

STATE OF THE
CHURCH

SINGAPORE 2023

**CHURCHES
ATTRACTING
YOUNG ADULTS**

**A 2023 FOLLOW-UP TO THE
STATE OF THE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE 2022 STUDY**

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INTRODUCTION

One significant observation from the State of the Church in Singapore 2022 (SOTC) study¹ was the movement of young adults (aged 19 to 35 years) across churches, covering a period which included the COVID-19 pandemic (roughly March 2020 to April 2022). This phenomenon was accompanied by an observed decline in attendances at many churches.

This matter has received substantial interest among churches. However, a quantitative study such as the SOTC can only surface such observations and relationships; it cannot properly address the question of why young adults have moved.

We sought to uncover reasons for such movement by conducting a qualitative study of the leadership of the churches who have been a net recipient of young adults during the pandemic years. A more thorough study would of course directly seek the views of young adults who moved (or remained) and of the leadership of the churches that saw a net outflow of young adults, but these lay beyond our scope and resources.

This report is written with the local church leader in mind. Our aim is to faithfully report on what we have learned, to help all local churches gain insights into the factors that seem most significant to young adults in terms of church attendance. We sought neither to elevate nor to criticise any particular church tradition – in other words, we were “tradition-blind” in our approach. For this reason, we are confident that all churches may gain insights from the push and pull factors identified in this report.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted structured interviews with the Senior Pastor (or equivalent) of a selection of churches. The criteria for selection was that these churches have experienced – during the window covering the pandemic – a net inflow of attendees, with a significant percentage of young adults in their congregation. In some cases, we had anecdotally heard they had received a significant inflow of young adults during the pandemic season; we would verify these in the course of the interviews.

The Senior Pastor was welcomed to invite up to two others to participate in the interview. The data, however, was recorded and analysed with the church as the unit of analysis.

The list of primary questions that we asked are given in **Annex A**.

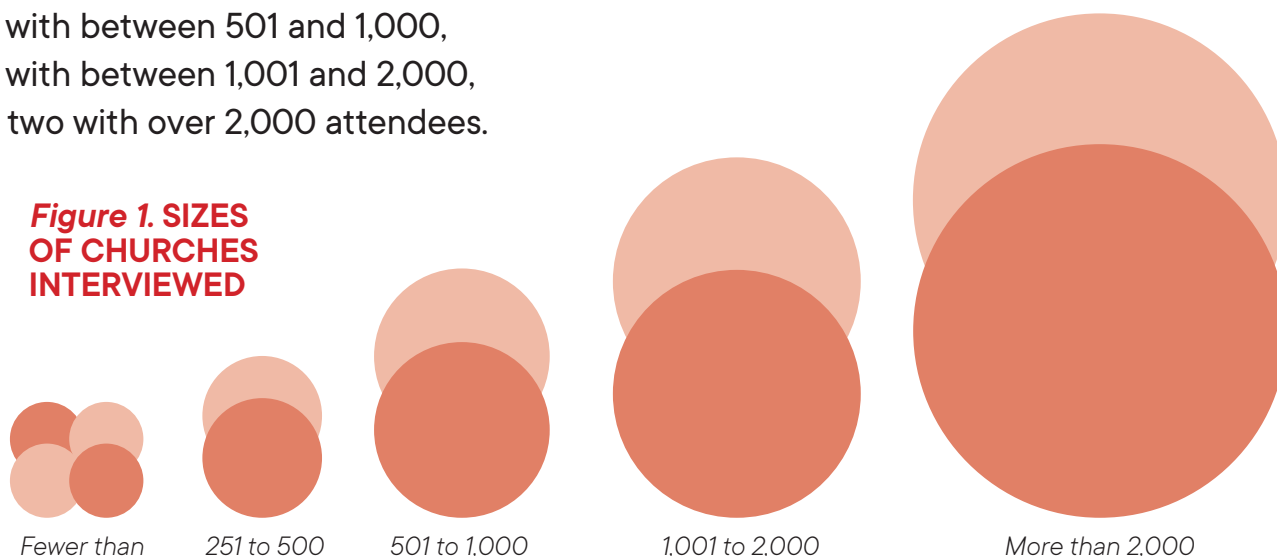
¹ The original SOTC study report is available at <https://saltandlight.sg/sotc2022/>

DEMOGRAPHY OF YOUNG ADULT ATTRACTING CHURCHES

We interviewed 12 churches comprising a range of sizes:

