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2021

Seasons of Life

The Good Soil

Features

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Sowing Early
Better Late Than Never
A Father's Heart
What If
On Hard Soil
A New New

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The Good Soil

There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all in varying degrees.

Bishop Titus in his Presidential address to the 25th Session of Synod in November 2020 mentioned that it is no overstatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic is historically unprecedented to humanity. The scale of its impact is direct, wide, and great— from economics, geopolitics, medical infrastructure, social security, to religious activities.

COVID-19 has also been dubbed “The Great Reset”, a leveller of sorts. It presents a new opportunity for us as a Christian community in SJSM to relook at and rethink our lives, our families, and our faith in God. The theme for Seasons of Life (SOL) in 2021 is “Greenshoots”. We will be exploring stories about greenshoots—greenshoots of recovery, of forming new habits, new worldviews, and new practices. As the world takes tentative steps towards a new normal, we hope that the stories covered in our 2021 issues will bring hope and light in these difficult, new, and strange times.

The theme for this edition of SOL is “The Good Soil”. In this issue, we will explore ways in which we can become more like the good soil. Drawing from the agrarian analogy, you will read of how the pandemic brought adjustments to parenting and how couples who are sprouting new lives together in SJSM are adjusting to the changes. You will hear of stories by fellow SJSMers on how God broke through resistance and a “hard soil” with the saving message of Christ. You will also hear from our youth community of how COVID-19 has opened up new ways of connecting spiritually through social media. What is a day like for our Vicar? Have a glimpse of this in a new feature to get to know our pastors and leaders better. Be sure also to read the article that brings the stories into biblical perspective.

In these unprecedented and shaky times, may these stories help us to cultivate our faith in God and to build our lives on good soil.

Ps Daniel Teo

On behalf of the Editorial Team

Looking Outward in Isolating Times

Daniel Tham

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on Singapore, affecting many livelihoods and almost everyone's lifestyles. Much adjustment has also been needed in the local church: the Anglican Diocese of Singapore suspended all onsite worship services and gatherings beginning 19 March 2020—two weeks before the nationwide Circuit Breaker measures kicked in. In SJSM, as in other churches in Singapore, many would agree that spiritual and community life has not been the same since.

In times like these, what is God saying to us as His church, and how is He shaping us through these circumstances? In pondering these questions, my attention was drawn to the outlook and outreach of one SJSMer, Leo June Kit; his journey

is one that I have found inspiring in these isolating times, and his outward-looking perspective offers one possible answer.

Finding Strength and Direction

Over the past two years, June Kit has been battling a condition marked by extreme fatigue and dizziness. To date, this has yet to be clearly diagnosed. For one and a half years, June Kit was so weak that he was effectively homebound, having to spend most of the day lying down. Eating, breathing, and even walking within the house was exhausting. Thankfully, his condition started improving since November 2019, and he has been able to resume teaching on a reduced workload, as he still fatigues easily.

When COVID-19 struck, June Kit's thoughts were with his Bangladeshi friend Ashik (name changed to protect his privacy). Ashik first voluntarily stepped into SJSM in 2013, where he was befriended by several SJSMers including June Kit who subsequently walked with him on his journey towards baptism in 2015. Just before Circuit Breaker, June Kit managed to visit Ashik at his dormitory to see how he was doing.

During the visit, June Kit discovered that the residents were scared—some even suicidal—over the situation

they were in; unable to work and thus having no salary, no food, and no option to leave. For them, the situation was (and still is) rife with crippling uncertainty.

June Kit had already been seeking God's direction for his particular area of service before the start of the pandemic. Central to this were two convictions he held on to dearly: that the church should always be a part of and in service to the community, and that God has a special place in His heart for "the last, the least, and the lost". These convictions became even stronger with the onset of COVID-19, and his awareness of the urgent predicament faced by Ashik and his compatriots.

Called to Action

June Kit firmly believes that loving others requires us to love the communities we are placed in, or led into, and that "the church ought to endeavour to be among the first responders to the needy around us", whether their needs are physical, emotional, or spiritual. This is not about rushing into things hastily, he adds, but more about the posture of the heart: a willingness and readiness to make ourselves available to those in need, just as our Lord Jesus and the early disciples did.

He also believes it is important to

remember that caring for and loving others has to begin from a genuine position of love and concern for the other person's well-being and interests. This means putting aside our agendas and how we want to help, and instead empathising and understanding their needs and concerns.

As Circuit Breaker began, June Kit took the initiative to survey the ground in search of opportunities to serve the needy. As he was getting better, but still mindful of his ongoing fatigue, he looked for opportunities that were less physically demanding, such as packing food in soup kitchens, and delivering meals and essentials to the needy and the expatriate brothers (migrant workers).

Under Ps Andrew Raman's leadership, SJSJ started partnering the Alliance of Guest Workers Outreach (AGWO) in adopting two dormitories in Tuas. June Kit did not hesitate in signing up to help, although he was aware of his own limits due to his condition. "If I had energy to serve at all," he shares, "I wanted to serve my parish first, because this is the community that God has planted me in."

The SJSJ team June Kit joined was tasked with providing both halal and non-halal meals to the workers in the dormitories during Ramadan, the Muslim fasting month. Although

Central to this were two convictions he held on to dearly: that the church should always be a part of and in service to the community, and that God has a special place in His heart for “the last, the least, and the lost”.

An expatriate brother receiving prayer for an ear problem.



they had just about a week to plan, June Kit was touched and greatly encouraged by the overwhelming response by his fellow SJSMers—they rallied to contribute necessary items, assist in food deliveries, and with various collections for and deliveries of items like hair clippers and games equipment, to address the workers' physical as well as socio-emotional needs.

"The same love and care we ourselves have received from God, we would like to share with our brothers too," June Kit says. While meeting immediate physical needs is crucial, one must also take psychological and socio-emotional needs into consideration—building relationships based on trust and sincere friendship is very important. This is the basis of Care Connexion, a new outreach ministry to the dormitories, under SJSM's Missions department. A Facebook page has also been set up to facilitate online interaction and ministry.

Shifting Paradigms

To June Kit, this ministry required a paradigm shift. "When we call them migrant workers," he explains, "we segregate them by status and value." In discussion with Ps Andrew, the team decided on the term "expatriate brothers and sisters" to accord them the dignity and respect they deserve.

While this is a timely mindset change, there remains a needed shift in how we view our own efforts in serving others. This is especially relevant now, when many Singaporeans, SJSMers included, are themselves struggling to make ends meet, to adjust to new arrangements for working from home, to find time for adequate rest, or to stay safe for the sake of their own families. June Kit is careful to point out that these are very real concerns that need loving attention, which require community support, and should not be dismissed or swept under the carpet.

It is no surprise that this is one of the leading reasons many people are unsure about committing to community service, at a time when it is most needed. In fact, as pandemic safety regulations gradually relax, and with more people returning to their workplaces, it has become harder to find volunteers to keep such ministries going. This is accompanied by the common perceptions that it is intimidating to make new friendships—something that introverts in particular find to be outside their comfort zones.

As an encouragement to those struggling with various challenges in their own lives, June Kit adds on, "We need not do grand things for our service to be meaningful. God knows our frame. He is more concerned with the posture of our hearts, than



Ps Andrew (left) and June Kit (right) at one of their befriending visits to a dormitory in Tuas.

"It is possible for us to love and serve others even in our weakness."

the form of what we do. As we love and serve with a sincere heart, even our smallest actions will make a difference to the lives of others, and be a fragrant offering to our heavenly Father." He believes that loving and serving others can start with whatever relationships that God has already placed in our lives, such as in our families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and churches.

"It is possible for us to love and serve others even in our weakness. We can care for others in whatever little capacities God has given us grace to, for the different seasons of our lives," reflects June Kit. These words, coming from someone fighting his own battles with chronic fatigue,

inspire me greatly as I wrestle with my own constraints and limited capacity during this period. It is in turn my prayer that in these times, so marked by isolation and a tendency to focus on ourselves, that our attention—and our prayer, time, and service—be directed outwards, to those who most need the experience of God's love put into action.

"Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalms 34:8) is the invitation that resounds, almost counterintuitively, in the face of trial and tribulation. That might just be what God is saying to us, individually and as a church, as we keep looking outwards during this difficult season.

Sowing Early

Yeo Hem Joo

Proverbs 22:6, a well-known verse, states:

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.”



Sue May and her two girls, Christal and Charlene

Parenting in the 21st century digital age is no easy business. And when life threw us a curveball with the outbreak of COVID-19, parents were faced with novel challenges: work-from-home arrangements, children's Home-based Learning (HBL), health and safety concerns, aged parents' caregiving arrangements and so on. Last May, an article by Salt&Light ministry reported that 6 in 10 out of 1,000 mothers surveyed faced higher stress during this period.

