

# TOGETHER

TRUE WAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ENGLISH CONGREGATION

Issue 2 • December 2020

MCI (P) 061/03/2020

## The year when everything changed

by Michelle Cheong

**Framed by the year's confusion, inefficiency and worry, the world's contradictions seemed stark. But living in hope is possible.**

"Lift Renewal: 28 March 2020 – 16 June 2020," read a notice stuck on the metal barrier in front of me.

I groaned. Overnight, a large metal barricade appeared in front of one of the two lifts that served my mother-in-law's block. With only two temperamental lifts, waiting times at her 30-year-old flat were already long. "How on earth will we *tahan* just one lift?" I wondered in frustration.

But a few days later, when Singapore began its circuit breaker on 7 April, congested lifts were the least of anybody's concerns.

Life without a full-time job was not what I'd thought it would be. Any fantasies that things would be easy were soon ripped to shreds.

### A changed new year

I had expected COVID-10 to change things, but not like this.

At the end of 2019, I bade goodbye to ten years of life as



'Social Distancing in the Mission' by U.S. artist Jennifer M. Potter

a school teacher. I envisioned carefree days ahead, gently nurturing my three children, free from ever-growing stacks of papers to mark. Perhaps like a scene out of *The Sound of Music*. But I had discovered by March that life without a full-time job was not what

I'd thought it would be. Any remaining fantasies that things would be easy were soon ripped to shreds with the start of home-based learning.

Our family was privileged to have two home laptops we could share with our

two primary school children. Thankfully, our 5-year-old's kindergarten never jumped on the home-based learning bandwagon. However, clashing needs and a steep learning curve meant chaos.

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"I cannot find the Google Meet link, mummy! The meeting's supposed to be NOW!"

"This online quiz has never-ending pages! Help!"

"Mummy, come help me in the toilet!"

With us effectively in a lockdown, the little financial contribution I made to the family was reduced when a student I coached had to stop the lessons permanently due to cash flow problems.

For a time, I kept late nights struggling to use the iPad (when the kids were done with it) to deliver work I had committed. I was upset at the sight of dust and grime in our house, because our part-time Myanmar helper could not come during the circuit breaker.

My stress grew without the lunches and dinners lovingly cooked by my in-laws every day. One day, when I found that household necessities had flown off the shelves at supermarkets, I realised my nerves had become frayed to the maximum. Suddenly, I was not only a far cry from Fraulein Maria, I was a raging monster who breathed threats and spewed words I would afterwards have to apologise for.

### What our children said

The unprecedented change COVID-19 brought into our lives made an imprint on the children as well. One morning when I took our 5-year-old, Prudence, for a walk, she suddenly stopped and cowered behind me. Two passers-by walked past with concerned looks on their faces. Finally, she squealed, "Other people came so near us, mummy!"

Another time, while explaining to my 9-year-old, Christianne, how the actions of selfish "hoarders" affected others,

## The unprecedented change COVID-19 brought into our lives made an imprint on the children as well.

she urgently requested to see our stock of food in the storeroom. "But that's not enough, mum!" she exclaimed in alarm, "You better go out and grab at least two times of this!" While I did not take up her suggestion, I must say she made me doubt whether I was doing enough for the family.

### Bright moments

Thankfully, things got better. Trying to look on the bright side, we bought ourselves a toilet roll cake from BreadTalk. We had never seen one before. Because the barber was closed, we took our 7-year-old son's haircut into our own hands. Armed with a shaver, my husband John and I gleefully ambushed him one night. Without grandparents to save him, Jonah ended up with a lopsided under-shave. It was all good fun since there was no school and nobody to see. As Jonah was a homebody, he didn't mind never stepping out of our house during the lockdown.

### All is not well

Yet it became increasingly clear that all was *not* well for many other people. My heart broke each time I walked past the taxi stand across the street. A long line of about a dozen taxis – an uncommon sight – would wait silently as I walked towards the supermarket. When I left the supermarket, the line had not moved.

Kopitians normally packed with lunchtime crowds were empty except for stall-owners looking alternatively expectant and sad. Soon we would read about taxi drivers breaking down and crying in the street. A number of food businesses around our estate would fold, leaving no trace of their gay colours when they were first redecorated for Phase 2.

Closer to home, after weeks of uncertainty, an aunt who

worked at a Chinatown restaurant was put on no-pay leave. Several young friends who were graduating could not find jobs, and became filled with anxiety and self-doubt. Others cut short their overseas study programmes. Some of our friends had spouses or parents working as taxi drivers, or in the airline industry.

Aware that we were in a privileged position, John and I tactfully asked some of our closer friends if they needed any help. Most, including our part-time helper, turned us down. As for others, we decided the best thing to do was to pray for them privately.

We have an old friend who recently had a baby and bought a new home. Her husband was an air steward. I did not have the courage to ask her how she was coping until we were into Phase 2. She sounded fine – over text messages and social media – but I still feel rather ashamed for not getting in touch sooner.

### Cabin fever

Actually, while I use "we," it was usually just me, getting in touch with others. Not that I'm good at it, but John was swamped with work and struggling to understand the creeping listlessness he felt. Besides suffering persistent backaches from sitting at his desk all day, he needed (much more than I) a separation between work and home life. Whereas I was content with jogging, he pined for his basketball game. He needed the adrenaline rush he got competing with friends or strangers he met on the court. With the ban on group sports, he was forced to abandon his healthy routines, sleeping and eating at odd hours, gaining weight and dissatisfaction. But he was entirely supportive of all I tried to do.

### The conflict of being safe

John and I both felt that we were very fortunate to be unscathed by Covid-19. Feeling undeserving and somewhat apologetic (although not to the extent of joining some of

our friends who gave away the government handouts we all received), I looked around for ways to do good, with John's support. Besides passing on a writing stint to a widowed friend and sending gifts to some family and friends – this was either money, or food from hawkers we were trying to support – I also made donations to various organisations and was thankful for John's generosity and trust.

We made it a point to tip food delivery riders and taxi drivers. When we said, "Keep the change," I found myself wondering whether the taxi drivers thought we were being squeamish about physical contact. Would they be offended? Or will they think we're showing off? Neurotic as I was, it was hard not to entertain these thoughts. I tried very hard to take courage in the fact that my conscience was clear.