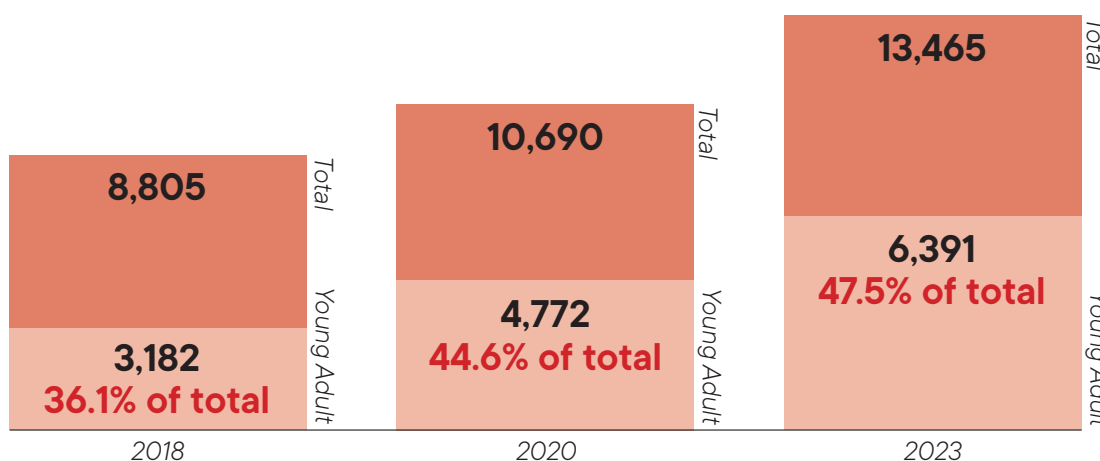
Four with 250 attendees or less,
 two with between 251 and 500,
 two with between 501 and 1,000,
 two with between 1,001 and 2,000,
 and two with over 2,000 attendees.

Figure 1. SIZES OF CHURCHES INTERVIEWED



These churches saw growth over the period of 2018 to 2023, with their aggregate number of attendees (across all ages) increasing from 8,805 in 2018², to 10,690 in 2020, and to 13,465 in 2023. The number of young adults in these churches doubled from 2018 to 2023: From 3,182 in 2018 to 4,772 in 2020, and 6,391 in 2023.

Figure 2. TOTAL ATTENDEES VS YOUNG ADULTS



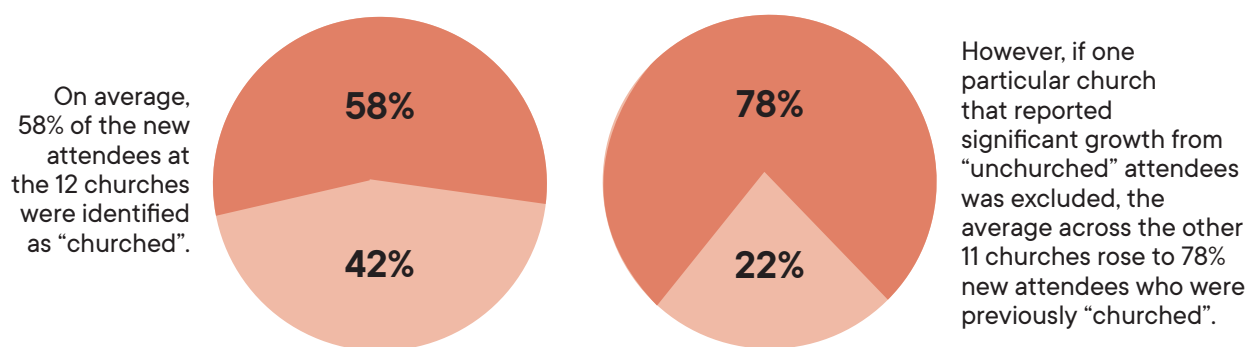
These churches currently comprise between 20% and 83% young adults. On average, 47% were young adults. Seven churches had a majority young adult congregation. The other five had a more multi-generational congregation, with 40% or less being young adults.

² One church was not open in 2018, having been a church plant that began in 2019.

Trend of growth. We asked about the trend of growth since 2018, to determine whether these churches grew due to the unique circumstance of the COVID-19 pandemic or longer-term factors. We found that, with two exceptions³, all the churches were growing since 2018 (ie, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic). Most of this growth was linear, but two churches reported accelerated growth during the pandemic.

We examined whether the growth was confined to the young adult demographic or included other demographic groups. Seven churches reported growth across all age groups over the last 5 years. The remaining five churches saw the bulk of their growth (60% and above) being young adults; these churches had a high proportion of young adults to begin with.

