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**Space, Meaning and A “Neighborhood”
Charismatic Fundamentalist Church**

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Introduction

The question of the relationship between beliefs, meanings and *local space* is one that is conspicuously missing from the corpus of sociological works on contemporary religious movements. This is partly due to the historical trajectory of the sociological theorizing of religion. The legacy of Weber has been that of focusing the sociology of religion on the cultural, institutional-organizational and socioeconomic interfaces between religious institutions and secular modernity. It is also partly due to Christianity’s pre-eminence in the West’s cultural history, which has conditioned sociology by emphasizing the texts, belief-systems and institutional processes of religion over how religious practitioners actively infuse everyday life and the physical domain with meanings which are simultaneously being negotiated, relativized and contested. Thus, in the case of religious fundamentalism, the West’s mixed feelings of fascination and worry with regards to the politics that arise from fundamentalist beliefs distract sociology from exploring the more mundane dimensions of fundamentalism (e.g. Hadden and Shupe, 1989; Marty and Appleby, 1991). For the same reason, Charismatic Christianity is often characterized by its heightened spiritual experience, spontaneous effervescence, decentered organization of churches, and emotional and upbeat expressions of faith (e.g. Hunt *et al*, 1997). Few have attempted to come down from the generalized abstract level or go beyond the above conditioned limits to look at *the meanings of concrete social actions performed by actors in physical-social space*.

In this paper, I will explore the possibility of integrating a sociology of space and general social theory with the sociology of religion to address the missing dimension. This is achieved by way of looking at the empirical example of a “neighborhood” Charismatic church negotiating its identity and relevance vis-à-vis its urban residential surroundings in Singapore while at the same time trying to achieve church-growth and sustain membership. The sociocultural dynamics underlying the church’s articulations of its relations and its actual interactions with its immediate physical-social surroundings will be the analytical focus. These dynamics will then be contextualized within the form and content of modernity as it has been consciously developed by the post-colonial Singapore state and two theses will be offered to explain the dynamics.

The Rise of Charismatic Fundamentalism in Singapore

The Charismatic Renewal movement has its roots in the first Pentecostal revival that began outside mainstream denominational churches in late 19th century USA. The contemporary

movement began in the early 1960s and is considered a neo-Pentecostal revival spreading in evangelical, denominational and even Roman Catholic churches. The Fundamentalist movement began in USA at about the same time as the first Pentecostal movement, mainly in reaction to liberal Protestant efforts to modernize Christianity. The movement found new strength and purpose in the midst of rapid social change in late 1960s America. The two movements have had a deep impact on Protestant churches in America and around the world. The convergence of both Charismatic Renewal and Fundamentalist movements is evident in many contemporary independent *Charismatic Fundamentalist* congregations emerging outside of mainstream churches.

Some may object to the inclusion of Charismatics who hold Fundamentalist beliefs as Fundamentalists (e.g. Ammerman, 1991:3-4). These typological objections unnecessarily exclude movements with family resemblance and hinder comparative analysis of cultural flows. Charismatic Fundamentalism combines Pentecostal beliefs in the immanent spiritual realm and spiritual power in the form of “gifts of the Holy Spirit” such as speaking in tongues, the ability to prophesy and healing, with Fundamentalist beliefs which Ammerman (1991) describes as consisting of evangelism, the “inerrancy” of the Bible, a complex interpretation of the Bible’s millenarian prophecies termed “pretribulation dispensational premillennialism” and separatism. This combination has given rise to a characteristic blending of Pentecostal spiritualism with Fundamentalist apocalyptic language that provides a poignant master discourse about spiritual warfare in the “end times”. This discourse speaks of the world, societal institutions and “hearts” of individuals as battlegrounds between the irreconcilable forces of good and evil — God’s army in the church of true believers and Satan with his “legion of demons”. Contemporary times is seen as filled with signs that we are living in the “last days” with the “Rapture”, when true Christians everywhere will be brought up to heaven before the “end of the world”, imminent. The Charismatic “gifts” are believed be re-introduced by God as spiritual combat equipment because the battle is intensifying and thus also taken as a sign of the “last days”.

The best argument for the category of Charismatic Fundamentalists comes from the subjective identification of such congregations themselves. These congregations see themselves as part of the Fundamentalist family of true believers separated from the rest of the apostate church. However, they see themselves as being more progressive because they accept new timely “gifts” from God who has a deliberate schedule for the church’s role in fulfilling eschatological history. There is a sense of pity for anti-Charismatic fundamentalists who are seen as fellow soldiers who sadly reject effective combat equipment. This is reflected in the remark made by an elder of Bethesda Cathedral, the “neighborhood” church in question here, during a small group meeting:

You know the Bible Prebysterians, they are so deep into the Word of God that they think they don't need the Holy Spirit. That's why I am quite scared of those who came up from Bible schools, they can be quite dry with their knowledge of the Bible but *crippled* without the Holy Spirit. (Emphasis added).

This identification can also be seen in the names of some churches that were established either by shifting *en masse* from conservative evangelicalism to Charismatic Fundamentalism or through schismatic process. Considering their Charismatic practices, churches such as Faith Community *Baptist*, Living Sanctuary *Brethren* and Agape *Baptist* seem to have oxymoronic names. But the retention of the old denominational tag expresses their belief in grounding Charismatic practices in strong Biblical focus.

How did Charismatic Fundamentalism emerge in Singapore? In the 1970s, through international denominational networks, the Charismatic movement arrived from North America and Europe and proved to be extremely popular among young Singaporeans (see Sng, 1994). The Pentecostal Assemblies of God churches benefited most from the movement's popularity. Other local Protestant churches were deeply affected and were forced to respond in either an anti-Charismatic fashion or in a compromise that allows for Charismatic practices and beliefs to sit tensely with traditional services and doctrines. The Methodist and Anglican churches, the two largest Protestant denominations in Singapore, took the latter path. Throughout the 1980s, traditional services in many Methodist and Anglican churches were reduced in number, pushed to early morning or evening timeslots and attended by aging congregations. "Modern" services characterized by spontaneous prayers, contemporary Christian pop songs, modern rock and jazz bands leading worship and freedom for expressive worship took over the late morning timeslots more popular with young people.

By way of adopted Charismatic practices and beliefs, Fundamentalist beliefs began to appear in these churches and became a catalyst for emerging quarrels between traditional "conservatives" and Charismatic "progressives". The content of preaching and teaching started to shift to Fundamentalist themes such as the stress on tithing as a strict Biblical command, the inerrancy of the Bible and the looming end of the world. The agents of these fundamentalizing changes were newly converted youth leaders and young pastors trained in Charismatic seminaries in the US rather than Anglican seminaries. These changes were radical and deep-seated, and hit at the core of Christian identity in Singapore. An article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that an antique Chinese table, once used as an altar, was removed from the Anglican Cathedral because its traditional Chinese dragon motifs was thought of as satanic. An Anglican canon was quoted as saying that traditional Anglicanism was foreign to

Singapore: "We want to be a national church ... It is best to describe ourselves as a national, evangelical and charismatic Anglican church in Singapore." (*FEER* 1987:63).

