



In Malaysian City, Christians Act Together

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Sibu is the economic capital of Sarawak, Malaysia. It has a port for ocean-going ships and serves the towns and rural people along the Rejang River. Estimated population of greater Sibü is 75,000. Ecumenical relations have been particularly difficult because of Sibü's diverse population. Major racial groups are Chinese, Iban, Malay and Indian. There are also smaller tribal groups present. All use their own languages. For example, the Methodist Church of Malaysia includes two annual conferences in Sarawak, Iban and Chinese, and congregations use those two languages plus English. Yet the Fellowship refuses to allow culture and language to prevent the unity of the Christian witness.

The Sibü Ecumenical Christian Fellowship was born out of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1973. The Week began with an ecumenical worship service in Chinese at Sacred Heart Catholic Church and concluded with a trilingual combined service at the Methodist Secondary School Auditorium. Out of this intensive week of prayer and reflection emerged a clergy fellowship embracing Anglicans, Catholics and Methodists. In

time developed a very strong lay involvement. This year the fellowship includes not only pastors and two lay persons from each local member church but also representatives of the YMCA, the Methodist Theological School and other institutions. The chairman, Sammy Chiu, is a layman.

As the fellowship has grown in ecumenical experiences, it has launched ecumenical projects: youth rallies, talks on community development, exchanges of pulpits, choir concerts and Christmas carolling. Two years in a row more than 2,000 people proceeded through downtown Sibü at Christmas demonstrating the unity of the churches. The fellowship raised more than \$1,000 for relief in Bangladesh. It has sponsored talks on the different denominations. A counselling workshop sparked interest in providing family counseling, vocational guidance, suicide prevention and poverty alleviation services. The Fellowship is investigating a joint leadership training program for mature church leaders. It is also considering dialogue with Muslims, who are numerous in the area.

Recently the social concerns com-

mittee of the Fellowship asked itself who the outcasts in Sibü were. Prostitutes was one easy answer. More than 500 girls admit to being prostitutes in Sibü and the police estimate them to be only 25 percent of the total.

Why so much prostitution? The most important causes are poverty and loose divorce laws. Divorce leaves women to support themselves as well as their children. Many of these women have turned to prostitution.

Older "hard core" prostitutes often lure rural girls as young as 12 or 13 into Sibü and help them get started as prostitutes. Most of these rural girls are from poor families. Frequently their parents urge them to go into prostitution to help the family out. These girls are used primarily by soldiers, sailors, crew members from the various ships and local businessmen.

Other young women do not have to resort to prostitution, but they find it a nice supplement to their incomes. Many of them work as singers in local nightclubs. They have been called "the flying seventies" because of what they charge.

After studying the problem of

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prostitution in Sibu, committee members asked what could be done. About 90 percent of the known prostitutes come from the Iban tribe (the farmers and the poor in Sarawak). It was felt young people need to take marriage more seriously. A small fine for divorce is insufficient; some provision should be made for the support of a divorcee who has children to care for. Acting on the committee's recommendation, the churches began formulating a common document expressing a Christian approach to marriage and divorce.

The second step was to send

copies of the prostitution study report to lawyers, political leaders, and the newspapers, asking them to consider changes in laws that penalize only the prostitutes and ignore those who use them.

Finally, the committee recommended that those who can best be helped are the young novices. The committee suggested that churches keep track of the girls going to Sibu and that the Fellowship initiate a program to help them. The Ecumenical Fellowship hopes to establish a Social Center in Sibu to offer these young Iban newcomers to town orientation, counselling and help in

finding suitable employment.

These suggestions would not eliminate prostitution in Sibu, the committee realizes, but they do represent some practical, inexpensive steps churches could take to help those being pulled into prostitution through economic hardship. In this way the Ecumenical Fellowship hopes to carry Jesus' concern to one long-neglected group of persons in Sibu. ■

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