Figure 3. CHURCHED VS UNCHURCHED NEW ATTENDEES



Movement: Churched versus Unchurched. The estimated percentage of new attendees who were “churched” – in other words, they were previously regular attendees at another church – was 58.25%⁴. If we excluded one church that reported exclusive growth from non-believers, the percentage jumps to 78%, indicating that substantial proportion of growth was due to transfer between churches.

The “unchurched” may include those with no prior history of being a professing Christian (“non-believers”), as well as those who had been professing Christians but had not been an active part of a local church. With three exceptions, all of the churches reported between 7% and 30% of their growth came from non-believer conversions. Of the exceptions, one reported almost exclusively non-believer conversions, and the other two reported almost all new members being previously churched.

³ One church saw a surge in young adult attendees during the pandemic, largely due to the fact that these young adults could not attend an onsite service in their home church. But since then, the number has gone back down to what it was in 2018. The other exception had been declining in number from 2018 to 2020, but experienced a turnaround during the pandemic, following a change in its leadership.

⁴ By churched we mean young adults who had been regularly attending a local church. By unchurched we mean young adults who had not been regularly attending a local church, regardless of whether they were professing Christians or non-believers.

Involvement in Church Life and Ministry. An estimated 75% of the young adults in these churches were reportedly active in community life and ministry.

Outflow. All the churches reported some outflow of attendees, but with one exception their outflow was no more than 30% of the inflow of attendees. The main reasons for outflow were to do with marriage or relationship tensions within their original church. Minor reasons included changes in residency (either moving overseas or to a different corner of Singapore), theological differences or difficulties adjusting to the church’s strategic direction.

YOUNG ADULT MOVEMENT: PULL FACTORS

GOD’S WORD: BIBLICAL PREACHING & TEACHING MINISTRY

The single most frequently cited pull factor was the church’s preaching ministry.

Five churches spoke of practicing expository preaching⁵. Expository preaching was frequently contrasted by our interviewees with topical preaching. The priorities of expository preaching often lead to a concern for preaching “the whole counsel of God” and so these churches tended towards preaching consecutively through an entire book, rather than simply choosing highlights. These churches would also seek, over time, to cover the full breadth of Scripture. For example, one church planned its yearly preaching schedule to cover an Old Testament book, a New Testament book, a Gospel, and some topical sermons.

A few churches also spoke of wanting to be Christ-centred in their exposition, that is, to show how the passage related to the person and work of Christ. This was particularly relevant when preaching from the Old Testament, though it would be evident in a concern to see the Gospel as the uniting centre of all of Scripture.

The single most frequently cited pull factor was the church’s preaching ministry.

⁵ While “expository preaching” is a broad label that is used slightly differently by different preachers, it typically involves careful attention to the intention of the original author. It seeks to identify the message and purpose of the text, reading it in context so as to understand the particular contribution of each text to the message of the biblical book as a whole. Expository ministry will then typically involve preaching in a way such that the main emphases, structure and tone of the sermon are well aligned with that of the text. This will then determine the way in which the text is applied to a contemporary audience.

Five churches discussed how the preaching at the worship service would be augmented by follow-on conversations about it, for example through questions for small group discussion when the group meets during the week.

In other words, much of the Church life and ministry was organised around the study of the Scriptures, and integrated with the sermon delivered at the Sunday gathering.

There were some variations from an expository preaching approach, broadly correlated with churches hailing from a more charismatic tradition. One church spoke of “revelation” – encountering the presence of God and “hearing” God through the preaching – and “transformation” – exhorting the worshipper to bring the reality of God into all spheres of life.

Another church’s view of a “strong pulpit” was one that unpacked why and how the Bible spoke on specific issues of life, and that featured a range of speaking styles (for example, fiery, teaching-style, intellectual, justice-oriented). That church further observed that young adults preferred the “spiritual with a deep sense of the intellectual”.

In a similar vein, another church spoke of “blending the Word and the Spirit”, such that its preaching was both contemplative and intellectual.

There were two churches that did not identify the preaching ministry as a pull factor – indeed, one underwent a substantial restructuring of its church life that de-emphasised the worship service, and elevated the importance of the ministry of serving others through mercy and justice. The other church emphasised having a personal encounter with God during the prayer and worship segments of the service.

GOD’S PEOPLE IN COMMUNITY & DEEP RELATIONSHIPS

The Worship Service. Many of the churches had the worship service, plus the activities that happen before and after, as a central part of its community life. We could not help but notice the level of care and attention paid to organising the service in a manner which helped build community.

Most prominent was the ease by which visitors were made to feel welcome and part of the church community. As one Pastor put it, the church had “an easy culture to get your feet wet”. This was marked by a degree of informality in the service, such as in the dressing of those who went onstage.