This fundamentalization is aided by the absence of Liberal Christianity, nipped in the bud by a watchful authoritarian state because of its orientation towards social activism. More importantly, the fundamentalization of the Charismatic renewal can be seen as local shock waves that follow the mass preaching of itinerant Fundamentalist preachers from America, South Africa and other countries. These preachers prowl the international Christian rally and conference circuits to "evangelize" the masses. Singapore with its majority non-Muslim population was seen as an important stopover and a potential Christian "light" in Southeast Asia. Big-time preachers like Luis Palau, Reinhart Bonnke and Billy Graham have visited Singapore for major rallies while less famous ones visit individual churches as special guest-speakers. These preachers have played a major role in globalizing Fundamentalist Christianity. Robertson argues that with increasing globalization, ideologies inevitably get engaged by relativization processes involving the categories of "humankind" and "world-system", and the "proliferation of orientations to the global situation" (Robertson, 1995:252). Charismatic Fundamentalism is one ideology that has responded to these relativizing processes by aggressively spreading its beliefs and influence worldwide to compete with other global ideologies. Additionally, the globalization of Charismatic Fundamentalism can be seen as inherent in its aggressive evangelical posture but *may* also be in part driven by the constraints and intensive competition of the American religious marketplace.

For many newly converted Charismatics in denominational churches, established hierarchies, internal diversity and traditions hindered their neo-Pentecostal religious expression and Fundamentalist motivation. Hence, some Charismatics struggled to dominate and reform their churches, failing which they would leave traditional churches to join independent Charismatic churches. This was how one Charismatic informant narrated his struggle and departure:

We went back to church, I didn't want the normal service, the normal Sunday school meetings. So what we did was a few of us, who were on fire for God, ... we begin to encourage the people to worship God in spirit and in truth, with all their hearts, mind, soul and strength ... For the first time in our Methodist church, during the youth camp, people were baptized in Holy Spirit and prayed in other tongues. And the subsequent year, another camp, the rest of the people ... , and so about ninety percent of the [youth] were baptized in the Holy Spirit. ... We even organize outside meetings ... As a result of that, the youth begin to become different from the other rest of the church and we encountered a lot of opposition. There were a lot of talking, discussions and ... we got black-marked. ... However we went underground and beginning to encourage the members of the youth ministry to practice the gifts of the Holy Spirit. ... Like the saying that there cannot be two tigers on the same mountain ... so what happened was that [I] realized that, hey, maybe I should ... leave the church.

Either through outright schisms or the gradual exodus of Charismatics from mainstream churches, the bloom and explosive growth of independent Charismatic churches in Singapore occur in this context. Many of the founding-pastors of independent Charismatic churches themselves left mainstream denominational churches because of the churches' unwillingness or inability to give them space to fully express their Charismatic Fundamentalist beliefs.

Bethesda Cathedral: Chosen to be an Oasis in a Promised Harvest Land

Bethesda Cathedral started out as a branch congregation of the Church of Praise, a church belonging denominationally to the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. The key figure here is Pastor Tay. Tay left the Brethren church after a string of experiences that began with some Charismatics praying over him at a 1986 international evangelical conference conducted by Billy Graham in Amsterdam. A few months prior to his departure from the Brethren church, Tay experienced a vision while he was being driven from Atlanta to Denver in the US:

Suddenly while driving on the long road, hardly any cars, rolling road, I saw there was a big turmoil, commotion in the clouds, very cloudy day and there seem to be a wind blowing around. And then I saw a church form up, made up by the clouds and it comes nearer and nearer and near towards the car. I was in front, my good friend was the driver but the sad part was my driver did not see anything. Only I saw, and I saw this, this part of the church [points to a photograph of the present church building] and I saw the building [points to a block of public housing flats in the photograph] and it was a towering block behind it. I saw the name "Bethesda Cathedral". And I saw the word "Jesus is Lord" on a neon sign, you know advertisement neon sign and the word was in neon "Jesus is Lord" [makes a circular motion indicating that the neon words were revolving around the church image]. ... When I saw the vision, there was the nudging of the Holy Spirit prompting me to build, to pastor this church.

Taking this as a divine signal, Tay left the Brethren church in 1987 and joined the Church of Praise, where he became the lay-pastor of a 200-strong branch congregation in 1989. In 1992, he took the branch out of the Church of Praise and registered it as an independent church called Bethesda Charismatic Center. At that time, the church was meeting in a rented old theater and Tay, with the vision in mind, explained that he was "shy to call ourselves cathedral" because the church was not yet in its chosen place.

Then, in the middle of 1993, Tay decided to bid for a plot of land in Chai Chee estate, a residential estate within the suburban public housing heartland of Bedok (estimated 206,000

residents in 1998)¹ in the Eastern region of the island. However, unlike other estates in Bedok, Chai Chee is made up largely of one to three room flats, the lowest end of residential housing in Singapore, and is thus a lower-class area with many neglected aged residents and cases of abject poverty. With the approval of the congregation, he outbid three other bidders with a 2.735 million dollar offer. The construction of the church building cost another 5 million dollars because the building was built to match exactly the image Tay saw in his vision on the road to Denver. The three-storey church building, with its Greco-Roman columns and porch, tall glass panes and majestic steeple-tower likened to European cathedrals, stand out as a grandiose white architectural form among the dull monolithic landscape of public housing blocks (Plate 1). As it was impossible to duplicate the revolving neon “Jesus is Lord” in reality, Tay asked for the words to be inscribed at three different locations around the building’s exterior to adhere as closely as possible to the vision. With regards to the nearly 8 million dollars bill, the church had only 130 thousand dollars in the bank when they made the successful bid. Together with its small membership of 200 and lack of collaterals then, it would take a tremendous amount of faith to actually act upon the ambition of buying land and building a church according to one’s grandiose vision. Making that great leap of faith was what Tay did, and the subsequent success in securing bank loans (by mortgaging his house) and raising the money to repay all loans by 1998, within 5 years, was to him a vindication of his faith. Additionally, this 8 million dollar story was told as a miracle story that affirmed his calling to build this church and showed undeniable proof that Bethesda Cathedral was in God’s favor.

Tay is a prophet in Weber’s sense, “a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment” (Weber, 1968:439). The divine commandment in question here is the founding of an independent Charismatic church and construction of a divinely specified building to house the church. The “charismatic authority” (Weber, 1968:241-5) accorded to him by the 200-strong congregation enabled him to lead the church through this collective leap of faith and the subsequent success not only strengthened the community but Tay’s charismatic authority. But the role of the prophet is fused here with the roles of *pastoral care* and *preaching*, which Weber understands as “results of prophetic religion” reflecting routinized and rationalized charisma (Weber, 1968:464-7). This fusion of roles is derived from a deep conviction of his calling as a divine instrument to *preach*, *pastor* and *organize* the church so as to “raise up an army for the last days”. This gives Pastor Tay the ability to exercise his prophetic charismatic authority in almost every aspect of the church community’s life, giving him almost absolute power to determine the

¹ Statistical source: Housing and Development Board, Singapore.

strategic directions of church growth, the tactical realization of these strategies and church identities vis-à-vis the surrounding Bedok community.

