

# Beyond Mall Christianity:

## Megachurches Navigating Southeast Asian Urbanism

Terence Chong and Daniel P. S. Goh

### ABSTRACT

The global spread of Pentecostalism has been facilitated by a combination of transnational impulses and indigenizing interests. In the case of independent Pentecostal megachurches, their growth in urban centres is reflected in both Western and Asian societies. Megachurches in America and Southeast Asia have flourished because of their unique blend of middle-class congregants, appeal to consumerist and popular culture, as well as their compatibility with the urban lifestyle patterns of their congregants. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the drivers of growth and the conditions behind the common features of these megachurches are the same. Examining Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila, we show that megachurches are not located in shopping malls and commercial complexes merely for growth purposes or to align with the consumerism ethos of capitalism. Deeply local concerns, such as hostile neighbourhoods dominated by Muslim or Catholic majorities, have led to the camouflaging of Christian symbols in urban settings. The purposeful targeting of youth also reveals the Southeast Asian megachurch engaging with the new urban mobilities triggered by rapid economic development. We conclude that the Southeast Asian city's structure and layout are being repurposed by Christian innovation and reinterpretation. Christianity in the Southeast Asian city is hidden in plain sight.

**Keywords:** Pentecostalism, megachurch, Southeast Asia, shopping malls, urban mobilities, urban centre

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## Introduction

On Sunday mornings in Kota Kasablanka, a thriving shopping mall in central Jakarta, crowds of young adults throng the mall. Many, however, are not headed to the shops but are snaking up to the third-floor auditorium, where an independent Pentecostal megachurch is holding its service. And because the church is strict with punctuality, attendees queue one hour ahead of the service. A K-9 unit sweeps the area before the first morning service and a military officer is stationed outside the auditorium for effect and deterrence. Several booths are available outside the auditorium for tithes and offerings. The auditorium is dimly lit and the stage is decked with high-end musical instruments. With precise coordination, the stage lights up with the eruption of music as six stylishly dressed worship leaders race onto the stage to belt out the first song of the service. A huge digital screen spanning the length of the 40-foot stage flashes the lyrics to all the songs. Welcome to the Jakarta Praise Community Church (JPCC).

The JPCC's use of shopping malls for Sunday services is commonplace for booming Christian megachurches in the urban centres of Southeast Asia. Sargeant observes that many "seeker churches" in America have sought non-traditional spaces, and the "shopping mall church" is a popular alternative for two reasons. First, the design and aesthetics of shopping malls are more appealing and familiar to young adults. This makes it easier to attract non-churchgoers. Second, while the shopping mall "creates needs and desires for commodities that we may never have thought of or desired before," the seeker church, likewise, appeals to people by promising "direction in one's search for meaning and purpose in life" before offering "a relationship with God" as the answer.<sup>1</sup> Are the megachurches of Southeast Asia experiencing a similar process? Are megachurches choosing to locate themselves in shopping malls to position themselves for better church growth in religious marketplaces that are aligned with the growing consumer economies? Are we seeing a global alignment of Christian megachurches with forms of capitalism and urbanism, thus creating similar experiences in Asia and the West?

In this article, we argue that a different dynamic is affecting Southeast Asian megachurches. The churches have been responding as religious or ethno-religious minorities to hostile majorities amidst the new urbanisms of social class mobility and gentrification by locating themselves variously in shopping malls and in large complexes in enclaves. There are notable exceptions to this trend, as some churches have chosen to remain in contested neighbourhoods, occupying street-front buildings. Scholars have made the link between the mall Christianity of megachurches and their propensity to

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<sup>1</sup> Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Non-traditional Way* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 106, 108.

preach the prosperity gospel of health, wealth, and victory,<sup>2</sup> noting the globalization at play with these megachurches, as their reach grows from America to the Global South.<sup>3</sup> Our study contributes to a growing body of scholarship rethinking this simple process of globalization of megachurches as a more complex adaptation of Christian forms to Southeast Asian contexts.<sup>4</sup> Though the churches may be located in shopping centres, we seek to understand Asian Christianity beyond mall Christianity.

We draw on our research into the growth of megachurches in Southeast Asian cities in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines to make our case. From 2018 to 2020, we carried out fieldwork on 40 Protestant megachurches in cities in these four countries, visiting the churches, interviewing the pastors, and observing the services and other events. We selected the largest megachurches, with memberships numbering in the tens of thousands, but also churches with over a thousand worshippers that are experiencing rapid growth. Many of these megachurches were independently founded by charismatic pastors and have adopted Pentecostal beliefs and practices, though some identify themselves as Evangelical rather than Pentecostal and a number remain loosely linked to mainstream denominations. As these megachurches were founded in recent decades and are not held back by traditional beliefs, they are more flexible and agile in deciding on the related issues of where in the city they should settle and what role they should play in relation to urban society. In this article, we focus on Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila to comparatively analyze the decision patterns of the churches across the cities.

We also found that the megachurches are not simply responding to hostile circumstances, but also actively contributing to the making of the new urbanisms of class mobility and gentrification. In this sense, the megachurches are also public religions, their place-making activities constitutive of the urban transformation their respective cities are experiencing during periods of rapid economic growth and urban redevelopment. In the next section, we situate our comparative study in the theoretical discussions of the growth of Christian megachurches in Asian cities, as well as the relationship between Christianity and the city in both the West and Asia. We also explain why we left out Singapore in our analysis and discuss the burgeoning body of studies

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Bowler, *Blessed: A History of American Prosperity Gospels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Wilkinson, "The Prosperity Gospel and the Globalization of American Capitalism," in *Religious Activism in the Global Economy: Promoting, Reforming, or Resisting Neoliberal Globalization?* eds. Sabine Dreher and Peter J. Smith (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 57–72.

<sup>4</sup> Juliette Koning, "Beyond the Prosperity Gospel: Moral Identity Work and Organizational Cultures in Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches in Indonesia," in *New Religiosities, Modern Capitalism, and Moral Complexities in Southeast Asia*, eds. Juliette Koning and Gwenael Njoto-Feillard (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 39–64; Jayeel Cornelio and Erron Medina, "The Prosperity Ethic: The Rise of the New Prosperity Gospel," in *Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society*, eds. Jayeel Cornelio et al. (London: Routledge, 2020).

on Singaporean megachurches as a contrastive starting point for our comparisons of megachurches in the four cities. Singapore is an outlier city in this study because of its highly secularized and commercialized setting, coupled with strong state regulation of the religious sector. This means that the megachurches in Singapore are engaged with a different dynamic, not as a religious minority, but as a relatively privileged and well-resourced partner of the state in forging social harmony amidst urban diversity. Nevertheless, we leave out Singapore in a mindful manner, aware that its descriptive differences with other urban centres do not imply that the city-state cannot be understood within a broad conceptual framework. We then compare how the megachurches navigate hostile neighbourhoods, new urban mobilities, and gentrification, with different emphases and nuances in each city.

