

STATE OF THE
CHURCH



SINGAPORE 2024

**THE CHURCH
AND SENIORS**

**DEMOGRAPHIC TIME BOMB
OR SEASON OF OPPORTUNITY?**

THE 3RD ANNUAL *STATE OF THE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE* STUDY
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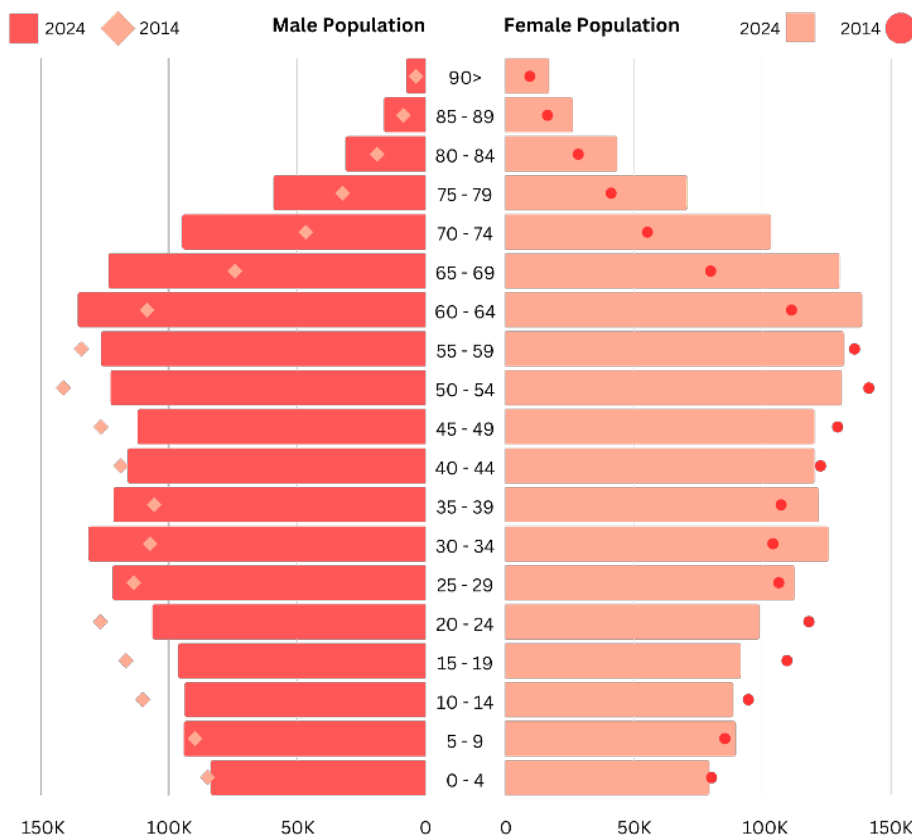
INTRODUCTION

The State of the Church (SOTC) in Singapore Study is a combined effort between Biblical Graduate School of Theology, Singapore Bible College, Trinity Theological College and Salt&Light to serve the Church in Singapore. SOTC provides empirical research with data from the Church in Singapore, for the Church in Singapore.

The inaugural study was done in 2022, in the wake of Singapore emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic¹. The following year, the SOTC team conducted a qualitative study on “Churches Attracting Young Adults”². For 2024, we pivoted our attention to the older end of the age demographic spectrum, and studied the “The Church and Seniors”.

A major motivation for studying the Church and Seniors is the recognition that the nation of **Singapore is projected to be a super-aged society in 2026**³.

Figure 1. Age Profile of the Singapore Citizen Population, as at June 2024.



Source: “Population in Brief 2024” publication, released September 2024.

¹ <https://saltandlight.sg/sotc2022/>

² <https://saltandlight.sg/sotc2023/>

³ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/initiatives-in-place-to-help-tackle-ageing-as-s-pore-nears-super-aged-status-in-2026-ong-ye-kung>

As of June 2024, about 1 out of 5 (20%) Singaporean citizens is aged 65 years and above⁴. This is a marked increase from 12.4% in 2014. The Singapore government has further noted that the aged are “living longer and healthier”⁵, and has been taking active steps for successful aging. Christian charities such as St Luke’s ElderCare have been proactively responding to care for seniors in the wider society.

What about the local church? How are we shaped demographically, and how are we responding to the reality of being in a “super-aged society”?

SOTC 2024 seeks to generate insights into the following key questions:

1. How is the Church in Singapore experiencing the increasing agedness of our society? *This is a question of demography.*

- a. What is the age demography of the Church at the aggregate and the local church level?
- b. Is there a difference in demography between the two primary language groups of the Church: English-speaking versus Mandarin⁶-speaking congregations?
- c. What is the age demography of local church staff and leadership?

2. How is the Church in Singapore engaged in the ministry of Seniors? *This is a question of vitality.*

- a. What does a vibrant ministry to seniors look like?
- b. How are seniors mobilised for ministry?
- c. What are the top concerns and priorities concerning seniors in the eyes of top Church leadership?

⁴ From the Population in Brief 2024 report by the National Population and Talent Division.
<https://www.population.gov.sg/population-in-brief-2024-key-trends/>

⁵ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/today/big-read/super-aged-2026-singapore-ready-4656756>

⁶ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/initiatives-in-place-to-help-tackle-ageing-as-s-pore-nears-super-aged-status-in-2026-ong-ye-kung>

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Survey Instrument. Our data collection took place from July to September 2024. We asked the Lead Pastor or equivalent of a church to do an online survey instrument that had 30 questions. A Mandarin translation of the survey was made available.

Survey Frame. A database of local churches was formed by pooling multiple existing databases – a combination of open and closed sources. A database of local churches was first formed. A sample of 35 churches was then chosen to be interviewed, with representation from Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Bible-Presbyterian, Brethren, Evangelical Free, Methodist, Presbyterian and independent churches.

