

Youth Ministry Realities in Singapore: Insights and Wisdom from the Ground

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Introduction

The state of youth ministry is a major concern for Singapore church leaders and Christian parents. The new conditions of immediacy, global connectivity, and media saturation have led to dramatic changes in the nation's socio-cultural landscape, shifts in mindsets, and erosion of time-honored values held by traditional institutions.

At the same time, church leaders and Christian parents have often articulated that the future of the church is dependent on how well youth ministries serve and nurture the Christian youth of today. The deep level changes in society coupled with this high-stakes burden bestowed upon youth ministries raise important questions for the church today.

Between September 2014 and February 2015, the Ethos Institute of Public Christianity endorsed a National Study of Children's and Youth Ministry in Singapore to explore ground level realities faced by children's and youth ministries in Singapore. This study was initiated and undertaken by the Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore and One Hope, global children's and youth organization with a 'next-generation' research focus. There were three parts to the study: i) an online quantitative survey of children's and youth ministries in Singapore (ages 5-12 years and 13-19 years respectively) and ii) qualitative interviews with leaders of churches and Christian organizations that were recognized as well-established or having impactful ministries amongst children and youth.

Findings of the first study were released on 21 August 2015 and is available at <http://ethosinstitute.sg/survey>. This study reports the findings from the qualitative interviews with fourteen leaders from church youth ministries and Christian youth organizations. Of the fourteen, eight served in church youth ministries (YC1-YC8) while six served in Christian youth organizations (YO1-YO6). Four of the fourteen participants were female while the rest were male. Five research questions seeking to find out the state of youth ministry in Singapore were posed to them. The five were:

1. What are goals that youth ministries in Singapore aspire toward?
2. What are strengths observed in youth ministries in Singapore?
3. What are weaknesses observed in youth ministries in Singapore?
4. What are the opportunities presented to youth ministries in Singapore?
5. What are the challenges presented to youth ministries in Singapore?

Collectively, their responses offer the church rich insights of ground level realities surrounding the Singapore Christian youth scene. Their responses also share the wisdom of the fourteen leaders gained from their years of experience working with youth and Christian youth ministries in Singapore.

Goals that Youth Ministries in Singapore Aspire Toward

The aspirations of youth ministries are what they want to do and be as a collective. They are captured in their vision and mission statements as well as the goals and emphases articulated by leaders. Amongst the key goals mentioned in the course of the interviews include “honouring God,” “knowing the heartbeat of God,” “experiencing the love of God,” “a sense of spiritual awakening,” “transformation of lives,” “shaping of identity,” “laying foundations for lifelong discipleship,” “nurturing Christ-centred youth,” “evangelism” “raising a harvest force,” “building community,” “impacting communities,” and “leadership development.”

From this list of goals, several were recurrent and given prominence by the leaders.

These include:

- Experiencing the Love of God
- Building Community
- Evangelism
- Christian Discipleship, and
- Youth Leadership Development.

Experiencing the Love of God

The first repeated goal was leading youth to experience the love of God. For several leaders, this goal was the chief end of their ministry and foundational to everything else they did. In fact, it was seen as the primary identity to be forged within youth. A church youth pastor highlighted this aim in their church vision statement.

Our vision statement is to transform a generation to become passionate lovers of God. So I think the heartbeat of the ministry is to see young people encounter God, understand God, the ways of God, and to allow them to know that He is a part of their lives to experience God in a powerful and real way. I guess the bottom line is for them to receive the love of God and to be able to love Him for the rest of their lives. That would be the primary identity that we want all the young people to possess that they are passionate lovers of God. (YC1)

This goal was emphasized by another pastor who again highlighted the experience of God's love as the key takeaway he wanted to leave with the youth attending his church youth ministry.

When they leave, we accomplish the goal of them experiencing God's love and also the character of God and that they have heard about the love of God and his character. (YC2)

Experiencing the love of God was also of fundamental importance because it effected spiritual awakening amongst youth, fueled passion for the things of God, and shaped lifestyles. The vision of an inner transformational experience of God's love was expressed this way by one leader.

We see a gap in the youth in Singapore on coming back to having the first love, to have a radical devotion, to have a sense of spiritual awakening, coming back to the reality of God's Presence and His Word...The fundamental thing...is more than just having people doing church but having their hearts at the altar, a passion that's fuelled by the internal reality of the love of God more than the external expression which fizzles out easily most of the time, from camp to camp, event to event, conference to conference. All these events are good but we want to help people to cultivate a lifestyle and they can fuel this love on a daily basis through worship and prayer. (YO1)

Another youth leader shared how the experience of God's love should be so compelling that it became a "superior pleasure" for the youth. The experience of God love as a superior pleasure served to provide fulfilment for their deepest personal desires and was the compelling rationale for giving up competing desires.

We want to raise young people up who are first and foremost the lovers of God and who know the heartbeat of God. After knowing that heartbeat, they will be alive in their hearts with God's will to be able to bring heaven on earth. So we want to raise up "laid-down lovers" who will behold Christ. It is about having the young people who will be able to give up everything within them for this man, this God who is fully man and fully God. It is about having youths coming to a place, where they can tell God they have tasted what is in this world or some of it they would not even have to taste because He is their superior pleasure that fulfills their innate desire such that, they would say: "I don't need to turn to anything else. I would give up everything in my life to pursue You and to know You" and to know who this God who is fully man and fully God and to have an intimate relationship with Him". "Laid-down lovers" are people who really are able to lay down everything in their lives for the cause of Love. (YC4)

The experience of God's love was not just regarded as a privatized experience but also would lead to the witness of Christ and impact in the community. These ideas were clearly articulated in the following comments.

...we are a catalytic movement that will eventually propel them to be forerunners and labourers to prepare the way in whichever field they are, whether it's in the marketplace, in the schools, in the homes – in every sphere of society. Everything they do will be fuelled from the place of loving God. (YO1)

Having a bunch of young people live this way and know God as their superior pleasure and have tasted and witnessed it before. Witnessing to other people is then just a by-product. It is an overflow from their lives. They are not witnessing something that is false. It is a personal witness of this Man, this God who is so real. (YC4)

Building Community

A second goal that was repeated amongst youth ministry leaders was building community within their groups. Youth leaders spoke of the community culture in their churches or organization and how this was central to their ministry DNA.

One leader share how the organization “is a community, not a workplace. It’s where we live and work and relate together. It’s a missionary discipling community - we live together!” (YO4) Others elaborated on the nature of community, and the effects that community culture had on the youth who attended their groups. One youth pastor described how the spirit of community that was experienced was “organic” and “welcoming.”

When it comes to community, we are very organic and communal. We have people come into our community, and they automatically feel at home because they are a family and it feels like home, and the youths are familiar with each other. Sometimes you’ll see young ones making fun of each other, scolding each other in a non-threatening way - like brother and sister. I feel that in this community, people who have stayed through are free to be who they are. (YC4)

The idea of an organic community was echoed by another pastor who felt that the organic, authentic nature of community that was experienced in his ministry encouraged group members toward the collective pursuit of God.

We do have a large group of young people who are looking for a community, one that runs together and does things together and journey together, wanting something that is really organic and authentic. Many came back again mainly because they have found a community. This community encourages one another to pursue God together passionately. This is something we promote a lot. (YO1)

A final facet of community that was surfaced was expressed in terms of partnerships between Christian youth organizations and churches to advanced the shared objectives of learning about youth and outreach to them.

We do see that we don’t do that on our own. We do it actually in the context of the community, the Christian community. We do look for opportunities to work with different groups, to see how we can learn from one another, and how we then work together for the advancement of the kingdom. (YO5)

Evangelism

A third goal that was repeated amongst youth ministry leaders was evangelism. For some, the evangelistic thrust was directed at youth outside the church. One such youth

organization, while asserting its commitment to youth evangelism, professed no pre-commitment to any particular form or style of evangelism.

The broad vision and mission statement is really youth evangelism, to bring the Gospel to young people. More specifically, within our mission statement we did add the word ‘responsible evangelism’ because I guess people of old have the wisdom to know within evangelism there are probably many different brands and different versions and so we talk about responsible evangelism. (YO5)

Instead, the leader advocated “responsible evangelism.” This concept – defined as “to present the person, the works and the teachings of Christ” (YO5) – guided the organization’s approach to evangelism. To this idea of “responsible evangelism” was also the concept of “relatable evangelism” which one pastor explained as follows.

A lot of times in our evangelism, it is very relatable. Your friend opens up and you speak at the point in time, which you think they are ready. And that matters...not just as a number quota, but to love your friend when you are evangelizing. I think that is very important. (YC4)

Contrary to directing the evangelistic thrust outward, leaders also highlighted the need to do evangelism within their youth group itself. This was because the leaders felt that young people who attended their youth groups often did not have a personal relationship with God. This reality led church leaders to direct their evangelistic efforts inward within the youth group. One pastor thus reported the following.

So far the interaction with the young people, at least, I think a lot of them who came to Youth Ministry not having a personal relationship with God. Quite a number of them eventually realized that they don’t have a personal relationship, so they started to have a personal relationship with God. Then they grow so we can see some of them grow to the extent that they become leaders in the ministry themselves. So this is one of those things. That’s the most powerful thing that we are seeing at the moment.

We’ve got kids who come through the children’s ministry and I think children’s ministry does a great job. But the reality is our kids know the stories, they know the bible, but not all of them have a personal relationship with Jesus. I think all that we want to do really in our ministry is to share the Gospel to them and help them grow into that relationship. (YC5)

The emphasis on directing evangelistic efforts within the youth group was shared by one other youth organization. The process that this organization adopted however was one of sowing seeds amongst their youth, promoting a natural, lifestyle evangelism approach, and often seeing their labours come to fruition only much later.

...sometimes we don't see it during their four years but we know that the seed has been sown and it is planted. They come back and tell us, it is encouraging. (YO6)

...we do it so naturally, and it's a love, it's a service. We don't push the religion down their throat but rather, it's a way of life. We just love you and they can sense that there is this strong sense of fellowship and this love. And then we sing songs and we talk about God...not threatening. "Four spiritual laws - you want to accept Jesus?" We don't push that. It's mainly more by lifestyle evangelism. (YO6)

Christian Discipleship

A fourth key goal that the leaders repeated as critical in youth ministries is Christian discipleship. The central place of discipleship in their ministries is captured in the following remark, "For the youth, generally we want to disciple them. Discipleship is the key thing." (YC2)

Different facets of the concept of Christian discipleship were voiced by different leaders. Pivotal to the idea of discipleship is the idea of "following Jesus." This foundational idea was certainly not lost to leaders amidst the many other goals for youth ministries. Two leaders voiced this without hesitation when asked about the vision of their respective ministries.

...our aim is to help girls become followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. (YO6)

Our vision is "Movements everywhere so that every student knows someone who truly follows Jesus." No matter where the students are, they will be the "someone" who knows Jesus so that people around them will also come to know Christ through these people who truly follow Jesus. (YO2)

In addition, one youth pastor shared how the work of discipleship should take a long-range view built on the strong foundations. For the ministry he was leading, the foundations

of God's Word, prayer, community, and service served as the key foundations which contributed to the transformation of young lives.

The ministry's vision is "Youth transformed for Christ." The way we see ourselves carrying out that vision is through our mission of laying foundations for lifelong discipleship. The foundations are God's Word, Prayer, Community and Service. So those are the four ways we want to engage our youth in order to facilitate the transformation of their lives. (YC5)

A final facet that was voiced emphasized a strong outreach dimension of discipleship. While one leader drew attention to the community dimension of discipleship and how discipleship should lead to committed missionary service, another emphasized the necessity of discipleship as a natural progression of evangelistic activity.

We endeavour to be a vibrant, international discipling community committed to raising a harvest force of missionaries for Asia. (YO4)

The broad vision and mission statement is really, at the heart, youth evangelism, to bring the Gospel to young people... That is at the heart of our mission statement and the last phrase is to disciple the young people into the local church so that's really our main goal and in some sense, the reason for our existence. (YO5)

Youth Leadership Development

The final key goal that leaders echoed constantly was youth leadership development. This goal is clearly reflected in the responses of youth ministry leaders conscious of this facet of their ministry.

The mission is to complement and to unite the local churches effort in evangelism and discipleship of youth for Christ and raise up leaders for the next generation. (YC7)

I think for many years the mission has been to make every girl a leader. Of course our aim is to help girls become followers of our Lord Jesus Christ – every girl a leader with Christ of course as an example. (YO6)

...we exist to serve the church in nurturing Christ-centered youth. That is our vision. Our mission is to nurture Christ-centered youth in culturally relevant way through deep worship, discipleship, and leadership development. (YC8)

One church youth leader shared how helping youth understand that God has a purpose for their lives as well as the creation of a culture of leadership contributed significantly to youth leadership development in his church.

We want to thank God because ultimately when the young people know that God has a purpose for their lives, they begin to understand why they go to school. They begin to learn how to be a leader, how to lead themselves and others well. We realize that when they know that “I have a purpose”, we begin to see that as they grow older and they see that young people are coming into their cells, they choose to want to give rather than take. They choose to want to lead. I think that sense of taking leadership has been one of the major fruits that we’ve seen and this is why we always communicate this whole culture of leadership. We always encourage them and tell them that all of us can be a leader, somehow. In fact, you can be a leader of just one person and we tell them, “Eventually, you are going to lead somehow in your lives because when you become a parent, you got to lead a teenager, when you step into that office, you got to lead someone somehow. Leadership principles are universal, leadership principles are all very similar at the end of the day. Do you want to learn it at your teens? Do you want to learn these same principles at your twenties, or do you want to suffer leadership deficit in your thirties and forties? So we share this with them, and we realize that they take it very naturally and positively, and they realize that there is a lot of fun in leadership. There is a lot of self-development when they become a leader. This has been one fruit that we see from what we’ve been doing. (YC1)

The fruit of creating a culture of leadership as well as constant encouragement to lead was also observed by another leader who reported that “the other thing I see through our discipleship groups, young leaders rising up to take on the baton to impart to the younger ones.” (YC4)

One church youth leader shared how the commitment to leadership development by the church remained strong despite the past moral failure of a youth leader. The present willingness to work with those who make mistakes in life was contrasted with a different attitude from the past.

