

Christianity in Terengganu from Historical, Demographic, and Religious Freedom Perspectives

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Abstract

This study discusses the demographic aspects of the Christian community in Terengganu, a state predominantly inhabited by the Malay Muslim population. The issue addressed is the extent to which the Christian minority can practice their right to religious freedom as guaranteed under Article 11 of the Federal Constitution, within a social and legal context that establishes Islam as the official religion. The purpose of this study is to analyze the status, development, challenges, and lived realities of the Christian community in Terengganu in terms of history, demographic statistics, freedom to build places of worship, as well as the influence of state policies and laws on their religious rights. The methodology employed is qualitative, involving document analysis, interviews with Christian religious leaders, and analysis of statistical data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia. The findings reveal that although the number of Christians in Terengganu is very small (approximately 0.3%), they are still able to freely practice their religion, evidenced by the existence of 14 churches across several major districts. However, the construction of new churches is limited and subject to stringent regulations by local authorities. Additionally, issues such as migration, lack of official data, and strict controls on proselytizing to Muslims constitute major challenges faced by the community. The study also identifies ongoing efforts to promote interfaith dialogue at both academic and societal levels, yet there remains room for improvement to further strengthen religious harmony in the state.

Keywords: Demographics, Christian Community, Freedom of Religion, Church

Introduction

Demographics is the study of the characteristics and development of populations in terms of size, density, distribution, births, deaths, and other factors over a specific period (Kamus Dewan, Fourth Edition, 2010). Demographic analysis can be conducted on an entire population or particular groups based on criteria such as education, citizenship, religion, or

ethnicity. Demography also focuses on the quantitative study of population issues, including population size, structure, composition, and measurement techniques. This field is crucial for producing accurate and quality statistical data. Moreover, demography provides valuable information on how a population is organized, its size, and its composition. In addition, demography plays a significant role in economic planning, utilized by governments to allocate financial aid, delineate electoral boundaries, plan infrastructure initiatives, and more (Amane, et al., 2023).

In the context of Terengganu, research on the demographics of the Christian community by scholars in social sciences and religious studies has received limited interest and attention. Existing studies remain minimal and constrained, largely because Christianity and its adherents constitute a minority group. Among researchers who have discussed the Christian community in Terengganu are Awang & Khambali@Hambali (2016), Awang, et al. (2021), and Mat, et al. (2022). These studies primarily focus on the historical development of Christianity in Terengganu, particularly among the Chinese community.

The study of Christian demographics in Terengganu is compelling for several reasons. First, Christianity is a minority religion in a state predominantly inhabited by Malay Muslims. Typically, minority communities face challenges related to local cultural influences that may impact their identity (Zain, 2017). Second, the right to freedom of religion as enshrined in Article 11 of the Federal Constitution grants minority religious groups the right to practice their religion freely. Clause (3) specifies that every religious group has the right to manage its own religious affairs, establish and maintain religious or charitable institutions, acquire and hold property, and administer it according to the law (Azam, et al., 2023).

Third, historical contexts reveal issues concerning religious freedom and Islam-Christian relations in Terengganu. During British colonial rule in Malaya, the British and Foreign Bible Society sought permission from Sultan Zainal Abidin III (1881–1918) to distribute the Bible in Jawi script in Terengganu. Although no outright ban was imposed, the Sultan enforced state constitutional provisions to restrict Christian missionary activities. In 1924, the Menteri Besar, Haji Ngah Mohamed bin Yusof, rejected a British request to build a church in Terengganu, citing conflict with Islamic law in the state.

Additionally, the 1911 Terengganu State Constitution, known as *Itqan al-Muluk bi Ta'dil al-Suluk*, mandates that the ruler of Terengganu must be a Muslim of Malay descent and royal lineage. Chapter 51 of this constitution addresses the relationship between Islam and other religions in Terengganu. It declares Islam as the official state religion while allowing other ethnic and religious groups to live peacefully within the state. However, this chapter was amended in 1948 through the Terengganu Agreement to align Chapter 51 of the 1911 Act with Article 11 of the Federal Constitution concerning religious freedom. This amendment granted religious freedom to followers of other faiths in Terengganu, including Christians, consistent with other Malaysian states.

