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2022

Seasons of Life

Hand on the Plough

Features

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The 365-Day All-Year-Round Disciple

Blessed to be a Blessing

All Hands on Deck

Looking Back

Heart-Work

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EDITORIAL

Editor in Chief

Allen Lim Teck Chye

Members

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Francina Chan
Gabrielle Hoang
Sarah Suah

Contributors

Revd Alvin Toh
Janice Ng
Ryan Tan
Ps Chung Lai Mei

Designer

Fern Tham

Printer

Ho Printing
Singapore Pte Ltd

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Hand on the Plough

We have become more familiar with the idea of rest over the past two years. The pandemic provided a much-needed reset from everything life calls us to do—a silver lining amidst the havoc wreaked by the virus outbreak.

Time seemingly stands still in the process. We adjust to a new rhythm of life, which also involves distractions by developments around us as the pandemic rages on. But there is still much work to be done in God's kingdom. Are we approaching it just like everyday life, often going through the motions? We cannot serve God by staying still or waiting for things to get better. Our hands are already on the plough and we need to work the ground, instead of looking back at the world (Luke 9:62).

In 2022, Seasons of Life (SOL) looks at what it means to actively live out our faith. How should we respond to God's goodness and abundant blessings? It is time for us as a church to move beyond contemplation or even familiar areas of ministries and service, and allow His Spirit to do a deeper work through us.

We hope this issue will be a call to action in response to the fields that are white for harvest (Matthew 9:37-38). A former secondary school teacher witnesses transformation in Timor Leste as God works through her and her team. An undergraduate surrenders his life decisions to the Lord, in areas such as missions and his studies. A senior finds that God has yet to complete His work in refining his spiritual life. Other SJSMers look at what it means to be an all-year-round disciple and a Christian, especially in the current environment.

We hope these stories will bless you, and inspire you to finish the race, and keep the faith.

Prisca Ang

On behalf of the Editorial Team

It's harvest time, SJSM!

Ps Alvin Toh

The Chinese Communist Party's rise to power in 1949 was expected to deal a blow to the spread of Christianity in China, which was largely driven by the work of thousands of foreign missionaries based there. Many missionaries were placed under house arrest or forced to leave the country as it closed its doors to missionary work and banned religion during the Cultural Revolution that followed. It was thought that the church in China would have perished. But not only did it not perish, it grew like never before.

It was estimated that the number of Catholics and Protestants in China numbered around four million before 1949. Instead of decreasing after China became a communist country, the church grew to about 50 million by the early 2000s, and

was estimated to number between 72 to 90 million in 2020 (the numbers cannot be verified due to a lack of data). Missionaries spent almost a century growing the church in China to about 4 million by 1949, but God took only half that time to multiply it more than 10 times after the doors were closed to the missionaries!

"...What is impossible with man is possible with God." (Luke 18:27)

It is stunning that God stirred the Chinese people's hearts to be more responsive to the gospel during a season when the conditions for its spread were seemingly unfavourable. What Christendom thought was a disaster turned out to be a blessing in disguise and a revival in the making. God often sees what we do

not see with our human eyes and understanding.

“Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.” (John 4:35)

A revival in God’s making

It has been almost two years since COVID-19 hit Singapore’s shores, and we have seen churches empty out, services shut, cell groups unable to meet physically, and the many renowned foreign speakers who used to travel through Singapore no longer able to do so. On the surface, it seems as if the church would have suffered and declined. But instead, there have been pockets of revival as churches pivoted to online services, Sunday classes, and all sorts of Bible lessons. Everyone could suddenly access much more Bible teaching than ever before, and the responsibility of Christian education was handed back to Christian parents instead of being solely “farmed out” to Sunday School teachers. It can be argued that the church as a whole may be in a healthier position now, having been forced to rethink and relook at how we have been “doing church.”

Being starved of face-to-face interactions due to social distancing measures, there is a deeper

understanding, and perhaps even craving, for deeper connections and the human touch beyond staring into a screen over Zoom calls. Some churches have reported better responses when they knock on doors during their community visits and outreaches, and para-church organisations are seeing an increase in sign-ups for their evangelistic programmes. These are just some examples of silver linings amidst the dark clouds of COVID-19.

God is clearly doing something exceptional through this season as the world and the church grapple with an unprecedented pandemic. What we thought of as a disaster could well turn out to be a blessing in disguise and a revival in the making.

The fields are ready

Do we recognise the times and see the opportunities around us? Are we rising up as disciples of Christ to seize the moment and share the message of hope to a world that desperately needs it during these times? Are we rising up to embrace our identity as God’s people, to be a blessing to others and to love them as God has loved us? While others are living in fear, are we living in trust and faith in God? While others are feeling lost and uncertain about what tomorrow brings, do we feel secure in the hands of the one who holds the future? While



**"Only the love of God can
[transform the human heart],
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out, the knowledge of the
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others are pessimistic about how things will turn out, are we keeping our eyes on the God who is good and will make all things new? While others are behaving selfishly in self-preservation, are we displaying selflessness and other-centeredness, as followers of Christ are exhorted to (Phil 2:4)?

"The local church is the hope of the world," wrote American pastor Bill Hybels in his 2002 book *Courageous Leadership*. He said that while we recognise the great work done by politicians to serve the nation; businessmen to provide sorely needed jobs; educators who teach useful knowledge; self-help programmes that offer effective methods of behaviour modification; and advanced psychological techniques which aid self-understanding; none of these can truly transform the human heart.

Only the love of God can, and as Hybels pointed out, the knowledge of the radically transformative power of God's love has been given to the church. And this message of love not only needs to be told, it needs to be shown.

Spring forth

More than ever before, the church needs to rise up to be the church God calls her to be. And for the church to become what she is meant to be, each member of the body of Christ needs to be fully engaged in the body life and fully exercise their spiritual gifts to build one another up. We need to commit to loving and serving the Lord, and giving ourselves in service out of love for one another.

It is said that the stars seem to shine the brightest when the night is at its darkest. As the Last Days unfold, things around us will get worse and humanity will rear its ugly head. When the world is at its darkest, will you be at your best and brightest? Will you choose to step up and be counted, step forward and serve, and step out to share God's love? Truly, "lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." (John 4:35) The local church is the hope of the world—what you do makes a difference!

The 365-day all-year-round disciple

Michael Tan

We know it, right?

Everyone who has been a Christian and in church for a while knows that Jesus did not call us to be a “some-days-on, some-days-off” disciple, but to be one consistently, daily, all year round.

But how many of us would consider ourselves as living up to the mark?

We might feel affronted if someone labels us a Sunday-only-disciple (with an equally affronting acronym S.O.D.). But if we aren’t careful, we can easily become one even if that was never our intention.