Over the past two years, I think if we say that our focus has been on the leaders, we’ve had a fair bit of success. Even one of my leaders who had previously stepped down because of moral sins, came back to serve. I think it was a certain journey that allows us to focus on their personal growth and wellbeing. These things happen from time to time, but in the past when someone did something wrong, they would be too ashamed and might even leave the church. I think we have had success stories from

people who were imperfect and had made some mistakes, but are now stable enough and reinstated. (YC6)

A final interesting observation was how one leader of a church denominational youth organization made a distinction between “programme leadership” and “thought leadership.” For him, “programme leadership” was better achieved in local churches, whereas his vision for “thought leadership” was aimed at helping the youth from his denomination to develop theological mindedness through an internship process.

I don’t want to run programmes for the sake of running programmes, so what I do is I kind of shake the whole council to think theologically and to have more of “thought leadership” rather than “programme leadership” to complement the churches in what they cannot do. So we come up with things like internship programme. (YC7)

Strengths Observed in Youth Ministries in Singapore

When it came to the strengths and qualities of effective ministries, youth leaders interviewed shared what they observed and believed to be the strengths exhibited by youth ministries in Singapore. Amongst those that were mentioned include “dedicated servant leaders,” “the quality of committed volunteers,” “passion of leaders,” “good understanding of youth culture,” “belief and empowerment of the youth.” The strengths that were repeatedly mentioned by the leaders, however, include:

- Organizing Large-Scale Programmes and Events
- Involvement in Music, Worship, and Other Creative Avenues of Ministry
- Developing Foundations through Bible Teaching and Preaching, and
- Building Community and Relationships.

Some of these strengths were observed to be concrete and tangible while others were less tangible but profoundly important to the life and health of youth ministry.

Organizing Large-Scale Programmes and Events

The strength of youth ministries most repeated by leaders of both churches and Christian organizations was the ability to organize large-scale programmes and events well.

The comments of three leaders clearly highlight this strength:

What the Singapore churches are doing well with the youths are their amazing programmes - run excellently, impress and capture the youth's attention! (YO1)

Basically churches are very good at organizing things and rallying the people for events. I think our Christian organizations, like our churches, organize events very, very well. They organize church services very well. I think these are the stuff that we do very well. (YC8)

Whenever we do events and big programmes, we do have the expertise, the leaders, and the number of people we need to run such events. (YC5)

Amongst the large-scale youth programmes and events that were named included socials, sports and team games, worship concerts, camps, and conferences. That leaders felt Singapore churches and Christian groups did well in socials, team games, and sports is reflected in the remarks below:

When there are events, a lot of people will like to gather and there's food too. These things generally attract youths. Having this kind of events or massive parties, they are with their company of friends and the key thing is the relationship. They ask their youth to invite their friends. (YO2)

I think sports and games could bring like-minded people together and our kids today may be lacking this because they are either spending too much time in tuition centers and staying at home doing homework and assessment, they are not outdoor much. With things like games and sports, it will attract people otherwise kids will say, "So boring." It helps to just get them out to do something. (YC7)

Church camps were also cited by leaders as strengths of youth ministries in Singapore. While a large-scale event, the church camp is more commonly done in-house and not with other churches or across denominations.

One more thing churches are doing very well would be youth camps. Youth camps are very effective to gather people and even for the youth to invite their non-believing friends. (YC8)

We've said this a few times already but I think camps, we are good at camps. I think there is no youth ministry worth its salt in Singapore that doesn't do a camp and camps are always significant moments for youth, something about staying together for three or four days, just hearing God's Word, being in community, encouraging one another. I think we do that in Singapore quite well. I don't know if people in other country do that, I presume they do and I've read they do. Youth camp is a regular phenomenon in youth ministry. I think we do that well. (YC5)

The type of event which most youth leaders cited as a strength of youth ministry in Singapore was the national level youth conference. These are annual events organized either by Christian youth ministries, missions organizations, church denominations, or large youth-centric churches.

These are some good churches, they believe in youth and they run conferences and they open up to different denominations. People are responding. They come together, feel blessed, and these are some things they do well. (YO3)

Several conferences were mentioned by name. These included the Young Methodist Leaders' Conference organized by the Trinity Annual Conference of the Methodist church, GoFest Conference organized by Youth with a Mission, GoForth organized by the Singapore Centre for Global Missions, The Next Level Conference organized by Cornerstone Church, and The Edge Conference organized by Victory Family Centre. The Edge Conference was particularly cited for its cutting edge impact on youth and youth pastors in Singapore. This conference is organized by the church for their own youth but is also open to participants from other churches.

We just went to The Edge conference by Victory Family Centre and I honestly think it is one of the best-run youth conferences in Singapore. I've not seen something like that from a conference level. Of course some churches big enough to be a conference ... it's collaborative, everybody come together that kind of thing, and they have done a tremendous job. It was exciting, it was fun, the energy was high, music is great, and speakers were inspirational. It's just packaged to be so attractive to the young person. It was a three days conference, or rather two and a half days because it starts in the evening. It's a youth conference. We don't really have many youth conferences in Singapore. They enjoyed it...Super-exciting. The people at the counter who greet you are all youth or young adults. The person on stage is also young adult or youth. The person that's leading is young adult. The person that is leading the Praise is young adult. Everything is run by the youth. (YC5)

The Edge is very strong in their gifting in music. They are very much built around Jeremy Seaward. He is an American, an inspiring, cool youth pastor and an eloquent, amazing communicator. These are their strengths for the youth ministry. It is very much in the gifting of a few men. They do discipleship. They have a strong team of leaders who are strategic, so I guess that is also how they disciple their people. With good preaching every week, with good band every week, plus a strong discipleship helps establish the youth ministry. (YO1)

I think they are very relevant, in terms of their expression of youth ministry, in expression of praise and worship, they are always pioneering, always trying to do something new, something fresh, something someone has never done before, there is this entrepreneurial spirit, and that always pushes the boundaries, inspires the rest of the youth ministries here in Singapore. (YC4)

Involvement in Music, Worship, and other Creative Avenues of Ministry

An offshoot of programmes and events which was highlighted by leaders was music, worship, and creative avenues of ministry. One leader described the standard in churches as “high” when compared with the arts scene in Singapore.

I think the creative arts is one area that is quite worth celebrating what the church has done. Overall the standard is a bit high across the board, compared to another countries. In terms of Christian music and art scene, there is really quite a good standard compared to the rest of the art scene in Singapore. If you go to a youth group, you can just throw a stone and you will hit someone who plays some kind of music instrument. If you go to a school, you can't do that as a lot of people they just don't. Somehow the church environment produces that. (YC6)

Several leaders offered reasons why youth ministries did well in music, worship, and the creative arts were flourishing amongst youth groups. One leader felt it was the affluence of the nation that contributed to the wellbeing of these ministries.

I think we do music quite well as a country, maybe being affluent helps because people are able to play instruments and visited churches and most churches have quite a viable music ministry and so I would say that those are a couple of things that they do really well when it comes to working with youth. (YC5)

For two youth leaders, the reason offered was because churches were able to adopt models from other parts of the world. These models have either made their presence felt in Singapore or were readily accessible in other ways. They then functioned as templates which their youth ministries could base their practices on.

I think quite a lot of big names dropped by Singapore this year—like Hillsong, like Jesus Culture. They just came this year. (YC3)

They do very well in the area of programmes, and very structured activities. They do very well also because we have got lots of models from the West—like Hillsong. They also do very well in area like running a youth service, as in the technical part. Just like when I come in, the lights are dimmed, the worship is on, because there is a model. You watched it on YouTube, or have even been to Hillsong Conferences, you will be able to see that everything like “clockwork”, as in after worship, the speaker will come on, to deliver the message, and then there will be altar call, that kind of thing. They do very well in that, I believe. (YC8)

Finally, one leader felt that there was effort put into nurturing the youth in creative media and arts.

One area that I see is giving young people a chance to develop their talent especially is the area of creative media, arts, because this something in which young people are very captured by it. But there are some who simply no opportunity or no outlet to express it...The church group nurtures the talent. For those that already have, then there are avenues that enhance. For those who don't have, this is the place they can potentially pick up. I know that for City Harvest, a lot of guys who come in, and they are in that sense not from so well to do families. But along the way, they also get free training in music. Their cell leaders teach them how to play the guitar, and from there that's how they pick up...I think this is something that the church has done very well in. (YC6)

Developing Foundations through Preaching and Bible Teaching

One area of strength that was mentioned by a few leaders was in developing foundations through preaching and Bible teaching. Despite not being able to be fully certain about the impact of the teaching faith foundations, one ministry leader nonetheless thought that the efforts put into teaching were undeniable.

I think we do teach the Bible fairly well in Singapore. That being said, how much of that impacts their lives? I can't say for certain but I would say that we do teach them what it means to be a Christian, what scriptures say about certain things, so I think we do try to do that quite a bit. (YC5)

Even though he thought that good teaching was made available to the youth in Singapore, one leader felt it was largely confined to a handful of large churches.

Also in some places, there is solid expository teaching. These are the things we don't lack for our young people to grow in and learn from. However, this is only seen in a handful of churches, especially in the churches with thousand plus congregation. (YO1)

One leader expressed concern for what was preached over the pulpit and the impact upon the youth. His concerns about what was voiced over the pulpit include preachers not being faithful to the text, pursuing personal agendas, taking a narrow and authoritarian position, or even putting down other churches. In his view, whatever is communicated over the pulpit is readily discerned by the youth and picked up in one way or another.

If today the pastors are seriously preparing their messages and they are faithful to preaching the Word and not preaching what they think the Word is or maybe they have their own agenda to push. This can be easily picked up from the congregation themselves. That's why youth are moving from one place to another, and they are comparing notes with each other. "Who's a good speaker? Who's not a good speaker?" They are watching. They are listening. So when I said, "Values are not taught, they are caught," it's not just happening in families. It happens everywhere. So be it in a church, especially the church where the pastors is speaking publicly, I think the youth and young adults can pick up all these things and they will compare it. But to me, what is disturbing is rather the attitude of "Only I'm right, everybody else is wrong" fundamentalist kind of mentality whereby just follow what I say and you will be on the right track. The tendency of pastors who also want to put down other pastors, is quite common as well. That to me is not being faithful to the Word. I think we could all think about a more inclusive approach and also more faithful to the Word. Exegesis rather than eisegesis! (YC7)

Building Community and Relationships

Another aspect that leaders felt was a strength of youth ministries in Singapore was the strong emphasis on building community and investing in relationships with the youth.

Two leaders shared their observations.

Some of the values that I have observed in youth ministry that's thriving is that they genuinely love you, they experience that acceptance no matter where you come from, no matter what you are doing, we love you, we accept you, we want you to be part of our family and I think that makes a huge difference in the life of a young person. That's what they are looking for, that's what they are searching for. They can find it in a Christian community. (YC5)

You can see that in those Christian groups and organizations that the youth leaders know the young people. They meet up with the young people, and they can tell you

the struggles the young people are going through. If you genuinely want to hear and help them, the young people would tell you what's on their mind. (YO5)

One leader felt that it was the smaller churches that were better able to provide experiences of close, organic, community life because the youth groups in mega churches were way too large.

The smaller churches are also good in that they are able to create a close community where they are able to share life together. This is the brilliancy of small churches as compared to the mega churches, which only relied on their life groups. The issue of being an organic community comes in and the smaller churches have it well. (YO1)

Be that as it may, two leaders emphasized providing a sense of belonging as well as requiring accountability as an important reason why the community aspect was so important to youth ministries.

I think there are a few youth ministries and I think relationally, it has to pan out really well. The youth need to feel a sense of belonging. (YC4)

Most of them are in a cell group system and are accountable to that group. If they attend the church itself, it is massive, you may just get left out or you just don't feel belonged. I think in that group, a smaller group is where they find their sense of community and belonging. (YO2)

Finally, one leader pointed to how relations developed in youth communities are important to youth because these experiences are absent in their own biological families.

I think the interest, the love that shows, and building the relationships which I think in many of the young people nowadays, they cannot find this in their families. I think the church is providing that. (YO6)

Weaknesses Observed in Youth Ministries in Singapore

In contrast to what was perceived as strengths of youth ministries in Singapore, the number of weaknesses, gaps and concerns that were articulated by leaders were much more plentiful. As one leader put it, "I feel bad saying this but we have a lot more weakness than strengths in our churches. There is a lot of lack." (YO1)

These were areas which leaders felt could be done better if more effort and thought were put into running youth ministries. Amongst the weaknesses mentioned include “too much focus given to activities/events/programmes,” “lacking relevance,” “lack of mentors/role models/spiritual parents,” “weak leadership,” “lack of manpower,” “failure to reach youth from specific socio-cultural quarters,” “too many restrictions imposed,” “lack of winsome evangelistic approaches,” “lack of integration across the generations,” “dealing with manpower crunch by shifting the burden on youth,” “giving overly large responsibilities to the youth,” etc. Leaders however repeatedly highlighted the following:

- Too Much Focus Given to Events and Programmes
- Lacking Relevance
- Lack of Mentors, Role Models, and Spiritual Parents, and
- Failure to Reach out to Socio-Cultural Others

Too Much Focus Given to Events and Programmes

An area of weakness that some leaders felt was present in youth ministries was the tendency to focus on events and programmes. This weakness that was highlighted was not a critique of events and programmes *per se*, but an observation of the dependence and priorities given to them. One leader illustrated by contrasting the time spent on planning and organizing events with the time spent journeying with youth.