This “cluster of churches” is a random sampling to ensure representation from different segments of the church in Singapore and to allow us to make unbiased estimates of the age demography of the wider church in Singapore.

These churches together comprised 57,686 regular attendees.

Figure 2. Number and Size of Churches Involved in SOTC 2024. Total: 35 churches

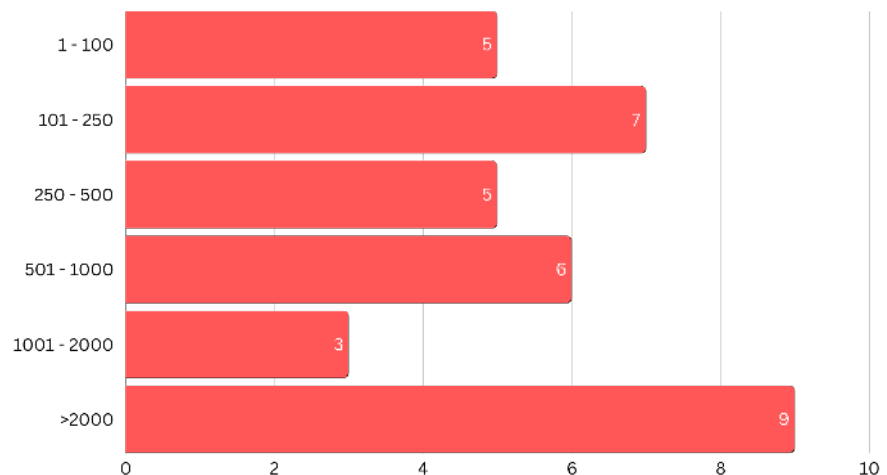
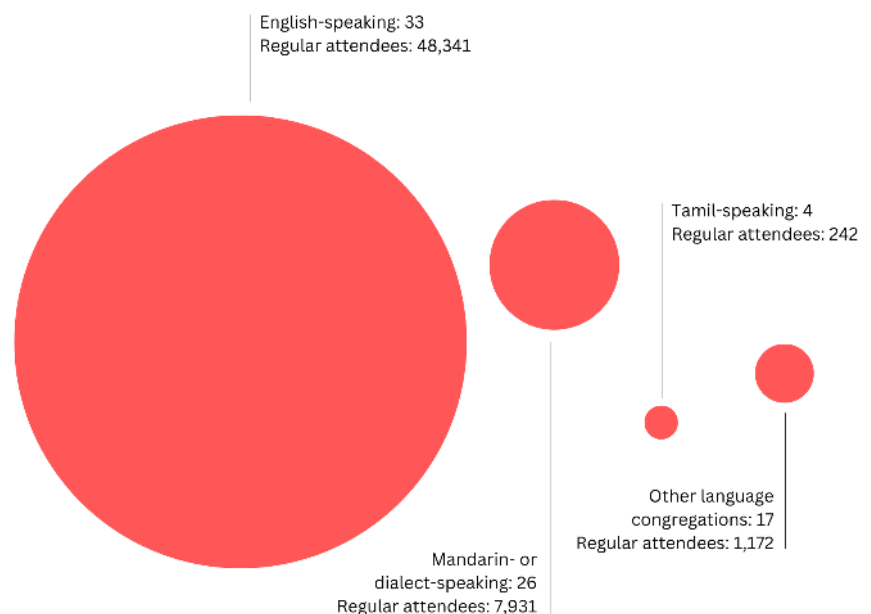


Figure 3. Number and Size of Congregations (by Language) in the SOTC 2024 Sample. 23 of the 35 churches had both English- and Mandarin-speaking congregations.



Age Bands. Our age categories followed the categorisations used by the Singapore Department of Statistics and National Population and Talent Division. We collapsed these categories to form fewer ministry-relevant age bands (in years), for which we might reasonably expect church leaders to make estimates about:

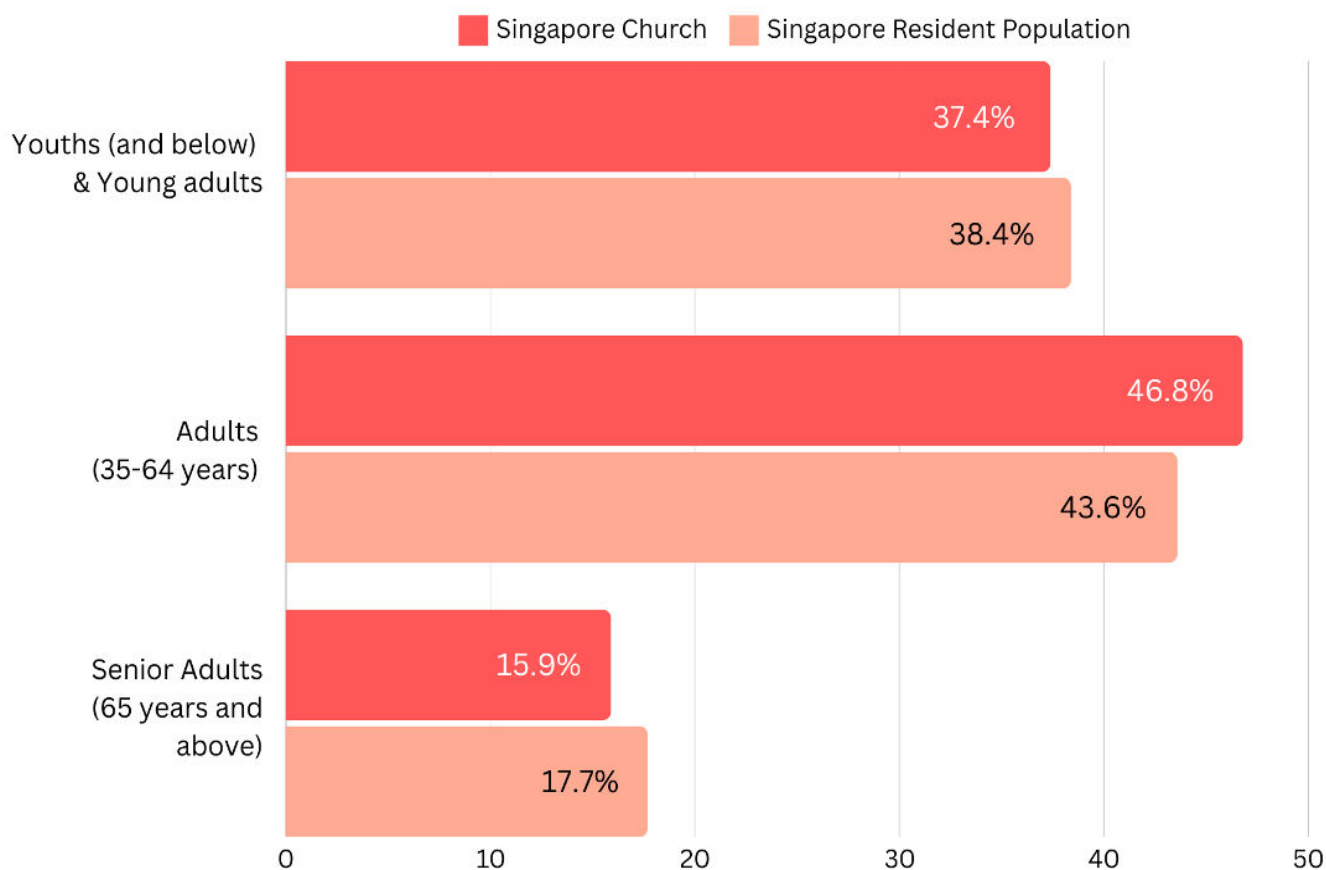
- a. Youth and below (aged 0 to 19)
- b. Young Adult (aged 20 to 34)
- c. Adult (aged 35 to 54)
- d. Adult (aged 55 to 64)
- e. Senior Adult (aged 65 to 74)
- f. Senior Adult (75 and above)

Figure 4. Age Demography of All Congregations in SOTC 2024

	Aggregated across all Congregations	English-Speaking Congregations	Mandarin-speaking Congregations (including dialects)	Singapore Resident Population
Youth and below (Aged 0 - 19)	17.2%	19.1%	5.6%	18.9%
Young adult (Aged 20 - 34)	20.2%	22.2%	8.2%	19.5%
Adult (Aged 35 - 54)	33.2%	34.7%	24.3%	29.5%
Adult (Aged 55 - 64)	13.6%	12.1%	21.3%	14.1%
Senior Adult (Aged 65 - 74)	10.9%	9.0%	22.3%	11.3%
Senior Adult (75 and above)	5%	2.9%	18.1%	6.4%

Comparison to national demographics. The Singapore Church's age demographic is roughly comparable to that for the Singapore Resident population⁷ (refer to Figure 5).

Figure 5. Comparison of Age Demography between the Singapore Church and Singapore Resident Population.



On aggregate, 37.4% of the Singapore Church are Young Adults or younger (below 35 years of age). In comparison, 15.9% are Seniors Adults (aged 65 years and above). That translates to a 2:1 ratio of roughly two Young Adults or younger for every Senior Adult.

If we compared Adults (aged 35–64 years) with Senior Adults, the ratio is about 3:1.

⁷ Based on data from Singapore Census of Population 2020.

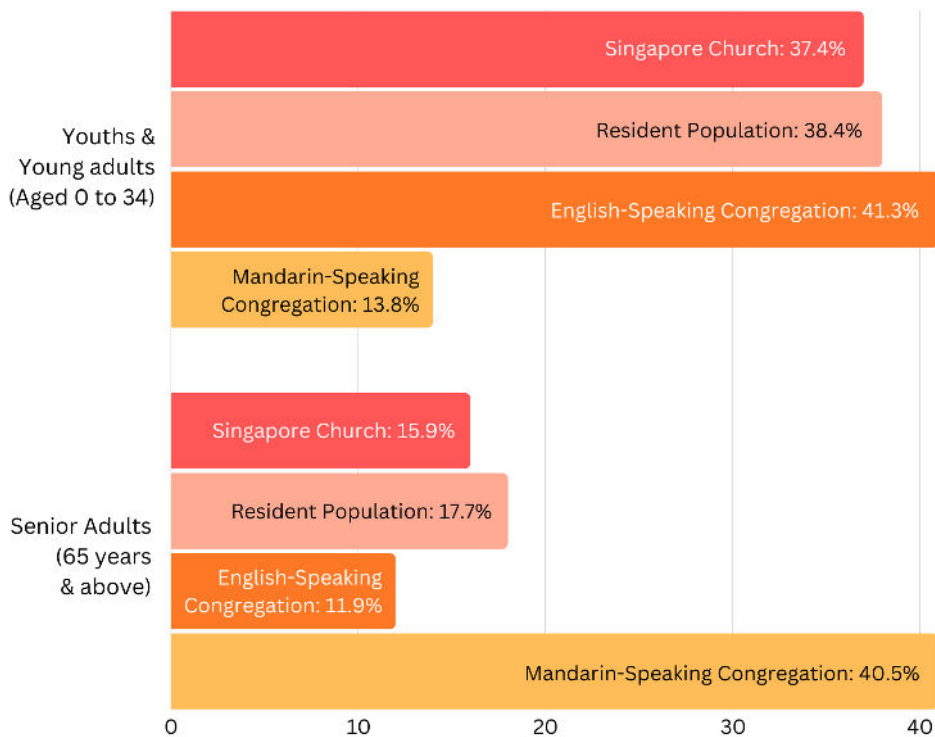
https://www.singstat.gov.sg/publications/reference/cop2020/cop2020-sr1/census20_stat_release1

English and Mandarin-speaking Congregations. In general, congregations that are Mandarin-speaking are more aged than English-speaking congregations.