### **Christianity and the City**

There has been much discussion of the relationship between Christianity and cities in the West since Cox's seminal *The Secular City*, which saw religion as retreating from the public arena to the merely personal.<sup>5</sup> Later, Cox and sociologists of religion revised their secularization theses and found religion to be resurgent in many urban public spheres around the world, not just in the West.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Sheldrake has discussed how contemporary cities may tap into the rich histories of Christian urban expression for shared beliefs and values in plural societies.<sup>7</sup> In a sweeping history of the dialectic between the growth of urban life and religious change, Rüpke comes to the same conclusion on the ways in which Christian urban and architectural expressions can inform contemporary urban life.<sup>8</sup>

While scholars working on Christianity and the city in America tend to focus on churches and their engagement with increasing individualism and new urban diversities,<sup>9</sup> our study shows that megachurches in Southeast Asian cities have had to engage as religious minorities with majority communities that are politically and socially entrenched. Both Indonesia and Malaysia have witnessed greater democratization as well as the Islamization of politics

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<sup>5</sup> Harvey Cox, *The secular city; secularization and urbanization in theological perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Jose Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The desecularization of the world: resurgent religion and world politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *The Spiritual City: Theology, Spirituality, and the Urban* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Jörg Rüpke, *Urban Religion: A Historical Approach to Urban Growth and Religious Change* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Lowell W. Livezey, ed., *Public Religion and Urban Transformation: Faith in the City* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

and society.<sup>10</sup> Even in the Philippines, where democratization, immigration, and religious diversification have diminished Catholic dominance, the church remains a dominant force in politics and society.<sup>11</sup>

However, our study does not treat Christian communities as merely reacting to hostile urban conditions as minorities under social pressure. We follow Hegner and Margry in highlighting the agency of religious actors in simultaneously reproducing and remaking urban culture, “spiritualizing the city” with their performative actions and spatial practices.<sup>12</sup> In our study, this entails focusing on the strategies and tactics adopted by megachurches to protect and advance their interests in response to urban hostilities, which then become the very actions reshaping urban spaces to be variously more diverse, class-stratified, connected, or gated/gentrified. Lanz and Oosterbaan call this phenomenon “entrepreneurial religion,” which should not be defined as pockets of resistance against neoliberal urbanism, but should be instead recognized as “a constitutive force of contemporary capitalism” in the Global South.<sup>13</sup> Many studies have shown the role of Pentecostalism in shaping and remaking the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the suburbs of Lagos, and the cities of Kenya and Uganda, through cell prayer groups, prayer camps, and decentralized church building.<sup>14</sup>

In Pacific Asia, studies of Christianity and the city have foregrounded the high visibility of megachurches and their spatial practices in the global cities of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Seoul. While scholars have emphasized both the glitzy large-scale development of retail, commercial, office, and building complexes to house megachurches and the community place-making efforts of small-group prayer networks,<sup>15</sup> the overall picture is one that shows

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Woodward, “Indonesia’s Religious Political Parties: Democratic Consolidation and Security in Post-New Order Indonesia,” *Asian Security* 4, no. 1 (2008): 41–60; Sunny Tanuwidjaja, “Political Islam and Islamic Parties in Indonesia: Critically Assessing the Evidence of Islam’s Political Decline,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32, no. 1 (2010): 29–49; Jason P. Abbott and Sophie Gregorios-Pippas, “Islamization in Malaysia: processes and dynamics,” *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 2 (2010): 135–151.

<sup>11</sup> Jayeel Serrano Cornelio, “Religious Freedom in the Philippines: From Legalities to Lived Experience,” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2013): 36–45.

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Hegner and Peter Jan Margry, “Introduction: Spiritualizing the Urban and the Urbanesque,” in *Spiritualizing the City: Agency and Resilience of the Urban and Urbanesque Habitat*, eds. Victoria Hegner and Peter Jan Margry (London: Routledge, 2017), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Stephan Lanz and Martijn Oosterbaan, “Entrepreneurial Religion in the Age of Neoliberal Urbanism,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 3 (2016): 487–506.

<sup>14</sup> Stephan Lanz, “The Born-again Favela: The Urban Informality of Pentecostalism in Rio de Janeiro,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 3 (2016): 541–558; Asonzeh Ukah, “Building God’s City: The Political Economy of Prayer Camps in Nigeria,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40, no. 3 (2016): 524–540; Damaris Seleina Parsitau and Philomena Njeri Mwaura, “God in the City: Pentecostalism as an urban phenomenon in Kenya,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36, no. 2 (2010): 95–112; Alessandro Gusman, “Strategie di occupazione dello spazio urbano: il caso delle chiese pentecostali di Kampala (Uganda),” *Anuac* 5, no. 1 (2016): 107–128.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel P. S. Goh, “Secular Space, Spiritual Community and the Hybrid Urbanisms of Christianity in Hong Kong and Singapore,” *International Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 432–449; Maurice K-C. Yip, Joanne Lee, and Wing Shing Tang, “From God’s home to people’s house: Property struggles

Christianity as closely intertwined with the urban materialisms and circulations of high capitalism and the developmental state in Asia. On Christianity and the city in Singapore, the scholarship has shifted in conjunction with the transformation of the city-state from an industrial city to a global city, especially as an economic hub in Southeast Asia. Initial scholarship focused on the spatial politics of house churches seeking permanent sacred spaces to house their growing congregations and the spatial logics of the preferences for auditorium hall worship sessions to make Pentecostal spiritual practices tangible.<sup>16</sup> In more recent years, scholarship has focused on the ostentatious commercialisms and market-oriented approaches of megachurch spatial practices amidst increasingly tough competition for a shrinking pool of potential converts and limited urban space for church growth, as well as the investment in “Christian capital” to plug the megachurches into transnational circuits of exchange of Christian resources and commodities, making Singapore a religious hub.<sup>17</sup>

Though Singapore was part of our research on the growth of megachurches in Southeast Asian cities, we believe it should be excluded from the current study because the spatial politics and logics operate very differently in Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila. We do not see this differentiation of two sets of spatial politics and logics as indicating a hierarchy that sets global cities such as Singapore above the rapidly developing and urbanizing cities of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The megachurches are not epiphenomena of a two-speed transnational capitalism transforming Asian cities in the past decades. Instead, this is a recognition that urban transformations play specific functions in the international divisions of labour of Asian capitalism and megachurches are caught up in this worldly logic. In Singapore, megachurches are not seen or treated as religious minorities, but are equals in a secular marketplace competing for members, consumers, and space, as well as potential partners of a highly regulatory state seeking to foster social harmony amidst growing urban diversity. Megachurches in Singapore respond primarily to engage the secular world and some may seek a “cultural mandate” as theological justification to reach out to non-believers

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of church redevelopment,” *Geoforum* 110, no. 1 (2020): 14–24; Ju Hui Judy Han, “Urban Megachurches and Contentious Religious Politics in Seoul,” in *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 133–151.

