

TOGETHER

TRUE WAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ENGLISH CONGREGATION

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The Starfish Schools By Joyce Peh

On 19 October 2024, in partnership with Starfish Asia, True Way Presbyterian Church English Congregation sent out its first mission team to Lahore, Pakistan. The team of six comprised Pastor Tan Cheng Huat, Pastor Edwin Wong, Anna Puah, Matilda Fong, Serene Tan and me.

With the exception of Matilda and I, the team was visiting Pakistan for the first time. Geraldine Lee, who was the veteran and the one who knew Lahore the best, had gone a week ahead to visit her friends in Pakistan. She had worked in Pakistan missions for about forty years, and joined us after we arrived.

Our trip had straightforward objectives--to find out how we could better support the needs of the Christian local schools in Lahore, to bring encouragement and joy to the children, and to expose more of our church members to the work done by Starfish Asia.

Starfish Asia is a UK charity headquartered in South London. It raises and channels financial resources to partners in Pakistan that provide help to the country's minority Christian community.

So, our itinerary included school visits, organising two rounds of inter-school competitions for students aged 13 to 15 years old, and time with the local workers



Unlike Singapore where education is compulsory, school is often something you dream of in Pakistan.

and Rob Bavington, the CEO from UK who was also in town.

What should a classroom have?

Pakistan is not Singapore. If you have travelled only to places like Korea or Japan or Bangkok, Pakistan will deliver a shock to your senses.

We were in Lahore to visit schools, so here are some facts about education there. A considerable number of Pakistan's children still don't attend any type of schooling and those who are in schools don't often perform well. It's a sober fact that far from being compulsory, school is something to dream of.

According to the Global Monitoring Report, Pakistan

It's a sober fact that far from being compulsory, school is something to dream of.

falls into one of 14 countries where the number of out-of-school children exceeds one million.

continues on page 2

continued from page 1

The Starfish Schools

Pakistan's national leaders know that the problems in education are complex, and working solutions few. The country's first governor-general, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, has said: "Education is a matter of life and death for Pakistan. The world is progressing so rapidly that without requisite advancements in education, not only shall we be left behind others but may be wiped out altogether."

Education is a matter of life and death for Pakistan.

Preparing for the mission, we learned about the country's need for materials, classrooms, and teachers. We knew that government budgets were small, that many students could not afford the fees to stay in school. In rural regions, being illiterate, parent aren't convinced about the importance of education. Their kids drop out early to find jobs to support the family.

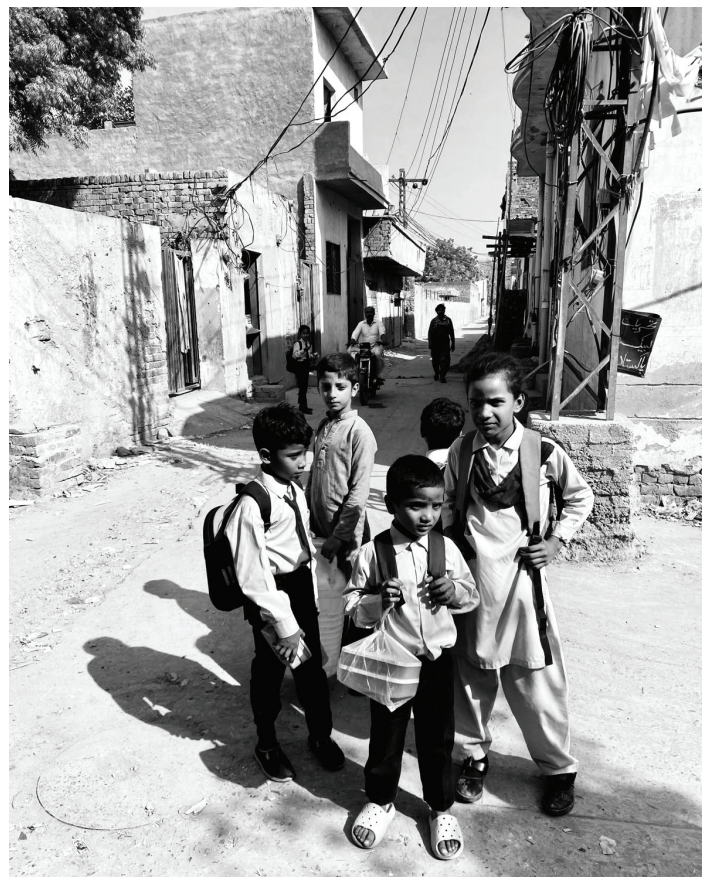
But the visits to four of the six Starfish schools encouraged us. Time and distance did not allow us to visit the remaining two schools.

