

TOGETHER

TRUE WAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ENGLISH CONGREGATION

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Dividing us by Lee Chung Horn



A sea of Singapore flags at a national day parade at the National Stadium. Photo by Rogan Yeoh, *Unsplash*.

COVID-19 has thrust a sword through Singapore, dividing us in many areas. Our churches have not escaped vaccine differentiation, one of the pandemic's most worrying incisions.

No country seeks division within itself. Every nation lauds unity. As a concept, unity is always enshrined in a country's constitution. The preamble to the U.S. Constitution begins with the three words, "We the people." Ratified in 1788, the three words are a deep cry, a reaching toward unity.

It's not just about constitutions. In Singapore, many of us grew up reciting a pledge to build a society founded on justice and equality, a country of happiness, prosperity and progress. This resounding vow, all 38 words of it, builds our national consciousness, ringing out across school assemblies and national day parades. It was written in 1966 by our founding fathers. One united people.

Like countries, the Church speaks of unity, longs for it. No church wants to be divided against itself. I have never heard people at church forums say division is unavoidable. I have seen Christians quickly push arguments out of sight

History is filled with examples in which groups of people, usually minorities, are identified and separated from the larger populace. They become the "others".

with an appeal to church unity.

The pandemic's sword

But COVID-19 has thrust a reluctant sword through Singapore, dividing us in many

areas. The Singapore church, though an altogether different organism, has suffered many cuts.

The starkest cut came arguably on 27 September with the disallowing of unvaccinated church people from joining the vaccinated assembly in Sunday worship.

The reasons are sound. Vaccine differentiation – in its simplest understanding, treating unvaccinated people differently from vaccinated people – springs from a protective motivation. We are told it does not punish the unvaccinated.

But it could feel that way.

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Dividing us

History is filled with examples in which groups of people, usually minorities, are identified and separated from the larger populace. They become the "others". From 1939, Adolf Hitler began rounding up Jews, removing them from their homes and putting them into ghettos, where they lost jobs, the liberty to go shopping, and the right to mingle with non-Jewish friends. Finally, six million Jews lost their lives.

Vaccine differentiation in Singapore has nothing at all to do with Nazi Germany. The rules churches and religious organisations are required to abide by in their meetings are not unreasonable or egregious. But anti-vaxxers in the West have already claimed centuries of Jewish anti-semitism to look like martyrs. This is a false equivalence.

So what has happened in church? Well, the new vaccine-differentiated measures that were added to our safe management measures now allow for up to 1000 vaccinated worshippers to gather, but this number falls to only 50 if there were unvaccinated worshippers present in the group. Unvaccinated persons are excluded from joining groups larger than 50. The reasoning is that joining larger groups may put the unvaccinated person at risk of contracting COVID-19.

The TraceTogether app on our smartphones is now a flaming sword that guards the entrance to Sunday worship. You can't sidle in.

Nor would you want to. Not if you, like unvaccinated persons I have spoken to, feel any combination of these emotions: embarrassment, marginalization, or hurt.

It has been three months now. Unless this rule changes, is it conceivable that our unvaccinated church members will find it harder to join future Easter and Christmas services, future church camps, the combined Lunar New Year service, and more?



The first COVID-19 vaccine was given to a 91 year old British woman on 8 December 2020. By 7 December 2021, 8.24 billion doses have been administered worldwide. Despite their demonstrated safety and benefit, there remains a large group of vaccine sceptics around the world.

The vaccine

When news came late December last year that a vaccine would soon be available in Singapore, I registered to get vaccinated as soon as possible. I discovered that many doctors at our hospital made the same decision because my name was only called on the third day.

Were we not worried about the newness of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine? Well, doctors are used to reading thousands of words a day, and the published early research we examined was good enough for us. This was a global crisis. We were experienced enough to know we had to act.

Because we take care of patients who rely on us for advice and counsel. If we didn't read the data quickly and exhaustively, if we chose to dawdle and sit on the fence, how would we lead our patients?

I didn't want to tell a patient: "You decide for yourself. Don't ask me." I didn't want to have to tell her: "I'm not obliged to answer your question, but if you must know, I've not taken the vaccine."