### Church life in the age of Zoom

"Actually, I feel closer to everyone because despite the tough times, we're all doing our part to meet like this!" This was my answer at a small group session during the circuit breaker. Our group leader, Eddy, had asked how everyone felt about church services and group meetings going online.

The blur of Zoom did not hide the surprise on the screen faces that looked back at me. Everyone else said that the lockdown was taking its toll on them – they dearly missed face-to-face interaction, and online gatherings were not a close substitute by far!

But what I never told the group was that my positive energy was starting to fade after a few weeks. From looking forward to our more frequent sessions (bible study every fortnight, and group prayers in between), I found myself feeling resentful that the meetings were a reminder that another week had passed without me accomplishing anything.

As one week melded into the

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next, remembering each of my children's online Sunday school class also became tiresome. *Is it Saturday, or Sunday? This week, or next week?* I could not figure it out, instead requiring frequent reminders that I usually failed to heed until it was too late. This added to my growing sense of failure.

With my own experience in mind, I was immensely thankful for each young adult who turned up for the bible study sessions John and I led. Still, our group shrank – we had only started to make friendships in December and January, and found it hard to support these young people better when the circuit breaker started.

Things were not working out as we had hoped.

### Feeling stalled

The lack of accomplishment that I felt was not only my own. It disappointed me that Christianne had only about two months of gymnastics CCA experience before it ground to a halt in school. Having quit her external gymnastics class last year because the programme never seemed to progress, we were eager for her to develop her skills and grit through the school training. But the small beginnings turned to nothing. I had also been anxious for her to find friends in her new class this year and thought she made some good inroads in Term 1.

But after eight weeks of separation, and strict social distancing rules in place when school reopened, her

The isolation Covid-19 brought has increased our emotional and mental vulnerability.



Not going to school didn't mean no homework. Drawing by Deb Monti.

friendships cooled, and she spent many weeks simply keeping to herself. I also felt guilty that I hadn't helped her to organise Zoom or Houseparty calls during the circuit breaker.

### Losing control over our lives

To be honest, my personal 'losses' cannot be blamed on Covid-19.

As I reflect on this year, I'm tempted to sink into some measure of self-contempt. Despite giving them more devoted attention, the two tuition students I coached this year showed little discernible improvement when examination results were released.

Two publishing projects that I had poured considerable time and effort into since 2019 also failed to take off.

Even plans for home renovations for the end of the year (we had hoped that restrictions would end then) went back and forth

repeatedly, only to end up nowhere.

I had hoped that staying home this year would let me feel closer and more satisfied in my relationships with my children. But instead of that, I discovered new areas of friction between my two older children and me.

I heard a voice within me whisper that my initiatives to help others were simply futile and uncalled for – nobody needed or appreciated them – and I found it hard to disagree. In short, if it had been a bad year for me, it was due to my own shortcomings

But the temptation to sink into self-pity was checked by a sense of gratitude. I shudder each time I hear about a friend's toxic work culture, which was horribly exacerbated by the requirement to work from home. This friend had escaped wildfires and Covid-19 in California, only to return to local bosses who expected her to respond to texts any time from 6 am to the wee hours of the night, and an

entire team of co-workers who feigned a show of enthusiasm and cheerfulness while being called into midnight meetings.

"I only work and snooze. I can't even go to the toilet," she told me, "so my husband does all the cooking, cleaning and looking after the kids after he's done with work." In comparison, living with John's cabin fever was a walk in the park!

There were news of close friends' relationships breaking up after living too closely for comfort. Families got into each other's way. Recently, one friend confided that her son had come out of a mood disorder only to find that Covid-19 had wiped away his gig jobs. Seeing him dispirited and aimless filled her with anxiety. He angrily brushed away all her recommendations.

"I'm just helpless. When you have a child, their happiness or sadness is your happiness or sadness. I would give anything in the world for him to be happy but it's just not possible. I can only pray for him."

A few weeks ago, I received news that a young girl I once mentored had passed away. I couldn't believe what I heard. She was barely in her twenties. I longed for closure, but her funeral was over. Probing turned up only a few details. Few people wanted to discuss the cause of death, but it appeared she had taken her own life.

The isolation Covid-19 brought has increased our emotional and mental vulnerability. It has exposed how little control we actually have over our lives and future. Humbled, I could only commit my setbacks and cares to God.

### Rolling out of Phase 1 and 2

"Level 9... 8... 7... Mummy, the lift stopped for the fourth time!" My children exclaimed in annoyance.

They were waiting to see their grandparents. We had already let an earlier lift pass because it had no room for us.

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# What is the gig economy and why is it controversial?

by Lee Chung Horn



There is a lot of talk about the liberating potential of digitisation and the sharing economy on labour markets. But the last word has not been said about gig work.

**Breathlessly hailed as the future of work, we should ask whether a lack of job security, lower pay and fewer benefits is the future we want to build?**

No job in present-day Singapore is more misunderstood than that of a gig worker.

A young friend from my church got into gig work last year. He said: "Many of my friends who graduated the same time were getting married. I wasn't and I hated parties because I'd be asked one question every time I met a table of strangers, 'What do you do?'"

"I'm a freelancer,' I'd say. Freelancing sounds better than gigging. But I knew people would still react

with awkwardness, pity, condescension.

"It didn't help that my family saw freelancing as a nice word for 'unemployed,' a stop-gap something for someone incapable of landing himself a real job."

## Gig and church

Truthfully the gig economy is, for good and bad, transforming our world.

Why am I writing this piece? Well, I wanted to understand the facets of gig work culture,

and its history. But I'm most interested to see how, as it transforms human culture, the gig world bumps up against the church and faith.

In Singapore, the number of people in freelance work has increased over the years, according to the annual reports published by the Ministry of Manpower. There were about 200,000 freelancers in 2016. Last year, the number was 211,000, or 9% of the workforce.

We don't know yet how this year's coronavirus pandemic will sift these numbers, as well as our beliefs about jobs, economics and life.

Our newspapers reported that more fresh graduates were

heading straight into gig work, instead of more conventional jobs. For example, the statistic that 2% of our fresh graduates were engaged in freelance work in 2017, compared to 1.7% in 2016.