Some spoke of the intentionality placed on recognising and engaging newcomers, yet without making them feel in the spotlight. One church featured a pre-service coffee cart.

Beyond easing newcomers in, the strength of the community was evident in many of the churches. One Pastor spoke of a strong culture of creating a sense of belonging and of being loved. Another emphasised relationality: “I’m taking the Bible seriously, but I’m also taking you seriously.”

“I’m taking the Bible seriously, but I’m also taking you seriously.”

A Pastor places equal importance on Scriptural relevance and personal relationality.

Small Groups. An important community factor shared by these churches was the role of small groups, commonly known as cell groups. These churches tended to quickly integrate visitors into small group community; some of these groups would conduct discussions or studies that were related to the sermon series. Other churches encouraged the formation of small groups organised around interests shared by young adults. One church even re-organised itself into a house church model so that the small group – ie, the house church – became the primary expression of church community (more of this below).

Leadership Modelling. Perhaps just as important was the relational character of the leaders. A few Pastors stressed the importance of being accessible. Another shared about inculcating in all the leaders the willingness and ability to play the role of “spiritual father”. Another spoke of the leaders in his church having to model authenticity and humility, which were stressed in the direction set by the church’s leadership.

GOD’S PEOPLE ADAPTING: CHURCH RESTRUCTURING

We discerned a strong growth and adaptation spirit in many of the churches we interviewed. This was not about adapting one’s teaching, but about one’s organisation and activities. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted significant adaptation to serve the needs of relationship in community. One church (mentioned above) multiplied its number of cell groups. Another re-organised itself into multiple congregations to improve the quality of relationships and accountability.

The most substantial transformation was by one church which chose to adopt a house church model, moving from a “pyramid” to a “constellation” model where each star represents a house church group. This meant that half the time, Sunday worship service would take place at the house church level. The rationale behind this was to foster a culture of more authentic discipleship; members would not get “lost in the crowd” if they met in house church groups.

Five of the churches have adopted a church-planting mindset, actively planning to plant new churches in Singapore when their congregation reaches “saturation point”. Indeed, two of the churches we interviewed were themselves recent church plants.

Three churches were intentional in forging an inter-generational community, to build a loving church family across demographics. These churches de-emphasised demographically-segregated ministries, even at the cell group level. One church even rotated its small group members every two or three years so that members got to know others in the congregation. The extent to which this strategy had an impact on young adult growth is uncertain.

Finally, one church expended substantial resources to create a platform for young adults to engage with contemporary issues of interest.

EMPOWERMENT OF YOUNG ADULTS

One church intentionally made service in ministry accessible to many young adults. The Senior Pastor recognised young adults as an engine for growth, through getting things done. This church adopted a “Serve first, then we will train you” mentality, and the effect was that their number of cell groups doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Senior Pastor of a multi-generational church chose to actively involve young adults in leadership and decision-making, with one-third of the church’s top decision-making body comprising young adults.

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELISM

The minority of new young adult attendees were conversions. There was a general sense of churches wanting to do better in reaching non-believers.

The minority of new young adult attendees in most of the churches were non-believer conversions. There was a general sense of churches wanting to do better in reaching non-believers.

Some of the churches articulated a strategy for outreach which focused on the worship services.

These churches scheduled evangelistic services a few times a year, where the intended audience was non-believers invited by church members. Others planned for their regular worship services to feature expository preaching with the non-believer clearly in mind; this translated to taking care to faithfully communicate the Gospel and to do so in a way that a non-believer could understand. To enable such a service-oriented evangelistic strategy, members had to be encouraged to invite friends and feel confident that their friends would be able to follow what was going on.

At least four of the churches had evangelistic programmes designed to create space for non-believers to explore the Christian faith. These included Alpha and Christianity Explored. One church even experimented with “Congregational Alpha”, which saw the whole congregation, with their friends, undergoing Alpha together.

Another church organised regular “pre-evangelistic” sessions where non-believers could gather and read Christian literature and ask any question related to the Christian faith. These sessions would be a precursor to the formal evangelistic programme.

Another prominent strategy for outreach was to “naturalise” personal evangelism. At least four churches spoke of nurturing a relational approach among their members to share Christ with their friends. Two churches spoke of equipping its members to be able to do 1-to-1 evangelism, in the form of reading the Bible with their friend.

Finally, three churches spoke of evangelism through acts of mercy and justice in their neighbourhood. Two churches spoke of organising their young adults to serve the needy or to conduct home visits, and inviting their non-believer friends to serve alongside them; some of these “co-workers” and “recipients of mercy” subsequently joined the church. One church organised its young adults into small groups who would fan out to do “various acts of kindness” towards strangers.

