

TOGETHER

TRUE WAY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ENGLISH CONGREGATION

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One big family by Ashrael Low



Move, look and shoot! Some of us were naturals, some not. But everybody had a great time.

Our church has not held a family day since 2011. Bringing it back reminded us how we are, despite our different strengths, weaknesses and quirks, one big family in Christ.

Gathering on May 24 May, sun in our eyes, all pumped up for a big experience, I and a big throng of church folks stormed the field at West Coast Park. When we arrived, the organising team had already set up a registration booth, and at different corners of the field, game masters were getting ready for the morning's matches.

The turnout was notable – some 225 participants out of 250 who registered their names – assembled by 9am, waiting for the day's programs to begin.

The mood was infectious. I saw 2-year old babies in their parents' arms. I also saw seniors in their 70s. I saw many familiar faces, I also saw people I did not know.

A half-day of events had been

... the sight of the church coming together to spend time with one another moved me.



Getting sorted out at the registration table.

lined up for True Wayans. The station games had zany names like Hoopla-hoop Captain's Ball and Life-sized Rush Hour, following which there would be a picnic over

bento-box lunches. There was an ice cream booth, and judging from the snaking queue that quickly formed,

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this was arguably the most popular part of the day. The sun was hot but between the buzz of conversations and a close-to-endless supply of ice-cooled bottles of water, the day was off to a stellar start.

I wasn't sure if I had come for the previous family days, but soon learned that this was only the second time the church held a family day. The first-ever family day happened in 2011. That one was held in Pasir Ris and I was told that there had to be buses to take a big bunch of excited people to Pasir Ris. I don't remember that earlier family day very well now. However, I can safely say this is my first family day as an adult, and one I will hold close to my heart. This is because the sight of the church coming together to spend time with one another moved me.

Three "i's" defined family day for me – interaction, inclusion and identity.

Interaction

Upon arrival, we were sorted into ten different-coloured teams, with a mix of boys, girls, men and women. I had been appointed group leader of the Black team, with Uncle Wikendro. At the start, across groups, I noticed things seemed a little awkward. In church, people mostly interact with those they know. But at family day, we didn't get to choose our group members. Mixing was a key goal of family day.

As a group leader, my job was to make sure that everyone participated actively as we went from station to station. In the process, people who didn't know each other would hopefully become friends. At first, a few members of my group had reservations in participating, fearing that



The exciting hoopla hoop captain's ball game began with the ball toss.



Playing on the same team meant trusting and supporting each other.

the games would be too physically demanding. So I assured everyone: "Let's play together as a group, help each other and just have fun today, don't worry too much."

With that, we proceeded to play our first station: Bible Group Charades. Through a combination of brave guessing and even braver acting, we breezed through the cue cards. We had great fun. I had several great actors who didn't have a single self-conscious bone between them, who never gave up even when their acting drew a blank. There was so much

laughter! My initial worries that nobody would take part dissipated.

Through each game and conversation, we quickly warmed up to each other.

Darrell Lim, who grew up in church with me, recounted that even after the official games ended, some of the young, very young and young at heart kicked a ball around and ended up playing a casual round of football. "I saw how church bonds could be forged," he said, "not just through formal programs but also small, spontaneous

interactions.

"If we put aside our hesitations, we will see there is so more that we have in common."

I saw how the games brought us around a common goal for three hours. The goal of participating bound organiser, participant and spectator to a common endeavour. We laid aside our 'differences' and as one True Wayan put it, simply 'enjoyed each other.'

"True inclusivity did not mean that everyone had to participate in every item on the program, or that everyone had to have the same experience."

Inclusion

The second 'i,' inclusion, speaks of how family day brings people from various ages and stages of life together in a day of fun and games. Nobody was left out.

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Commented Joshua Seah, who led another group: "I was worried at first that some of my older members would find the games too physical for them."

Alvin Chia, another group leader, said: "Cohesion and bonding would be affected if some folks sat out the various games. To my surprise, the older adults and the younger children took part."

"During captains' ball, we deliberately created opportunity for older folks and young children to participate by passing the ball to them."