I don't know if this small increase of 0.3% is able to bear the weight of the hand-wringing and trepidation behind it. Certainly, no local expert has offered an opinion yet. But think tanks around the world are sitting up and taking notice.

## Around the world

Last year, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics said that 55

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million people in the country were 'gig workers,' which is more than 35% of the U.S. workforce. That number is projected to jump to 43% by 2020.

The UK's Trades Union Congress says that one in ten British workers are in 'precarious work.'

People inside the gig economy are a diverse group. All of us immediately think of drivers who work with Grab, Gojek and Uber. We also think of people who work with FoodPanda, GrabFood and Deliveroo. If you have a furnished space to rent out, you could become part of the AirBnB family. If you bake cakes, make jewellery, sew tote bags, you could sell them using social media. If you could paint, why not hawk your art using a digital platform?

Perhaps you're not in your twenties. You're an experienced, 52-year old trainer or life coach who's quit your corporate job. But you have skills to sell, savings in the bank, and marketing savvy. You're walking out the door, and finally becoming your own boss.

### Defining the gig economy is hard

Many people now believe that the term 'gig economy' was coined during the financial crash of 2007, when so many people were forced to 'gig' or freelance to make a living by working one or more part-time, or temporary, jobs. Etymologically, this makes this phrase just a little more than ten years old. As personal experience and social phenomenon, 'gig' goes much further back, of course. People have been working gig jobs since the previous century began.

In his 1937 essay *The Nature of the Firm*, Nobel laureate



In the UK, Uber fought a court decision that forced the company to acknowledge its drivers as regular workers. In Argentina, Uber workers decided to form their own workers' union. Uber and Ola drivers in India, unhappy since 2017, had bought new vehicles thinking these companies would keep their promise of helping them generate high incomes as ride-hailing drivers. Instead the drivers could not pay back the loans because of fee and fare reductions. Photo by Joel J. Gonzalez, Unsplash

Ronald Coase identified the basic lynchpin of what would later become the gig economy: that firms should employ people only if the cost of paying outside contractors is higher than for hiring employees.

A gig economy is now understood as a free market system in which part-time positions are common and organizations preferably contract with independent workers for short-term engagements.

But the realization that we now have something that needs to be studied started recently.

### Why people get into gig work

Singapore's MOM uses several assessments. One classification cuts the gig army into three platoons: primary workers are those gig folks who engage in freelance work as their primary source of income; preferred workers are gig people who are happy doing freelance work; while non-preferred workers are the ones who would rather be in full-time employment, and did not choose to do gig work.

You can't talk about the gig

A gig economy is now understood as a free market system in which part-time positions are common and organizations preferably contract with independent workers for short-term engagements.

economy without talking about millennials, the generation that has been blamed, rightly or wrongly, with disrupting everything from housing to marriage. Many millennials say they gravitate towards gig work because they want greater work-life balance. But when boomers and people on the brink of retirement are drawn to gig work, they say it brings extra income without a major time commitment.

We have heard golden testimonies about how freelance work has brought happiness, financial independence, flexibility, and "finally, a chance to be true to myself."

But many of us also know a thing or two about the dark side of the gig economy: exploitation, enslaving,

poverty, and debilitating fruitlessness.

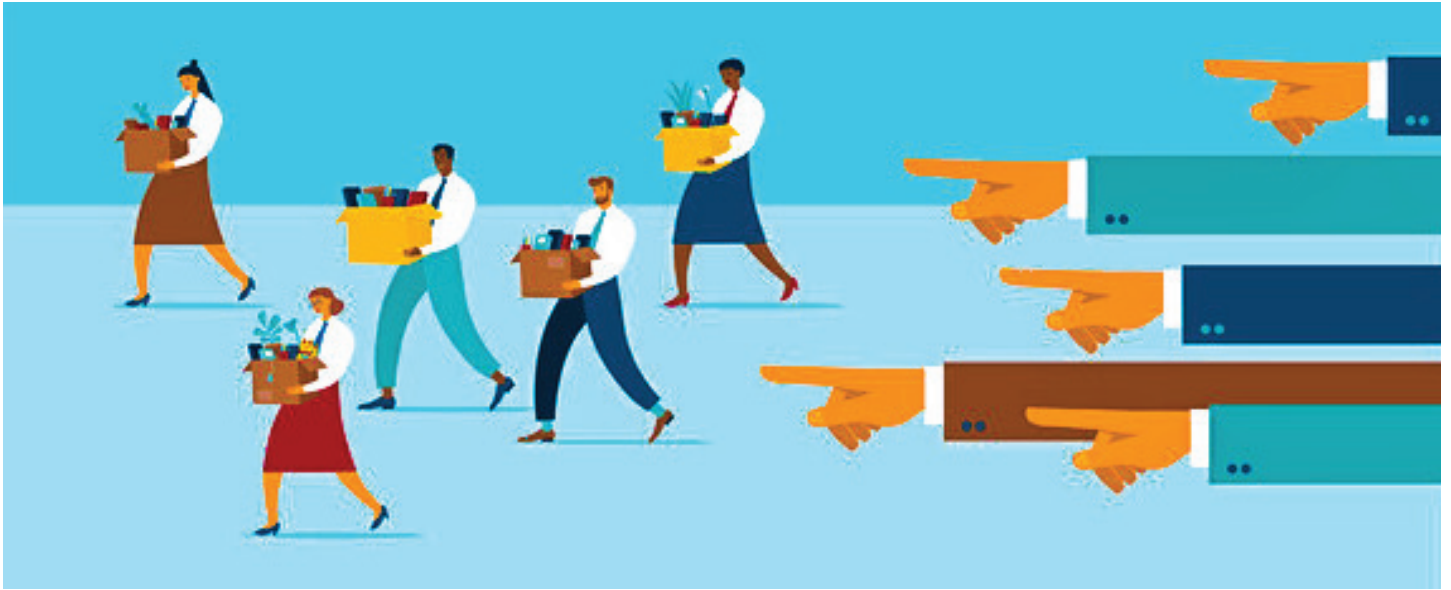
### The big leap of digital

To be sure, the gig economy isn't a new phenomenon. The thing that's startling is how fast it has grown. Thanks to the transformative power of the internet, it is a new frontier that every man and woman with a computer and a connection looks at with curiosity and desire.

