

# HEART OF GOD CHURCH IN THE NEWS

These articles were published in the Straits Times in November 2010 in light of the gang activities that were prevalent in Singapore at the time. It featured Heart of God Church and the principles taught by Pastor Tan Seow How and Pastor Cecilia Chan because of the positive influence and impact we have on youths.



[WWW.HEARTOFGODCHURCH.ORG](http://WWW.HEARTOFGODCHURCH.ORG)



Young members of the Heart of God Church put on a dance performance. The church encourages artistic self-expression among its members, many of whom go on to enjoy success in their chosen fields. PHOTOS: HEART OF GOD CHURCH

# Pushing education with a creative touch

Independent church offers gifts like iPods to spur academic excellence

SUNDAY worship starts at the leisurely hour of three in the afternoon at the Heart of God Church.

Most members of the church, which has 1,000 youth and 250 adult members, are

young "digital natives" who live online or study into the early hours. The late start allows them to sleep in, and gives them time to enjoy brunch or dinner with their families.

But the laid-back start of Sunday service

could give the wrong impression. It masks a very upright attitude to education and attainment.

The independent Protestant church in Paya Lebar – started in 1999 by Senior Pastor Tan Seow How and his wife Cecilia Chan, both 40 – has a big focus on academic excellence and the creative expression of young people.

Pastor Tan says: "I have observed Christian youth who are very committed to their faith but neglect their studies, work and even family. When they reach their 20s, they realise they are far behind in life, career and finances. Tragically, some blame God and leave

church or even the faith."

He and his church leaders "aggressively push education", as 70 per cent of their youth members come from neighbourhood schools, said the pastor, an Anglo-Chinese School alumnus with a finance degree from Santa Clara University in the United States.

iPods are given to those with good grades, if they achieve an aggregate score of 200 and above in the Primary School Leaving Examination or make it to university. In the past five years,

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Multimedia-savvy youth at the Heart of God Church create a dynamic worship experience but are taught to be responsible and frugal with purchases of equipment.



The Heart of God Church focuses on strong academic performance, along with emphasis on creative pursuits, and offers group tuition to its young members. PHOTO: HEART OF GOD CHURCH

## Encouraging a passion for study and creativity

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awards worth more than \$23,000 have been disbursed.

During examination season, students are urged to study for at least 10 to 20 hours a week before they attend church. As a result, Pastor Tan says the students have outperformed the national average for five years running, and several have even made it to the medicine faculty at the National University of Singapore.

Full-time national serviceman Tan Jian Ming, 22, who has a polytechnic di-

ploma in business computing, used to get F9 in his subjects and shone only in maths.

His marks shot up when Pastor Tan encouraged him and launched the iPod gifts. He now plans to study for a degree.

Church manager Yasmeen Chan, 26, points out that under the church's system, students "set their own standards" and take ownership of their desired academic scores and goals by stating them on a pledge card.

Unsurprisingly, parents love the academic focus, and even those who are not Christians pitch in with Nike vouchers or

cheques for the award scheme, she adds. Some drop their children off at church, then go shopping.

Alongside the academic incentives, the church also encourages young people to excel in creative pursuits. "Singapore youth are very creative, smart, innovative and even entrepreneurial," Pastor Tan observes. But these talents are buried when they lack confidence or do not communicate well, he says.

The church provides the environment and equipment for young people to explore what they are good at - music, multimedia, lighting, dance, fashion and

art.

They have become musicians and singers in four worship teams, video camera operators and multimedia creators.

Before long, Pastor Tan says, the young people end up managing the audiovisuals better than their adult supervisors who first showed them the ropes.

Some years back, an introverted 15-year-old was allowed to tinker with the church office's Apple Mac computer. Now 22, and newly employed in a post-production company, Mr Chua Feng Xu created the introductory video for the opening ceremony of the Youth Olympic

Games in August.

Pastor Tan says any organisation serving young people is unlikely to be rich. Churches survive on cash tithes by members, and with such a concentration of youth, most of whom are not yet working, the collection box does not overflow.

"For very practical reasons, I do not see many youth churches arising in Singapore. It's like raising a family of 10 kids," he said.

But he looks far into the future: "If I can teach, grow and mature a thousand young people into responsible, godly, loving citizens, in 20 years there will be 1,000 great families, 1,000 good fathers and mothers, and 1,000 responsible citizens."