In the schools, we saw and felt something more powerful than the dust and lowliness. Something that rose out of the meagreness, and stirred our hearts. I think it was the indomitable spirit of the children and their teachers. A spirit that says yes to life.

Thanks to the generous financial support from our church members over the years, we saw that school facilities have improved from my first visit in 2018. It's amazing what a new coat of white paint, nothing



What should a classroom have? If we don't have computers or projection, is a roof enough, and chairs and walls?



The lanes are dusty and rough in Lahore, but not to us.

fancy, did to brighten the classrooms.

Working with other volunteers from the UK, we have over several years worked at training the Lahore

teachers. The classrooms we saw seemed more organised, the lessons we heard were easier to follow, the instruction seemed less random.

We saw that the older students were more proficient in English. Some could read really well, but not all. Proficiency varied from school to school. We weren't sure if this was partly because of varying teacher competency. The younger ones spoke English less well. The pre-schoolers, for instance, could say, "Good morning, teacher. How are you today?" when we walked in the classroom. But not much more.

We also realised that some teachers were better at English than others. Lessons were conducted in English but sometimes teachers and students spoke Urdu.

Space was a big constraint and there were still not enough teachers. This meant that two or even three levels could be having classes in the same room, and taught by one teacher.

Space was a big constraint and there were still not enough teachers.

How did this work? Well, the teacher would choose to teach one subject for a given period. She would teach the younger level first, and then increase the depth and complexity to the higher level. When the teacher was teaching the younger kids, the older level would be receiving a refresher before they got meatier stuff. Also when one group was being taught, the other group could be doing worksheets, or reading their textbooks.

A few teachers told us that they could manage this because a trainer had taught them how to organise their timetables and rework their lesson plans so that they could teach students from different levels, all in the same period.

continues on page 3

continued from page 2

The Starfish Schools

Needless to say, everything can feel terribly distracting. Some classes were held in the inter-connecting corridors, so you would hear shouting, singing, as well as the alphabet being recited. You would see teachers and children going up and down the stairs.

If your classroom had a door, the teacher would shut it. If you were in a space with no door, you grow accustomed to not having a door. You make do.

What was also heartening for me was to see many familiar children. A few kids I met in 2018 were still in school! I asked them: "Are you happy that you are still in school?" Every one of them nodded vehemently.

Girls from small families in rural areas are at particular risk of leaving their schools. When a girl turns nine, it is common for parents to send her to work in a factory or farm. When they are older, some parents take them out of school and marry them off.

If a choice has to be made, parents will keep a son in school over a daughter. In Pakistan's patriarchal society, sooner or later, girls are married off. You will lose a daughter anyway.

The female labour workforce participation rate in Pakistan is about 22.5 per cent in 2019. The world average in 2019 was 52.6 per cent.

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The students come from different levels but they share one teacher and one classroom.

We heard that principals and teachers are doing their best to communicate with parents about the importance of sending their children to school. We were glad to hear more parents are now keeping their kids till matriculation. Some of them now make it to higher education.

Inter-school competitions

During a brainstorming session with Rob and national director Danishmand Wasti in April this year, a suggestion was made that a non-academic program be created as none of the schools had the resources for co-curricular activities and competitions. Something fun!

This was so unlike what we have in Singapore. So we came up with four activities – art, drama, captain's ball, and Bible quiz.

More than 350 students and teachers participated in the two-day competitions. We ran one competition in Lahore, and the other in Gujranwala, a town which was a 2-hour drive from Lahore.



New friends and old friends – nothing like the sight of a few familiar faces.

