

Contextualizing the Global: Exploring the Roots of Pentecostalism in Malaysia and Indonesia

Consisting of eleven nations divided between “mainland” (Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam) and “island” (Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Timor Leste), Southeast Asia has a combined population of around 586 million, of whom Christians number approximately 21%. From the 1970s the Christian face of Southeast Asia began to change because of influence of the Pentecostal movement. By 1998, for example, the Pentecostals were said to be the fastest growing of all Indonesia’s churches, with estimates of members as high as 10 million.

Southeast Asia’s Pentecostal churches share much in common, by reasserting biblical authority, emphasizing Christianity as a religion of physical and spiritual healing, and affirming belief in extraordinary signs as evidence of God’s presence. Like their African counterparts, Southeast Asian Pentecostals espouse a theology of success and prosperity in which the Bible is a book of God’s promises and a storehouse of parallels and analogies that help to illuminate the present reality. Across the region the influence of Korea and Singapore is also evident, especially in large cities where well-funded and well-marketed mega-churches attract a high percentage of middle class professionals and young people.

Despite its origins in urban America, Pentecostalism in Southeast Asia has evolved into a movement with a global reach that extends far beyond specific cultures. With charismatic preachers exhorting individuals to be “born again” and an emotional atmosphere heightened by music, vibrant praise and “high-tech” performances, Pentecostalism is often seen as a response to specific economic and social changes associated with the 20th and 21st centuries. This paper, however, is an effort to historicize and contextualize contemporary developments by comparing two Pentecostal churches, the Sidang Injil Borneo and the Gereja Bethel Indonesia. It is not surprising to find that in Southeast Asia the Pentecostal movement has found a fertile ground in revival movements which stress prophecy, speaking in tongues, miracles and delivery from satanic powers. At the same time, its strong presence in urban centers, and growing differences with rural communities, owe much to the world-wide communication made

possible by the internet, commercial publishing and interactive networks made possible by access to sites such as Facebook and You Tube.