YOUNG ADULT MOVEMENT: PUSH FACTORS

More than three-quarters – 78%, if not counting the outlier church – of the growth in young adults among these churches were local church transfers. This justified our inquiry into the push factors behind such movements, as perceived by the leadership of the receiving church.

We identified five factors, and list them below in order of perceived significance.

Dissatisfaction with Preaching Ministry. This was noted by six churches, from comments they reported receiving. Such church transfers reported that the preaching of the original church was seen to be either not strong – that is, they felt that the Bible was “watered down” and not taught well enough – or not aligned with the young adults’ theological convictions.

Concerning the latter, a few churches reported comments from young adults who took issue with the “prosperity gospel” they said was being taught in their original church. One church reported receiving young adults who felt a certain “theological narrowness” in their original church when it came to defining Christ-centredness.

The bottom line was a perceived lack of adequate spiritual feeding from the pulpit.

Lack of In-Person Community and Relationships During the Pandemic. This factor was primarily related to the original church’s perceived lack of doing much to foster community during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few churches reported receiving young adults who came because their original churches did not hold onsite services, did not provide onsite activities for children, or stopped gathering in person altogether. One church provided onsite worship services specially for the unvaccinated.

Some of the young adults who moved during the time of pandemic-related restrictions chose to remain in the churches they visited after these restrictions were lifted.

Church Leadership and Culture. Four of the churches we interviewed spoke of receiving young adults from other churches perceived to have one or more of the following issues:

- The church was “militaristic”, with an authoritarian leadership.
- Members felt that they were being used or spiritually manipulated by the leaders.
- Members felt frustrated that they were unable to communicate with their leaders, or would get challenged when giving feedback.
- Members did not feel a sense of belonging in the church, or were not being given opportunities to serve.

The Pastors we interviewed spoke of receiving young adults who had been burnt or burnt out from serving in their previous church, and had moved in need of healing.

At membership classes for those seeking a transfer, one church intentionally included a module on “leaving their original church well”.

One Pastor shared an example of a young adult couple who said they were made to serve in ministry until they were burned out, who felt manipulated by their leaders who were dictating what they could or could not do, and were also denied communion when they raised issues with their leaders.

Natural Evolution and Acceleration. Two churches said they received young adults who moved because they were simply looking for something “different” when it came to church life. One church observed that some local churches had lost too many young adults to have a stable community, which served to accelerate the loss.

Church-wide Issues. Finally, two churches reported receiving young adults who transferred as a result of deep-seated church issues, such as a split within the church.

SOCIALISATION AND FACILITATION OF TRANSFER

We asked these churches what they did to facilitate the socialisation (or onboarding) of young adults who wanted to move over for good.

At least five churches had formal membership or newcomers' classes, with another church currently exploring having such a class. One church intentionally included a module on "leaving their original church well". Another church made it a requirement that all incoming members had to have a one-on-one meet up with a church Elder.

At least two churches made it a requirement for new members to be in a small group (cell group or equivalent). One defined membership as regular attendance in a small group. The other, through its house church model, necessitated small-group membership by design.

Effort to Facilitate Transfer from Original Church. Five of the churches we spoke to had clear action plans for engaging the original church to facilitate a smooth transfer. One Pastor spoke of connecting with the Pastor of the original church, even at times encouraging the young adult to return. Others would either require the young adult to inform the original church of their intent to move, or the church would itself send a courtesy email to the original church.

A few Pastors spoke of talking to the young adults to give advice on "leaving well" – in such a way so as not to stumble others – and on occasion speaking to the Pastor of the original church to confirm the young adults' desire to transfer.

Four other churches reported that they did not as a practice contact the original church, unless there were significant issues to address.

CONCLUSION

This is a study of churches that have been growing in their young adult population.

We are confident that we have obtained a representative sample of churches that have seen net growth in their young adults over the past five years, at least half of which were pandemic-affected. We were struck by the diversity of the churches that we interviewed; they did not fit any one particular profile or tradition.

However, we cannot establish the degree to which we could properly represent the young adults in the churches that we interviewed. Are they representative of all young adult Christians in Singapore? Are they representative of all young adults in Singapore, for example in such areas as educational levels, or language spoken?

Future studies may look into the more precise demographic make-up of the young adults in the churches in Singapore.

We have noted that by and large, these churches had grown both in “churched” as well as “unchurched” young adults. Our interviewees noted that the pull factors that they had identified did not distinguish between “churched” and “unchurched”; in other words, they applied to both categories of young adults.