Roughly fifteen per cent of independent gig workers use a digital platform for their work. For most gig companies, digital platforms are the spinal column for operations, markets, analysis and strategy. It's not just selling goods or services online. Freelancers find work online. These days, it's not unusual to find a job in Brazil, a potential business partner in East Malaysia, and virtual friendships that you feel you should explore because, well, why not?

But the gig economy is not the digital economy. The distinctive of the gig world is this: work is seen as discrete, bite-sized 'gigs,' and bosses and giggers have only fleeting obligations toward each other.

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As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc on economies around the world, unemployment has risen in Singapore. Many gig persons know that freelancing platforms like Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer offer gig jobs. But it's harder than it looks. You could monetise your hobby or skill-set, but are there many people who would pay for Photoshop or video editing in a recession?

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### The dark side

Why do studies show conflicting conclusions? Well, the findings change depending on which group of gig worker you're examining. Is it business consultants? Or food-deliverers? Or cleaners? A second reason: is the gig one that has volume, or has the economic climate made it wilt?

Still another reason: what type of remuneration are we talking about – a project that pays \$8600, or a gig that pays \$3?

Here are some figures from the U.S. 58% of persons doing gig work for their primary income said they had difficulty handling an unexpected expense of \$400, compared to 44% of those doing gig work to supplement their income.

Sixty-three per cent of full-time freelancers dip into savings at least once per month, versus 20% of full-time non-freelancers.

And this: people inside the gig economy have been found to be more anxious than people who work non-gig jobs.

### How the gig economy may change our religious institutions

In many ways, the sprawl of the gig economy stands apart from religious life and thought. The Christian gospel diagnoses and remedies the human condition of sin. The church is primarily called to restore and return man to God, redeeming society in all ways, so that God's name is given glory.

Church leaders will rightly remind us that Christians have lived through all manner of economic structures. These include the politics of Leninism where nobody owned anything or had any wealth he might call his own, the Labour governments of Great Britain, and the free capitalist markets the Republican Party of the United States defend. So, in similar manner, Christians as working persons would live through, survive and find a place in the new gig economy.

Indeed, Jesus was interested in what we treasure inside our hearts, telling the rich young man that a camel would find it easier to enter the eye of a needle than a rich man squeeze into the Kingdom of God. Jesus said nothing about communism, socialism or capitalism as economic ideologies and human structures.

But what would Jesus think if He saw that the gig economy

has brought about lower prices and a greater variety of consumer products? That the competitiveness inside the gig economy could improve services and goods?

A member of Singapore's Government Parliamentary Committee for Transport described the competitiveness this way: "With disruptions, incumbents tend to up their game.

"Taxi operators are doing more to compete, from partnering (other companies), launching their own apps, and even improving terms to retain their drivers as well as enhancing privileges for commuters."

The gig economy has paved the way for individuals and small companies to become more entrepreneurial. Resources that were inefficiently used – a car sitting idle in the parking lot, spare rooms in an empty nester's apartment – can now be tapped on to make money.

### Not saying too much is saying something

To modern economies, the notion of the desirability of greater efficiency is hard to assail. The church doesn't say very much about efficiency because efficiency, and for that matter, productivity and success, are not bywords in the Christian gospel.

Work is seen as discrete, bite-sized 'gigs,' and bosses and giggers have only fleeting obligations toward each other.

But our bashfulness is significant to a watching world.

It would be profitable to the church's witness if its theologians and leaders had something to say that was convincing to its members and the larger world. Something that shows how the radical, counter-cultural message of Jesus could expose, or unmask the other side of the 'more bang for your buck' dictum.

A few weeks ago, I joined a group of young adults in a bible study of the twentieth chapter of Matthew. Here, Jesus tells a story of a man of some means who goes out to find workers for his vineyard. He is out every third hour. Finding unemployed, unskilled men each time, he shoos them into his vineyard, saying he will pay one denarius for the work. When the hot day ends, and equal wages are paid to all, even the men who worked only one hour, an unhappy group confronts the vineyard boss. In his own defense, he says: "Did I not keep my

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word? Am I not free to set what I pay? I choose to be generous.”

I'm amazed the Bible has this story because I think this may be the nearest the Bible comes to an issue of compensation. Indubitably the point of the story is the infuriating generosity of God, not an examination of wage equity, unions, or workers' rights.

But a story where you get one denarius for one job is a story about gig work.

In recent time, it has become clear that gig companies do not bother fastidiously about structure and regulation. There are usually no detailed job contracts, no training, no employee welfare, no leave agreements, no sick leave, no career paths. Sure, as gig companies became more successful, its owners would begin to invest in all of these areas; in the process, becoming more and more like traditional companies.

Still, they are careful not to kill the freedoms that are key to their own success. Keep the doors open to people who want a ride on the gig life, limit employer-to-employee obligations, reduce staffing costs, stay nimble, never become a bloated mess.

### Readjusting

In April 2019, the European Parliament approved rules on minimum rights for gig workers, including the need to provide free training and keeping workers informed about their working condition from the beginning.

In a similarly drastic move, the U.S. state of California passed a bill last year requiring gig economy companies such as Uber and Lyft to treat gig workers as employees and grant benefits like paid time off and minimum wage.

Striking a balance is not easy. Labour economists say authorities should create an environment that allows for free entry and exit into the market, while avoiding the death knell of a heavy-handed approach.

### The thing about convenient and cheap

Quite clearly, we love the smartphone apps because they're convenient and cheap. We get a thrill when the pizza we order arrives at our door "in thirty minutes, or you can have it free, shoot the driver, take his car, or file a class-action suit."