Who are the unvaccinated?

After twelve months of the vaccine year, I have garnered

some observations about the unvaccinated. Who are they?

Firstly, they are not homogeneous. As I got better at identifying the traits of these people, I'd also been surprised in a few instances by a person's non-vaccinated status. But there are many sub-tribes.

Secondly, the months sifted the group. As March became June, and June became September, and September became December, the unvaccinated group discarded, in succession, the vaccine-tardy, the vaccine-hesitant, people who wanted to wait "till 30 of my friends have taken the jab and survived," the people who naively thought the crisis would end in nine months, people with genuine allergies, the folks who flirted with, and shared, fake news, the ones who whimsically believed their bodies would crumble under the needle, people with imagined allergies, people who worked at jobs that didn't require them to leave their homes, and the ones who didn't have a regular doctor to talk to.

Right now, only 15% of our total population remains unvaccinated. Actually, we can break this figure down to children under 12 who account for 9%, leaving a 6% group who is holding out. Singapore has done very well. Most people got vaccinated

For nearly a year, I have seen people running from rock to rock. But the rock won't hide them.

without fuss. But from August, we saw a lot of persuading. Some people refused to yield, but woke up in September to the reality of big numbers and deaths. These people finally rolled their sleeves up, muttering under their breath that if the vaccine made them ill, they would sue the government.

At the bottom of the pile we have a 6% number. Who are these people? Well, it is useful to first state who they are not. They are largely not people with medical exemptions. This means they don't have serious medical illnesses that made vaccination a life-threatening action for them. Even lay people now know that cancer patients can safely take the vaccine. Kidney patients, heart attack patients, lung patients, lupus patients. Pregnant women, too.

So the unvaccinated will be revealed, as the sifting continues, to be people who can take the needle perfectly safely, but just don't want to be vaccinated. Their anti-vaccine stance isn't supported

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by medical exemptions.

They don't go to the doctor, because when the doctor tells them that they can be vaccinated safely, they are dismayed, because they can't hide anymore.

This means that this late in the game, if you still have not taken the needle, you have to be a vaccine refuser, or vaccine denier.

For nearly a year, I have seen people running from rock to rock. But the rock won't hide them. This has happened in many countries. In the U.S., 3 out of 10 adult Americans have yet to receive a shot. Perhaps there is still safety and power in a number like 30 percent. But in Singapore, when the number is now 6%, where can you, if you're a member of a shrivelling minority, shelter? In churches, when services are differentiated by vaccine status, where do you go?

Under attack

As much as anti-vaxxers can be strident and unapologetic, as a minority, they're also under attack. They are blamed for many things.

In the liberal West, where trust in government and public institutions is thin, and human rights inalienable, unvaccinated people can stand tall. In Singapore, apart from a vocal fringe, the unvaccinated know it's safer to be quiet and hide.

Our respective national and cultural histories are different. We read that some U.S. churches have openly decried masking. Some American pastors have refused to stop or limit Sunday services. In the U.S., there are anti-vaccine pastors who teach their flock how to get a legal certificate on the grounds of religious liberty. In Singapore, our churches and pastors do not do this. This is a mercy.

In May, a patient told me of her neighbours who steadfastly refused vaccination. But it wasn't just father,

mother, daughter and son. The family refused to let their Filipino domestic worker get vaccinated, too. They knew the national vaccine program welcomes all persons on long-term work passes because the coronavirus doesn't care if you're Bangladeshi, Vietnamese, Thai or Chinese national. Every vaccinated person protects the country.

This story shocked me. But my patient's story took a gleeful turn. She said that when her own vaccinated domestic helper heard the story, mistress and helper decided quietly to register the first helper for vaccination. The little plot succeeded. The vaccine-refuser family never knew their household now has a vaccinated soul.

A weak chink

The phrase "No one is safe until we are all safe," was first used by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres. It reminds all of us that the strongest chain can be undone by a weak chink. This fact bears repeating as the cumulative global number of deaths is expected to rise past 5 million as the year ends.