Fourth, official statements from the Terengganu State Legislative Assembly (DUN) between 1994 and 2014 included eight official remarks addressing Christian-related issues. Only the statement on August 14, 2007, explicitly raised concerns about a Christianization agenda purportedly aimed at converting Muslims in Terengganu. Furthermore, the

enactment of Enactment A37: The Control and Restriction of Non-Islamic Religions Act was introduced to regulate the propagation of non-Islamic religions to Muslims in Terengganu. This law, drafted in 1980 and effective from 1986, aligns with Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution. It was amended in 2013 and re-gazetted in 2014 to strengthen penalties against the proselytization of Muslims by non-Islamic faiths. These measures were intended by the Terengganu government to safeguard the sanctity of Islam and prevent apostasy, without denying religious freedom to non-Muslims (Zain, et al., 2023).

Given these factors, the question arises: To what extent can followers of other religions, especially Christians, exercise their right to religious freedom in a state dominated by Malay Muslims? This question is particularly pertinent given the regulatory environment shaped by Enactment A37 at the state level and Article 11(4) of the Federal Constitution. This study will explore these issues in detail.

Christian Demographics in Terengganu

Generally, accurate and detailed statistics on the Christian population in Terengganu are difficult to obtain. This is primarily because Christianity represents a very small minority compared to Islam, which is the majority religion among the Malay population. Even interviews with several Christian leaders in Terengganu, such as Rev. Tan, Pastor James, and Pastor Pay Lin, reveal a lack of precise demographic data. Nevertheless, based on the 2020 statistics from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, six religious categories are reported in Terengganu: Islam (97.3%), Buddhism (2.0%), Christianity (0.3%), Hinduism (0.2%), Others (0.0%), and No religion/unknown (0.1%).

Comparing the religious statistics of Terengganu with those of Malaysia overall, it is clear that Christianity occupies the third position after Islam and Buddhism both in Terengganu and nationally. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below. Similarly, in Kelantan, Islam leads followed by Christianity in third place. However, this pattern does not hold in other Malaysian states due to differing ethnic and religious compositions. Moreover, each ethnic group has its own dominant religion, influencing the religious demographic patterns within those states.

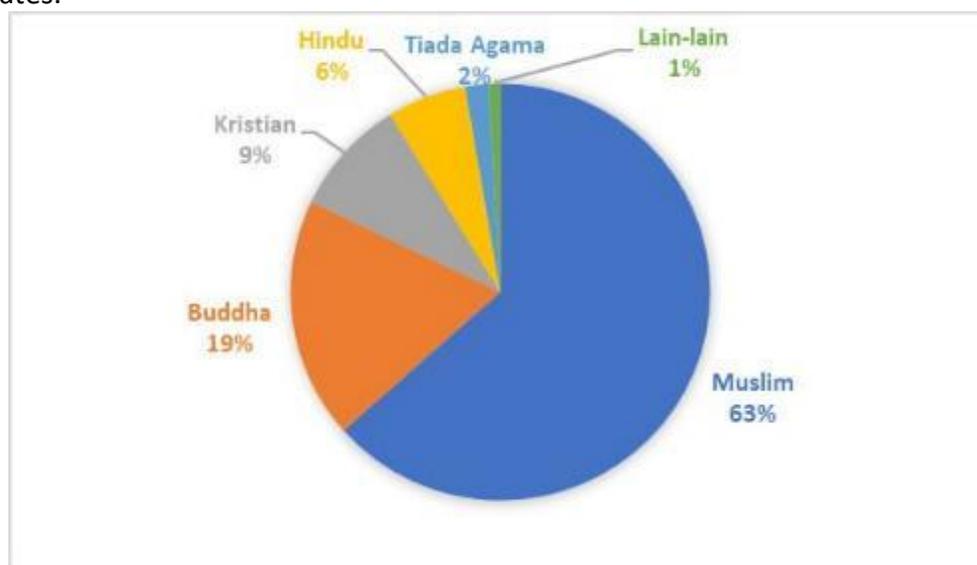


Figure 1: Religious Statistics in Malaysia

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020)

Jadual 2: Statistik utama penduduk pada tahun banci, Terengganu
Table 2: Principal statistics of population on census year, Terengganu Page 1

