

STATE OF THE
CHURCH



SINGAPORE 2022



**FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST
STATE OF THE CHURCH
IN SINGAPORE STUDY**

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INTRODUCTION

What is the state of the Church in Singapore today? This is a question of constant interest within Christian circles, especially in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We often rely on anecdotes to piece the puzzle together, but most are not so widely connected as to be able to “look beyond their tribes”. There have been studies from secular institutions (such as the Institute of Policy Studies), but they are limited by the scope and type of data that they can collect from within the Church¹.

The Church in Singapore has also looked to research on the Church from the West (including from the Barna Group, LifeWay Research, et cetera). However, unless the data are collected from Singapore, the findings from such research cannot be directly extrapolated to our local Singapore context. Local studies are few and far between.

The State of the Church in Singapore 2022 study is our attempt to conduct a quantitative and current study of the Church here. We had a few objectives in mind when embarking on this study; the most important was to acquire evidence-based insights on the Church in Singapore to inform local church leadership in the spirit of collaboration and not competition.

The research is an attempt at facilitating a conversation within the Church in Singapore on where we are at and how we are doing at this critical juncture: The Church is just emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the nation further reopens and decisively moves towards “normalcy”, it is timely to take stock of the impact of the pandemic and to “compare notes” on what different local churches are grappling with.

We hope that the findings of this study will serve as a useful sounding board for each local church to reflect on its own situation, and better discern what it should do for the year ahead.

Finally, this study serves as a proof of concept for empirical research within the Church in Singapore – in other words, research by the Church to serve the Church. The State of the Church in Singapore 2022 study is a collaboration between three theological institutions in Singapore and Kingdom platform *Salt&Light*; such a study is more than what any single institution can do alone. If this initial study works well, God willing, more will follow.

¹ Organisations that are external to the Church are less able to obtain data from church leaders, compared to organisations within the Church.

METHODOLOGY

Our aim was to piece together an accurate picture of the Church in Singapore and assess the impact of the pandemic on the Church. We surmised that collecting the data after 3 months into the “post-pandemic phase” of the nation (see *section below on Time*) would be appropriate.

The impact of the pandemic was studied in 3 dimensions:

- 1. Strength** – The number of attendees. We prioritised onsite attendance at the regular weekly worship gathering, as it is much harder to assess quantity (for example, does 1 view on live-stream = 1 individual or 1 household?) and quality of engagement online. We also chose to use the term “attendees” instead of members as churches have different definitions and criteria for membership; the bottom line was whether or not these people “attended church”, however attendance was defined.
- 2. Vitality** – Three areas were considered here: A) the scale and scope of ministry activities conducted during the pandemic, including evangelistic activities; B) the impact of the pandemic on the well-being and number of full-time staff, and C) finances.
- 3. Adaptation and Outlook** – related to the above is the capability of the church to adapt in the face of disruptive circumstances, such as the pandemic. We asked church leaders to reflect on how their congregations have grown during the pandemic season. The post-pandemic season is also a time for adaptation – pastors need to lead their churches out of the pandemic season, too. We asked church leaders to share about their priorities as they look to the year ahead.

Survey Frame. A database of local churches was developed by pooling multiple existing databases – a combination of open and closed sources. We asked the lead pastor or equivalent to do the survey on an online portal. The lead pastor was given the discretion to A) delegate the task to a member of the leadership team; and B) extend the survey to the pastor of a language-congregation in that church².

Survey instrument. Our survey instrument had about 40 questions, and was meant to be completed within 20-25 minutes. A Mandarin translation of the survey was made available.

Time. The survey was administered between 1 July and 15 August 2022. (This roughly corresponds to 3 months since the announcement of DORSCON Yellow in Singapore.)

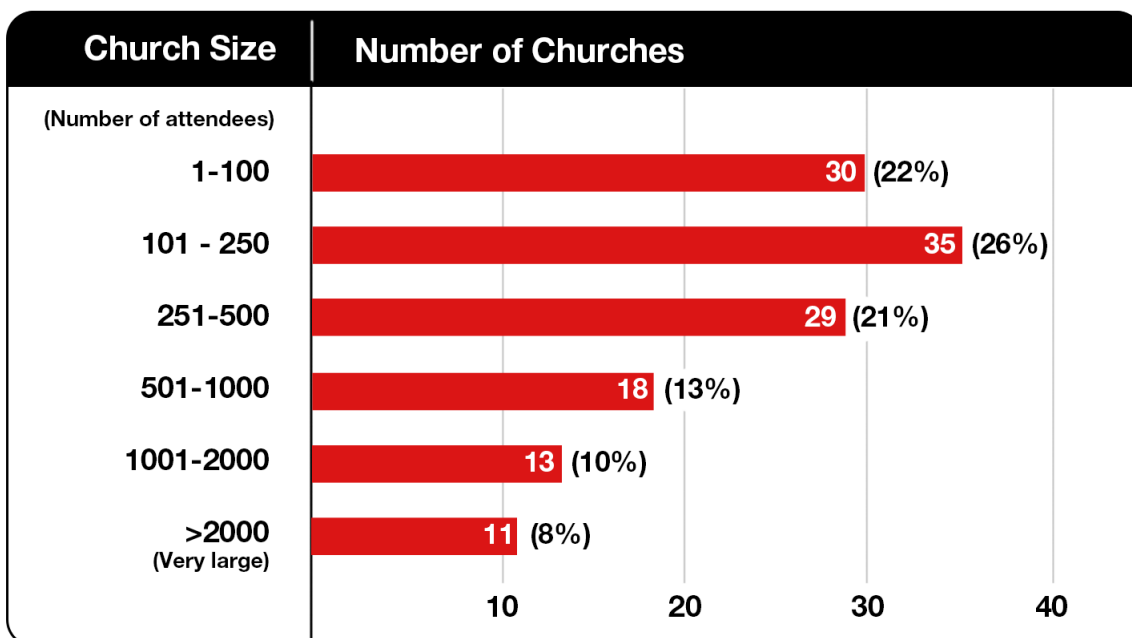
² In such a case, these were for the most part treated as two unique responses.

We assessed that 3 months should afford adequate time for churches to make adjustments to “return to normalcy” as well as to begin laying down more concrete long-term plans. For all our questions, we were careful to specify the time window for answering – e.g. whether it was about the situation prior to the pandemic, during the pandemic, or at the time of doing the survey (“now”).

THE DEMOGRAPHY OF THE CHURCH

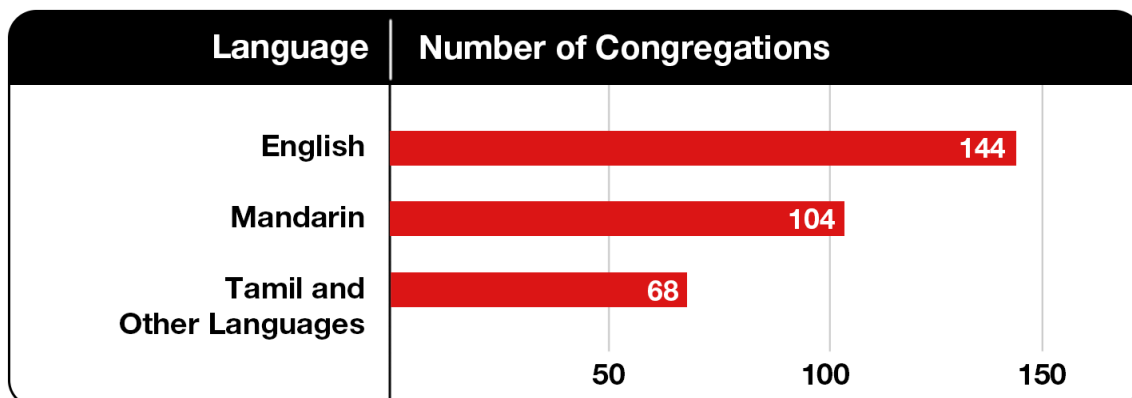
We received responses from 144 churches, representing a total of 104,653 attendees, across 316 congregations. Eleven of these churches were very large (with more than 2,000 attendees), and these alone accounted for more than half (54,224) of the total attendees.

Table 1. CONGREGATIONS BY CHURCH SIZE



For administrative reasons, in some instances we pooled the data from multiple respondents and treated them as “one church”. This was only for the purpose of computing church size.