Mandates around the world

From August onwards, there was a wave of international news that employers were starting mandates. If an employee refuses vaccination, he loses his job. Employers like UPS, Goldman-Sachs, Delta Airlines, CNN, Uber, Walgreens, Cisco, Amtrak, Starbucks, McDonald's and many others made announcements.

On November 2, when the U.S. military's first deadline arrived, the U.S. Air Force discharged 40 service members who refused vaccination. It is now going through the files of thousands of others who failed to get a coronavirus vaccination. A spokesman said: "Now that the deadline has passed, there's a clear line to begin holding people accountable."

In our country, the first announcement of a vaccine mandate for employees was

couched in softer language. The Public Service Division announced on November 5 that public officers who choose not to get vaccinated despite being medically eligible may be put on no-pay leave, or not have their contracts renewed. PSD is Singapore's largest employer with about 153,000 officers.

A joint advisory from Ministry of Manpower, NTUC Congress and Singapore National Employers' Federation predated this announcement. The advisory said any job termination from an employee's inability to perform his contracted work because of his unvaccinated status would not be wrongful dismissal.

These changes to employment terms may come to churches and religious organisations. Why should we receive different treatment, if all of us want to see the light at the end?

More questions

In Singapore, our hospitals have been turned upside down when an unrelenting surge in daily infections began in October. Many people, not just doctors, are beginning to ask a series of hard questions. For example, should hospitals treat the unvaccinated differently? The kernel of this query: if we have the resources to save only one patient who's battling COVID-19, should we save the unvaccinated one or the vaccinated one?

This troubling ethical question is hard to answer. In medicine, we try to save every man, regardless of race, education, religion, whether he could pay the ICU bill or not. Saint or sinner. But what if he's a man who has refused to take the needle?

How should weary doctors, running out of strength and compassion, treat the unvaccinated?

As we begin to open up our country, should the unvaccinated minority hold back the vaccinated majority?

A bone-weary doctor friend said: "Enough of waiting, shall we pass a law to mandate

vaccination for persons 60 years and above, the high-risk group who may well die? If we can't mandate vaccination for the 35 year old who will fight us, should we just save the older people with a mandate?"

Another doctor friend said: "You can't do that. Are you prepared to lock up the white-haired grandmother?"

Peace and a sword

In March 2020 when the coronavirus outbreak struck, Californian megachurch pastor John MacArthur complied fully with health orders requiring churches to close, telling his congregation that Christians should live peacefully with the government.

Defiance of safety measures is a "foolish" thing to do, he said, that makes "Christianity look anything but loving."

But by July, MacArthur had changed his stance, reopening his church against orders. His people came back. A statement on the church's website said: "Jesus would want the church to reopen. Christ, not Caesar, is Head of the Church."

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

This led to Los Angeles County bringing a lawsuit against MacArthur and his church for holding large, indoor services in violation of the county's health order. Within hours, lawyers representing MacArthur and the church countersued the state, county, and L.A. city officials, alleging that the order violated their First Amendment rights.

The legal battle ended in August 2021 with the county forking over \$400,000 in damages to MacArthur and the church.

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Whatever our view is about MacArthur and his defiance of county laws, we might see in it the cosmic war that Jesus warns us about.

Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:34-39)

Jesus says "I have come to bring a sword". To divide. He was talking about discipleship. What else did He mean?

The meaning of unity

I think unity among two or three people, or people in a group, gets its virtue entirely from something else. Until it is given goodness or badness by something else, unity itself is neutral.

Paul and Silas singing together in their prison cell for Christ's sake (Acts 16:25) is an example of good unity. Pilate and Herod united in ridicule for Jesus (Luke 23:12) is not good unity.

We know, more than just creedal words, our unity is given us by the Holy Spirit. "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13).

Jesus's words in John 17 describes for us the profound spiritual unity between the Father and the Son, and with those whom God has chosen out of the world (John 17:6). "I ask that



The reality that America has become a divided country was visible to the world when pro-Trump protesters stormed the U.S. Capitol to contest the certification of the 2020 presidential election results. The result was five deaths, at least 138 injuries, 15 hospitalisations, and \$30 million of property losses. Four security officers died by suicide after the riot. Photo by Roberto Schmidt.

they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21).