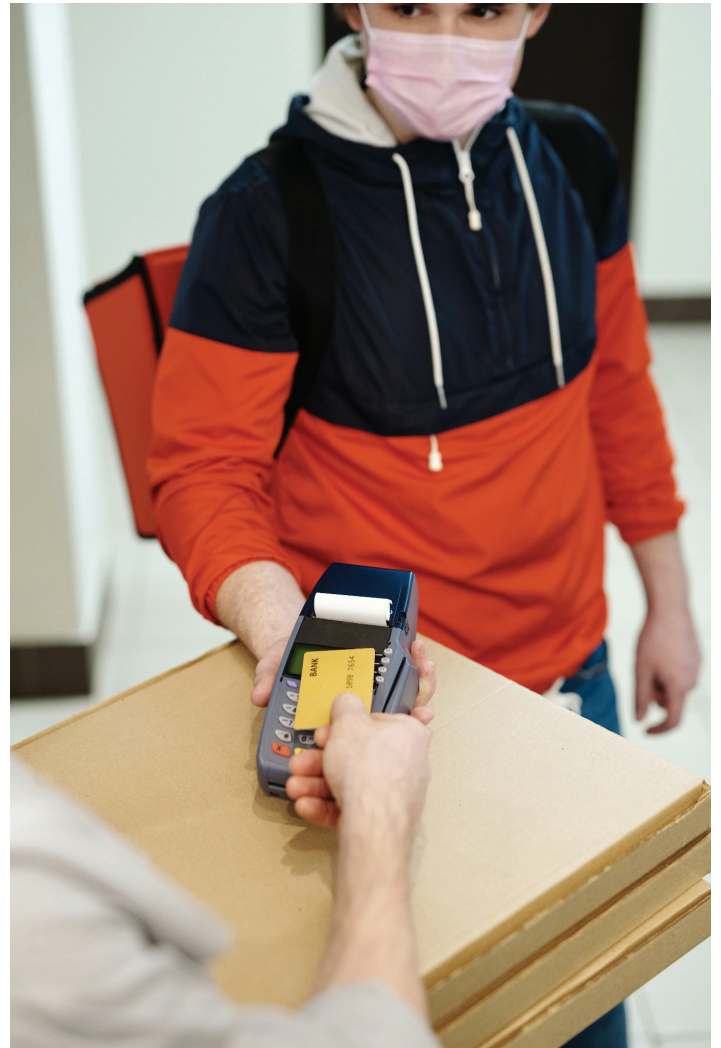
I'm quoting a line from *Snow Crash*, Neal Stephenson's 1992 dystopian novel. As end-users of the gig economy, many of us aren't its contractors. We have little interest in its layers, and we don't see that we are drawn in.

### God and justice

There is a clear, undergirding point to this discussion: Will the gig economy, as it takes deeper root, produce less structural inequality in society, or more? How should the church as an agent of God's justice respond?

The Bible speaks clearly about social and economic justice. In a simple sense, the word 'justice' means to 'make right.' The God of Jesus Christ cares relentlessly about the poor and weak in society (Ps 82:3), the stranger (Matthew 25:35), widows (Isa 1:17), subpopulations with little power like women and children (James 2:16). Don't cheat the worker of his wages, we are told (Lev 19:15).

Keep the doors open to people who want a ride on the gig life, limit employer-to-employee obligations, reduce staffing costs, stay nimble, never become a bloated mess.



Before Covid-19, food delivery was great when you had to burn the midnight oil in the office. Now it's perfect when after a long day working from home, you don't really want to leave the house. Photo by Norma Mortenson, Pexels.

If someone asks you for your tunic, give him your cloak too. (1 John 4:8, Matthew 5:40).

So at the points where the peculiarities of the gig economy rise up against these Biblical injunctions, the church has a clear instruction about doing what is right, and avoiding what is morally wrong.

In Singapore, a Tripartite Standard on Contracting with Self-Employed Persons was announced in March 2018. This guideline offered a set of voluntary employment practices on how businesses should go about contracting freelancers.

Recently, freelancers hired by the Singapore government will have a portion of their fees automatically transferred to their Medisave accounts under the Contribute-As-You-Earn (CAYE) pilot scheme. There are no plans yet to extend this to

Will the gig economy, as it takes deeper root, produce less structural inequality in society, or more?

the private sector.

If a gig job forces people to work unconscionably long hours, whose responsibility is it to draw lines – the worker, the gig organization, or the government? What does the church do?

If a pandemic or a recession reduces gig jobs, putting many people into economic hardship, what should our response as the church be? Should we mutter darkly that gig workers should know better? And turn away?

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### How can the church care for people in gig work?

Personally, I feel church leaders should try to understand what problems people in the gig world face. Sometimes, the problems are financial. They can arise suddenly. In these situations, the church must have the will to help affected persons and families, and not erect difficult hurdles that need to be crossed.

While the church is not the

state, and has no primary responsibility for directing a country's economy, we have to get closer to people because economic changes affect all our lives, and usually in unequal measure.

We should remember that people who work inside the gig economy may struggle with problems of discipline. Without a boss to report to can have a bad side. Even if you could truly wake up any time you want, and work only when you want – these are often myths – it will only be so long before you start to realise why a work routine is good (Prov 12:24, 2 Thess 3:10).

Church leaders should understand that gig people whose work scope is narrow may over time lag behind in

the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. Because of the nature of their work, they will take longer to acquire a breadth of experience. Surely this cannot be the job of the pastor? But when gig people who already have no work benefits or retirement benefits lose their gigs, say, in a pandemic or downturn, their lack of skills may mean they will stay unemployed longer.

### Our part of the future

Is the gig economy the future of work?

This question continues to intrigue economists, labour counsel, academics and business people. Most people believe it will not go away,

## What happens when a generation raised by the internet now begins to make a "life" that requires new steps outside that world?

but evolve. As a Christian, I urge that we also ask ourselves this question, because it will affect the church and society in expanding ways. We need to find an answer about what happens when a generation raised by the internet now begins to make a "life" that requires new steps outside that world. ■

Lee Chung Horn is a church elder. He works as a medical doctor.

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## The year when everything changed

Soon, more residents arrived, as we all waited in tense silence for the sole lift to inch its way down.

It arrived minutes later, spewing out too many masked neighbours than safe-distancing measures allowed. We piled in – determined not to miss another lift – and were followed by four other people.

I closed my eyes. *Oh well, extenuating circumstances. I suppose the authorities will understand!*

Later, I examined the metal barricade outside the other lift. No sign of any recent work being done. The notice had been torn down. No more promised completion dates. Nobody knew when the foreign construction

*"Walk in the peace and freedom... you're not being measured by God by how much you get done..."*

workers would resume work replacing the lift. But who could blame them? Far from home, confined behind walls and packed in small quarters, they were in a worse situation than we.