Finally, we want to stress a feature that we observed among all our interviewees: they demonstrated a certain humility in the course of our interviews. They recognised that they had not gotten everything sorted for their church, and expressed a desire to constantly do better, for example, in evangelism.

We hope that this spirit will characterise the whole church, as we aim to mature in Christ as His Body here in Singapore.

ANNEX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. We understand that over the pandemic, and even before that, your church has been growing in its number of Young Adults. Please estimate how many young adults you grew by (a) during the pandemic, and (b) over the last five years (2018 to 2022 inclusive)?
 - 1a. Do you have a system by which these become members of the church? If yes, what is your criteria for membership? How many young adults have become members in the last five years?
 - 1b. Roughly how many of these young adults came over as unchurched and how many as churched (i.e. had been regularly attending another local church)?
 - 1c. Of those who were churched, were they “core” members or “fringe” members of their original church?
 - 1d. What was the trend of growth over the last five years?
 - 1e. Have you seen an increase in people of other ages coming to regularly attend your church services as well? If yes, what is their age demography?
2. Of the young adults currently in your church, what percentage are active in community and ministry?
3. From your interactions with these young adults, what were the pull factors that drew them to your church *and* persuaded them to stay on as regular attendees? Please provide examples to illustrate these factors.
 - 3a. Please also clarify whether the factor you discussed applies to those who were churched, unchurched, or *both*.
4. From your interactions with the young adults who transferred to your church, what did you observe to be the main push factors? Without mentioning any specific church, could you provide some examples to illustrate these factors?
 - 4a. When young adults come over from another church and have expressed a desire to transfer, how do you “on-board” these people, if any. In other words, how do you integrate them into your local church community?
 - 4b. Do you have a process for liaising with the original local church to facilitate the transfer? Why or why not?
5. As you observe young people coming to your church, do you also observe young people leaving your church to worship elsewhere? Please estimate how many young adults left your church (a) during the pandemic, and (b) over the last five years (2018 to 2022 inclusive)? If yes, what reasons have you identified for this movement?
6. As you make sense of the movements and the factors behind them, what are your reflections for your practice as a local church leader or Pastor?

ANNEX B

WRITTEN RESPONSES TO THE “CHURCHES ATTRACTING YOUNG ADULTS” STUDY 2023

“PEOPLE HAVE NOT LOST THEIR APPETITE FOR THE WORD OF GOD”

REV DR BEN THOMPSON

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Member of the Churches Attracting Young Adults Research Team

I approach the results of this survey with a number of different reasons for interest.

First, having been involved in pastoral ministry in the United Kingdom for nearly two decades, including leading a group of churches through the early stages of the pandemic, I am aware of the great challenges facing those entrusted with the responsibility of leading Christ's people at this time.

Second, having moved to Singapore during the height of the pandemic I found myself thrust into the position of needing to find a church to belong to. While I have long since graduated out of the 20-to-35 age bracket which was the focus of the study, I readily empathise with those who have been seeking a spiritual family to belong to during this season.

Finally, having come here to teach and train future church leaders, the survey has given me the opportunity to reflect on what is needful for faithful and effective ministry as we enter the post-COVID-19 world.

NOT BY MIGHT, BUT BY THE SPIRIT

In saying that the concern is for faithful and effective ministry, it is not accidental that I have led with the word “faithful”, and this highlights one of the limitations of the study.

The growth of the kingdom is a spiritual matter rather than a (simply) sociological one. Attracting large numbers to a particular movement is not necessarily to be equated with a genuine work of God by his Spirit.

Those of us entrusted with responsibility for Christ's flock must not simply adopt whatever ministry philosophy is currently *en vogue*, but must take care to make sure that we are discharging our duty in line with the heart and priorities of our great over-Shepherd.

That is revealed to us not by a survey, but by the Word of God. And yet, a survey such as this one might perhaps give us the opportunity to reflect on whether there are blind spots or emphases in our ministries that could be reformed by the Spirit freshly applying the Gospel both to our hearts and then to those we serve.

FOUR REASONS FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

With that caveat, I came away from the report with four distinct encouragements that spur me on in the work of ministry here in Singapore.

First, I was delighted to see that these churches have seen substantial numbers of unchurched people joining the church. It is sometimes suggested that these churches only grow through transfer growth. Clearly, there are significant movements of churched young people.