The art and drama competitions showed how creative and artistic many of the students were. One teacher who served as a judge for the art competition remarked: "I really like art but when I was younger, no one encouraged me to pursue it because the focus was on me doing well academically. Now I'm so glad these children are being encouraged to do something outside of their academic work. We know we need to be pragmatic, but this is so good!"

Students who participated in the Bible quiz diligently memorised four sets of passages in English. While

we weren't quite sure if they understood what the passages were saying since they could not always answer the accompanying questions, we knew that the Spirit of God will use His Word to illumine the hearts of these young ones.

We weren't sure what to expect with captain's ball. The games were chaotic! It seemed that Pakistanis were not very familiar with captain's ball. Before the competitions, we had sent a video to every school explaining the rules and how the game was played.

continues on page 4

continued from page 3

The Starfish Schools

But it became clear very quickly that not everyone understood the rules, or in the same way.

After a few boisterous games where there was a lot of shouting, the referee and students got things sorted out. After that, it became very exciting to watch the students, even the girls, running up and down the field, chasing fearlessly after every point. The sight of the teamwork filled our hearts to bursting with pride.

After all the events were over, Pastor Cheng Huat shared with the participants how they could display the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. The Bible quiz was based on the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Everybody was then treated to lunch and the winners were rewarded with medals. As I watched the young faces around me, I realised that this day brought a huge joy into the lives of the students.

Grandma, grandma

The finale of the day was a celebration of the life and ministry of Geraldine Lee. Geraldine who has worked quietly since the early 1980s is a beloved figure and familiar face to many of the teachers and students.

I don't know with great



The six Starfish schools send their children to two days of competition and fun.

certainly how long Geraldine will continue to work with Starfish Asia. Perhaps she will step back a little. The trip was a kind of closure, a time for goodbyes. At the end of the games, when the team from Starfish Pakistan presented a tribute to her, there were long cheers from the ground. The children were calling out, "Grandma! Grandma! Grandma!" Geraldine was very loved. Quietly, she had earned love and trust.

Who would have thought that we were in Lahore now only because 40 years ago, a Singapore woman heard God's call to go to Pakistan? Geraldine certainly didn't

The trip was a kind of closure, a time for goodbyes.

know her road. But God knew. His plan was to send her to Pakistan and then to True Way to tell us.

In my heart, I can still see and hear the children calling out "Grandma! Grandma!" It

was a touching moment for me. As ministry workers, we don't always get to see the fruit of our efforts. But God decided to let Geraldine see just that. ■

Lee Chung Horn contributed reporting.

Joyce Peh has been a full-time staff worker with Singapore Youth For Christ from 1999. She came to True Way in 1993, first joining the evening service. All photos were taken by her except otherwise indicated.



Captain's ball is not a competition if you don't put your heart in it. Photo by Matilda Fong.



From the 80s, Geraldine Lee (left) has visited Pakistan numerous times, making many firm friends in the country.

First mission trip to Japan

By Corinne Liu

True Way commissioned and sent out her first missionaries to Japan six years ago. Because the Japanese people are overwhelmingly Shinto or Buddhist, Sean and Hooi Yin Tan knew they had their work cut out for them. They learned the language. They served in a small Japanese congregation. They got to know people. But their efforts didn't change the truth that gospel work in Japan isn't easy. The church mission team who went recently to Japan also knew these realities but the project turned out to be one charged with **honesty and courage**

The six of us - two seasoned mission-trippers and four first-timers - set off for Kyoto on 16 September 2024, armed with a smattering of Japanese greetings, several kilos of kaya and coffee powder, and a large dose of excitement and apprehension.

We were excited because this was True Way's first mission trip to Japan to provide support for Sean and Hooi Yin in their outreach efforts at Kusatsu Church. Sean and Hooi Yin Tan are our church missionaries.

But we were also apprehensive. Despite many months of planning, practice and prayer, we wondered whether the Singapore-themed outreach events would resonate with the intended crowd.

Then there was the language barrier. Apart from Sharon



Working together deepens friendships—the team from True Way, Sean and Hooi Yin and their three children, and the Kusatsu church.



Our 100Y set meal.