	1970	1980	1991	2000	2010	2020
Agama/ Religion						
Islam	380,042	493,511	728,469	852,591	980,190	1,118,764
Kristian/ Christianity	1,283	1,531	4,528	2,483	2,206	2,928
Buddha/ Buddhism	13,998	17,619	25,811	21,593	25,132	23,382
Hindu/ Hinduism	1,351	1,496	2,055	1,554	2,461	2,803
Lain-lain/ Others	5,064	6,850	2,627	1,411	648	421
Tiada Agama/ Tidak diketahui No Religion/ Unknown	3,186	1,364	882	602	726	1,142
Peratus agama/ Percentage of religion (%)						
Islam	93.9	94.5	95.3	96.9	96.9	97.3
Kristian/ Christianity	0.3	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.3
Buddha/ Buddhism	3.5	3.4	3.4	2.5	2.5	2.0
Hindu/ Hinduism	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2
Lain-lain/ Others	1.3	1.3	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.0
Tiada Agama/ Tidak diketahui No Religion/ Unknown	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

Figure 2: Religious Statistics in Terengganu (1970–2020)

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020)

Referring to the religious statistics presented in Figure 2, the number and percentage of religious adherents in Terengganu over the span of 50 years (1970–2020) demonstrate fluctuating trends. During the first phase, which spanned 21 years (1970–1991), the number of Christian adherents showed a notable increase, particularly in 1991. Meanwhile, in the second phase (1991–2020), the number of adherents experienced fluctuations, with periods of increase and decrease. This pattern can be observed more clearly in Figure 3 below.

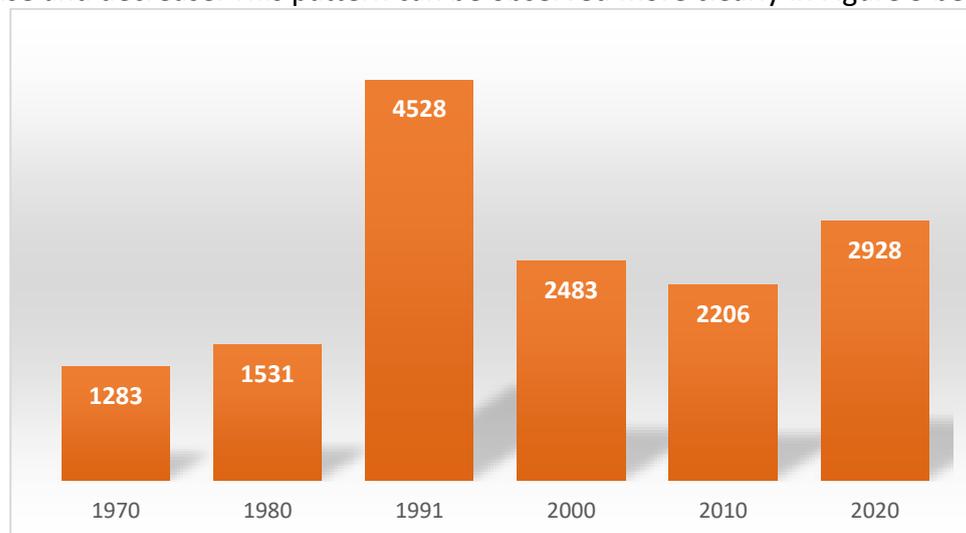


Figure 3: Number of Christian Adherents in Terengganu (1970–2020)

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020)

Fluctuating Trends in the Christian Population

The fluctuating trend in the number of Christian adherents over the period may be attributed to migration, particularly among Christian youths who relocate to the west coast of Malaysia. This claim is substantiated by Pastor Pay Lin (2025), who noted that the small number of Christians in Jerneh—ranging between 15 to 20 individuals (comprising four to five families)—is due to their children migrating to Kuala Lumpur for education and employment. A similar issue was raised by Pastor James (2025), who observed that the Christian population in

Dungun mainly comprises individuals from Sabah and Sarawak. These individuals work temporarily in Dungun and eventually return to their home states upon completion of their assignments.

Migration's effect on religious demographics is not exclusive to Christians. For example, Zain (2001) reported a significant decline in the Sikh population in Kelantan in 2001 compared to previous years. Many Sikhs residing in Kelantan during that period were not local residents but had been temporarily employed at Universiti Sains Malaysia Hospital (HUSM) and other government offices. As these individuals were transferred or returned to their hometowns, the demographic composition of religious communities in Kelantan changed accordingly.