At first, some of the seniors in my group told me that charades was fine for them but our younger members must take the lead in the more demanding games. But our group didn't have many young members. Thankfully we still had enough players to field.

True inclusiveness did not mean that everyone had to participate in every item on the program, or that everyone had to have the same experience. True inclusiveness allowed us to keep our differences while being committed to our teams.

I would like to give a shout-out to two young-at-heart True Way aunties -- Auntie Linda Keh and Auntie Leong Yin Fong who volunteered to play captains' ball. These aunties didn't pull any punches, running up and down, shouting orders and

"They came because they felt family was important. Surely, our presence, and absence, means something to someone."



The telematch relay game showed us that our bonds can reach across generations.

scoring many goals. I was glad they were on my team and I didn't have to play against them.

Darrell: "The people whom I thought would struggle to participate were running around trying their best to win! So inspiring."

Identity

When the games drew to a close, people brought out their mats, and set up camp chairs. Others collected lunch and got ice cream. Many of the groups ate together. In that hour, we were enfolded by the murmur of our voices and the tingle of new friendships.

As I witnessed the unfolding of the day's events, the final 'i' - identity - truly resonated with me. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:27 declares that we all are members of the body of Christ. Our true identity is our belonging to, our being a part of the body of Christ. Yes, we are different body parts, having various functions, roles and responsibilities, but we are one united body of Christ. We are united in our love for Him and each other.

"True inclusivity did not



When the games ended, we got ready for lunch and ice cream in the park's shady edge.

mean that everyone had to participate in every item on the program, or that everyone had to have the same experience."

Melvin#, came to True Way two years ago. "The day reminded me that although God's people are incredibly diverse, we were still unified under a common identity."

The words of two church seniors encouraged me.

Uncle Wikendo: "I think the younger people had a different experience of family day compared to older members. Our experiences of the world will always be different. But this is

something to be grateful for."

My aunt Hian Imm said: "I was blessed and enjoyed being with the big family of God."

The apostle Paul reminds us: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together."

A poignant comment I heard and remember: "I was surprised and touched to see people whom I didn't think would come for family day. They came because they felt family was important. Surely, our presence, and absence, means something to someone." ■

Silent retreat

by Chai Wen Cong



A silent retreat can help one step off life's never-ending treadmill, offering space to pay attention to what is really going on in one's heart.

A young church deacon joins a silent retreat and encounters a refreshing experience of spirituality.

I didn't sign up for my church's recent, first silent retreat of my own accord.

In fact, I'd just returned from an overseas trip and would have been more than happy to stay at home and catch up on rest.

Also, to be honest, the idea of paying an attendance fee to refrain from talking wasn't appealing at first. I could save my money for something else, and lazing around at home would be more comfortable.

The only reason for my attendance at the retreat was to accompany Jamie, my wife.

We had got married last August. Jamie was looking forward to setting aside quiet time to reconnect with God. So, out of loyalty, I signed up. Well, a part of me was interested in learning the

tools for spiritual discipline and finding out how focused time with God felt like.

A silent retreat is time set aside to leave the noise of the world and our daily routines behind, and spend quiet, intentional time with God.

A silent retreat is not a high-energy church camp because there are no conversations, group games, or busy activities to occupy the time. It's quite the opposite. We were, instead, invited to maintain silence throughout the retreat, avoiding small talk, phone use, and unnecessary noise to create space to reflect, rest, and listen. The retreat was two days, two nights long.

Silent retreats have roots in several religious traditions, particularly within Christianity and Buddhism. The modern idea of silent retreats, as we know them, emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Retreats became popular in the West

from the 1960s as people got interested in contemplation and meditation.

Jamie and I checked in to Montfort Centre in the upper Bukit Timah area at 9am. Our spiritual director was our senior pastor, Rev Lee Kien Seng. When we arrived with our bags, we saw that there were twenty of us. Jamie and I found our room on the second floor, and we were glad that though talking was discouraged, we weren't required to sleep one to a room. The room was about 10 feet by fifteen feet. It had a window, one table, two chairs and two single beds. It had air-con. There was wi-fi.