<sup>16</sup> Lily Kong, “In Search of Permanent Homes: Singapore’s House Churches and the Politics of Space,” *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1573–1586; Robbie B. H. Goh, “Hillsong and “megachurch” practice: semiotics, spatial logic and the embodiment of contemporary evangelical Protestantism,” *Material Religion* 4, no. 3 (2008): 284–304.

<sup>17</sup> Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth, “We aim to provide excellent service to everyone who comes to church!: Marketing mega-churches in Singapore,” *Social Compass* 60, no. 4 (2013): 503–516; Orlando Woods, “Religious urbanism in Singapore: Competition, commercialism and compromise in the search for space,” *Social Compass* 66, no. 1 (2019): 24–34; Robbie B. H. Goh, “Christian Capital: Singapore, Evangelical Flows and Religious Hubs,” *Asian Studies Review* 40, no. 2 (2016): 250–267.

through popular culture and entertainment.<sup>18</sup> This is not to suggest that megachurches in Singapore must be examined or understood on a different theoretical plane from regional counterparts. For while Singapore megachurches may be treated as equals in the secular marketplace, a privilege not extended to their regional counterparts, they are marginalized in more subtle forms. Mainline denominational churches may view them as upstarts or with moral disdain, especially after high-profile criminal cases such as the City Harvest Church saga.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the wealth of Singapore megachurches and their presence in non-traditional spaces like downtown auditoriums or exhibition centres have aroused suspicion and jealousy among Christian and non-Christian groups alike. Their ability to engage in “infrasecular geographies” as they create sacred spaces in the marketplace may be conceptually akin to the way their regional counterparts use retail spaces for their services, but their reasons are very different.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, the megachurches in Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila are seen and treated by majority conservatives as religious minorities, often as upstarts, that could threaten the position of the religious majorities. This overlaps with ethnic tensions in Indonesia and Malaysia because a large number of megachurch leaders and members are ethnic Chinese, though many *Pribumi* (native Indonesians) are prominent in Indonesian megachurches and ethnic Indians make up a sizeable group in Malaysian megachurches. These megachurches do not find themselves having to respond to secularism and a regulatory state, as in Singapore, but instead to majoritarian-minoritarian urban politics permeating central government and local authorities. At the same time, they have been encountering new urban mobilities and gentrification of spaces accompanying economic growth, in which their upwardly mobile young members participated in as skilled workers and professionals.

The megachurches in the four cities have had to navigate hostile neighbourhoods, and some have chosen to respond by moving into shopping malls, but others have navigated hostile urbanism by engaging urban mobilities and gentrification and by participating in shaping their transforming cities. While this was generally true across the four cities in our study, we show that the severe situation for Christian churches in Indonesia has led the megachurches in Jakarta and Surabaya to move into shopping malls. The primary mode of engagement with urban mobilities in Kuala

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<sup>18</sup> Terence Chong, “Speaking the Heart of Zion in the Language of Canaan: City Harvest and the Cultural Mandate in Singapore,” in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), 207–234.

<sup>19</sup> In 2015, City Harvest Church founder Kong Hee, along with five other senior leaders, was convicted of criminal breach of trust. The leaders were sentenced to jail terms ranging from 1.5 years to 3.5 years.

<sup>20</sup> Veronica Della Dora, “Infrasecular Geographies: Making, Unmaking and Remaking Sacred Space,” *Progress in Human Geography* 42, no. 1 (2018): 44–71.

Lumpur has been shaped by internal migration and middle-class growth in Malaysia, while in Manila, intense gentrification has led to class segregation, which in turn has shaped engagement patterns. In some cases, moving into shopping malls has also been a way of engaging urban mobilities and gentrification, thus the distinction is often blurred and depends on the situation faced by the church in the specific city.

### **Jakarta and Surabaya: Navigating Hostile Neighbourhoods**

As suggested by the ethnographic example of the JPCC, housed in an upscale Jakarta shopping mall, Indonesian megachurches have been thriving as mall churches. According to our Jakarta respondents, one key reason for appropriating shopping malls was to circumvent the obstacles to church construction in Indonesia. The Joint Ministerial Decree of 21 March 2006, issued by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Ministry of Home Affairs, made it compulsory for all religions wishing to build a place of worship to possess a building permit. A church is required to submit a list of at least 90 of its congregants, with identity card numbers, to the municipal government. The church is also required to submit to the municipal government at least 60 non-Christian signatories from the local community who consent to the building of the church in their neighbourhood. Finally, the church is required to obtain a written recommendation from the municipal heads of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Religious Harmony Forum. Many churches failed to produce the necessary documents. Even if an IMB (Izin Mendirikan Bangunan, a legal permit or building registration) is granted, acceptance from Muslim-majority neighbourhoods may not be forthcoming.

One of our JPCC respondents, a US-educated church leader, told us that shopping malls are ready-made venues for large numbers of people, circumventing the need to build a church in a potentially unfriendly neighbourhood. But perhaps more crucially, many of these shopping malls are heavily guarded by armed security forces. The presence of retail shops and major brand boutiques offers a sense of reassurance to the independent Pentecostals that cannot be found at a stand-alone church on the streets in a Muslim-majority neighbourhood. As our respondent explained, “Muslim radicals are much less likely to protest outside [shopping malls] to demand that developers close down the mall.”<sup>21</sup> This opinion was echoed by many Indonesian pastors. While the convenient location of malls and relatively cheaper option of rental spaces were important considerations in all four cities studied, security considerations were most prominent in Indonesia. The hostility displayed by Islamic political activists is only the tip of the iceberg

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<sup>21</sup> Interview, Jakarta Praise Community Church, Kota Kasablanka Mall, Jakarta, 23 April 2018. All interview respondents, unless otherwise specified, preferred to remain anonymous.

of the extensive Islamization of Indonesian society, a trend that has seen a shift from the more liberal form of customary Islam to less tolerant variants stemming from Middle Eastern influences.<sup>22</sup>

The trend in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, is similar to that found in Jakarta. The location of churches in malls is already a defensive move, but the configuration of the churches in the malls further reinforces this. The Masa Depan CeraH (MDC), or the Bright Future New Covenant Christian Church, in Surabaya is headquartered in a quiet corner of the Putat Gede neighbourhood facing a main highway. However, the nondescript building with an art-deco frontage, with its entrance moved to the side, and shorn of religious symbols, is no longer used for weekend worship services. The MDC's main services are now held in a ballroom in the shopping mall of Ciputra World, a large mixed-development complex of residential, office, and hotel towers that opened in 2011, a short distance away. The ballroom is inconspicuously tucked in a corner on the top floor of the mall next to the cinema and the executive Muslim prayer room, and is void of religious symbols. After attending the service, we met the senior pastor, who led us down the escalator into the mall to dine and chat at a Thai restaurant. Unmarked as Christians, camouflaged as consumers, with no liminal threshold to cross between the sacred and the profane, we could move and talk freely.<sup>23</sup>

Another three churches clustered in Lenmarc Mall blend easily into the commercial environment. The Surabaya branch of Every Nation, part of a global network of independent churches headquartered in the Philippines, has a map of the world on its wall and a corporate-looking front desk with lounge seats for its shopfront in Lenmarc. This shopfront also serves as a preschool operated by the pastor and his wife, thus further camouflaging the church premises. The other two churches here, a satellite of the Happy Family Centre and the Faith Unlimited Hall, also have commercial shopfronts, which together with their generic names hide the Christian worship spaces from window shoppers.