Many Bethesda members like to compare the church's founding story to the Biblical narrative of Exodus, where God's chosen people, led by the prophet Moses and given the promise of prosperous land, moved in the Sinai desert and entered the promised land eventually, miraculously overcoming all obstacles. Likewise, the Bethesda congregation was chosen by God (1992), led prophetically by Pastor Tay and given the promise of land and a grand building to call its own (1993), wandered through rented halls and entered the promised land of Chai Chee (1995) miraculously. This narrative is overlain with other metaphors from the New Testament. The name "Bethesda" refers to a pool in Jerusalem mentioned in John 5:2-4, the water of which supposedly had healing properties when it was stirred by an angel at a certain time. Bethesda members like to draw significance from this by seeing the church as an oasis of faith, healing and salvation in the middle of the human suffering of the surrounding Chai Chee estate. The church's logo consists of a simple-lined image of the church building, under which a pool radiates concentric circles of water. Another metaphor is the metaphor of Christians as God's laborers sent out to harvest the field (Matthew 9:37-8) that is used to express the Christian duty of evangelism. The church is thus seen as a group of laborers planted in Chai Chee to harvest the souls there. These themes – miraculous journey into the Promised Land, oasis for the needy and harvest labor – are reflected in one issue of *The Cathedral Chronicle* published by the church:

Our planting in Chai Chee is sure. And God has somehow entrusted this field to workers such as us, in this moment and at such a time as this, here in Singapore. Once a "homeless" church, God poured His Love on us through the years, and demonstrated it even through the construction and completion of the cathedral. ... Now it is time for us to respond to the needs of this land that has welcomed us, to give and to serve the community here and share His salvation plan. For Chai Chee is the beach head for our taking of the land for Christ. And together, hand in hand with the churches of Singapore, we'll win this island nation for His glory. ("Church Without Walls: A Vision for Chai Chee", *The Cathedral Chronicle*, Jun/Jul 1999)

The sociological significance here for us is that Pastor Tay and Bethesda members can be seen as social actors who actively draw rich symbolic resources from their Charismatic Fundamentalist worldview, a worldview that is undergoing some amount of globalization, to impute meaning into personal and collective experiences and local physical reality. For Pastor Tay, an experience that would otherwise be shrugged off as a hallucination is interpreted as a calling within the Charismatic meaning-frame of visions. With this interpretation and his charismatic authority, he is able to fashion the physical reality of a grandiose white church

amidst impoverished surroundings. The Bethesda community then gave special meaning to their relocation to the new church building. Here, the spatial dimension becomes evidently crucial to the process of articulating the church's identity and vision, and thus also to the motivation for collective action. First, it saw itself as a chosen people moving *into* a promised land. Second, it imagined itself as an oasis *situated* in the midst of impoverishment. Third, it viewed the surrounding blocks of flats as *harvest land* for evangelical action. However, the whole process was not a straightforward one. The church moved into its Chai Chee building in 1995 but the above quoted articulation of identity was dated 1999. It was not so much that the church was late in articulating this identity but that pragmatic considerations due to obstacles hindering church growth caused the leadership to negotiate several turns in the process.

Church Growth, Spiritual Warfare and the "Neighborhood"

In my two months of fieldwork, the community life of Bethesda Cathedral revolved around the central issue of church growth. Week after week, Pastor Tay would update the congregation on progress made and further plans. Members were sometimes given strong reminders bordering on scolding but they were mostly encouraged to perform their evangelical duties by the force of Biblical preaching. There are a number of factors that drive this single-minded pursuit of church growth. First of all, the most cynical explanation that we can give is that the church was facing the brute fact of multi-million dollar debts and an important source of income was the monthly tithing of members. Second, we can argue from the perspective of inter-sect competition without resorting to rational choice reductionism (e.g. Stark and Bainbridge, 1987; Finke and Stark, 1992) or postmodern consumption cynicism (e.g. Percy, 1997). The rise of Charismatic Fundamentalism in Singapore has led to the explosion of many novel independent churches led by local pastors who believe strongly that they are being called prophetically by God. Though they loathe claiming any special status because of the requirements of Christian modesty, these pastors exude such a strong confidence in their prophetic mission and fiery preaching that this confidence in itself becomes a claim to special greatness. Seen in this overall picture, Bethesda Cathedral is only one church among many led by prophet-pastors claiming to be special emissaries. This leads to an underlying competitiveness between prophet-pastors and explains the strange lack of regular collaboration despite sharing worship style, beliefs and worldview. The three Charismatic Fundamentalist churches that I studied, Bethesda, City Harvest and Faith Community Baptist, were not only greatly similar in the above terms, they were also within close proximity to each other (3.5 km radius, see Figure 1) and yet there was near-nil collaboration between the pastors.

Third, it may be argued that the focus on church growth is found inherently in the evangelical ideology of Charismatic Fundamentalism, which is accentuated by the urgency-inducing “end times” discourse. Fourth and the most pertinent, revivalist religions are driven by the need to keep up the momentum of revival or the heat of revival would die out and a certain degree of institutionalization would have to take place. Institutionalization may be inevitable in the long run (Weber, 1968:246-54), sparking off a new cycle of schism and revival that has an erosive secularization effect (Bruce, 1990), but at least while the founding prophet-pastor is still alive with vigor, the revival must go on. Moreover, religious harmony is a sensitive issue in multi-religious Singapore due to the geopolitics of being a small majority Chinese society surrounded by the majority Muslim populations of Malaysia and Indonesia. The state has furthermore enshrined this religious harmony in law giving itself the powers to curtail any religious group that it deemed is threatening that harmony. Therefore, one cannot preach openly in public spaces and the charisma of the prophet-pastor is locked up within churches and rented halls. The only way then is to organize the congregation to bring in the masses, to cast their nets as wide as possible and bring potential converts to the church so that they can experience the charisma of the prophet-pastor. This is achieved by organizing the whole church into “cell-groups” of 10-15 members led by trained older members. These cell-groups, called *oikos* by Bethesda, are organized spatially. Members who live near each other in a particular area form a cell-group and meet in the home of a host for mid-week worship, teaching and fellowship. This organization is effective not only because it allows the leadership to monitor and shape the lives of members but also because cell-groups as organizational units form the basis for evangelical mobilization.

Organization and planning are important but the more difficult part is to mobilize and motivate the congregation – for the prophet-pastor is asking the church members to freely contribute their leisure time, which is already greatly limited by work commitments in fast-paced Singapore. Charismatic Fundamentalists find the motivation key in the whole discourse on “spiritual warfare”. Enveloped in this discourse, evangelism is transformed from a dreary duty into an exciting and meaning-filled call to arms. Unbelievers are seen as in the grasp of the enemy satanic forces and victories are achieved when their “hearts” are “won for Christ”. The act of proselytization alone does not constitute the “battle”. Prayer prior to the act in the various forms of exclaiming, singing, clapping, speaking in tongues, laying of hands is seen as the critical act of softening defenses said to be akin to “artillery bombardment”. Bethesda Cathedral organizes a “Prayer and Praise” session every Friday for this very purpose. The session is “advertised” in the weekly church bulletin with graphic images of soldiers with swords, armors and shields and catchy one-liners proclaiming, “Partnership with God to pull down strongholds

and possessing our territory”, and “Let us invade the powers and principalities of darkness, and claim territories for God’s kingdom!” The use of the word “territory” appears figurative but Bethesda members see it as seriously literal as they see spiritual warfare:

In Joshua 1:3, the Lord instructed Joshua that “Every place on which the sole of your foot *treads*, I have given it to you ...”. The word “tread” in Hebrew *darak* ... involves the concept of violence or war. [It] actually came to be used for “bending the bow” when about to shoot an arrow and is still used today in Israel for the command, “Load your weapons!” So God is telling us that with every prayer we pray, every intercession we make for the residents of Bedok, Bedok Reservoir and Chai Chee, every HDB block we prayer walk, every invitation leaflet we give away, and for every place that we are willing to LOAD OUR WEAPONS AND TAKE, He is going to give us! *So FORWARD IN FAITH, army of the LORD!* (“Enforcing the Victory”, *Chronicle*, Feb/Mar 1999; emphases original).