So, SOL caught up with a few mothers from SJSJ to find out how they have been adjusting to the new normal, and especially how they have continued to cultivate the good soil of their children's hearts to grow them in the ways of the Lord.

Home-based Bonding

Sue May was glad that her twin daughters, Christal and Charlene, 11,

"Last May, an article by Salt&Light ministry reported that 6 in 10 out of 1,000 mothers surveyed faced higher stress during this period."

—

adjusted well to HBL. "However, with their father away since March due to the pandemic, I've had to hold the fort at home, while also supporting my elderly parents with their groceries over the Circuit Breaker period," she admitted.

Sue May encouraged her girls to call their grandparents especially in the weeks when social distancing measures were the most stringent. With more time at home, Sue May and her daughters navigated online school and Bible lessons, creating pockets of fun and teamwork. They bonded over simple activities such as watching Disney, following YouTube fitness videos, baking goodies for family and friends, making box homes for their hamster using recycled materials and enjoying other craftwork.

As a family, they participated in a school project to contribute food and toiletries to migrant workers housed near the girls' school. The girls made appreciation cards and simple masks for these workers. Not having to attend school physically also meant more time for bedtime hugs and sharing, as Sue May and her twins bonded over their favourite VeggieTales show and the Daily Bread devotions for children. Sunday mornings were spent on FaceTime, catching up with Daddy whom the girls missed dearly.

“I was a little lost at what to do with my boy initially, but as I prayed and read up about home-schooling, I took baby steps to teach him by starting from the book of Genesis 1.”

All these activities and the weekly Zoom lessons, put together by SJSJ's Junior Church and Teen Encounter to enjoy and study God's Word, made family life busy and fulfilling. It might be nothing out of the ordinary but the quality time spent together goes a long way towards building positive and confident children.

Home-school Experiment

For Dee, the initial period of Circuit Breaker proved quite overwhelming as she had to set up the computer, coach her daughter, Dorothy, 10, in her studies during HBL, and keep herself and son, 5-year-old Daniel, occupied at home. The family loves the outdoors so being cooped up at home was not easy either. It helped when Dee later found out about free online art classes that were conducted almost daily. These helped keep the children excited and occupied for a while.

When Circuit Breaker ended, Dee and her husband made the joint decision to pull their son from kindergarten to home-school him.

“I was a little lost at what to do with my boy initially, but as I prayed and read up about home-schooling, I took baby steps to teach him by starting from the book of Genesis 1.”

It took about four months to complete the first chapter but the slow-paced study proved fruitful: Daniel can now read most of the text and they enjoyed learning together about the vastness of the universe and the wonderful earth God had created. Similarly, Dee ordered Manga Genesis for her daughter to read so they could discuss their thoughts and insights from the book of Genesis.

“COVID-19 has revealed a lot about ourselves during this time—our fears of the unknown. Despite all that, we can learn to cope and even thrive under such circumstances. I’m reminded that we need to learn to give thanks in all circumstances. Difficult times are opportunities for God’s presence and love to break through.”

Humble Listening

Even as Z (who wishes to be anonymous) aspires to bring up her boys, 12 and 16, in the ways of the



Dee's children, Daniel and Dorothy

Lord and prays for them often, this season has been a humbling one for her. She has been learning to repent of what she wants to do with her children and to surrender to God's ways instead.

"I wanted children who are thankful to God and positive no matter how they felt. That created scenes of unhappiness and correction from me with them at home. As God prompted me to listen more to their questions and struggles, I learnt that God was meeting them already." Once, her elder son told her that she was always scolding him and not helping him. Contrite, she apologised, recognising that she needed to trust him more. And to her encouragement, for his 16th birthday, he asked for an ESV Study Bible instead of a gadget or device.

Her younger son had a hard time last year but God blessed him

with dreams that comforted and strengthened him. "One of his dreams was about a large bird of prey that rested on his arm. It gripped him very tightly, and there were lots of people around him encouraging him and telling him that it would be okay. I felt that God was that large bird holding onto him... through his PSLE journey."

She recounted that on one occasion, they participated in a card-making blessing to migrant workers who were confined to their dorms. The younger boy was unwilling initially. Then he had a dream of being in a very cramped and uncomfortable hut. He sensed that God was showing him how the migrant workers lived and felt. Compassion flowed and he was glad to take part in the project.

Thus, Z's heart is encouraged to see her boys grow in sensitivity to God's prompting. Indeed, she shared that in her moments of stress, they have sensed it and asked her, "Can I pray for you, Mummy?"

God-centred Living

Although her children are older, being 16, 18 and 20, Esther and her husband, Elijah, have never stopped nightly prayers with them nor regular time for worship and sharing of God's Word. Their top priority has always been to build a strong spiritual foundation in their

children and to make the home a natural extension of biblical learning. Therefore, during Circuit Breaker, they made good use of the increased time spent at home to do in-depth Bible studies together.

Two of the children had major exams last year so the family created workspaces for a conducive study environment and supported one another through prayer. That period of time has strengthened family ties and promoted true Christian living.

From these mothers' sincere sharing, I learnt this: whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, remain humble and depend on God to guide us through His Word and His Holy Spirit. Then we can sow into the lives of our children by loving them, grounding them in the Word and by modelling for them resilience, care for others and faith in God. And in time to come, we will reap a harvest of righteousness: a new generation of men and women of God who love Him and love His people.



Better Late Than Never

Michael Tan

Our God is the God who pursues each and every one of us relentlessly so that we may come to the knowledge of His saving grace. St Paul says that while we may plant and water, it is ultimately God who gives growth. It is never too late to reach a loved one for God, just as it is never too late to reach God for yourself. He waits and He beckons. Woan Chee's story tells powerfully of our God who pursues.

Q: When did you become a Christian? Briefly describe the circumstances and event.

Woan Chee: I accepted Christ in 2017 at a Gospel and Healing service at SJSM. I was 48 years old then and had been attending SES at SJSM regularly for about a year. Why was I attending church regularly? Prior to 2016, this would have been impossible. However, in September 2014, my husband, Chin, suffered a massive stroke and this turned our whole family upside down. Chin was hospitalised for three months and until today he is still physically disabled and has near-zero vision. From being a traditional housewife whose head of family is the husband, I have had to take charge of everything, including making important decisions about our finances, home management, children and handling IT-related matters, which I really struggled with. Imagine, Chin was previously the one who purchased and set up my mobile phone and our home computer! I was so clueless! The pressure and stress that I was under was tremendous. This was exacerbated by our then 5-year-old younger child's diagnosis of ADHD and learning difficulties,



followed by another diagnosis of a hole in his heart requiring heart surgery. I felt so much weight on my shoulders and so alone. I felt so much sadness, anger, worry and stress. I would fall asleep exhausted at night, only to wake up in the early hours and lie sleepless in bed. My relationship with my husband was bad as we had arguments most of the time. Chin was struggling so much with his situation. The psychological impact of his condition on him was tremendous and I struggled to deal with the change in his personality.

Amidst all these problems, Chin accepted Christ as his Saviour at the end of 2015 while undergoing treatment in Taiwan. From mid-2016, he started attending SES at SJSM. As his caregiver, I would accompany him every Saturday, in Christ Sanctuary. At that memorable Gospel and Healing Service, the pivotal moment came when Ps Joshua spoke of how Jesus was there for us, if we

would only reach out to him and find rest in Him, for His yoke was easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:28-30). And tentatively, I reached out my hand to the Lord.... Oh, the tears and the relief that followed!

Q: How did you see life and its priorities before you came to know God? What about now?

Woan Chee: Before I came to know God, life was focused on myself and my family. I used to think that life was about striving for excellence, for financial security and for our own happiness. I believed that we had to work hard and excel, all by our own merits and effort. And that we had to overcome any challenges on our own.

Now that I know God, I know that God has to be my number ONE. When I am close to Him, my soul is well. I have peace and wellness in my heart. These are so much more precious compared to monetary rewards, academic excellence or material goods.

I understand that Jesus does not promise us that life will be a bed of roses when we choose to be His disciples. In fact, God continues to give us challenges because He loves us. Unfortunately for us as humans, when things are going fine

in life we tend to forget God in our "contentment." However, it is through a life of endurance, facing up to tests and trials that we will grow in our discipleship as Christians. So although it is very difficult, I thank God for His love and for trials in my life. Most importantly, when I face challenges, I know that I can turn to God for His strength, His guidance, His peace, which will help me overcome all trials. I know that I can do all things through Him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13) and that I can trust in the Lord with all my heart and not lean on my own understanding; but in all my ways acknowledge Him, and He will make my paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Q: What are some of the unmistakable changes that your life has undergone since?