Another cluster of churches is located at the nearby Pakuwon Mall, the largest mall in Indonesia. The International Christian Assembly, part of the Assemblies of God of Indonesia network, is located on the top floor of the parking structure, tucked discreetly in a corner. When we visited, we only found it by following the stream of worshippers climbing a staircase and walking across parking lots towards it. Coincidentally, the service that Sunday focused on preparing the church for a church planting mission in a Pribumi

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<sup>22</sup> Robert W. Hefner, "Where have all the abangan gone? Religionization and the decline of non-standard Islam in contemporary Indonesia," in *The Politics of Religion in Indonesia: Syncretism, Orthodoxy, and Religious Contention in Java and Bali*, eds. Michel Picard and Rémy Madinier (London: Routledge, 2011), 71–91.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Masa Depan CeraH, Ciputra World, Surabaya, 27 January 2019.

neighbourhood in the coming year, with the pastor leading the congregation to pray for political favour to establish a place of worship.<sup>24</sup> The megachurch Gereja Mawar Sharon (Rose of Sharon Church) is located more prominently in the Surabaya Convention Centre in the mall, recognizable by its tagline, “Welcome Home,” emblazoned on the wall, but not by any religious symbol or name. Among the other churches in the supermall is a branch of the Gereja Satu Jam Saja (One Hour Only Church), an innovative mall adaptation with a schedule of back-to-back fast-paced services every hour for the busy shopper.

Most churches housed in their own buildings on the streets in Jakarta and Surabaya were built some time ago or belong to established denominations with greater presence and visibility. The risk of conducting services at these buildings became manifest in May 2018, when Islamic terrorists carried out suicide bombings at three churches located on streets in Surabaya, killing a dozen people. When we visited a mid-sized independent church located on a street in a neighbourhood in 2019, which we are not naming for security reasons, the fear was still palpable. As we approached the half-shuttered entrance, a uniformed security officer stopped us, checked our bags, and called for the church secretary to confirm our identities before we were allowed to enter. During our interview with the pastor, he recounted that the church was still edgy because they were surveilled by suspicious strangers in the weeks leading up to the bombings. He believed that they were considered a potential target, but God protected them.<sup>25</sup> One possibility could be that, compared to the three churches that were bombed, the church was housed in a shop lot in a row of commercial shophouses, did not have crosses or other religious symbols, and did not have signboards indicating it was a church or belonged to a Christian organization. It was camouflaged and did not stand out as Christian in the neighbourhood to attract hostility.

There are several reasons why neighbourhood churches have chosen not to relocate to shopping malls for security. First, a long-established presence in a neighbourhood makes it costly to relocate elsewhere. Second, these churches have deep roots in their communities, having built multi-generational ties to families living in the neighbourhood, roots and ties which would be jeopardized with relocation. Third, and most importantly, churches retreating to malls incur the social cost of segregation from mainstream society and lose out on the pool of potential converts that gives purpose to the evangelical mission of megachurches. The pastor of a dynamic megachurch located in a Surabaya shopping mall told us on condition of anonymity that the church had been carrying out secretive church-planting projects in Muslim neighbourhoods. It was secretive partly because of the

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<sup>24</sup> Visit, International Christian Assembly, Pakuwon Indah Supermall, Surabaya, 16 February 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Surabaya, 26 January 2019.

political sensibilities that such a project would provoke among Muslim radicals, but also because of the controversies it would spark among the congregation safely and happily cloistered in the mall. The converts were from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the church leadership feared cultural clashes and class conflicts if the main church in the mall opened its door to the converts. Instead, the converts remained segregated in their house churches out in the neighbourhoods. The pastor remarked that it was a regrettable conundrum that he could not solve.<sup>26</sup>

The last point is reinforced by local studies of Pentecostal churches in Indonesian cities and towns. Asmara, Susilowati, and Supriyono observe that the development of a small Charismatic Christian group of 25 congregants in Semarang into a megachurch of over 13,000 members by 2015 has greatly shaped life in the city, generating controversies even among the Christians due to differences in theology and worship practices, which the church has responded to by offering social and educational services in the neighbourhood.<sup>27</sup> Similar studies of Indonesian churches opting to locate themselves out on the streets in neighbourhoods show that these churches design their buildings and adopt social entrepreneurial practices purposefully to attract people in the neighbourhood, which reduces urban hostility.<sup>28</sup> Swanto and Soehartono observe that at least one church currently located in the malls, the Jakarta Pentecostal Church in Surabaya, has embarked on a development project to build a church in the surrounding neighbourhood that will architecturally express its desire to belong and grow in the community and that will provide social services, including free clinics and a community library.<sup>29</sup>

This is not to argue that the mall megachurches are socially alienated. Their decision to stay in the malls is not simply a defensive retreat. On the contrary, the churches are actively engaging the new urban mobilities that, in the highly stratified urban transformations of Jakarta and Surabaya, are concentrated in mall complexes functioning as gated recreational centres for the rising middle classes. Increasingly, this is a diverse space mixing ethnic Chinese and Pribumi. Köning and Dahles point out that Charismatic Christianity initially attracted mainly the Chinese managerial and professional

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Surabaya, 14 February 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Oni Andhi Asmara, Endang Susilowati, and Agustinus Supriyono, "The Influence of Charismatic Church Development in the Religious Christians Life in Semarang, 1970-2015," *IHis (Indonesian Historical Studies)* 4, no. 2 (2020): 155–169.