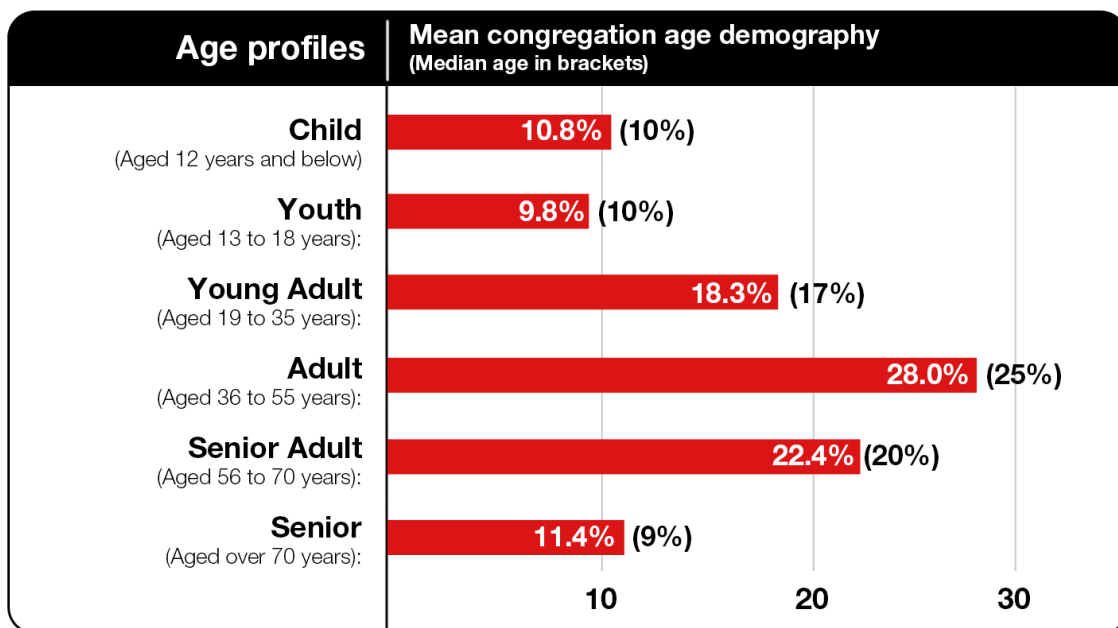
Table 2. CONGREGATIONS BY LANGUAGE



Other languages include: African and Chinese Dialects (Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien), Filipino, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Myanmar, Peranakan, Telugu, Thai and Vietnamese.

Age Profiles. The typical church in Singapore had the following age demography:

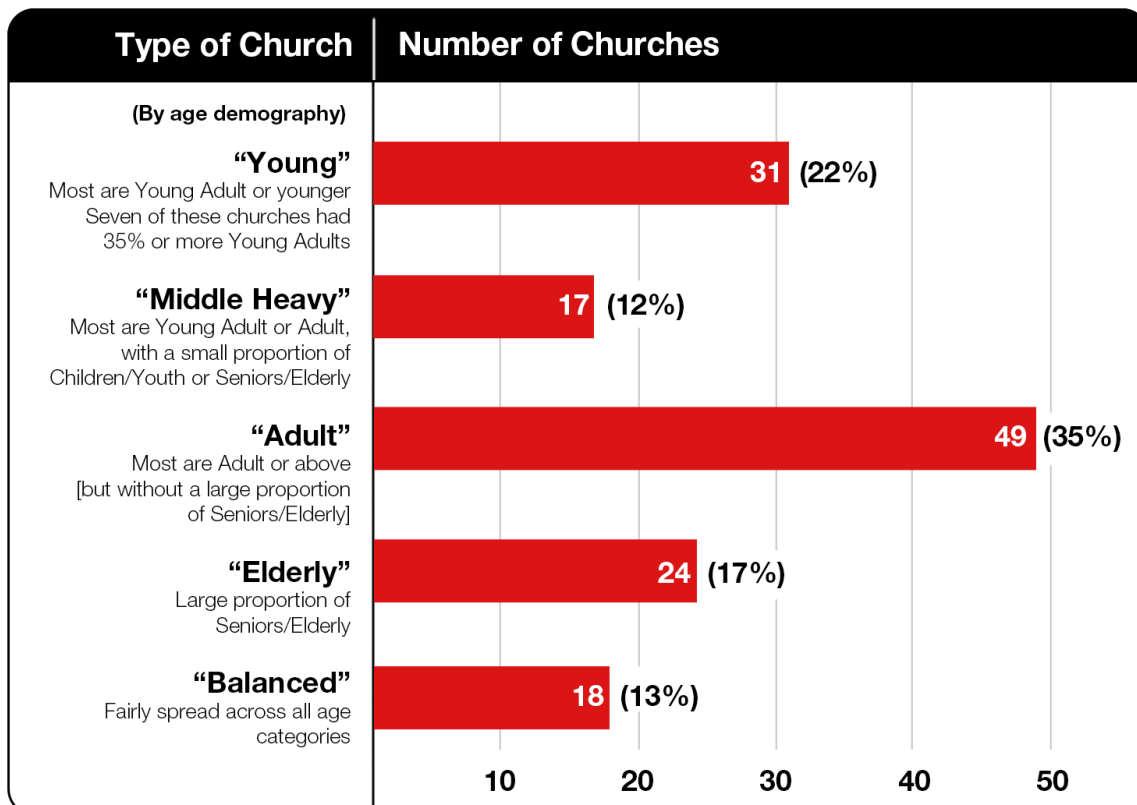
Table 3. TYPICAL CHURCH DEMOGRAPHY BY AGE



These proportions are fairly reflective of the age demography of the Singapore Christian population (based on the Singapore Population Census 2020).

We broadly profiled the churches along 5 types:

Table 4. CHURCH TYPE BASED ON AGE



*This is based on 139 churches for which we had demographic data.
Percentages do not sum up to 100% due to rounding.*

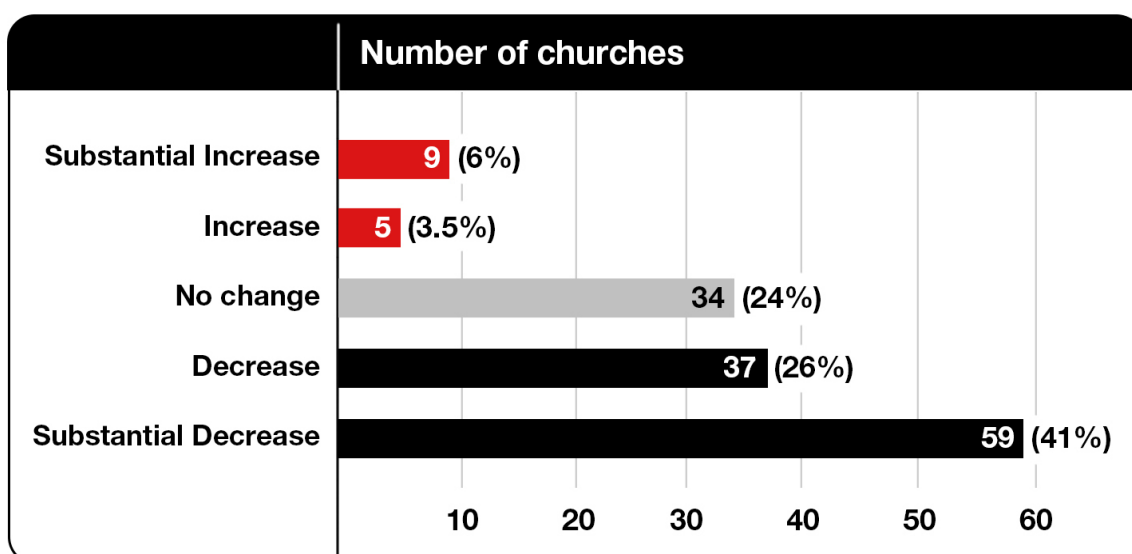
Evidently, there is significant variation in the demographic profiles between local churches. As a further illustration: 29 churches had more than 15% elderly, 20 churches had less than 10% young adults, 20 churches had less than 5% youths, and 17 churches had less than 5% children. All of these are significant deviations from the typical profile.