My argument here is that the spatial dimension is a central facet of Charismatic Fundamentalist beliefs and practices and cannot be deconstructed away. The centrality of space can be tied to the organizational imperatives of collective evangelism for church growth. The pragmatic organizational element is highlighted in an article on an ongoing Bethesda project named in classic war lingo:

Operation Adopt-A-Block is about focusing consistent and regular prayer, and meeting the need to share God’s Word to *specific* apartment blocks that are *in your care*. ... [A]n increasing number of volunteers have been spending every Tuesday and Thursday mornings since January, prayer-walking particular blocks of flats. Come Saturdays, they meet residents on the void decks, chat with them, learn about their prayer needs, and if the opportunity arises, share the gospel perhaps or invite them down to our services. (“Project”, *Chronicle*, Feb/Mar 1999; emphases original).

A more basic argument would be that the centrality of space is derived from a reflexive consciousness with regards to one’s surrounding space. This reflexivity towards space stems from sociological causes which I shall theorized later in the paper. The reflexive consciousness of space causes prophet-pastors to relativize their worldview with surrounding spaces, leading to the infusion of Biblically derived meanings into surrounding spaces. This can be seen in Bethesda’s interpretation of its participation in the Annual Good Neighbor Day Walk organized by Chai Chee Community Center:

It was a week that changed us and Chai Chee. Geared to a commitment to pray and serve our community, the last week of May began with ..., Prayer and Praise – claiming a territorial stake to the neighborhood ... *Walking around the city wall!* 1. Bedok Town Centre is the town center and an integral part of the

neighborhood. 2. the early workout! 3. [Member of Parliament] Mr Tan Soo Koon flagging off the walk. 4. [Bethesda Cathedral] members and residents blend as one. 5. Pastor Tay runs the race! ("Speaking in Pictures", *Chronicle*, Jun/Jul 1999; emphases added).

The passage above evokes the Biblical narrative of the siege of Jericho when under God's instruction, Joshua led the Israelite war party in walking around the city wall with the Ark of the Covenant and the defensive wall miraculously collapsed (Joshua 6:1-20). The use is not merely metaphoric. Believing that they are the Chosen People in Chai Chee, Bethesda members were re-invoking the promises of God. Though the promises were made historically in the context of the ancient Jewish theocracy, because the Bible is seen as "Living Word" speaking contemporaneously to Christians, they are seen as eternal and literal. That space is focal could also be due to the active appropriation of modern methodologies into traditional cosmologies. The method of "Spiritual Mapping" has become widely used by many Charismatic Fundamentalist churches including Bethesda. The research component in this method involves talking to residents to find out their religious status, "participant-observing" of locales and locating other religious buildings in the demarcated vicinity. The "data" is then processed onto modern cartographic maps to give a detailed "spiritual" picture of the vicinity. It will then become the basis for evangelical action plans. In sum, we can argue that the centrality of space results from the fusion of organizational imperatives, spatial reflexivity, imputation of indigenous meanings and employment of modern methodologies.

Other than the weekly "Prayer and Praise" session and projects like "Operation Adopt-A-Block", Bethesda organizes regular prayer-walks around the Bedok region. Depending on the will of Pastor Tay, prayer-walks are small group gatherings distributed over an estate where either members would simply spread out to pray and simultaneously walk around a defined area or they would combine the former with more strenuous house-to-house preaching and giving of leaflets. Prayer-walking is given more significance because Bethesda defines itself as a "neighborhood church":

Welcome to your neighborhood church. Looking at Chai Chee neighborhood from here is a *wonder*, even more so because of the way this top floor came to be built. About 2 years ago, God caused miracles to enable this building to be constructed. It wasn't just the building the financing of it, but during that time, God worked in the individual lives of the workers and church members, healing people of hurts, illness and bringing families *together*. Today, this building stands as a witness that God is able to do the impossible *if only we believe*. And we invite you to be a part of the greater things to come. (1995 introductory leaflet given to first-time visitors; emphases original).

Its self-definition as a “neighborhood” church is mainly conditioned by its incidental location in high-density Chai Chee residential district (Figure 1) and was done so very early when the congregation moved into the church building in 1995. In 1999 however, Tay seemed to imply that the significance of the “neighborhood” identity was novel:

[T]hat did not necessarily imply that we should turn our backs on Chai Chee. Sadly, this was what we did in the process of focusing our energies on evangelizing Bedok Reservoir. But God knows our hearts. Hence this gentle nudge to make an U-turn now. ... It was at the Ed Silvoso Seminar in late April 1999, amongst a large gathering of local pastors and church leaders that *I realized the significance of our being placed here in Chai Chee*. (Pastor Tay, “Navigating the U-turn”, *Chronicle*, Jul/Aug 1999; emphases added)

Class Configurations, Religious Competition and the “U-turn”

I read the above quoted article, “Navigating the U-turn”, as a rhetorical move to realign evangelical focus and re-mobilize for action. During my fieldwork stay with the church from July to August 1997, Pastor Tay and Bethesda members were very consciously articulating this “neighborhood” identity and the name “Chai Chee” was constantly being used in our conversations concerning the church. At that time, the church was also busy organizing Chinese-speaking cell-groups and services to cater to the mainly Chinese-speaking Chai Chee residents. Moreover, on the first Saturday in August 1997, I was a participant-observer in an ambitious house-to-house evangelism drive covering the whole of Bedok and Chai Chee that involved nearly 200 members. I followed a Bethesda member assigned to two blocks of public housing flats close to the church. One was a gloomy and congested 10-storey block of 216 one-room flats while the other was a relatively pleasant and upbeat 13-storey block of 130 three-room flats. At the first block, before we started the prayer-walk preaching, the member requested that I joined her in prayer. She prayed for the residents, “claimed” the whole block for Christ, asked the Holy Spirit to give us powers to touch hearts and asked God the Father to prepare the ground before us. She was initially disheartened by the poor response of many adult Chinese residents who turned us away by proclaiming that they have their own religion of worshipping Chinese spirits. She said she felt very troubled and began to pray in tongues as she walked from flat to flat. At certain places where artifacts of traditional Chinese religion such as mirrors, talisman and joss-sticks were present, she would forcefully pray *against* them because they were believed to be the actual manifestations of the satanic enemy’s hold on the territory. She later became very delighted because a sickly middle-aged woman and her troubled alcoholic uncle responded favorably to her preaching. It was discovered a few weeks later that their primary intention was to obtain financial assistance. Other than these two, two young

persons also responded favorably. In the other block, two mothers appeared to be interested in the church but more so for its ancillary social activities. One of them wanted tuition lessons for her child while the other thought that attending church might help her child improve her use of English.