I think sometimes we focus a lot on the events rather than on journeying with them. We spend more of our time organizing and planning events. After events, people receive Christ or when they are more interested, but we lack of manpower to follow through and journey with them. It ends up like this a lot of times where people get lost along the way. (YO2)

One pastor too felt that youth leaders were too reliant on programmes. For him however, this reliance was in the form of depending on a specific programme to do the job the very first time it was implemented. His concern was thus the lack of reflection and consideration for local context when he drew attention to what he observed amongst some youth pastors.

It will be too programme reliant. So a lot of times when I meet new youth pastor, we'll talk. They are more concerned about programmes and let's say they fail in the previous attempts to do something, they may not want to try again. I think that's when they are too programme-oriented and if you fail once, you won't try again. I mean you can be doing a lot of programmes but if you are not programme focused, then if they fail, they will take time to ascertain actually what went wrong? It is not the programme fault but perhaps we did not think about the context and we just copied and pasted or perhaps our people are not ready to run with it." In my own experiences, we have times when they failed a lot, because we are too programme focused. Now I can see some of the other churches that are very focused on programme, so I think when that is the case, this is a very evident weakness. (YC6)

Three other leaders drew attention to the hype which came with some youth activities, events, and programmes. For them, activity and hype had potential to replace the important foundational elements of Christian life. They thus cautioned of how activity and hype was capable of displacing the place of discipleship, maturity in Christ, God's word, and intimacy with God.

I think too much focus on activities and the lack of focus on biblical foundation. We are seeing a lot of activities, a lot of fun but a huge lack of biblical foundation. (YC1)

We got to be careful with hype. These are some of the weaknesses. Hype can be through the in-thing like the Christian in-thing is the latest song to sing, clap, or the latest gathering in schools as we pray for people. Those are important but it must not be based on programme. It must be based on open intimacy with God. (YC2)

Sometimes it's a lot of hype, a lot of the razzle-dazzle that it's like a facade whereby I go to church, the service is wonderful, and the service is good. But sometimes it is very shallow. The whole thing is! I mean there is no deep growth in the area of discipleship and maturing in Christ. I can have a wonderful worship. I can have a wonderful sermon. And I just feel it's so shallow that when trouble comes, when there's a crisis, the youth tend to fall away quite easily. They are like the 'strawberry generation' that is easily bruised. There are so many factors but I just feel like how do we dig deep and build deep in their lives. I'm not saying that all these are not important. It is important for them to come but a lot of times, really to allow God's Word to take root so that when storms come, there will still be an anchor if not they'll just be blown away. (YC8)

Lacking Relevance

A repeated theme that was echoed by many leaders was how youth ministries in Singapore were lacking relevance and not engaging the youth sufficiently. The fact that

youth culture evolves rapidly and youth ministries tend not to keep up was noted by the following two youth pastors.

Youth culture is very fast-paced, it changes so quickly. When the adults get on to it, it's too late. We're just 2 or 3 steps behind them. (YC5)

Going to bible school you hear a lot about that, a lot of literature on this, on how there are a lot of youth are dropping out from the churches because of relevance and because the culture has changed so rapidly around us. Maybe change is the only constant in a way, but yet a lot of times our church traditions have not kept up to the change and we have not engaged culture relevantly or fast enough. (YC3)

Some leaders felt that lacking relevance and engagement was because of a resistance to change experienced in youth groups. Two leaders commented on how they felt 'being comfortable with old methods' and 'not wanting to re-learn youth ministry' within their own organizations contributed to this inertia and resistance.

We have never changed until now. It is something we are very comfortable with, till the point if we don't do it we are afraid whether will the contacts be coming in. So that is one thing we are still quite stuck with. (YO2)

There is a lack of 'wanting to re-learn' youth ministry. Some people will want to take what they have gone through as a kind of template and just do it for the next generation but it does not fit. Because that worked at that time, it does not mean that it works today so there is a need for re-learning. (YC7)

One leader made an observation about some youth ministries in Singapore which were resistant to change because of the fear of change. Phrases like "struggling to hold on to," "crumbling," "decaying already" were used to describe such ministries.

That means running in the same way when the culture is changing and we are not changing. When they don't change I realize that basically they are just struggling to hold on to certain forms of discipleship, certain programmes, or even certain people that they have but they are not willing to allow fresh blood to come on. On the whole, they just unwilling to change because of the fear of changes. I find that it's not like they are just crumbling but slowly I can see that the ministry is kind of decaying already. (YC6)

Apart from resistance to change, other leaders described the lack of relevance and engagement in youth groups in terms of the age and culture gaps between youth leaders and the youth. One youth pastor remarked how the youth described older speakers as ‘boring.’

The first thing I hear from youth about them is that they are boring: “I don’t want to spend my Saturday there. I can go to a café, an arcade and meet my friends. I don’t want to go to a space where I’m confined in four walls. I’ve to hear an old person speaking.” (YC4)

Another pastor described the gap in terms of older speakers and leaders of youth groups not being able to relate and communicate well to the ‘strawberry generation.’

This generation of young people is very visual, so we need to be able to speak their lingo. This is why I really believe it pays when the youth speakers, the youth pastors are young. I am not criticizing anyone. I know of youth pastors who are old enough to be the young people’s granddad. I think it is difficult because no matter how much they try to be in their culture and try to be relevant, we live in an extremely different generation. This might not be a nice label but my youth pastor-friend feels that he is speaking to a “strawberry” generation who is easily bruised. If we tried to bring in a pre-war World War II person to speak to a “strawberry” generation, they are going to be bruised quite a fair bit. I don’t think it is anyone’s fault but I do think that generation gap is a very real problem, for example, sometimes I go to youth ministries and I see the slides that they are putting on screen, that design looks like two decades old. I think young people pay attention to these things. (YC1)

The idea of speaking the same lingo was again emphasized by another youth pastor as he shared the struggles of youth ministries served by aging youth pastors. Despite doing well in his own ministry, he agonized with this concern which in his observation, was one that older, mainline churches were going through.

Language is different, what is popular is different, and I think we struggle, especially we have older people who are doing youth ministry, like myself, I am 15-20 years apart from them. What is important to them is different from what was important to me when I was at their age already, what more if someone is older and I think in the older churches, speaking about mainline churches, we tend to be very conservative about the person that we employed to be the youth worker, to be youth pastor. As a result of that, I think there is a weakness in the way we engage them. (YC5)

The same pastor however went on to point out the tension between wanting to employ younger leaders who were able to engage with the youth and the academic and career pursuits of these younger leaders at that stage of life.

If I could appoint an 18 year old to be my youth pastor, or youth worker, I think he's going to be really engaged with the youth. But we just can't do that. At 18 years old, you're trying to get a degree, you are not going full-time, and so we struggle with that a little bit. (YC5)

At another front, youth leaders also pointed out that lacking relevance and engagement amongst youth in Singapore was a result of groups shying away from engaging societal issues. As one youth leader put it, "Either we are afraid to confront or address these issues or we are simply constantly trying to be positive about things." (YO1) This tendency was echoed by another youth leader who observed that engagement with social issues was a part of the school curriculum for older youth. This lack, he felt, contributed both to the church's loss of relevance in society as well as connection with its youth.

Also I think we tend to shy away from issues that are controversial. Again this is a broad stroke, I don't think it's representative of every church. In general, I think, we do shy away from nationally debated issues. Perhaps it's the whole secular state thing but I think we do shy away from the social sphere, public sphere—be it in matter like sexuality, matter relating to community life in our nation. I think that makes us in a certain degree less relevant and the youths are being taught that in school, be engaged on all these things in school, especially if you are in the IB programme or in JC. These are what you talk about but I think as a church, we kind of take a step back, we don't engage as much, so lose a bit of that connection. (YC5)

One leader felt that churches were silent on important issues relevant to youth such as gender identity, body art, and sexuality. For him, the church needed to be a voice speaking with courage and authority as well as providing biblical counsel to guide practice and responses.

I think the issue on LGBT and the issue on even tattoo-piercing. Issues that are really very relevant to them - like some of them really struggle with it because they see it so often on either media or social media. How do we address such issues? I think sometimes the Church is a bit silent for say, teenage pregnancies. They do address a little bit but I don't think they are hardcore, like really addressing it, and having

someone who dared to speak with authority coming down and say, “Look. This is what you guys should do.” Of course it must be based on the bible and to say that this is what I strongly believed in, this is what the Church believed in and this is what you guys should do.” (YC8)

Yet another facet of young ministry that was highlighted for not being relevant and engaging was imported curriculum and resources from overseas. These were resources which youth leaders reported as ‘not being able to connect,’ ‘hard to follow,’ or ‘not really applicable’ to the Singapore context.

A lot of our materials are from the States which, culturally, the examples cannot connect. I mean they are correct for their cultures, for the illustration and the games but when it comes to Asia, these can’t connect. (YC2)

We see a lot of resources from the US but it is very Westernized. I’m not saying that we are not totally Westernized but there are some resources which...some of the things that they talk about are not really applicable to us. That’s where the youth leaders have to make the adjustment...I used the DVD and because they have the American accent, some of the younger youth, their command of English is not so good and they are not exposed to US. So they have a hard time trying to follow what they are saying even though there were subtitles. (YC3)

One final area where relevance and engagement was observed to be lacking was in the way youth leaders communicate as well as teach the youth. Educational practices in youth groups were observed to be still “old school’ and “top-down.” One pastor described his own learning journey about how the young people learn and affirmed the need to respond to the fact that different youth learn differently.

Also in the way we communicate with them. Sometimes the old school way, it’s always top-down. You just can’t do that with the young generation and they are into the social media thing. For our small groups, bible study time, the young people they come and talk to me about...“Oh...it’s sitting there, just sort of lecture thing.” So they don’t like that at all. On the other hand when you engage them, they just keep quiet then you also have a hard time. Some of them learn by doing, so we need to be more aware of how the different ones learn. Some are just hands-on. They learn by doing the things together. I just spoke to one the other day, a 16 year old. I said, “ How do you learn? You read or you converse?” He said, “No. I need to do the things. I need to do hands-on.” I said, “OK. I try to figure out how, next time when I go for certain things I’ll bring you along, then you hands-on some of the stuff.” They are different. So now during small group time, because if you are set in that room and you are

seated around so it's quite a challenge for the small group leaders how we actually try to engage them. So it's always a struggle. It's not easy. (YC5)

Lack of Mentors, Role Models, and Spiritual Parents

“Mentoring is a very powerful thing for youth. Especially young people need a mentor.” (YO3) While this is a widely held view, it was the lack of mentors that was highlighted amongst youth leaders. One leader thus noted what she observed was a gap in youth ministries in Singapore.

Lack of mentors. People whom the youth can look up too. All of us are not from perfect families. When the youth become adults, there is this lack of mentors, or guidance because they don't get it from home. Sometimes they will look to church but the church doesn't provide it. Thus there is this lack of it, where people are willing to invest their lives in them, to train, teach and guide them in their mouldable years. (YO2)

One youth leader highlighted how contact time was often limited to once a week. Conversely, the absence of mentor influence for the rest of the week was conspicuous and its impact noted. The lack of this crucial input was thus underscored by him.

I think the area of discipleship and nurture, or even mentoring seems to be quite lacking. Or rather it's a weakness because it's easy to do a big event, feel good kind of thing and everybody comes together. But what happens from Monday to Saturday I think that's very crucial to the development of the youth. Most of the time they are just being left alone (during weekdays) until they come back again for a booster or a re-charge on Sundays during the Youth Ministry or even the service. I think that's quite lacking in terms of mentoring or discipleship. (YC8)

Two youth leaders commented on this gap in mentoring youth in terms of the lack of adults who would invest their lives in teaching God's Word and faith foundations to the youth. One youth leader felt that it was because teaching youth was not very glamorous when compared with other ministries like leading worship and children's ministry.

There is a need in every aspect like be it churches, ministry organizations, in aspects like the need of teachers, people who teach God's word...As much as we say we want to build deep into the lives of youth but when we look at churches, there are churches where not a lot of people are willing to invest their lives into teaching ministry or

being a Sunday school teacher etc. Such roles as compared to the other roles like the more glamorous kind for instance, worship leading or children's ministry etc. (YO2)

The lament over a lack of teachers in youth ministry was echoed by a youth pastor.

For her, what was needed were mature and wise teachers who would faithfully teach God's Word as well as important lessons for successful living.

I think it's being rooted in the Word and there is a lack of teachers. Older ones who are wiser would come and teach the Word and the truth rather than just teach from experiences as it is very shaky from experiences. Having the older ones come to share. It's not just sharing about the spiritual things but I want to come help you become a successful person in life. Youth ministry is not just a time-frame. It is learning to live life as a young person so that you will excel as you grow older. For example, career talks, and stuff like that will get them ready for the next phase in life, after they finish their O levels or A levels or what schools to choose. I think that is very important as well. If as a parent, I were to put my child in youth ministry, I don't just want it to be spiritual. It can be mainly spiritual but it is also good to hear some natural practical advice from a spiritual standpoint of view. (YC4)

In a similar vein, a youth leader framed the gap in terms of a lack of good youth leaders who live out their faith both in church as well as in the world to serve as role models.