Because the Church teaches us that we are all one body and should behave like one body, we are uncomfortable with difference, alternate views and dissent. But our world is filled with complex, pressing problems, so Christians do not all hold one view on issues like climate change, sexuality, poverty, and justice. But not one of these issues has forced us like COVID-19, pressed us to decide where we stand. COVID-19 has revealed the fault-lines in every country, and they aren't pretty.

In this time of state-mandated divisions and vaccine-differentiation, how may we who call Singapore our home relate to people who turn their backs on the things we hold to be important? We want an answer because we have watched with concern the violent January 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol when supporters of former president Donald J. Trump took part in an undemocratic act, refusing to accept the results of a democratic national election.

We want an answer because the tongues of even American

particularly the words *E pluribus unum*, promising "Out of many, one."

We want an answer because we are afraid that lines would become rifts.

As Christ followers, how do we hold on to Christian unity, whatever it is, and whatever it is not? If a Christian brother has lived in a fake news silo, should we hold him at arm's length?

As Christ followers, how do we hold on to Christian unity, whatever it is, and whatever it is not?

Loving across lines

That answer is easy. It is no. We cannot dismiss that brother. We must not hold him at arm's length. But this stance can be hard to practise. We should love across differences those who are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ. Hate serious blunders, not sincere brothers. We are never good at this. The socio-political climate today makes it even harder.

Not only loving, but also serving. For the sake of a witness to the world, we must seek out ways to show love for

brothers and sisters who stand on the other side of the line, who are angry at us. The line that now causes pain may yet be removed, though I think this will not happen for some time.

Whichever side we are on, we must avoid the language of 'persecution' to describe our circumstances. We must also remember how Jesus often unsettled our certainty that God is on *our* side. When Jesus says "Whoever is not against us is for us," he blurs the lines we want to darken, reminding us to "be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:50).

We often teach our people that unity in the church is attractive to the fractious, watching world. When everything is nice and dandy and we can all come together in church, there is perhaps not too much that impresses the world. But when we're at a place where there is a real difference, where our passions are roused, where there is a majority and a minority pitted against each other, and we exhibit observable love, then that is something that the world can see. It may be the thing that may lead the world to judge that these ones really are Christians, and that Jesus has indeed been sent by the Father. ■

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

A big move

by Tan Yi En

Her husband abroad for studies, a young mother of two small children finds a deeper faith.

Come 28 December 2021, my family and I will be moving to Hamburg, Germany.

This year has been quite a journey for our family, as we learned to trust in God's goodness and His perfect plan. In early 2020, my husband Benjamin was selected to attend an overseas Command and Staff College course. Ben is a career logistics officer with Singapore Armed Forces. Command and Staff courses are one of the highest levels of formal military education.

This was an amazing opportunity for Ben's career. We knew the best time for a family to pursue any overseas education would be when the children were young and not yet in the school system. Also, being a stay-at-home mum, I didn't have to worry about leaving formal employment or breaking contracts.

Ben and I have two children. Esther is now three years old and Joanna just turned one. When we first got the exciting news, COVID-19 was beginning to spread all around the world. There was a lot of uncertainty. Nothing could be confirmed quickly, and our plans changed again and again over the course of the year. Would it be France or Germany? When the global infection numbers waxed, waned, and waxed again, we didn't know what to do, and how to plan. Were we still going? How safe would it be for our young family? What were we leaving? When were we leaving?

For these reasons, 2020 became a year of learning to wait on God and to trust in His plan for us.

It was also a year of tests. Of our faith. Ben described our year of pondering and decision this way. He said: "God has opened the door for us. All we need to do is to have the faith to walk through it."

Ben spent a lot of his 2020



The Tan family: Benjamin, Esther, Yi En and Joanna.

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year attending multiple courses. This allowed him to be at home a lot of the time. Esther and I were very happy. When Joanna was born in October 2020, I was grateful that Ben could help with so many things now that there was a little baby in the home.