Ang, the rest of us were not conversant in Japanese. Also Wong Chee Seng, Liu Hann Fang and I are baby boomers, Sharon and Edwin Wong are Gen Xs, and Irene Ng a millennial. Would we be able to work cohesively as a team?

Praise God that our intergenerational team bonded well as we used

our diverse gifts to support one another. There was openness, authenticity and unity as we engaged in our nightly debrief sessions over 7Eleven eclairs and drinks. Our fears about language being a barrier proved to be less of an issue than we had imagined. Tang Ern Chi and Joyce Peh, who were in Kyoto at that time, and

Praise God that our intergenerational team bonded well as we used our diverse gifts to support one another.

continues on page 6

continued from page 5

First mission trip to Japan

Sean, Hooi Yin and their children helped us bridge the gap in our interactions with the Japanese. Non-verbal gestures also went a long way to communicate our love and concern for our Japanese friends.

One of our outreach efforts was to support Izumi Church in reaching youths who drop in at a community club by serving a 100yen meal and engaging them in Singapore games. Izumi Church is helmed by a Korean pastor. Sean has worked with them and felt it was good to get us involved.

We decided on Singapore-style yangzhou fried rice and a Merlion cookie + banana dessert for the meal. For games, we picked chapteh and paper ball. It was difficult to gauge how much we had to cook as we had no idea how many youths would come. As the night unfolded, students, undergraduates and some young adults trickled in. Some tried their hand at the games, some just did their homework or simply chilled but almost all had the 100yen meal. To our amazement, what we had cooked was just enough for the young people who came, the volunteers and staff. There were no leftovers!

We wrapped up the night with "shingaporu chahan, totemo oishii desu" (Singapore Fried Rice is very delicious) ringing in our ears, thankful for God's direction and guidance.

Non-verbal gestures also went a long way to communicate our love and concern for our Japanese friends.



Youngsters at Izumi Church enjoying the 100yen meal.



Our "Singapore Day" flyer was designed by Irene Ng.

The next two events were Singapore-themed outreach events. One was held at a community hall to reach out to the Douwa Chiku community and the other was held at Kusatsu Church.

Both events were intended to generate awareness of the church and to grow ties with the local community in hopes of potential opportunities to share the gospel with those who came.

We were expecting many to come as the church had printed and distributed hundreds of flyers to promote 'Singapore Day'.

The day of the Douwa Chiku outreach, we waited in anticipation for the crowds to come. Goodie bags filled with a tract and old-fashioned Singapore biscuits were ready to be given out as welcome gifts. The stations for five stones, pick-up sticks, children's crafts and tote bag painting had all been set up and ready for their first eager participants. Kaya butter toast and kopi were waiting to be served.

Fewer people than we had expected turned up, though. We wondered why. Later we were told that because of the exceptionally warm weather that day, an advisory had gone out urging people to stay home. Yet, at the end of the event, we realised that the small number was a blessing in disguise for a variety of reasons. It allowed us to be more intentional in engaging the children and adults in the craft and tote-

continues on page 7

continued from page 6

First mission trip to Japan

bag painting activities. With our limited manpower, we would not have been able to cope if the numbers had been huge.

Also, the oven toasters took turns to break down resulting in a reduction and delay in the toast that was being churned out. God knew how much we could handle! His ways are higher than our ways.

God knew how much we could handle! His ways are higher than our ways.

At both the community hall and Kusatsu Church events, we had the opportunity to share a slice of Singapore through the rendition of some of our local songs in Malay, Chinese and English. It was a delight to see the Japanese clapping along to the tunes and enjoying the music. They were especially fascinated with the angklung which Ern Chi brought all the way from Singapore to play at the events. "Because He Lives," sung in Japanese, resonated with the people who came, and many adults rose to their feet to join their children to sing "My God is so Big," complete with actions, perhaps getting some sense of how "there is nothing our God cannot do".

We too can testify that there's nothing God cannot do. He took us out from our comfort zones, sent us to a country whose language we could not speak and challenged us to share His love with the people there. But we were not alone. God went ahead to pave the way for us. From the moment we landed at Kansai Airport to the welcome sight of Ern Chi and Joyce waving our



Our team got the participants in the Douwa Chiku event to sing along to "Our God is so Big".