I think it's to have very good youth leaders, generally. I don't think money is the issue. For some churches, money is not an issue. It is also not about a lack in opportunities as some of them can travel almost anywhere for mission trips. I think what is lacking is to have a very good role model who can show them that the Christian life is really worth living. Youth are at the stage where they find a lot of things they learn in church as fake because they find that they hear one thing but they see another. What they are taught is good at church, but once they go out, it is not true or real, and if you live by that kind of lifestyle, you're weird. They don't see that living by that kind of lifestyle is a very enjoyable and viable alternative. So if you have better, stronger youth leaders who are better role models, at least Bible role models of faith for them, I think it would make a lot of difference. But I also think we don't have enough of that. (YO5)

Finally, a youth pastor expressed this absence of mentors for youth in terms of a lack of spiritual parents who value the youth, believe in them, and were willing to nurture in spite of the problems, weaknesses, and issues encountered.

The lack of resources is not really in all these tools but there is a lack of fathers and mothers, who have a heart for the young. It is about valuing young people more than seeing them as a number. We really need father and mothers. I'm not talking about

biological fathers and mothers but a fathering and mothering heart. One who nurtures and believes in the potential of the youth who will begin to look beyond the dirt...they are all messy and have problems, weaknesses and issues and find the gold in them. We lacked in leaders who carry a father and a mother's heart, and who can nurture and see the gold in them, refine them and walk through in life with them. This is the most lacking thing in the churches. Because the youth ministries today see them as numbers, see them as tools to work, to build a ministry. It is more like building a brand than building their lives. We need more than just instructors or hirelings, we need more people who carry the heart of God and people who sees them as how God sees them and to polish them and see them grow to become lovers of Christ. (YO1)

Failure to Reach Out To Socio-cultural Others

One concern that a few youth leaders pointed to was the inability of youth groups to reach out to and connect with youth who don't share the same socio-cultural backgrounds as their own. One youth leader shared this observation when asked about where his denomination was not strong.

The inability to reach certain groups, in a way. For example, I speak for some of the youth who "fall through the cracks" in our churches that are perhaps from disadvantaged families. Maybe families that have got parents who are single parents, maybe lower income families who perhaps don't fit into our typical mold. Some of these youth, sometimes it's not that they don't want to come to church but because they need to take up a job, maybe work in McDonalds to pay for their fees. So is there an alternative whereby the church can reach out to them and say, "Let's have Youth Service on Saturdays, or maybe one of the weekdays, weekday nights or an afternoon, when their afternoons are free." Can we really look into that instead of doing church on Sundays? Or Youth Ministry on Saturdays and Sundays? (YC8)

Another youth leader noted the gap between the well-to-do youth who had grown up in church and unchurched youth from lower social economic classes. The gap was big enough for him to see the need to require separate programmes for the two groups. For some reason, he used the term "youth-at-risk" to describe the latter group, presumably because of the greater level of challenges exposed to them.

Weaknesses? Very obvious. I think there is one challenge. A lot of youth ministries grow in strength. At the same time they also discover there is another generation of youth they find hard to reach out, which is in Singapore, we term them Youth-at-Risk. Let's say you have a homegrown church. All youth are Christians. But if you have a bunch of youth not homegrown in the church, they find it so hard to reach out to them because going to church is always churchy. You find a different set of programmes

for them or a different set of services. Whatever the topic, the challenges that Christian churches, pastor find it very hard unless he can raise another person who has this calling to reach the Youth-at-Risk and pioneer this project then they can work together. These are the struggles I saw. (YO3)

Apart from socio-economic differences, one youth pastor drew attention to how differences across cultural-linguistic lines also resulted in English-speaking Chinese church youth shying away from reaching out to and connecting with youth from mainland China who were studying in Singapore schools. Interestingly, the reasons shared were not just cultural-linguistic but were fueled by pragmatic reasons as well as imagined fears. While this was presented as weakness in youth ministries in Singapore, it was also presented as an opportunity which should not be missed.

I find that a lot of English-speaking Chinese youth do not want to relate to the Chinese. Either they think that they are too backward, they find that these are rowdy people based on what they read online, or they find that these are people who are here to steal their scholarships, and then in future their career you see. If we are willing to embrace them, we go to school, we find ways to connect them, we do programmes that we think will be successful in inviting them, we will not be able to help these Chinese come. If we can bring at least some for a start, then sooner or later the rest church will see that actually it's a very powerful movement of God. So I find that there is a lot of opportunity if you are willing to explore. (YC6)

Opportunities Presented to Youth Ministries in Singapore

Youth pastors and leaders who were asked about the opportunities presented to youth ministries in Singapore were able to point to ones which were current and significant. Although “increase in youth centres,” “power of signs and miracles,” “prayer movements,” “preparation for marketplace ministries,” “use of celebrities,” “developing intergenerational churches,” “ministry to foreign students attending Singapore schools,” and “better management of transitions into and out of youth groups” were mentioned, the ones which were repeated by leaders include:

- Use of Music and the Creative Arts
- Emerging Youth Friendly Structures and Ministry Approaches
- Use of Social Media and New Technologies
- Ministry to Second-Generation Christian Youth

- Ministry to At-Risk and Vulnerable Youth
- Raising a Generation that Thinks about Others beyond Self and
- Mutual Support amongst Youth Leaders Across the City.

Use of Music and the Creative Arts

One oft-repeated opportunity for youth ministries that was cited was the use of music and the creative arts to connect with youth. In their responses, youth pastors and leaders were unanimous about how music and the arts featured prominently in the lives of the youth and had the power to connect with them.

One new opportunity that is increasing nowadays is the arts and the music scene. A lot of young people are very interested and attracted to this music scene. (YC4)

Creative scene. You have the music, the drama, dance and even other things like film, making short movies and video and photography. This is one huge area. I think there is huge potential. (YC5)

Young people are attracted to the arts such as hip-hop, dance, K-Pop, etc. They are very excited about all these, so you can reach them very strongly. (YO3)

In addition, the latter youth leader felt that music was even more effective for communicating to the youth than sermons. This was because music and song helped listeners to remember what was said better.

Music is very powerful. You can use music to reach them. They can forget all your preaching, but won't forget your songs and music because music is very powerful. (YO3)

For another youth leader, music and the creative arts represented the new channel of communications for the future. In his opinion, there was already in the horizon a new breed of messengers communicating the things of God through new forms and platforms quite apart from the pulpit. This he felt was going to be the new reality for the future.

I believe ten years ago we relied on the pulpit ministry but there is going to be a new breed of messengers but they are going to be speaking through new mediums and platforms besides the pulpit. Some of them can be writers, songwriters, musicians,

videographers, moviemakers, etc. We are seeing the emergent wave of messengers and voices in the world that can shape history and to be a voice in their generation. This doesn't necessarily have to be in the church but in society! (YO1)

Leaders shared that the early foundations provided by parents and churches allowed the youth to develop music, drama, dance, or filmmaking skills at a young age. Furthermore, there was also encouragement for the youth to recognize the divine Giver behind these gifts.

I guess that trend, that shift in culture has brought about a very positive impact on youth ministries. Most of them start to learn music at a younger age. They serve on the band at a younger age. They realize that they can create music on their own. They want to create albums...things like that. (YC1)

I think it is because we are getting more affluent in Singapore. During my time, we hardly can afford anything but now, parents are more willing to help their children get into some of these things which is good for them and it is a way to help them understand the giftings they have. So it's an opportunity for us to help them to see that these are given for us. And we as Christian need to know where it comes from and then express those things. (YC5)

Beyond early foundations, the push to encourage youth to develop their gifts was also evident. One pastor articulated the need to help youth to redeem current music and other creative art forms in a way which would glorify God and not fall prey to worldly values.

I think it is a new opportunity but it takes a lot for youth ministries to turn their mindset towards it because it is always identified and associated with the minority group or a wrong influence. However, if only youth ministries can see that we can redeem it and allow our young people to express themselves through that not in a wayward way. They can write songs. They can write songs in this genre like the indie genre or in a contemporary form but for God. They can produce music and do dramas. Dances which are not sensual, yet attractive and entertaining but still glorifying to God. I think songs are one of the main things. Young people have the desire to write and be a voice in this generation. Songs penetrate into this generation like no other. If only, opportunities are given to hone young ones to paint, draw, write, and sing whatever they feel God is speaking to them. (YC4)

Yet another pastor felt that it was important to nurture the young people to discover their talents, put them to use, and even explore career choices in the creative industries where they could be a voice for God in their unique spheres of influence.

We need to encourage our people, especially if they want to develop in those areas so you have people who are able to be behind the camera, people who can go direct, go and write the script and stuff like that and put them together, put it out there, even the song writers so we are trying to help encourage our young people to start writing songs and stuff like that. (YC5)

Our young people who are interested in this area should start to develop and grow themselves in such areas. Eventually they grow older. Some of them will be in the marketplace in these aspects. Hence, there is a huge potential to really reach out to the world as a whole. For themselves, it is a discovery of who they are that God made them to be and they can just live it out rather than having an old mindset about our children becoming a lawyer or a doctor in order to live well. In that sense you don't have to. (YC5)

Finally, in spite of recognizing the value and influence of music and the creative arts, one leader was concerned that investment into these fields were not reaping meaningful spiritual returns.

While in some sense we're moving forward, structurally, but I don't know whether qualitatively we have moved as far forward. (YO5)

This leader's concern was in the context of developing creative outreach ministries in churches and organizations. What he felt was that for all the effort put in and talent nurtured, ministry groups were sometimes too inward looking in their orientation and hence not impactful. Otherwise, they were so focused on performance rehearsals that they neglected to invite people to attend their outreach events.

So today we do churn out a lot of people who are musically talented but I don't know what is the impact it has apart from the fact that the church now has a music team or a worship team. Whether these teams will travel out to share the Gospel? Whether these teams will go out of their way? (YO5)

There are churches who put up dramas but you'd find that the number of actual non-Christians who would turned up is not significant compared to the seating capacity because we spend a lot of time rehearsing, rehearsing, rehearsing. We're delivering the right script and all that. Very well written script, good dramas. But how many non-Christians are getting invited? Because we're so busy preparing we didn't work at the inviting bit. You know what I mean. So I don't know. (YO5)

Emerging Youth Friendly Structures and Ministry Approaches

One interesting development articulated by youth leaders was the emergence of new forms that were being introduced or experimented with by youth ministries. These were recent evolutions of structures and ministry approaches in response to changes in youth preferences, needs, and culture. One church youth pastor spoke of the evolution of the youth service where youth no longer worshiped together with the main church congregation. Instead, they had their own separate youth-centric services.

The youth worship service is a new phenomenon which you didn't have in the past. Now you have to cater for Youth worship service because the number is just big and you want adapt to the changes that are happening. If youth were to stay in the main church they would feel out of place, so out of that necessity you have a separate service for them. When it's larger, it's more exciting so our previous ministry model has always been village church, every town has a church and we'll go to that church and now people would travel to be at a certain venue. You would have thousands of youth gathering in one place every Sunday and they come from all over the island, so transportation has made all that a lot of that possible. You have big youth groups that are vibrant, huge and exciting. When you have more of them, you can do more things, bigger things. (YC5)

Another pastor provided insight into the "look-and-feel" of the youth service by commenting on the ambience that was created at these gatherings. Much effort was taken to create settings that were appealing and to use communications media effectively.

In fact in most youth services you go to, the ambience is there during the service. There is a huge emphasis on creating the right ambience for the youth to worship. If there are lights, the lights must be off. The Powerpoint must be cool. If it is not cool, it does not speak to the youth. I mean the preachers do spend effort on Powerpoint and things like that. (YC3)

One youth leader shared about the progressive transformation of the youth service experience. The change often resulted from the diffusion of ideas amongst youth as they visited each other's churches or the larger churches in the city. Consequently, this leader saw opportunities for improving youth service experiences by inviting youths themselves to share ideas with their leaders.

Somehow I sense that because they have friends from different churches, maybe a bigger church or mega church in Singapore, they would hear about the different worship experience which, involves lighting and is seemingly more exciting - like MTV style. So they would go and take a look. Some would say, “Wow, my Youth Ministry is like still quite archaic and can we change that?” Sometimes the church leaders can change, by introducing some songs youth can identify with. I feel that the youth are beginning to speak up more in the public spaces. Maybe they are given a voice, but in church I guess they are still pretty much reserved. Perhaps for things that are spiritual, they might not want to have too much of a say. However, if we were to hear them out and maybe just have a little conversation on how can the church services be improved, how can the youth services be improved, you’d be surprised at how much ideas they have. (YC8)

Apart from the evolution of the youth service, another emerging form and approach to ministry was also cited. One youth pastor shared observations of youth ministries going the way of the “organic church movement” which has a decreased emphasis on meeting within church buildings. She also shared her experiment with “organic church” practices by holding cell groups meeting at Starbucks.

In terms of new developments, I also see a few ministries actually diving into this organic church thing. We took our cell groups three years ago out of church into Starbucks and we had cell groups there. The main aim was to break down the mindset that church is a place but church is wherever we gather. We did that and we would go on the streets and talk to people. (YC4)

Another youth leader also felt that breaking out of the four walls of the church for youth outreach and discipleship activities was something to be further explored. Reflecting on the existing developed café culture which is extremely popular amongst youth today, he suggested that setting up social hangouts which attract even the non-religious and those from sub-cultural groups would be an opportunity worth investing in.

I supposed right now in Singapore, we see right now is this booming of a café culture. The young people like to hang out at cafés and just take time to chill and to unwind. I don’t know whether it is a fad or it’s something here to stay. I think that the youth just want to find a place besides homes or even schools to hang out, unwind, and be with their friends. I see the opportunity for ministry in this area if some Christian entrepreneurs or even church were to have a business arm. We might consider having an alternative place purely for outreach and for youth who don’t like to go to a church or be associated with anything religious. But the intention of it is to really to show forth Christ’s love. This is a friendship form of evangelism in a non-threatening way,

where you can be who you are. I see a lot of sub-cultures or sub-groups coming up, and it would be great if the church could get some adults who are passionate to engage them. (YC8)

Use of Social Media and New Communications Technologies

Several youth leaders pointed to how developments in new technologies have dramatically altered the media and communications landscape in Singapore. The integration of the Internet into modern lifestyles has now reshaped communications habits and introduced a new level of access and connectivity to users.