This was also the time when we became more certain he would be travelling to Europe for the 24-month course. We also knew he'd have to spend twelve months studying and learning a foreign language before beginning the course.

At last but not yet

We were excited when we were told we would leave

in January 2021. The course would be in Germany. But more uncertainties surfaced. Vaccinations in Singapore were starting to roll out in January 2021. Ben would of course get vaccinated, but was it safe for me to get vaccinated, since I was still breastfeeding Joanna? What does the research say about COVID-19 vaccines and breastfeeding? After another wave of COVID-19 cases appeared in Germany, we asked: was it safe for Esther and Joanna since they were both young and unvaccinated?

Would I be able to care for two small children in Germany without the help I was getting from my mother and relatives?

After much prayer and discussion, we decided that Ben would leave for Germany alone in April 2021. The girls and I would stay in Singapore. We both agreed that the safest place for the girls and I would be at home in Singapore with our families.

The thought of my being separated from my husband, and the children from their

father was very hard. But we decided that being apart for the first part of Ben's overseas stint, when he would be learning the German language, was the best thing to do.

It's been eight months now after Ben flew to Germany. The long distance relationship was hard, for both Ben and us. We've learned to adapt to a routine of video calling multiple times a day, snapping lots of photographs and videos, and sending many voice messages to each other. This helped us get through the months. Technology allowed the girls to still remember Papa and talk to him, and for Papa to "watch" the girls grow up. We're so thankful for technology, so our family could still read books and pray together every night before bedtime.

Prayer was a nightly routine for our family when Ben was still with us in Singapore. (There's a time difference, now, but it hasn't stopped us.)

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Esther still says: "I'm so sad my Papa is in Germany. I miss my Papa." But she also adds this: "I will see my Papa in December in Germany, and I will run, run, run to him and give him a big hug." She says this every single day.

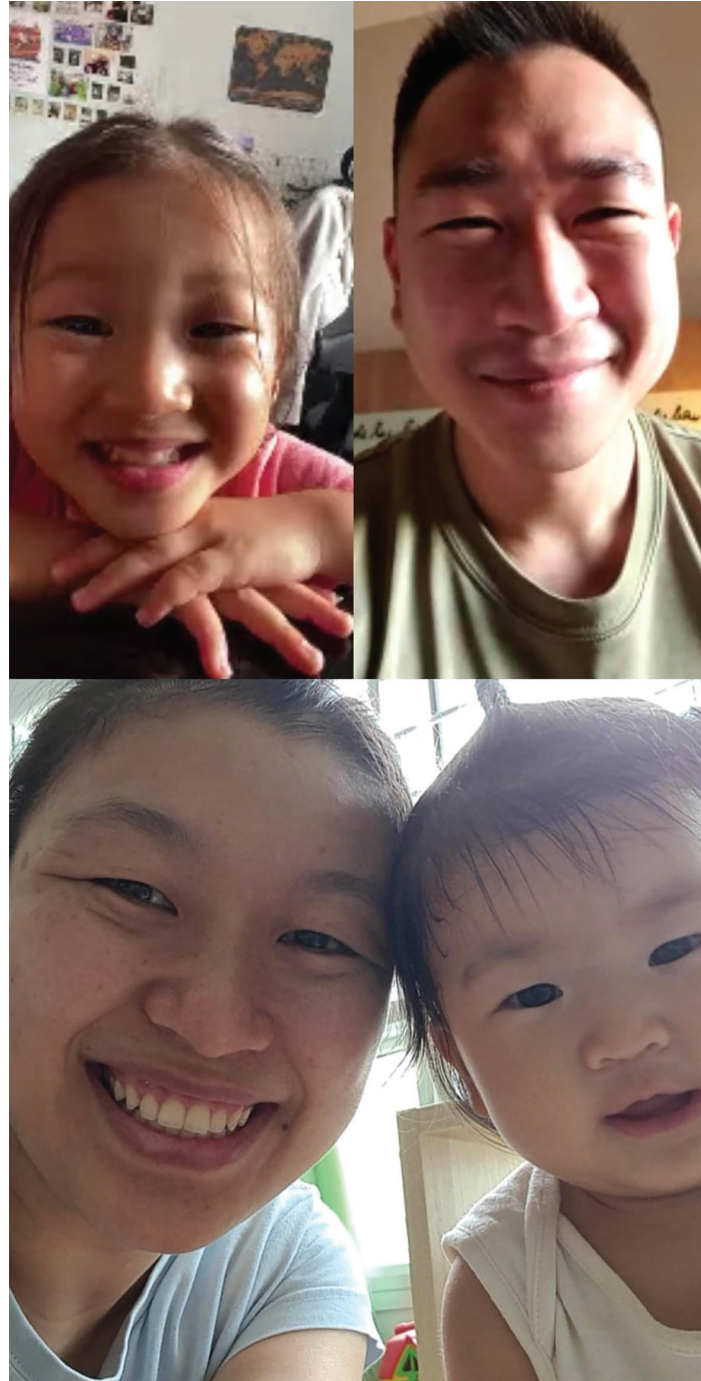
We have learned to treasure every moment we have with each other, and not to take each other for granted.