At the youth centre, there was something for everyone who popped in.

train tickets to Kyoto, to the last day when they waved goodbye to us at the Kyoto Station, we had no doubt that it was divine providence that both of them were there to help us navigate the challenges of transport and language. They were the additional hands and feet that our lean team so badly needed to carry out the outreach activities that we had planned.

Through it all, we learnt that man may plan but ultimately, it is God who directs our paths. We learnt that no

Man may plan but ultimately, it is God who directs our paths. We learnt that no matter how prepared we were, things sometimes did not go according to plan.

matter how prepared we were, things sometimes did not go according to plan. We had to accept what happened and make the most of it. We

had to let go and let God work His good and perfect will in and through us.

This mission trip has opened our eyes to the needs of the Japanese and the challenges faced by the church there. May we press on in prayer for them, availing ourselves as Christ's hands and feet in helping the Japanese to find their true belonging and identity in the God who created them. ■

Corinne Liu is a church elder and a retired educator. All photos by Liu Hann Fang.

A Cuppa

with Pastor Charles Lee

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

**Jakin Heng for TOGETHER:
Tell us how you first came
to True Way, and what
made you want to stay.**

Preacher Charles Lee: I came to True Way through BJ [Benjamin Jonathan Tan] when I was in Secondary 3. But I'd become a Christian earlier when I was 10—yet I hadn't found the courage to ask my parents if I could attend church. At some point however, it became clear to me that if I wasn't rooted in a church, I wouldn't grow, and wouldn't be an effective witness to my parents. So I asked BJ to bring me to his church. When he introduced me to YZ (YouthZone), I felt so blessed to be part of a Christian community. I was hungry for Christian community and all it promised, not having experienced it before.

It was your aunt who'd brought you to the faith, as you mentioned once in a sermon.

My maternal aunt shared the gospel with my fourth sister and me over weekly dinners at her house. After dinner, we'd go to her room and she would testify about God.

How did she continue to journey with you in the years that followed, before you found a church community of your own?

Well, she continued to talk to my sister and me about Jesus, so I continued to be influenced by her faith. And by God's providence, He placed me in ACS (Anglo-Chinese School), a mission school. I was strengthened by the Christian presence there—and that was where



I met BJ.

When did you first wonder if God was calling you to serve as a pastor?

I was given opportunities to teach in YZ when I was in my late teens. Internally, I experienced an inexplicable joy that came from teaching God's word. Externally, I received affirmation from leaders that what I shared was edifying. Subsequently, Pastor Kien Seng, who was youth pastor at the time, suggested that I should seriously consider full-time paid gospel ministry.

"Full-time paid gospel ministry"? What does that mean?

Glad you asked! I think the term "full-time ministry" that we sometimes use to refer to pastors and missionaries can be misleading and unhelpful. Because all Christians are full-time gospel workers. But it's also necessary that

some individuals focus on the work of the gospel in such a concentrated way that they most certainly won't get their livelihood from the world. Instead, they are supported by the generosity of others. I'm thinking of 1 Corinthians 9:13–14, Luke 10:7, Philippians 4:15–18.

In your role at True Way, you assist in ministering to the youths in YZ—where you started out. How has YZ changed over the years, and what has encouraged you so far in the course of your ministry?

A lot has changed about youth ministry, because a lot has changed about youths. It's hard to overestimate the impact of the combination of smartphones, social media, and expressive individualism. Our youths have never lived in a world without these. And mental health and social awareness have declined among youths.

What has deeply encouraged

me, however, are the faithful characters who have served in this ministry week in, week out, in beautifully ordinary ways. In a world that prizes the sensational, these YZ leaders are wonderfully countercultural examples to the youths.

I've also been deeply encouraged by how robust YZ has become in terms of its teaching curriculum, programmes and general expertise. I'm grateful to be stepping into something so well developed, with good gospel work done over the years.

While you help out with youth ministry, your main responsibilities in the church are with the young adults. As a young adult, you did your undergraduate studies in London, where I understand that you were an active part of the Overseas Christian

continues on page 9

continued from page 8

A cuppa

Fellowship (OCF) there. Did anything that happened during that time leave a lasting impression on you, or change your life?