Full-time Staff. Prior to the pandemic, the number of full-time staff employed by the churches were 1,189 ministry staff, and 915 non-ministry staff, yielding a total of 2,104. This means that churches had roughly 1 staff for every 50 attendees, and 1 ministry staff for every 88 attendees. That being said, at the local church level we found significant variation in the number of full-time staff relative to the number of attendees.

NUMERICAL STRENGTH

At the time of the survey, 114 (79%) churches had resumed at least 75% of all their onsite activities. Only 27 (19%) churches had resumed half or less of their onsite activities. But how many have returned for weekly worship services onsite?

Table 5. ONSITE WORSHIP: CHANGE IN ATTENDEES NOW COMPARED TO BEFORE THE PANDEMIC



"Substantial" denotes a change by 2 or more categories of attendee numbers.

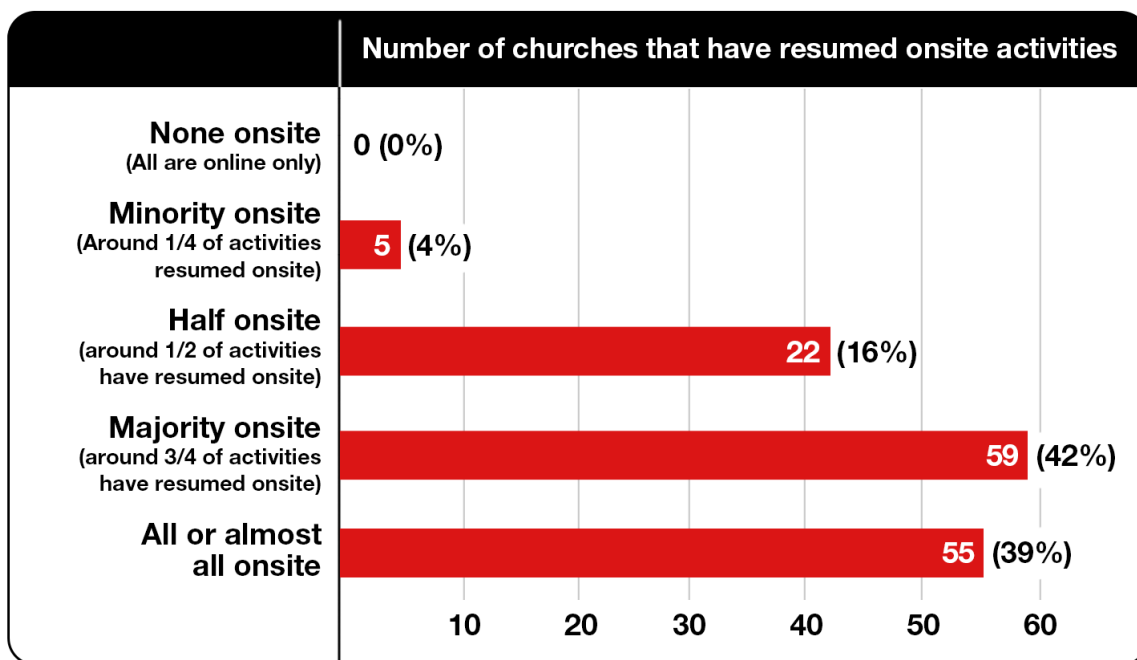
Change in Onsite Attendee Numbers. Compared to pre-pandemic times, the number of attendees has decreased for two-thirds (67%) of the churches. Among these churches, 59 (41% of all churches) saw a substantial decrease. Attendee numbers stayed largely the same for only 34 churches, while only 14 churches reported an increase.

The churches that reported an increase tended to be relatively small in size (having less than 250 attendees each prior to the pandemic), and only 3 of these churches reported having more than 500 attendees now.

Churches that have resumed all or almost all of their activities ranked among those who reported a decrease in attendees³.

In summary, in-person worship gatherings have not reached pre-pandemic attendee numbers, but are short by between 13 and 43%. To be more precise, our point estimate of the number of attendees who have returned for worship onsite is 72% of pre-pandemic levels.

Table 6. RESUMPTION OF ONSITE ACTIVITIES



Note: 3 churches responded "Not Applicable".

There are a few possible reasons for this "shortfall":

1. The continued availability of Live-Streamed services⁴. 106 churches reported that they continue to provide live-streaming, and only 22 have ceased it. However, we did not find a significant difference in the change in onsite attendance between churches that ceased live-streaming and churches that continued.
2. Very large churches (more than 2,000 attendees) were less able to accommodate their full pre-pandemic congregations and so had to oblige their members to "worship from home". Indeed many reported a substantial decrease in onsite attendance. Our point estimate for the percentage of attendees who have returned for very large churches is 61%. However, this does not explain the full picture as there were some very large churches that were able to maintain their numbers.

³ We found no significant relationship between the extent of resuming onsite activities and change in attendees.

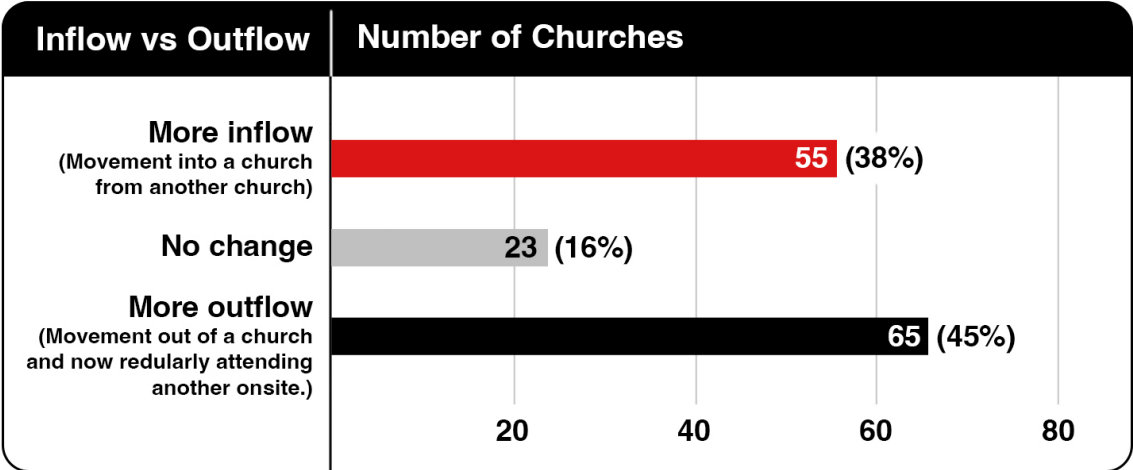
⁴ Five churches did not live-stream during the pandemic.

3. Churches with a higher proportion of elderly tended to have a reduction in onsite attendees. The pandemic situation may have compelled the vulnerable elderly to worship from home, and it may be that not many were ready to return onsite so quickly.

But it is not just “worshipping from home” that explains the decrease observed by many churches. We found that the pandemic was a period of substantial movement of people between churches – this may be the single greatest factor in our study that explains changes in onsite attendance numbers. We turn to this issue now:

Movement of People between Churches. Participants reported an aggregate of 12,428 of their regular attendees who had gone on to regularly visit another church’s service onsite. While it is common for people to transfer church membership, the numbers reported signal a relatively substantial outflow of people, amounting to roughly 12% of the total number of attendees accounted for by the churches.

Table 7. POST-PANDEMIC ATTENDEE MOVEMENT



Overall, our participants observed an aggregate of 4,545 regular visitors from other churches regularly attending their weekly services (inflow). This falls short of the number who had gone out (outflow). 65 churches of all churches reported more outflow than inflow, while 55 churches reported a higher inflow than outflow.

The bulk of this movement may be attributed to the very large churches: these alone accounted for 9,010 or 73% of all outflow. As a ratio of the current reported attendees, we assessed that very large churches had an average outflow of 17%⁵, while the remaining churches had an average outflow of 7%⁶. As noted earlier, these churches would have faced the most challenges in accommodating large numbers due to prevailing safe management measures.

⁵ This means that for every 100 attendees, 17 moved elsewhere.