The Advent of Christianity

The spread of Christianity in Peninsular Malaysia is closely intertwined with the arrival of Western colonial powers, particularly the Portuguese (1511), the Dutch (1641), and the British (1786). These colonial regimes sought not only to expand their political and economic influence but also to promote Christianity. Each colonial power brought with it its own Christian denomination: the Portuguese introduced Catholicism, the Dutch brought Protestantism, and the British propagated Anglicanism.

The expansion of Christianity gained momentum after the establishment of the Malayan Christian Council in 1948. Through this council, various Christian denominations began to establish churches across the region, including the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, Chinese National Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and American United Lutheran Mission. In 1986, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) was established, representing over 40 denominations and churches. This umbrella organisation marked a significant milestone in the coordination and unification of the Christian community in Malaysia, particularly in advocating for religious freedom and collective interests (Basri, 2014; Sofian & Hussien, 2018).

In Terengganu, the earliest recorded effort to spread Christianity dates back to 1828. W. Medhurst, a Christian missionary fluent in Chinese, engaged in religious discussions with the local Chinese community and even held dialogues with Sultan Abdul Rahman Shah (1826–1831). Medhurst reportedly produced a Malay translation of the Bible sourced from Singapore (Ghazali, 1984). This marked the beginning of Christian propagation in Terengganu, particularly among the Chinese community in Kuala Terengganu.

Christianity gained a foothold in Kuala Terengganu with the establishment of the Kuala Terengganu Presbyterian Church in 1963 on Jalan Air Jernih. The church enabled the Chinese Christian community to conduct religious activities and participate in education, careers, and academic life (Zain, et al., 2023).

Consequently, Chinese Christian settlements were concentrated in villages such as Kampung Banggul Kemang, Kampung Tirok, and Kampung Cina in Wakaf Tapai. Notably, residents of Kampung Banggul Kemang and Kampung Tirok share close familial ties and identify collectively as "Cina Tirok." These communities share a Christian cemetery, which is

also used by non-Christian Chinese. In Kuala Terengganu, another Christian cemetery is located along Jalan Pusara (Sua, 2011; Mat, et al., 2022; Wan, 2025).

Clearly, the spread of Christianity in Malaysia, including Terengganu, is inseparable from the legacy of colonialism. Despite being a minority, the Christian community holds historical and demographic significance. The existence of churches and Christian institutions reflects the exercise of religious freedom under the Malaysian Constitution.

Church Establishment and Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is a fundamental right enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. Article 11(1) stipulates that “every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it.” This right encompasses the freedom to believe, openly express one's faith without fear or coercion, and manifest belief through worship, practice, teaching, and propagation (Jalil & Halim, 2014).

However, Article 11(4) restricts the propagation of non-Islamic religions to Muslims, stating that “State law and, in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.” Thus, the Constitution simultaneously guarantees religious freedom and protects Islam from external religious influences (Sofian & Adnan, 2018).

In line with this right, religious communities are entitled to construct places of worship. Given Malaysia's religious diversity, various places of worship exist: mosques and suraus for Muslims, temples for Hindus and Buddhists, and churches for Christians. The construction of these religious buildings is governed by specific legal frameworks. For Muslims, mosque construction falls under state Islamic religious administration laws as stipulated in the Ninth Schedule, List II of the Federal Constitution. For non-Muslim places of worship—including churches, temples, and shrines—construction is governed by the Town and Country Planning Act 1976 and the Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974, categorised under List III (Concurrent List) as public services (Ahair & Kusrin, 2020).

Historically, church construction in Malaysia was tied to colonial missions aimed at spreading Christianity not only in urban centres but also rural areas. However, the majority of Christian evangelical activity in Peninsular Malaysia remains concentrated in urban and semi-urban regions. Consequently, cities like Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya have higher numbers of churches compared to other parts of the peninsula (Sofian & Hussein, 2018).

In Terengganu, church construction and that of other non-Muslim places of worship require approval from the relevant municipal councils, such as the Kuala Terengganu City Council (MBKT) and various district or municipal councils. Approval processes consider building plans, parking space availability, and safety measures. In Kuala Terengganu, where the Christian population is largest, MBKT oversees church construction approvals. However, some longstanding churches may lack official records with MBKT, as many operate out of shop lots under general building use and are registered as religious organisations with the Registry of Societies (ROS). According to Wan (2025), there have been no recent applications for new

church buildings in Kuala Terengganu, suggesting that current facilities suffice for the existing Christian community.

