah played a key role along with my own pastor Reverend Benjamin Yeoh and Reverend M. Tankaraj of the Tamil Methodist Church in Malacca. (My wife's recollections are found here: <http://memoriesabound.blogspot.com/2008/07/memorial.html>)

MEMORIES, MUSIC AND MONEY

BY RAJEN DEVADASON

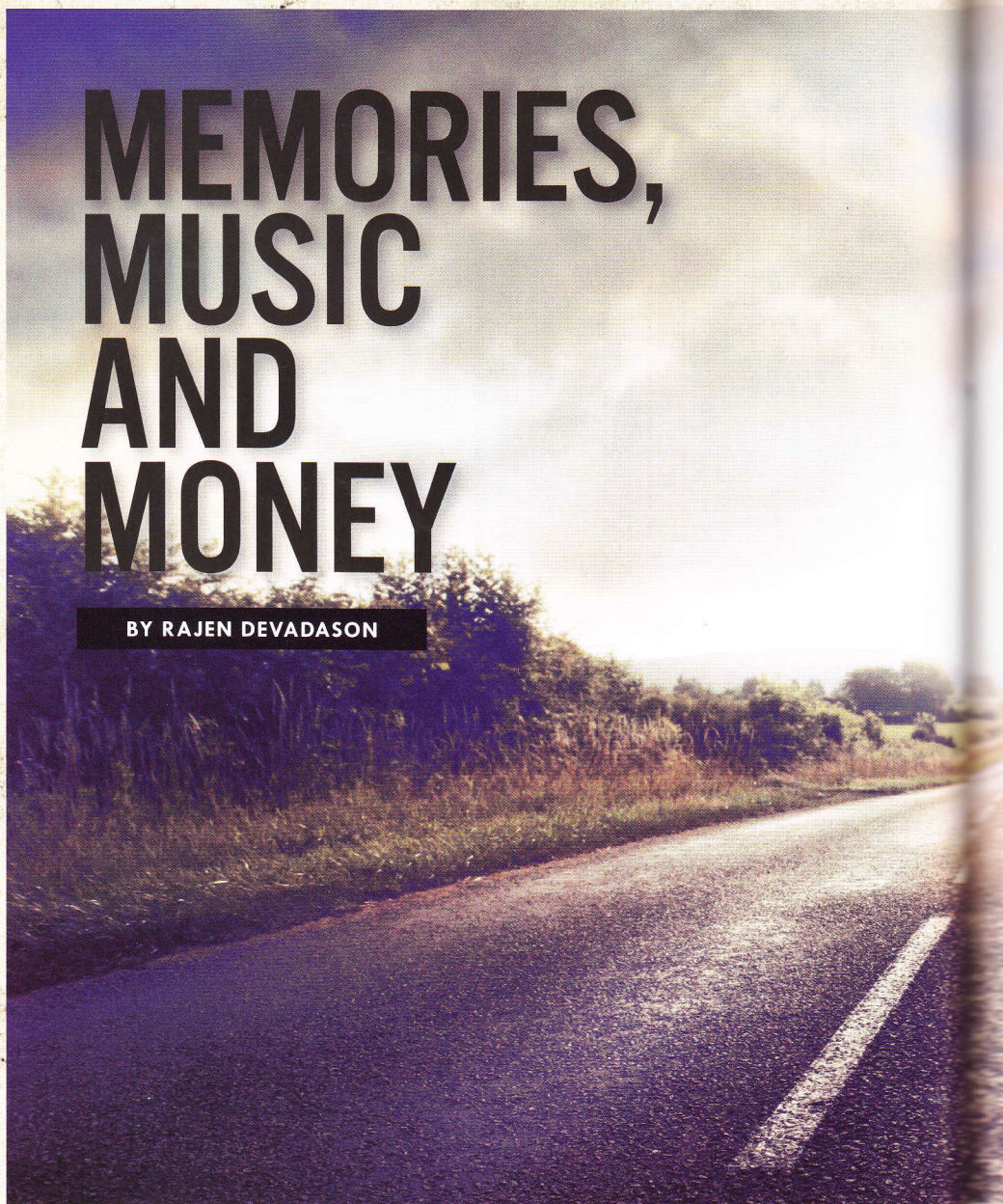
In early September 2014, while at work – still earning money to pay his own bills and to help his congregation – Pastor Suppiah collapsed. The medical team was unable to revive him. The most likely cause of his death at 66 was a sudden heart attack. By the time I heard about his passing several days later, his funeral was over.