There are significant differences when we look at language-specific congregations. Compared to the Church on aggregate (15.9%), the English-speaking congregations have a lower proportion of Seniors (11.9%), and a correspondingly higher proportion of Young Adults or younger (41.3% compared to 37.4%). On the other hand, the Mandarin-speaking congregations have a higher proportion of Seniors (40.5%) compared to the Church aggregate (15.9%)

For Mandarin-speaking congregations on aggregate, the ratio of Adults (46.8%) to Senior Adults 11.9% is roughly 4:1. For Mandarin-speaking congregations, the ratio is roughly 3 Seniors for every 1 Young Adult or younger (40.5% versus 13.8%).

Figure 6. Comparison of Age Demography between English- and Mandarin-Speaking Congregations (on Aggregate).

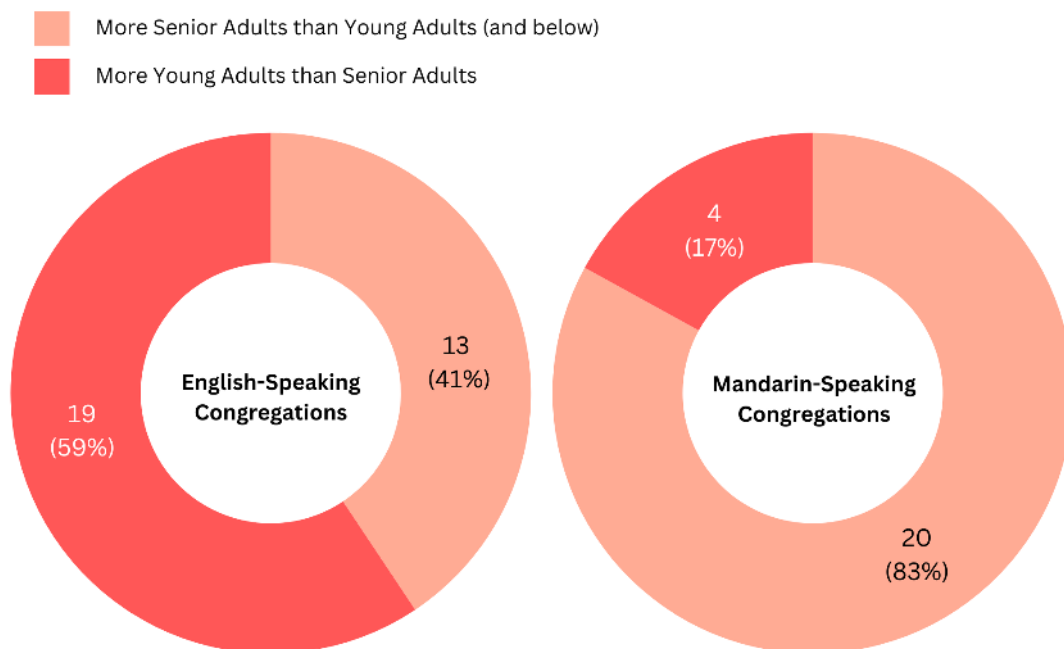


Differences between Congregations of the same Language. We also may not assume that every congregation of the same language has the same age distribution, as we found that some churches have more senior adults than others.

Among English-speaking congregations, 13 (41%) had more Senior Adults than Young Adults (or younger), while the remaining 19 (59%) congregations had more Young Adults (or younger) than Senior Adults.

The difference is more stark for the Mandarin-speaking congregations, of which 20 (80%) congregations had more Senior Adults than Young Adults or younger, while the remaining 4 (20%) had more Young Adults or younger.

Figure 7. Proportion of Congregations' Senior Adults vs Young Adults (and Below)



We may infer that in an increasingly aged society, some congregations are experiencing ageing more starkly than others, especially among the mandarin-speaking congregations.

These statistics paint the picture of a potential **demographic time bomb**. This refers to the challenges faced by a community with increasingly more seniors than young, such as the relative numbers available to care for the elderly. To illustrate this: The average English-speaking congregation had 2 adults⁸ for every 1 senior adult. For the Mandarin-speaking congregations, there was on average 0.6 adults for every 1 senior adult (or 1.5 senior adults for every adult)⁹.

Dementia. This is an issue that particularly afflicts the elderly. Nationwide, the prevalence of dementia is estimated at 8.8%, or 1 in 11 among older adults (aged 60 and above)¹⁰. Church leaders estimated that up to 2.9% of the seniors in their churches have dementia. This may be an under-estimation by church leaders for various reasons: For example, dementia is not always diagnosed or reported, and people with dementia may have stopped regularly attending church services.

⁸ We defined an adult as someone aged between 20 and 64 years.

⁹ In our calculation, we excluded a small mandarin congregation that was 100% senior adults.