### Plenty and need

While my children bemoaned the start of 'normal' school in Phase 2, they seldom needed public transport so I didn't have to worry about them picking up germs on the way home. And though the zealous safe-distancing measures at Christianne's school cut her off from friends, she was very happy that, when the weekend came, her uncle and auntie would play hours of Nintendo Switch with her.

Hence, inconvenient as post-CB life was, it was undeniable that my family and friends were mostly sheltered from the storm. In fact, I thank God that one of my close relatives who had been unemployed for a few years after an entrepreneurship stint went wrong, actually snagged a job during the circuit breaker, and in his former industry, no less.

A friend who works in an MNC commented that the circuit breaker had been a breeze. There was plenty of space and laptops for her, her husband,

two children and parents in their home. "My mom cooks and my parents watch the kids, so I can pop downstairs in between working from home to play with them or enjoy home-cooked food. I could keep on doing this!" she said candidly.

The contradictions in our world have never seemed more stark. The number of lives lost globally has passed 1.6 million. Unemployment threatens countless families, and poverty and hunger rise. Yet stock markets soar unfettered. Luxury cars continue to be sold while home prices pursue their upward march. The old cliché seems true: the rich get richer while the vulnerable poor become further exposed. How unfair life is.

In the face of these mind-bogglingly opposite trajectories, I suddenly recalled a prayer I wrote in my diary at the start of the year. "Help me to always remember Your truth: that this world is fading and will face judgment, but we stand in the hope of Christ's return and His command to share it with others."

### How God sees us

In the light of this, my botched renovation plans and my students' bad examination

results fade in significance. So does my inefficiency, and lack of accomplishments. Perhaps this is why Paul could write, "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Phil 4:12-13)

I think this quote from John Piper brings comfort to stay-home-mums like I: "Walk in the peace and freedom that, when your to-do-list shatters on the rocks of reality (which it will most days), you're not being measured by God by how much you get done. You're being measured by whether you trust the goodness and the wisdom and the sovereignty of God to work this new mess of inefficiency for his glory and the good of everyone involved, even when you can't see how."

And so, for every person who has taken the time to read this, whether you are "abounding" or "brought low" in 2020, I pray that you may have the comfort of God's immeasurable grace, His mighty promises and everlasting love. ■

Michelle Cheong teaches English at a local secondary school. She will return to the classroom in 2022.



# 4 reasons why virtual church may be problematic

by Png Eng Keat

**The internet shapes modern society in many good ways. But it pumps a vast flood of spam, viruses, pornography and misinformation around the globe. This sheer flood changes interactions between human and human, between man and God.**

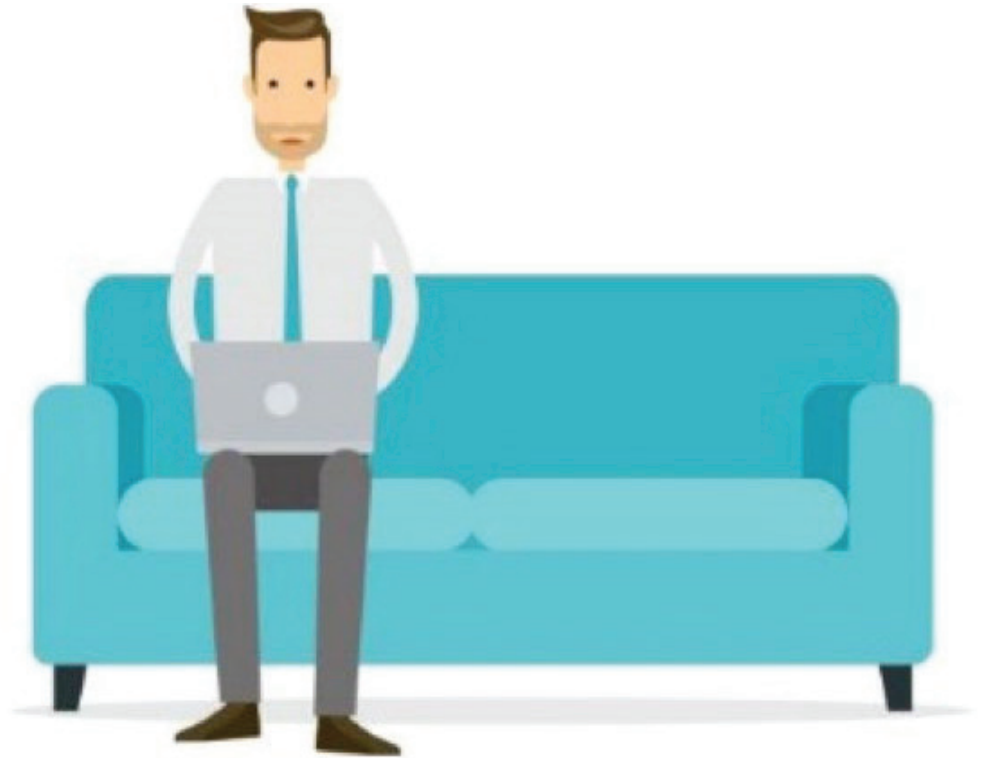
**W**hat should we think of virtual churches, that is, churches that exist only online?

This idea has been around for a while and indeed there are virtual churches that exist only on the internet. But virtual church has not been a mainstream phenomenon, and internet churches hover on the fringes of Christianity.

This changed when COVID-19 struck. What was a fringe idea became the only way to do church. Faced with an unprecedented situation, many churches in Singapore reacted by leveraging on technology. They took services online, either screening them over video-sharing platforms, or conducting real-time services through video conferencing. Small groups and prayer meetings also shifted online. Nearly all our churches became fully virtual, if only for a time.

But now that the pandemic has catapulted the idea of “church from home” into the collective consciousness of Christians, a new question arises: why not keep things that way? Why not go virtual for good? After all, the church still seemed to function despite its members not meeting in person.

There can be no doubt the internet can and ought to be



used by the church to the glory of God and in the service of his Kingdom. The sudden shift has opened new vistas into how the church can harness the power of the internet for good. However, the concept of virtual church is problematic.