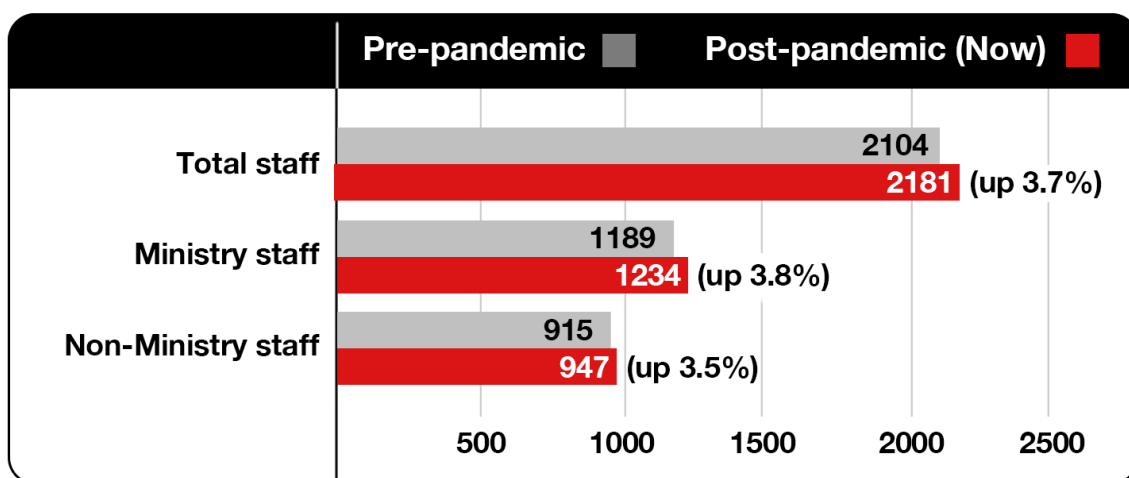
⁶ This means that for every 100 attendees, 7 moved elsewhere.

Churches that experienced more outflow than inflow tended to be medium, large and very large churches (more than 250 attendees). Churches with 250 or less attendees were less likely to experience net outflow and in fact were more likely to report net zero inflow versus outflow.

Do age demographics explain the movements? We found significant correlations between inflow of young adults and proportion of young adults, as well as between the increase in attendees and proportion of young adults⁷. In other words, churches with a high proportion of young adults tended to receive attendees from other churches and also grow in size. This pattern of correlations was not observed for all other age groups.

Staffing. We observed that the pandemic was a season for recruiting more full-time staff. On aggregate, the number of full-time ministry staff increased from 1,189 to 1,234, while the non-ministry staff increased from 915 to 947. This increase was not uniform across all churches: 43 (30%) churches reported an increase in staffing; these churches tended to be “young-adult heavy”, reported a net inflow of attendees, and overall increase in attendees compared to before the pandemic. A total of 34 (24%) churches reported a decrease; these churches tended to also report a significant decrease in attendees.

Table 8. STAFF STRENGTH



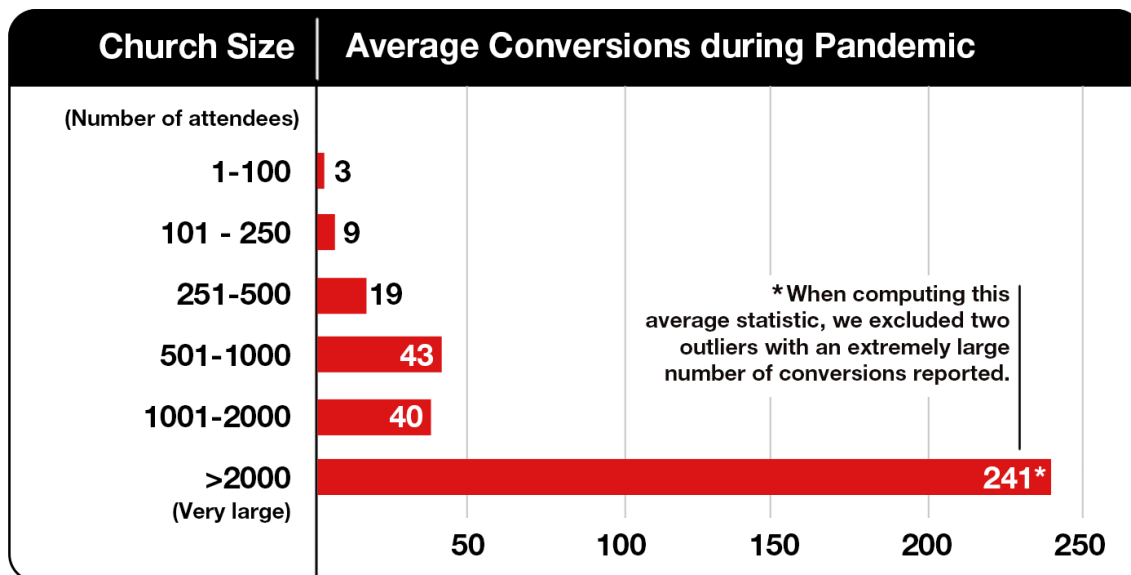
MINISTRY VITALITY

Beyond attendee numbers, we looked at various indicators of church vitality. The overall picture is that the pandemic has had a variable impact on the local churches. Some have found it to be a season for fresh expressions of vitality, while others found it to be a challenging season.

⁷ $r = .235$ and $r = .258$ respectively. Both $p < .01$

Conversions. The pandemic was a time for evangelism, and seeing people come to know the Lord. Churches reported an aggregate of 11,468 “conversions”, which is close to 11% of the total attendees. Indeed, only 15 churches reported seeing zero or only one conversion during the pandemic.

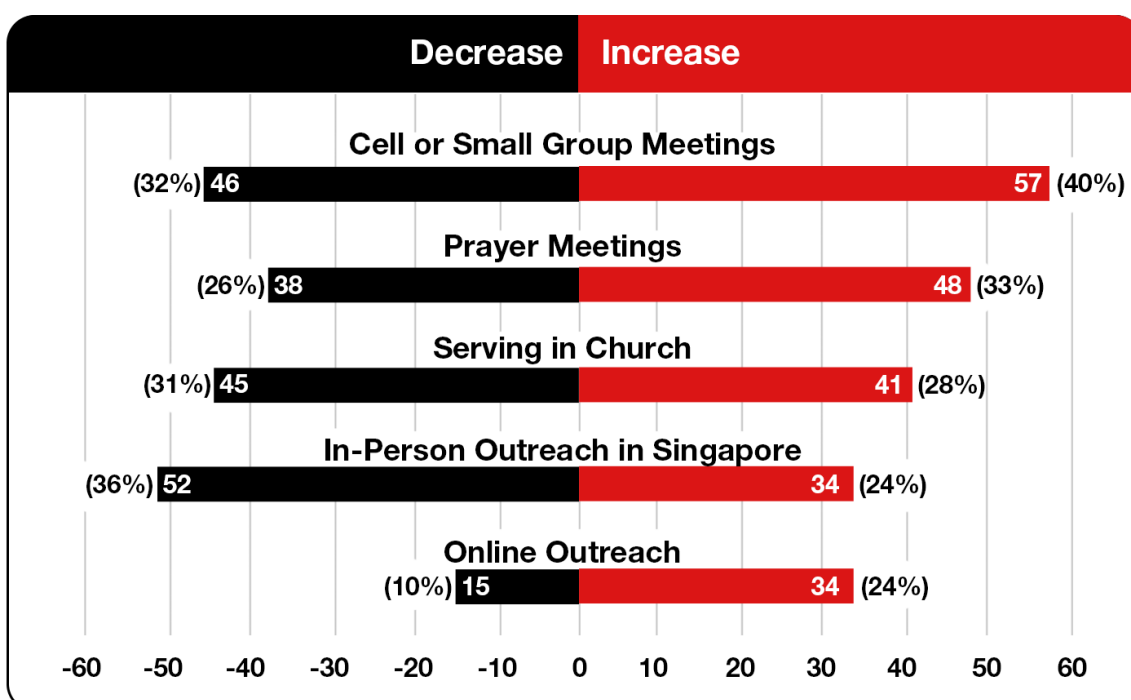
Table 9. NUMBER OF CONVERSIONS



We must add the caveat that the survey respondents may hold different criteria for defining a “conversion”. Some, for example, may only count people who were baptised.