¹⁰ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/prevalence-of-dementia-in-singapore-falls-to-1-in-11-among-older-adults-imh-study>

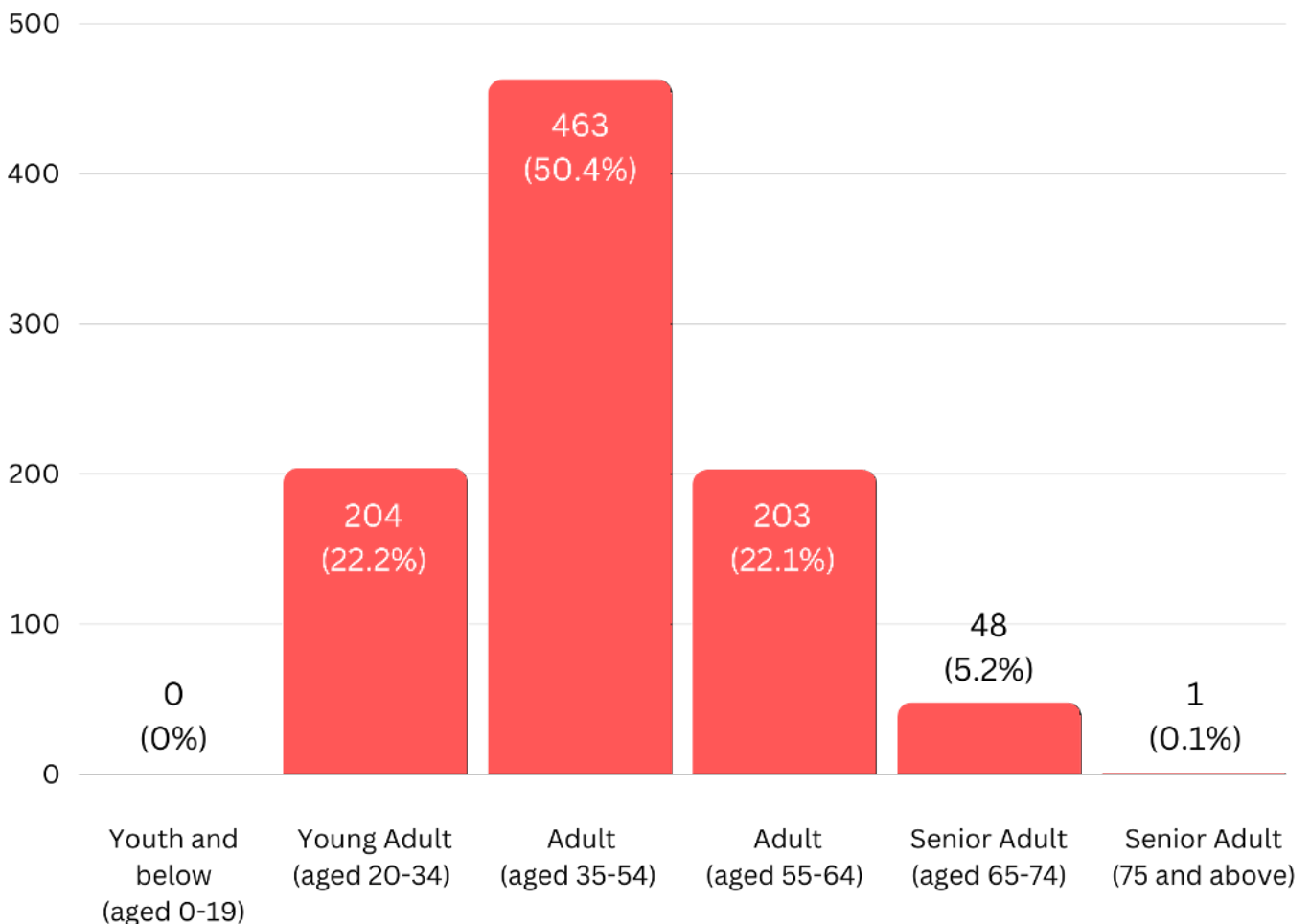
AGE DEMOGRAPHY: LEADERSHIP AND STAFF

Church Staff. The churches in our sample had a total of 919 full-time staff.

We found that roughly one-third (12 churches) had more than half of their staff aged 55 years and above. Six churches had 70% of their staff aged 55 years or older. These churches face a staff replacement problem as the majority of their staff will have to retire within the next 7 to 10 years.

Most churches in the study (23 out of 35) had a retirement age for full-time staff, which ranged between 62 and 65 years. Only five of these churches had an option to re-contract retirees for an extension of service.