Woan Chee: The first change was the easing of pressure and stress. I was getting better sleep and it made a huge difference in how I approached my day. Slowly, I learned to put my faith in God and believe that God is in control all the time. I learned the power of prayer—that I should not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, I can let my requests be made known to God (Philippians 4:6). Many times when I was struggling to deal with my younger son or my husband, I found

that I could take time out and pray, and the situation always worked out well or even changed for the better. On the contrary, especially during the initial days of being a Christian when I did not always think about coming to God in prayer, there was much struggle and conflict.

On the home front, although things did not change miraculously overnight, they gradually improved over time. I learnt about the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23, Colossians 3:12-15) and tried to practise what I learnt from God's Word, being conscious to be more like Jesus: to show love, patience, kindness, self-control, compassion, humility, forgiveness and thankfulness. That made a big difference in my relationship with Chin and in our daily interaction.

Q: What do you cherish most about your Christian faith?

Woan Chee: Firstly, my relationship with God, the Father. I am very thankful that He is always there for me, to strengthen and guide me during difficulties, and He is a Father to whom I can turn when I need to unburden myself.

Secondly, my cell group members, for all the care and support that

"...what I learnt from God's Word, being conscious to be more like Jesus: to show love, patience, kindness, self-control, compassion, humility, forgiveness and thankfulness."

they show each other. They have also supported me in my journey as a young believer, including going through study materials on the fundamentals of Christian life.

Q: Was it difficult for you making such a major decision relatively late in life? Why?

Woan Chee: It was very difficult. I hesitated for a long time because my deceased parents were staunch Buddhists and it felt like I was betraying their memory and all that they had brought me up to be. But I realised I had to make a decision for my own life and I am very thankful that I did, seeing all that God has done and continues to do in my life. In my case, it was truly better late than never.

Woan Chee is a mother of two sons and erstwhile scientist who has been a homemaker for some years now. She attends SES with her husband Chin and is regular at cell.



A Father's Heart

Kevin Kwang



My personal prayer, for myself as well as for other fathers out there, is that we do not forget to invest in our children's spiritual lives even as we're continually told to invest our energies—fortune, acclaim—elsewhere.

Sitting here in the delivery suite, at the start of yet another journey with a precious life God has blessed us with, I have to admit a bittersweet feeling.

It is now months into a global pandemic that has swept across the world and upended all our lives significantly—possibly for good. The economy is tanking. Flights and tourism are pipe dreams for many, if not most. Businesses in entertainment and nightlife face a murky future, even as Singapore enters Phase 3 of its gradual economic reopening.

Many have lost their jobs, or will lose them in the coming months, as government aid dries up for employers and employees alike.

Fresh graduates face their first major career challenge—simply attempting to land a job. A training or internship opportunity could well be the best that some can hope for, as many companies continue reining in their growth and hiring plans.

The spectre of another health crisis breaking out also looms large. Around us, countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines are battling their second or third waves of COVID-19 infections.

Further afield, the United States and Europe are still fighting to stem the spread of the coronavirus amid seasonal weather changes that are accelerating its spread.

Even as governments around the world struggle to keep the virus under control in the physical realm, a surge in misinformation—aptly dubbed an infodemic—has emerged in the digital space. Bad actors are sowing seeds of doubt about the seriousness of the pandemic and the need for mask wearing and social distancing, as well as reinforcing public distrust in the value and benefit of vaccines in general.

The Internet as a platform has also led to rising mental health issues and youth suicides in recent times.

The ubiquity of smart devices, and the easy access to the Web that comes with them—particularly social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, as well as chat apps—have resulted in the majority of today’s young people forging their still-nascent identities and self-esteem on the shifting sands of peer pressure and public sentiment.

In the World, But Not of It

Some might well ask: Why bring another life into this uncertain world? I have asked myself the same question, when I’m being honest.

Being in the media industry, and knowing clearly some of the challenges mentioned above, makes one circumspect about the direction this world is heading in.

People can also choose to behave in ugly ways, particularly when they assume anonymity and relinquish responsibility in their online personas. Just dip into the comments thread on any news outlet’s Facebook posts and you’ll see what I mean.

But we know that, as Christians, we are “not of the world”—no more than Jesus Christ was (John 17:14–19).

Jesus also expressly stated in this passage that He was not asking for

us to be taken out of the world, but for God the Father to guard us from the Evil One.

I especially take comfort from His words in verse 16 as translated in the Message version: “They are no more defined by the world than I am defined by the world.”

When I let these words take root and assume significance in my heart and life, I’m reminded that my children—all of them, not just the latest addition to the tribe—are God’s wonderful creations, each with a unique purpose and destiny given to them by their Creator.

Their lives are not diminished or rendered less meaningful because of what the world is becoming, or how people in many countries are becoming more divided and hateful towards one another.

In fact, my children’s lives—and yours—are full with the potential of bringing Christ’s love to people who are more in need of hearing this message of love than ever before.

It would thus be a real disservice to make a decision not to bring a new life to the world based on the abovementioned global trends and challenges.

Making Spiritual Deposits

One piece of advice I have taken on board during my journey of fatherhood is to pray into my children's lives.

I like to think of it as opening up a "bank account" for them in the spiritual realm, with each prayer a deposit and/or investment into their spiritual lives and futures.

It is my belief that each child has a purpose and destiny that only they can bring to fruition for the Lord's kingdom—and the Evil One will try to curtail or steal it from them for their whole lives.

Going back to John 17, it was said: "Make them holy—consecrated—with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth. In the same way that You gave me a mission in the world, I give them a mission in the world." (v.17–18, The Message)

My personal prayer, for myself as well as for other fathers out there, is that we do not forget to invest in our children's spiritual lives even as we're continually told to invest our energies—fortune, acclaim—elsewhere.

(BRB, I hear the baby crying. Again.)

A prayer

I pray we'll be able to protect when you need protecting.

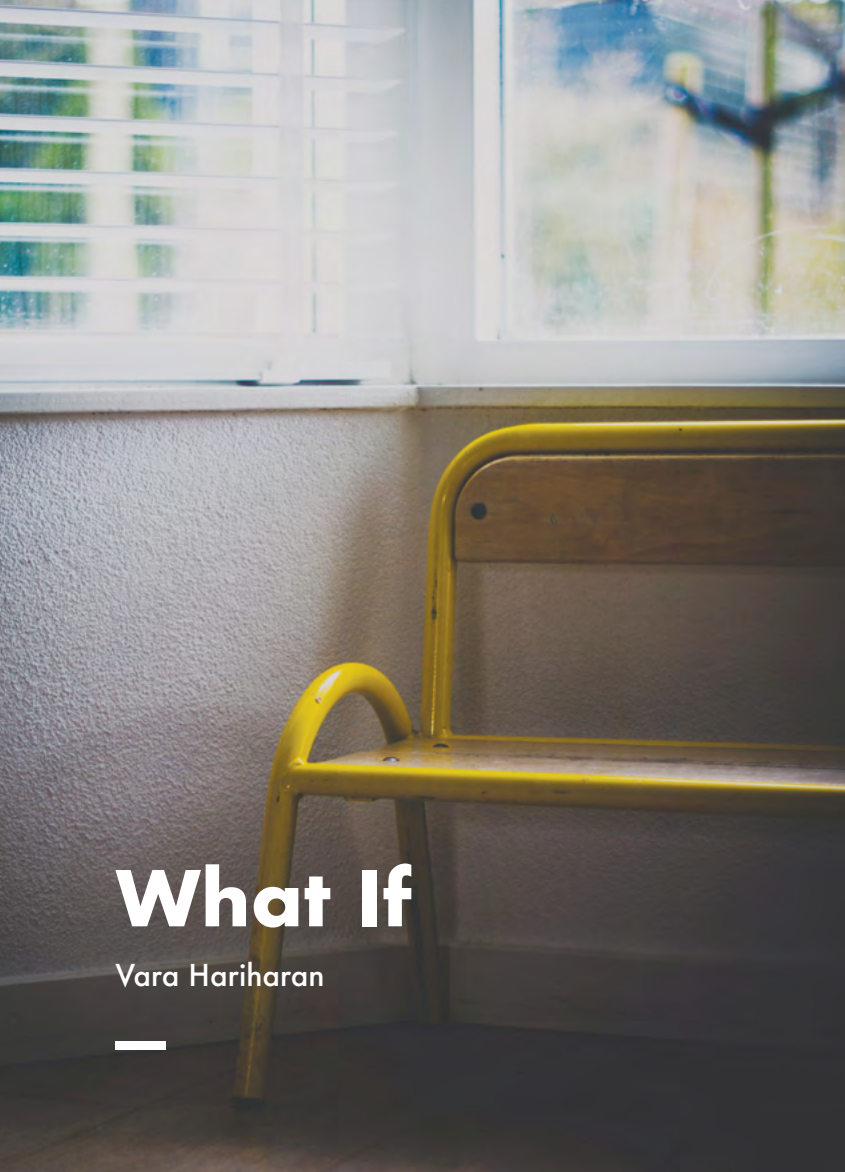
Nurture, when you are most inquisitive.