It is simply not possible for the central activity of the church—the service on the Lord’s day—to go virtual permanently without compromising the received theology, the liturgical practice, and the faith formation of the church. Here are four reasons why virtual church is problematic.

**↑ A virtual church service embodies neither our understanding of Christ, nor His good news.**

The church is the body of Christ. The physical gathering on Sundays is our clearest expression of this fact. When

we gather physically, we testify to God the Son’s incarnation as a real human in history.

The Nicene Creed declares that, “For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” It is by assuming our human nature, that the divine Son heals our human nature and saves us; if the Son did not assume our complete human nature including our embodied nature, then humanity is not saved.

Now, if the body of Christ is a truly physical body, then the church as the body of Christ must also be constituted by a gathering of physical bodies. By being Christ’s body, the church is the extension of Christ’s incarnation through history. The good news we herald as the body of Christ is the truth that Christ came to

**If the body of Christ is a truly physical body, then the church as the body of Christ must also be constituted by a gathering of physical bodies.**

us as one of us, died for us as one of us, and was resurrected ahead of us as one of us.

However, when it takes a virtual form, the church tacitly affirms the ancient heresy of docetism, which is contrary to our faith expressed in the Creed. Docetism arose because the idea that Christ is both God and human was perplexing to the early church. Greek and Hebrew thought always understood

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that God could not possibly be human: what is eternal and unchanging cannot become temporal and subject to change. The categories of divinity and humanity were firmly opposed.

Therefore, some early Christians tried to resolve the tension by claiming Christ was only a virtual human and not an actual human. He remained spirit and merely *appeared* to be human. His suffering was suffering only in *appearance*. This heresy became known as *docetism* after the Greek *dokein* which means "to seem."

A virtual church service may be said to be docetic as there are only semblances of presence—the church is not present to anybody.

Behind the moving images and sounds there is nothing but electrical information making present what is, in fact, absent. Like a docetic Christ, a virtual church is merely an appearance that is unable to embody in itself the truth of the good news.

### 2 A virtual church destroys the meaning of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

When church services went online during the pandemic, many churches chose to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion (the Eucharist) online as well.

In an "online communion" the bread and wine, or some substitute like crackers and grape juice, are prepared at home in advance. Then as Christians view the service, they consume them at the presider's direction during the rite.

Certainly, the desire to uphold the centrality of Holy Communion in the service is commendable. However,



As one body, Presbyterian churches gathered at 2017's EP Easter Convention to share in a corporate meal of bread and wine. Photo by Draw by Light ministry, ARPC.

notwithstanding its popularity, or the good intentions behind it, "online communion" remains theologically problematic.

In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, St Paul considers how the gathered Christians are one body because they eat of the one bread in the Holy Communion: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*, or communion in Greek) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we partake of the one bread."

The sacrament holds together a relationship between the three bodies of Christ: the physically gathered church as the body of Christ, the single loaf of sacramental bread as the body of Christ (1 Cor 11:24), and the historical, human body of Christ.

In St Paul's mind, the sacrament holds together a relationship between the three bodies of Christ: the physically gathered church as the body

of Christ, the single loaf of sacramental bread as the body of Christ (1 Cor 11:24), and the historical, human body of Christ.

Through sharing in the one sacramental bread, gathered Christians share in Christ and are mystically constituted in Christ as one singular entity, that is, the church. Hence, true communion in the church is effected by the sacrament. St Augustine says the same in a sermon concerning the sacrament, "If you receive [the body and the blood of Christ] well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle says, We, being many, are one loaf, one body (1 Cor 10:17). That's how he explained the sacrament of the Lord's table; one loaf, one body, is what we all are, many though we be."

An "online communion" is an invalid sacrament because it does not contain the crucial component of physically gathering around a table, and sharing in the holy food given by Christ.

For those of us who are Chinese, we could think of the annual reunion dinner we have with our families. It is a meal premised on gathering physically around a common table to share in food and drinks together. Sharing in the meal together reaffirms and strengthens the ties within a family. This is why many Chinese who live abroad still make great effort to travel home to join their families for that meal, even though they

could simply make a video call.

Furthermore, we need to note that Holy Communion is not about the individual act of eating and drinking, or an interior sense of spiritual satisfaction. St Paul criticizes this error of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians. Unfortunately, this egotism is what "online communion" mistakenly promotes by insisting on eating and drinking without physically gathering and sharing. Holy Communion is, as the word 'communion' indicates, an intimate act of being with each other in Christ which comes through sharing in a holy meal given by Christ (and that is Christ himself).

Just as a reunion dinner over a video call is not a reunion dinner as there is no reunion, Holy Communion done virtually is not Holy Communion as there is no communion.

### 3 Having virtual church services diminishes the liturgy because it alters the church and its service.

On Sundays, the gathered church collectively offers a service of worship to God. The term "church" is derived from the Greek *ekklesia*, which refers to a physical assembly of persons belonging to a polity, while the term "service" is derived from the Greek *leitourgia* (liturgy), which refers to the service or work rendered by persons belonging to an *ekklesia*.

In the Old Testament, Israel assembled as the *ekklesia* to participate in the temple *leitourgia* as ministered by the

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priests. In the New Testament, the *ekklesia* is a priesthood (1 Peter 2:9) whose priestly duty is to gather to break bread and pray (Acts 2:42) as sacred *leitourgia* to God.

Liturgical scholar Irénée Henri Dalmais describes the "liturgy" as "the exercise of worship that is public in the fullest sense, that is, a worship offered in the name of the community, which acknowledges it as its own." For Dalmais, "the Christian liturgy has no place for passive spectators. As soon as the liturgical function begins, all who take part in it are in the official service of God as persons who have been regenerated in the innermost depths of their being and have been led as by a new act of creation into the divine world of which they are now citizens."

Without a public gathering where the presence and actions of every person matter, there is no participation and, therefore, no service.

Think now: what does a dispersed group perform inside a virtual service? There is, in fact, no assembly, only scattered viewers ensconced in their homes before a screen, whose actions are imperceptible to others and are therefore inconsequential to the service.

Without a public gathering where the presence and actions of every person matter, there is no participation and, therefore, no service. It is like watching a live soccer match on television. Whether you cheer for your team or not makes no difference to what happens in the stadium. You



When we celebrate Holy Communion, we partake of God's grace as a family of God. Photo by Draw by Light ministry, ARPC.

don't participate in whatever is happening live because you are neither present to the crowds nor, to the players. No matter what you do, you are merely an unseen spectator of a spectacle, and this is what happens in a virtual service.