My village

While Ben lived in Germany, the girls and I have relied so much on 'our village' - our extended families, our neighbours, our discipleship group, and friends - for practical help, emotional support and prayer. My parents and sisters are my greatest source of help and comfort. I had initially made plans for my mum to stay with us the first week to help with our transition to "single parent" life. Then one week became two weeks, and then almost two months of Mum staying with us. Having Popo (grandma) around meant we had delicious meals, and I could also spend individual time with Esther or Joanna without making the other child feel left out.

Weekends were mostly spent with my parents and my sisters, so the girls always had a lot of attention and fun. Even after Mum moved home, our support system was still very strong. Meals were mostly prepared by Mum, and she was always ready to come around to help. The girls and I also spent time with my in-laws once a week. We met with neighbours and friends for play-dates and meals. We thank God for giving us a 'village' to lean on.

Esther and Joanna are generally very healthy and rarely needed to see the doctor. However, in the eight months, we had to deal with stomach flu, fever, and vomiting. My dad contracted COVID-19. But we also witnessed God's goodness and graciousness to us. With each health scare, my parents and



Meeting online every day helped the family get through the months.

sisters readily helped, taking one girl while I took care of the other. They helped send us to the clinic or the hospital. I thank God for our church community and Cornerstone DG, who prayed with us through every scare.

The most memorable health scare was when Esther slipped in the toilet right after her bath and suffered a deep cut under her chin. Blood gushed out, scaring both Esther and Mum. Having managed similar situations when I worked as an early intervention teacher, I knew we had to rush Esther to A&E. With a phone call, Dad

arrived at our door to send us to hospital, while Mum stayed at home with Joanna. Esther received seven stitches under her chin, tears running down her face. I saw it was painful but Esther was brave. Cleaning the wound at home frightened Esther, and this became an uphill battle each time. Through every step, we turned to Jesus and prayed. Esther's chin has healed very nicely, and the scar constantly reminds us of how God always watches over His sheep. We thank God for healing Esther, and reminding us that He is our Healer. Jesus being our healer was taught in a Sunday

school lesson one week. Esther understood this immediately. She sang the song "Jesus is our Healer" every day. She told anyone who would listen to her that Jesus healed her chin. It didn't matter to her one bit if they were believers or not. Such a simple yet powerful testimony of God's work in her life!

As I looked back, I saw God's hand.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep your going out
and your coming in from this time forth
and forevermore.

Psalm 121

I learned that being a "single parent" meant learning to prioritise what was important, and sometimes closing both eyes to things that aren't as important.

New lessons

As you read this, Ben will soon be flying back to Singapore. Then on December 28, we will leave for Germany, all four of us this time. Our 'village' will not be with us in Germany, but we know that their prayers will cover us.

I learned that being a "single parent" meant learning to prioritise what was important, and sometimes closing both

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eyes to things that aren't as important. The house is not as clean as I want, but I learned to thank God for every mess because it meant that the girls and I probably had a fulfilling day together. The girls did not

care if the house was clean or messy, if the food was fancy or simple, and if our day was packed with activities, or just free and easy. All that mattered was that I was there with them, that I loved them. I learned that I didn't have to always live up to any of the high expectations I had set for myself.

