Pentecostal megachurches in Southeast Asia

Terence Chong

The ARTICLES PRESENTED HERE are ethnographic studies commissioned by the Regional Social and Cultural Studies Programme at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute on Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia. Part of an edited volume to be published by ISEAS, these articles are excerpts from chapters which examine the growth of Pentecostal megachurches in urban centres in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore as well as their congregations and the politics and history from which they have emerged and flourished. Indeed the independent Pentecostal movement has been growing rapidly in Southeast Asia in recent decades, benefiting from the broader expansion of charismatic Christianity from the 1980s onwards in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as further afield in Taiwan and South Korea.

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A 2011 Pew Research Centre study estimated that there are 279 million Pentecostals worldwide, comprising 12.8 per cent of all Christians. There are no accurate estimates for the number of Pentecostals in Southeast Asia but the percentage of Christians (including Catholics) in Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore are 33.2 per cent, 8.8 per cent, 85 per cent, and 18 per cent, respectively. The exact number of Pentecostals are difficult to pin down because most country censuses do not differentiate Pentecostals from the larger Christian community. In addition, Pentecostalism does not have strict doctrines or hierarchies, and may manifest as standalone churches or as fringe congregations in mainstream denominations.

There are several reasons why Pentecostal growth in this region is important. Firstly, to a large extent the Pentecostal movement has an ethnic face. The majority of Pentecostals in urban centres like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Surabaya, Jakarta and Manila are, with some notable exceptions, upwardly mobile, middle-class ethnic Chinese. In countries where the ethnic Chinese are in the minority, Pentecostal churches and cell groups are crucial spaces for social networking, business contacts and identity-making.

Secondly, it has a wide economic appeal suggesting an ability to tap into different concerns and aspirations. For while the Pentecostal megachurch is often associated with the middle classes, it has great attraction for the poor and the working class in urban centres like Manila. Thirdly, the central figure of the charismatic leader in Pentecostal Churches means that senior pastors enjoy great deference and sway over large congregations. In actual terms, this has meant the ability to mobilise financial capital, and the conflation of politics, business and religion to varying degrees raises the spectre of religious nationalism.

Perhaps most crucially, these studies will demonstrate that Asian Pentecostalism has both transculturalising and indigenous characteristics. Drawing from the west and other parts of the world, Asian Pentecostalism is also driven by local prophetic preachers who are able to craft contextual theologies. As such, Asian Pentecostalism is simultaneously recognisable as a part of a global phenomenon and available for examination only as a politically and historically specific movement. These articles, together with the other chapters in the edited volume will offer an updated ethnographic survey of Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia.

Terence Chong, Senior Fellow, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute; and regional editor for the News from Southeast Asia section in the Newsletter.
THE JESUS IS LORD (JIL) Movement is one of the biggest independent megachurches in the Philippines and has even been described as one of the fastest growing churches in the world. It claims four million members in the Philippines and 55 other countries.

In 2013 JIL celebrated its 35th anniversary at the open-air grounds of the Luneta Grandstand in Manila. With an estimated 20,000 in attendance, the event adopted the theme ‘Revolution against the attacks against churches in 1996 and 1998, more ethnic minorities have gravitated towards larger events and congregations for collective healing and sense of security. The collective healing workshops and seminars are particularly attractive to psychologically injured Christians, many of whom are keenly aware of their pre-caruso existence in the world’s largest Muslim-majority countries. Churches located in malls or commercial buildings protected by guards and without obvious symbols of Christianity are now preferred over scattered neighborhood churches that riskclosure for not possessing a legal permit or may be vulnerable to attacks. Big numbers in big halls of saved Indonesian souls are vital signs of self-empowerment and (divine) justice, and open the door to more self-consciously spiritual, if not strictly Islamic, Indonesia.

Against this backdrop of Indonesian Pentecostal ethnoreligious complexity, the following discussion on the life experiences of the Chinese-Indonesian-Indonesian pastor Philip Mantofa. I pay attention to his programmes of worship such as ‘A Trip to Hell, Army of God,’ and ‘Asia for Jesus’, and the CMS church’s logic of counting souls. From there I shall discuss the international connections of the Indonesian Christian IRRI, which form part of the global Christian network of which CMS is an increasingly important part.

Throughout the sermons and worship appeals to the Youtube audience, I take up and rework the ideas of the online community, which are often characterised by the use of the language and the production of local worship songs, some of which have also become mainstream within evangelical circles. In doing so, I raise questions about the relationship between the online world and the offline church, and the implications for the field of religious studies.

From this perspective, I argue that the presence of the online community in the offline church is not just a mere continuation of the offline church in the online world, but rather a new form of religious expression that is distinct from the traditional forms of religious expression. The online community is not just a reflection of the offline church, but rather a new form of religious expression that has its own unique characteristics and dynamics.

Jeaney Yip, Lecturer, University of Sydney, Australia (jeaney.yip@sydney.edu.au)