Number of Churches in Terengganu

Christian communities in Terengganu have long maintained churches for religious activities. However, there is no official data from MBKT or district councils regarding the number of churches in the state. A search of official websites also yielded no relevant data. Consequently, this study relied on publicly available online sources, which, despite being unofficial, are considered reliable as they include church names, denominations, contact information, and precise locations.

According to these sources, there are 14 churches across four districts in Terengganu: seven in Kuala Terengganu, four in Dungun, two in Kemaman, and one in Besut. No data was found for Setiu, Hulu Terengganu, Kuala Nerus, or Marang. This information is presented in Figure 4 below.

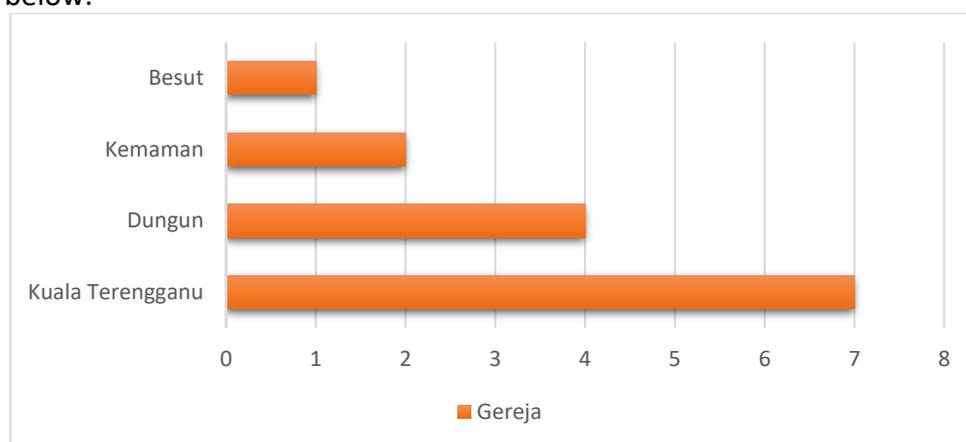


Figure 4: Number of Churches in Terengganu

Source: Internet (2025)

The accuracy of the reported 14 churches in Terengganu could not be independently verified by church authorities or pastors. Information obtained through interviews with Christian pastors in Kuala Terengganu, Kemaman, Dungun, and Besut focused more on explaining the religious practices observed in these churches rather than providing precise numerical data.

For example, Pastor James (2025) explained the prayer practices of Christians at the Presbyterian Church in Dungun. According to him, prayer services are typically held on Fridays and are usually attended by 17 to 20 workers from Sabah and Sarawak. Meanwhile, Pastor Pay Lin (2025), who serves at both the Jerteh Chinese Methodist Church and the Kota Bharu Chinese Methodist Church, elaborated on the religious activities of the Chinese Christian communities in Jerteh and Kota Bharu. He noted that these communities conduct their religious ceremonies using a Chinese-language Bible written in classical Chinese characters, rather than English versions of the Bible.

Christian Denominations in Terengganu

Christianity in Malaysia encompasses a wide range of denominations. Among the major denominations are Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Independent Churches, and Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB), along with various other streams. Based on internet sources, the

Christian denominations present in Terengganu include Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Evangelical churches. Research conducted by Awang & Khambali@Hambali (2016) indicates that the majority of Chinese Christians in Kuala Terengganu adhere to either the Protestant or Catholic traditions.

In addition, the Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB)—a denomination predominantly found in Sabah and Sarawak—had previously established a presence in Kemaman. However, this church could not sustain its operations due to the absence of a qualified pastor to lead the congregation. Furthermore, the majority of its followers in Kemaman were contract workers from Sabah and Sarawak who were only temporarily stationed in the area, usually for one to two months. Most of them returned to their home states, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic (James, 2025).

Information regarding the names and denominational affiliations of the churches in Terengganu can be found in Figures 5 and 6 below.