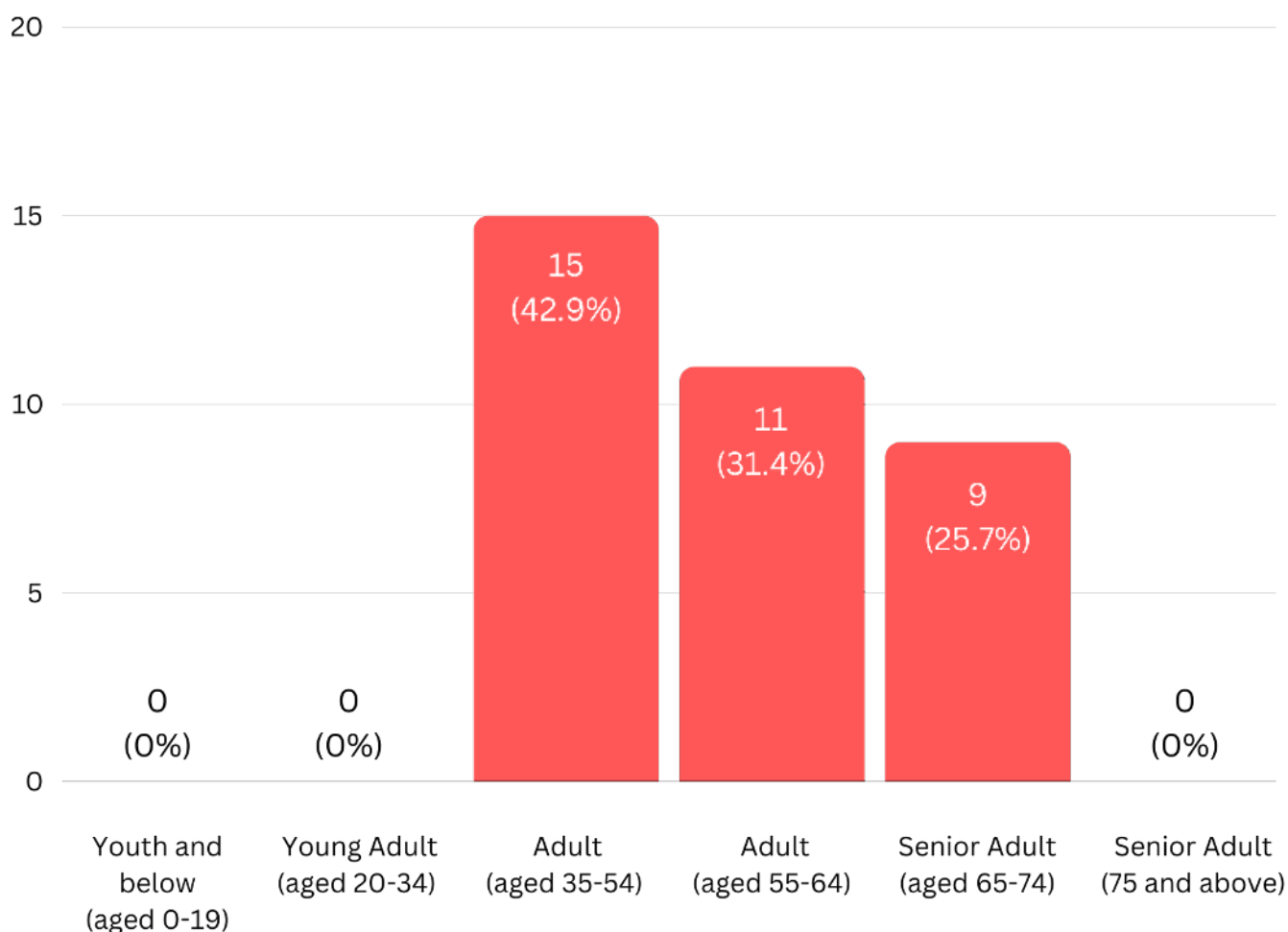
Figure 8. Age Demography of Church Staff. Total: 919



Senior Pastor (or equivalent). Of the 35 churches surveyed, 42.9% of their Senior Pastors¹¹ were aged between 35 to 54 years, 31.4% were aged between 55 and 64 years, and 25.7% were aged 65 to 74 years.

This means that more than a quarter of Senior Pastors in the study sample are serving beyond the minimum retirement age of 63 years¹². Some of these are serving in a church that had a set retirement age of between 62 and 65 years.

Figure 9. Age Demography of Lead Pastor or equivalent. Total: 35



¹¹There is a margin of error in estimating the true number of Lead Pastors for each age category. There may be Lead Pastors under the age of 35 years or over 75 years, but these would probably be extremely few.

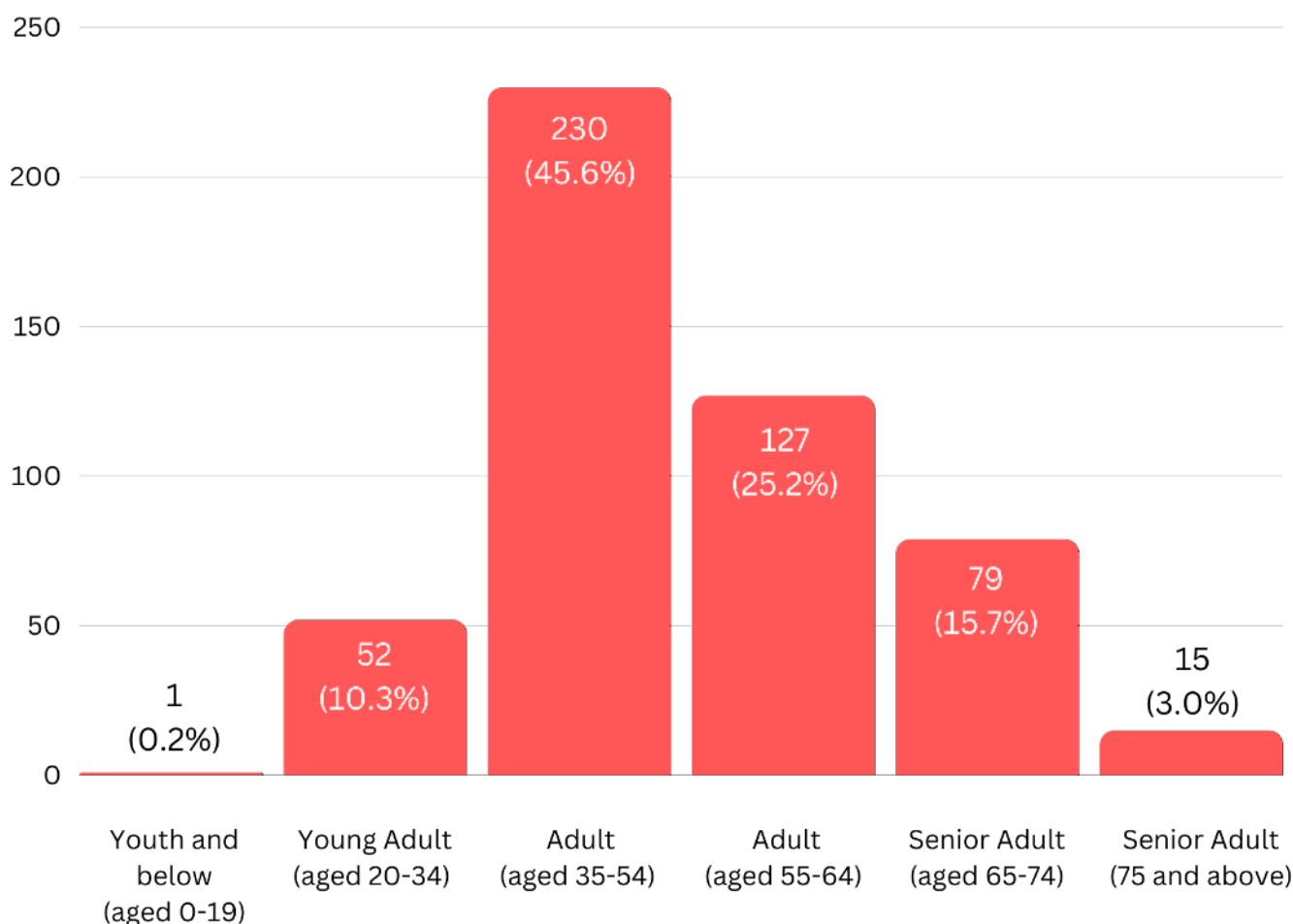
¹² <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/retirement>

