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## **Bishop John Leonard Wilson (Singapore 1941–1949): Koinonia in Suffering**

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### **Abstract**

Despite a century of ecumenical efforts among Protestant churches, real koinonia remains as elusive as ever. This article introduces John Leonard Wilson, one of the early contributors to the formation of Trinity College (known today as Trinity Theological College) in Singapore, to emphasize his ecumenical spirit that continues to be a key characteristic of the college. Leonard Wilson's war-time experiences in Singapore and its aftermath, as well as those of TTC's cofounders, show koinonia working at a much deeper level beyond the loose associations, large gatherings, and joint declarations commonly seen in modern ecumenical movements. Wilson's imprisonment and torture experiences during the war, his wider contributions before and after the war, and his devotion to church unity continue directly and indirectly to influence the Singapore church's larger story. Wilson's almost fanatical commitment to and practice of koinonia in the midst of harsh circumstances has demonstrated that real koinonia is possible, but it comes with a heavy price.

### **Keywords**

John Leonard Wilson, koinonia, ecumenical, forgiveness, World War II, Singapore

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## BISHOP JOHN LEONARD WILSON (SINGAPORE 1941–1949): KOINONIA IN SUFFERING<sup>1</sup>

Despite a century of ecumenical efforts among Protestant churches, real koinonia remains as elusive as ever. There are the WCC, the World Evangelical Fellowship, World Pentecostal Fellowship, etc. But these are loose associations with some levels of cooperation. In theological education, there are theological consortiums. But seldom do we see ecumenism involving four mainline denominations working together to run a single theological college. Such cooperation could only be explained by a shared history, a koinonia borne out of deep suffering. The stories of the “founding fathers” of Trinity College (known today as Trinity Theological College) are seamlessly woven together to form a single story, a living tradition in the MacIntyrean sense: a community bound together by deeply shared core beliefs and practices. This article introduces one of the early contributors to the formation of this college in Singapore, and to emphasize his ecumenical spirit that continues to be a key characteristic of Trinity Theological College (TTC).

This article focuses on the story of John Leonard Wilson’s war time experiences in Singapore and its aftermath as way of introducing one of TTC’s earliest contributors to seminarians who continue to benefit from Wilson’s ecumenical vision.<sup>2</sup> Wilson’s story,<sup>3</sup> his life and legacy during his

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1 I am deeply grateful to Chiang Ming Shun, Audrey Quay, and Sim Ngah Imm (who was with me when we were first introduced to the bishop in Birmingham Cathedral) for their comments on an earlier draft.

2 The author of this article conducted an informal survey with 63 current students and alumni of TTC from Singapore and the surrounding region to enquire about their knowledge of TTC’s founding members and events. Of the 63 respondents, eight were able to name at least one early founding member, while 55 of them did not know any names. When asked about whether they knew how and where the idea for a union college was first formed, 47 of them were able to mention briefly that it began out of Changi Prison during World War II, while the other 15 did not know. It appears that past and present students are quite familiar with TTC’s prison and war origins but unfamiliar with the people who together envisioned and established the college. This essay hopes to introduce one such figure to seminarians who continue to benefit from Bishop Wilson’s ecumenical mindset.

3 For more on Leonard Wilson’s life, see Roy McKay, *John Leonard Wilson: Confessor for the Faith* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973); John Hayter, *Priest in Prison: Four Years of Life in Japanese-occupied Singapore, 1941–1945* (Singapore: Graham Brash,

office as bishop in Singapore, together with those of the co-founders, shows koinonia working at a much deeper level beyond the loose associations, large gatherings and joint declarations commonly seen in modern ecumenical movements. Perhaps if there is any lesson to be learned, it is that true koinonia is costly grace. Due to lack of space, I have merely hinted at the broader impact of the bishop's life, his theological contribution and social concerns. It would require another paper to flesh these out.

### INTRODUCTION TO JOHN LEONARD WILSON

John Leonard Wilson, more commonly known by his middle name, was born in County Durham, England, on November 23, 1897. After receiving theological training at Queen's College and Wycliffe Hall, both in Oxford University, he was ordained in 1924 to serve as an Anglican priest. In 1938, Leonard Wilson was appointed the archdeacon of Hong Kong, and on July 22, 1941, he was consecrated bishop of the Anglican Church in Singapore. His time as bishop, from 1941 to 1949, included the difficult period of the Japanese occupation in Malaya. After living through World War II in Singapore, Wilson was called back to his homeland by the Church of England, where he was Dean of Manchester from 1949 to 1953, and subsequently, Bishop of Birmingham from 1953 until his retirement in 1969. He passed away on July 22, 1970, after a stroke.

