Churches and worship

Given its long history of almost 500 years, Christianity in Malaysia reflects a wide range of church traditions, church architecture, church administration and worship styles. Churches range from large cathedrals with imposing bell towers to simple wooden buildings in rural areas. A modern development in expanding residential areas in cities is the setting up of churches in existing shop lots. The fundamental belief of service to others is shown through relief organizations and community service.

Church architecture

In Malaysia, churches have developed from buildings with traditional Western-style architecture, whether Dutch or English, and classical 'high church' liturgical worship to drop-front churches with an almost ritual-free worship format and vernacular churches with a charismatic, ecstatic worship style. Architecture and worship styles are undoubtedly influenced by the traditions of the respective church denominations within Malaysia but are also the result of indigenous developments. Given the diversity of ethnicity and culture, it is not surprising that there are many vernacular churches in Malaysia, each using its own language, such as Tamil, Malayalam, Iban, Kadazan, Sengoi, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and Foo Chow. The use of these languages makes Christian worship and education relevant and accessible to the people.

Christian churches are found not only in major cities but also in the smallest villages or townships and serve as centres for Christian worship, spiritual nourishment, education, youth development and social concerns throughout Malaysia.

Bell towers
Bells were traditionally rung to mark important times during the Christian day and for special events such as marriages and at Christmas.

Altar
Here, including Communion are conducted at the altar.

St John's Cathedral, Kuala Lumpur
Traditionally churches are built in the shape of a cross, usually with the altar at the eastern end (the direction of the Resurrection).

Seating for the elect

Priests and ministers
In both the Catholic and Protestant traditions the pastor or minister is the leader of the community of faithful. Apart from leading the congregation in prayers and preaching the word of God, priests and ministers celebrate holy communion, baptise infants, conduct marriages, funeral services and regularly reach out to members of their congregation and others in need. They also guide lay people in community service by raising money for the less advantaged or for the Church. Catholic priests also listen to confessions made by individuals.

Sri Hand Lim Chang Eng at St. Mark's Cathedral, Kuala Lumpur, 2004.

Sri Brother Cassian Pagoo at St. John's Cathedral, Kuala Lumpur.

Individual devotion

Christians believe that the Holy Spirit dwells in each believer. Thus, Christian spirituality can be both personal as well as congregational. Personal worship begins with the individual spending time alone with God in their personal devotion in the privacy of their home or office or whenever a moment of quiet can be found, either in the early morning or in the evening or both.

The devotee may read a short piece of scripture from the Holy Bible and say a prayer. An individual may even sing or hum a hymn or two. Some families have their own family devotions involving the children. These usually include songs, a reading or story from the Bible and saying a simple prayer. This keeps the family focused on God and reminds family members of their duties to God. Family devotions are sometimes fondly referred to as the family altar regardless of whether there is an altar or not. Traditionally Christians pray before going to bed.

Church services

Larger families of Christians gather in church for congregational worship. Normally, there are at least two gatherings each week, the smaller group meetings (which are often held in the home of a church member on a rotational basis) for prayers and Bible study, and the main Sunday worship. In addition, many Roman Catholics attend mass in church every morning or every evening at 6pm. Regardless of church tradition, the Sunday worship in Malaysia includes silent prayer and meditation, singing of hymns, readings from the Bible, a sermon or homily, prayer of confession and intercessory prayers, thanksgiving, the affirmation of faith, holy communion (or mass in the Catholic Church) and the benediction. The diversity of worship styles is apparent in the sequence in which these different components of the service are performed, the times and musical accompaniment of the hymns, the way in which prayers are said—whether sitting, standing or kneeling—the length and emphases of the sermon, the way in which communion is served and understood, and the attire of those who lead the service.

Among the various denominations, worship service styles vary between quiet and loud, passive and active, but the emphasis is on worshipping God and receiving instruction, inspiration, encouragement and wisdom.

In the service of God

Christians believe that their worship of God is not only to be performed by attending church services and praying but also in how they conduct their lives. The purest form of worship is in doing God's will. Thus, church buildings are also centres for the education and development of children and provide facilities for those in need, such as soup kitchens.

Churches in Malaysia
Churches in Malaysia range from simple wooden buildings to grand cathedrals. Most Christian communities have their own churches. In rural communities the churches are simple, such as those found in small villages. These can be little more elaborate than huts. The cities have large churches built in traditional English styles.

St Mary's Cathedral Kuala Lumpur, built in 1887, exhibits traditional English architectural style.

The oldest functioning Catholic church in Malaysia, St Peter's Church, Melaka, was completed in 1710.

St Michael's and All Angels Church, Olive Hill, Sabah. The magnificent church, made from locally-mined granite, was completed in 1912 after 23 years of construction.

Kuala Lumpur's Holy Rosary Church was completed in 1894. The church is Gothic style and was established by Father Francis Eddie Farrier, a French missionary, in order to the city's then mainly Chinese community.

The St Pachomius Chapel along the Coo River, near Kiku, Sarawak, ministers to a remote rural community.

Pastoral counselling is available in most churches. Malaysian churches are centres for social work and foster healthy socialization among young and old. Churches emphasize serving all sectors of society, especially those considered to be disadvantaged, such as the disabled, the sick, the poor, and the old and frail. Churches help by constantly raising money to either set up homes for these people or by contributing to existing homes and organizations. One such example which was set up by the Christian community is the Malaysian Christian Association for Relief (CARE). CARE was born out of the conviction that something must be done for the poor and needy in the country. It was established in 1978, and today offers diversified services such as residential care and community services. Most churches have committees, comprising lay members of the church, to organize events and services which allow them to contribute to their local communities.