To keep us on the right track, here are some marks of a disciple of Christ:

1. A disciple has a Master or Lord.

By definition, a disciple needs to have a master or lord who he or she follows. When we call ourselves Christians, we are calling Jesus Christ our Master and Lord. But do we really treat Him as such in our daily lives? Are we at His beck and call, and do we always avail ourselves to Him, His will and purposes, with no exceptions made? If not, we are disciples only by our own reckoning, not God’s.

2. A disciple practises discipline.

The two words, disciple and discipline, share an obvious common root. A disciple is expected to please his



Master, to emulate and imitate him, and is thus expected to live a life serving him conscientiously and dutifully. In the Christian's case, this is motivated by the growing love he has for his Master, but is also cultivated by the practice of spiritual disciplines in order for him to present himself regularly and wholeheartedly in his service to his Master. Are we consciously doing any of the above in order to hone an increasing love and worship of the Living God? And are we living and serving in a manner that pleases Him?

3. A disciple dies, daily and completely. Galatians 2:20 tells us that Paul is completely clear that he does not own his life—if he has

accepted Jesus as Lord, it means he has been crucified with Him and the life he now lives has to be lived by faith in Christ. Jesus Himself left us no ambiguity about this, whether it is about us denying ourselves daily and taking up our cross to follow Him (Luke 9:23), or being a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies in order to bear much fruit (John 12:24). Death is not morbid to the Christian; it is central to our faith, and to being a disciple.

4. A disciple loves God. James 4:4 states plainly that "friendship with the world is enmity with God" and "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." These are very strong words



indeed, but James wasn't the only one making such a distinction. John uttered the same caution in 1 John 2:15: "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." The world prescribes a pursuit that is not only very different, but one that is diametrically opposed to God's will (1 John 2:16–17).

And so when a disciple isn't wholeheartedly devoted to God, it is the world instead that holds sway.

5. A disciple cannot love money.

Jesus tells us that "No one can serve two masters....You cannot serve God and money." (Matthew 6:24). I don't think anyone loves money *per se*, but we love the things it can do for us, especially in achievement- and success-driven Singapore! Money is meant to serve us, but if we aren't careful, and worse still, not honest with ourselves, it usurps God as Master.

6. A disciple abounds in love and good works. 1 John 4:7–8 essentially states that if we do not love one another, we do not know God, because God is love. This is the hallmark of a Christian: being one who loves. The New Testament is replete with teachings about being a disciple and abounding in good works; this can be seen from the gospels (e.g. Matthew 5:16) to the

epistles (e.g. Ephesians 2:10). Just as a tree is judged by its fruit, so is a disciple judged by the good works that emanate from his life.

This list is by no means exhaustive but I think it captures the essence of what a 365-day, all-year-round disciple will look like or is growing to be like. But coming back to this phenomenon of being a S.O.D: How does one end up becoming one?

It starts with a subtle disconnect between what is understood and what is lived. Ouch! What begins as a simple disjoint between head and heart gradually widens. Add the pressures of life we are all familiar with and it widens until instead of living as a disciple all the time, we simply try looking like disciples on Sundays (or Saturdays, if you prefer evening services).

Our week goes by in a blur because of the busyness we are often plagued with. Our Quiet Time or personal devotions in the morning (for those who still practise it) enliven and encourage us, correct and admonish us in other times. But once we are drawn into the hustle and bustle of the day, we gradually gravitate back to our way of getting things done, not necessarily God's way. We may see other people as "trees," nondescript

and part of the background of our lives instead of what Jesus exhorts us to see them as: our neighbours.

And we wonder why we collapse into bed totally exhausted every night, devoid of the joy and the abundant life that Jesus promised (John 10:10), when we find peace to be at best fleeting on most days and we seem stuck in our lives. We come to weekend services for a much-needed recharge but the spiritual boost we receive usually seems to peter out by the early part of the week.

There is no magic formula that turns one from an S.O.D. into an all-year-round disciple. What I do know is that the 365 days that face the all-year-round disciple can only be approached a day at a time. We cannot be sure that we will still be soldiering on a year from now, but what we do know is that God wants and will help us to be faithful disciples, a day at a time, moment by moment, as we defer to Him and as we obey Him.

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness...." (2 Peter 1:3a)

Finally, it is not through sheer willpower that we become disciples who please God, although it definitely requires us to act out our will to conform with His. His divine, enabling power has already been given to us. So let's act on it, and encourage one another to do so, wherever and whenever we can.

Let us be S.O.D.'s no more!

"...God wants and will help us to be faithful disciples, a day at a time, moment by moment, as we defer to Him and as we obey Him."

Blessed to be a blessing

Janice Ng



Heartfriends Centre in Manatuto, Timor Leste

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.” (Isaiah 61:1-3, NIV)



Our brave forerunners Francis and Grace (first row on the left)

What is the significance of Jubilee for you?

As SJSM celebrates Jubilee, 50 years of God's faithfulness, what does it mean for us personally?

The prophet Isaiah has reminded us of the ministry of our Lord Jesus, to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim freedom in the year of the Lord's favour.

Some of you may wonder, "Is there still good news in the midst of a pandemic?" Indeed, this season of waiting seems difficult for many of us. Yet the gospel and the miracles of the Lord are still advancing all over the world, including in Timor Leste.

Where it all began

Timor Leste is a small nation that can be easily forgotten by people. Yet God never forgets her! In 2004, Love Singapore discerned prayerfully that it was time to "adopt" Timor Leste, a fledgeling nation that gained independence in 2002. Out of the 13 districts, SJSM became the anchor church for the Manatuto district.

A couple was brave enough to respond to the call of God to venture to this island in 2006, even though resources such as water, electricity, and internet were limited then. Francis and Grace became our first SJSM missionaries to establish a youth centre known as Heartfriends Centre in Manatuto, a 2-3 hours' drive from the capital, Dili.



Thankful for this birthday celebration organised by fellow staff

Despite facing strong persecution from the locals and religious leaders, SJSM was able to establish a local NGO training centre in 2011 to facilitate community work, youth training, and children's ministry. The community work, medical missions, Boys' Brigade (BB) and Girls' Brigade (GB) ministry, as well as English and computer classes became the "open door" for outreach into the traditionally close-knit community.

Growing initiatives

With the support of many SJSM members and a local staff team, Francis and Grace laboured tirelessly to establish a well-known Christian NGO school at Kampong Alor, taking in about 40 - 50 youths yearly to undergo a job skills

programme so that they could find employment in Dili. The centre also hosted a residential programme for youths from distant places. Many children from Manatuto town were also welcomed into our BB and GB ministry on Sundays. By the grace of God, we now enjoy good relations with parents, village chiefs, and the administrator.

Over the years, we have also been very encouraged to see lives transformed by the word of God and who subsequently came into the saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus. Many have learnt to honour their parents, repent from their past sins, and grow in good character. A few have joined our Heartfriends Centre as trainers, while others found jobs in Dili in sales, clerical work, and other

positions. Together with our church planter and missionary, Ps Nilton, we hope to continue to reach out to our alumni students in Dili by inviting them to our Agape church service and programme. With church-planting being sown at different places, our desire is to see the whole of Timor Leste be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea!