God taught me many lessons of patience and of grace – holding a crying, clingy baby while cooking; hearing Esther shout 'No!' at her little sister; feeling angry at their whining and crying. I have lost my temper and snapped at the girls so many times. But I thank God for His mercy and grace when He prompts me to seek

forgiveness from my children.

Being a "single mum" isn't easy. But being their mama is a privilege. I pray God will change me. ■

Tan Yi En, 33, joined YZ when she was a youth. After graduating YZ, she continued to work in YZ. She has served there for close to twenty years.

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A cuppa

churches were doing, how their churches were surviving? Were they open in sharing their struggles?

It would be over casual conversations rather than intentionally calling them up to find out how they were doing. Everyone laments about the difficulty of persuading their people to come back for physical service. Worshippers seem to be comfortable attending online service from home.

What good have you seen come out of the pandemic? Any changes in your wishes and desires?

I have been encouraged by three observations. First, it's heartening to see different people rise up to care for one another.

When sister Clarissa Chan* came down with cancer, the whole DG formed a chat group that later incorporated even more people to encourage her. They constantly sent her words of encouragement and even prayed with her over Zoom, given it wasn't so safe to visit due to Covid and her health state.

When my dad's laptop camera stopped working, his DG leader came to his place not just once, but twice, to try to fix it. In the end, it was a hardware issue and the laptop had to be sent for repair. The fact that his DG leader made the effort to come so that my dad could participate meaningfully at DG meetings was commendable. I understand the other DG members would also help him

whenever he had challenges using his laptop.

When an elderly church member was discharged from the hospital, a sister from church was all ready to work out a roster so that there was a group of people who would deliver meals to her home. In the end, by God's providence, there wasn't a need to execute the plan. But it was so heart-warming.

I don't know whether these anecdotes are a good representation of what's happening across the whole church. I hope they are.

Second, I'm very encouraged by the giving of tithes and offerings. I thought because of COVID-19 affecting livelihoods, we may see a decrease in giving. But the people of God have continued to give, and when we asked for donations to help Pannee, our missionary in Thailand, build a church in her village, the amount raised far exceeded the initial target. I really thank the Lord for the generosity of the church family.

Third, as I have mentioned above, the pastors cannot do church on their own. We really need the support of the members. And I'm again encouraged by those who have risen up to serve so that church life is not disrupted. Even the librarians have made it possible for us to borrow books from the church library!

Recently, we had to rewrite our Sunday duty rosters because there was a government advisory discouraging people above 60 from attending religious activities. Thankfully our young people stepped forward to fill the shoes of these people. Our Meals-on-Wheels

program went on, and the Sunday services too.

To do all this, our people have to be creative, flexible and adaptable. And I must say that they have indeed risen to the occasion.

I must confess that it's not all good and rosy. There are people who feel left out or disappointed with how things are run in church or in their DGs. Some think that the quality of our worship service isn't as good as other churches. I just want to say that those serving are trying their utmost, juggling competing demands from various fronts. Pray for them.

I really desire to see our people coming back for physical worship now that the country is entering the endemic phase. As I have said, we exercise responsibility in observing the safe management measures but we should also exercise some degree of faith for we walk by faith and not by sight. We must therefore learn to trust in God's protection and sovereignty even as we gather for worship.

What do you find is the hardest part of pastoral ministry? What is your biggest joy?

Changing people's convictions is hard. I could share from the Word of God and say this or that is not my idea, but something clearly commanded by God. But when people are set in their way of thinking, it is difficult to change them.

When they explain why they're still insisting on their own ways, they almost expect me to empathise with them. Otherwise, they think the pastor is legalistic, or he is

not compassionate enough. Sometimes, members fail to understand that pastors are prophets who have the responsibility to speak the truth on God's behalf. We have to be accountable for their spiritual well-being.