Num	Church Name	Denomination	District
1	Catholic Mission Terengganu	Catholic	Kuala Terengganu
2	St. Philip Minh Community, Kemaman	Catholic	Kemaman
3	Dungun Catholic Community	Catholic	Kuala Terengganu
4	St. Andrew's Church Kuala Terengganu	Anglican	Kuala Terengganu
5	St. Joseph's Church, Chukai	Anglican	Dungun
6	Kuala Terengganu Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Kuala Terengganu
7	Gereja Presbyterian Dungun	Presbyterian	Dungun
8	Air Jernih Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Kuala Terengganu
9	Kemaman Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Kemaman
10	Kemaman Life Bible Presbyterian Church	Presbyterian	Dungun
11	Jerteh Chinese Methodist Church	Methodist	Besut
12	Ayer Jernih Chinese Methodist Chapel	Methodist	Kuala Terengganu
13	Sidang Injil Borneo (SIB) Kuala Terengganu	Evangelical	Kuala Terengganu
14	Gereja SIB Bakau Tinggi, Chukai	Evangelical	Dungun

Figure 5: List of Churches in Terengganu

Source: Internet (2025)

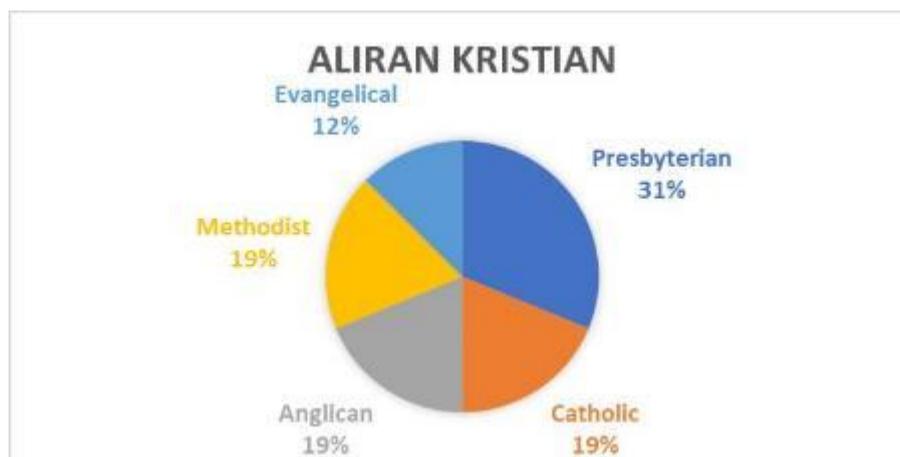


Figure 6: Christian Denominations in Terengganu

Source: Internet (2025)

The discussion on the existence of churches of various denominations within the Muslim-Malay majority society in Terengganu in this study demonstrates that the right to freedom of religion is generally well-practised. Although Christians constitute a minority, they are granted the right to build churches and freely and safely practise their religious activities. However, they are not accorded the right to propagate their religion to Muslims, as this contravenes the Federal Constitution and state-level enactments.

The Issue of Apostasy and the Position of Islam

The issue of apostasy and the constitutional status of Islam has frequently sparked controversy, particularly during the 1990s. These debates were largely triggered by high-profile cases such as Azlina Jailani, Kamariah Ali, and Muhammad Abdullah @ Moorthy, which captured public attention. Furthermore, calls to amend or repeal Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution, which pertains to the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts, and proposals to establish bodies such as the Interfaith Commission of Malaysia (IFC), along with advocacy groups like Article 11, have further complicated this discourse (Muhammad et al., 2018).

As a result, apostasy applications have continued to occur and appear to be increasing. According to statistics presented during the First Meeting of the Fifth Session of the Selangor State Assembly in 2017, a total of 171 applications to leave Islam were registered over a three-year period (2014–2016). In response, several states—namely Negeri Sembilan, Melaka, Pahang, Perak, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Sabah—have taken preventive measures by codifying apostasy as an offence under their respective state Syariah criminal enactments (Samudin & Chabidi, 2023).

In the state of Terengganu, legal provisions concerning apostasy fall under the jurisdiction of the Syariah High Court, as stipulated under Section 11 of the Syariah Courts Enactment 2001, for offences described in Section 7 of the Syariah Criminal Offences Enactment 2001. The penalty prescribed is a fine of RM5,000, imprisonment for up to 3 years, or both (Nasir & Ismail, 2016).

According to data from the Prime Minister's Department, from 2000 to 2010, the Syariah Courts across Malaysia received 863 applications to renounce Islam. Of these, only one application originated from Terengganu (Muhammad, et al., 2018). This indicates that

apostasy issues affecting other states have had minimal impact in Terengganu, where Muslims generally remain firm in their faith. Conversely, there has been a notable trend of Christian converts embracing Islam in the state. Data from the Kuala Terengganu Islamic Religious Office shows that over a 10-year period (2015–2024), a total of 366 individuals of Christian origin converted to Islam.