Then, at the end of the same month, church members were mobilized for another prayer-walk, the aim of which according to Pastor Tay was to cover three “pockets” that were left out in the last prayer-walk. These pockets were the two low-density high-end housing estates of Frankel and Opera, and the mix-density estate of Kembangan. Two Sundays before the prayer-walk, Tay encouraged the congregation:

We must meet to bind the territorial spirits. We would pray as we drive down the streets at the two estates and at major intersections, we would get down and pray. At Kembangan, we would lay hands on the blocks and pray as we walk to claim the area from spirits of demonity. We must be bold as a lion to reclaim the land for God!

This time, the prayer-walk was a simple exercise of praying and walking. Following the cell-group that I had attached myself to, we met at an apartment in the cluster of public housing blocks in Kembangan. The gathering began with a mini “prayer and praise” session. After which, filled with spiritual strength, we split up into pairs to prayer-walk around the blocks assigned to us. I followed the cell-group leader on his rounds at one block, at which he promptly began the prayer-walk by going up to the highest floor and then prayed, extending his hands, to “bind the territorial spirits in Jesus’ name” to the bewilderment of residents there. In line with the spatial reflexivity of spiritual warfare, the weapon of prayer is seen as more effective on higher ground. However, the main point to be made here is that it was not completely true that Bethesda had turned its back on Chai Chee but that in the pursuit of rapid church growth, the church had cast its net ambitiously over the Bedok region.

How do we account for the rhetorical move and the “U-turn” focus on Chai Chee at this juncture? What has happened in the four years since moving into Chai Chee that has motivated Pastor Tay to articulate the “neighborhood” identity of Bethesda stronger than he had already done earlier? Sociologically, the configuration of class, language and worldview that differentiates Chai Chee from the rest of Bedok can account for the “U-turn”. As mentioned earlier, Chai Chee estate consists of low-end public housing. Most of the residents who stay in the 8700 or so apartments in the estate can be said to belong to the working class, although a significant number cannot even be classified as such. The working class population in Singapore tends not to be comfortably proficient in English but speak in their own ethnic dialects. Considering only the majority Chinese population, the religious worldview of the working class

is predominantly traditional or folk Chinese. Anthropologists have described this worldview as animistic with a strong spatial emphasis that sees physical reality as filled with a multitude of spirits. In this sense, traditional Chinese religion is particularly similar to Charismatic Christianity. Indeed, Charismatic Fundamentalists do not see Chinese religionists as irrational superstitious people but more as people who have been deceived into the enemy's camp and under Satan's spell. The Chinese religionists are seen as possessing demonic power that are powerful enough to challenge the church and "supernaturally" cause disturbances such as making members fall ill.

What this configuration means for us is that it accounts for the poor rate of response that Bethesda is getting from Chai Chee. For example, in the first prayer-walk I attended, only six residents, of which four were insincere, out of 446 apartments responded to the evangelism. The issue of class-consciousness is important because the church with its grandiose architecture gives off the message that the church is wealthy. The cars, many of which are branded, that overfill the church's parking space on Sundays and spill over into the street also give the same message. Many members are aware of this issue but feel rather helpless about it as can be reflected at a cell-group discussion:

A: Bethesda Cathedral is in a pretty poor neighborhood, should we, especially the ushers, musicians and so on, dress so high-class because we can scare the neighborhood people who are interested away?

B: As long as we treat them well equally regardless of the way they dress, it is okay.

Leader: To the Romans, be like the Romans, Paul said that. But we shouldn't compromise. As long as we keep demonstrating our love, for we cannot tell people to dress down or don't drive big cars.

Language is another big problem for the church because the Chai Chee residents cannot follow the fast-paced English services that use Biblical texts and screen-projected song lyrics intensively. The Chinese services are not doing well because it uses the official Chinese dialect of Mandarin instead of the various regional dialects Chai Chee residents commonly use. In addition, leaflets published in Chinese characters have little effect when many of the residents are not well literate. Traditional Chinese religion is mainly passed on orally and in ritual practice as compared to Christianity's high reliance on words. Furthermore, given its prominence in colonial history and its main language of articulation, Christianity is seen as a Western religion. In any case, the Chinese religious worldview of the working-class residents has served them well in terms of meaningfulness. By referring to spiritual agencies, traditional Chinese religion has provided the working-class residents explanations for problems, prescriptions of religious practices for remedying problems and further explanations for failed

remedies coupled with more prescriptions. In this way, it has provided well for their agency in everyday life. Thus, there is no ideological and practical need to replace a functional religious worldview with an alien one. Pastor Tay explained the failure of Bethesda in Chai Chee with a non-sociological key that has space as a key element:

The sight of the two [Chinese] temples at the junction of Chai Chee Drive and Chai Chee Street, as I drove past everyday, seemed to tell me that Chai Chee was, so to say, *their domain*. ... I had a sense of fear each time the temples decorated the encircling area with their prayer flags, staking their spiritual claim on the land. And I somehow found that as an excuse to avoid outreach in this area. (Pastor Tay, "Navigating the U-turn", *Chronicle*, Jul/Aug 1999)

With the continuing poor response from Chai Chee residents and the urgent need for church growth, Bethesda thus expanded its evangelical action to the whole region of Bedok. About one year after the church moved into its building, in 1996, Bethesda changed their introductory leaflet entitled "Dear Resident" into a fully-colored pictorial one addressed to the residents of "Bedok and Bedok Reservoir" ("Navigating the U-turn", *Chronicle*, Jul-Aug 1999). The residents in the wider Bedok region are mainly lower-middle class Singaporeans comfortable with the use of English and disembedded with some distance from the traditional Chinese religion of their parents. Thus, with candor, Pastor Tay reflected on the sensible move to reach out to wider Bedok:

Anyone familiar with the eastern part of Singapore would know that Bedok Reservoir is a *large area*, extending from Tampine to Eunos. And the closest blocks are just a stone's throw away, right across Bedok North Road from the cathedral. The estate is relatively new, with a sizable number of *English-speaking* residents. It *makes sense* to reach out to the community there. ("Navigating the U-turn", *Chronicle*, Jul/Aug 1999; emphases added,)

I have written elsewhere arguing that there are existential reasons for the specific appeal of Charismatic Fundamentalism to such lower-middle class populations (Goh, 1999). For present purposes, it is enough to note that Bethesda did not face class and language barriers when preaching to the residents of wider Bedok, and that the lower-middle class residents' detachment from Chinese religious worldviews threatens a cultural void which can be meaningfully filled in with accessible Charismatic Fundamentalism.

The rapid growth of Bethesda Cathedral happened in this period of outreach to the wider Bedok region. The congregation grew from the 200 members who followed Pastor Tay into Chai Chee to over 800 in 1997. Many of the new members fit into the class, language and

worldview configuration characteristic of wider Bedok. Attendance at the English services expanded quickly but the Chinese one grew very slowly. If casting a wider net was so successful, why then the 1999 “U-turn”? After nearly four years of prayer-walking and evangelical preaching, the church must have reached a point when the amount of effort put into evangelizing wider Bedok did not justify the diminishing returns. Furthermore, the presence of 25 other Christian churches (excluding Roman Catholic, see Figure 1), many of which are also Charismatic Fundamentalist, within a short 4 km radius of Bethesda, could have “saturated” the Bedok pool of potential Christian converts. During my fieldwork, the younger members who attended Bethesda spoke excitedly about three other churches within the 4 km radius, Lighthouse Evangelism, City Harvest and Faith Community Baptist. It was on their recommendations that I went on to the latter two churches.