The continuing work

2020 was a major transition year for Heartfriends Centre. Since I took over the leadership role from Francis, we faced many challenges such as a cyclone flood, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent lockdown in Timor Leste. In the early morning of Easter Sunday (4 April 2021), we experienced an unprecedented heavy downpour on Timor island due to Cyclone Seroja. Many homes and offices in Dili were heavily flooded. As a result, 41 people lost their lives and thousands were displaced from their homes. Many missionaries and friends were praying and trying to cope with the sudden disaster. At Heartfriends Centre in Manatuto, after our Easter dawn worship service was over, we quickly rallied our students and staff to pray for the storm to subside. Surrounding

areas such as rice fields and homes were also flooded. We witnessed the raging sea before us at Kampong Alor, which is situated right next to it, and we wondered where we could run if the flooding water came rushing in! We began to pray earnestly and worship together, and sent urgent prayer requests to our friends. Gradually the rain stopped and the sun began to break through the stormy clouds. Cyclone Seroja had left Timor! Finally we could breathe a little easier and our centre was spared from any loss of lives and property. Hallelujah! It was a miracle and we were so thankful for God's protection and the prayer support.

In spite of the many challenges, the Lord saw us through and much to our joy, 26 students graduated on 24 June 2021. Despite the scant medical resources, very basic medical healthcare system, and travel restrictions, we witnessed God's faithfulness and saw the hand of God through miracle healings and provision of food. As the Lord led me to minister to different ones, some were healed of sicknesses such as headaches, ovary infection, bone fractures, body pain, food allergies, and even spiritual disturbance. To God be the glory!



Heartfriends Centre is not just another youth training centre. I believe it is a discipleship haven where the light of Christ can shine for those living in darkness; a place to bind up the brokenhearted; a place where Christ is proclaimed and the power of God is manifested to a people whose hearts have turned away to worthless idols and witchcraft. Two and a half years of living on this island has opened my eyes to the supernatural, to the hopelessness, pain, and suffering of the poor. And only Jesus Christ can set these people free!

Our God is Jehovah Jireh and Jehovah Rapha. What a privilege for us to demonstrate Jesus' love and power to our students and neighbours, through prayers and acts of kindness. We are blessed to be a blessing. What a joy to witness lives transformed, the oppressed set free, the sick healed in the name of Jesus, and to offer a cup of water to the poor. *This is Jubilee for me!*

What about you? What is Jubilee for you? What is God calling you to do?

If you desire to walk on water, you need to get out of the boat.

Janice Ng was working as a secondary school teacher when the Lord called her to full-time ministry. She joined SJSJ as the missions administrator for 11 years before she was posted out as a missionary in 2019. Currently, she is the operations director of Heartfriends Centru Kristaun, a local Christian NGO training centre based in Manatuto, Timor Leste. Anyone interested to find out more about the work in Timor Leste can visit their Facebook Group, "Heartfriends Centru Kristaun Manatuto."

All hands on deck

Tricia Kuan and Eleanor Que

The biblical vision of intergenerational discipleship

“Intergenerational discipleship” could be interpreted as a tall order, or a bunch of fluffy buzzwords strung together. But with Project Spring-Winter (PSW) finally launched, the notion of being intergenerational hits closer to home now more than ever. This inadvertently prompts us to take stock of SJSM’s own multigenerational congregation, and evaluate how we have fared in cultivating a cohesive worshipping community.

Zechariah 8:4–5, the passage anchoring the vision behind PSW, depicts unity as such: “Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand

because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.” Titus 2 provides us with another snapshot of ideal multigenerational relationships: older women are to “train younger women” (v3), while older men are to be “model(s) of good works” to younger men (vv7–8).

Building upon these passages, it is evident that we are to guide and be guided in our spiritual journeys. Have we leaned into our greater calling and purpose to disciple each other, or have we conveniently allowed the divisions between generations to become more pronounced?

A firm understanding of existing gaps is crucial to making intergenerational discipleship actionable. At the



Leaders' Gathering 2021, a research team from Graceworks presented a local, typology-based framework which captures common Christian archetypes across each generation: Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials. Informed by empirical data collected from numerous congregants of Singapore's churches, the framework summarised the unique pain points and needs of each demographic, and demonstrated the sheer diversity of co-existing perspectives.

Intergenerational discipleship in SJSM

As Gen Zs (we are 19 and 24 respectively), we resonated with the woes highlighted in the Millennial bracket, namely the disconnect between generations, and the yearning for stronger spiritual mentorship and guidance. We hope this piece will shed light on the viewpoints of SJSM's youths, as well as the organic efforts to foster discipleship within Heartbeat.

For example, the mentorship programme established by the Fellowship and Sisterhood ministries pairs the youths up with mentors who are older or of a different life stage to facilitate Christ-centred relationships and create a support system for the youths. Grace Ong (22), one of the Sisterhood's committee leaders shared: "During

this pandemic, when physical worship services or cell meetings were not regular, mentors were a constant source of support and accountability for many of the girls. Over the past 2.5 years since the mentorship programme began, I've personally had the joy of witnessing many of the younger girls mature in their faith and begin to serve in other ministries alongside their mentors. This article, for example, is being co-written by a mentor-mentee pair!" What's more, seeing the mentors and mentees interacting outside of church settings reiterated to her that fellowship comes in all shapes and forms.

In applying the intergenerational discipleship principle beyond ministry-level, Fellowship and Sisterhood have made efforts to bridge gaps and build relations between Heartbeat and the rest of the church. As the ministries which were created to establish a safe space for youths to explore gender-specific topics like sexual purity, the committees often consult Men4Men and Women at the Well to seek advice on how to tactfully handle such sensitive discussions, even approaching adults who can draw from their personal experiences to speak at workshops. Though they play a more low-key role, the Nextgen Intercessors have also been a constant blessing to Heartbeat through their roles as intercessors during the annual youth camps.



That being said, more can still be done to support and guide the youths. Heartbeat often feels like an entity on its own despite being part of the SJSJ community. Ephesians 2:19–22 challenges us not to be strangers, but to work as one body of Christ to be built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. How can we nurture our next generation in wisdom when there is a disconnect between our own communities in SJSJ?

Samuel Ng (21), a Heartbeat leader, reflected that both Heartbeat leaders and members have been impacted by insufficient care and

support, and he attributes this partly to the lack of consistent communication between Heartbeat and the rest of the church. Further, due to the shortage of manpower when it comes to leading youth ministries and cell groups, leaders are often forced to wear multiple hats. This leads to burnout—leaders serve out of obligation, and they struggle to balance their personal responsibilities while ensuring that those under their charge are taken care of. Repercussions of insufficient support trickle down, and can be seen rippling through the youth congregation, e.g. cell groups that are unable to withstand disruptive curveballs like COVID-19.