No wonder the author of Hebrews exhorted his audience to submit to their leaders so that the latter's work is a joy and not a burden. If work becomes a burden, it would also not benefit the church. Of course I need to pray more for the Holy Spirit to work powerfully in people's hearts. At the end of the day, it's the Spirit who convicts.

Another challenge is to be a peacemaker, the moderator whenever there are diverse views. There are so many groups of people interacting with each other in the church family – pastors, leaders, worshippers. The relationships within each group and between groups can be complex. The dynamics, complicated. Yet we are told to preserve the unity of Christ's body in the bond of peace.

On the other hand, what gives me joy is to see individual Christians growing in their faith and commitment to the Lord, being more intentional in holy living, becoming more active in service and evangelism. I long to see the DGs thriving, supporting each other, going a second mile to carry each other's burdens. What warms my heart is also to see organic groups rising up from the church family to serve the wider community, each taking their own initiatives and letting God use their gifts and talents so that many more will come to know the love of God. ■

*Clarissa Chan was called home to the Lord on 20 August 2021.

A Cuppa with Rev Lee Kien Seng

A Cuppa is a column of candid conversations on personal faith, current issues in the True Way church family, and the church at large.



Rev Lee Kien Seng meets a group of young adults after Sunday worship. Photo by Lee Chung Horn.

TOGETHER: Firstly, how did COVID-19 affect you, your sense of self, your family?

REV LEE KIEN SENG: By God's mercies, COVID-19 did not adversely affect me. Even during circuit breaker, I was quite happy working from home and occasionally going out to buy meals for the family. I thought it was a wonderful time when all my three children could be at home, and Gaius had just returned from the U.S. Only my poor wife had to crack her brains over what to cook for us as the weeks flew by.

Where ministry was concerned, I also adapted. Thank God for technology, I could still interact with people face to face via Zoom. If the family was open for me to visit, without breaking any safe management measures, I brought holy communion to them. It's wonderful to be able to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the homes.

Then there's of course

WhatsApp, and more recently, I also started using Telegram, thanks to the young people in my discipleship group, where I could have meaningful conversations with various individuals.

Meetings and classes have all gone online and attendances are encouraging. In fact, I suspect people are more willing to show up from the comfort of their homes without the need to travel to church.

Thus, doing ministry through social media is viable although I still very much prefer a physical meeting with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's great. How did COVID-19 affect your pastoral team? Did anyone struggle executing programs? Anything that the pastoral team needed to unlearn or relearn during the pandemic?

Everyone was willing to put their hands on deck.

Some were more cautious than others because they had various existing health conditions, and none of us is getting younger. No one shied away from work and ministry. Contrary to what some may think, workload has increased rather than diminished.

We continue to abide by MCCY guidelines. We also have to work closely with the Chinese church so there're many constraints to work around to ensure that different aspects of church life could still carry on.

We tried to be creative doing ministry online. We were conducting Sunday school via Zoom and resourcing parents with useful materials via WhatsApp. We were conducting DGs with the youths and young adults, again over Zoom, but always seizing opportunities to meet in person whenever we were allowed to do so.

Prayer meetings continue to take place on the first

Wednesday of every month and the breakout rooms enable us to pray in small groups just how we did it in the MPH, pre-Covid.

Our outreach projects have gone online like the mid-autumn evangelistic event. We even had a virtual newcomers' get-together where we sent snack packs to homes as a gesture of our welcome and love.

Sunday worship is a very important part of our church life and organising it has been the most challenging thing. Every time MCCY comes up with new advisories, we have to adapt accordingly. We have made the utmost effort to open up the church for worship service, sometimes accommodating more people, other times less, but always making sure that we provide a sacred and safe place for God's people to gather physically to worship Him. We made online services available because not all could come back at the same time. This was another big set of challenges.

Pastors definitely cannot do it on our own, so we are thankful for all the people who stepped forward to serve so willingly and sacrificially.

We learned to be flexible and adapt; we learned to listen to one another more; we learned to accommodate each other's style of doing things; we learned to trust in the sovereignty of God. Man can plan but ultimately it's the Lord who determines our steps.

Indeed, we are dependent on God every step of the way. Did you and your team find out what other

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