<sup>28</sup> Dani Eka Wijaya, Hedy C. Indrani, and Hendy Mulyono, "Perancangan Interior Gereja Pantekosta Isa Almasih Sukacita Pemulihan di Surabaya" [Interior design of the Pentecostal Church of Jesus the Messiah *Sukacita Pemulihan* in Surabaya], *Jurnal Intra* 4, no. 2 (2016): 641–649; Mika Daddu Ngedi, "Praktik Kewirausahaan Gereja: Upaya Gereja Pentakosta dalam Megentaskan Kemiskinan di Kota Wamena" [Church entrepreneurship practices: The Pentecostal Church's efforts in alleviating poverty in Wamena City], *Visio Dei: Jurnal Teologi Kristen* 1, no. 1 (2019): 19–37.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Lewi Swanto and Ir. Frans Soehartono, "Gereja Pantekosta Jakarta di Surabaya" [Jakarta Pentecostal Church in Surabaya], *Jurnal eDimensi Arsitektur* 9, no. 1 (2021): 1–8.

classes in Indonesia, as it afforded them spiritual power to make sense of and act on their economic empowerment.<sup>30</sup> But Hoon argues that it has become more broad-based as it has expressed the urban aspirations of the middle classes for consumption lifestyles and social security.<sup>31</sup> In summary, the megachurches navigating hostile neighbourhoods in Jakarta and Surabaya have had to choose whether to build their churches out in the streets or in the malls, decisions split along class lines and thus producing the urban stratification defining Indonesian cities.

### **Kuala Lumpur: Navigating Urban Mobilities**

We see the engagement of urban mobilities more clearly in the Kuala Lumpur case. A similar process of Islamization of society has been taking place in Malaysia, but a key difference is that rural states see a higher concentration of religiously conservative voters compared to the capital city. The proportion of Malays and Chinese residing in Klang Valley, the metropolitan region where Kuala Lumpur is nestled, is about equal, 46 to 43 percent, with Indians and other ethnicities making up the rest. Christians comprise about 6 percent of the residents and are mostly ethnically Chinese. Ethnically segregated old neighbourhoods and a greater ethnic mixture in more recent, middle-class developments mean that Christians have faced fewer hostile neighbourhoods than in Jakarta and Surabaya. However, Kuala Lumpur Christians have not stayed secluded in their own sacred communities and places. They have faced insecurities in a regime that privileges Malays and to some extent Islam in the pursuit of affirmative action against the economic, educational, and urban preeminence of the ethnically Chinese, leading to a different struggle for security for Malaysian Christians.

In contrast to the Indonesian cases noted above, there has been less pressure for Malaysian megachurches to move into shopping malls due to a greater availability of land parcels and a looser urban planning regime. As a result, megachurches have had more freedom in choosing their locations and have been able to focus on engaging new urban mobilities emerging in the capital region in the singular pursuit of church growth.<sup>32</sup> Chong argues that in Klang Valley, Pentecostalism has been characterized by the privatization of religion for personal empowerment, for which the only exception is evangelistic outreach to the non-Malay middle classes.<sup>33</sup> Klang Valley nearly

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<sup>30</sup> Juliette Köning and Heidi Dahles, "Spiritual Power: Ethnic Chinese Managers and the Rise of Charismatic Christianity in Southeast Asia," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 27, no. 1 (2009): 5–37.

<sup>31</sup> Chang-Yau Hoon, "Religious Aspirations Among Urban Christians in Contemporary Indonesia," *International Sociology* 31, no. 4 (2016): 413–431.

<sup>32</sup> Jeaney Yip, "Reaching the City of Kuala Lumpur and Beyond: Being a Pentecostal Megachurch in Malaysia," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong (2018), 71–99.

<sup>33</sup> Eu Choong Chong, "Pentecostalism in Klang Valley, Malaysia," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong (2018), 100–125.

doubled in population from 2000 to 2020, to an estimated 8 million people, many of whom are new migrants from other parts of Malaysia. The past ten years have been a period of rapid economic development and urbanization, a result of the Malaysian developmental state's plan to transform the capital region into a global city-region. National, regional, and global connectivity has been the focus of infrastructural developments, while commercial and financial links to the Middle East have been specially cultivated to allow the economy to shift from ethnic Chinese dominance to favour Malay businesses, especially those that specialize in the Islamic sector. But the connectivity and circuits of capital and migratory flows have also been there for the megachurches to engage for church growth.

We visited Calvary Church, which is linked to the Assemblies of God of Malaysia network, on the golden jubilee of its founding. The church building at Damansara Heights, an affluent suburb sought after by professional elites and expatriates, resembles a sprawling bungalow. It was closed, guarded by a single Nepali security guard, who pointed us to a sign that said there was no service on Saturday evening and there would only be one combined service on Sunday at the Calvary Convention Centre. The next day, we went to the centre, a six-storey multiplex comprising a 5,000-seat auditorium, a banquet hall, and an educational and training annex of theatrettes and meeting rooms. The auditorium was three-quarters filled when the service began, its members mostly English-speaking, middle-class Chinese families. The leading pastors of the church were a husband-and-wife team who embodied the multiculturalism of the cosmopolitan middle classes of Kuala Lumpur. Pastor Prince Guneratnam is of Indian ethnicity, while Pastor Petrina is of Chinese ethnicity. Together, they celebrated the wonders of God in seeing them through the risky bank loans they took on to buy the expensive piece of land in affluent Bukit Jalil next to the elite golf resort to construct the centre. Costs had ballooned after Calvary decided to purchase more land to prevent entertainment businesses and hostile establishments from sprouting up next to it. Now the debts had been recently paid off, an announcement that elicited a standing ovation from the congregation.<sup>34</sup>

Calvary leadership envisioned the centre to be an important source of income that would allow the church to expand its space to anticipate increased membership. The centre would provide the foundation to grow the megachurch, with David Yonggi Cho, head of the largest megachurch in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, opening and blessing it. More importantly, as the senior pastors emphasized, the centre also functions as an instrument to bless Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur by providing MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, exhibitions) services with a Christian touch. Other than hosting Christian meetings such as the Pentecostal World Conference, it has hosted TEDxKL, and a concert by the

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<sup>34</sup> Visit, Calvary Church, Calvary Convention Centre, Kuala Lumpur, 28 October 2018.

pop group Air Supply. In this regard, Calvary seems to be doing something similar to Singaporean megachurch City Harvest Church, which purchased the Suntec City Convention Centre in Singapore. But there is a significant difference: whereas City Harvest was primarily motivated by the need to circumvent state land-use regulations to further its growth ambitions,<sup>35</sup> Calvary saw a market demand for MICE services in the globalization of Kuala Lumpur and sought to meet the demand by building its own convention centre.