Social media is everywhere. The youth even use their phones when they are in the toilet... That is where they are. At this age group, the children are always online and connected. (YO2)

They are crazy over YouTube videos, Twitter feeds, Instagram! (YC3)

Because of Instagram, everybody is taking photos. I don't think there is a generation that has taken more photos in the history of photography. (YC5)

I supposed right now because of media, social media, Internet and everything, we are very connected to places around the world. (YC8)

In particular, the ubiquity of the mobile phone and its function as a primary communications tool for the youth was repeatedly mentioned. This was a change that leaders observed which was opening doors for new ministry opportunities.

I think every kid has a phone today. That's not true ten years ago. Today, every kid has a smartphone and uses WhatsApp. We can reach a youth in his bedroom in the middle of the night through a message which you can't ten years ago when you got to call them on a shared phone in the family. Now you can just reach them all the time and they can connect with you all the time as well. That's the radical change in the way we do Youth Ministry. (YC5)

If there's one thing that you can get to a young person it is through his phone, not even his computer. The key to it today is that their lives are centered around their phones. One very good way that we are cracking our heads on is how do we connect with youth on their phones. That to me would be something very key that we would have to think about – at least for now where the phone is everything! (YO5)

I guess the mobility of phones. It's literally always there 24/7. They are there, even in the army camps. Although we banned phones in army camps, at night when they are free? Goodness! You can see the first thing they will do is to touch their handphones

and to see who messaged them, how many likes they have had on Facebook, etc. It's almost like something that is inseparable and so if it's something that could get through to them, something that will engage them, something that is attractive, that I think, would really have the impact. (YC8)

Several leaders shared how the youth in their ministries were already using the Internet and social media with encouraging outcomes and positive impact observed. One leader felt that social media helped to broaden youth perspectives as well as to connect them with others.

I think it has given them exposure and widened their horizons. It also brings people closer. I mean for us we say they don't have face-to-face time which isn't a good thing sometimes. But it is also good because now you chat, you write one message and you can get to twenty, thirty people at the same time. It's a lot faster. Things are done a lot faster. I do appreciate the chats. I mean when we want someone to pray for us, we just write one text, and everybody gets it. I think that is positive, if it is used properly, it's a very powerful tool. (YO6)

A youth pastor shared a story of how WhatsApp helped students in the year-end class promotion exercise when boys and girls transitioned from Children's Ministry to Youth Ministry in his church.

What I discovered this year for the Secondary 1 students was that they bonded within the week on WhatsApp. From Children's Ministry they move to Youth Ministry so some people don't know each other at all in the group. I have one girl saying, "I don't want to be in this group because I want to be in the other group where my friend is!" That was the first Sunday where they all met but they got on WhatsApp already immediately. Our strategy was to have them all in WhatsApp, take a group photograph, then everybody knows everybody. Next week, I went back to the girl and said, "OK. I heard that you don't want to be in this group. Should I bring you over to the other group?" "Why? I don't want!" she replied. I found out that they bonded within a week on WhatsApp. So it became "I don't want to change group anymore. I have found my friends here already." (YC5)

Apart for connecting the youth with each other, one leader appreciated how youth sometimes use their mobile phones to check different bible versions and verify if what speakers say over the pulpit is accurate or not.

To me, it is great while you are talking and that guy is reading different versions and checking what you've said. He can press the link on one of the apps he bought that

has got very commentaries on it. He is actually checking you out and checking the basis of what you are saying. That is great and it is great learning. (YO5)

Other leaders pointed to how mobile phones and new communications platforms allowed youth to influence their peers in matters of faith.

I see that as strength for the young people because if you are an influencer in a group and you are able to influence your peers and on fire for God, I think social media and stuff like that will help to expose their friends who are non-believing to know about God. I think the young people right now are pretty unashamed and, if they are really on fire for God, they will really tell you. Gone are the days when we are a bit shy of our faith. I have encountered a couple of young people who are really very bold before. Of course, they must be properly disciplined. (YC8)

On a larger scale, the nature of social media allowed today's youth to influence society and to shape history in a way never previously possible. One youth leader thus noted its invaluable potential for the extension of God's kingdom.

We are seeing the emergent wave of messengers and voices in the world that can shape history and to be a voice in their generation. This doesn't necessarily have to be in the church but in society! Ten years ago we do not have that, but today, we have social entrepreneurs. They also influence their spheres through social media. (YO1)

Several suggestions were offered when leaders were asked how it was possible for youth ministries to take advantage of the opportunities that new communications technologies afforded. Responses indicated that much thought and effort needed to be put in to make it a reality. One leader for example felt that given the scale of the endeavor, a multidisciplinary effort involving people with different skillsets was necessary for organizations to create effective social media platforms.

I think you need to have a good combination of probably three groups of people coming together. One, you need to have very strong content developers. Second, you need to have very strong IT support. Third, you need to have people who are very strong in ministry and people who think of how to use these things. Somehow these three groups of people could come together either within a church, three individuals, three departments, or three organizations working together. But you really need to have very good relevant content. (YO5)

In addition, inter-organizational partnerships and collaborations were also named as necessary if church ministries were to develop impactful social media initiatives.

It could be translated into a partnership in collaboration and in alliance with different churches to build something, I think that maybe no individual church is able to put it together. Maybe some can but I cannot say this in general. If that could be done well, I think it could be quite exciting. (YC5)

Finally, the “niche” nature of social media platforms together with selectiveness in user behavior were noted. Efforts in social media thus needed to be targeted and consumer behavior well understood.

When we did recruitments, we also asked them to go online and the response wasn't very good. So we have been wondering what the cause of it is since everyone is using social media. It is a very mixed reaction. I think even on social media, people are very selective. They just share what they want to share they like and what pleases them. Even though social media is a good platform but it is very niche. You really have to know how it can be spread widely. (YO2)

Ministry to Second-Generation Church Youths

One interesting reality surfaced by leaders was the presence of second- and third-generation church youth together with the attitudes and issues that they brought along with them.

I think maybe about 80% of our young people are second-generation Christians, meaning most of their parents are Christian, as well. (YC6)

There is another group of people, that is the second-generation Christians and they might have dragged their feet to church. They might have grown up in church and don't have a choice because parents force them to go for service. (YC1)

Leaders pointed out that youths who are new in their faith can be characterized differently from second-generation church youth. These first-generation Christian youth also faced issues, which are very different from their second-generation counterparts. Ministry to youth thus requires knowledge of the differences which characterize the different groups.

If you talk about ministering to new converts and to second-generation Christians, I guess the issues they are facing will be very different. I guess when it comes to

ministering to them you have to be aware of it. For new converts they might be more passionate about their beliefs. In terms of the issues that they face, it will be very different, like how do I tell my parents, how do I relate my faith with the faith of my parents. And when my parents practice ancestor worship or when they celebrate religious festivals, how can I participate or not participate, things like this. For second and third generation Christians, they might not face such questions but of course challenges would be different. For example, have they made the faith of their parents their own faith? Have they made their personal choice? Have they realized what it means to be a Christian? (YC3)

Sometimes, the second-generation Christians don't even know what they believe in because they just grow up in church and they know Sunday is "my day to go to church". They will just sit there and attend sermons then have fun with my friends but yet they don't know the distinctives of their faith. They live life calling themselves Christians but their lives are still the same. So now Christians and non-Christians have become an apathetic generation. Faith and belief is something they don't know and they don't care. They don't bother finding out how it affects their lives. (YO2)

Youth leaders saw the phenomenon of second/third generation church youths in their midst as important ministry. Their presence was seen as an opportunity to give necessary attention to this distinct group and to avoid taking them for granted. Several leaders expressed felt responsibility to reach out to them, lead them toward first-hand encounters with God, and strengthen their faith foundations.

I believe we need to focus is back to our second-generation or third generation youth which I think also can be quite scary because sometimes the second-generation or third generation youth don't have first-hand encounters with God themselves despite having been born into Christian families. We need to also focus on them so as not to not lose them. A few of these Christian families are good servants of God and are afraid of losing their children to the world. Recently one of the youth told us that she didn't go church for a year and she was born in a Christian family. She also mentioned, "My parents are all ministers." So this is alarming. It is shocking, but I think it is another opportunity for us to reach out to people like that. Sometimes we can be so busy as parents or leaders that we take for granted these youth have good leaders and think they are doing okay. I think most of the time they will need our attention, our focus and we should not neglect them. (YO3)

...I can't exactly tell if they are saved or not, whether they know God or not. So for both these groups we realize that one of the best things that we can do for this generation of young people is to help them encounter the love of God. (YC1)

Personally, I find that over the course of serving in this ministry, especially considering the high number of youth coming from a second-generation background, I find that a lot of them don't really know what church is about. Church is either just a programme that they attend or a building that they come to. The reality of God and

church is not as strong in their daily, individual lives. So about two years ago, I realized that, even for our youth leaders, it's the same issue. I think God has placed this vision in my heart to bring a greater realization – that as disciples of Christ, we need to experience life and think more about who God wants us to be; not just in the church, but wherever we are, rather than just getting them to do some church programme. So that's how this vision came about. (YC6)

When it came to reaching and nurturing second-generation church youth, youth leaders highlighted two key approaches. The first was through the Christian nurture efforts of Christian parents at home. One leader who was a father shared how God challenged him in his responsibility toward his teenage children.

For second-generation Christians, it boils down to their parents. The fathers will have to be the father figure at home. The father figure has to come in and mentor their youth...I am speaking from my own experience. I neglected my teenagers, by just leaving it to the church to take care of them. When they were young, I spent time with them, read the bible, memorize scriptures. When they grew older, they don't talk to us because they also have their own peers. Due to changes in adolescence, they connect less with us and we parents tend to let them go, they keep themselves in the room. The Lord spoke to me two years ago and said, "Son, get back to where you started when your child is very young. At least try, just try, you must come up with something." So He challenged me. I said, "Can meh? My son is so big already and don't even talk to me - all the time playing on the computer!" But the Lord said, "The responsibility lies on the parents, not the church. The church is what God raised to support the young but at the end of the day, the parents have the responsibility!" So He challenged my heart. (YO3)

Given however the limited involvement of many parents in shaping faith at home, the other approach was through intentional ministry in the form of planned youth group events. One youth pastor thus shared how important youth camps and conferences were for their ministry. While these were aimed at all church youth, leaders had in mind outreach and nurture to second-generation church youth when they planned these yearly events.

We focus quite a fair bit on our youth camps. We do one youth camp every year in June and we do a youth conference in December, every year. We get all the young people to come, we try to get a really good inspiring speaker. We use this platform; we have that time locked in for maybe three full days, four full days. And on these days we talk about things very relevant to their lives, and especially at the night meetings where we preach, open up the altars, get them to come to the front and we lay hands and pray for them. The whole primary purpose and focus is to help them to understand the great love God has for them and we want to see them experience the power of God. So far, I think that has worked very well for us, for the past 14 years that this youth ministry has existed. (YC1)

Ministry to At-Risk and Vulnerable Youth

Another opportunity that was named by leaders was ministry to at-risk and vulnerable youth. A leader of a youth organization shared his burden for this category of youth, which arose in the course of his contact with them on the ground.

We need to work on reaching out to these at-risk youth. Churches who want to know how to reach out to at-risk youth will need to find help. If they are not equipped in that area, they will need to find help or find out which organization is doing this, and to provide some training and how they can go about it. They must be willing to find help, talk to people, pray and ask God to raise someone who can envision the burden to reach this group of people. I believe God can raise someone and then they find such people. That's one area. (YO3)

One pastor likewise highlighted at-risk youth in the neighbourhood which his church was reaching out to. His brief description of their profile and how he was reaching out to them provide practical wisdom and insight in running this ministry.

They spilt them up into two levels. One is "police-case already" and the other level is those who missed school. You can still help them and generally they are in Secondary 1 and 2, different level of at-risk kids so if you really want to go in and do it. It is a once a week kind of thing. You must be able to befriend them. They must see you like a hero. It is not going in to run games or programmes. They don't want to do means they don't want to do. I would say it is specialized. One to one is going to be difficult because of manpower. My side is one staff will take about 2-3 kids. Again that is very hard when it comes to filtering. That is why it is specialized. Every child is different for this kind of ministry. (YC2)

In addition to the types of youth described above, one leader identified several issues faced by vulnerable youth. Amongst the issues included working out their sexual orientations, infected by sexually transmitted diseases, or carrying unwanted pregnancies. Such youth were encountered in the course of his ministry and help was made available to them through counseling and other means. While he felt that the nature of the work was delicate and sensitive, he nonetheless felt that it was an opportunity for ministry to a growing, targeted segment of the youth population.

Definitely very sensitive - counseling and ministry to those who are sexually broken, as in those with different kinds of sexual orientation. They will not be ashamed to

come but they can just come regardless of their religion and background. The other one closely related to it is help for those who are HIV infected or other kinds of STD even though it's not a very big group. Once they are into this lifestyle, then to me this is a much more neutral ground. For people who want to be counseled for their sexual orientation, it's quite unlikely that they will be fully saying, "I want it." Usually it will still be a struggle during counseling, as they also kind of want to stay in their lifestyle. If you talking about their issue of STDs and maybe even for the girls pregnancy, then this is definitely an issue they want to receive some help for. I find that if churches can put more thought into thinking about how to help with STDs or unwanted pregnancies, this will be a great avenue to transform lives. I see that as an opportunity, but frankly speaking, so far I've only seen one person who really launched into this area of unwanted pregnancy. For STDs, there are a lot but I think it's more of the government ones and not so much from the church. This is an opportunity as in maybe churches can develop ministries or even develop people who can minister or help in this area. (YC6)

Raising a Generation That Thinks About Others Beyond Self

One significant opportunity that youth leaders drew attention to was that of raising a generation that would think about others and not merely focus on their own wants and needs. Pointing to how churches tend to err on the side of familiarity and security, one leader reflected on the need for churches to allow their youth to trust God's leading and guidance as they explored undiscovered opportunities of service in Singapore's Jubilee year.