Top decision-making body. This may be the Elder’s board, the pastoral team, or equivalent. Its size ranged from 1 to 40 persons, with an average of 14 and a median of 11 persons).

Seven (20%) of the churches had a mandatory age limit – ranging between 63 and 75 years – for membership in their top decision-making body. The other churches had no set age limit.

Concerning the age demography of the top decision-making body, we found a few varieties. Just over half of the churches (19 out of 35) had a decision-making body with a majority of its members aged 55 years and above. Just under half, or 16 churches (or 45.6%), had at least one youth or a young adult in their top decision-making body. Thirteen churches (37%) had at least 4 out of our 6 age categories represented in their top decision-making body, suggesting age diversity and representativeness.

Figure 10. Age Demography of Top Decision-Making Body in Local Church (on Aggregate). Total: 504



MINISTRY VITALITY: TO SENIORS

We found no shortage of ministry initiatives for Seniors. This ranged from talks that helped to address issues that Seniors face; care for Seniors (including those suffering from dementia) and for their caregivers; and various activities that help Seniors practice “active aging”.

Many of the activities were designed with purpose of facilitating “friendship evangelism”. The majority of churches surveyed – 26 out of 35 churches, or 74% of the churches in the study – had a ministry specifically designed to (a) minister to seniors and/or (b) mobilise seniors to minister to others.

Do churches grow in their number of Seniors? If so, this is an indicator of the *vitality* of Seniors ministries. We received data from 33 churches concerning the number of new regular attendees and baptisms among those aged 65 years and above, since 2022 to the present. For comparison, we also asked how many of their seniors had passed on in the same time period.

On aggregate, these churches reported 747 deaths, 1,967 new regular attendees, and 548 baptisms from among Seniors.

Two-thirds of the churches (22 out of 33) reported receiving more regular Senior attendees than the number who have passed on.¹³

If we looked at baptisms, More than half (52%; 17 churches) reported having more bereavements than baptisms, while seven reported that their figures were the same. It may arguably be expected that bereavements will be more of the norm, compared to baptisms, among Seniors.

However, we were surprised to find that over a quarter (26%, or 9 churches) reported having more baptisms among Seniors than the number of Seniors who passed on. The presence of such churches suggests that it is possible for senior-aged congregations to grow through conversions.

¹³ 7 churches reported having more Seniors passed on than become new regular attendees, while 4 churches reported that their figures were the same.

MINISTRY VITALITY: BY SENIORS

Internal Ministry. Churches estimated between 0 to 85% of their seniors (an average of 35%) were involved in some form of internal ministry. Examples given included prayer and altar ministry, befriending, ushering, care groups, reading the Bible 1 on 1, and conducting activities for other Seniors.

Local Outreach Ministry. Churches estimated between 0 to 75% of their seniors (an average of 21%) were involved in some form of local outreach ministry. Examples given included neighbourhood visitations and community outreach, participation in a senior activity center, prison ministry, and evangelism.

Overseas Outreach Ministry. Churches estimated between 0 to 35% of their seniors (an average of 5.5%) were involved in some form of overseas outreach ministry. Examples given included short-term missions trips, and being a member of the church missions committee.

CHURCH LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SENIORS

We asked church leaders to share their top 3 ministry priorities and concerns related to Seniors. Their responses were tabulated, coded and presented below in Figures 11 and 12.

Figure 11. Priorities Concerning Seniors, as Perceived by Senior Church Leaders.

Priority (Number of Churches)	Elaboration
Mobilising for Serving and Outreach (19)	Mobilising the 'sleeping giant'; Reach out to others in their age group
Attractive Seniors Communities (17)	Overcoming Loneliness; Support groups; Tea sessions; Fellowship; Small groups; Involving Seniors in different activities; Community engagement
Discipling Seniors to finish well (16)	No stagnation; Assuring them of their salvation; Use golden years fruitfully; See that they are still learning and growing
Pastoral care for seniors (14)	Visitations; Meet Seniors' felt needs; Spiritual warfare and prayer for seniors
Health, and staying active (9)	-
Mental Wellbeing and Cognitive Function (6)	Remaining contactable for any help; Wellness and keeping purpose in life
Grow Volunteer base for Seniors ministry (5)	Equipping ministry leaders to shepherd seniors, intergenerational support

Figure 12. Concerns for Seniors, as Shared by Senior Church Leaders.