And yet, in the work of ministry it is typically much easier to help someone who is already a churchgoer move churches, than to help someone not currently attending church to see the importance and benefit of so doing. The fact that nearly one-quarter of those who joined these churches did so having been previously unchurched (or nearly one-half if the full set of churches is included) is a cause for great rejoicing. Christ is using these churches to grow the Kingdom.

Further evidence of an evangelistic zeal is seen in the way that these churches typically have a clear evangelistic strategy. We live at a time when many would want to say that Christianity is a religion of the past, of little relevance to the modern world. This survey would suggest the opposite.

We live at a time when many want to say that Christianity is a religion of the past, of little relevance to the modern world. This survey suggests the opposite.

Second, I was struck by the hunger for the Word of God that seems to be present in the young adults. It is striking how many of the churches seeing growth have an expository style of preaching. This reflects a confidence that they do not need to make the Scripture relevant to people's lives, as though it was somehow irrelevant, but that as it is faithfully taught God will speak. The Pastors are willing to do the demanding work in their studies of labouring to understand the text, trusting that the young adults will have a passion to grapple seriously with the Word of God as they seek to grow in Christ.

This gives me great encouragement that we are not living in an age where people have lost their appetite for the Word of God. I'm very aware from years in ministry of how hard it can be to safeguard time at the desk for deep study, rightly dividing the Word of Truth. But this survey confirms the conviction that this has to be a priority for those in pastoral ministry.

Third, and connected, it was reassuring to see that in many ways the distinctives of these churches were not particularly novel or radical. These churches have not unearthed an entirely new ministry philosophy, but they are simply keeping the main thing the main thing as they seek to keep the Word of Christ dwelling richly among the People of Christ. It is encouraging and challenging to see that Christ is still building his church as he always has done.

Having led a church through the early stages of COVID-19 that perhaps lost as many people as it gained, this report is a chance to reflect on whether there were aspects of church life that were allowed to obscure the things of first importance, or whether even some of those primary areas of a healthy church – preaching, discipleship, evangelism, fellowship – were neglected.

Finally, the report challenges me personally, as I reflect upon the humility, wisdom, faith and courage of the leaders that God has raised up for these churches. Leadership is exhausting, draining and, at times, terrifying. The temptation to seek to lead out of human resources and strengths rather than out of the Gospel is constant, especially in a time of crisis.

I am struck by the way that each of the leaders in these churches responded to COVID-19 not as a problem, but as an opportunity for the growth of the Gospel; how they personally demonstrated great faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as they stepped into an entirely unknown ministry context; how they made an absolute and unwavering priority of the Great Commission to make disciples, alongside a courageous flexibility that was willing to reimagine church in a way that best served that calling.

As we enter the post-COVID-19 world, and in some ways we find a new normal, the reality is that we will continue to need those same qualities.

“MANY CHURCHES ARE HURTING WITH THE LOSS OF THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS”

PASTOR EDRIC SNG

Editor, Salt&Light and Thir.st

Member of the State of the Church in Singapore 2022 steering committee

Picture the finishing line of a particularly gruelling race. Perhaps an Ironman challenge, or an ultramarathon, or cycling's month-long Tour de France. There, a journalist gathers quotes and reactions from the champions, finishers and their entourage.

The soundbites are mostly triumphant, celebratory: *I did it; we made it*. A select few will be lauded on the podium. History remembers only the winners.

But consider: who doesn't make it to the nightly news package? Those who don't do well enough to medal. Those who trail so far behind that by the time they reach the finishing line, the news vans have long driven off. Not to mention those who don't even make it that far — those who drop out of the race with injury, fatigue or just plain resignation.

LOOKING BEYOND THE 12 CHURCHES

The *Churches Attracting Young Adults* study you have read is a follow-up from 2022's *State of the Church* survey. Unlike the 2022 study, which sought to objectively capture the reality of church health across Singapore, this year's researchers wanted to go deeper into why some churches are doing better than others, especially among young adults. Hence, 12 churches known for their growth in this demographic were handpicked for this series of conversations.

This is akin to the interview at the finishing line. Nothing wrong with that; there are so many positive lessons to glean, and best practices to emulate, be it in the realm of preaching, spirituality, evangelism, building community, or engaging the generations.

But what it cannot adequately reflect is the state of the rest of the race pack; the stragglers in the peleton.

Because the reality is that these leading lights notwithstanding, many churches are hurting. Beyond these 12 churches interviewed are hundreds of other churches who are losing numbers, many of whom are young adults and youths. These are not mere numbers or statistics. They are their sons and daughters; their potential future leaders, missionaries, Pastors and Elders; their hope for renewal.