Other than the mobilities of capital, which require a high degree of market savviness and risk appetite, social mobilities have also opened up for Chinese communities, in the form of professional and business opportunities. Situated in the heartland, the light industrial district of Subang Jaya, the Full Gospel Tabernacle (FGT) has served as a community centre that has grown up with the upwardly mobile working-class and lower middle-class residents. The church was formed by a group of young people who did not want to follow the Full Gospel Assembly's (FGA) relocation to the Majestic Hotel ballroom in the 1980s. Instead, they moved into a shophouse to remain close to the community and later built Wisma Eagles in 2002, a large nondescript building complex that blends into the industrial park it is located in. With ample parking lots, the complex contains facilities such as youth auditoriums, a multi-purpose sports hall, a physiotherapy centre, and a cafeteria to serve the nearby housing estates. FGT church services are held in the bright and spartan multi-purpose hall with simple light and sound systems, and a computer screen projected onto the wall, instead of the fancy concert-like auditorium settings of megachurch praise and worship.

In contrast, the FGT's counterpart, the FGA, moved into its own building, Wisma FGA, in Taman Goodwood, a middle-class suburb, soon after the move to Majestic Hotel, with its English services held in a spruced-up theatre with big multimedia screens. Situated next to the town centre, the FGA's presence dominates the low-rise landscape of shophouse rows of restaurants, cafes, and shops, with its main building and annex building linked by a bridge over the access road to the shophouses. During our interviews with the pastors, we were told that the growth of the English-service congregation had stagnated, while the Chinese Youth Church was experiencing exponential growth and comprised a younger crowd. Class differences are at play, as the English-service congregants are made up of aging middle-class parents whose children are instead opting for the more dynamic megachurches found in the malls, while the Chinese Youth Church congregants are upwardly mobile working-class youths discovering a religious idiom that empowers their

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<sup>35</sup> See Daniel P. S. Goh, "Legal Pluralism, Patronage Secularism and Prophetic Christianity in Singapore," in *Regulating Religion: Norms, Modes, and Challenges*, eds. Jaclyn Neo, Arif Jamal, and Daniel P. S. Goh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 256–275.

position in the new economy.<sup>36</sup> Together the cases of the FGT and the FGA demonstrate that while there is a correlation between class and church location, this correlation is complicated by the added factor of language. In the case of Malaysia, the Chinese-speaking working-class congregants have made the FGA their home precisely because of the absence of English-educated Chinese youths, who have moved to churches in malls. This social mobility in Southeast Asian cities plays an important but often overlooked role in shaping the demographics, language, and culture of Christian megachurches.

The Damansara Utama Methodist Church (DUMC) has experienced the same trend. The DUMC is located in the technology district close to the University of Malaya and its Dream Centre complex of auditoriums, classrooms, cafeteria, and bookshop fits nicely into the hipster-styled neighbourhood. But its English-service congregation has also stagnated, while its Chinese-service and Myanmar-service congregations, especially the latter, have been growing fast. There are hundreds of thousands of Myanmar migrant workers, male manual workers and female domestic workers, in Kuala Lumpur, and the DUMC has tapped into this potential market—who might be Shan, Karen, Chin, or perhaps Burmese-Chinese—and, without prejudice, has grown its membership.<sup>37</sup>

A related thread of urban mobilities is internal migration. During the 1990s boom, Kuala Lumpur developed into a higher education hub for the country, with private colleges and branches of foreign universities setting up in the city. This led to many young people migrating to the city from other parts of the country, many of them settling down in the capital region to raise families. Dynamic megachurches attracted them and catered to their needs. Collective was set up in 2001 as City Harvest Church KL, an affiliate youth church to the Singapore megachurch. It changed its name in 2018 to signal its independence. It was a timely move, because the out-of-state members who joined the church as college students in the 2000s are now settled in Kuala Lumpur as parents, with children who are attending the church. Reflecting the working-class background and upward mobility of its members, Collective is based in a converted warehouse in a light industrial estate in Sunway new town, equipped with a gym, futsal court, and container classrooms, enjoying a décor of postmodern industrial chic. Internal migrants from East Malaysia have led to the setting up of a branch of the Sidang Injil Borneo (Borneo Evangelical Church), the SIBKL. The church occupies three floors of an office building in the commercial centre in the upscale Damansara neighbourhood.

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<sup>36</sup> Interview, Full Gospel Assembly, Wisma FGA, Kuala Lumpur, 21 February 2020; interview, Dorsett Grand Subang Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, 24 February 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, Damansara Utama Methodist Church, Dream Centre, Kuala Lumpur, 22 February 2020.

However, to many contemporary middle-class youths in Kuala Lumpur, Collective and the SIBKL already feel dated, and are considered to have lost their dynamism. They are instead attracted to a new crop of churches with a different approach, based in shopping malls. Established in 2006 and located in the Evolve Concept Mall in Damansara town and Sunway City Mall, Kingdomcity features rave-style worship with strobe lights in a dark room and focuses on personal healing that addresses youthful troubles. Livestreaming services connect six cities in Malaysia and new branches in Hong Kong, Phnom Penh, Singapore, Surabaya, Bali, Perth, and London, as well as branches in South Asia, the Middle East, and southern Africa. Established in 2000, with its central church located in the Summit Mall in Subang Jaya, Acts Church also offers vibrant worship services. The central church is called Dream Village Conference Centre and features a hipster bookstore and Froth Café. Acts Church also has branches in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Australia, Africa, and the United Kingdom. Unlike the churches in Indonesia locating themselves in malls out of need, these churches are deliberately placing themselves in malls to engage their Christian youth with global images of interconnected cities linked through travel, lifestyle, and virtual videos.

More than simply finding their niche and growing their churches, by engaging the urban mobilities of booming Kuala Lumpur, the megachurches are actively contributing to the making of a “globalizing city-region,” with its attendant modern symbolisms and gentrifying neighbourhoods.<sup>38</sup> Gentrification is not a straightforward and unproblematic term. In the widest sense, it refers to the urban strategy adopted by states acting with capitalist markets, rather than regulating them, to redevelop old city precincts, a strategy that has globalized with the neoliberalization of economies.<sup>39</sup> Lees, however, warns us to use the term critically to think through our categories of understanding, especially with the specific postcolonial characteristics of the Global South urbanisms.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, the megachurches in Kuala Lumpur should not be seen as merely reacting to new urban mobilities. They have actively shaped new urban mobilities in ways that reproduce the racial-religious stratification between the politically dominant Malay-Muslim majority and the economically privileged Chinese minority, transforming the latter into a more urbane, cosmopolitan, and middle-class group that acts as a key agent of gentrification.

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<sup>38</sup> Tim Bunnell, Paul A. Barter, and Sirat Morshidi, “Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area: A Globalizing City-region,” *Cities* 19, no. 5 (2002): 357–370.

<sup>39</sup> Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy,” *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 427–450.

<sup>40</sup> Loretta Lees, “The Geography of Gentrification: Thinking through Comparative Urbanism,” *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 2 (2011): 155–171.