Before the retreat, we had received some preparatory instructions. We didn't have to surrender our mobile phones, tablets or computers but we were encouraged to refrain from surfing the internet and using social media at the retreat. Books were not banned but it was implicitly understood that they weren't needed at the retreat.

A set of reference notes about

A silent retreat is time set aside to leave the noise of the world and our daily routines behind, and spend quiet, intentional time with God.

spiritual disciplines was given to us. Pastor Kien Seng, in his introductory briefing, talked about minimising distractions and creating space for introspection.

The two-day silent retreat contained short teaching sessions that introduced ancient spiritual practices such as lectio divina (slow meditation on Scripture), Taizé worship (simple songs sung repeatedly), Ignatian imaginative prayer (prayer that visualised Gospel stories), a labyrinth walk (a solo, reflective walk with God), the Jesus Prayer and the Examen (a guided review of the day). These tools have existed for a long time. For example, lectio divina is believed to have started in the 12th century, and the Examen in the 16th century.

In recent time, moderns have rediscovered these spiritual practices, finding them to be effective aids for connecting with God in quiet and personal ways.

I know of camps and retreats where there are agendas and goals, or a clear focus on delivering a dramatic spiritual breakthrough. Our silent retreat was not like that. There were no breakout sessions, no brainstorming sessions. Nobody mentioned goals or targets. Instead, we were told to focus on slowing down, paying attention to our own body, thoughts and feelings, and being with God.

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Silent retreat

Juggling work and church

Before registering for the retreat, I had been juggling work deadlines and church event planning, moving from one task to the next. When I had time to rest, I watched my favourite video game streamers. I felt relaxed with the games, but my mind was active.

To be honest, I'm not sure if I can make a clean break from the games that I and many young men enjoy, but I see how silent retreats help us step off that treadmill, offering space to pause, reflect, and pay attention to what's really going on beneath the surface.

To paraphrase acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton, you could argue that silence is not just about the absence of noise, but the presence of stillness. In 1989, Hempton worked as a bike messenger in Seattle while learning to record natural sounds. He recorded the sound of rain on leaves, waves on a shore, the crackle of forests. Forty years later, his hobby has become a project that is now recognised around the world.

I want to make room for stillness to meet with God in a quieter, slower way, and consider how He might be gently inviting me to respond.

This idea of meeting God has a scriptural basis. The Bible demonstrates that stepping away into solitude was an important part of life with God. Jesus regularly withdrew to quiet places to pray. Luke 5:16 says, "But he (Jesus) would withdraw to desolate places and pray." We know that Jesus in His human nature prayed to commune with the Father. Jesus wasn't only taking a break from ministry work. Rather, by prayer and communion, Jesus found strength to continue,



Retreatants can meet God in the quiet of the dining room.

and received affirmation from God.

The prophet Elijah also encountered God in silence. In 1 Kings 19, after a fear-filled and exhausting escape from Jezebel, Elijah stood on the mountain waiting for God to pass by. We read that there was a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire but the Lord was not in any of them. Instead, Elijah heard God in a gentle whisper. Quiet moments can reveal God's nearness in a way that dramatic events do not.

Psalm 46:10 also encourages us, "Be still, and know that I am God." Stillness isn't just about resting. It allows our trust in God to grow deeper. When we lower the volume of the world, we become more attentive to the groanings of our hearts and more sensitive to where the Spirit is leading us.

Upon arriving at the retreat centre, I saw immediately that I was the only male

Quiet moments can reveal God's nearness in a way that dramatic events do not.

lay retreatant. Yes, Pastor Kien Seng and Charles were present, but if you don't count them, I was the one guy among the women and vastly outnumbered. Where were the men?

"Like many people, I had always thought that because spiritual disciplines were intangible and hard to measure, they were less 'important' priorities."