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”

The ingredients for successful intergenerational discipleship

In the course of writing this piece, we have recognised that there are multiple tenets underlying intergenerational discipleship. First and most fundamentally, there must be the **humility to acknowledge that there is much to learn from each generation.** After all, regardless of age, Proverbs 27:17 states, “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” This should set the tone for productive mutual listening and understanding. In practicable terms, firstly, this could look like intentionally inviting youth representatives to weigh in on “adult” discussions, or being careful not to articulate opposing views in a condescending or antagonising manner.

Secondly, **intergenerational discipleship needs to be buttressed by genuine commitment,** which can seem daunting for adults who have their own careers

and families to juggle. Rather than serving out of reluctant obligation, we want to encourage service out of an overflow of God’s love. Only then does serving become sustainable, laced with genuine care and concern. As Grace testified, mentorship is not a unidirectional transaction but a relationship-building exercise. There were times where she had been encouraged and blessed by her own mentees, and this has reaffirmed to her how joyful serving can be.

Moving forward, as part of one SJSM community, **both the youths and the adults have equal responsibility to communicate and to build each other up.** It’s our hope that highlighting these gaps within our intergenerational community can instil a sense of urgency in creating an effective support system that fosters discipleship and care for leaders and congregation members alike. As our church endeavours to bridge the gap between the old and the young through PSW, it is only right to first ensure that our own community models this very same ideal.

Looking back

Anonymous



While driving, we do not avoid using the rearview mirror, but instead use it well, in order to drive and manoeuvre the car safely. Even so, no one drives with their eyes trained on the rearview mirror all the time, as that can be even more disastrous than not using it.

Reflecting on one's life is somewhat similar: looking back serves as much use as it does in helping us with the journey ahead. When we share our past with others, it can encourage them to reflect on their own past. Here, a brother in his eighties shares his life in his own words, such that in addition to our own experiences, we may also learn from the experiences of those who are ahead of us in their life journeys.

The early years: Giving thanks with a grateful heart (Psalm 136:1)

The word “remember” appears repeatedly in the early chapters of the Bible: namely in the book of Deuteronomy (5:15, 6:12, 8:2), with God’s exhortations to the Israelites to not forget their deliverance from slavery.

This had a great impact on my own journey, particularly at the point of my conversion to Christianity during my early teens, against a backdrop of deprivation and hostility (post-WWII, circa 1952). God in His divine intervention—which I was unaware of at the time—rescued and placed me in a Christian environment that had strong fellowship. It taught me about social and leadership responsibilities, and it was where I first learned to walk with and trust God.

However, even though I tried to be a disciple of Christ, it was mostly transactional, and I depended largely on my own efforts. While I felt enlightened and encouraged at times, more often than not, there was a deep sense of frustration and disappointment. My prayer life was awful, and this adversely affected my relationship with God. I had a genuine desire to walk closely with God, but the attractiveness of the world around me disrupted this relationship, and I found myself living an unhealthy lifestyle amidst a turbulent working environment.

Despite this period of spiritual emptiness and a poor prayer life, God watched over me and brought me through several life-threatening crises, strengthening my belief in His purpose and plan for me.

My current journey

Even now in my eighties, I sense that God has yet to complete His work in refining my spiritual life and in re-establishing my relationship with Him. The first forty years in my relationship with God was largely lukewarm and devoid of commitment, yet God did not forsake me.

The last 25 years have been a renaissance of sorts for my spiritual life. The breakthrough came upon my retirement in 1998, when I was

prompted to attend the Alpha course. I suddenly felt refreshed and revived, and was led by the Holy Spirit to serve in various church ministries. I realised that my ignorance of the Bible was a key reason why the Holy Spirit had been quenched in my life all those years. I am very grateful that God has since brought many like-minded, God-fearing Christians into my life journey to help me grow spiritually.

My involvement in three ministries has played a pivotal role in my spiritual journey:

- **Pastoral care ministry:** my time spent here was most fulfilling as I witnessed the healing grace of God in the lives of those who were spiritually and emotionally discouraged and wounded. Praise the Lord for restoring damaged relationships, in addition to their self-esteem and confidence! Most importantly, I saw how those who found God's purpose also experienced hope in Him.

- **Cell ministry:** my source of spiritual and personal "metamorphosthe" or transformation. Learning together with cell members through the application of Scripture, as well as peer mentoring, resulted in the formation of close relationships with them.

• **men4men (SJSJ men's ministry):** Christian men are often forgotten even though they may face a myriad of life challenges, leaving them feeling helpless and weighed down. Again, through God's guidance I became involved in men4men from its inception. Here, men are able to share their life experiences in confidence without fear of being judged or bombarded by unsolicited advice. I had felt a strong connection to this ministry, which has since become an indispensable part of my spiritual journey.

Still to go

• **Soul care:** David Roper, in his reflective book, "In Quietness and Confidence," commented that "old age is the season when we can give ourselves to soul caring and soul making." In my busyness amidst the distractions of life, I had unintentionally drawn away and neglected the most fundamental aspect of my spiritual wellbeing: soul care. I had experienced spiritual dryness four years ago. I had also experienced bouts of what some call the "dark night of the soul," suffering from a confusion over my beliefs while simultaneously neglecting my time with God. I was depressed in late 2020 over my medical condition and the recent passing of some close friends. In such circumstances, I needed instead to focus more on

God's grace to bring me back to where He wanted me to be, and even more so during these last two years of the COVID-19 pandemic that have made the recovery journey even more arduous.

• **Soul making:** I am generally a Christian "consumer"—asking God for everything, without thinking about how I could live for Him! Upon retirement, I began to reflect more deeply on life, myself, and others. If I can be useful to others as a spiritual friend, mentor, listener etc., or whatever God wants me to be so as to help them, I should do it.

• **Introspection:** I like to use St. Ignatius' Examen as a daily tool for reflection. It helps me to understand how God wants to guide and grow me. It is simple, but it is also the most important part of my spiritual walk.

Finally, I hope to grow in "glorifying and enjoying God" (Westminster Shorter Catechism), so that I can walk more closely with Him and enjoy Him for all the days of my life.

Our brother here has been candid. Life is full of distractions if we do not keep our eyes focused on Jesus. May we all aspire as our brother does in this season of his life: to live to glorify and enjoy God more and more.

Heart-Work

Tricia Kuan

Julia and Guan Yu first met as classmates at NUS Business School. Before getting into a relationship, Julia made it clear to Guan Yu, who was not a believer at the time, that he had to come to know Christ as she was looking for somebody who could not only partner her emotionally and physically, but also lead her spiritually.

In accepting her conditions, Guan Yu attended the Alpha course with Julia. He then participated in an exchange programme in Helsinki where Christian friends encouraged him to attend church. Slowly but surely, his knowledge of Christ and the faith that was established during the Alpha course started to grow.