LEE SIEW HUA



**BAHA'I:** (From left) Venkatesan Somesh, 11, sharing a story with Mr Oliver Oxenham, 29, Mr Darren Chua, 20, and Mr Ben Morris, 25, at their weekly small group book study at Pinnacle@Duxton. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

# Making faith cool

Youthful worshippers are prized by temples, churches and mosques here, determined not to lose a generation to godlessness, especially now

with youth gangs in the news. Young people are also key to the survival or revival of ancient faiths. So religious leaders now strategically unleash youth-friendly programmes, from sports to social networking. They cheer on good students with iPods, and race online to connect with teenagers and young adults.



BY LEE SIEW HUA  
SENIOR WRITER

WITH youth gangs in the news, religious leaders now face new urgency in reaching out to the young.

What is at stake is clear to church, temple and mosque elders, who prize young worshippers and have in recent years made ancient faiths more youth-friendly. Instil the next generation with a sense of identity and purpose or, they fear, lose them to cynicism, violence and even fanaticism.

Religious leaders think faith can play a role in arresting youth gangsterism, by helping to calm raging teen hormones and supporting those in fraying families.

A member of the Baha'i community, Mr Chong Ming Hwee, 31, says: "It's a difficult age. There is a lot of surging energy which, if not properly harnessed, may result in the problems of youth that we see. Youth can play a significant role in society." He deems them "very noble beings".

Like him, religious leaders here see the potential for good in the young: their altruism, sense of justice and eagerness to learn. But they say this can come to the fore only if teens are nurtured properly.

"Youths need to belong to a family," says Mr Daniel Chua, 34, lead pastor of The City Church. "They need authentic relationships where you can hear quarrels, and you work it out.

"Looking around us, there so many problems of dysfunctional families. There's a lack of kinship. That's what society needs and that's what the Bible



**ISLAM:** Nur Nadhira Yunos (left), 15, and Nurin Sofiya Sri Rosfadil, 14, engaged in an opening prayer before their interactive a.L.I.V.E. class, conducted in English for young people aged 13 to 16 at Al-Mawaddah Mosque in Sengkang. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

Buddhists teach loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity, he adds. "Growing up, young people have raging hormones and pent-up frustration, probably because of their family. With understanding and patience, we can help them."

While gangsterism is worrying enough, even more sinister is the threat of religious fanaticism. And this is spurring faith groups here to intensify recruitment of the young.

Miss Vidhiya Devi Ramasamy, 29, teams up with other Hindu youth volunteers to run lively Sunday classes in basic Hinduism for children in neighbourhood temples here - convinced that sound religious teaching fortifies individuals against fanaticism.

"With technology, the young

witness injustices that take place in the name of religion all over the world," she says.

"Young Hindus are taught to love, harmonise and have greater understanding of one another. When we focus on reaching youth, their awareness of extremism is heightened. They will spread their concerns about fanaticism not only to their friends but also throughout the world with technology."

Eight religious groups - the Buddhists, Taoists, Roman Catholics, Protestant Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Baha'i - report increasing their focus on the young.

They have launched youth-friendly programmes featuring sports events, social networking and the latest music to help reel in youth.

 MORE ONLINE

**FROM GANGS TO RELIGION:** For writer's blog on youth conversions, go to [straitstimes.com](http://straitstimes.com)

The Heart of God Church uses iPods and Nike vouchers - paid for from church coffers or donations by parents - to encourage studying and achieving good grades.

The Baha'i community of 2,000 people reaches out to its youth with a weekend programme of study, discussion and fun activities designed to foster positive language, help teens make moral decisions and involve them in service projects.

And other faiths here have introduced new youth wings and youth clerics - almost unheard of 10 years ago - and are spreading the word online via Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

## Learning from Protestants

THE good news is that young people seem to be open to such efforts.

A 2008 Straits Times survey of 1,000 Singaporeans aged 15 and above found that those aged 15 to 19 were the most likely to convert to a religion.

"Young people are attracted to spirituality," says youth specialist Glenn Lim, 39, a former Anglican youth pastor of 10 years. The former drug addict and gang member now trains youth pastors at the School of Youth Ministry, where he is the programme director.

He has met many former offenders who cross easily into religion. Where they once looked for identity, significance and a sense of power in gangs, they now find them in religion. He says: "It is almost like they substitute domains - the gang for the religious group."

"Religion is one platform to do good for mankind," he adds. "Young people readily rise up for a cause, whether it's animal rights, disaster relief or the Youth Olympic Games."