The problem would be that the churches are too afraid of what they do not know. We tend to be afraid of the unknown, but if we were to allow them to explore the unknown and trust God to lead and to guide them (of course providing mentoring and discipleship), I think they can change. This Jubilee year we have an opportunity to raise a generation who would not just think about themselves but will think about others. (YO4)

For this youth leader, his desire was that youth discover and encounter for themselves poverty which is often invisible to Singaporeans.

I think God is moving the Singapore church to this focus. You cannot avoid the poor in the Year of Jubilee. It'll be such a shame in the year of Jubilee to proclaim God's favor just on our lives. I feel that here in Singapore there is a national opportunity now for the church to step up into going out to the poor. (YO4)

This youth leader also shared that his organization had plans to move to a new location. A part of their ministry would be dedicated to running youth camps for churches which would include visits to the streets of Singapore to experience serving the poor.

We are looking into moving into a new property. We will free up the community space to host youth camps and invite the churches to hold youth camps at our premises. The difference is we run the programmes and we want the young people to experience morning prayer, work duties, going out into the streets, and serving the poor. I feel that when they touch the poor, they will see God and change can happen. (YO4)

Another youth leader also talked about service amongst the underprivileged in Singapore society. Citing one specific church in his denomination which was already actively involving their youth in service to the community, he pointed to outreach to community youth as well as to the elderly as avenues of service which their church youth were already engaged in.

They also have their own community outreach to the youth there. They have a centre that young people from the community can go there, play sports games, get tuition. But they also encourage these young people to join their community programmes. Other avenues of service include going to houses and doing a bit cleaning. Some of the houses are in poorer estates or have elderly who are by themselves. These are the things that the young people get exposed to. (YC6)

Beyond the opportunity to serve the local poor and underprivileged segments of Singapore society, youth leaders also highlighted the increase in overseas travel for service and missions trips. These also were helpful for youth development as they provided exposure to regional poverty and helped youth to become more aware of global realities beyond themselves. Youth leaders shared how these trips, which were increasingly popular amongst schools and churches, served to broaden youth perspectives on life, develop personal maturity, and cultivate gratitude for what they have in Singapore.

We also do ministry abroad. We bring teams - we are encouraging groups to plan trips overseas. We run vacation camps and teach English. You do all these things and it really brings out maturity and a different perspective of life. (YO6)

I think travel has gone up. I think that has helped. People are now more grateful for where they are, for what they are getting because often they're sent to a poorer kind of a situation for them to appreciate what they have. I think these have now been made more available than before compared to when we were younger. (YO5)

Mutual Support Amongst Youth Leaders Across the City

One of the observations that was made by a youth leader was that local church youth ministries were often very individualistic and parochial. In spite of the new challenges faced by youth and youth groups, too many leaders were not thinking together or sharing their resources to make an impactful difference in their ministries.

We need like-minded people to come together. I think it can be used to gather and bring people together to really make this a reality. Otherwise there are no people coming up for the next generation. If we could come together to share the resources and the vision, I think we could make a lot of difference. (YC7)

While this tendency seems to be prevalent, there were however indications that some youth leaders were making time to meet with each other for mutual support and for sharing ideas. Even though these leaders were from different congregations, their growing friendship offered much encouragement to each other as well as presented opportunity for their ministries to mutually flourish. One youth leader attributed it to a generational characteristic amongst younger leaders.

Interestingly, in my generation, we very much like to do things together. I represent my generation, the twenty-plus age group. When I meet another of the same generation, we have this common thinking to do things together. I think that is the difference between my generation and my father's generation. Most of the time, the older generation will do things on their own, with their church, within their arena and ministry. But now you are seeing a new breed of young leaders coming together. These young leaders have this vision and they will say to the other leaders, "Let's do it together!" I believe this is how it is going to be and it will become a reality to see a new breed of young leaders who love to do things together in the next ten to forty years. (YO1)

One twenty-plus youth pastor shared how she was part of a circle of youth leaders from different congregations which met regularly to share about their ministries. Specifically

she shared the need for accountability partners amongst themselves as well as buddies to dream dreams with.

I speak for the youth ministries around the country. It seems to me, the youth leaders are more open to partnerships. It is more relational. We will hang out over coffee, sit down and talk about our youth ministries. We come to place where we realize that as youth leaders, we need accountability partners. So we speak to each other. We dream together. (YC4)

Finally, one youth pastor shared how he was part of a group of youth pastors open to change and exchange. Amongst themselves, they had developed deep friendships and trust so as to be able to minister at each other's churches without the risk of "stealing sheep" or undermining each other's ministries.

I realized that youth pastors these days are more open-minded. I think they are more open to try on new things, trying new systems, new materials, inviting speakers. I think this has helped because it has broken the monotony, that status quo. It causes young people to be excited about moving forward as a generation of young people. I think that development has been important because youth ministries are more open to sharing resources and ideas. In fact, my youth pastor friends have invited me to speak at their youth services. I think that is quite a risk because what happens if I speak there, and their youth decide, "Oh, I like this speaker. I'm going over to his youth ministry!" These things do happen. It's because between youth pastors we are close friends, so because if I know of one of his youth coming to my youth ministry. I would tell that youth "You should go back." We want our friendship to be so pure. Because of that, I think there is a greater sense of friendship among youth ministries here in Singapore. (YC6)

Challenges Presented to Youth Ministries in Singapore

When asked about the challenges that youth ministries presently face or can expect to face, several were listed by the youth leaders interviewed. Amongst these include "working with a pick-and-choose generation," "changing trends and lifestyles," "conflict across the generations," "a lack of youth pastors," "poor planning for leadership succession," "dealing with guilt and shame because of pornography," "different addictions," "lacking a proper focus at the pulpit," "the health of Chinese youth ministries. Those repeated by youth leaders however were:

- Youth Ministry in an Increasingly Liberal and Secularized Society
- Impact and Influence of Media Consumption
- Weak Faith Foundations
- Academic Demands from School
- State of the Family
- Discouragement and Burnout Amongst Youth Leaders, and
- Poor Partnerships with Parents.

Youth Ministry in an Increasingly Liberal and Secularized Society

One of the challenges for youth ministry in Singapore that leaders shared was the transformation of the socio-cultural landscape in Singapore. In their view, Singapore society was becoming increasingly liberal and secularized, and growing up in such an environment with its accompanying influences was an emerging reality that needed to be acknowledged and managed. One youth pastor thus made the observation that “the media is getting more liberal, as we all know that already. Or rather, society is getting more liberal, not just media.” (YC6) A similar observation about the changing nature of Singapore society was shared by a youth leader. For him, this was a critical period in world history where the reversal of values is becoming commonplace.

We are now standing at crossroads where everything in the world is shaking. What used to be abnormal now becomes normal. What used to be right now becomes wrong, and what used to be wrong now becomes right. This is because of ideology, philosophy, humanism and post-modernism. Due to these influences lurking in the world, Singapore is now in a place where we are deciding where we should stand... That is the scary thing. The next fifty years—if we don’t begin to come back to a place where we say, “God we want to consecrate ourselves and align our hearts to what your Word says,”—we are going to lose an entire generation to this post-modernism, humanistic and western philosophy that is going to seep through our society and our moral values will crumble. We will look so good but internally but we become morally more corrupt externally, and that becomes lawlessness. (YO1)

In the midst of this growing mood in society, there was also the observation of growing consumerist behavior not limited to the consumption of goods and services. Consumerist behavior also applied to the consumption of ideas, values, and beliefs. One youth leader thus made the observation about youth growing up in Singapore, and how “it

has become a ‘buffet generation’ where they just come and pick whatever they want to believe in.” (YO2)

An interesting observation by one youth pastor was how educational institutions served as platform where liberal ideas were being introduced to students. In his mind, not only universities but even secondary schools were access points for liberal ideas, which in some cases were ushered in by foreign speakers.

I would say that even in the schools, education, the teachers - all changing very, very fast. So if you are aware, NUS have their own LGBT camp, they can openly publicize. Sometimes they invite a lot of the foreign speakers to come for panels in universities. They have all sorts of people come in. So even in the schools they experience this. So it’s no longer that far off from the media. The schools have become the platform in terms of being the place of promoting liberal ideas. I think the schools are fast catching up so this will be another challenge. (YC6)

One of the consequences of increasing liberalization and secularization of the national socio-cultural landscape of Singapore is its impact on church and youth outlook on Christian faith. Several effects were emphasized by youth leaders. One youth pastor for example felt that the secularization of society was gradually isolating the church and squeezing it into a small corner.

The church is being squeezed into a smaller and smaller corner, that’s what we are experiencing socially as a country and that translates to the way the youth look at church life and faith as well. Faith is being squeezed into a little space. (YC5)

For another youth leader, the effect was felt in the presence of many alternatives as well as the loss of clear absolutes had eroded confidence in biblical truth.

Our youth today are presented with so many alternatives. I dare say that our young people today do not know what is truth. What used to be black and white to you and I are now grey for them. It’s grey for them because there are so many alternatives and the biblical truth doesn’t seem to be a winner for them. The biblical truth doesn’t seem to work for them. (YO4)

Finally, youth leaders also observed how churches and their youth were adapting to changing realities by adopting the values of liberal society in both church life as well as personal lifestyles. One leader noted this phenomenon as he shared his concerns for how churches and their youth have conformed to the world's standards of morality.

There are corrupted moral standing issues that have not been addressed simply because we are afraid to offend or afraid to stand in truth, or we fear what non-believers will think and that they won't come to church etc. We are able to be free to present the full counsel of God. This is one serious threat in the Church today. We are rising up a breed of young people who has no backbone. Morality is no longer something they embrace. It is about free life. For instance, now this is what God has done for us, it is free life. That is why we have young people who live a certain kind of lifestyle that doesn't present the gospel rightly. We can have many people coming to church today and feel good about themselves but morally we are decaying as a society. We don't bring change into our world; we don't bring change to our society because we don't have an anchor in our moral standing. So we become swept into the carnality and the social norms that all is fine. We just want to do this love thing to bring people to church yet morally they are decaying as a society. Our young people have no idea of what is right and what is wrong anymore. It's all about love and people can say we celebrate love and that is it - they bring it to the point of where everything is about love and you stand in the middle ground. (YO1)

Another youth leader also spoke of adoption of the values of the world seen in the embrace of alternative gospels. He described what he saw happening in youth groups as 'paganistic Christianity.'

Alternatives. Some of the challenges like the prosperity gospel, the kinesthetic, feeling-centred, the new age stuff of approaching God. "When I feel good, it must be good." A stronger word I would use is "paganistic Christianity" - being pagan in our thinking and all captured in our Christian lingo. (YO4)

When asked to elaborate a little more on what he meant by the term "paganistic Christianity," this leader went on to explain the concept.

It is asking, "What can Christianity do for me?" It is what we call "the gospel of salvation but no gospel of the Kingdom." It is "Jesus is my Savior - what can He do for me?" and very little, "Jesus is my Lord - what can I do for Him?" The biggest challenge to youth ministry is that it centres on what God can do for me, other than what I can do for God. With that you look at the trend of the worship songs, you look at trends of the groups that are very big and what has been the spiritual diet. It is all about what can God do for me. (YO4)

Impact and Influence of Media Consumption

An earlier remark by a youth leader suggested that Singapore society's values mirrored the values portrayed in the media. This remark—about “media getting more liberal...or rather society getting more liberal, not just media” (YO6)—is noteworthy as it raises the question of the impact and influence that the media and media consumption on the youth. This indeed was a challenge that youth leaders raised as a concern amongst the youth in their ministries. One youth pastor shared that “the greatest challenge is also the media” (YC4) while another shared that it was the “main influence in their lives” (YC3). Yet another remarked, “I think that is the weakness of the whole general society that we are so enslaved digitally.” (YO6) One described today's youth as “a Google generation attuned to Instagram and captured by photography” (YC2).

One significant observation was how both knowledge acquisition and spiritual growth for a generation of youth is highly dependent on new media platforms. This dependence was a concern for two pastors. In addition, one of them felt there was a reduced emphasis on processing the information consumed.

If they want sermons, if they want anything, now practically online they can get everything. Good worship experience, they can just play the iTunes. (YC6)

I think this generation of young people acquires knowledge mainly through new media. Through YouTube for example. So the spiritual growth is dependent on the YouTube sermons they listen to but they just won't sit down and read the bible for themselves...If everything is given to them wholesale (as we are looking at a “movie” generation right now), we would just be sitting there like couch potatoes. The way you acquire knowledge and generally young people are reading lesser these days, so they don't talk about books or the bible. They are watching more and become lazy in terms of their mind. (YC1)

Also mentioned was the visual fantasy world that youth were engaged in and how media played a teacher role in that world.

You look at the generation now is going deeper into Instagram, a very picture kind of thing. They fantasised a lot. The media and their friends. What they see is their

teacher... We have one generation that is coming up that is diluted in their faith and we don't want that. (YC2)

When it came to impact on their behavior, one youth leader was quick to point out how games on their smartphones were a source of distraction during youth services while at the same time provided an avenue of escape from life's realities.