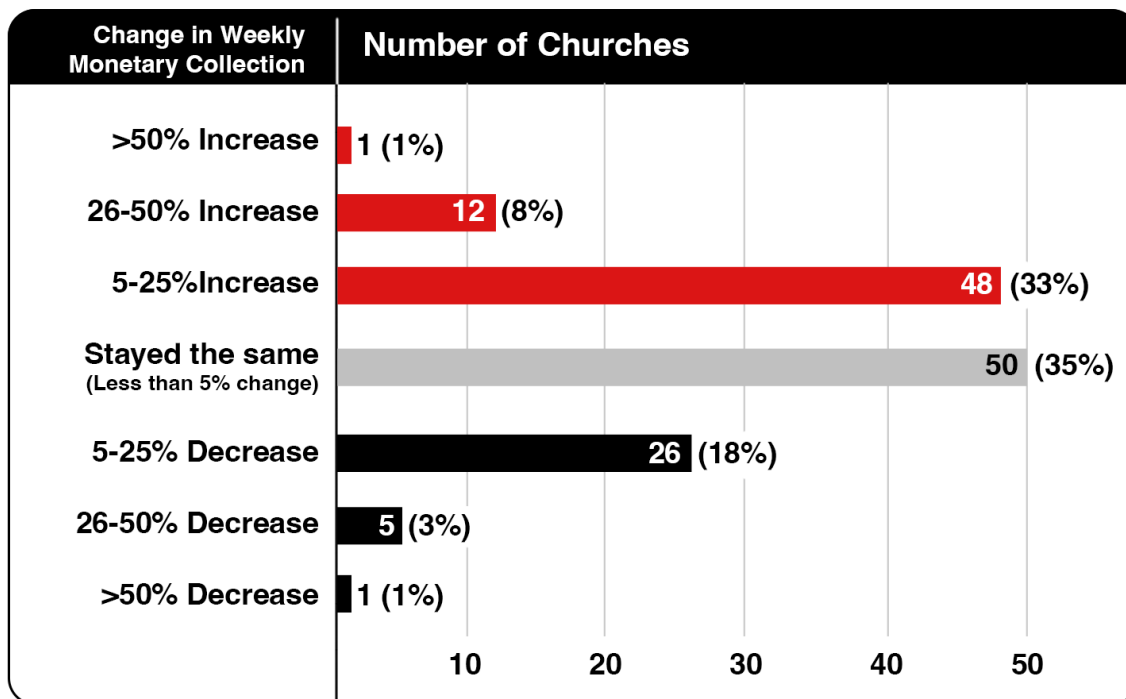
Participation in Ongoing Ministry. The pandemic had a mixed effect on ongoing ministry activities. Some churches reported less participation by their members for some activities, while others reported having more participation.

Table 10. PARTICIPATION IN ONGOING MINISTRY



Finances. We expected churches to have been adversely impacted financially, assuming that most attendees made it a habit to give when they came in-person. We were thus surprised to see more churches (61) reporting an increase in their weekly offering compared to those that reported a decrease (32).

Table 11. FINANCIAL GIVING IN CHURCHES



Percentages do not sum up to 100 due to rounding.

The change in weekly offerings was not found to be related to the change in attendees, probably because those who worshiped online continued to give through digital means. However, there was a significant relationship between the change in weekly offerings and net attendee outflow: churches that reported a net outflow of attendees were more likely to report a decrease in their weekly offering (and vice versa). Furthermore, churches with a higher than usual proportion of adults aged between 36 and 69 years were also more likely to report an increase in their weekly offerings.

The change in weekly offering collection was not correlated with the change in onsite attendees, presumably due to the availability and usage of online giving methods. However, there was a significant relationship between giving and changes in full-time staffing: Churches that saw a decrease in weekly collections tended to also reduce their staff, and vice versa.

Mental Health impact. While the pandemic saw a flurry of new ministry activity, there were clear signs of adverse mental health impact. The majority of churches reported observing more mental health issues among their attendees compared to before the pandemic.

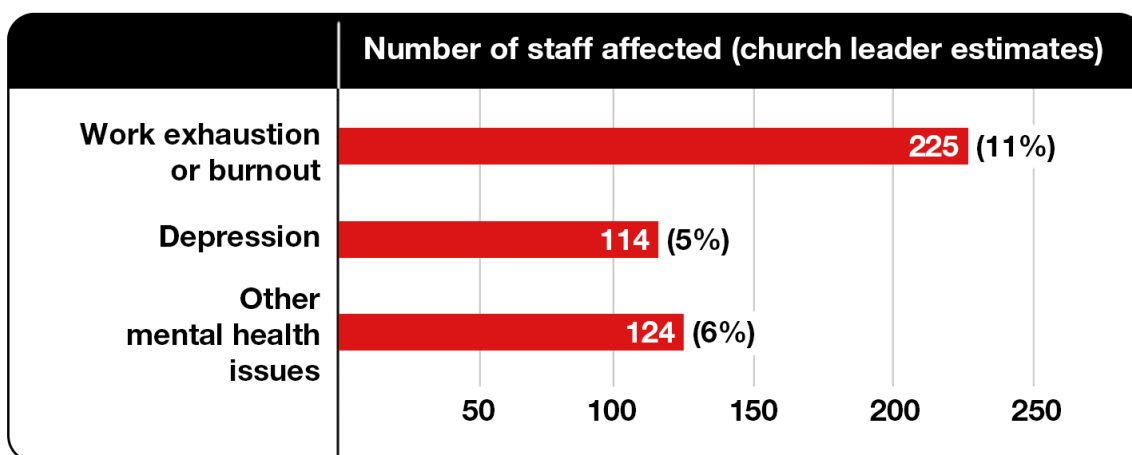
We also asked churches about the mental health impact on their full-time staff, and found signs of extensive adverse impact. During the pandemic, 114 staff suffered depression, 124 staff suffered some other mental health issue, and a staggering 225 staff experienced “burn out” or work exhaustion.

In the “best case” (granting the possibility of double- or triple-counting), this means that 1 out of every 8 full-time staff suffered an adverse mental health outcome. In the worst case (i.e. assuming no double or triple counting), this means that 1 out of every 4.5 full-time staff suffered an adverse mental health outcome.

Almost half – 64 (44%) churches – reported no staff having any mental health impact⁸.

Table 12. CHURCH STAFF MENTAL HEALTH

Of the total 2,014 staff in the churches surveyed, their church leaders estimated that up to 22% suffered adverse mental health impact during the pandemic.



ADAPTATION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

The pandemic was an engine for change and adaptation for the church. Most churches adapted to operating either entirely online or in hybrid mode (both online and in-person events). Some churches undertook substantial structural changes such as (a) shifting to become a “house-group” church, or (b) a multi-congregational church. Almost all churches (94%) have moved half or more of their activities back onsite or in hybrid mode.

New Ministry Initiatives. Churches also reported initiating new ways for pastoral care and for outreach. The vast majority of the churches (127; 88%) explored new ways of caring for their members.

⁸ We wondered if the ratio of attendees to staff might be a factor – that is, do churches with a relatively large number of attendees per staff member find more negative mental health impact on their members, and vice versa? However, we found no significant relationship between mental health impact and attendee-staff ratio.