The main parts of this essay survey Wilson's experiences of extreme torture by the Japanese, his acts of service for the Malayan church, and his fervent ecumenical vision. For reasons of space, instead of a chronological recounting of events that took place between 1941 and 1949, this essay discusses topically significant aspects of the bishop's time in Singapore, to demonstrate that Wilson's contributions as bishop toward the building of the church in Singapore extend far beyond the Anglican diocese and the Christians of his era. The bishop's life of service and sacrifice, enveloped in love and forgiveness, coupled with his zealous commitment to church unity, continue to impact current and future generations of Christians in this region. For one (and unknown to many), Leonard Wilson was involved in the early discussions about the formation of an interdenominational

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1991); Joseph Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism in Singapore, 1819–2019: The Bicentenary of Divine Providence* (Singapore: Armour Publishing, 2020), 183–200.

college in Singapore, known today as Trinity Theological College, a subject we return to below.

This essay benefits from additional primary source material, drawing from interviews with one of the few people alive who had known Leonard Wilson from the late 1950s and early 1960s. Stephen Record, who currently serves as Visitor's Chaplain at the Birmingham Cathedral, recalls invaluable stories, impressions, and memories of the bishop from when Stephen was a little boy.<sup>4</sup> In one of our interviews, the seventy-three-year-old Visitor's Chaplain ended with the comment that Leonard Wilson's story "needs to be told to a new generation." Stephen's convictions provide further compelling motivation for compiling this fresh narrative of Bishop Wilson.<sup>5</sup>

### **WAR TIME EXPERIENCES: THE EPITOME OF FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION**

Shortly after his consecration in Hong Kong on July 22, Leonard Wilson and his family settled in Singapore at the beginning of August 1941. Four months later, and before he could familiarize himself with the local parishes, the Japanese invasion took place. John Hayter, a junior priest who worked closely with the bishop, records in his own autobiography:

Within no more than two months of his arrival, the Bishop began a very successful tour which, in eight weeks, took him to every part of his diocese. It has been said of him at this time "Wherever he went those of all races who met their new Bishop were struck at once by his friendliness, his sympathy and his understanding. They were delighted by his humour and his gaiety. They found in him a preacher and a teacher who really helped them to understand." Bishop Baker of Hong Kong said of Leonard Wilson's time there "He brought a breath of fresh air into the life of the Church and the community." That was certainly the experience of their new Bishop of the people of all races in Singapore and Malaya, Thailand,

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4 I was first introduced to Bishop Leonard Wilson by Stephen Record when I was visiting the Birmingham Cathedral. The interviews cited in this article were conducted over several e-mail exchanges as well as an extended Zoom video conferencing call in the last quarter of 2021.

5 Stephen Record, e-mail message to author, October 5, 2021.

Java, and Sumatra.<sup>6</sup> After the tour, Leonard flew home to Singapore from Saigon on the day before the outbreak of the war on December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1941.<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning of the Japanese Occupation, all civilians not employed in essential services were interned in Changi Prison. All European clergy and diocesan workers were interned except for Wilson and two of his clergy, Reginald Keith Sorby Adams and John Hayter, because they were deemed to be providing helpful services.<sup>8</sup> The three of them remained mostly free—though under close scrutiny from the Japanese—for the next thirteen months. Their relative freedom was largely owing to the generous help and support of a Japanese officer, Lieutenant Andrew Tokuji Ogawa. Already an Anglican from his university days in America, Ogawa had been attending the cathedral regularly.<sup>9</sup> As Director of Religion and Education, he obtained permission for the bishop to visit prisoner-of-war camps without an escort, by providing him with a letter in Japanese explaining Wilson's role and his purposes of taking confirmation services.<sup>10</sup> However, things became difficult for Wilson after Ogawa was transferred to Sumatra in September of 1942, and the bishop knew that their days of freedom would soon come to an end.

True to his premonition, on March 27, 1943, Bishop Wilson, together with Sorby Adams and Hayter, were given forty-eight hours' notice that they would be joining the rest of their friends in Changi Prison.<sup>11</sup> Their first six months in Changi were more bearable and interesting than they had imagined; despite the squalor and cramped conditions, they were quite well fed, given access to BBC news, and allowed to study and enjoy

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6 These places were (and still are) part of the Singapore diocese, which explains why the bishop travelled there.

7 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 22.