Empower, when you need to make your own decisions.

Set you free, when God gives you the wings to fly.

Smile, when we are no longer together in this life.

Amen.



What If

Vara Hariharan

**"Outward gains lead to inward losses.
Outward losses lead to inward gain."**

I little thought, when I taught Robert Burn's poem 'To a Mouse' to my classes, that it would be a poem that my mind would keep returning to 35 years later. These lines from the poem have been an almost daily refrain in my head:

**"the best-laid schemes of mice
and men**

Go often awry

**and leave us nothing
but grief and pain,**

For promised joy"

2020 has indeed been a year when my best-laid plans went awry, just as it has for many others.

Those who know me well tease me about my obsession with my planner. I have used the same type of monthly planner for more than 10 years, with neatly marked squares which I would fill with my scheduled meetings and to-do lists, stubbornly refusing to be enticed by online planners which did not give me the same pleasure and sense of accomplishment that came from crossing out and ticking off tasks and appointments.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and the squares filled with travel plans, meetings, study schedules and dinners emptied out. Amidst people who were mourning the loss

of jobs and income, I could not voice the loss that those empty squares in my planner spelt for me: the loss of identity, the loss of purpose, the loss of social connection, the loss of passions. I felt a grief that I was embarrassed to voice.

Yet, this has been a season of loss of a number of roles and relationships that gave me purpose and joy. I had retired in 2018. My adult daughters are married and live abroad so the nest is empty. I became a grandmother for the first time at the end of 2019, but I cannot discover the joys of grand-mothering as COVID-19 forced me to return to Singapore. Activities that had filled my days—part-time teaching, tutoring, church, theatre, volunteering—all came to a stop. I was frightened by the magnitude and ferocity of the spread of the virus. I was also sad and lonely, asking the same question that many Christians must have been asking—why, God? How long, Lord? I don't know if others received an answer; all I got was silence.

Then one day I was startled by a memory. In January, when reading an exposition of Judges by Timothy Keller, I had been struck by this quotation and copied it into my journal: "Outward gains are ordinarily attended with inward losses; while, conversely, 'inward gains'—growth in humility, self-control,



wisdom—are ordinarily attached to ‘outward losses’ of our finances, careers or relationships failing.”

This quotation returned to me with a new force. Outward gains lead to inward losses. Outward losses lead to inward gain. Perhaps, when my life was full with appointments and plans, too much of my identity had been shaped by my outward gains. Perhaps, now, it was time to stop mourning the outward losses and turn my gaze inward. Perhaps, as Philip Yancey said in a podcast interview with Sheridan Voysey, “Why is this happening?” is the wrong question to ask God when things go wrong. When the unexpected happens, the questions to ask are, “Now that this has happened, what do you want me to do, Lord?” and more importantly, “Who do you want me to become?”

I have not figured out what God wants me to do or who He wants me to become in these murky times. But if this is your path too, I would like to share the “what if’s” I asked myself.

1. Re-position – What if, as the world of “doing” fades, God is calling me to shift my posture from “doing” to “being”? From listing my “to-do’s” to listening to God’s heart? Perhaps, Jesus is saying to the Martha in me, “You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary”, and I am being called to “choose the good portion” of sitting at His feet and listening to His teaching (Luke 10:39-42). Perhaps, I need to shift from planning, to accepting that it is only the present that I will know with certainty.

2. Re-kindle – What if, this “new normal” is time to re-discover “the old normal”? Perhaps this hiatus is time to deepen the known, to re-set my true identity as child of God. Perhaps it is time to re-invest in relationships. During Quiet Time one day, God said, “Pray for those you have decided are ‘the impossibles’.” To me, those were my siblings. Over the years I have drifted away from my sisters and brother as they are very much older than me. During this lockdown period, I re-connected with my nephews and nieces and persuaded them to help my siblings use Zoom. I have been humbled by just how happy these monthly Zoom meetings have made my siblings. Perhaps there are people you have not invested time in before—old friends? Family that you have not talked with in a long while?

3. Rebel – What if when the old patterns have been challenged, it is an opportunity to dare do something that is unlike me? We think of God as powerful, holy, mighty, and He is all these, but perhaps we forget that God is creative. He is not one to be put in boxes, and made in His image, neither are we meant to be. The “old me” hesitated, but I sent out feelers in one of the WhatsApp groups I belonged to, to ask if anyone would like to try an online book club. This book club, with two women I had not met before, turned out to be the highlight of the Circuit Breaker period for me. It has resulted in an unexpected new friendship with women who are very unlike me, but who have blessed me with their vulnerability and spiritual walk.

4. Re-discover – What if, this period of uncertainty is the time to re-discover my interests, talents and spiritual gifts? Perhaps the busy, full life had led us to put aside tasks with the promise that we would do that one day. My online book club friends re-affirmed that teaching was my calling, but opportunities to teach students or facilitate professional development courses for teachers had disappeared. Interestingly, a letter included in the book we were discussing gave me a new direction. Responding to a teacher who felt frustrated that she did not get a teaching job she had applied for, Sheridan Voysey wrote,

“If God has gifted you to teach—if it flows in your bones and you’re effective doing it—then you are a teacher whether you have an official role or not. Who else in your community needs your gift? I’ll be praying for a place where their need and your talent can meet.”

That question, “Who else in your community needs your gift?”, helped to re-direct my searching. I do teach now—I teach English online to one migrant worker. He is just one, but the earnestness with which he copies new words into his notebook, his regret when he is unable to finish the homework and his hope—“Teacher Vara, one day I want to talk English like you”—is a re-discovery of a passion for me.

I would like to say that things have changed, but the world is still as it was. I’m writing still, out of a place of questions, silence and confusion. But I have learnt to wait. I have learnt to pray my lament. And I have learnt to not just listen to my heart, but to speak to it and say, “if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13)

On Hard Soil

Prisca Ang



Charis Ng and her mother, Madam Yeo Yia Hoe, celebrating both their birthdays at home in July last year (2020).

First-generation Christian Charis Ng, 40, has been sharing the gospel with her family for 20 years. She started attending SJSM in 1998 and accepted Christ into her life in 1999—the first in her family to do so. She now works full-time in the prayer and intercession ministry.

Despite facing years of resistance, Charis perseveres in speaking God's love and sharing her faith with her family. By God's grace her mother, Yeo Yia Hoe, 63, became a Christian in November 2019. They share their journeys with SOL.

Q: Charis, how did you come to accept Christ into your life?

Charis: I was not doing well in junior college, so my economics teacher (an SJSMer) gave me extra tutorials before the GCE A-levels in 1998. During those tutorials, my friends and I told jokes about Christianity; in response, our teacher shared how God created everything, including us. She said that Jesus is the one true God, and that whoever doesn't believe in Him will suffer eternal condemnation because He is a holy God while we are all sinners. As non-believers, we were offended by this.

I wanted to prove her wrong, but God revealed Himself to me in a tangible way while I was searching for the truth. The day before my

General Paper exam, I received a delivery—a parcel of books including the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Instead of revising, I read those books and fell asleep on my desk. I woke up late the next morning, anxious and angry, feeling that God had sabotaged me. My bus had just left when I reached the bus stop. I challenged God to make it come again, which happened the moment I prayed. I was terrified because it seemed like God heard me though I hadn't said a word. On the bus, I asked God to help me not be late, and the bus drove straight to school without stopping—something that had never happened before.

After my exams, I read the Bible every day; I hid this from my parents, who were staunch believers in another religion. My teacher invited me to Alpha at the end of the year. To discern which faith was true, I attended church while still visiting temples with my family. After a year, I was convinced that God was the true, living and powerful God, who sent His son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for sinners so that we could be reconciled to Him by grace through faith. I talked to Him and He answered my prayers. Church members also prayed for me and were patient and loving, even when I asked weird and rude questions. I accepted Christ as my Saviour in 1999.

Q: How did your family react?

Charis: When my parents found out that I had decided to be a Christian, my father, who was especially angry, wanted to disown me. It was as if I had betrayed the family. For a few years, he would get drunk late at night, lose control, throw things around and ask evil spirits to possess him. But over time, as I showed them more love, they started to realise that Christianity was not as bad as they had thought. I was baptised only in 2008 because they initially objected, but my family, including my dad, attended my baptism. They also started to be more open about the faith and asked questions about it.

Q: How did Yia Hoe come to accept Christ into her life?

Charis: I attend the night-time Christmas Eve and Covenant services every year. After I was baptised, Mum started expressing concern about my coming home alone so late. I invited her to the services; she has attended them with me every year since. She didn't understand them because they were in English (she speaks Chinese), but she would sing along during worship. I started inviting her for church camps five years ago, and she attended two. She joined my cell for outings, Christmas outreach events and Alpha dinners. My cell members always made it a point to reach out to her.