Protestant Christianity seems to be particularly successful at attracting young people. The Straits Times poll found that one-quarter of those surveyed turned to Protestant Christianity before they were 20 - easily surpassing conversions to Catholicism (11 per cent), Bud-

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**CHRISTIANITY:** Young dancers at a performance at Heart of God Church in Paya Lebar, where young people exceed adults fourfold. PHOTO: HEART OF GOD CHURCH



**TAOISM:** Taoist Federation Youth Group members at China's Mount Hua in Shaanxi province, one of five sacred mountains in Taoism. PHOTO: TAOIST FEDERATION YOUTH GROUP

# They've come, but will they stay?

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children at the Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road, devising props with themes of good and evil.

At the National University of Singapore, Sikhs make overtures by sharing their culture. Mr Harminder Singh, 25, has tied turbans for non-Sikh students, when the university hosted cultural bazaars.

For the past year, a group of 10 to 15 Sikhs have been discussing Sikh literary works and contemporary issues over tea

at a campus canteen, says Mr Singh, who graduated in July and is now working at the Defence Science Organisation.

In many churches, young people shine at music, drama and multimedia – the creative side of church life, says Pastor Chua.

They stage drama productions and create videos and multimedia to accompany sermons and “are highly talented and at the forefront of innovation”, he says.

In August, during the Youth Olympic Games, Mr Chua and other youth pastors mobilised several churches to host the families of athletes. They also staged a

Loudfest youth festival that included bicycle stunts and bands at Ngee Ann City.

## Just a phase?

BUT the huge investment in youth often raises the question of whether religion is just a rite of passage for some. After expending so many resources on reaching young people, do they stay the course?

After all, youth programmes do not come cheap. Any organisation serving youth is never rich, says Senior Pastor Tan Seow How, 40, of Heart of God Church.

Sociologist Dr Mathews, who has stud-

ied church growth here for many years, notes: “Among young people who go to church, conservatively, at least half drop out.”

“Anecdotally,” he adds, “they may come back in their 40s or 50s. Maybe as their own kids enter the teen years, they feel the children need religious guidance. Or towards their 50s, health becomes an issue and existential concerns come back,” he says. “People revisit the spirituality of their youth.”

Many religious leaders prefer to overlook this possibility and say the infusion of life that the young bring to any place

of worship should be prized – whatever its duration.

Miss Mabel Ong, 19, a Nanyang Technological University psychology student, says young people drift in and out of her Singapore Buddhist Mission youth group of 100 members, and it's a “bonus” if they stay on. “Our motivation is that whether they are here for one year or one session, we plant the seed of Buddhism in them.”

Similarly, Father Brian D'Souza, 41, is at peace if his young Catholic parishioners venture into vibrant Protestant churches – even as he pitches youth programmes such as a six-week School of Witness on character formation and the sharing of the Gospel through music and dance. The camp for young potential leaders aged 17 to 25 is held at the Catholic Archdiocesan Youth Centre off Upper Serangoon Road.

“Rather than attend Catholic mass as a routine, if a young person decides to attend a Christian church and is fervent for Christ, I am happy,” he says.

The youth chaplain of the Catholic Youth Ministry Office, set up by Archbishop Nicholas Chia in 2003 to coordinate resources for youth work, is buoyed by the hope that wandering youth will one day return to the Catholic fold.

Pastor Chua of The City Church points out that young people are a very powerful force in evangelism – both in class and in co-curricular activities (CCAs).

“Their social structures are bigger,” he says. “Because they're more experimental and daring, they are quicker to reach out to friends and ask them to come along to see for themselves. It's an expression of their new-found zeal and passion.”

Churches have found that youth beget more youth – speedily. Without any blueprint to build a youth church, the Heart of God Church started a youth group in 2000 with nine youngsters aged nine to 13. They were too old for Sunday School and therefore bored, but too young for the adult service.

“Over the next 10 years, they outpaced the growth of the adult church,” he says. Now, the church has 1,250 members, with youngsters exceeding adults four-fold.

So, as Pastor Tan puts it, the patience and love needed when working with youth is well worth the effort.

“They will hang out late, be unwise, be immature, have a bad attitude and make bad decisions. Sometimes they will neglect their studies and family time. At Heart Of God, we call them ‘excellence-in-progress’.

“How to work with youth? In a few words: Love youth, respect youth, believe in youth.”

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