You mean in service when they play candy crush and not listen to the sermon, some sort of distraction? They will indulge in things mindlessly just to get in their own world and not to face the problem. They will want to escape from reality. It is easy to take out your Smartphone or take out whatever just to be away from the real situation. That's a challenge because first of all they will not want to face reality. Secondly, they will not want to take that time to process. Because of that instant gratification is too much, they will want to satisfy instantly instead of being bored. There is no time to be quiet and silent before God. Rather, it is, "Let's do this and let's do that!" so that I can be occupied and not think about problems. (YC7)

Beyond providing distraction during the youth service, youth leaders also observed how media platforms were also eroding ability to relate healthily in face-to-face social situations. One pastor drew attention to how some have withdrawn into their own cyber worlds at the expense of the development of social skills.

There are some that become withdrawn, so they live in their own cyber world also and so their social skills are not developed. We have a small portion of our young people who are like that, very awkward socially and stuff like that. (YC5)

What another youth leader noticed was how some youth were losing face-to-face relational skills and hiding behind either social media statuses or created images.

We have a generation of young people who do not know how to talk to one another. They are socially awkward because of social media. It can be a strength and also a weakness. We have a group of young people who just do not have a personal touch anymore. They are all hiding behind their statuses, their videos with a created image through the things they post on the internet but when you sit down with them to talk with them about their lives, they would not open up because they feel awkward and just do not know how to. (YO1)

The idea of hiding behind fronts and facades was also commented on by another youth leaders who pondered on the differences observed in youth in youth group settings and in social media settings. Differences in personas displayed in the two settings were described as “really quite amazing” and its impact on ministry noted.

We are not good in social settings or forming relationships. That’s something that will affect ministry as well. How do you reach out to people who are not very comfortable in social settings? It’s really quite amazing, you see the youths here on Sunday, they are very quiet but then on their Facebook, it’s like a different person, very vocal, comments about a lot of things. (YC3)

Finally, one youth leader again highlighted the tendency amongst youth to “hide behind the screen” and how this affected face-to-face human communications. He also singled out the specific concern of being isolated from the family as a result of spending too much time online.

If they grow up having too much involved in technology, meaning being online too much, it isolates them even with family. That creates a barrier of them even knowing how to communicate when it comes face to face with human beings. That is a kind of challenge because they won’t be able to share openly. They will want to hide behind the screen. It will take them a longer period of time to warm up with somebody. (YC7)

Weak Faith Foundations

In addition to the realities of an increasingly liberal, secularized society and the influence of media consumption on youth, youth leaders also indicated weak or absent faith foundations amongst youth today. For the leaders, this was clearly undesirable and a cause for concern amongst them.

We have one generation that is coming up that is diluted in their faith and we don’t want that. (YC2)

...we are seeing a lot of activities, a lot of fun but a huge lack of biblical foundation. (YC1)

So if the faith is not properly grounded, it does have repercussions for the next generation. (YC3)

One leader directed his concern particularly at second-generation Christian youth who despite their regular exposure to church, fail to grasp the value and significance of their heritage of faith.

Sometimes, the second-generation Christians don't even know what they believe in because they just grow up in church and they know Sunday is "my day to go to church". They will just sit there and attend sermons, then have fun with my friends, but yet they don't know what the distinctives of their faith. They live life calling themselves Christians but their lives are still the same... Faith and belief is something they don't know and they don't care. They don't bother finding out how it affects their lives. It is challenging. (YO2)

Youth leaders pointed to how youth ministries failed to build faith foundations into the lives of their youth. One youth leader shared the tension existing in youth groups today. On the one hand, pulpits did not focus sufficiently and deeply on the knowledge of God. On the other hand, youth were perceived to avoid the foundational doctrines of the church resulting in spiritual hollowness.

If you look at preaching from the pulpit, majority of the pulpit preaching is instructions on how to live, how to live for God, how to do better. But very few pulpits teach who God is. That to me is a challenge because in the end our young people grow up learning how to live but don't know who they are living for. But they can say all the Christian lingo, the jargons about Jesus dies for me. However, there is really not very much understanding on who is He as in "Who is the Father? Who is the Son? Who is the Holy Spirit?"... Today, we use the word doctrine, it is always immediately thrown out. Don't even mention the word to me! So I find that very much lacking and that is a big threat to me in the quality of Christianity and I feel for our young people in that... What I'm more interested in is in their inner life but a lot of them, most of them, when you knock, it's just a "hollow sound" so that to me, would be a weakness. You see that young people are just not interested. (YO4)

One youth pastor who regularly spoke at different youth groups shared his observation of how some ministries neglected to build their ministries on the foundations of Christ and God's holiness. When he introduced some of these foundations in youth groups however, his observation was that they were hungry for those missing foundations.

I go around preaching in churches quite often. My struggle is this: I find that we have not majored very much on the character of God through the Word... 1 Corinthians 13 spells the whole thing when Paul talked about himself and Apollos. You cannot lay

the foundation other than the one that has already been laid by Christ so it is God who caused the growth. Therefore the lack in embracing, especially, the holiness of God, and we must look into that. I noticed when I preached about that, the young people break down and they really want. I don't get it - why are we so afraid to preach about this? About holiness and going out for God? I see the young people responding so this is really what is lacking. (YC1)

Finally, the consequence of lacking faith foundations was voiced by one pastor. He observed that while this sometimes led to individuals falling away from their faith, it also resulted in skeptical individuals remaining in church and exerting negative influence on others around them.

It's a challenge because at the end of the day, those without strong foundation will just fall away. When they are in the church, if they are very insistent on their views, then they can sway other youths as well. So it's not just them wanting to fall away, even they don't fall, they are still here, but they keep challenging authority figures all these questions, challenging their fellow peers, after a while they will have a ripple effect. (YC6)

Academic Demands from School

One of the critical challenges faced by youth is the time demand put on them by school life. As a society, education has always remained a premium priority and pursuit. This is consistent with the national rhetoric of having little natural resources and needing to develop human capital. The impact of this priority however was noted by many youth leaders as one of the main challenges to youth ministry in Singapore. School life dominated the world of youth. In the words of one youth pastor, Singapore is a "tuition nation" with a "huge emphasis on academics" (YC3). In the words of another youth leader, this emphasis and demand set the pace as well as defined the world of the youth.

School has really driven, in some sense, sets the pace for a lot of our young people's lifestyle. Not just the time but also the whole experience. They define everything around their school experience. Sometimes just finding time with them is a challenge. (YO5)

In this light of this reality, understanding what school life entailed and its impact on the youth is critical. This in fact was a point made by a youth pastor.

One of the challenges will be how tied down they are with school. For a leader to actually call forth commitment to church, we have to also understand their family and their time. (YC4)

Several youth leaders highlighted different facets of school life for Singapore youth. One leader spoke of the demands of regular school, school trips, as well as extra hours for tuition. Another spoke of lengthened hours and afterschool co-curricular activities. Yet another spoke of a youth's weekends being eaten up by projects and schoolwork.

You've got the secondary schools and the demands, the travels and the tuition and everything. (YO4)

I think that today, the school hours are much longer. The CCA time has eaten into their weekdays so Saturdays becomes a time for them to catch up with their work, their friends, and for some to catch up with church activity. (YO5)

In fact his weekends are burnt. He has to meet up with his schoolmates for projects to discuss for schoolwork and all that, so he is really stretched. (YC3)

While one leader pointed out to the how school holiday period provided some respite from the demands of time, he was nonetheless quick to point to the common phenomenon of school holiday remedial classes for Singaporean youth.

When school term starts, it is a different ballgame already. It is still all right during holiday but sometimes youth also have no time, as they must go back for remedial classes during holidays. (YO3)

Some of the consequences of school life's impact on youth ministry were also reported. One leader reported how it affected regularity in the youths' attendance and contributed to them missing church and youth group activities.

The youth today are so busy with school. We used to have a lot of time going to each other's houses. Nowadays like, "Can we skip this because there is a test coming up or something?" (YO6)

One leader looked upon the absence of participation in church activities sympathetically as he reflected on the encroaching impact of school life on church youth. For him, it was the fact that the youth were stretched to their limits that resulted in their absence from church. His use of verbs like “swallow” and “squeeze out” reflect the level of intensity and pressure experienced by the youth and the effect on their spiritual life.

The demand on their time is huge from schools. It swallows you up...It's true. It just takes every single waking moment of a youth. It's not that they do not want to be part of our church life or be involved in what we are doing. It's just that they've reached the end of their capacity and I fear that it will continue in that trajectory and there will come a point where time in which the church or religious life, spirituality is squeezed out of our national consciousness, becomes a CCA or just an optional activity that you take with you. (YC5)

One youth leader also reported that youth often could not meet even when time was set aside for them by their leaders. This reality was shared by another leader who added that sometimes the absence was because parents insisted that their children spend time with studies and hence did not allow them out.

Even if you have time for them, they will say they have no time for you. With the youth, sometimes you connect them, they also say, “Cannot. Today cannot.” So the challenge is also to make that time; even to connect is really a challenge. (YO3)

Even if the youth leader had time to spend with them, the youth themselves have no time and the focus is very different now. And the parents will not allow them to come out right. You have to study, you get your grades, you get As and A-stars and what have you. So that is priority. (YO6)

One final consequence of the demands from school that was reported was the stress experienced by youth especially during the examination period. Stress and examination periods however also provided occasions for prayerful support for the youth in their times of need.

It is actually very stressful for the youth, very stressful for them. Exam periods are also stress periods for the ministry as well because we are supporting them in prayers and all that. (YC3)

State of the Family

One of the challenges that was reported is the state of the family and its impact on youth as well as on youth ministries. Youth leaders reported incidences of parental absence from family life as well as broken family situations. One pastor saw this as a growing trend which affected how youth relate to authority figures.

In Singapore we are having more and more nuclear families, smaller family units and parents are usually not around. It does affect like how the youth relates to authority figures and relate to their parents. (YC3)

Another youth pastor also raised the topic of absent parents as a concern. By his reckoning, parents were absent from the family because both were preoccupied with providing for the family. This approach of focusing on financial provision at the expense of time with their children during their growing up years led to a negative outcome of rejection by their grown up children. The consequence of absent parents was thus described by him together with another facet of family life in Singapore – divorce and broken families.

Family situations across our country whereby, usually it is the dual income kind of setting so by the time the parents earn enough, they want to spend more time with their kids, the kids don't want them already. I mean that's very basic. Other than that, there are also cases of divorce so even church families are not spared. To me, that will be, if not the top, then one of the key challenges. (YC6)

The reality of both absent parents as well as broken families was also raised by yet another pastor who spoke of encountering both latchkey kids as well as youth from broken families as a major challenge for youth ministries in Singapore. This pastor went on to describe an experience of taking a poll about family situation in a youth cell group as well as the impact of family realities on young people.

The troubling development within the family dynamics. We see many latchkey kids these days. We also see many broken families these days. It was quite interesting a few years ago when I went to a cell group meeting. I asked this cell group—these teenagers—to lift up their hands if they come from single- parent families. I had more than 50% of them lifting up their hands. Of course I asked them to close their eyes before lifting up their hands. I realized that this is difficult. We can speak on the

Father's heart of God. We can speak about Luke 15—how much God loves them. And they do believe it, they do experience it. At the same time, they still have some trust issues, some authority problems as well. (YC1)

That family breakdowns impacted youth behavior was echoed by another pastor who shared what she observed about youth from broken families.

When a child from a broken family steps into a service, either they get integrated really fast (then you see signs of “trigger points” along the way as you disciple them), or is it so hard to get them to be engaged. (YC4)

Finally, one youth leader pointed to how family breakups ‘make things more complicated’ and introduced new issues both to the individual youth as well as to the church group. A key challenge posed to the church thus was to become a place where they could find healing and reconciliation.

I think as the society progresses, there is the breakup in the families. Families get nucleated even more because of the breakup and it makes it more complicated. I think there is a whole new area of issues to deal with when they grow up and they don't know how to deal with the other gender. It becomes challenging because if the church doesn't have space for them to heal and to reconcile, they will find that this faith is meaningless. (YC7)

This challenge of helping the youth find refuge in the church was also shared by a youth pastor who encountered youth who described youth group not as their “second homes” but as their “first home.”

I think single-parent families is one really huge problem. There isn't this sense of belonging. Some of them tell me, “Pastor, I wish to let you know that I love this youth ministry because it isn't my second home. It is my first home.” On weekends, sometimes they have nowhere to go to. (YC1)

Discouragement and Burnout Amongst Youth Leaders

Several participants shared insights into current challenges which youth pastors and leaders faced in the course of ministry. A combination of factors ranging from the difficult

and demanding nature of youth ministry to lack of mentoring support by senior pastors led to discouragement and burnout amongst youth pastors and leaders.

The nature of the youth ministry, described as demanding and emotionally draining, was one of the factors contributed to youth leader discouragement and burnout.

There is a lack because nobody dares to take the job. It's the most underpaid and most demanding. It's very sad to see that full-time ministry is something that young people are shunning, rather than saying, "Yes! It's a privileged to be called by God to do this." (YO4)

Youth work is very challenging. It draws a lot from you. It also draws patience and emotions and has to deal with a lot of issues...Ministering to youth is very challenging, and discouraging. You will have all sorts of adolescent problems and if they are very emotional, they will drain you and you will have to listen to them. They will have BGR problems. It is very draining being a youth worker. (YO3)

Not feeling appreciated for their efforts as well not seeing fruit of their labour was also another contributory factor to youth leader discouragement.

Discouragement, perhaps not feeling appreciated or not seeing fruit. This is the common thing I encountered when relating to different pastors. So I think if you stop short of serving to the full length that God wants, then we are not as effective as we could have been. (YC6)

Sometimes you don't see results. You need time to see results. Results don't come overnight. For a person who stayed long haul in youth ministry, you will know that God has called you. When you are down, who do you look to? Or you just throw in the towel? I've been there before. I had given up before. I left even the youth ministry before. When you are burnt out, you throw in the towel and leave. But God is great. He called me back and asked me to go back to where I left and I still come back to youth ministry. The challenge is when the youth worker becomes discouraged and burnout, they don't know who to turn to and they threw in the towel. (YO3)

One of the reported challenges was that youth leaders were sometimes spread thinly over several ministries in their local churches. In these instances, youth ministers did not have the luxury of focusing purely on youth since their responsibilities straddled multiple ministries. This point was reported by one leader.