8 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 19. Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184 records that these clergymen cleared the nave of its pews so that St. Andrew's Cathedral could be used as a hospital for the war wounded, and they convinced the Japanese authorities that the work of the Church constituted an essential service.

9 For more on Andrew Tokuji Ogawa's life and his contributions to the church and Bishop Wilson's ministry, see Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 189–195; Hayter, *Priest in Prison* 259–260.

10 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 19.

11 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 27.

some entertainment.<sup>12</sup> However, everything was to change overnight after the “Double Tenth Incident,” when the *Kempeitai* (the Japanese Military Police) descended on Changi, seizing control. Seven Japanese ships had been sunk and the Kempeitai suspected that the internees in Changi Prison were responsible for acts of espionage and secret intelligence that led to the attack on their ships. Arriving in Changi on October 10, 1943 (hence the name “Double Tenth”), the Kempeitai started to arrest and torture a total of fifty-seven civilian internees in the coming days.

Bishop Leonard Wilson was added to their suspect list. On October 17, one day before a confirmation service in Changi, Wilson was taken away to the Kempeitai headquarters at the YMCA. He was questioned and tortured for three days, from the evening of October 17 to October 19. Leonard Wilson was charged for using his position as bishop to organize a large espionage movement throughout Malaya, and it was alleged that as the head of this organization, he was aware of shortwave wireless messages arriving in Changi Prison.<sup>13</sup> Only after three days of extreme torture were the Japanese convinced that their charges were unfounded.<sup>14</sup> By the time the bishop was returned to his cell on the third evening, he was already in a semiconscious state and remained in this state for the next three weeks.<sup>15</sup>

Wilson survived the torture, but he was not released from the YMCA until seven and a half months later, much to the relief and joy of his fellow clergymen and internees. John Hayter’s diary entries recorded many of the bishop’s experiences from the conversations they had after the latter’s release. Besides writing that Wilson had worked very hard to protect Sorby Adams and himself from being arrested too, Hayter chronicles for us a detailed account of the bishop’s three most agonizing days, based on their long talks:

On the following morning he was again taken to the torture room, where he was made to kneel down. A three-angled bar was placed behind his knees. He was then forced to sit back on his haunches. His hands were tied

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12 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 137–141 records their first six months in prison, in which he details the conditions of the prison cells, their daily routine, food and meals, and other encounters in Changi.

13 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 160.

14 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 160.

15 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 13.

behind his back and pulled up to a position between his shoulder blades. His head was forced down and he remained in this position for seven and a half hours. Any attempt to ease the strain of the cramp in his legs was frustrated by the guards, who brought the flat of their boots down hard onto his thighs. At intervals the bar behind his knees was twisted or the guards would jump on one or both of the projecting ends. Beatings and kicks were frequent. Throughout the whole of this time he was being questioned and told to confess that he was a spy. He said afterwards that this was the one time that he lost his nerve and pleaded for death.

Again the next morning the bishop was brought up from the cells, this time to be tied face upwards to a table, with his head hanging over its end. For several hours he remained in that position while relays of soldiers beat him systematically from the ankles to the thighs with three-fold knotted ropes. He fainted, was revived with warm milk and the beating continued. He estimated that he must have received over three hundred lashes.

It is quite impossible to set this down as he described it when he returned to the Camp and even more to attempt to describe his thoughts during this time. But the picture would not be complete without it. The beating, he said, was far easier to bear than the excruciating pain of the previous day. It was not long before he lost all sense of feeling. The blows had lost their power to hurt, so dead were the nerves in his body. He felt, too, almost a feeling of exaltation on this third day.

Those of us who heard him cannot doubt the reality of his experience of the near presence of God. He felt himself uplifted and supported at a time when his body had ceased to have any meaning for him at all. Finally he was taken down to the cells and thrown onto the floor. There was no skin left on the front of his legs from his thighs downwards. His flesh was raw and livid from the blows he had received, torn to shreds. No medical attention was provided for him while he was in that state and he said that if it had not been for the help of Walter Stevenson in the same cell, who subsequently died as a result of the treatment he received, he would not have survived.<sup>16</sup>

When Bishop Wilson was released on Thursday, May 26, 1944, “he had lost a lot of weight—about four stone—but he was fit enough to walk the half mile to the hospital.”<sup>17</sup> Two weeks later, on June 6, 1944, Hayter journals

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16 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 161–162.