I must say I'm so thankful to the Lord that I got to serve alongside the OCF facilitator, Mark Jit, who mentors the presidents of the OCF centres. His example of godliness and focus on God's kingdom was deeply formative for me.

As a renowned professor in the field of virus and vaccine modelling, he's one of the most brilliant individuals I've met. But he's also one of the humblest individuals I've ever known. His thoughts, words, decisions, affections and relationships are deeply formed by the gospel. I often came away from my interactions with him realising that I needed to grow so much more.

And of course, I got to know Christabel more fully at OCF, so yes, it did indeed change my life!

You already felt clear that God had called you to full-time paid ministry when you met Christabel—how did she feel about it?

Even before we started dating, I made it very clear to Christabel that my plans were shaped by God's call to me to teach the Scriptures. She was never against it, but over time her personal conviction about my calling grew.

You read economics in university, and would go on to work in a bank. But how did that fit with your sense of calling to be a pastor?

I had known that I wanted to work for a while before

attending seminary, and considered being an economist or market analyst or even a management consultant but those doors never opened. In the end, the only door that opened up after dozens of job applications was the management associate programme at Citibank.

But the banking world is often a difficult place to be a Christian. I struggled with trying to share the gospel, being a godly testimony, finding like-minded Christian bankers, avoiding the love of money, finding purpose in my work, and so on. I found myself longing for deeper theological and communal support in my experience of the corporate world.

This is why one of my hopes as a pastor now is that we can encourage Christians in the corporate world to live out the realities of the kingdom of God in the workplace.

Did that sense of calling waver at any stage during your banking career, or did it only get stronger?

Setting a timeline helped. Christabel and I realised that for our consciences, we needed to set a timeline of working for 5 to 10 years before I entered seminary. I expected my eventual transition into seminary to be very painful—and so it was. Also, it was nice to earn a banker's pay for a while, and to have my parents stay proud of me. Importantly, the timeline was necessary to keep me from backing out of my plan.

At the same time, when banking work felt deeply futile to me, the timeframe reminded me that I needed to be patient with my job for a while more.

I shared this with trusted friends to keep me accountable. During those years, I think there was a general deepening of my

conviction of entering the ministry—because I was teaching and serving in church quite actively. That said, it wasn't smooth sailing by any means. There were difficult conversations to be had, especially with my parents.

What were some of these conversations like?

They were extremely upset with my decision to quit my lucrative job for what they felt was "useless work". They tried every means to dissuade me. It was very painful. But over time they realised that I wasn't going to reverse course. And I think they needed time to grieve the loss of their "successful" son. They also needed to know my relationship with them wouldn't change. They didn't lose a son—I tried my level best to assure them of that. By God's providence, the birth of our son Caleb was a gamechanger. His arrival helped mend my relationship with my parents. This is yet another story. *(He laughs)*

Of the things you learnt and experienced at TTC, what did you enjoy the most, and what surprised you the most?

This is difficult to answer, there were too many things!

Though it shouldn't, what surprised me the most were the friends I made. I think as we get older, we sometimes wonder if forming deep friendships is still possible – especially for guys. I am so utterly grateful to God that in TTC I have friends that I can be completely transparent with, that I can trust in the safe space and godly counsel that these friends provide.

I thoroughly enjoyed my modules in New Testament and in Theology. I remember moments of ecstatic joy where I was struck by what I was reading or writing. Moments that drove me to my knees in worship. God's plan in Christ

is so awesome, and I use the word in the traditional sense of the word, not in the rather shallow way that people use it today.

I also thoroughly enjoyed interacting with my lecturers. Seeing the coherence in their teaching and life did something to me. It gave me a varied stock of images of what a servant leader looks like. Even in just these few months at work in church, I've drawn from their examples in various pastoral tasks.

Coming on board True Way's pastoral team has involved two transitions for you: from a regular churchgoer, albeit in a position of leadership, to a member of staff; also from seminary to pastoral work. How have these two transitions been going for you, over the past few months?