Guan Yu's turning point was when he got lost while hiking in the woods. With no GPS or anyone in sight, he

cried out to the Lord for help and finally found himself on a highway as the sun started to set. It was there that he truly accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Fast forward a few years, both Julia and Guan Yu are faithful stewards of the Lord who actively serve together in Heartbeat, SJSM's guest worker outreach, and their home cell.

The couple takes some time out of their busy schedule to chat with SOL about serving together in these ministries, and the heart behind their work.

SOL: What led the both of you to start serving together?

Guan Yu: In short, God! After getting married in 2019, God drew nearer to us as we began to seek Him.

Our Lord Jesus doesn't just give us the cross, but also the towel. All who have been redeemed by His blood have received the call to be washers of feet. Knowing and experiencing God's infinite love for us compelled us to serve together.

Julia: I was the typical nominal Christian, so there was no way that I would have wanted to take up the role of cell leading. But my husband challenged me with difficult questions. To be a cell leader is to be a servant leader, and Jesus asks us to do just that by loving and serving others. How could we continue to be "consumers," knowing that Jesus Christ is the servant King?

Being the youngest in the cell back then, we decided to serve and learn from the mature ones. Thankfully, our cell leaders Page and Gerry have set a great example for us to follow!

When I was called to Heartbeat as a staff member, Guan Yu naturally came along as part of the package. He now serves as a leader to one of the youth clusters.

In July 2020, we had intended to attend YWAM Discipleship Training School, but when COVID-19 hit, we couldn't go overseas.



Julia and Guan Yu at their graduation from Tung Ling Bible School last year

Instead, Pastor Andrew reached out and asked us to consider joining the Tribute Programme with SJSM's Missions department. That led to us being active in the guest worker outreach and I must say it is so happening!

SOL: How does serving together grow and challenge you?

Guan Yu: With every challenge we face when serving together, we come to a deeper understanding of our inadequacy, and gain a renewed revelation of God's infinite grace.

Truly there's little we can do without His strength and wisdom.

It is a joy to mature spiritually as a couple through serving, and to be passionate about the same things. Surprisingly, serving together has not increased friction in our relationship but has brought us closer, and we continue to be each other's best friends.

Julia: Guan Yu had never interacted with youth before and so serving in Heartbeat was not natural for him at all. It is still challenging—the way youths communicate with short forms and emoticons is so different! Every day is a learning journey for us. We went from having no children of our own to caring for many youths!

What's challenging in our home cell is that we are attracting new members faster than we are raising leaders for cell multiplication. With a group size of around 40 members, it can be difficult to ensure that every individual is cared for, spiritually fed, and plugged in.

As for the guest worker outreach, sharing the gospel has been the greatest challenge. Not every heart is ready to receive the truth, and that saddens our hearts.

SOL: Serving continually can be draining. What's something that keeps you going?

Guan Yu: We have only been serving together for a short while, so we are hardly qualified to answer this question! Daily prayer and thanksgiving certainly helps, and we are strengthened as we experience the joy of the Lord.

We also have excellent "power couple" role models to look to for advice and motivation. Our cell leaders Gerry and Page have been serving continually in cell ministry over the past three decades, and are our greatest examples and encouragers.

Our friends, Vernon and Kerine, also serve tirelessly in pre-school, junior church, live-streaming, cell ministry, and SJSM's guest worker outreach, while raising two wonderful kids of their own and holding full-time jobs!

Julia: Another thing is our relationship with the Lord. Upholding the Sabbath is not taking a break from the Lord, but taking a break with the Lord. Each time we align ourselves to His purposes, we are filled with a supernatural joy that comes from Him. Thank you Father, thank you Jesus, thank you Holy Spirit.

SOL: How have you seen God move in the ministries you are in?

Guan Yu: It's been amazing to witness God at work when reaching out to the guest workers! He has been our Provider, giving us donations and volunteer support whenever needed; He has been our Protector, keeping all of the SJSMers involved free from COVID-19; He has been our Healer, physically healing guest workers whom we have prayed for; He has been our Miracle Worker, granting us unexpected favour with the authorities; and He has been our Teacher, showing us how to love the guest workers.

Julia: I've seen how the Lord has been at work in our cell. Running Alpha has allowed our cell to revisit the foundations of Christianity and to open doors for us to meet new people. Over our past two Alpha sessions, we have had three Alpha babies accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Hallelujah! I have also seen how the Lord has been refining both Guan Yu and me, in bearing the fruit of the Spirit and developing character traits that God desires in us.

SOL: What advice would you give to other couples who would like to serve together?

"It is a joy to mature spiritually as a couple through serving, and to be passionate about the same things. Surprisingly, serving together has not increased friction in our relationship but has brought us closer, and we continue to be each other's best friends.

Julia: Focus on aligning yourselves with God and God will do the assigning. Serve as a couple because two is better than one! Whenever there are differences in opinion, pray that the Lord will change you rather than your partner, and help you to see things from your partner's perspective.

Guan Yu: Always place the welfare of your partner above your own. Seek God for His assignment, rather than simply taking on anything that comes your way. And then, dive right in and don't look back! Always keep His Kingdom in view, and prioritise His purpose over your own. Ultimately, don't neglect your relationship with the Lord, lest you serve in vain and lose your way.

5 THINGS ABOUT:

Ps Alvin Toh, SJSM's new Vicar!

Christy Or

SOL: Share with us your conversion story. How did you come to know Christ as your Lord and Saviour?

Ps Alvin: I grew up with Christian influence from my mother and my grandmother, whose example in daily Scripture reading and prayer impacted me much. It was also through her storytelling, while waiting for my school bus in my early years, that I first heard about the many heroes of our faith in the Old Testament. I ended up attending Glory Presbyterian Church where my grandmother had worshipped at, and it was during one of the Sunday School classes there as a 12-year-old that I remember raising my hand to receive Christ into my life and

committing to follow him. In a sense, you can say I'm a third-generation Christian, having seen how my grandmother (and her sisters) live out their faith.

SOL: What was your working life experience like before the Lord called you into full-time ministry?

Ps Alvin: I had received what I felt was God's call into full-time ministry during my university years, and it was in the process of discerning with my church pastor and the Cru Singapore staff whom I was serving with as a student leader that I had come to ascertain God's call for me specifically in pastoral ministry.



Above: My family (from left: Dionne, Felicia, me, Dylan, and Dawn) on holiday a few years ago, in Taiwan

Right: My beloved grandmother and Dawn (when she was an infant)



After I graduated, God opened the door for me to work in corporate banking with a financial institution. I thoroughly enjoyed the work because it gave me a deep appreciation of the commercial world and how things work, covering corporate lending for companies in various industries like chemicals, construction, electronics, property, and even palm oil plantations! One unforgettable experience was riding on a propeller plane from Seletar airport to Indonesia to visit a palm oil plantation. Our convoy of vehicles was “escorted” by the police all the way, and we stayed overnight there in the middle of the plantation, which stretched as far as the eye could see!

SOL: Do help us know your family more?