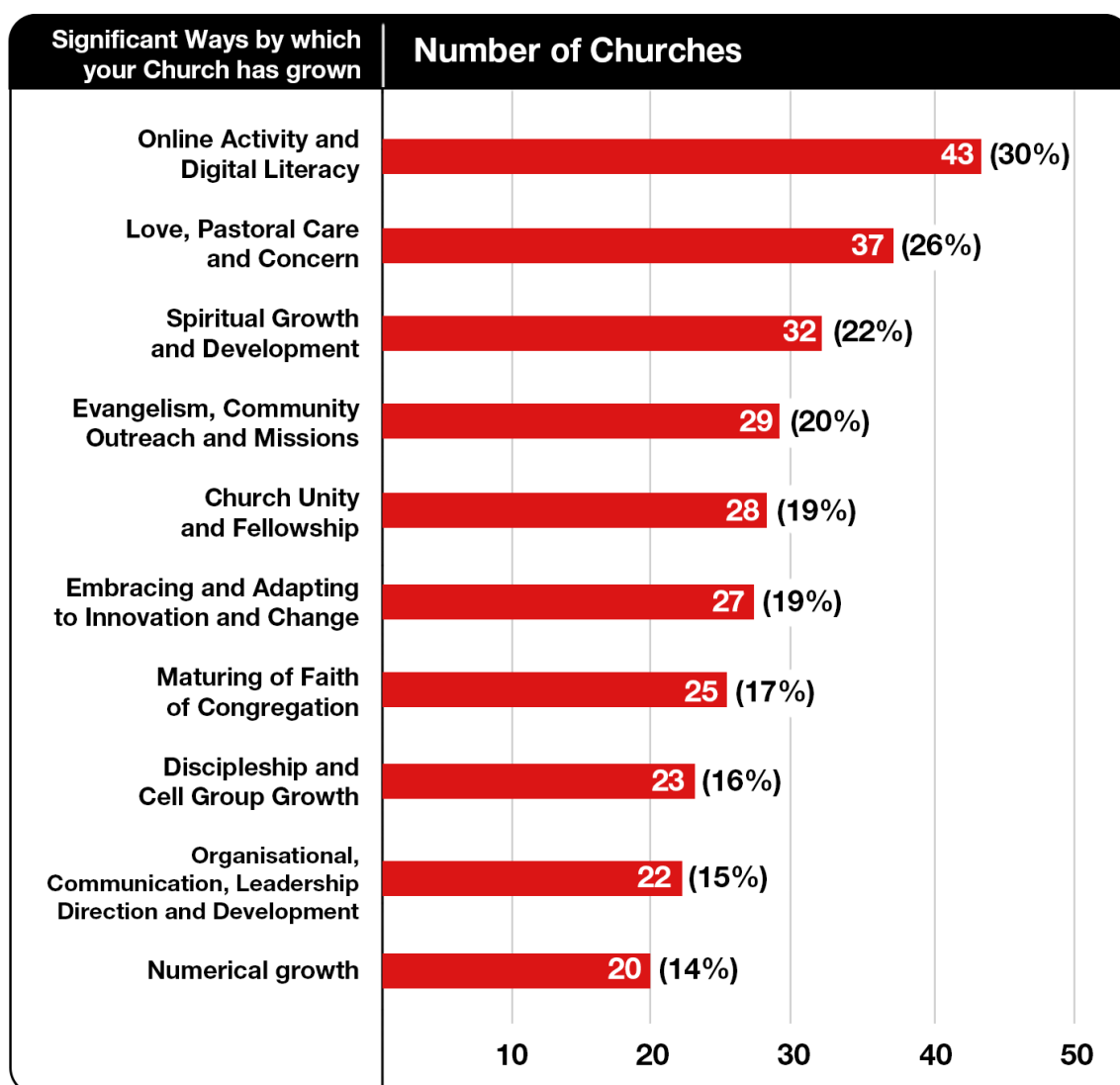
Three-quarters of churches (108, or 75%) reported undertaking at least one outreach initiative, while 27 (19%) churches reported doing a full range of outreach initiatives (from their immediate neighbourhood to overseas missions). About half (70, or 49%) churches reported initiating new ways to reach their immediate neighbourhood, while a similar number (71, or 49%) churches reported initiating new ways to reach communities in Singapore beyond their immediate neighbourhood.

There were even 46 (32%) churches that undertook new initiatives beyond Singapore. The pandemic was not a time for sitting back and doing nothing.

We also found that churches that reported an increase in participation in its existing activities were more likely to undertake new missions and pastoral care initiatives.

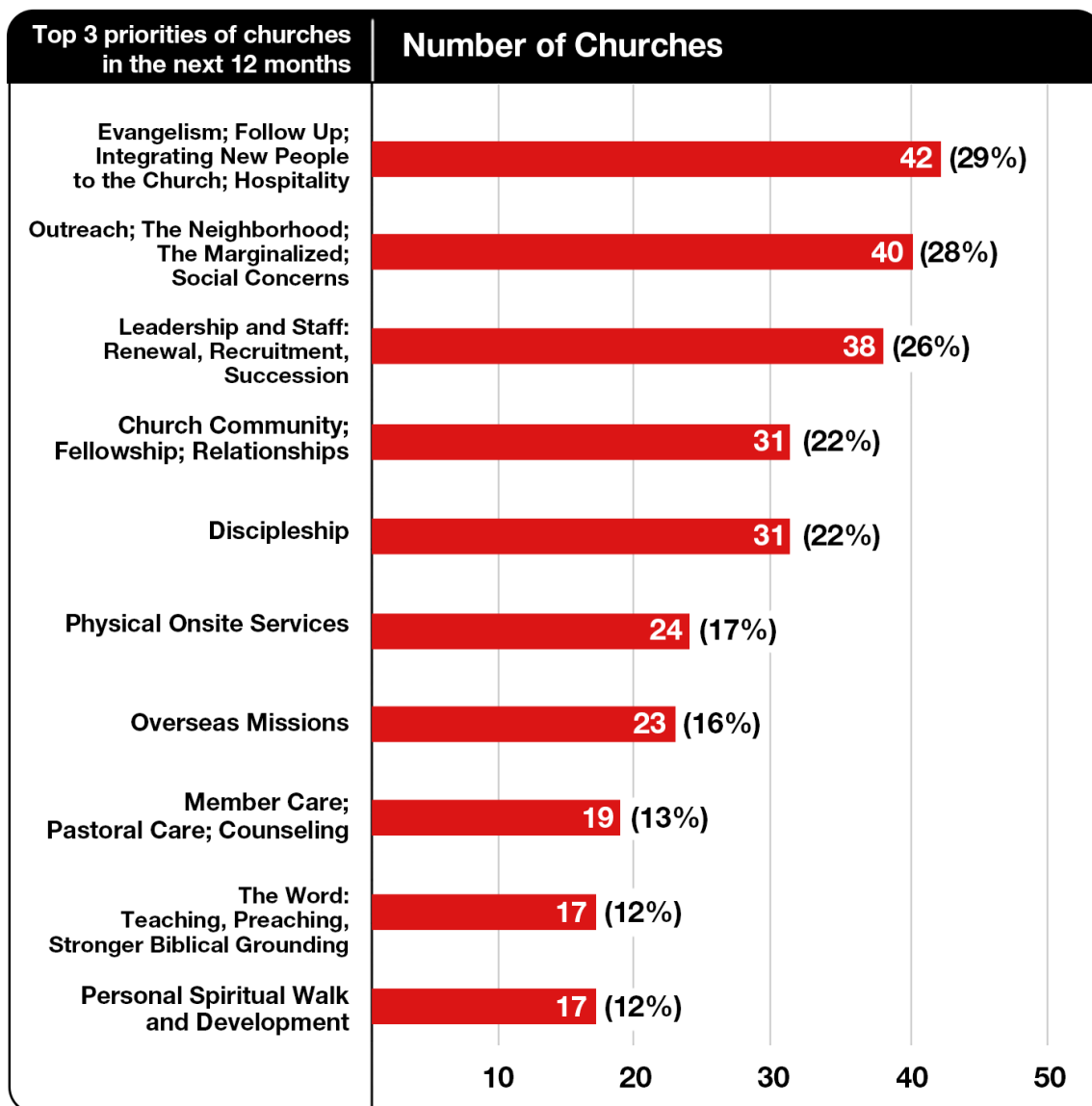
Reflecting on the Pandemic. We asked our survey respondents to reflect on the most significant ways in which they have seen their church grow, with growth being interpreted in a broad sense. These were the top 10 growth areas identified:

Table 13. PERCEPTIONS OF CHURCH GROWTH



Looking Ahead – Top Priorities of Church Leaders. We also asked respondents to identify their top priorities for the next 12 months (from the time of taking the survey). Here were the top 10:

Table 14. PRIORITIES OF CHURCH LEADERS



Finally, in order to get some sense of the outlook of church leaders, we asked them to share the emotions they have as they reflect on the season that their church is in. The top 7 words were: *Hopeful, Excited, Thankful, Grateful, Anticipative, Joyful* and *Tired*.

The interpretation of the word “Hopeful” may be nuanced depending on the other emotions cited by the leader: Some leaders expressed “hope” alongside other positive emotions such as “grateful”, “anticipating” and “joyful”, whereas other leaders expressed “hope” alongside negative emotions such as “demoralised”, “tired” and “longing”. Regardless, as the nation reopens and returns to normalcy, it looks fair to say that the general mood of the Church in Singapore is positive and full of hope.

Fervour for Reaching Out. We are heartened to see that many churches have sought opportunities to reach out to others during the pandemic. Many continue to prioritise missions now. We hope that this continues, and desire to see all churches being outward-looking and mission-minded.