### **Manila: Navigating Gentrification**

In the case of the Philippines, the small Chinese minority is well assimilated into society and forms an integral part of the *mestizo* political and economic elite, where inter-ethnic unions are common and familiar. For instance, Peter Tan-Chi, founder of the megachurch the Christ's Commission Fellowship (CCF), is a well-respected Chinese Filipino who married an American missionary visiting Manila with Campus Crusade for Christ in the 1970s. Instead, the limitations faced by upstart megachurches in Manila have to do with a deeply religious society where, for centuries, Catholic parishes and institutions have held sway over rural villages and urban neighbourhoods. The tight Catholic grip was only loosened when the Americans replaced the Spanish as colonial overlords after suppressing the Philippine Revolution at the end of the nineteenth century. Under the Americans, Manila experienced modernizing development and metropolitan expansion, which opened the city to new cultural influences and social mobilities, including those offered by American Protestant missionaries. Several large independent churches were established by Filipinos in the colonial period, including the nontrinitarian Iglesia ni Cristo and the nationalist Aglipayan Church. The megachurches we studied were founded in the postcolonial period, mostly from the 1970s onward, after the wave of Evangelical and Pentecostal revivals spread from America to Southeast Asia.

The CCF started as a home-based bible study group made up of professionals and businesspeople led by Tan-Chi in 1982. The group quickly grew to become a church, moving from one rented space to another—business school, shopping mall, convention centre, office building, and country club—until they located permanently at the 10,000-seat CCF Centre. The centre is located in Ortigas East, a 16-hectare mega mixed-use development that is a self-contained town in Pasig City, Metro Manila. With construction still going on, the estate is opening in phases. The CCF itself is still developing the other half of its 2.3-hectare plot. According to a CCF pastor we interviewed, the CCF originally purchased a premium plot in Ortigas Centre, a high-end commercial district, but a Protestant church in the vicinity requested the CCF not set up shop there to prevent religious competition since space was already very limited for Protestant churches due to hostility from Catholic landlords. The CCF then worked with the development company, Ortigas, to obtain a discounted plot in Ortigas East to become an anchor tenant. It is expected that some CCF members will buy residential property in Ortigas East, as development continues.<sup>41</sup> When CCF Centre construction is complete, it will boast educational, training, sports, dormitory, and hospitality facilities, with the goal of eventually enrolling

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<sup>41</sup> Interview, CCF Centre, Pasig City, Manila, 1 December 2019.

3,000 students for Life Academy, the CCF's global learning institution offering preschool to high school education.

The CCF's closest neighbour is Victory Fort Bonifacio, the central branch of Victory Christian Fellowship, located in Bonifacio Global City, a former American army base transformed into the next-generation financial and lifestyle district of Manila just southeast of Makati. Victory Fort Bonifacio is a glass-clad building bounded by elite and expatriate school campuses such as the International School Manila, De La Salle University, British School Manila, and Japanese School Manila. This siting is intentional, as Victory is focusing its evangelizing efforts on campus outreach. Victory is also the founding church of Every Nation, a global movement of churches and campus ministries with hundreds of affiliates in major cities around the world, with Victory Fort Bonifacio serving as regional headquarters. Not coincidentally, Victory Fort Bonifacio is also sited close to shopping malls and the upscale strip malls of Bonifacio High Street, locations where much of the student recruitment has taken place.

In many ways similar to Kuala Lumpur churches, but in this case shut out of traditional neighbourhoods dominated by the Catholic Church, the CCF and Victory have navigated the urban mobilities of the rising middle classes in Manila. However, large-scale gentrification and production of exclusive spaces such as Ortigas East and Bonifacio Global City have only served to heighten the inequalities of globalization in Manila. While not completely gated, these gentrified spaces are highly securitized. As a result, the profile of a CCF or Victory member is a lot more elitist than the diverse profiles found amongst members of Kuala Lumpur churches. In fact, Victory has targeted its outreach at elite high school and university students, believing that they will eventually become the political and economic elites of the country and will lead the nation on a Christian path.<sup>42</sup> We also visited Victory U-Belt, located in a shopping mall in St. Thomas Square, in the University Belt district close to the presidential palace, where there is a concentration of college campuses. Services are conducted largely in English with a smattering of Tagalog and are more focused on bible study than on praise and worship.

South of the University Belt, the main campus of the Cathedral of Praise (COP) is situated at the heart of the civic district, opposite the Supreme Court and close to the National Museum and National Library. The COP main campus complex took three decades to construct and features a state-of-the-art auditorium with 8,000 seats. Unlike Victory, the COP targets middle-class families. Praise and worship gatherings are longer in duration and more vibrant at the COP, but the mix of young and older members means that different energies are brought to the service. The COP has north, east, and south campuses in Metro Manila, all of them also fully owned

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<sup>42</sup> Interview, Victory Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City, Manila, 29 November 2019.

facilities that serve families in the area. The north campus is located in a shop lot next to the local supermarket in the upscale townhouse neighbourhood of Dona Carmen, while the east campus is in a shopping mall in the technology district south of the Ortigas Centre commercial hub. Similarly, Bread of Life has moved around the city, from college auditorium, to medical centre, to sports complex, to old theatre, before settling down along Mother Ignacia Avenue in Quezon City across from St. Mary's College, one of the oldest Catholic schools in Manila, and close to terrace houses and gated communities. Its seven-storey Crossroad Centre holds a 2,500-seat auditorium and many halls and classrooms used for bible study and fellowship by its many targeted ministries; it also functions as a community centre.

The one megachurch defying gentrification in Manila is Word of Hope. This has to do with the origins of the church, which began when the founding pastor, Dave Sobrepeña, watched the 1986 mass uprising against the authoritarian Marcos regime on television in Dallas. "Seeing the vast sea of humanity that passed along the entire stretch of the highway," Sobrepeña felt "deep compassion for his countrymen" and that "it was time to go back to his roots."<sup>43</sup> Sobrepeña returned to Manila and started a church at Paramount Theatre along the same highway, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), in 1988. The church attracted working-class and middle-class converts and grew quickly. It purchased a plot in a strip mall along EDSA and, in the 1990s, built a seven-storey modern-day church, crowned with a cross. It was strategically located near the main terminal of the Metro Rail Transit and between two of the largest shopping malls in the Philippines. The church expanded in the 2000s when they bought land behind the main building and built an eight-storey building housing an academy for preschoolers and grade-schoolers and the Hope Leadership Institute.

Word of Hope's original political inspiration means that its outreach is oriented towards the masses rather than the elites. While it has not located itself in a traditional neighbourhood, it did find a place where the main campus is accessible to the masses, rather than retreating to an exclusive gentrified neighbourhood. In fact, the church has deliberately made sure it is highly accessible from the street for walk-in inquiries. The church has claimed 50,000 conversions and over 45 satellites in Metro Manila and the suburbs since the mid-2010s. Its goals are to reach out to the masses outside the National Capital Region and, for 2019, to plant 23 satellite churches in the provinces.