Ps Alvin: I met my wife Felicia during our days studying accountancy in NTU and while serving with the Cru Singapore campus ministry. During our courtship, she was already aware of my calling into full-time pastoral work, and I’m thankful that she has been my most ardent supporter to-date! After many years in the accounting line, she is now heading the Shared Service Centre, Procurement and Compliance section with the company she has been with for the last 15 years. She is the youngest of four siblings, while I too am the youngest amongst my two brothers.

My son Dylan matriculated into NTU last year, doing a double major in business and accountancy. He's a brilliant young man and we have given him the baptism name Caleb, praying that he will grow to understand and act upon God's promises, and faithfully serve God even into his latter years. Dawn has just completed her 'A' levels and we are looking forward to her baking more now that she has more time on her hands! Her baptism name is Marie (variant of Mary) and we are so pleased to see her growing faith in God and love for those around her. God has given her such a considerate and tender heart. Dionne is fourteen but she will always be a baby to us! She has been such a blessing and she brings much joy to the family. We gave her the name Abigail, praying that she will grow into the wise and measured woman that the biblical Abigail was.

SOL: What hobbies and fun activities do you enjoy?

Ps Alvin: I got hooked on board games after a visit to my cousins' in Sydney many years ago, when they introduced the game Settlers to me. Since then, I'm always on the lookout for well-designed board games to play with my family and friends! It's certainly something I find very enjoyable and relaxing, although



Felicia and I at our NTU graduation

I can't say the same for Felicia... (unfortunately!).

On my off days, I play badminton to stay fit, and also to relive the good old days of competitive sports. I used to play softball when I was a student, and continue to love the game! I'm glad it rubbed off on my two girls, who now also play softball in their respective schools.

SOL: What is your vision for SJSJ in the coming five years and beyond? What priorities do you hope to put in place?

Ps Alvin: The foundation for what SJSJ will be doing in the next five years (and perhaps even beyond)

has already been laid in the past five years. While SJSM is not defined by just the nursing home and childcare centre ministries, they will nonetheless feature quite strongly in the various missional efforts of the church as we live out our call to grow as disciples of Christ and to be a light for the nations (Isaiah 42:6).

There are a few things that God has put on my heart, which I believe will come to pass in the years to come. I believe God will once again raise many SJSMers into full-time ministry. SJSM has a rich heritage of strong evangelism and rooting deep in the word of God, and through the years many full-time workers and missionaries were raised and sent forth. I believe in this new season, the Spirit of God will once again move mightily to touch the hearts of many to step up to the call, and perhaps also to step out into the field.

I am also burdened for the young in our midst—those in Junior Church and Heartbeat. I am praying that more will respond to the need there for greater involvement, and strong modelling for our young people, so that their faith is not theoretical but living and active, seen and experienced up close and personal through other SJSMers who serve in their midst. There's so much of intergenerational relationships that we have yet to flesh out and

"Church is not where we go to do "religious things" together, but it is where we live and share life together... a foretaste of what heaven will be like. May SJSM be a church where Jesus would love to be at!"

—

plumb deep into. I hope to see more intergenerational ministry core teams formed, not just for purposes of representation, but for effectiveness and mutual learning, sharpening and discipling.

With the many challenges and changes COVID-19 has brought about to church life, my prayer is that SJSM will once again rediscover church primarily as a family, not a religious centre for theological knowledge. Church is not where we go to do "religious things" together, but it is where we live and share life together... a foretaste of what heaven will be like. May SJSM be a church where Jesus would love to be at!

LESSONS IN LIFE:

The Lord knows better!

Ryan Tan



With my Culinary and Catering Management course mates

It was not so long ago in 2018 when I was a slightly depressed and lost student who had just finished my first year at Singapore Polytechnic (SP). With a GPA of 2.7, I knew I would not be able to get into a local university. I was angry with myself for being complacent and not having tried hard enough.

I believe it was the Lord who prompted my parents to nudge me

to think about transferring to the Culinary and Catering Management course in Temasek Polytechnic (TP). Personally, I thought it was a crazy idea. I had already invested a year into the course and did not want to start over. I had friends, leadership appointments, and even the specialisation in entrepreneurship that I wanted for my second year at SP. Change scared me. There were so many uncertainties: What if I didn't

"This experience taught me that the Lord is indeed my Good Shepherd and He has an amazing and beautiful plan for me. Despite so much initial resistance and apprehension, I found myself thoroughly enjoying my new course—so much so that I ended up topping my cohort! "

do well again? What if I hated the course? Too many what if's....

to let him know by Sunday if I was going to enrol on Monday.

Encouraged (or should I say, badgered) by my parents, I grudgingly applied for the course. Over the next few months, I unconsciously tried to sabotage the transfer but it turned out successful nonetheless. Yet, up to the last day for enrolment, I could not make up my mind whether to go ahead or not.

It was the most painfully slow weekend ever and I recall finally deciding at 5pm on Sunday that I would take a leap of faith. This was after seeking the Lord in prayer throughout the night as I was too anxious to sleep. Immediately after sending the confirmation email, I found peace in my heart that had escaped me for the last one month.

Exasperated, my parents suggested that I speak to a course tutor at TP that very day. It was a Friday and when we turned up at 6.30pm, the school had already closed. However, the course director had somehow stayed back in the office. He was surprised that I was not yet rejected by the school as I had already missed the orientation program and there was a waiting list of course applicants. Patiently, he answered my questions for over an hour, after which he left me his email address

The next morning, I went back to SP to hand in my dropout forms before heading to TP for my first lesson!

This experience taught me that the Lord is indeed my Good Shepherd and He has an amazing and beautiful plan for me. Despite so much initial resistance and apprehension, I found myself thoroughly enjoying my new course—so much so that I ended up topping my cohort!



With my grandparents

In March 2020, I landed a six-month internship with a famous Mexican restaurant in Chicago. I was ecstatic. However, within five days of arriving in the “Windy City,” I was recalled by the Ministry of Education back to Singapore due to the escalating COVID-19 situation.

I was angry and upset with God over the lost opportunity. However, if I had stayed on in Chicago, I might have been stuck in a dangerous situation where not only was the infection rate very high, there was also looting, attacks against Asians, and violent protests. When I returned, God provided me with a new internship in less than a week. Surely, the Lord is my protector and provider!

Presently, I’m in the next season of my life as an army boy. Though I wonder if I will be able to survive the two years well, I know He has carved out a way for me and it will be good!

Ryan Tan is 21 and currently serving his national service before furthering his studies in SMU where the Lord has blessed him with a placement. In his spare time, he derives much joy from cooking for his family and friends.

YOUTH SPEAK:

Simple faith. Radical living

John Cheong and Kevin Kwang



Caleb (third row, right) and the YWAM team in Nepal

There's a well-trodden path to adulthood in Singapore and it goes like this: Get good grades, go to university and pursue a degree—preferably one that leads to a well-paying profession like law or medicine—graduate with said degree and then pursue a career in the professions mentioned above.