Innovation and Adaptation. These qualities were necessary during the pandemic, and will remain so as the church transitions into the post-pandemic season for the long term. We hope that this study will be a spur for greater innovation and adaptation as we come to grips with the changes that have been taking place within the Church.

Mental Well-being of our Staff. The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on our full-time staff. Looking ahead, each time the Church faces disruption and has to adapt, the staff may also suffer affliction. It is important for churches to consider how to safeguard and sustain the mental wellbeing of their staff through all seasons.

Serving Others in the Body. During the pandemic, some local churches have had it worse than others. We encourage leaders of different churches to be in conversation, and to explore how they can help one another to adapt, thrive and grow, so that we may all rejoice together (1 Corinthians 12:26).

ANNEX

**REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIRST
STATE OF THE CHURCH
IN SINGAPORE STUDY**

CELEBRATE OUR COLLABORATION

REV DR BERNARD CHAO | TRINITY THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE

This State of the Church in Singapore 2022 study is to be celebrated for the Christian unity and cooperation that it expresses. This study was a notable collaboration between Trinity Theological College, Singapore Bible College, Biblical Graduate School of Theology, and Salt&Light. It was also a partnership between the 144 churches who participated in the study who recognised the value of what we can learn together rather than alone.

As the Psalmist declares: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” (Psalm 133:1, NIV) We should not take for granted this precious degree of ecumenical relations and trust that we have amongst churches in Singapore. We must nurture this mutual trust wisely and respectfully.

Primary Expressions of Church & Ministry Challenged

According to our findings, two-thirds (67%) of churches surveyed reported a decrease or substantial decrease of in-person attendance of worship services. Between 13% and 43% of pre-pandemic attendees have not returned to in-person worship services. Only a small number of churches (9.5%) reported attendance increases in their onsite worship services.

The pandemic disrupted our primary expression of church: Weekly worship services. Based on our findings, this disruption is having a post-pandemic impact. Things have not reverted to pre-pandemic norms. This disruption highlights our current and pervasive dependence on large format meetings or worship services as our primary expressions or modes of being the Church and doing ministry. The pandemic forced many of our churches towards a renewed emphasis on smaller meetings and doing ministry in smaller groups and even one-on-one.

I understand that many of us view this disruption negatively. However, I suggest that this challenge to our current and primary large format expressions of church and ministry is a positive opportunity. We have been reminded of the value of more intimate modes of community and ministering to one another. This is an opportunity to move away from what I call “big church”, which is our overwhelmingly singular and dominant large-format expressions of spirituality. Instead, the pandemic has offered us a needful reframing of our thinking toward “small church”. Smaller modes of meeting and doing ministry may have a greater impact on individuals in the longer-term and are more resilient to future pandemic-like restrictions on movement and gatherings.

An Emerging Phygital Reality

Our study found that 106 churches (74%) continue to offer live-streamed services even as

many have restarted in-person worship services. In fact, a significant minority of 27 churches (19%) reported that they have only resumed half or less than half of their in-person activities. The pandemic has supercharged the process of churches engaging with new technologies and digital modes of conducting worship services, meetings and various forms of ministry.

Digital modes and new technologies are not going away. Furthermore, we are now increasingly living and ministering in both physical and digital modes. This hybrid or dual mode is an emerging “phygital” reality. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. We already use digital modes of payment when we buy food in hawker centres, and play games on our phones that interact with the physical world.

Churches can no longer ignore the importance and impact of emerging technologies, digital platforms and phygital interactions. The persistence of our online offerings is testament to this new reality. New patterns of life are being shaped in the workplace, in schools, in homes and in our churches. There are real benefits of convenience; savings in terms of costs, travel, and time; and newfound accessibility for different groups of persons. Phygital realities offer new possibilities for both missions and discipleship.

Innovation or Back to the Old Normal?

Churches in this study reported a flurry of innovation and new ministry experiments catalysed by the pandemic. A majority of churches (88%) experimented with new ways of caring for their members. Almost half of the churches surveyed (49%) tried new ways of outreach in their immediate neighbourhood. Another half (49%) initiated new approaches to reaching those beyond their immediate neighbourhood. A third of churches (32%) started new missions work overseas.

While no comparative data is available vis-à-vis pre-pandemic levels of innovation, these are impressive and encouraging statistics. Amid relentless adjustments to new protocols during pandemic times, our churches proved to be resilient and innovative. The question is: Will we now revert to the old normal, or will we continue to innovate?

Critical Reflection Work by Local Churches

The above are just brief and preliminary notes. I look forward to engaging in deeper analysis of the data alongside local churches in the coming months. For this reason, I do not wish to overly colour the varied perspectives, assessments and analyses that individual pastors and local churches are going to bring to the table as they view and digest the data of this study.

I want to emphasise the importance of your ground-up response and reflection. Your critical engagement with the data will be a very important benefit of having such a study and adds a critical layer of analysis and understanding for your local congregations and the Church in Singapore as a whole. The work of the research team ends here for now, but the work of critical reflection, spiritual discernment and timely decisions by individual churches begins.

TWO HOPEFULS AND ONE CONCERN

DR KWA KIEM KWOK | BIBLICAL GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

To be hopeful is to be able to see the good that is there. To be hopeful is to know that in the small things, God is working good and growth, if we are attentive to it. To be hopeful is to be aware that while there is sin, evil forces and human foolishness which can all work against God's will, they will not prevail. So, despite setbacks, we continue to live in hope. Hope, not in ourselves, but in the goodness and grace of God.

First, I am hopeful for the Church because, when forced by circumstances, the Church could adapt. The Church has shown that she is generally not moribund nor stuck in a particular mould. Sure, some churches adapted better than others, but we all had to adapt, and we did. As individuals and as corporate bodies we adapted in various ways. So it is not as if the Church cannot change, or "we've always done it this way". We pivoted. And church leaders led their members and congregations to that change. Very quickly, we learned how to record ourselves and hold online services. We learned to adapt each week as safe management guidelines changed.

So we can say that we are adaptable. We just need to hold on to our traditions in a good way, so that even when we adapt and pivot, we continue to hold on to what is important. We don't just take on new things for expedience, or convenience, but we balance that need to be adaptable with our conviction to hold on to our traditions.

Secondly, I am hopeful because I see signs in these last two years that the church is growing. And growing in various ways, not merely in numbers. Maybe the past two years of inactivity and lying fallow has spurred and given birth to new initiatives, which is a good thing.

Recently I took part in a first conference on Creation Care. This was a ground-up initiative by a group of people who are passionate about caring for creation and who put together a whole-day conference to discuss the topic holistically. Later this month, Micah Singapore will have another conversation, this time on Christian hospitality. Again, here is a bunch of volunteers and a ground-up initiative. Both these groups are passionate about these causes and there are people who will carry these out.

These two events augur well for the church as a whole. If we have a broad view of the church – that it's not just about my local church – but also includes the broader church, then I think we are in good stead. After all, we are all here representing parts of the wider church – the theological institutions whose task is to equip the Church, and the Thirst Collective (including *Salt&Light*) which seeks to tell the stories of the Church.

I also have one concern that comes out of this study. My concern is whether we are too quick to “go back to normal” without deeply taking in the lessons we have learnt these past two years.

This pandemic forced us into change. Two years ago, we were all going about in happy, busy ways, and then we were stopped in our tracks by a deadly virus. We spent much time in isolation reflecting and figuring out how to go forward, what to do going forward. Because we were forced to slow down, many of us spent time thinking, reflecting, going deeper into God’s Word, perhaps in prayer, or in more meaningful relationships with other people. All that is good.

But now that things are opening up, we’ve gone back to our happy, busy lives, and all our reflections and thinking of the past two years seems to be forgotten. I am concerned that, in our eagerness to go back to travelling and doing things in person, we’ve forgotten the lessons we have learned, or should have learned, during the pandemic.

Could the past two years be indications for us to rethink how we do Church? Is this a time for us, not just to go back to the way it was in the past, but to think: What is Church? How should we be Church? What are some of the practices we need to do away with? What are some new practices we need to take on?

For example, we are keen to bring people back to onsite church services and activities, so churches have ramped up all kinds of activities. Some people come back, but some don’t. Perhaps they have gone somewhere else during the pandemic.