I hypothesised that men were perhaps less comfortable with stillness. Perhaps men, more than women, believed that every waking hour should be spent doing visibly productive work. You will see later why I qualify productivity with 'waking hour'. Growing up, young men are often taught to keep moving, solve problems, and fix things. Not having a task or visible goal to work towards feels strange, inefficient and wrong. Like many people, I had always thought that because spiritual disciplines were intangible and hard to measure, they were less 'important' priorities.

Perhaps we, both men and women, hold a belief that spiritual disciplines could be left till a later, slower season

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of life. Would the spiritual disciplines benefit senior aunties and uncles more than millennials and young adults?

I guess young people with fewer resources might feel that it is hard to spend money on a retreat, much less a silent one.

I'll also admit that I took a lion's share of naps during the personal reflection blocks. The jet lag was real, and the peaceful setting made it easy for me to doze off.

Thankfully, Ps Kien Seng reminded us that rest is also part of the retreat, which I took as permission to sleep. I remembered a quote I'd heard from the late Pope Francis: "Fathers love it when their children fall asleep in their arms." That image stayed with me. I knew that

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Silent retreat

in my tiredness, God received my nap as an act of trust, and He was holding me as I slept.

Silence was also observed during meals and while moving around the grounds.

Without the usual distractions, I soon became more aware of my restlessness. We were reminded to chew slowly and pay attention to our taste buds. The food was simple and sufficient. We took care to wash our cups and plates quietly. We moved chairs noiselessly to avoid disrupting the stillness. There was no small talk during breaks, which felt weird as we were all used to filling silence with words.

We also received helpful prompts to look out for the small things, such as the sound of rustling leaves, the sun's warmth on our skin and the scent of grass. I wasn't particularly skilled at noticing these things but I found I could slow down and reflect on memories I hadn't visited in a while.

We went to sleep early so that we could wake up on time for breakfast the next morning.

The teaching sessions helped bring structure to the day. Lectio divina slowed my reading of Scripture and created space for it to sink in. The calm simplicity of Taizé worship was deeply moving in its repetition and allowed me to rest in repeated words and silence. Ignatian imaginative prayer

The walk was a meaningful invitation for me to surrender everything that stood in the way of enjoying God.



Walking the labyrinth brings a contemplative calm to hearts.

made Scripture come alive as I imagined myself in a gospel story, making Jesus' presence feel more personal. The Examen was a good way to reflect on the day and notice what I would normally miss.

A warm presence

Two disciplines stood out for me.

The words of the Jesus Prayer - "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" - was a quiet anchor I clung to after the retreat. I'd been struggling to resolve a personal issue which had weighed me down. My vision felt dull, my shoulders heavy, and I experienced cold sweat. In desperation, I cried out, "Lord, Son of God, have mercy on me." It was a simple prayer but in that moment, it felt like a fog was lifted from my eyes, and I sensed a warm presence comforting me. My problems didn't disappear, but the prayer encouraged me to lay my head down, gather strength and face tomorrow.

The labyrinth walk was another favourite of mine. The labyrinth has a centre and its prayer path leads us towards the centre. But the winding route brings

us sometimes closer, and sometimes further from the center, mirroring how we sometimes feel close or distant from God.

The walk was a meaningful invitation for me to surrender everything that stood in the way of enjoying God. At the retreat, I found myself walking the labyrinth many times. Each step calmed me and lifted me.

The retreat didn't come with a spiritual high or intense emotions. What it offered was quietness and reorientation. I was reminded that I am not a worker bee striving to serve God and the church, I do not need to always be efficient and steady. I am God's child, beloved and I can just sit with Him, to rest and listen. In Luke's story of Mary and Martha, I am often Martha. But I'm also allowed to be Mary.

At the retreat, God didn't meet me because I was the model retreatant who did everything right. He met me in my tired naps, my slow reading of Scripture and my drawn-out reflections. I left with a deeper sense that closeness with Him wasn't about doing more—it was about being open, even in

weariness or uncertainty. I got close to God not by striving but by abiding in a personal relationship with Him.

Speaking about openness, I once held a well-paying role in an engineering company that left me with little room for God and His people. Evenings and weekends were spent on work and the company's prestige made it hard for me to let go even when I was invited to 'voluntarily' resign. Looking back, I'm thankful God called me out of that season to be available to serving others and glorifying Him. In doing so, I found meaning in pursuing things of greater eternal value.