For many young adults, deviating from this path is uncommon. Yet, Caleb Goh is someone who has taken

the road less travelled. While still in school, he went on a mission trip to Perak in 2011 and got to experience supporting the local orang asli community. This impacted the then-13-year-old so much that he committed to returning to Perak for the next four years to continue the work and help other youths embark on similar mission trips.

After he finished his National Service stint, Caleb chose not to do what

most of his peers would do—go on a holiday, chill and hang out with friends, or get a part-time job while waiting to enrol into university.

Instead, he decided to put his savings where his heart was by signing up for a four-month music and singing YWAM Discipleship Training School (DTS) in New Zealand. As part of the training, he spent two months in Nepal supporting the local churches in their activities.

So why is this 23-year-old choosing to eschew conventional wisdom to live out his faith?

“Jesus is worthy,” Caleb replied.

Harvest is ready

Speaking to SOL recently, the law undergraduate recalled how his first church camp in 2010 inspired him to live out his faith. National Director of YWAM Singapore Joseph Chean was the main speaker at the camp, and Caleb said the experience birthed within him a desire to attend a YWAM course when he could as well as a heart for missions.

One thing led to another, and the trip became a reality in 2019—but not before he saw God’s hand directing him to the DTS he was to participate

in. He had signed up for a social justice DTS in New Zealand, but received a reply letting him know that the DTS was closing due to a lack of staff and suggesting he take up the music and singing DTS at the same base instead.

He said: “The next day, as I opened up Scripture and as I was reading, Isaiah 42 jumped out. It said: ‘sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea’.

“That’s when I knew that God was being very clear when He told me to go to New Zealand, which is the ends of the earth, and do the music and singing DTS. So I said ‘OK, I’ll do it’,” he recounted.

From the DTS, he had the opportunity to go on a mission trip to Nepal where he was based in the capital city of Kathmandu, and would travel to both the country’s north (near the Indian border) and south (near the Tibetan border) to support the church’s activities like delivering bibles.

One of his most memorable moments of the trip was when they were lost in a village, but felt the Lord directing them to visit the houses around. As they did that, they called for those



Caleb (second row, second from right) and his law school's Christian fellowship group

who were sick, to lay hands and pray for them.

"One after another, they started getting healed. Soon enough, the entire village was out to meet us," Caleb said. "We were laying hands one after another, praying the Gospel that people would believe."

"One person said the reason why I believe, even though I wasn't healed today, is because you came from all over the world and I see that you guys love me and so I believe in this God you're presenting," he recalled.

His takeaway from the six months away? "The harvest is ready, but the workers are few."

Law school, not mission field (yet)

After he returned, Caleb was fired up by what he had seen and heard, particularly by the young people in their 20s dedicating the best years of their lives to bring the Gospel to the unreached.

Yet, when he sought the Lord's direction for his next stage in life, he felt led to matriculate into law school instead.

He shared how it was a real struggle to give up his plans to go full-time and into the mission field. "I was ready to go full-time but the struggle was saying yes to law school, which was counter-intuitive. I said to God: 'What's your problem? You have someone who wants to go into

missions, but you don't let him. You ask him to go to law school."

But Jesus is worthy. Caleb recalled God's word and realised that if the Lord calls him to go to law school, he would go "all in" as well.

This can be seen as he heads up the law school's Christian fellowship, while also remaining active in the youth and campus ministry at SJSJ. His gift in understanding the Word has also seen him make appearances at the pulpit during Heartbeat services.

Now into his third year of studies, Caleb continues to put God first in his decision-making such as choosing a law firm to practise in. Rather than opt for the conventional path of getting in at a "Big 5" law firm, he chose instead to join a local mid-sized firm. He shared how his friends had told him to choose otherwise, as joining a smaller firm would lead to wasted opportunity and cause him to lose out in terms of earnings and a more-than-comfortable lifestyle.

He explained that his choice was because the firm he's joining is run by God-fearing Christians who would understand if he were to have ministry or church activities outside of work. "They might not say yes to



Caleb (left) preaching in Nepal

letting me go, but at least they would understand!" he quickly added.

Asked how he juggles his many responsibilities, Caleb said that God provides and equips. In the past three years in university, his timetables and exam schedules have mostly not clashed with ministry needs.

He also shared how he chooses the joy of ministry over earthly pleasures such as keeping up with the latest movies or Netflix series.

For Caleb, Jesus is indeed worthy and he isn't just paying lip service. His life, and the choices he makes, are a reflection of faith in action.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF:

Ps Chung Lai Mei

Ps Lai Mei joined the SJSM Zone Pastors team on 18 August 2020. She oversees 13 cells as the Zone Pastor for Zone 5. This includes providing pastoral care to her members from cradle to grave, e.g. organising wakes & funerals, post-bereavement care for grieving family members, counselling in marital and household conflict as well as mentoring, discipleship, and teaching. Although there is something different every day, she tries to share with us what a typical day in her life looks like.

I usually start my day at 6am. After silencing my alarm, I get dressed for my regular exercise. Don't be mistaken, I am far from athletic, but this is a forced habit that grew out of desperation for self-discipline to care for my body and seek God in the morning. Before leaving the house, I feed my two cats who would either be scratching at my bedroom door or meowing for their food.



Accompanying husband on official function

Once out of the house, I begin with either a slow jog or a brisk walk, which depends on whether or not my husband joins me. I jog if I am with him and walk if I am alone. I also listen to a contemplative devotional over my earphones as I do so. Upon hearing the sound of church bells ringing at the beginning of the devotional, a sense of peace and quiet comes over me. I have heard from God on numerous occasions through the thoughts that come from

the meditation, and have sometimes even heard His voice in my head as I jog or walk.

After 30 minutes of circling my estate, it will be time to stretch and wind down at home. Breakfast is usually tea or coffee with two slices of bread or two eggs. This routine is usually the same every morning, unless I am informed that someone has fallen, been admitted to the hospital, or gone home to the Lord. In those cases, the walk will have to be postponed or cancelled, depending on the follow-up needed. Thus, a typical morning can easily become atypical.

However, I want to encourage everyone who finds difficulty in forming the habit of communion with the Lord in the morning to continue trying even if it is not regular. I remember a story that a pastor once told me—we are sometimes like a frog in a well trying to jump out of it. For each failed attempt, it falls back to the bottom of the well. But with each try, it will jump higher than its previous attempt. In the same way, if at first you aren't consistent with your quiet time, continue to try again, and don't give up. God never gives up on us.