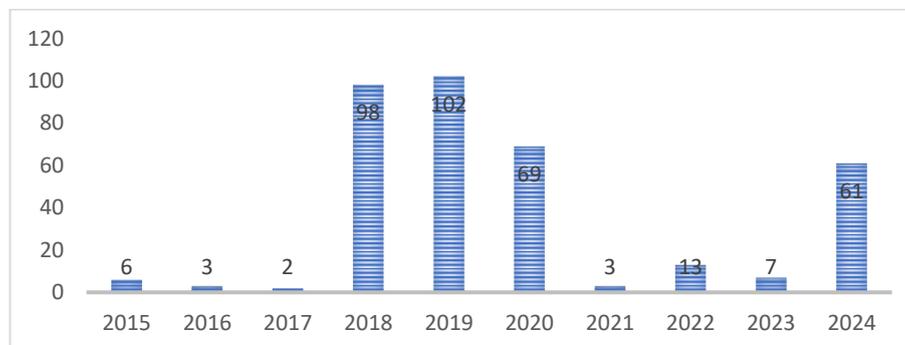


Figure 7: Number of Converts from Christianity (2015–2024)

Source: Kuala Terengganu Islamic Religious Office (2024)

Fostering Interfaith Dialogue

In a multiracial and multi-religious country like Malaysia, there is a pressing need for platforms that facilitate interaction and mutual understanding among communities. Interfaith dialogue is widely recognised as an effective means of fostering harmony between followers of different religions. Broadly, interfaith dialogue can take two forms: formal and informal. Formal dialogue involves structured programmes where adherents of various religions come together to share perspectives on common issues. Informal dialogue, meanwhile, takes place in everyday interactions such as business transactions, festive open house visits, community clean-ups, and other social engagements (Ramli & Awang, 2018).

Although freedom of religion in Terengganu is generally well-maintained, religious issues occurring nationwide cannot be taken lightly. If not properly managed, such issues could become a “ticking time bomb” capable of disrupting social harmony. Therefore, fostering interfaith dialogue should be considered an essential preventive measure by the government.

In this regard, state agencies such as the Terengganu Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MAIDAM) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MACMA), Darul Fitrah Association, and the Muslim Welfare Organisation of Malaysia (PERKIM) play crucial roles in promoting interfaith dialogue and managing matters related to converts to Islam (Awang, et al., 2023).

At the youth and academic level, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), through its Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies, incorporates interfaith dialogue into its Comparative Religion course. As part of this course, students participate in study tours titled *Travelogues of Houses of Worship*, which include visits to Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu places of worship in Terengganu, Kelantan, and Melaka. These visits often include interfaith dialogue sessions with religious leaders and community members. Through these interactions, students are

able to connect the religious beliefs and worship practices learned in the classroom with real-world practices observed among various religious communities (Zain, et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the Terengganu State Government continues to make efforts to maintain interfaith harmony and prevent conflict. While Christians are allowed to practise their faith within private and controlled spaces, there must be a balanced approach to ensure that no tensions arise between the Muslim and Christian communities.

Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights that the Christian community in Terengganu lives as a religious minority within a predominantly Malay-Muslim society that is deeply rooted in the state's social and cultural framework. Although they are granted religious freedom, such freedom is exercised within a highly regulated and monitored environment, particularly concerning religious propagation and the construction of houses of worship. Statistics indicate that the Christian population in Terengganu remains small and is mostly concentrated in specific districts such as Kuala Terengganu and Kemaman. Factors such as migration, a lack of permanent pastors, and the influence of historical and legal structures have contributed to the instability and decline of the community.

Nevertheless, the presence of churches representing various denominations—such as Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Evangelical—demonstrates that space for religious practice does exist. While apostasy has been a national-level controversy, it is not a significant issue in Terengganu. On the contrary, official data reveals that more Christians have embraced Islam in the state. Finally, interfaith dialogue initiatives led by institutions such as UniSZA and Islamic NGOs are seen as constructive steps towards building mutual understanding and preventing religious conflict. As such, this study recommends that interfaith dialogue and religious education be expanded as part of a long-term strategy to strengthen harmony in Terengganu's pluralistic society.

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