Philippine megachurches are politically reticent in general, with many preferring to focus on church building and evangelistic outreach rather than civic engagement. Philippine democracy is populist in character, with a strongly politicized civil society sharpened by decades of opposition to

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<sup>43</sup> Word of Hope, "History," 2020, <https://www.wordofhope.ph/home-1>, accessed 26 January 2022.

American imperialism and the Marcos regime. The Catholic Church, influenced by the social gospels and liberation theology, has played a central role in civil society. The professional, business, and bureaucratic elites of the megachurches want little to do with either populist partisan politics or civil society politics. The pastors of one of the churches that we spoke to have been trying to encourage their members to be more socially conscious, but they fear that the church may split if they venture into political advocacy or criticize the increasing authoritarianism of the Duterte regime. Instead, they have opted to work quietly in the background with civil society organizations to develop leadership training programs for church members.<sup>44</sup> Again, Word of Hope bucks the trend. Pastor Sobrepeña has taken on leadership positions in the country's evangelical bodies and has used his clout to engage with political leaders and endorse their candidacy for elections.<sup>45</sup>

As the various dates above indicate, the CCF, Victory, and the COP, as well as other megachurches, have engaged with gentrification in their church-building projects in the past twenty years. Word of Hope is the exception in our study, since it opted out of this engagement by remaining in the church it built on the streets in the 1990s in order to reach out to the working classes. This is significant, as Filipino scholars who have conducted studies of religious change in the Philippines in the early 2000s have found that, contrary to popular perceptions that non-Catholic Charismatic organizations have predominantly poor and uneducated followers and are political apathetic, Pentecostal churches in fact have a wide reach across social classes and represent a genuine pathway for Filipinos to adapt to modernization and tackle rapid socio-economic change.<sup>46</sup> Francisco's study reveals that Charismatic Christians, including Catholics, have creatively constructed new religious and civil spaces in their adaptations to modernization and rapid economic growth.<sup>47</sup> In our study, we found that many of the megachurches have engaged the urban mobilities that have emerged since the 2000s, and have actively contributed to the gentrification of the districts they are located in. This is very much in line with what Cornelio has described as "religious worlding" in the new production of space in the Philippines, infusing capitalist urbanism with spiritual meanings of godly triumph and grandeur.<sup>48</sup> Some pastors, like the young leaders at Victory, with working-class roots, have been

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<sup>44</sup> Interview, Manila, 29 November 2019.

<sup>45</sup> See Joel A. Tejedo, "Pentecostal-Charismatic Megachurches in the Philippines," in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia*, ed. Chong (2018), 156–178.

<sup>46</sup> Christl Kessler, "Charismatic Christians: Genuinely Religious, Genuinely Modern," *Philippine Studies* 54, no. 4 (2006): 560–584; Joseph L. Suico, "Pentecostalism and Social Change," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 195–213.

<sup>47</sup> Jose Mario C. Francisco, "Mapping Religious and Civil Spaces in Traditional and Charismatic Christianities in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies* 58, nos. 1–2 (2010): 185–221.

<sup>48</sup> Jayeel Serrano Cornelio, "Religious Worlding: Christianity and the New Production of Space in the Philippines," in *New Religiosities*, eds. Koning and Njoto-Feillard (2017), 169–197.

questioning their place in gentrification and finding new purpose in outreach efforts to the marginalized beyond Manila. This is the essence of religious worlding, the spiritual questioning of one's place that openly engages the world beyond the immediate sacred spaces and the city that one occupies.

## **Conclusion**

A cursory observation of megachurches building up in Jakarta, Surabaya, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila would lead one to think that mall Christianity is being transplanted from Western cities to these Southeast Asian cities. Yet as we have argued in this paper, something more complex is taking place beneath the surface. The megachurches are choosing to locate themselves in shopping malls and commercial complexes and districts not merely as a way to promote church growth. The caricature of these mall churches as preaching the prosperity gospel to align themselves with the consumerism of contemporary capitalism does not hold.

First and foremost, the megachurches in the four Southeast Asian cities studied are engaging hostile neighbourhoods dominated by Muslim or Catholic majorities with entrenched political and social power. Moving into the mall represents a choice for greater security. This has been most urgently experienced in Jakarta and Surabaya because of the extensive Islamization of politics and society. Churches that have chosen to remain out on the streets have had to adopt some form of camouflage to look less like a church, or have set up social service programs to reach out to the neighbourhood to establish friendly relationships and lessen hostilities. In Manila, the hostility of Catholic landlords and of some neighbourhoods has led many megachurches to seek out commercial complexes and gentrifying districts. Kuala Lumpur has experienced the least pressure, because the population is more evenly balanced between Malay Muslims and Chinese and Indian minorities. Internal migrations and urban sprawl have given room for megachurches to build out into the streets rather than move into malls.

Moving into malls and commercial areas is not simply a defensive reaction. In Kuala Lumpur, newer megachurches targeting youthful Christians have moved into malls strategically, thus engaging the new urban mobilities thrown up by the rapid economic boom experienced by this globalizing city-region. In Jakarta and Surabaya, megachurches that moved into malls have continued to expand along urban networks, opening branches in other malls and in other cities, while serving the spiritual and material needs of the new middle classes. The more enterprising churches continue to explore evangelistic missions in Pribumi neighbourhoods, struggling to overcome the urban stratification that they themselves contribute toward. In Manila, similar attempts by megachurches situated in gentrified districts to tackle urban stratification through outreach to marginalized communities show that the Christian church leaders are aware and uncomfortable about the fact that

they are contributing to urban stratification. While they celebrate the health and wealth of their upwardly mobile members, the megachurches are not forgetting their working-class roots.

The structure and layout of the Southeast Asian city are being repurposed by Christian innovation and reinterpretation. Christian marks and symbols, hidden from sight in hostile landscapes, are being reinvented or camouflaged. Moving from mall to mall, convention centre to convention centre, neighbourhood to neighbourhood, these churches are also responsible for redirecting the flow of people in the city and impacting small businesses like retail stores and eateries around these locations, and sometimes even whole shopping complexes, like Pakuwon in Surabaya, and whole neighbourhoods, like Ortigas East in Manila and Taman Goodwood in Kuala Lumpur. Their footprints around the city intertwine the Christian churches more intimately with pluralistic local communities and economies and simultaneously produce urban stratification. This is how the megachurches are “spiritualizing the city,” producing not only sacredness that takes “(visible or secretive) presence in the city” through religious architecture, signs, and symbols,<sup>49</sup> but also increasingly contributing to creating the urban fabric of local societies.

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National University of Singapore, Singapore, January 2022*

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<sup>49</sup> Hegner and Margry, “Introduction: Spiritualizing the Urban and the Urbanesque,” in *New Religiosities*, eds. Koning and Njoto-Feillard (2017), 9.