One of the saddest things or challenges that youth workers face is that they do a lot. They do children's ministry, they do youth ministry, and then they have to do church ministry. It is overwhelming and when you are put into that kind of situation because

you are employed as a staff, you get expectations. Then if you cannot meet them, you will feel burnout. The key word is burnout. (YO3)

Apart from being spread over multiple ministries in church, another leader observed that youth ministries were often called to support main church events. This had the additional effect of overwhelming youth pastors.

Of course the demands most churches put on the Youth pastors. Today when you go and see any church, the big projects are always done by the youth. And when you sit down and talk to the Youth pastors, they are so exhausted, because they have to support church-level events, whether is it worship, or the set-up of everything. Everything is thrown to the young people and the Youth pastor struggles. The youth pastor is stuck and he is so heavily loaded to do all these other things except what he is called to do. I feel for them because I see them drowning. (YO4)

A striking concern that was raised was the lack of mentoring support provided for youth leaders. One church leader thus had this to share.

When I look at youth pastors in the broad spectrum, the struggles that they have today are they are very left alone to do their work. Their pastors have no time for them. When they sink, they sink alone and when they struggle, they struggle alone. No one sits down and really care for them so to me their immediate area of struggle or weakness of youth ministries and youth pastors is their internal well being, the lack of mentoring for them. It's so hard today to run youth ministries and I think that youth pastors need help. If the Seniors Pastors are just too busy with the church management, then I think the need is the middle tier, to raise a group of people who would just mentor and walk with youth pastors or youth workers or youth leadership. Yah...that to me is the biggest lack. (YO4)

Couple with this lack of mentoring support was also the observation that misguided expectations arising from flawed definitions of successful youth ministries contribute to youth leader burnout.

The youth leaders are getting burnout. They are trying to keep up to a set of expectations because of certain expectations from their senior pastors or themselves. This arises because of the definition of what a successful ministry is. They are burnout because they have a wrong understanding of success. To them success is big churches, big youth ministry, everything is big. It is about numbers, accolades, fame and wealth. (YO1)

In this situation, the effect of burnout was not only confined to youth leaders, but also extended to the rest of the youth group. Here, the flawed definitions of successful youth ministry maintained at the highest levels of leadership was filtering into the youth group culture and percolating down to the ranks of the youth themselves.

When you begin to have youth leaders who are like that, firstly they get burnout, secondly, they reproduce themselves. It'll penetrate through every level even to the youth. We will end up rising up a youth ministry of slave drivers who constantly are trying to meet and hit the target, which is not to be the case. We are supposed to raise up disciples and Christ-lovers, people who become lovers of God more than lovers of ministry. If not, we would be raising up more burnout kids and reproducing a whole ministry of burnout youth, who already have had a lot of expectations in their schools. Now when they come to the youth ministry, it will be another set of targets and it is going to get worse. Until we are able to re-define what success is, in ministry, I think we are going to reproduce a group of burnout kids and burnout leaders. (YO1)

Poor Partnerships With Parents

One key point that a few youth leaders pointed out was the need for youth groups to work closely with parents to achieve the common goal of helping youth in their development. While this partnership was acknowledged as a good thing, there was acknowledgement that it remained a struggle for youth leaders to work more closely with parents. One youth leader put it this way, "I know that in churches, one of the struggles that youth leaders and youth pastors have is working with families related to young people." (YO5)

Sometimes, not working with parents was a result of the youth themselves not wanting to involve their parents in their lives. Here there was a lack of trust on the youths' part resulting in parents being looked on as "enemies." One pastor drew attention to this phenomenon, describing it as "unhelpful."

The other thing will be the lack of partnership, so when they feel that, "I can't really trust the people in the church or the adults or parents are my enemies." I think those mindsets, not say it is very prevalent, but to some extent are present in different pockets of the youth churches in Singapore. So those are not helpful things. (YC6)

Other times, not working with parents was because youth leaders failed to take the initiative to connect with them. This point was noted by one church pastor who at the same time raised the two sides of the coin of parental involvement. This highlighted the difficulty of striking a balance between youth group input and parental input into the lives of the youth.

Not working with the parents is also a weakness. I think it's mutual. We don't take enough initiative at times to connect with them and they leave their children to us without finding out much. They can also swing to another extreme where they take into too much control and don't give too much room to speak into their lives. It can swing both ways. (YC4)

Youth leaders also reported difficulty working in partnership with parents because parents restricted their youth from participation in church group activities. The same youth pastor reported how parents who were non-believers imposed a string of restrictions which made it difficult for their children to grow spiritually.

Some of their parents don't even allow them to come to church. Some of the youth cannot bring a bible home. They have to use their phone and even read at night. Some of them don't even have a space to pray. They live in a small house so they have to go outdoors to pray. Their prayer life is not consistent. These youth come from non-Christian families. (YC4)

Non-believer parents however were not the only category of parents cited as placing restrictions on their youth. One youth pastor shared how even Christian parents often don't see Christian faith development as a priority for their children which resulted in restrictions and cutbacks in involvement.

I mentioned just now about the studies scene in Singapore: tuition nation! There is a huge emphasis on academics. It is actually very stressful for the youth, very stressful for them. Exam periods are also stress periods for the ministry as well because we are supporting them in prayers and all that. Parents in the church would want to see a decrease in activities from the youth ministry because academics are so important. Of course not every parent is like that but there is that emphasis. (YC3)

This same pastor went on to share a conversation with a mother during which time concern for the son's spiritual growth was expressed. The pastor shared how taken aback she

was when she heard the mother's response—a response which pointed to the difficulty of setting aside time for spiritual development in a world of competing priorities. In some cases therefore, it was not because youth leaders didn't want to work with parents, but that they had to work around the conditions set by even by Christian parents.

Actually I do have one youth in my ministry who has not been regular but he grew up in the church. Recently I had a talk with his mum and I was quite surprised at her perspective. She hinted and hoped that we will not pressurize her son to go to church because he is very busy at school. I shared my perspective with the mother. He is 15, which is Secondary 3 next year and he is in a very good school. In fact his weekends are burnt. He has to meet up with his schoolmates for projects to discuss for schoolwork and all that, so he is really stretched because he is in the (IP) Integrated Programme which is why he has a lot more course work to do. Because of that he cannot come to church so I shared with her my view that if at this young age, during the formative years, if his faith in God is not grounded he is going to lose it. It is very easy for him to lose it if he grows older and he does have questions about the faith. I mean right now in his life there is no Christian exposure at all, no Christian influence at all. It is not so much about him not coming to church that is our concern but rather how is his spiritual life. When I talked to him, I can hear that he is actually very stretched out, but being so young, how would you know how to handle that stress and how would you know the purpose in life and why are you so busy about. Five years down the road when you look back, would you have wanted your secondary school life to be like this? When I shared that with her, she was a bit silent but she was still coming from the perspective that it is very stressful for the child, not to put the child through it, that kind of thing. (YC3)

The tension between what youth leaders felt was beneficial for the youth and what parents thought was beneficial for youth was a point raised by another leader. While the idea of working with parents was not ruled out, in the end, he recognized the limitations of church involvement in youth lives.

Of course the question is, "What is best for the young person?" Each is defining what is best for the young person so how do you reach a point where both agree that's the best for the young person? When things don't work out, the church can't do very much because the parents still feel strongly that they know best. This is based on what I hear from some church youth leaders. This must have been a constant challenge for them. (YO5)

Finally, instead of expecting the church to take the lead in nurturing youths, one youth leader was insistent that Christian parents needed to step up in their efforts to disciple and nurture their own youth. This was thus the advice he offered to Christian parents of youth today.

I felt that one great challenge is the parents have to go back and disciple their youth again. I'm speaking from my experience, so if I have a word to all the parents, I will say, "Go back to where God tells us. Parents must sit down and talk to them again, like what they did when they are children, even their youth, teenagers growing up into adults. We must find the time. Once in a while, we should sit down and talk about the things of God. Of course we all have so many challenges, if we can go back to the basic where God says, 'Fathers, parents, go back to where you are.' I tell you that will be a great challenge, at the same time it is amazing...I must say it's not going to be easy because it's so tiring, after work, it's so tiring, but I think it's a commitment and discipline. That is the challenge, I also feel for the second-generation of Christians." (YO3)

Reflections on the Insights Gained from Youth Ministry Leaders in Singapore

By way of summary, five research questions were posed to fourteen leaders from church youth ministries and Christian youth organizations in Singapore. The five research questions are listed below together with the recurring themes that surfaced in response to the questions:

1. What are goals that youth ministries in Singapore aspire toward?
 - 1.1 Experiencing the Love of God
 - 1.2 Building Community
 - 1.3 Evangelism
 - 1.4 Christian Discipleship
 - 1.5 Youth Leadership Development
2. What are strengths observed in youth ministries in Singapore?
 - 2.1 Organizing Large-Scale Programmes and Events
 - 2.2 Involvement in Music, Worship, and other Creative Avenues of Ministry
 - 2.3 Developing Foundations through Preaching and Bible Teaching
 - 2.4 Building Community and Relationships
3. What are weaknesses observed in youth ministries in Singapore?
 - 3.1 Too Much Focus Given to Events and Programmes
 - 3.2 Lacking Relevance
 - 3.3 Lack of Mentors, Role Models, and Spiritual Parents
 - 3.4 Failure to Reach Out To Socio-cultural Others

4. What are the opportunities presented to youth ministries in Singapore?
 - 4.1 Use of Music and the Creative Arts
 - 4.2 Emerging Youth Friendly Structures and Ministry Approaches
 - 4.3 Use of Social Media and New Communications Technologies
 - 4.4 Ministry to Second-Generation Church Youths
 - 4.5 Ministry to At-Risk and Vulnerable Youth
 - 4.6 Raising a Generation That Thinks About Others Beyond Self
 - 4.7 Mutual Support Amongst Youth Leaders Across the City

5. What are the challenges presented to youth ministries in Singapore?
 - 5.1 Youth Ministry in an Increasingly Liberal and Secularized Society
 - 5.2 Impact and Influence of Media Consumption
 - 5.3 Weak Faith Foundations
 - 5.4 Academic Demands from School
 - 5.5 State of the Family
 - 5.6 Discouragement and Burnout Amongst Youth Leaders
 - 5.7 Poor Partnerships With Parents

As can be seen, the interviews surfaced many interesting insights and allowed the research team to offer rich and thick descriptions of ground level realities. Collectively, these descriptions formed a tapestry of voices which tell a story of the state of youth ministry in Singapore. As mentioned previously, this study limited itself to understanding youth ministry realities through the lens of fourteen youth ministry leaders. This being so, it does not attempt to offer encyclopedic knowledge and comprehensive answers to all the questions asked of the local Christian youth scene. Instead, it offers us vignettes of current youth ministry realities in Singapore. In addition, it invites us to seek a more complete picture by listening to the voice of other stakeholders such as senior pastors, parents, family members, and the youth themselves. Rich and informed as the existing findings may be, we must listen to more and for more. Such is the spirit of qualitative research.

What emerged from the study however does invite comment and calls for reflection and response. Four brief comments are offered for youth ministries to consider:

- i. Small as it is, the list of ministry goals that emerged reminds us that youth leaders must always ask what their overarching ministry vision and mission is. Ministry goals should guide activities, events, and relationships. They should inspire confidence in Christ and anchor youth in authentic, historic, Christian faith.

- ii. Accounts of strength observed amongst Singaporean youth ministries do much to encourage the body of Christ and should be celebrated. Where relevant, best practices can be shared and adopted. Toward that end, formal and informal networks amongst youth leaders and youth groups should be encouraged. Care however should be taken to avoid uncritical copying since what is workable for a large city youth ministry may not apply to a small Chinese-speaking youth ministry in the heartlands.
- iii. Precious lessons can be gleaned by noting areas where youth ministries are not faring well. The conditions of connectivity, change, busyness, and pressure from school present challenges which impact youth ministries in Singapore significantly. The catalogue of weakness and challenges which were surfaced calls for greater attention, strengthened commitment, and better resourcing of youth ministries. The list also reminds us that the end goal of youth ministries is not in how well our programmes are run but how well our youth are nurtured as followers of Jesus Christ in a world of global connectivity.
- iv. Life in an era and environment of flux always brings new opportunities for youth ministries to explore creative responses and renewal. Being in a culture of fluidity challenges status quo and “business-as-usual” mindsets. The present changing conditions call for leaders to anticipate the future while not forgetting the lessons from history. They invite youth leadership teams to guide fresh kingdom-driven initiatives as well as to build capacity for nurture and service. In addition, the need to ensure that practices are biblically grounded, culturally relevant, contextually appropriate, educationally informed, and missionally oriented cannot be overstated.

Conclusion

Youth ministry in the twenty-first century is an increasingly complex undertaking requiring considerable energy, imagination, belief, and staying power. The findings of this study provide some insight into the task ahead for those serving amongst youth in whatever role or capacity. The findings also invite key stakeholders to process the data and birth responses which support and strengthen the ministry of reaching and nurturing the next generation for Christ.

Ultimately, the future of youth ministry must be grounded in the belief that God’s eyes look out for, his hands reach out to, and his palms gently hold our youth to his heart. Such is the extent of his care and commitment to the next-generation which in turn serves as fuel for our prayers and our efforts. Upon this assurance of God’s longsuffering love and

faithfulness, we lay to rest our deepest concerns and our highest hopes for the future of youth ministry in Singapore.

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