I joined the SJSJ staff in February 2019 after quitting my job as a senior educational psychologist and manager. Before I could inform the family, Mum, a hawker, found out about it through another SJSJ member who congratulated her on the news while visiting the stall. Mum went into denial. Her first question was whether I would be paid. She did not understand how I could make such a huge decision without consulting the family, and she constantly expressed her unhappiness and worries on this point. Eventually, I had had enough. Deciding that she couldn't grumble or complain against God like that, I signed her up for Chinese Alpha in church.

The night before the first Alpha session, Dad got drunk again and was weeping and trying to hurt himself. That hadn't happened for a long time. Due to the uncanny timing, I believed it was spiritual warfare. I prayed authoritatively for him, aloud in Jesus' name. He calmed down. I also prayed and read the Bible with my family as they were frightened. The next day, Mum was anxious about how Dad would feel about her going to church for Alpha. Amazingly, she attended every session and read the Bible every day.

During the last Alpha session, there was an altar call. I asked Mum if she wanted to step forward but she demurred. I prayed fervently that she would respond, and gestured to the leaders. One of them came

over, hugged her, and kept telling her that Jesus loves her. Mum broke down and couldn't stop crying. I was shocked that a simple action could move her so deeply. She went for all three rounds of altar calls, and said the Sinner's Prayer. Afterwards, she kept asking me about baptism dates; she wanted to get baptised as soon as possible. It was incredible how wonderfully God was working in her.

Q: What changed after Yia Hoe became a Christian?

Charis: We were all afraid to tell Dad that Mum had become a Christian. When he found out, he was sad and shocked; miraculously, he came to witness her baptism. He still isn't keen on coming to church, but he is not as resistant as before. We continue to pray for him and try to bring God into conversations whenever opportunities arise. My parents' relationship has also changed. Previously, they quarrelled often and disagreed on many things. Now, Mum is much more loving and caring towards Dad: for example, she responds well when he doesn't want to eat food she's cooked; previously, she would complain about being unappreciated. There is a lot more joy in her daily life, and she is more peaceful. Her countenance has changed. She is also supportive and understanding of my work in church now.

Yia Hoe: I felt very peaceful and assured of God's love for me after

I accepted Christ into my life. It was like a weight had been lifted off my heart. The church community was also very warm and caring, and this really made a difference to me. My relationships with my loved ones also improved; in particular, I grew closer to my daughter Charis as we have a shared faith. We read the Bible and pray together—her in English and myself in Chinese. I'm grateful that she persevered over the years to bring me to church and to share God's love with me.

Q: Charis, what has kept you going over the years?

Charis: There were moments when it seemed like the more I prayed and cried out to God, the more resistant my family became. They visited the temple for longer hours and served there more fervently. But whenever I felt helpless, God would send me encouragement. For example, a woman I had met at a Varsity Christian Fellowship camp in university told me she had prayed for her mum's salvation for 20 years—our part is to pray and intercede, and God will do the rest as He loves our parents too. Coincidentally, I too waited 20 years before Mum accepted Christ. It was a very sweet victory. My friends and I also pray for one another's parents' salvation; that sense of togetherness really helps. Attending the SJSM Prayer Training in 2016 also enriched my prayer life; I became much more intentional in praying for them.

A New New

Amanda Chong



Is marriage still worth pursuing?

To more and more couples in Singapore, perhaps not. According to SingStat, the number of marriages registered in 2019 was 5.8% lower than the year before, and the lowest it has been since 2010.

Opposite to this, the number of marital dissolutions hit a record high in 2019, in at least thirty years.

We don't yet know if the COVID-19 pandemic will accelerate these contrasting trends, but it is not difficult to appreciate the added challenges couples now face when considering marriage. How do we plan a wedding when the regulations keep changing? Will we have enough money to start a home of our own? Is our income stable?

In these turbulent times, who's to say that our marriage will stay solid?

In this article, we hear from three young couples (myself and husband included), about what it has been like starting a new life together, and



why—in the midst of a more difficult and uncertain world—they're still choosing to do so.

Leonard and Stephanie Holding Fast – Unity Through Uncertainty

Leonard and Stephanie are currently planning for their wedding, which they hope to hold in May 2021. There has been much uncertainty in many areas of the process—how many guests to invite, where to hold the wedding reception, how last-minute changes will affect their budget. All these factors hinge on the state's regulations for social gatherings, which could change in the blink of an eye based on conditions on the ground.

“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Genesis 2:18)

Understandably, this process has had its fair share of stressful moments. It has been a bit more discouraging for Leonard, who has it in his nature to make contingency plans for every component so that things run smoothly. The sheer unpredictability of the pandemic has been a crash course in learning to adapt and be flexible.

It has not been easy, but they reassure each other and work together to resolve the hurdles that come their way. To them, marriage is ultimately about being united through adversity and growing through change. It is about two people enjoying the good times, but also embracing the bad times as one.

This idea of holding fast is also found in the Bible, and it is first mentioned in Genesis 2:24—"Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Later on, these same words ('dabaq' in Hebrew) are commanded of the Israelites in keeping covenant with their God: "You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve Him and hold fast to Him, and by His name you shall swear." (Deuteronomy 10:20)

In a time of change and uncertainty, it is this posture that Leonard and

"They might not know for sure what the road ahead will be like, but they are committing to hold fast to each other, trusting God with each step that they take."

Stephanie are choosing to take. They might not know for sure what the road ahead will be like, but they are committing to hold fast to each other, trusting God with each step that they take.

Max and Amanda **A Salve for Harsh Times**

My husband Max and I (Amanda) got married in February 2020, one week after Singapore moved into DORSCON Orange. Although wedding planning

Max and Amanda



was nightmarish for various reasons—something neither of us would ever wish to relive—we thank God for His grace and provision in seeing us through. It was a lesson in learning to trust God and His goodness even when life seems to be serving you lemons, and even when His timing seems sadistically sour in the moment. (It is not).

Max has been dealing with the pandemic-altered year fairly well, but I don't think I've ever struggled with the blues this much. One day bleeds into another and it has been easier than ever to feel a sense of existential dread and purposelessness—at least I know I have. Add to that a guilt for not feeling more thankful than you should be, and you get an internal spiral of shame and despair.

God's clearest provision to me during this pandemic journey has been the gift of getting to do life with Max. My husband cannot shake off my sadness, but he holds me steady. He has been a ray of sunshine in a bleak 2020. Our first year of marriage has been a daily reminder that life can contain much good, in the most ordinary of ways, even if it can also feel utterly drab.

We need these reminders, and I think more often than not they come from human connection, especially



from the ones closest to us. "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (Genesis 2:18) This idea—that marriage was intended to be good for us—is echoed in Proverbs 18:22, which says, "he who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord."

Likewise, I believe that marriage can be a very present salve for both husband and wife, who take turns to soothe, support and supply strength to each other.

Clarence and Cindy For Our Good and for His Glory

For Clarence and Cindy, who are working towards marriage, the past two years of dating have taught them more about what it means to love in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18).

During Circuit Breaker, Cindy had to undergo surgery to remove some ovarian cysts. Thankfully, because the hospital she was in did not admit any COVID-19 patients, she was allowed to have one accompanying visitor. Clarence stayed with her throughout her hospitalisation, helping her in practical ways and comforting her. (They often joke that it was their mini staycation!)

They also found simple ways to show each other care and concern when they were not able to meet—sending Grabfood deliveries to each other’s houses, watching Netflix titles at the same time, and playing Overcooked online. Even though their homes were not the most conducive of environments to tide through Circuit Breaker, these simple acts of consideration and connection provided much-needed respite and encouragement.

It was also during this period that Clarence and Cindy found the time to complete a devotional guide for dating couples, which facilitated deeper conversations that drew them closer to God and to each other.

Cindy, who readily confesses to being the “clingier” one in the relationship, appreciates it when Clarence encourages her to look outwards and make more time for the people around her.

"Marriage, the most intimate of human relationships, is but an earthly glimpse into a deeper, most glorious union between God and His people that will see fruition when Christ returns."

After all, they believe that love and marriage are not merely purposed for our good, but also for His glory. “This mystery,” Paul writes in Ephesians 5, of two people becoming one flesh, “is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (v32). Marriage, the most intimate of human relationships, is but an earthly glimpse into a deeper, most glorious union between God and His people that will see fruition when Christ returns.

Although Clarence and Cindy do not yet see or know fully God’s plans for them, and life brims with uncertainty—especially now—they are choosing to rest in the knowledge that He sees and He knows fully (Psalms 139:16). And because of that, they are at peace.