Unlike in an in-person service, where our bodies are completely engaged outwardly in the complexities of a liturgy, and completely present to one another, and engaging in what is real together, participation in virtual church is limited and reduced to what could be seen and heard—an exchange of electronic information.

This leads us to the final problem.

### 4 When a church service goes virtual, it loses much of its formative aspect.

Truly, a worship service is not constituted only of its verbal content but also by external actions. What we do physically inside a service forms us as Christians. We may not be aware of this formative aspect because we place a premium on content: we are taught to care only about the lyrics we sing, the words we pray, and the Scripture and sermon we hear.

This obsession with content may be a result of our education system. However, when Christ instructed his disciples to "do [the Holy

Communion] in remembrance of [him]," he affirms that there is more to a church service than just words. Christ is brought to remembrance when the church performs the sacrament with words and also external physical actions.

What we do in a service matters as much as what we say or sing, because actions done or experienced are not value-neutral. A handshake conveys friendship and partnership; it creates its meaning through performance. A fist conveys anger and violence; when we shake our fist at someone, we create a relationship of animosity.

Furthermore, our external actions have an effect on ourselves. Try making a sad face and you will end up feeling sadder. Try making a happy face and you will end up feeling happier. From clinical research, we know that our emotions can be changed by changing our bodily expression. Hence, clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson posits that the simple act of standing up straight with your shoulders back changes how we feel and think of ourselves and the world because the act has tacit meaning. Acting physically "is to accept the terrible responsibility of life... It means willingly undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality."

Simple actions have an unseen

world of meaning that affect us and others at a profound level.

What we do in a service embodies and enacts our Christian values. And when we do these actions week in and week out, they form us as Christians. We become what we do. The liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw remarks that for the many centuries of Christianity, "groups of Christians have agreed that a weekly meeting over word and meal illumines their lives and focuses their energies. The symbols and rituals experienced on Sunday mean to birth and sustain meaningful personal lives and beneficial communal engagement."

The fullness of what is done and experienced by the assembled church is formative. However, by going virtual, the church loses this crucial aspect of formation, and worse, imbibes alien values contrary to the Christian faith.

What we do in a service embodies and enacts our Christian values. And when we do these actions week in and week out, they form us as Christians. We become what we do.

For example, few understand that the act of getting from home to church on a Sunday is already liturgical. This faithfully repeated act of leaving, travelling, and gathering symbolises a departure from the world to be gathered before God in a heavenly liturgy in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22-24). It is a little pilgrimage, which also implies that our life is a pilgrimage—it has meaning and a goal given by the liturgical act. And just as going to a service every week requires effort and discipline, so does a life that is lived toward God. ■

Png Eng Keat is a preacher of True Way Presbyterian Church English Congregation. He studied at Trinity Theological College.

# In short



Jeffrey and Felicia Wai became communicant members recently. Photo by Ang Li Yan

## Christmas baptisms

We welcomed 29 persons into communicant membership this Christmas. Ten adults were baptised, and 19 other adults transferred their membership to True Way.

One infant was baptised.

Covid-19 disrupted the church's schedule for receiving new members this year. The Easter Sunday baptisms and transfers were cancelled because the country was in lockdown.

Senior Minister Rev Lee Kien Seng explained: "When we received instructions to close church down, we had already completed the Easter classes and members' interviews.

"After I broke the news to the group, I felt disappointed for them all. I'm now so encouraged to see them come at Christmas."

Jeffrey Wai and his wife Felicia became communicant members on 26 December. "I had wanted to be baptised a few years back. But each year, I couldn't attend the baptism classes because I had to travel for work. Last year, despite the church trying to accommodate me, I still could

not make it to the classes," Jeffrey, 46, said.

When the pandemic forced the classes to go online, he finally succeeded.

"Covid-19 was a blessing in disguise."

Felicia, 44, transferred her membership to True Way. She said: "It helped that the classes happened on Zoom. This meant I could stay home and keep an eye on the kids. We saw that some class members tuned in while making their way home. Some other members would be finishing their dinners when the classes started.

"I was baptised in Christian Assembly in 1994. But from 1996, I left. I came to True Way around 2005."

Undergrad Nicole Tham, 21, was among the baptism candidates. "My dad and mom are veteran church members, so I grew up in True Way. I remember Sunday School. When you're 12, you feel awkward doing the action songs, but looking back now, I have the most beautiful memories of many things. For example, right after worship, we would run to Cozy Corner

to grab biscuits and drinks, which we shared during bible lessons.

"I'm now a member of the Navigators at NUS. At the start of every year, we draw a list of ten things that feel 'impossible' to us. For me, getting baptised was impossible because of my fear of sharing my testimony.

"But the sisters at Navigators challenged me to share my thoughts and I got some practice in my small group."

Nicole, who participated in church musicals and served as a puppeteer in the church's puppet ministry, said: "I pray to have an earnest desire to

listen to God and the Holy Spirit."

## New church leaders

At this year's annual congregational meeting on 23 Aug 2020, the church elected to office the following leaders: Rev Tan Cheng Huat as associate minister; Chng Say Tiong as serving elder; and Joel Seah, Soh Lay Suan and Koh Guat Hua, all as deacons.

Belinda Lee and Chua Li Hua completed their terms as deacons.

## Farewell, Rev Ronnie Ang

We bade farewell to Rev Ronnie Ang in August 2020. Beginning with an appointment as associate pastor in 2005, Rev Ang served as a member of the pastoral team for about fifteen years. He came to True Way in 1992. He had worked as an engineer before enrolling as a student in Singapore Bible College from 2002 through 2005.

Rev Ang was involved in a small church plant project called 'Punggol 21.' He also worked with the church's young adults ministry, meeting and teaching young people in tertiary education or entering work life. ■



Rev Ronnie Ang greeting worshippers at this year's combined lunar new year service. Photo by Erick Kencana.



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TOGETHER is produced up to three times a year. Current and previous issues of TOGETHER are available at [www.truewaypc.com](http://www.truewaypc.com)