17 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 177.

again about his superior: “The Bishop is wonderfully well, very much thinner, bearded, with ghastly scars on his feet—perpetual witnesses to agonizing days of horror—but nothing of himself has been lost or changed, unless it be some of his impatience. Certainly none of his love or wisdom. We have talked for hours.”<sup>18</sup>

Even more remarkable than his survival was Wilson’s response to the traumatic experience. He never dwelled on the torture and horror he received from the Double Tenth Incident. Each time he referred to those experiences in his speeches and interviews, it was to confess his Christian faith and to declare God’s faithfulness to him. In a postwar broadcast sermon that he gave in 1946, Bishop Wilson said,

In the middle of that torture they asked me if I still believed in God. When by God’s help I said, “I do,” they asked me why God did not save me, and by the help of His Holy Spirit I said, “God does save me. He does not save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but He saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it,” and when they asked me why I did not curse them I told them that it was because I was a follower of Jesus Christ, who taught us that we were all brethren.<sup>19</sup>

In the same sermon, Wilson said, “I had known Him in a deeper way than I could have imagined, but God is to be found in the Resurrection, as well as in the Cross, and it is the Resurrection that has the final word.”<sup>20</sup> He also clarified, “It is not my purpose to relate the tortures they inflicted upon us, but rather to tell you of some of the spiritual experiences of that ordeal. I knew this was to be a challenge to my courage, my faith and my love.”<sup>21</sup>

The bishop’s magnanimity was also witnessed by a local war hero, Elizabeth Choy, who had fearlessly served those in need during the Japanese Occupation.<sup>22</sup> In an interview given in the 1960s, Choy said the following about Bishop Wilson:

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18 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 180.

19 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 186.

20 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 44–45.

21 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 103.

22 For more on Elizabeth Choy Su Moi, see Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 195–200. Elizabeth and her husband, Choy Koon Heng, helped smuggle money, medicine, messages, and radio parts to British civilians in prison despite the great risk. They were arrested, imprisoned, and tortured following the Double Tenth Incident.



[He] was whipped with wet ropes and tortured so badly that he became unconscious and his body became swollen. For days he could not eat and the bruises made his whole body look blue and black, yet he did not curse his torturers. On the other hand, he prayed for them and when Singapore was liberated by the British, some of his torturers came to him to be baptised.<sup>23</sup>

The phenomenal story of the bishop baptizing the very man who tortured him is further confirmed and explicated in a letter that Wilson wrote to Brigadier Sir John Smyth, V.C. in April 1967.

In 1947 I took various services of baptism and confirmation in the cathedral for those who had been prepared, and I got permission for those who were serving sentences to be marched up from the prison. Among those that I baptised and confirmed was one of the men of the military police who had been responsible, four years earlier, for taking part in my own torturing. I have seldom seen so great a change in a man. He looked gentle and peaceful, even though he was going back to serve a ten-year sentence, and later he received communion at my hands in the prison.<sup>24</sup>

Reading about this remarkable life of forgiveness, acceptance, and reconciliation, culminating in the celebration of the sacraments, one may be left wondering how such generosity is humanly possible. We may gain some hints from a 1969 BBC program that featured Leonard Wilson. In March of 1969, Wilson returned to Singapore to participate in the special program titled *Mission to Hell*, in which he shared about these war experiences. According to Wilson, it was during those torturous days that he felt most certain of his faith and the living presence of Christ, being so strengthened by the support of his fellow prisoners.<sup>25</sup> Wilson's acts of love, forgiveness, and mercy are expressions of how "the grace of God had transformed hell into something like heaven."<sup>26</sup>

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After the war, Elizabeth was proffered the OBE (Order of the British Empire) by the Queen.

23 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 187.

24 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 37.

25 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 45.

26 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 45.

It is thus no wonder that Leonard Wilson's biographer, Roy McKay, would summarize that "the Double Tenth experience was in many ways central to Leonard Wilson's life. Not only did the story become one of the Christian epics of the century, but, more importantly, he himself regarded these events as among the most significant moments of his Christian experience, and a lasting proof of the reality of the Christian faith."<sup>27</sup>