It's been tough emotionally. In terms of busyness, there are many tasks to be done every week but I'm relatively ok with that because banking was also intense. The difficult part is the emotional energy needed, especially when there are tragedies in the church family or when there are spiritual attacks.

With regard the latter, I think the NT teaches that while we're at work, the devil is at work too. It seems to me, though I'm not absolutely certain, that he uses thoughts of discouragement and bitterness, among other things. That's why the Lord's Prayer is so precious to me. Pray for your pastors.

You mentioned leaders in YZ who have been "beautifully countercultural examples to the youths". Who, or what, are some concrete examples of this?

There are people who joined

continues on page 10

continued from page 9

A cuppa

YZ and never left.

In a world of “continuous partial attention” – a world where people don’t want to give too much of themselves to anything lest they miss out on some elusive something else – in such a world, I’m so thankful for people who show up week in, week out, to give of their lives to the youths. I think I won’t mention their names so that they won’t blush.

I know that these YZ leaders have experienced the constancy of God’s grace. Perhaps they have seen how

their own leaders served and committed to walk with them. Commitment begets commitment, so I hope the younger folk reading this will learn to foreclose their future options and commit to what truly matters for the Kingdom. Sorry for being preachy – but then, I’m a preacher.

You also described YZ’s teaching curriculum and programs as “robust”. What do you mean, and how do you think they have been helpful to our youths?

Robust because there have been lay leaders and pastors who have put their hand to the plow in YZ. Robust because there are some solid

foundations like the teaching curriculum and how to manage things like transitions from U12 to YZ.

With regard to the YZ curriculum, a youth who comes in at 13 and leaves at 18 will cover topics like OT Survey; What is Scripture, Gospel, Liturgy, Prayer; the Storyline of the Bible; the Apostles Creed; the Ten Commandments; the Lord’s Prayer; How to Read Scripture; Sacraments; Mission and Spirituality, among other things.

Of course, there is always a gap between what is planned and what is actually received. And of course, youth ministry is far more than just

curriculum. Nevertheless, this coverage forms a foundation for their formation.

You are a young parent in a church community with a fair number of young parents. Would you have some words of encouragement for your peers in this stage of life?

I think we’re the ones who need the encouragement instead! So if you see us in church, please tell us that the “terrible twos” will pass! Or that Jesus is coming back soon! ■

Jakin Heng studied linguistics in the Australian National University in Canberra. He works at Our Daily Bread. Photo by Lee Chung Horn.

In short

By Lee Chung Horn

IN SHORT is a regular column of significant church news. In a world of expanding voices, news reporting is the foundation for context and debate, and a bridge to the future.

Church leaders gather for annual planning retreat

Every September, the leaders of the Elders and Deacons Court (EDC) gather at a two-day annual retreat where they hear presentations, discuss on-the-ground church matters, debate emergent issues that will affect the church.

The EDC is the broadest elected leadership body of the church, comprising pastors, elders and deacons.

This year, we had a refreshing discussion on holy communion, ate meals together, prayed, and tried to examine ways to build up the church politic.

Perhaps the most insistent discussion at the retreat was the one that revolved around a question: “How should we approach the LGBTQ issue in our church?”



Saturday night at the Desaru church camp featured an intergenerational forum where many brave views about LGBTQ were heard.

Elder Lee Chung Horn moderated a wide-ranging discussion after presenting the topic’s current thinking. This pulled together important threads from Biblical teaching, history, medicine, law, sociology and church experiences around the world.

But exactly what is the LGBTQ issue in True Way? Is there one, what is happening in our church?

There is data from around the world, but in Singapore, the research is sparse. In our church, there are no numbers to share. The LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) issue --- or the more narrowly defined issue of same-sex attraction, and all related epidemiology---is hard to measure accurately because stigma drives it underground.

But churches are part of society, and we all move between the bubble of the church, and the more clamorous world outside – schools, universities, workplaces, civic spaces. The borders are porous. We in the church truly have no insulation from what has become a hot-button topic in Singapore.

So much as some church folk may be startled, this is not something that should interest only church leaders. Every one of us is a sexual

being, and any person who follows Christ must start to pay attention because we bear the image of God.