In comparison, Bethesda would lose out to City Harvest and Faith Community Baptist in terms of attracting members. Not only are the pastors at the latter two churches younger, they have better showmanship and more charismatic appeal. More importantly, their young ambitious pastors have set their sights on the whole of Singapore and more. For these reasons, the two churches have thus seen more explosive growth than Bethesda. City Harvest seeks to “harvest” the city and calls itself the “Church Without Walls”. It grew from 20 members in 1989 to over 4,000 at the end of 1997. Calling itself an “Apostolic church”, and therefore associating itself with the early missionary Christian church described in the Bible, Faith Community Baptist aims to establish a network of strong local churches, a parallel network of social welfare services and at the same time, to go global by mobilizing Singaporeans for church-planting across Asia and Africa. It grew from a handful of members in 1986 to over 9,500 in 1999. This is not to say that the two churches are not as spatially reflexive as Bethesda. Cell-group is organized regionally. Faith Community Baptist even has campus cell-groups focused on the evangelical transformation of university “neighborhoods”. Unlike Bethesda, what these ambitious churches have done is to articulate a superset national identity that includes subset “neighborhood” identities. Younger converts would thus find it more exciting to be part of a “national” Charismatic movement spearheaded by their church while at the same time, able to partake in their cell-group’s “neighborhood” identity.

With “saturated” Bedok and stronger competition from proximate Charismatic Fundamentalist churches such as the two mentioned, Tay inevitably began to relativize Bethesda with the other churches in terms of space:

At the recent Ed Silvoso seminar (April 1999), pastors and church leaders flooded the front area of the conference, each one holding on to or sharing a placard that held the name of a constituency in Singapore. In Pastor [Tay’s]

hands was a sign that read “CHAI CHEE”. It was clear to him, and other witnesses at the seminar, that BC was the only church in Chai Chee. (“Church Without Walls: A Vision for Chai Chee”, *Chronicle*, Jun/Jul 1999)

Looking at the 4 km radius map (Figure 1), we can see that 13 of the 25 churches are concentrated in the southwestern area. There are 4 churches further east of Bethesda, 1 further northeast and 3 further south. The 4 churches within the immediate Bedok region are evenly spread out, surrounding Bethesda in a rectangular fashion. Assuming that these churches exert some kind of spatial influence, the reason for Bethesda to focus on Chai Chee becomes obvious. Moreover, Tay must have been aware of the location of these churches from the start in 1995 because of the practice of “spiritual mapping”. A number of street maps with noted locations hang prominently in the church’s office when I visited it in 1997.

The renewed vigor for the “neighborhood” identity has resulted in the master plan of a “Cluster System” (Figure 2) to divide and conquer Chai Chee.

To help us reach out to Chai Chee, the BC oikos have been organized into something called a Cluster System. ... Each “cluster” to date has been allocated one or two church staff members (also called “facilitators”) and five or six oikos groups. Through this network, we can pray and minister effectively to each particular “cluster”. And because every oikos group *belongs* to a cluster, there is greater focus of our resources and fostering of identity too. ... Our aim is to eventually establish a cell group in every block, and, in God’s strength and by His authority, win the entire constituency for Christ! (Emphases original, “Networking Through a Cluster System”, *Chronicle*, Jul/Aug 1999)

With the added hierarchical command and control and the placement of commissioned staff officers heading each unit of cell-groups, Bethesda’s evangelical program has achieved greater coherence with its spiritual warfare ideology. While the organizational thrust is impressive, Bethesda may not achieve the success Pastor Tay desires because of the inherent sociological problems that the church face with Chai Chee residents. Instead, the highly focused campaign may alienate members who do not come from the surrounding area. Already in 1997, the member whom I joined for the first prayer-walk, who stayed outside of Bedok in the Western region of Singapore, left Bethesda for City Harvest, actually only 3.5 km closer to her home, because she felt that Bethesda was too far away from home. She had at first told me that God called her to be in Bethesda through a vision. Another young adult member who lived in Bedok Town Center also expressed unhappiness at Tay’s “narrow focus” on the “neighborhood” and was open to moving to a more “dynamic” church.

The Problem of Meaningful Space

Why do Charismatic Fundamentalists in Singapore attach such strong meanings to their surrounding physical spaces? Generally, the church members I met were consciously imputing meanings into the concrete places of their everyday life and the imagined places of everyday discourse. Specifically in the case of Bethesda Cathedral, Pastor Tay, by the force of his charismatic authority, has built up a coherent discourse on the church's "neighborhood" identity. Why did hundreds of church members buy into his vision and participate actively in prayer-walking the "neighborhood"? I suggest that the answers to these questions lie in the rapid physical changes to Singapore engineered by the post-colonial developmental state. Independent Singapore was a political reality thrown upon the English-educated elite of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in the 1965 separation from Malaysia. This and the brute economic fact of the British military withdrawal shortly after compounded the English-educated elite's lack of legitimacy as government. The leftist Chinese-educated elite possessed greater ideological legitimacy because of its organic and cultural links with the majority Chinese population. By his own admission, Lee Kuan Yew told how the English-educated elite he led "rode" the popular leftist "tiger" to power (Bloodworth, 1986). Once in power with the left suppressed, the PAP transformed the administrative state into a *survivalist technocratic* state focused on economic development. Without other sources of legitimacy, rapid economic growth was the only means to justify their rule. The strategy adopted was to attract foreign capital. The huge success of this has led to Singapore's dependence on transnational corporations and a high-level of integration into the global economy. At the same time, state control of civil society was tightened drastically and justified on the ideology of "survival".

More importantly for our purposes, the ideology of "survival" was combined with the fact of Singapore's relative smallness in size to produce a discourse on "land scarcity". This then justified the intensified internal territorialization and technocratization of land-space for the purpose of rapid industrialization and urbanization (see Perry *et al*, 1997:153-190). The 1966 Land Acquisition Act concentrated overwhelming power in the state. With the Act, land can be acquired for "any public purpose", "any work ... which, in the opinion of the Minister of National Development is of public benefit or of public utility or in the public interest", or "any residential, commercial or industrial purpose". As a result, the PAP government increased its inheritance of 44% of Singapore's land-space to 80% in 1992, while minimizing the cost of this heavy acquisition by setting the value for compensation almost completely at will (Perry *et al*,

1997:166). The percentage of built-up area increased from 18 percent in 1963 to 48.2 percent in 1985 and stands at 49.8 percent of total land area in 1998.² An estimated 20-30 percent of remaining non-built-up area consists of military training grounds and other “sensitive” areas that are restricted in access. The Housing and Development Board (HDB), a government statutory board established in 1960 to construct and manage public housing, had housed 87 percent of the population in its flats by 1988. Only about 9% of the population or 150,000 persons lived in public housing in 1960. In 1998, over 2.7 million people live in public housing estates taking up an estimated 9 percent of total land area or about 60 km² (45,000 persons per km² residential space). The modern technocratic methodology of the state has transformed the undulating, tropical and *kampung* (village in Malay) landscape that covered much of the island into a flat, orderly and highly rationalized urbanscape.