### AFTERMATH AND PRESENT WITNESS

Fast forward to the year 2022. Bishop Wilson's memorial stone sits inside the Birmingham Cathedral, and the Visitor's Chaplain there, Stephen Record, plays a key role in narrating the bishop's time in Singapore to visitors. About ten years ago, Record noticed some Japanese visitors in the Cathedral. Upon discovering that the son, studying at Birmingham University, was there with his elderly father, the Chaplain told them the bishop's story, which was so moving that the father shed a tear. After that experience, Record resolved to point out the memorial and recount the story every time he meets Japanese visitors.<sup>28</sup> In another interview, Stephen Record wrote, "I have seen elderly Japanese men openly weeping when they hear the story. It is a powerful testimony that even under extreme torture and death Bishop Leonard can move people by his life and witness to the Lord."<sup>29</sup> For as long as Record serves as the Visitor's Chaplain, he will continue to lead tourists to the foot of the chancel steps where the bishop's Memorial Stone is placed and designed in the shape of a rhombus with the following inscription:

†  
JOHN  
LEONARD  
WILSON  
1897–1970  
FOURTH BISHOP OF  
BIRMINGHAM  
SOMETIME BISHOP  
OF SINGAPORE  
Confessor for  
The Faith

<sup>27</sup> McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 13–14.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Record, interview by author, Oxford, November 2, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Record, e-mail message to author, October 5, 2021.

These words engraved on the ground of the sanctuary may be camouflaged by Birmingham Cathedral's grandiose English Baroque architecture, giant pilasters, and Burne-Jones stained-glass windows, but thanks to faithful raconteurs like Stephen Record, the remarkable story of Bishop Wilson continues to be retold to new cathedral visitors.

### LEONARD WILSON'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SINGAPORE

Having reviewed the poignant accounts of the bishop's physical torment and his altogether gracious reactions, we explore some of Wilson's contributions during and after the war. Before the Japanese invasion in Singapore, when soldiers were still advancing from the north, the bishop's house was turned into a temporary shelter for women and children seeking refuge from the northern region.<sup>30</sup> When the Occupation began and when it was no longer safe, Wilson helped with the evacuation of women and children, including his wife and children, to Australia and South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Despite having to face an uncertain future without his family while living in a new place that was as yet unfamiliar, the bishop swiftly found ways to make himself useful during this difficult time.

For one, Bishop Wilson ensured that church services continued throughout World War II. At one point, the nave of St. Andrew's Cathedral was cleared and used as a hospital for the wounded, which explains why Bishop Wilson, Sorby Adams, and Hayter were not interned because they were providing an essential service to the people.<sup>32</sup> Soon, the plight of the Changi internees became obvious, as many were admitted into hospitals starving and sick. The bishop started raising funds for those in Changi to purchase essential items for their welfare. However, his sources of help—the Japanese, local banks, and International Red Cross—were not permitted by the Japanese authorities to lend money for prisoners and internees. His solution was to borrow it in the name of the Anglican church; Bishop Wilson “told the lenders that the Anglican Church had outlasted many empires, and that it did not matter who the victor of this war was—for they could be assured that the church of God would go on, and their money

30 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 16.

31 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 17.

32 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184.

would be safe.”<sup>33</sup> Through Wilson’s financial sourcing efforts large amounts of money were smuggled into Changi Prison from Miyako Hospital, often through the help of Elizabeth Choy and her husband, Choy Koon Heng. Both were eventually arrested and tortured.<sup>34</sup>

Besides smuggling money, Leonard Wilson braved serious consequences and personal risks by passing messages between prisoner-of-war camps and their friends and families in the civilian Changi Prison. The Japanese did not allow communication between civilians and prisoners of war, but when the bishop gained entry into the small prisoner-of-war camp he arranged for exchange of letters through those admitted into Miyako Hospital. Without his initiative, many prisoners and internees would not have received news from their loved ones.<sup>35</sup> There is another anecdote that demonstrates the fearlessness of the bishop when coming to the aid of those in need. One Sunday morning, a choir girl on her way to service was stopped by a Japanese soldier on the private road inside the cathedral precincts; he insisted that she bowed to him in the Japanese way. “When the bishop, who was in the vestry, heard of the incident, he immediately went out to demand an explanation!”<sup>36</sup> All these courageous acts and risky activities, however, came to a halt when Wilson, Sorby Adams, and Hayter themselves were also interned in Changi Prison in March 1943.

### POSTWAR EFFORTS

As one of the first people to get out of camp, Leonard Wilson quickly reconnected with the Asian Christians who had continued the work of the church over the previous two and a half years without a bishop. He gave them all his attention and energy and started to organize relief for the locals in both Singapore and the rest of the diocese.<sup>37</sup> In a later letter reply to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Wilson wrote, “I was a little overworked when I first came out of internment, doing relieving work in Malaya, consequently I am overtired now.”<sup>38</sup> He was finally reunited with his family in Australia in

33 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184.

34 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184.