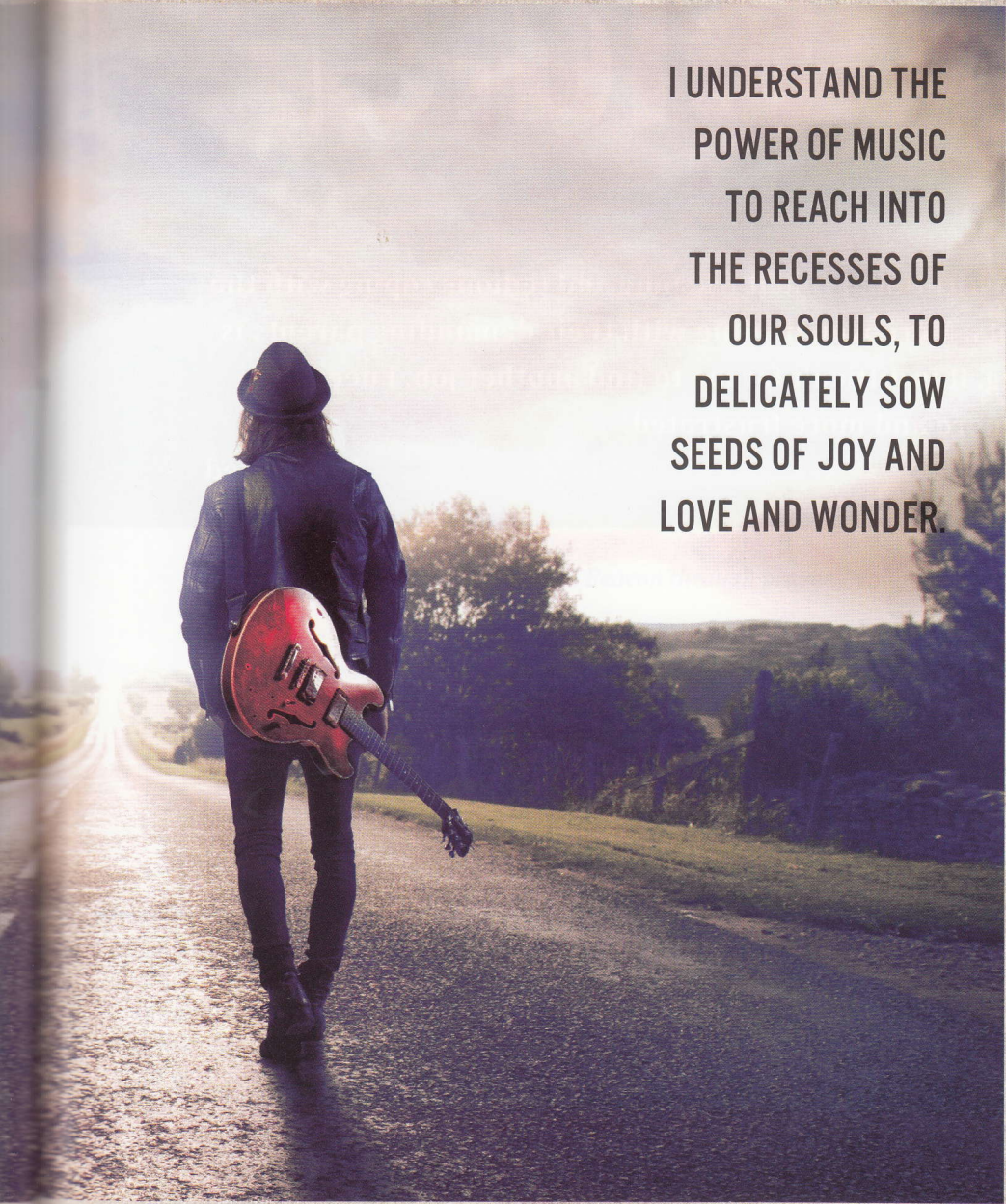
My biggest regret is that I procrastinated on a promise I made to him to speak at his church. I can't now; it's too late! But I am relieved I used some financial resources to make things a little easier for him over the last several years of his phenomenal life. When I think of the help he extended to so many over more than 40 years of ministry for Jesus, I am reminded of Paul's self-description

in 2 Corinthians 6:8b-10: *"genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything."*

The line that keeps running through my mind is 'poor, yet making many rich'. Part of the way Pastor Suppiah enriched those around him was through his music. It's pertinent for me to share here what the late great jazz legend Duke Ellington explained: "There is hardly any money interest in art, and music will be there when money is gone."

Relatively few make much money from music. But most people who love music and who make the lives of





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those around them better through it, do not grow wealthy from their singing and performing. Even as a Christian financial planner who spends every working day focused on the money part of the equations of life, I understand the power of music to reach into the recesses of our souls, to delicately sow seeds of joy and love and wonder.

I have also noticed four connections between our personal finances and music:

1. Both must be offered **sacrificially** to be valued by God;
2. Both are capable of **strengthening** our capacity to deal with life's difficulties;
3. Both grant us **rest**; and
4. Both are most effective when they **flow** from an abundant source.