5 THINGS ABOUT:

Ps Dino Thangamany

Kevin Kwang

“One thing that I hope and pray to achieve is the participation of each and every member of SJSM, because we are all stewards; we’re all stakeholders.”

Pastor Dino V. Thangamany is no ordinary chaplain.

Most people his age—he’s 66—would be planning to spend their silver years with their spouses and family, or pursuing leisure activities like travel (before COVID-19 put a stop to this) that they might have had to defer while they were still working.

Rather than retire quietly into the background, here he is, having rocked up at SJSM last April, to assume the role of Chaplain for the soon-to-be-opened SJSM Village. The SJSM Village comprises a nursing home, senior care centre and childcare centre (SJSM Kindercare), and Ps Dino has since rolled up his sleeves and gotten to work. He and

his team are diligently preparing for the day that the doors to these facilities can be opened to welcome members of the Dover community and beyond.

Speaking to SOL one Sunday afternoon in August last year, Ps Dino shared his wish for the SJSM Village: the involvement of our church members.

“One thing that I hope and pray to achieve is the participation of each and every member of SJSM, because we are all stewards; we’re all stakeholders.”

Training programmes have since been launched to equip those interested or keen to serve as befrienders to the



Ps Dino and family on holiday in 2015

“So everyone has a ‘hand on the plough’, because if we say we’re a village, it is our village.”

—

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SJSM Village’s elderly, and Ps Dino hopes to have about 500 volunteers ready when operations begin.

“So everyone has a ‘hand on the plough’, because if we say we’re a village, it is our village. Let us not just talk about it and say that it sounds nice,” the chaplain added.

But who is Ps Dino besides the SJSM Village chaplain? SOL finds out.

Q: Tell us more about your family.

Ps Dino: My wife is Maria Anita and we’ve been married for more than 30 years now.

We first met when we were both working in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; she as a dietician at one of the biggest hospitals in the world at the time, and I as a retail specialist and partial ‘tent-maker’. One of the staff perks for me working at the eye hospital was the use of a video library, and I enjoy watching movies.

A mutual friend who frequented my workplace knew this and invited me to the library on the pretext of borrowing a video; little did I know that his intention was to introduce me to Maria all along.

How did I know that she was the one? We had been dating for seven

months and our chemistry was building, despite us being chalk and cheese in terms of our character and preferences. I was always comfortable around her, and there was a prompting that she was the one for me—my wife and the mother of my children.

It is like when you're house hunting: when you walk into a house and you have that feeling, and it is not just you because your spouse feels it too.

Q: And do you have any children?

Ps Dino: Yes, we have three daughters and a son. My eldest, Natasha Valery, was conceived in Riyadh, and my second, Natalya Micah, was conceived in Oman. My third, Natanielle, was conceived in Doha, Qatar, and was delivered just before the first Gulf War.

Only my son, Nathan, the youngest, was born in Singapore when we returned here in late 1994.

Natasha and Natanielle are married, while Nathan is currently studying at a local university. Nathan and Natalya live with us, while Natanielle lives in Seattle with her husband.

"I was always comfortable around her, and there was a prompting that she was the one for me—my wife and the mother of my children."

—

Q: What made you decide to go into full-time ministry, when you were successful in the corporate world?

Ps Dino: I didn't want to at first. I was "closing my ears" to God's call, as my priority then was to climb the corporate ladder. Contributing to the ministries that I was involved in, as a part-time ministry staff, was enough for me.

However, in the span of two years, there were several incidents that pointed me towards full-time ministry. One such incident took place in Cambodia during a mission trip, when I was watching over some children; although most of them looked happy and contented, I noticed that there were three children with physical disabilities who had been left on their own and were looking sad. I asked God how we, as a team, could make

His reply was: “Serve me fully, and I will show you.”



these children happy and enable them to enjoy the games. His reply was: “Serve me fully, and I will show you.”

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On another occasion, I was visiting the then-St Andrew’s Orthopaedic Hospital when I noticed a helper trying to calm a young boy with autism, who was having a meltdown. As I prayed for them, I asked God how I could help the helper and the boy. Again, the reply was: “Serve me to help him.”

Fast forward to 2001. I had felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to let Maria know about God’s plans to call me to full-time ministry, but her response was, “definitely not you.” It was only a few months after, when prompted by God, that she told me that God was saying it was time for me to answer His call. And so I did.

Q: What do you do to relax amidst the work of getting the SJSM Village up and running?

Ps Dino: I used to play football on the weekends, but not anymore. These days, I play badminton with some of the clergy brothers, and have also started taking walks with my wife and daughter (Natalya)—something we used to do years ago.

Q: Finally, many SJSMers would not know this until they meet you in person, but you’re also quite tall! So, how tall are you?

Ps Dino: I am very close to 1.90 metres tall.



LESSONS IN LIFE:

Class of 2020: Getting Schooled by COVID-19

Eleanor Que



As of January 2020, I envisioned my year to unfold in this exact order:

- 1. Savour my final four months of university life.**
- 2. Marvel at more of God's creations on my graduation trips.**
- 3. Receive my degree scroll at the rite-of-passage commencement ceremony.**
- 4. Find a fulfilling job.**

But barely three months later, it had become painfully apparent that none of these plans would materialise. Amidst the chaos that ensued during the escalating COVID-19 situation, what I had imagined to be the perfect way to bookend 16 years of formal education had gone up in smoke.

"What do employment prospects look like for fresh graduates in this economy? Graduating in the middle of a global pandemic? Here are some job-seeking tips to cope with the new normal!"

Thanks to the unprecedented turn of events, the Class of 2020 received plenty of media buzz and public sympathy. YouTube even went the extra mile by hosting a star-studded, global virtual graduation ceremony. These initiatives were undoubtedly

intended to be morale-boosters and rallying points of hope. Even then, I found the extensive attention suffocating.

Even the innocuous advertisement for SGUnited Jobs hit too close to home and struck a raw nerve. In the video, the protagonist Zoom-calls her friend, saying, "Hey, have you heard about graduation? Can't believe we studied so hard, but cannot even celebrate." This sounds melodramatic in hindsight, but I wanted to mourn the could-have-beens without being reminded of the stark reality every two minutes.

Circuit Breaker gave me ample time to reflect and converse with God. A good portion of it was spent complaining.

Why now? Why me? At the same time, I felt guilty for whining to God when I had much to be grateful for. My family was healthy. I had a home to quarantine in. Singapore has accessible and reliable healthcare. There was a fine line between allowing myself space to grieve and letting my disappointment turn into bitter resentment, and it was one that I wanted to tread carefully.

That week, my friend recommended Timothy Keller's podcast series, aptly titled "Trusting God in Difficult

Times". His first few sermons centred on Habakkuk. In Habakkuk 1 and 2, we see the prophet doubting and accusing God to a point that borders on insult; Habakkuk's tirade not only demonstrated his palpable anguish, but also his brutal honesty. He was—as Keller put it—simply reacting to tragedy in an "emotionally realistic" way.

I felt God assure me that there was no shame in crying out to Him. Even if I had suppressed the turmoil weighing on my heart, He would have known. After all, "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight" (Hebrews 4:13). He knows every detail, down to the number of hairs on my head (Luke 12:6-7).

Moreover, plenty of Bible characters lamented: the Psalmist, Job and even Jesus. However, God never condemned or rebuked them unnecessarily once they had understood their infinitesimal statuses and surrendered to His immeasurability. Instead, He valued their postures of faithful submission. As mere humans living on this side of eternity, we are bound to experience helplessness in the face of uncertainty and stormy times, COVID-19 or not. I had to trust that the Father, whose thoughts are higher than mine, would give and take in His perfect wisdom (Luke 11:13).

My milestone year has been far from ideal, but God showed up in the form of loved ones who offered career-related counsel, interview opportunities and open doors. While I'm still finding my bearings during these turbulent times, above all I pray that my 2020 will be a testament to James 1:3—may the "testing of [my] faith produce steadfastness".

Eleanor has recently graduated from University. She worships at Heartbeat and occasionally writes for the Sisterhood Ministry.



YOUTH SPEAK:

New Ways of Sowing

John Cheong



The AMA workshop held in May 2020

In this issue of Youth Speak, we hear from Tammy and Yen Ee on how SJSM's youth ministries found new ways to serve the youth community during Circuit Breaker.

Tammy Choo, 22, Heartbeat's Social Media Team

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, youth leaders in Heartbeat had sensed that loneliness was an increasingly prevalent issue that young people were facing, with a growing number of them feeling disconnected from their peers despite

how connected they seemed. Once Circuit Breaker rolled around, there were fears of a disconnect from the support of peers and church leaders. As such, the Heartbeat (HB) social media team took the opportunity to address these issues.