35 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 24.

36 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184.

37 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 41–42.

38 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 103.

October 1945 after three and half years, and met his youngest son, James, who was then three years old, for the first time. In March 1946, the family spent six months in England where he was a much sought-after speaker because of his wartime experiences in Singapore.

One particular speaking engagement was a broadcast that Wilson delivered in October 1946, which was responded to by hundreds of letters. These letters were later compiled into a booklet to be published and distributed for sale to help raise money for the Diocese of Singapore. The bishop had done so, seeing the need to finance schools and mission schools, medical work and equipment, recreation centers for community life, recreation, and study, as well as to refurbish the Home for Blind Children, Hospital for Crippled Children, and damaged churches and halls, among other things.<sup>39</sup> These were some of the tasks with which Wilson busied himself for the next fifteen months when he returned to Singapore in November 1946.<sup>40</sup> However, he was also beginning to feel disappointed by his postwar experiences. In a letter that he wrote to a friend about eighteen months later, he lamented the dying enthusiasm he felt in the Malayan church, commenting that “people are beginning to settle down again into their ruts of denominationalism, and it isn’t easy to rouse them to the creation of a wider vision and a more united front.”<sup>41</sup> Denominationalism notwithstanding, the establishment of a union training college and the formation of the Malayan Christian Council were evidence that the ecumenical spirit was not quite dead. Leonard Wilson had always been particularly passionate about and committed to church unity. One of Wilson’s most significant and long-lasting contributions to a war-torn society was his ecumenical vision, a topic to which we now turn.

### ECUMENICAL VISION AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

Since the early 1920s, when he was studying at Queen’s College, Oxford, Wilson was influenced by the social and ecumenical commitment of the Student Christian Movement.<sup>42</sup> His devotion to church unity and

39 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 105.

40 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 106.

41 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 106.

42 J. C. H. Tompkins, “Wilson, (John) Leonard (1897–1970), Bishop of Birmingham,” in

enthusiasm for interdenominational cooperation are clearly demonstrated through his efforts in Singapore and beyond.

Noticing the adversities and ongoing challenges brought about by the advent of war, the bishop promptly sent out a circular to all non-Roman Catholic churches explaining the need for unity, mutual support, and collaboration during this trying season. He ended the letter by emphasizing that “[o]ur aim is a Universal Church in Malaya, not uniformity of worship but a united faith and an agreed order of ministry. One of the steps to such a goal is a Federation of Christian Churches.”<sup>43</sup> The Federation of Christian Churches that included the Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Adventists, Brethren, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Syrian, Far Eastern Missionary, and Overseas Baptists was established in June 1942.<sup>44</sup> This cooperation brought relief to the poor and provided an extensive welfare system. It was so well organized that the Japanese encouraged and supported their work, but it was also so successful that when the Double Tenth Incident happened, the Kempeitai suspected that the Federation of Churches was involved in the espionage plot; it was therefore closed down.<sup>45</sup> On a more encouraging note, during the war years, interdenominational services were frequently held not only in St. Andrew’s Cathedral but also in the local churches of the other denominations.<sup>46</sup>

Bishop Wilson’s eventual internment did not dampen his passion for church unity. In Changi Prison, Leonard Wilson established connections with Hobart B. Amstutz of the Methodist Church and Campbell Gibson of the Presbyterian Church, and together they laid the foundation of a postwar Christian Council.<sup>47</sup> Also, out of Changi Prison was born perhaps one of the most significant and lasting impacts of their ecumenical spirit: the birth of Trinity College as an interdenominational training center (known today as Trinity Theological College), officially established in 1948.

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*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. September 23, 2004 ed., <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref:odnb/36966>, accessed February 1, 2022).

43 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 76.

44 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 22.

45 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 77.

46 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 184.

47 Thambiah, *The History of Anglicanism*, 188.

The earliest discussions for a union theological institution began with Hobart B. Amstutz and Campbell Gibson, introduced above, as well as R.K. Sorby Adams, Leonard Wilson's fellow clergyman.<sup>48</sup> This was the start of a closer relationship between the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans that continues to this day.<sup>49</sup> We do not have incontestable records of the participation of Bishop Wilson in these early talks, but it would not be too far-fetched to assume that the bishop's ardent commitment to ecumenism was influential even when he was taken away from Changi for seven and a half months by the Kempeitai. We do know that when talks about Trinity College resumed more than a year after the war, after the leaders of the various denominations had returned to Singapore, Bishop Leonard Wilson and Sorby Adams both represented the Anglicans.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the lack of historical records explicitly stating Wilson's exact role in the founding of TTC, the following acknowledgement recorded in his biography confirms his early contributions to the union college:

At the end of 1948, when it became known in Singapore that Leonard was to go to Manchester, the heads of both the Methodists and the English Presbyterian Missions wrote to him to say how important they thought was the work of the united college ... which owed its existence to Leonard's vision, sympathetic attitude and whole-hearted co-operation.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, as a priest serving closely with the bishop, John Hayter also recorded in his diary how the Federation of Churches, which was eagerly initiated by Wilson though shut down by the Japanese, prepared the way for further ecumenical ties. From his perspective, there was "little doubt that the cooperation achieved during the brief life of the Federation was responsible for the speed with which Singapore's Trinity College was founded so soon after the war as an interdenominational centre of the

48 The war situation caused these leaders to realize that their churches could not depend on Western leadership only and that they needed to equip local leaders. See Bobby Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819–1989* (Singapore: Bible Society of Singapore, 2003), 200–202.

49 The Lutherans joined the union college later.

50 For details of the founding of the oldest union college, see Trinity Theological College, *At the Crossroads: The History of Trinity Theological College, 1948–2005* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2006), 39.

51 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 106.

training of Church leaders.”<sup>52</sup> As Singapore’s oldest seminary and only union college, Trinity Theological College continues to train and equip clergy and lay members of the church from around the region. The last seventy-four years of TTC’s growth, progress, and success can be traced back to a group of denominational leaders who, during and after the war, were intent on establishing a training center beyond denominational lines.

Bishop Wilson’s devotion to unity and social inclusion did not end with his time in Singapore but continued into his office as Bishop of Birmingham from 1953 to 1969. He was a dynamic supporter of the Birmingham Council of Churches, and his “episcopate saw a great influx of black and Asian immigrants into the midlands, and his example, with the establishment of a special chaplaincy, assured the initial amicable reception which was perhaps the greatest post-war social achievement of the Birmingham churches.”<sup>53</sup> The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* describes Leonard Wilson using his own words as “almost a fanatic about church unity.”<sup>54</sup>

### REMEMBERING THE BISHOP POST-SINGAPORE

In this final segment, we look at how he was and is still remembered after his service in Singapore. On January 30, 1949, two days before Wilson sailed back to England, he gave a broadcast farewell message in Singapore, which is worth quoting at length because it offers us a glimpse of his heart and mind:

I am very grateful for this opportunity of saying farewell from this studio. The studio has pleasant memories and historic associations. It was from this building that I conducted one of the last services before the Japanese occupation. It was from here that those who had been interned gave their first message to the outside world, when on their behalf I thanked God for our liberation....

I am saying farewell to friends, firm friends, made during eleven years in the Far East both here and in Hong Kong; to many happy and memorable associations; and to the work I have loved and tried to set forward during

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52 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 77–78.

53 Tompkins, "Wilson, (John) Leonard."

54 Cited by Tompkins, "Wilson, (John) Leonard."



the interrupted years of my episcopate.... My leaving does not mean that the ties that bind me to this country will be severed. No separation could do that, for not only has more than half my active ministry been spent in the East, but much the most eventful part of it....

My years in Malaya have taught me one thing above all else; the necessity of living without rancour and bitterness.... I have rejected all the other things I was going to say to the various and friendly communities of Malaya, both racial and religious, and I prefer to give to all the message of that simple line, "Purge from every heart the lurking grudge."

Last Sunday I saw again what is for me the fairest sight in all the Far East, the lovely view from Penang Hill, of islands, sea and distant peak; last night I watched the light of the setting sun on the waters of MacRitchie reservoir and saw most vividly "the long low splendour of the level lake." Here are things of beauty which one need not obliterate, because they are to be enjoyed forever, being part of the Divine Nature of the Eternal God. I shall take away from Malaya not only memories of this beautiful country, not only truths I have learned from all communities, but also, thank God, the love of many loyal friends.<sup>55</sup>

These excerpts from his farewell speech well summarize the strong relationships that Leonard Wilson cherished with the country and its people, his life-changing encounters, and his generous and forgiving attitude. Out of his seven years as bishop, he only had about a year and a half of living under normal conditions. But Singapore had left an indelible mark in Bishop Wilson's life. His dramatic and transformative time in Singapore was not only impactful for the bishop himself but also became the story by which people would remember Wilson even long after he had left. His name and life story could not be disassociated from the country's name and war stories. In the preface to John Hayter's book *Priest in Prison*, Mervyn Stockwood, former Bishop of Southwark, wrote the following about Wilson: "Leonard Wilson came into my life shortly after the war, when, as the hero of Singapore, he won the admiration of the young people of my parish in East Bristol."<sup>56</sup>