Let me explain these money-music parallels:

1 Sacrifice – God created everything. He doesn't need anything from us, yet the Bible tells us what He values. Psalm 27:6 says: *"Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord."*

Just as Jesus commended the poor widow who dropped the two small coins in the temple offering, the issue is not how much we give but how much we have left *after* we give. Similarly, when it comes to music, a true spirit of sacrificial shouting, singing and making music before Jesus appears to be what is called for by Scripture.

2 Strength – God gives us our strength. Strength to work and create wealth; strength to sing and make music. Psalm 57:7 says: *"My heart, O God, is steadfast, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music."*

External effort is evident in working hard and earning a living. Internal effort results in exercising delayed gratification to generate consistent cash surpluses that can be channelled toward savings and investments that grow over decades. Great effort, both externally obvious and internally hidden, is required for anyone to develop musical talents and then to use them to bring glory to Him who created us.

3 Rest – The right types of devotional music help us lean into the arms of Jesus to rest spiritually before God. Psalm 62:1 explains: *"Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him."*

In our later years, if we appropriately fund our retirements, money allows us to rest physically from our long years of toil.

4 Flow – When our hearts are grateful to God we find it easy to flow in worship. Doing so strengthens and refreshes us. Psalm 87:7 says: *"As they make music they will sing, 'All my fountains are in you.'"*

Financial freedom is achieved when the flow of cash in the form of our passive income from our portfolio exceeds all normal expenditure needs. As we spend, wisely, the passive inflow of cash through no active involvement on our part replenishes our financial reserves.

Pastor Robert Suppiah was by most economic standards not a rich man. He never achieved financial freedom. But his ability to preach, to sing and to advise allowed him to enrich the lives of countless people. I take comfort knowing that through the finished work of Jesus on Calvary I will one day again hear his distinctive voice singing praises to the One he chose to serve – as best he could – until his final breath! 🙏

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Rajen Devadason, CFP, is a Securities Commission-licensed financial planner, professional speaker and author. Read his free articles at www.FreeCoolArticles.com; he may be contacted at rajen@RajenDevadason.com

Dear Goldie



Dear Goldie,

I work in an educational institution. I find it irksome and tedious coping with the slow, unresponsive students. Moreover, dealing with their demanding parents is irritating and exasperating. It is difficult for me to find another job. I need help to cope as I am becoming more and more frustrated.

Frustrated

Help From Above

DEAR FRUSTRATED,

Recently I read Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. I wondered why the Samaritan, a traditional enemy of the Jews, would go to great lengths and risk dangers to help the victim. The key lies in this sentence: "he had compassion on him" (Luke 10:33). It hit me that compassion would turn a duty into a joy, an unbearable burden into a willing service, drudgery into delight.

In your case, compassion for your students and their parents would definitely change your perspective. But what if you don't have compassion? Despair not, because you can ask for supernatural compassion from "your Father in heaven who gives good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11)

Let me share my experience of receiving a supernatural gift of generosity.

Before our mission trip to Cambodia, I reminded our team that unity and harmony among us was most important if we desired God's blessings (Psalm 133). One night, my husband Tek was on Skype discussing with a team member about a request from our Cambodian host. He wanted us to pay more than what had already been agreed. As I listened to them talking I got more and more upset. Angry thoughts filled my mind: "we already have to pay our own expenses to go to help them... we also agreed

Compassion for others can turn a duty into a joy, an unbearable burden into a willing service, drudgery into delight. If we are willing, God can change us.

to pay for their expenses... now they want us to pay extra for tea breaks and snacks... this continuous 'give me' mentality is too much!"

Finally I heard Tek say, "Yes, eventually we will have to teach them about helping themselves but first we have to be generous." Then without discussing with me, he offered, "Goldie and I will top it up if there is not enough." I was fuming! I certainly didn't agree and resentment was rising within me.

Suddenly I realised this disunity and disagreement was exactly what I myself had warned others against. And it was between my husband and me! It was happening even before we embarked on the mission trip! Realising this I begged God for a change of heart and mind. "God, I can't do it myself. You have to give me the gift of generosity and willingness supernaturally."

And He did. By the end of their call, I was finally able to say to Tek, "I agree with you, let's do it." Peace filled my heart and mind. God not only gave me His gift of generosity for Cambodia, He also made me unusually

generous to others – relatives, friends, servants.

If we are willing, God can change us. He promised: "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Phil. 2:13) So ask God for supernatural compassion (or whatever you need) so that your job will become a joy. 🙏

Goldie

Footnote: That evening a friend invited us for dinner. After the meal, he took Tek aside and handed him two stacks of money, saying, "This is for Cambodia". There were so many RM50 bills that it took both of us counting several times before we knew how much there was. That weekend we spoke in a church and were given RM1000 for Cambodia. God does what He promises: He is no man's debtor and He blessed us when I was willing to be generous to others.

Do you have an issue you need advice on?

Write to *Asian Beacon's* Goldie Chong at aboffice@asianbeacon.org for her godly counsel.

Selected questions may be featured in this column. If you leave an email address, you will have your question answered, whether it's published or not.