The HB social media team comprises a small group of youths who manage the Heartbeat Instagram account, finding ways to engage and edify the community in an authentic manner. Thus, for us, the recent shifting of interactions onto the virtual space was an opportunity for us to serve with extra fervour. In light of all that had happened, we and other youth

volunteers began praying and trying to create “spaces” to help the youths journey with one another and spend their newfound spare time at home to deepen their relationship with God.

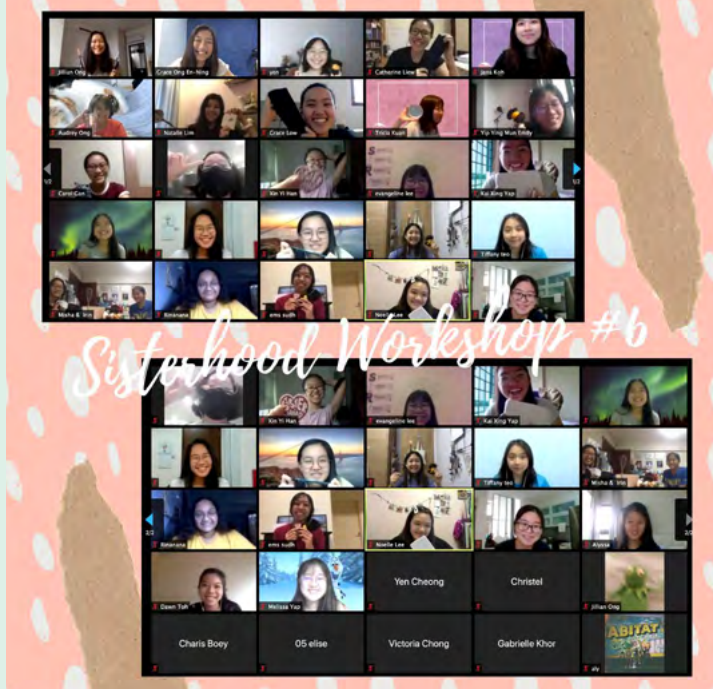
One such “space” was the 21-Day Quiet Time challenge. The idea behind it was to encourage the entire Heartbeat community to sync their quiet time texts and daily devotional focus, starting from the book of James and ending with the book of Jude. By reading just a chapter a day, the congregation would finish 7 books of the Bible together! We decided to have the challenge run for 21 days, drawing from research findings that 21 days of repetition forms a habit. We hoped to help youths who struggle with irregularity in their quiet time, and to offer a practical way for cell groups to encourage each other in this aspect of spiritual maturity.

To ease the leaders’ workload, a Telegram bot was created to send the passage of the day and assign a member of each cell group to share what they got out of their quiet time. There were also livestreams on Instagram where pairs of youths took turns to discuss their takeaways from certain passages. This way, youths were able to engage in daily devotion both within their small groups and as a congregation.

Besides the challenge, other “spaces” for engagement included our weekly Zoom Workout sessions on Sundays, Praise and Worship sessions on Tuesdays, Youth Leader’s sharing about godly living on Thursdays, and a Prayer session/Call to Prayer on Fridays. These gave youths avenues to serve and gather as one, enjoying each other’s presence and sharing life despite the physical restrictions imposed by Circuit Breaker.

We were very glad to hear that these activities helped many youths find stability in God and in the church community during that turbulent time. Besides the uninhibited sharing, we also had a lot of light-hearted, fun events where we met people outside of our assigned cell groups, and all these contributed to a strong sense of solidarity that we could not have anticipated.

For this, we have many people to thank, starting with our volunteers who met regularly to pray for direction, and those who anchored different activities and interactions! The HB social media team has found so much fulfilment in knowing that our platform could be used in such wonderful ways and that we could help encourage our community during this challenging season.



A Sisterhood workshop held in August 2020 that ran various stay-at-home activities over Zoom.

As all these activities begin to slow down, and life returns to pre-COVID normal, we hope that we can continue to use this platform to knit the community closer, helping youths know that they are not alone and that they are part of this Heartbeat body who share in their highs and lows.

Cheong Yen Ee, 21 **The Sisterhood Ministry**

When Circuit Breaker was first announced, besides my anxiety regarding university exams going online, I was also concerned about church activities being moved to an online platform. How would the dynamics of service change and what would engaging the church community online look like?

Amidst my prayers about these questions and considerations, God quickly answered in the first few weeks of Circuit Breaker. Quelling my fears, He reminded me that the church was never bounded by the physical four walls, and distance will never stop Him from continuing to minister to His people.

It was during this period that the Sisterhood Ministry team encouraged me to grow in my intentionality and heart for the girls in Heartbeat. At the same time, we met up more frequently online to brainstorm and discuss potential workshops we could organise to keep everyone connected to the community. One such workshop was held in May 2020, in conjunction with the Fellowship: the AMA (Ask Me Anything)!

The AMA was born out of a Sisterhood and Fellowship gathering where we discussed questions and misconceptions/stereotypes which we might have had about the other gender. We felt that the AMA was a great opportunity to engage Heartbeat and shed light on areas which we might not usually touch on, helping us better appreciate and love one another as a family in SJSM.

As a panelist for the workshop, it was eye-opening for me to see how our views differed across genders and how we ought to lead them back to the truth of the Bible. I personally learned so much from the team meetings we had before the actual event; there were many instances when I was able to see the contrast between biblical, godly views and the conventional, secular opinions which we so often hear.

Moreover, feedback we received from both the girls and the guys in Heartbeat was incredibly encouraging. The workshop clarified certain doubts or misunderstandings youths might have had, and beyond that, it served as a starting point for Heartbeat to engage in sensitive conversations in a healthy and respectful manner, ultimately growing us in love for one another and in unity as a community.

Besides the opportunity afforded by the workshops, we consistently engaged with the rest of the girls in the Sisterhood via our weekly posts on Instagram—"Motivation Monday", "Worship Wednesday", and "Faith Friday." The sharing of testimonies, words and images that God placed on our hearts, and even the worship song recommendations reminded us that despite being physically apart, we are all united in one thing and that one thing is Christ.

I would like to say "Thank you" to all who have blessed us with the sharing of your testimonies and experiences, to those who have prayed for us and to those who have helped us in one way or another! And of course, a huge thank-you to all the girls in the Sisterhood who have been ever so lovely. We hope that all of these initiatives have been blessings to you just as they have been such great blessings to us.

Looking back now, all my initial worries at the beginning of Circuit Breaker seem so small. We are still able to minister to each other, God is still moving in our midst and we are still united as one body and church. Having this in mind, let us continue to stir up one another to love and good works, to not neglect but to encourage one another as the year goes on!

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF:

Ps Joshua Sudharman

We begin a new series, “A Day in The Life Of”, which takes us through a typical (or is it?) day of the person featured. We hope it helps us understand them better, pray for them and others in similar roles, even as we co-labour with them where we can. Our Vicar aptly kicks off the series by sharing the many elements of his day and what goes through his mind.

A Wednesday in September 2020

6:00 am

The phone alarm goes off. I reach to silence it, rub my eyes, put on my reading glasses and read the assigned chapters for the day on my Bible app’s Bible-in-a-year reading plan. I then get into the rest of my morning routine: survey my appointments, do my exercises, wash

up, have breakfast, read newspapers, etc. My younger daughter and I are out of the door before 7 am. We chat in the car and catch up on the previous day’s happenings. After dropping her off at school, I circle back home to pick up my elder daughter, whose school starts later, and we catch up on her preparation for the upcoming exams. I pray for her before dropping her off at school at 8:15 am.

8:45 am

I park beside Mandai lake for a time of reflection and prayer. Bodies of calm water have a soothing effect on me, and I bow my head in worship and thanksgiving. Conscious of the cremation service that’s coming up shortly, I pray for the bereaved family, and ask for the Lord’s guidance in what to say and how to pray, as well as for the remaining engagements in my day. I respond to a couple of text messages from

**"I park beside Mandai lake for a time
of reflection and prayer. Bodies of
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my Personal Assistant requiring coordination, and make the short trip to Mandai Crematorium. As this cremation service is for a member who transferred out from SJSM to another church, the pastor conducting the service is from that church—he turns out to be a friend of mine. I offer my condolences and sympathies to the bereaved family members, and enquire about how they are coping and how SJSM can help. At the refreshments area after the service, the presiding pastor invites me to pray for the family, so I breathe a silent request to the Lord to give me the words before I do so.

11:15 am

I sit in my car and respond to some emails and messages on my phone before driving off for my lunch appointment. One month prior, I had received a message from another pastor friend out of the blue. He felt prompted to suggest that we catch up, so we picked a week when my calendar looked relatively empty. I smile as I reflect on how different my week's calendar now looks, almost completely filled with engagements that had been scheduled on short notice. As it is a long ride, my thoughts drift back to the funeral, and how sad it was that the brother who passed away was in his 40s; had been actively serving in church, exercising to stay fit, and working very hard. Had he been pushing

himself too hard? Sleeping too little? Lord, who are some others in SJSM who might be ticking time bombs without realising it? As I continue driving, I make a mental note of an SJSMer to whom I need to give a gentle reminder about minding his health.