One of the most moving testimonies regarding Bishop Wilson was delivered in a homily by his daughter, Susan Cole-King, who followed in her

55 McKay, *John Leonard Wilson*, 112–113.

56 Hayter, *Priest in Prison*, 11.

father's footsteps and became one of the first women ordained as a priest in the Church of England. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference worship service, a liturgy of reconciliation and forgiveness was deliberately prepared, as the day of the conference fell on the anniversary of the dropping of the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Susan Cole-King, because of her relationship to the bishop, was invited to preach at the emotional service, which also coincided with the Feast of the Transfiguration. After including several of the interview excerpts presented earlier in this essay in her sermon, she added, "My father's story is a transfiguration story, for himself and for his captors. After the war he returned to Singapore and had the great joy of confirming one of his torturers."<sup>57</sup> As priest and daughter, Susan's words speak volumes about the laudable example of her father, the bishop, who exemplified for future generations the power of transformation, forgiveness, and the love of God.

It is thus unsurprising that Stephen Record still remembers Leonard Wilson most fondly in relation to his war experiences in Singapore. Most people in the UK around Stephen's age remember Bishop Wilson at the annual Service of Remembrance held on the Saturday before Remembrance Sunday at the Royal Albert Hall, London, each year on the Sunday nearest to November 11. For many years the bishop, because of his experiences in Singapore, always conducted the service held in front of the Queen and the entire royal family; the service was televised throughout the Commonwealth countries. "Our perception of Bishop Wilson was this holy man who was greatly respected by the Royal Family and Military and by ordinary people who had survived the war, in the same way that he had survived the war, and yet their faith was intact. Growing up we would watch that on television and when he retired and died it was great sadness that Bishop Wilson wasn't there to do it anymore."<sup>58</sup>

Apart from the bishop's war affiliations, Stephen Record remembers meeting Leonard Wilson as a young a boy whenever the bishop visited Stephen's home parish of Cofton Hackett to support his old friend and vicar Fred MyHill, who served in Hong Kong and was also captured and

57 Katie Sherrod, "Transfiguration Liturgy Offers Moment of Blessing to Lambeth Conference," *Anglican Communion News Service*, August 8, 1998, <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/Lambeth1998/Lambeth-Daily/07/fatherwitness.html>, (accessed February 2, 2021).

58 Stephen Record, interview by author, Oxford, November 2, 2021.

tortured by the Japanese. Stephen was also able to contact two other ladies—ninety-five-year-old Beryl Clark and eighty-six-year-old Olwyn Powell—who remember Leonard Wilson. According to Stephen, those who remember the bishop remarked that in his presence “they just knew he was a man of God.”<sup>59</sup> Stephen’s wife, Sheila, was confirmed by Bishop Leonard in 1962 when she was thirteen years of age at Christ Church, Ward End, a suburb of Birmingham, and she remembers him “as a very kindly man who spoke to everyone in an easy and loving way.”<sup>60</sup> Bishop Wilson is also remembered as the first influential Bishop to speak out for and champion women in the ministry. More controversially, he campaigned for the repeal of laws against homosexuality. In Stephen’s opinion, “He was a man way ahead of his time.”<sup>61</sup>

At the end of our final interview, I asked Stephen for one thing that he would want people to take away from this article and to remember about the bishop. After a few seconds of serious reflection and silence, Stephen replied in a genuine and heartfelt tone, “His faith. That it was unwavering under extreme duress. It was totally unwavering.”<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The story of John Leonard Wilson’s remarkable life and ministry in Singapore needs retelling because of his lasting contributions that continue to shape the church scene in Southeast Asia. His imprisonment and torture experiences during the war, his wider contributions before and after the war, and his devotion to church unity continue directly and indirectly to influence the Singapore church’s larger story. The bishop’s almost fanatical commitment to and practice of *koinonia* in the midst of harsh circumstances has demonstrated that real *koinonia* is possible, but it comes with a heavy price.

## About author

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59 Stephen Record, interview by author, Oxford, November 2, 2021.

60 Stephen Record, e-mail message to author, October 5, 2021.

61 Stephen Record, e-mail message to author, October 5, 2021.

62 Stephen Record, interview by author, Oxford, November 2, 2021.