Other than rapid change and high-density urban living, Singaporeans have little control over the physical spaces that they live and move about in. For the majority who cannot afford private housing, public flats are mostly built *for* them and presented as some kind of welfare provision by the state (see Chua, 1997). The flats are sold and bought on a market closely monitored by the state, which controls the supply of new flats. Beyond the petty renovation decisions for the flat interior, any kind of public input or influence regarding common living space is severely limited. In recent years, the PAP government started a trend of housing upgrading that became a major issue in the last general elections. A national obsession with “upgrading” can be observed with people “upgrading” to bigger residential units or through interior renovations, commercial buildings “upgrading to serve [customers] better” and *churches building ever grander architecture*. Furthermore, there is a tendency for the state to bulldoze places deemed not worth up to its potential economic value in order to develop or redevelop them for “value-added” projects. Recent attempts to transform Chinatown and the National Library, both deeply etched in Singaporeans’ shared memories, have sparked highly vocal public reaction while a dedicated group of conservationists, promptly labeled “emotional” and “irrational”, have campaigned vigorously with unprecedented public support against the destruction of remaining wetlands and rainforests.

However, the problem of space in Singapore goes deeper than the issue of *control* to the issue of *meaningfulness*. On this level, it may be possible to generalize the experience of Singapore to the experience of modernity. Two theses, one weak and the other strong, can be derived from Habermas’ (1984, 1989) critical social theory to form the explanatory link between historical modernity as experienced by Singapore and space-conscious Charismatic

² Statistical sources include Singapore Department of Statistics, Housing and Development Board, Perry *et al* (1997) and Savage (1992).

Fundamentalism. Employing Habermas' theoretical framework of system and lifeworld, and his thesis of internal colonization, we can see that the "power" and "money" media of the modern nation-state and capitalist economy (system) intervene in our lifeworld of social relationships and sociocultural agency to erode the practice of communicative ethical discourse, which provides the communitarian basis for the lifeworld. In addition, it is my argument that the same process of internal colonization removes and abstracts social relationships and agency from physical spaces. This effectively disempowers communities by detaching them from their specific identification with real physical spaces and reconstituting identity by individuating discrete selves united on the level of imagined national community to provide rationalized units for capitalism and legitimacy for the nation-state, a process which Benjamin (1988) argues leads to the mystification of the nation-state.

The weak thesis is that this results in cultural impoverishment and epistemological uncertainty. Knowledge of the world, and thus also knowledge of how to act in the world, because they are constituted and maintained in community life, becomes fragmented, reflexive and specialized in the dissolution of spatially-detached communities. Giddens (1991) describes this as "deskilling", which is bounded up with the problem of "trust" in the "late modern age". Additionally, knowledge becomes a problematic that provokes the search for certainty and meaningfulness. Consequently, physical spaces are *problematic* because they connote uncertainty and threaten to become meaningless. The strong thesis is that the species-being, as the term was used by Marx (1844) in its philosophical-anthropological sense, of humans is in part constituted in *physical-social relationships*. In other words, human beings have an intrinsic need to be intimately connected to their physical surroundings. This intrinsic need is fulfilled sensually but also symbolically. The locus of symbolic fulfillment is in subjects of classic anthropological research such as ritual practices, worldviews and cosmologies, which achieve their efficacy in community life. In terms of phenomenology, we can argue that the whole process of detaching communities from the land provokes an existentialist response from individuals who are now deprived of tangible and concrete physical-social relationships to anchor their symbolic fulfillment.

Charismatic Fundamentalism promises to provide both tangible physical-social relationships and epistemologically certain cultural resources to correct the problem of meaningful space. On top of linguistic change, increased exposure to global mass media and higher education, the greater physical mobility of lower-middle class Singaporeans has contributed to the erosion of their embeddedness in traditional culture and *Gemeinschaft* community. This, with the hurly-burly of modern urban living, has led to the idealization of the *kampung*, the Malay word turned generic colloquial term for villages that dominated the past

landscape of Singapore, in nostalgic public discourses recapitulating a community lost (see Chua, 1995a). It is interesting to note that Bethesda Cathedral has made use of this discourse to gird its “neighborhood” identity in an article entitled “Revisiting Kampong Chai Chee” (*Chronicle*, Jun/Jul 1999). Percy argues that Charismatic religious movements do not have a secure future because they are built on the “shifting, playful sand” of experientialism, unless they realign themselves with Fundamentalism (Percy, 1997:224). This paper has shown that, at least for the movement in Singapore, Charismatics have already done so, and thus the argument for the category of Charismatic Fundamentalism. But these Charismatic Fundamentalists are doing more than balancing their experientialism with Fundamentalist sobriety. They are also articulating an alternative communitarian identity, to the state’s ideological articulation (see Chua, 1995b) that is both imagined globally with all “true” Christians and *anchored in local physical space*. Therein lies the movement’s strong ability to attract the discontents of modernity. But the movement’s success is limited by inherent weaknesses. This paper has suggested that these lie in the fragmented character of the movement, in large part due to highly independent prophet-pastors competing for greater church growth amidst the social-spatial configurations that they find themselves in.

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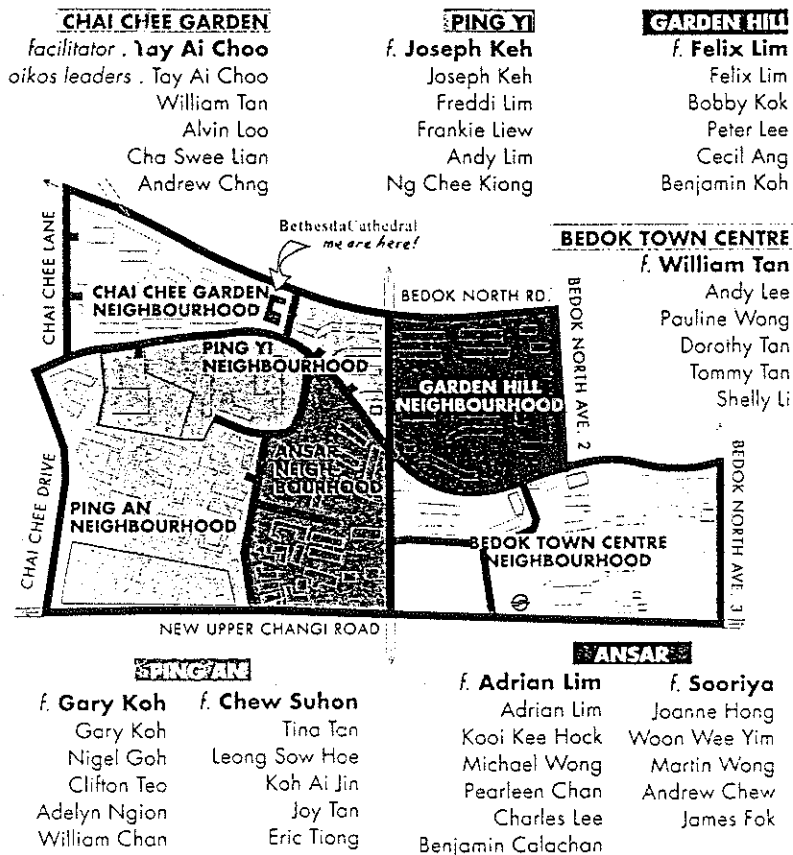