THE FRONT DOOR IS NARROWING, THE BACK DOOR WIDENING

For most of these 12 churches, the majority of their growth came from “churched” believers. This is a zero-sum game: +1 here means -1 elsewhere. Granted, if they were to leave their home church, then better for them to be in a church than not at all. But that is cold comfort to their home church. They may not have been stolen, but neither were they sent.

The national religious statistics reflect that the overall picture for churches is one of concern. The total population of Christians (including Catholics) may have increased from 18.8% in 2015 to 18.9% in 2020, but narrow that down to just the Protestants and the census shows we have shrunk from 12.1% to 11.9% in that same time – the first fall since such data were captured at the national level.

The *State of the Church 2022* showed more churches reporting an outflow of attendees (45%) than an inflow (38%).

So looking beyond the 12 churches, and taking an all-of-Kingdom perspective, the front door to the faith is getting smaller – only one of the 12 churches reporting conversions as their main driver of growth – while the back door of the church is swinging wider open.

This study lists *push factors* for young adults leaving their home church. To recap:

- **Dissatisfaction with Preaching Ministry**
- **Lack of In-Person Community and Relationships During the Pandemic**
- **Church Leadership and Culture**
- **Natural Evolution and Acceleration**
- **Church-wide Issues**

It could read like an ingrate’s list of faults and failings. But I prefer to choose to process the push factors through the lens of God’s mercy. Mercy is being given another chance; confession and repentance, at the corporate level, means acknowledging and addressing errors that we may have committed that have contributed to this loss of our members. And who knows, we may get a second chance to draw them back, and build again, better.

Dear church leader, if you see your younger demographic thinning out, your sons and daughters leaving your pews, do not stand at the grave and weep. Act. Which of the push factors listed above could you do something about? Might it take an act of humility, acknowledging error, and submitting to the Spirit’s guidance towards transformation?

God, give us the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish one from the other.

“INCLUDING YOUNG ADULTS IN LEADERSHIP NOW IS NECESSARY”

DR KWA KIEM KIOK

Member of the State of the Church in Singapore 2022 research team

Church leaders are always looking for the church growth “magic bullet”, that formula which will draw people into our churches. Hence this report is a welcome analysis of the Singapore church and the post-pandemic growth patterns of the 18-to-35 age group. The emphasis on young adults arises because they are mobile and fluid, able to go to whichever church strikes their fancy.

There is no magic in bringing young adults into the church. Preach the Word, for therein are the words of life, and enable them to be involved in the church community, in some form of small group.

While probably all churches will claim to have these, it is the perception of what is “preaching”, and the dynamics of the small group which will determine whether young adults will stay in that church.

This is their world and their context, and they can best guide and lead the church to live out missionally today. May young adults be instruments for the continued growth of the church.

As a local preacher myself, I suggest that we encourage a broad definition of “preaching” the Word as that which leads to life growth and change, and not merely whether it is going through a Bible book or is topical.

And while joining a small group is relatively easy, these groups must not be mere social clubs but are safe places where the hard questions of discipleship can be brought up.

STARING DOWN STAGNATION

The church in Singapore grew as a percentage of the national population from 18.3% in 2010 to 18.9% in 2020, and it remains to be seen whether that rate of growth can be sustained in this current decade, or whether the church will stagnate.

While we should continue to seek and save the lost, it is also time for the church to intentionally seek to grow in depth and maturity. Thus, this report must propel us to ask further questions, especially about the roles and contributions of young adults, because they intuitively understand the current milieu.

The easiest way of measuring growth is in numbers, but our understanding of “growth” must be broader. While these young adults are involved in the life of the community through small groups, are they also being disciplined into leadership?

We recognise that at this stage of life, with marriage and starting families as well as climbing the career ladder, young adults are juggling many balls in life. Still, some will also have the energy to contribute to shape the life of the church, and they should be invited and encouraged to do so. Including young adults in leadership now is necessary.

Growth should also include a more missional focus. It can be easy to rely on growth by attracting the same kinds of people, or using ready-made tools on the market like Alpha or Christianity Explored. At this stage of the maturity of the Singapore church, as this segment take their place in the church, they can help address questions such as how Christians can relate lovingly with our non-Christian neighbours, and how the church can be good stewards of the earth.

This is their world and their context, and they can best guide and lead the church to live out missionally today. May young adults be instruments for the continued growth of the church.

STATE OF THE
CHURCH

SINGAPORE 2023

THE “CHURCHES ATTRACTING YOUNG ADULTS” STUDY 2023
is a follow-up from the State of the Church in Singapore 2022 Study.

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TO THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE STUDY 2022.**

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salt&light

*Designed by the Thirst Collective.
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