On alternate Fridays, I will attend cell group at 10:30am. This group of

elderly ladies adopted me into their cell since April last year and have become my prayer support group. They are kind and full of compassion for each other. On the days that they don't meet for cell, they visit one another, especially the homebound amongst them. Through the cell group, not only have they learned to study the Bible, but they have also learned to love one another. Christ said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:35)

Once every 3 months, I travel to Tan Tock Seng Hospital to be treated for a neurological condition that I have suffered from for the past four years. It's called hemifacial spasm, whereby a blood vessel touching the facial nerve causes it to go into spasm. On good days, my face twitches; on bad days, I can hardly open my right eye. I have prayed and cried out to God for healing and am still waiting on Him. This condition has driven me to desperation, despair, and self-doubt. I dread taking photos and feel very self-conscious when I am on Zoom, where every facial expression is recorded and magnified. I am learning to overcome this insecurity and have developed more empathy for those who have special needs or any form of disability or disfigurement. Perhaps, this is what I needed to learn.



My cats, Loki and Snuffles, bird-watching

Every Friday at 3pm, the Zone Pastors gather on Zoom for our weekly prayer meeting. Typically, we begin by sharing the latest issues we've been facing or something that has made us happy. There is usually a theme that the rostered prayer leader will share about. We then start to pray for the items that we have listed down, or we just pray for one another. This has become the place where we share our hearts and become vulnerable. It is also on this platform that we "clash and later mesh" to become a united team. I have come to believe that the group that prays together, stays together. I give thanks to God for each zone pastor and am grateful to them for accepting me.

The meeting ends at 4pm and I usually take a break before starting on dinner preparations. On nights that I visit a cell group, I will finish dinner early and prepare to share the Word. This will end at around 10:30pm, depending on the length of discussion.

My day typically ends at around midnight, after I've showered and spent some time unwinding by watching k-dramas or lately, crocheting, followed by Examen and bedtime.

There are also some atypical nights spent on the phone with cell leaders to discuss the issues they face and plan how to move forward. In these COVID-19 times, much planning, counselling, caring, and praying is done over the phone, and sometimes late into the night because that is the only time they have to talk freely.

FROM THE WORD:

Building and watching our inner life

Christy Or

Such a time as this

With vaccines against the COVID-19 virus now available, many countries are gradually opening up. Yet infections continue to climb by the millions and death persists in claiming the lives of thousands around the world each day. COVID-19 is not just another virus. It can kill and has killed more than five million people at the time of writing. Is the worst of the pandemic behind us? How should the Christian and the church respond in such a time as this? We turn to Psalm 127 for a word in season that God may have for us, both individually and corporately.

“V1: Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain on it; unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman keeps vigil in vain.

V2: In vain do you rise early and stay up late, you who toil for the bread you eat; He provides as much for His loved ones while they sleep.

V3-5: Sons are the provision of the LORD; the fruit of the womb, His reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are sons born to a man in his youth. Happy is the man who fills his quiver with them; they shall not be put to shame when they contend with the enemy in the gate.”

(Psalm 127, Tanakh version)

A time to worship

Psalm 127 lies at the centre of the Songs of Ascent (Psalms 120–134), which are worship songs sung by pilgrims as they journey up to

Jerusalem during the annual festivals. Note the language used here—arrows, warrior, contending with the enemy at the gate. These words set the context for the times they were in, which were filled with real and imminent threats from their enemies.

At first glance, there seems to be a disconnect between verses 1–2 and verses 3–5. The focus shifts from the theme of building and securing to the theme of family. Upon closer examination, we see that verses 3–5 build on verses 1–2.

Verses 1 and 2 reveal the vanity (or emptiness) of man's endeavours apart from God. The rationale for this lies in verse 2: "He provides as much for His loved ones while they sleep." Verses 3–5 expound on this idea, declaring that children "are a provision of the Lord; the fruit of the womb His reward."

Vanity or fruitfulness?

So we see that the Psalmist is affirming the sovereignty of God over the affairs of man, and warning against the prideful and ungrateful tendency to ascribe achievements to man apart from God. It is important to note that the Psalmist is not advocating for us to be lazy or to adopt a fatalistic attitude. Rather, he calls us to be watchful over our inner

lives. What are we really building in our busyness? Where does our true security lie? Where is God in all that we are pursuing?

Psalm 127 declares that unless the Lord is involved, our efforts to build and our quest for security will simply be in vain. In fact, the phrase "in vain" is mentioned three times, signalling a superlative emphasis that ought to be taken seriously.

This psalm speaks cohesively of God's presence in the lives of His people, both in the public and private spheres. It motivates us to put our hands to the plough because God is working with us to accomplish His purposes.

"Doing church" in the pandemic

The pandemic has an uncanny ability to strip away façades. No longer is there a need to put on heavy make-up to cover up flaws—masks take care of that rather well. Nor is there a requirement to "show face" at the office—work-from-home settles that. Neither is there a need to entertain, drink, or club just to be part of the "in-crowd." Social distancing is the *modus operandi* now. But what about church life—is that no longer necessary, too? Some honest confessions from friends who used to serve actively in church have troubled me:

"I have been surfing different churches' online services every week."

"I don't even go online for services anymore."

"Let's face it, it's difficult to 'do church' now. So many restrictions—no singing, no mingling, must keep masks on at all times, sit far apart from one another, and get shooed off immediately after service. Might as well not go!"

The pandemic has forced us to examine what church really means to us. If our church involvement is only for social, political, or personal reasons, it will crumble in times of crisis. Each of us must honestly examine our hearts and reckon with these questions—who is God to me? Whom am I really serving? Is He worthy?

The pandemic has also accentuated the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. If we are of those who turn away from church in times of challenges, might it be that we belong only to the visible church and not the invisible but true church?

The pilgrims who sang Psalm 127 had travelled far and wide, resolutely making their ascent to Jerusalem

despite facing hardship and challenges. They sang with gratitude in their hearts for what God had brought them through: out of Egypt, through the years of wilderness, and into the promised land. Every stage was fraught with danger. Yet they rejoiced at being able to gather to worship God. They trusted in His protection in the face of hostility, and were thankful for His provision for their families and community in times of uncertainty and scarcity.

In the midst of challenging times, Christians must continue the work of building the church, trusting in God's covenantal love and grace to provide for His people.

Barrenness or blessedness?

Psalm 127 analogises the Christian life as a pilgrimage. When God redeems His people, He calls us out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9), and sets us on a journey of faith from our worldly life stations to His heavenly kingdom. Psalm 127 offers a great word of encouragement to the Christian pilgrim. Looking at the verbs used in verses 1 and 2, we see a picture of a God who is living, active, and present: the LORD builds, the LORD watches over, the LORD provides.

As God's pilgrim people, let's persevere faithfully in sowing, with

patience and endurance, even in times of challenges. We trust in God's promises and provision, and we delight in His presence and pleasure! Our eyes are fixed on God, for he provides the rain in season and the growth. We labour faithfully in the harvest fields because the Lord of the Harvest has declared, "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together." (John 4:35)

Indeed, the Christian life is filled with meaningful labour and faithful vigilance over those in our charge because the Lord builds, watches over, and provides for His beloved.

Christy joined SJSM on 1 September 2021 upon her graduation from Trinity Theological College. She is thankful to be able to serve in the Family Life Ministry.





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