Concern (Number of Churches)	Elaboration
Social Vibrancy and Mental Well-being (24)	That Seniors be engaged in Fellowship and live vibrant lives; Loneliness; Decreased social support; Isolation; Visitation; Family relationships
Spiritual Health (22)	Spiritual growth; What are their spiritual needs; How to disciple them; Using their time and experience well; Finishing well; Live a God-centered life in old age; Embrace a kingdom mindset; Direction after Retirement; Finding purpose; fulfilling their God-given callings
Physical Health (17)	Receive adequate care; Mobility; Sickness
Are Seniors Still Serving the Lord (13)	Sharing the Gospel; Serving; That Seniors think they cannot do much; Involvement in ministry; Passiveness; Decreasing interest in God's work; Becoming spectators
Support for caregivers (5)	-
Bridging Intergenerational Divide (4)	Mentoring the next generation; Family relationships
Joblessness (1)	-

CONCLUSION

The State of the Church in Singapore 2024 study serves to provide a mirror for the Church of Singapore, that she may better discern the times and her situation. We do not seek to dictate what the Church ought to do, but we offer these findings to prompt deep prayerful reflection and conversation, leading to change. Even though the topic is overtly about Seniors, the issues surfaced in this study should concern the whole Church.

We believe that the sample findings are an accurate reflection of the situation in the whole Church population in Singapore.

What follows are some summary observations.

DEMOGRAPHY IS DESTINY.

Age, unlike opinions and attitudes, cannot be changed. We are riding the tide of a super-aged society and cannot avoid the reality that the Church will likewise be ageing faster. Indeed, our findings suggest that with regard to age distribution, the Church in Singapore is a reflection of Singapore society.

We can use the present demography to project 10 years down and paint a reasonable picture of what the Church of Singapore will look like. There may be unforeseen major changes in our external circumstances, whether by the hidden hand or a visible sudden act of God, but even so it will not change the individuals who currently comprise the Church.

Demography indeed is destiny.

This phrase also applies at the local church level: Given a church's current age demography, it is possible to project what it will look like in the near future.

These projections may involve real challenges: We mentioned the demographic time bomb, where church congregations with a significantly large proportion of Seniors (relative to other Adults) will face in the near future major issues ranging from sources of financial giving, to available manpower to care for the elderly, to more general human resource problems, and concerns about the future of the Church and its ministries (for example, children's ministry).

Given that this is not a readily observable issue for them, we suspect that congregations with more young people than seniors are less likely to appreciate the gravity of this issue for the Church in Singapore.

OUR CHINESE-LANGUAGE CONGREGATIONS ARE FACING MORE PRESSING DEMOGRAPHIC CONCERNS.

We found that the demographic time bomb does not affect every local church in the same way. There are substantial differences in age demography between churches, and also between congregations (distinguished by language).

In general, the Mandarin-speaking congregations are facing the demographic time bomb sooner than their English-speaking counterparts. There are some English-speaking congregations that are also directly confronted with the problem.

We recognise that many local churches have both English and Mandarin congregations, and these congregations are interdependent; for example, the older generation of the same family may belong to the Chinese congregation while the younger ones belong to the English congregation. Our findings suggest that even in such cases, churches need to seriously reflect on the future of their Chinese (including dialect) congregations.

SENIORS' MINISTRY: SEASON OF OPPORTUNITY.

We hasten to add that Seniors must not be perceived merely as a challenge. Each one is made in the image of God, irrespective of their “ability” or perceived “usefulness”. They are also not homogenous in their spiritual vitality and in their needs.

We found many churches actively ministering to Seniors both within and not within their congregations. We rejoiced to hear of many baptisms from among the Seniors. We were glad to find that many Seniors were being mobilised within their church to be active in ministry themselves. Our findings put to rest any perception that ministry to Seniors cannot be vibrant.

Our prayer is that in the years ahead, the Church will be undaunted by the challenges of an aging population, but labour in faith in the harvest field of Seniors. Not only that, but also to mobilise their Seniors to flourish alongside all the other generations of the Church.

Challenging as it may be, the most frequently mentioned emotion concerning the pastoring of seniors was **“hope”**.

This is our outlook for the Church in Singapore in a super-aged society.

**Figure 13. Word Cloud formed by responses to the question:
 “As you reflect on pastoring seniors in your church,
 please share 3 different words that describe the emotions that you have.”**



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We intended this study to stir up reflective and constructive conversation within and between churches. Here are some questions you may use to generate such conversations:

1. WITHIN YOUR LOCAL CONGREGATION

- A. What will your congregation's age demographic look like, say 10 years from now? How will this older demographic impact your congregations' various ministries and congregational concerns? (For example, what is the "old age support ratio" of your congregation?)

- B. What ministries does your congregation currently have to care for Seniors?

- C. Many Seniors have a good number of years ahead of them upon retirement. How do you disciple Seniors to make disciples and serve in ministries?

- D. How would you describe your church's attitude towards Seniors? To what extent would you say that your church is intergenerational in its culture?

- E. What are the leadership succession challenges you foresee for your congregation, within the next 10 years? What is your church's succession plan for Pastors and staff? Is there a mandatory retirement age and what is its rationale?

2. IN SINGAPORE

- A. In what strategic ways might your congregation be positioned to reach out to an aging society in the communities around?

- B. Christian organisations serving in the silver space (such as hospitals, hospice care, nursing homes, active aging centres, and compassionate ministries) are lacking volunteer support. Will your congregation be able and willing to partner with these parachurches to minister to the growing base of Singaporeans needing such services?

- C. Our study shows a significant age demographic difference between English and Chinese-speaking congregations, and also among English-speaking congregations. How might younger congregations actively partner with older congregations (both within and between local churches), and vice versa?

3. BEYOND SINGAPORE

- A. By the grace of God, Singapore has been a strong missionary-sending base for many decades. Many of these missionaries are now advanced in age and returning from the field, and may face challenges adjusting back to life in Singapore. How can we care and provide for them?

- B. How may the Seniors in your church engage in missions, including getting sent out (short term or longer)?

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THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE STUDY
is a collaborative effort between Biblical Graduate School of Theology,
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