I left the retreat with a little more awareness of God's nearness. I learned to be more willing to be interrupted and to slow down. The retreat didn't just give me rest, it strengthened my desire to choose the good portion like Mary at Jesus' feet. I want to continue making that space in the midst of ordinary life for the One who every moment lovingly calls me to Himself.

Chai Wen Cong studied chemical engineering. He was elected as a deacon in 2024.

Terms of service

by Lee Chung Horn

At this year's annual congregational meeting, one question in a basket of many important questions fired the imagination of church members.

It's fair to say this: we church members (and I'm a church member as much as I'm a church elder) are always interested to hear the questions our people ask, even if we don't ask them, or think to ask them.

It's equally fair to say that because we're members of one body, we feel these questions belong to all of us. And we look forward to hearing the answers our church leaders give because there must be something important there and we want to learn stuff.

At our annual church business meetings – there are two, the annual congregational meeting and the extraordinary congregational meeting --- we gather to conduct the elections of pastors, elders and deacons; examine reports, accept financial statements; and, of course, to ask questions of each other.

In truth, asking questions is a key way to build our church, as it is in many organisations and communities. To ask each other if we have run our race faithfully, to ask each other if we have accomplished what we wish to accomplish, to ask what we have lost, and if necessary, to come clean and make fresh starts.

Well, the red-flag question on May 4 was submitted by a church member who, in essence, asked "I understand that we won't be electing elders this year because the members approached declined nomination. But how many elders were we



Elder Lek Siang Hwa and Rev Lee Kien Seng at this year's annual congregational meeting on 4 May 2025.

hoping to elect this year, anyway?"

In several recent years, we have decided that the questions at ACM would be shared between session leaders. Hence when the time came for this question to be answered, it was session clerk Elder Lek Siang Hwa who took it. I think many members sat up and listened.

Siang Hwa gave an illuminating response. He gave the facts. For example, he explained what the Session was, that it comprised ministers and elders. Not preachers, not deacons. He said it was our highest governing body. But more than that, he poignantly offered an account of his

To ask each other if we have run our race faithfully, to ask each other if we have accomplished what we wish to accomplish, to ask what we have lost, and if necessary, to come clean and make fresh starts.

own election as elder in 2013, of how our elders serve the church, and why calling elders into service has become an increasingly urgent matter.

I think many church members learned stuff. They learned that if our four church ministers were to be full, voting members of the Session the way it should be, we would need a complement of eight elders. This is because our church constitution requires a ratio of two-to-one for elders to ministers. This ratio is a governance guideline in the Presbyterian churches of Singapore. It says that it is important that there should be more elders than ministers inside the Session where matters of import may require a vote.

Church sessions, it is believed, are most effective and unbiased if they comprise persons who are not just qualified, diverse and independent, but also unburdened by conflicts-of-interest. It is the elders in many Presbyterian congregations who handle governance, oversight, financial planning, strategic planning, employment and

remuneration. Of course, they are also shepherds and teachers who work on the ground, looking after congregants. But in structural matters, they work like board directors.

Hence the ratio handed down by the office of the Commissioner of Charities. Yes, churches and religious organisations in Singapore are charities. We comply with many guidelines.

Elder Siang Hwa said because we would now have only four serving elders (one elder has just ended his term), with there being no elder candidate this year, we would have to restrict full, voting membership in our Session to only two ministers.

What this means is while wisdom is diligently and generously shared at Session deliberations, we will keep two ministers out of voting. These two ministers hold 'observing' roles. For better or for worse, this affects plurality, representation and dynamics.

"In our constitution, we're allowed to have a total

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Terms of service

of three to 12 Session members," said our session clerk. He didn't say we should have eight elders and four ministers. But that would have satisfied the ratio of 2:1 very nicely.

So, why are there no candidates for eldership this year?