Plate 1. Side Profile of Bethesda Cathedral (1997)

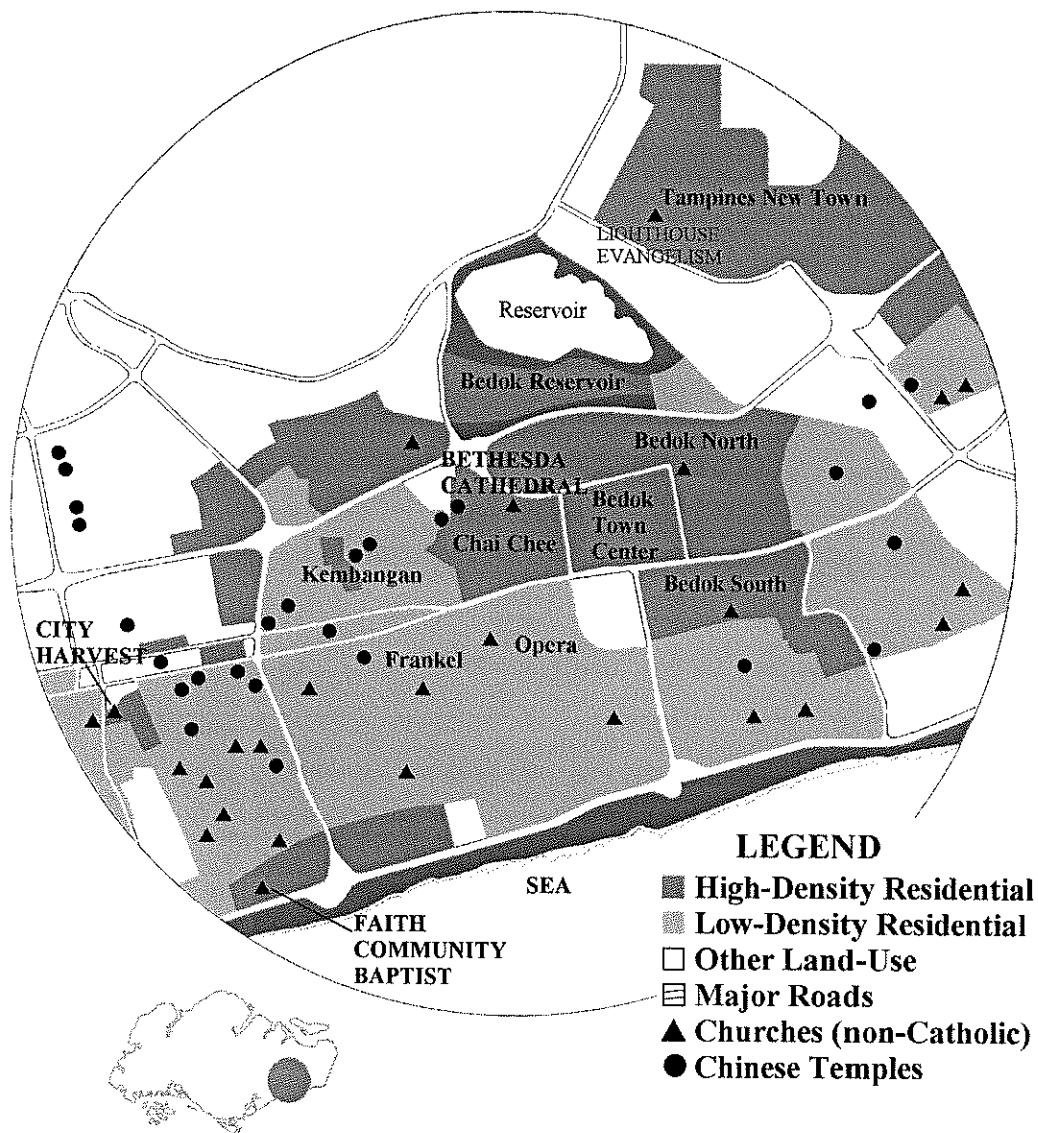


Figure 1. 4km Radius Map Centered on Bethesda Cathedral

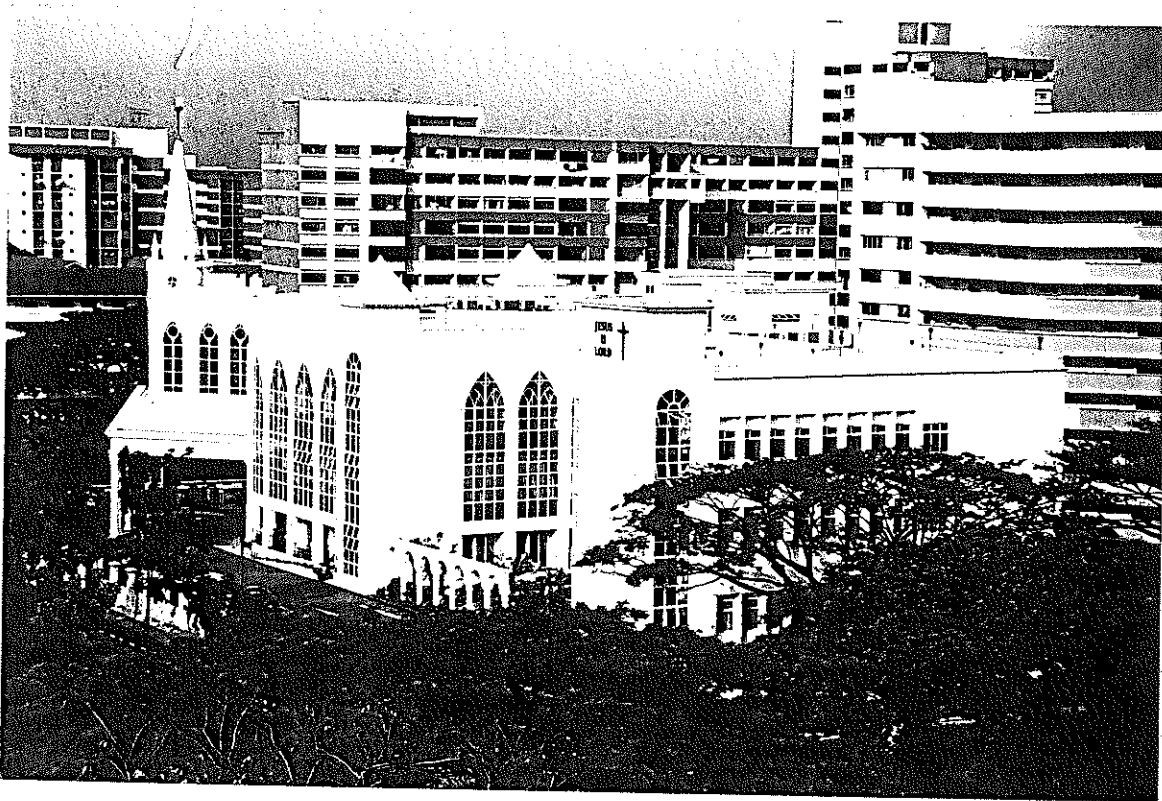


Figure 2. “Cluster System” (*Chronicle*, Jul/Aug 1999)

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