1:40 pm

After a pleasant lunch meeting during which possible ministry collaboration was discussed, I am once again in my car, heading back to SJSM for a 2 pm onsite meeting with our Nursing Home Executive Director, Winnie Chan. I apologise to her for arriving a little late. She graciously assures me that it is ok and kindly offers me a cup of coffee that she had bought on her way in. (Note to self: second cup of the day—one more to hit quota.) We discuss a matter that had come up in the emails between us a few days prior. Where matters are slightly more sensitive in nature, I have learnt not to try to resolve them through messages or emails, but through face to face meetings. We explore both sides of the issue at hand before coming to an agreement on the best way forward. I end the meeting with a prayer of thanks and a blessing over Winnie before we part company.

4:30 pm

I attend to emails and texts concerning SJSM and Diocesan

matters, read up on the relevant documents for my upcoming meetings, adjust my calendar commitments for the rest of the week, return a phone call from my parents that I had missed while in the meeting, and update my wife on my dinner plans. I recall my 'note to self' earlier in the day to talk to a particular brother about his health, and dial his number immediately. I somewhat awkwardly relate how the funeral I had attended was a sobering wake-up call about the possible dangers of overwork and neglect of sleep, and that I was concerned that he might be pushing himself a little too hard. To my relief, he took it well and was not offended. We hung up and I thanked the Lord for nudging me to make the call. I take a Zoom call with a clergy colleague at 5 pm to discuss Diocesan matters.

6:00 pm

Feeling a little mentally tired, I put on my mask and head out of the office to the nearby coffee shop for dinner. While eating alone, I catch up on some football highlights and news on my phone. I'm back in the office a half hour before my final Zoom meeting for the day. I go to my prayer corner in my office, get on my knees and still myself. "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." I spend time listening, gather my thoughts, and don my headphones for the Zoom meeting.

7:30 pm

As always, at the start of PCC Exco meetings, I lead a devotion on a text that the Lord laid on my heart to share. It is my opportunity to build into the lives of the church's key leaders—a practice that was formed through years of observing Bishop Rennis lead meetings. There is a single item on today's agenda: the upcoming clergy transitions, and the mood is sober as the Exco comes to terms with the many changes that are to come upon SJSM, especially my handing over to Ps Alvin. We discuss the implications and the timeline for notifying the staff, leaders and church members. There is a palpable sense of puzzlement: "Why, Lord?" Yet, this is counteracted by a deep ballast of trust in the sovereignty and wisdom of God, whose thoughts and ways are infinitely higher than ours. After our meeting concludes, I get back on my knees and thank the Lord for the maturity of the lay leaders He has blessed SJSM with.

10:00 pm

I chat briefly with the security guard on my way to the SJSM car park. I am home within 15 minutes. I wind down with some conversation with my elder daughter (my younger daughter is already asleep), potter around at my desk, take a bath, spend time talking with my wife and set my alarm for tomorrow before going to bed at midnight.



Photos used in this article are captured by Cleo Tay

FROM THE WORD:

The Good Soil and A Fruitful Heart

Understanding the Parable of the Sower

(Matthew 13:1-23)

Stanley Tay

When Circuit Breaker kicked in this year, my wife and younger daughter found themselves drawn to a new hobby that took up copious amounts of their leisure time at home: houseplants. A single two-leaf cutting from a friend quickly grew into 32 plants of varying sizes—plus a dedicated Instagram account!

One lesson they had to learn as novices was the vital role that soil plays in healthy plant growth. After experiencing numerous plant deaths, they realised the importance of having not just good soil but also the right type of soil. Talk to any plant enthusiast and he or she will tell you how critical it is to have a good potting mix to ensure root systems are well oxygenated.

These lessons may seem novel for urban folks like us but they are probably common knowledge to people who live in an agrarian society. Every farmer understands how essential good soil is for good harvests and the importance of establishing the right type of soil conditions for crops to thrive.

Jesus lived in a world where agriculture was part of everyday life. Hence, He used illustrations from the agricultural world to convey important lessons. The parable of the sower is one such example. How do you convince your hearers of the importance of cultivating the right kind of heart to be able to receive the word of God well? You use the seed to symbolise the word of God and the soil to represent the human heart.



So, the Jewish hearers understood that God's word (seed) cannot thus take root in unreceptive hearts (bad soil). Conversely, the word of God will produce fruits in a person's life when it is sown in receptive hearts (good soil).

The parable of the sower is considered one of Jesus' most well-known parables. Robert Capon points out that all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 1:1-20; Luke 8:4-15) accord this parable a star billing, as "not only do all three of them make it the introduction to the first deliberate collection of Jesus' parables; they also devote a disproportionate amount of space to it and to the comments Jesus made in connection with it."

Nonetheless, it is actually more accurate to label this story as the



parable of the soils. The focus is more on the soil than the sower, and specifically, on how well the different soils, representing the various conditions of our heart, receive or reject the seed which is the word of Christ. As mentioned, two kinds of heart conditions are highlighted—unreceptive hearts as represented by the three types of bad soils, and receptive hearts as represented by the good soil.

Unreceptive Hearts

The first of the three types of bad soil represents the hardened heart, pointed out by Jesus in verses 4 and 19 of Matthew chapter 13. This kind of soil is found on pathways. Seeds sown here cannot take root but remain on the surface, often getting eaten by the birds. This soil is like a heart that is unresponsive to the word. A person with such a heart

can read or listen to God's word but it is immediately forgotten due to disinterest or indifference. It goes in through one ear and out the other.

The second type of unreceptive heart is the shallow heart. In verses 5-6 and 20-21, Jesus likened it to those thin layers of soil that are often found on top of the thick layers of limestone common in Israel. Seeds sown here do grow but the plant dies easily under the hot sun because the roots cannot go deep to get water. Such soil represents a heart which is spiritually shallow. People with such hearts thrive when times are good. But because their faith is not based on the word of God, when trials or tribulations come their way, their faith gets shaken and they often end up giving up on God.

The third kind of unreceptive heart is the distracted heart. In verses 7 and 22, Jesus mentioned that seeds which fall among the thorns also sprout and produce plants but they cannot last because they get choked by the thorns. A heart like this kind of soil easily lets the distractions of life like worries, riches and pleasures compete with the word. These things cause the heart to become divided and crowded, eventually turning the hearers away from God and His word.

**“Other seeds fell
on good soil and
produced grain,
some a hundredfold...
this is the one who
hears the word and
understands it.
He indeed bears fruit...”**

—

An unreceptive heart can effectively prevent the word of God from going deep into one's life. Such kind of hearts are either hardened by disinterest, or they are spiritually shallow, or they are easily distracted by worldliness. When the word does not take root, lives are not transformed, behaviour not changed and the mind not renewed. There is no growth in maturity and no fruits can be observed.

Fruitful Hearts

What kind of hearts can then receive the word of God, letting it take root and gradually bearing fruits? Jesus called this type of heart the good soil in verses 8 and 23, “Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold... this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit....” How then does one cultivate such a fruitful heart? The simple answer—regularly ‘eat’ the word.

Eating the word is a biblical term found for example in Jeremiah 15:16 and Ezekiel 3:3. It means the taking in of Scriptures, chewing over it, digesting and letting it become a part of us. Practically, this involves firstly, the cultivation of the discipline of reading the Bible—getting to know what is in the Bible and familiarising ourselves with its teachings, learning about who God says He is.

Secondly, eating the word also involves studying the word. There is much in the Bible that we do not understand. In addition to listening to good sermons, learn to read books or use commentaries and other resources that help you go deeper into the word. As Jerry Bridges said, “Reading the word gives us breath but studying it gives us depth.”

Studying the word of God is hard work but absolutely necessary for our growth and maturity.

Finally, meditating on Scriptures. If you have read Psalms 1 or 119, you will find the word ‘meditate’ being used repeatedly. This is the process of enjoying, internalising and personalising the word. Friedrich von Hugel describes meditation akin to “letting a very slowly dissolving lozenge melt imperceptibly in your mouth.”

The whole process of reading, studying and meditating on God’s word is like putting a teabag into a cup of hot water. Reading is the first dip of the teabag. Studying the word is continuous dipping to allow more of the tea to be infused into the water. And when the teabag is immersed in the water long enough, it eventually gets the full taste of the tea. This represents the experience of meditating on Scripture so that it is stored in the heart.

In these uncertain times, God’s word serves as an anchor to keep us steady in our faith and provides us with a strong foundation to withstand whatever shaking we may experience. May we beseech God for a fruitful heart and do what we can to cultivate it—by learning to enjoy eating His word!







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