Interest – because the Western church where societies are more liberal have for decades been criticised for being homophobic and intolerant. Attention--because the strength of our Christian witness will be affected by how deeply we have studied the topic, and by how we are responding to LGBTQ people who have a genuine, abiding faith in Jesus Christ.

Unless we choose to bolt our doors, these people will be in our church, not just in the world outside.

At the church camp held at Desaru this June, five church members were invited to form an intergenerational forum. They were asked

continues on page 11

continued from page 10

In short

questions about the LGBTQ topic. They shared their views.

The representatives of the baby boomer generation and the silent generation were conservative. They said the Bible was the authoritative Word of God, and that the church must take direction from it. In striking contrast, the Gen Z generation did not feel that LGBTQ people should be criticised, judged or excluded. There was a pointed question from the audience. A millennial who had lived in the U.S. asked: "Should Christians attend a same-sex wedding if they were invited? Is going to the wedding an endorsement? Is not showing up a declaration that the friendship is unimportant?"

Jasper Lim, 42: "I thought the church forum was commendable. But there was no real expert in the panel. Nobody shared how LGBTQ people feel and think and what their struggles were. I know this was nobody's fault. Our camp theme was building intergenerational trust, and the forum showed how different the generations were from each other. A sensitive issue like LGBTQ can divide the church."

"I really appreciated that the LGBTQ forum wasn't 'engineered' to be homophobic," said Ching Mei Yun, 40, who attended the camp with her husband and children. "The people on stage were very brave. They shared many viewpoints."

"For example, they shared some practical ways to point the LGBTQ community to Christ. Christ's love to a sinful world—those points were

exemplary."

Elder Lee's questions at the September retreat brought the discussion beyond the points raised at the forum. His questions were unrelenting, they were uncomfortable. He asked retreatants the following questions, and more: Is there such a thing as a gay (LGBTQ) Christian? Are not these descriptors intrinsically contradictory? Why are some people gay? Do you think a gay person can be 'cured' of his sexual orientation? How? If we say our church must become more inclusive, do we accept a gay worship leader? A gay pastor?

When the session ended, the consensus unsurprisingly was that the examination had only begun. What lay ahead was more reading, more thinking, more work, more prayer.

After the church retreat, deacon Audrey Lee, 55: "I think we need to be unafraid to examine and discuss what the Bible teaches. We need to engage LGBTQ people and people with same-sex attraction. I don't think we can turn from people just because we're not comfortable with them. We need greater wisdom."

Christmas baptisms and transfers

One young man was baptised at Christmas, two young men confirmed, and five women transferred their church membership to True Way English Congregation.

Additionally there were two infant baptisms.

Caleb Tang, 18, who grew up in church and had been baptised as an infant, was confirmed. At confirmation,

a person 'confirms' the promises that had been made on his behalf by his parents when he was a baby. At confirmation, Christians are equipped to live out their calling more fully, serving God and neighbour with gifts bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit.

"I sense this was the time for me to join the membership of the church, and to take Holy Communion," says Caleb, who has now joined the computer crew.

Renee Ren, 35, was one of five women who transferred their membership. Renee was born and raised in China. She moved to work and live in Singapore in 2019.

"In China, there are two kinds of churches," says Renee. "The 'three-self' churches



Rev Stanley Soh and Caleb Tang.

were big, government-approved congregations. Their size made me feel invisible, no one welcomed me, or invited me to join their small groups. The second type in China are family churches, or "underground churches". But they are accessible only through personal introductions.

"I also lived in Leeds. In Leeds and Singapore, my experience was different. Christianity is part of the mainstream, so I could walk into any church and expect to be welcomed."

Renee worked in the finance world but is now studying counselling.

"I've never joined any church as a member before, but learning that True Way had a membership system stirred something inside me. My thought was, 'I must join.' I can't pinpoint a rational explanation for this decision. From a practical viewpoint, taking on an additional commitment might seem unnecessary. But I didn't overthink it. I simply felt led by God, and followed Him." ■

Lee Chung Horn is a church elder. He works as a medical doctor. The photos for In SHORT were taken by Jimmy Ang and Lee Chung Horn.



Together with four other women, Renee Ren (left) transfers her membership.



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