Have you asked them why? Have you reached out to those whom you know, or who have stopped coming, and asked them, gently, pastorally, why? Why are they not coming back? They could give you some important insights into church which may have arisen in the past two years which you need to take note of.

One older man in my church says that he prefers watching services online, and he does not come back to onsite services because he is getting hard of hearing and it’s easier to hear online. When we hear this we think: Oh, let’s make the worship services LOUDER so that he can hear. Or should we think of creative ways to use more of our other senses, such as sight and smell, maybe improve our visuals, so that those who are hard of hearing can participate with their other senses?

Has the pandemic taught us to do church in new ways?

Now that we have this report, let’s see how we can continue to do Church, and be Church, in a way that glorifies the Lord, for that certainly must be our aim.

REFLECTIONS THROUGH A POST-EXILIC LENS

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I want to express my heartfelt thanks to the wonderful band of brothers and sisters that I have had the pleasure of co-labouring with this past half year. God brought us together through sharing a meal out of love for the Church and concern over how the pandemic has touched our lives. This kindred spirit has been a blessing and I hope that this unity of Spirit to strengthen churches in Singapore will only continue to expand as the study is released.

The study should help us see that we are not alone, but are all sharing the same experiences and facing the same challenges. In the 21st-Century context, where nations rage, the tides of social change roar, and uncertainties swell, God's family must work together to stimulate one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Providentially, I have been reading through Jeremiah and Lamentations as we were collecting and analysing data. Through this lens, I find parallels between the post-exilic and the post-pandemic contexts as the exile from the physical space to the digital space is much like the exile from the physical space of Israel to Babylon. As much as exile should be seen as a warning rather than a judgement (see Isaiah 40), so too should the pandemic be a means to help churches re-align to their true identity as God's people in the world.

From my perspective, the pandemic on the State of the Church only accelerated the trends that I saw in my study of churches in Singapore. I have written twice on these concerns, once in 2019 and again in 2021¹. I noted that the trends of generational leadership change and the departure of young adults in Singapore are part of a global pattern that has spread from the West to the Majority World. What was seen in US two decades ago was seen in Korea a decade ago and is now being seen among the churches in Singapore.

The trends are closely aligned with the rise of secularism and postmodernity and the beginnings of deglobalisation. These changes have resulted in many churches isolating themselves from the world and looking inward. Many self-identified and forgot their role as God's people in the world (see the Church's role in John 17). Ministry and outreach became centripetal, inwardly focussed, rather than centrifugal, outwardly focussed. Many churches that used to be places of refuge for their neighbours who shared similar socioeconomic backgrounds, narratives, and dreams have grown detached and apart with "evangelical lift" and identifying with "Christian values".

One group that is most affected by these changes is the young adults, which this study has highlighted as the group with the greatest movement during the pandemic. Young adults, a product of globalisation and the most connected of the five living generations, increasingly became strangers in their own church families.

¹ <https://www.sbc.edu.sg/gods-pandemic-wake-up-call/>

Hence, when the pandemic hit, untethered from physical relationships and spaces, these digital natives were able to migrate freely through the digital space to arrive at new church homes. Sadly, as the Singapore Census of Population 2020 reveals, many also left the church even as the Christian population marginally grew from 2010.

The study also showed that the pandemic was not a judgement on the Church's mission drift, but a warning and an opportunity for realignment as churches were exiled to the digital space – the realm of the young adults. The young adults became the drivers and guides at many churches, helping congregations to go online as technical experts, playing critical roles in sustaining church gatherings and activities while in exile. In the digital landscape, Zoom and YouTube became the new centres of worship and Breakout Rooms became the new synagogues for instruction.

During the pandemic, many churches once again remembered their primary role to be the vessels of “love and good works”. Being unable to “gather”, many Christians once again had time to spend with their families, to see how their neighbours were doing, and to care for the foreigners and the least in their midst. New initiatives were birthed as churches revitalised and creatively contextualised.

Now, as we emerge from the pandemic, churches once again must reflect on their role in the world. Will they “return to normal” and retreat centripetally once again from the world and the digital space? Or will churches embrace the centrifugal opportunities created from travelling outside of their comfort zones?

As I reflected on my devotional readings, I am reminded of Jeremiah 29:7 & 10-13: *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ... For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.”*

This passage should challenge us to not abandon the places we have carved out in the digital and physical spaces. The young adults, digital natives, inhabit the digital space. If we want to reach them and provide a home for them, we should not retreat but expand church footprints in the metaverse. New unreached people groups continue to be created every day in our urban spaces. If God has brought us into this new land, we should allow God to bless us; we should desire to prosper in this new land, seeking its peace and welfare.

I do not know what the future holds, but as the Lord has blessed us with a warning and a means of realignment through the pandemic experience, we should humbly learn and take advantage of the new creativities, the new initiatives, and new spaces God has blessed us with. With an expectation of hope, let us be strong and courageous and bear Christ's light into the deglobalising, post-pandemic world. May His Kingdom come and His will be done!

UNITY, COMMUNITY, ADAPTABILITY

RESEARCH TEAM | MS PRISCILLA JAMIR, MS ANGIE NG AND PASTOR AMOS PANG

We entered the study not knowing what to expect. It has been a journey of learning that has not only given us a better understanding of, but also grown our hearts for, the Singapore Church.

Overall, the pandemic has been a refining fire for the Singapore Church. It has revealed the strength of the unity of the Church, but also exposed gaps that show the importance of community and adaptability in the local church.

Unity Binds the Singapore Church

We are heartened by the process and completion of this study. Being able to collaborate across theological institutions and engage a wide spread of churches reflects a unique unity that we tend to take for granted. In many countries or cities, such a large-scale study is unthinkable. With the age demographics of a “typical” church in the study corresponding with the Singapore Census of Population 2020, we probably have a sufficiently representative sample size to provide a reliable look into the Church.

A question for us to ponder is: How can the Church build on this unity?

While the findings reflect general trends, we look beneath and recognise the varied impacts of the pandemic. Some churches have grown and flourished; others have dwindled and are struggling to start again. We urge churches to serve one another by sharing experiences and exploring ways to collaborate.

Community Undergirds the Local Church

It is sad that the overall attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic numbers. Of those who have left, many were probably already on the fence, and the pandemic just made it easier to move or not come to church. Yet, we are also encouraged that the second most significant way the Church has grown is in love, pastoral care and concern.

The pandemic has amplified the importance of community. With the limits on size of gatherings, physical services and other activities, many of us missed the fellowship. While Safe Management Measures is a significant factor, the fact that small churches were unlikely to experience a decrease in attendance shows the value of stronger and closer interpersonal relationships.

As young adults, we were particularly interested in the net inflow and outflow of young adults. The medium-sized, young adult-heavy churches saw the most increase in attendees, many from other churches.

We recognise factors such as the churches' ability to pivot to digital platforms more quickly and the appeal of content that was already catered to the young adults. However, it may also be the poignant realities of a consumerist attitude to realise needs which the current church does not satisfy, or an honest search for their own faith through other churches. We could surely do more in terms of the discipleship of young adults.

As we return to large gatherings and more activities, may we continue to remember our innate desire for community, and consider how we may better create space and time for personal connections and care for one another.

Adaptability Sustains the Growth of the Church

Two tangible ways that the Church has adapted is in increasing the use of digital space and creating new ministries and pastoral care initiatives.

We have indeed progressed into the digital age, a move accelerated by the pandemic. Most churches have grown in online activity and digital literacy, and this is across churches of all age profiles and sizes. Some have also made it a priority to grow and build on this new capacity to reach further. We have seen the benefits, but also need to watch for the potential pitfalls of convenience and lack of commitment.

Some churches turned the crisis into opportunity. Those that started new initiatives saw more activities with increased serving (and vice versa). It is important that we adapt responsively to both outward and inward needs. Churches are putting an increased focus on outward ministries of outreach, evangelism and hospitality, as well as inward needs of leadership renewal and mental health concerns.

Let us continue to know the times, understand the changing situations and seek God for wisdom and discernment to guide our plans.

Holding on to everything that we have learnt, we continue to run the race marked out for us with perseverance (Hebrews 12:1). Looking ahead in watchful and hopeful anticipation, may we ride the waves of opportunity that the pandemic has given us, so we can better respond when faced with future storms of change.

STATE OF THE
CHURCH

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THE STATE OF THE CHURCH IN SINGAPORE STUDY

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