Because eldership is deemed a life-long vocation, our church elders, whom we ordain to three-year terms, are expected to return via elections to fresh terms again and again, until -- what? The constitution doesn't speak to this, but because it doesn't mention retirement, the understanding is until death, disability or mental decline.

"We have elected only one new, first-term elder in the last seven years," said Elder Siang Hwa. "And it has not always been easy to call our ordained elders back because we're all getting old. Thirteen out of our 17 elders are older than 65 years, and three are older than 70."

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The gift of years

Acknowledging unignorable realities, some of us (using the first-person, I'm speaking now as an elder) have shared

that it would get harder and harder to come back to the Session.

It is notable that our elders in this predicament share these thoughts with care. They don't want to be misunderstood or criticised. They have wondered if they should keep serving till they drop dead at the plow. They have asked if any person is truly irreplaceable in the church. They ask if not returning could be construed as a lack of faith.

Our leaders know that because they serve long tenures, the elders often have a wisdom more burnished and hard-won than other categories of church servants. This is not puffery. Elders are often our best critics because they have been inside the machine from the time they started as deacons (perhaps as thirtysomethings) and have a strong sense of which potential changes are feasible, and which not.

Said Elder Siang Hwa: "I heeded my call in 2013 because I believed in and voted for the constitution that God gave our church, that guides and shapes our church life. I remember being filled with fear and trembling because being an elder meant so many things."

It's not hard to realise that there are vulnerabilities when churches and organisations are led by people who are, well, too old.

What about brand-new elders for the session? If we can't tap on aging elders, how about finding new ones, perhaps men and women in their mid-40s to early 50s?

Well, this has also been a bit of a *cul-de-sac*. If you keep your eyes open about church,

you probably realise this. The qualifications for the job are high, the work has become more complex, the hours are often long. My count is: we might enter into unrushed, prayerful discussions with 7 to eight potential candidates, and find only one who'd accept a nomination.

These young leaders will climb a learning curve ... see our nuts and bolts, learn our restrictions and reality, feel our anxieties, and understand our hope.

At the ACM, we also saw the re-election of Pastor Kien Seng to his fourth term as senior minister of the church. While we have several associate ministers, the constitution allows only one senior minister at any one time. Ministers preach, teach, provide pastoral care, visit members, conduct funerals and weddings and baptisms. The senior minister does all this and a whole lot more. Reverend Lee Kien Seng will continue in a joyful but tough vocation. We must pray for him.

"In standing for re-election as your senior minister, I'm humbled and inspired when I see your faith at work. You show me what it means to be fervent in prayer, zealous in service, joyful in hope," Pastor Kien Seng said. "You taught me how to struggle with God and yet have faith."

Elder Andrew Goh and Elder Jonas Lim, both members of the English Presbytery exco, were in attendance to supervise Rev Lee's attendance. Elder Goh: "In the Presbyterian tradition, the calling of a minister is

both a divine appointment and congregational responsibility. It's a sacred act of discernment and not an administrative process."

Like Eld Siang Hwa who told us about elders, Rev Lee gave voice to leadership transition in the minister ranks. "I assure you that succession planning for the senior minister is on the minds of the elders."

Certainly, the question of "After me, who?" has many fine layers. All churches and denominations know life does not hold still and leadership can change many things. Very certainly, churches will pray, hesitate, disagree, shrug, waver, and pray again. But God who stands above time gives wisdom to people and leaders, and more than wisdom, He gives mercy and a future.

Elder Siang Hwa offered soft words to future candidates. "If you have to feel very adequate or very confident before you stand for leadership, you may be standing on your own strength."

I have not forgotten our deacons. They are equally important. This year, seeing five deacon candidates on the ACM agenda fills my heart with joy. Many of us in the pews that morning felt the same joy. These young leaders will climb a learning curve, but they are our future. Not only will they renew our ranks, now that they have stepped across the threshold of election, they will see our nuts and bolts, learn our restrictions and reality, feel our anxieties, and understand our hope. ■

Lee Chung Horn is a church elder. He was elected in 2011, and has just completed his third elder term. He is a medical doctor and TOGETHER's editor-in-chief.

