

RESPONSES TO THE NATIONAL MISSIONS STUDY 2019 REPORT

RESPONDENTS

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Young People in Missions

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Note: The first 4 respondents shared their responses live at the official release of the NMS 2019 findings, on 15 Nov 2019. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinion of SCGM.

ERICK TAN

INTRODUCTION

- A. I served as a missionary with MMS 1998 to 2011. Reassigned back to the local church, I am currently serving at the Bukit Panjang Methodist Church as an Associate Pastor.
- B. Having ministered in over 6 Methodist churches in 2 countries, I have had the opportunity to work with missions committees within the Chinese Annual Conference, especially in the drafting and updating of their missions policy.
- C. The National Missions Survey 2019 is a comprehensive work done by SCGM and here are some of my responses to the some of the data:

INCREASE IN CHURCHES SENDING MISSIONARIES DIRECTLY

My colleague Dr Andrew Peh and I noticed the percentage decrease of churches partnering with missions agencies and/or overseas partners (e.g. indigenous churches or organizations). We are concerned about this phenomenon and suspect that it could be due to:

- A. Chasing Fads
 - i. Singapore church leaders have a penchant for chasing after fads. The challenge is that fads are difficult to sustain as it becomes an additional “program” that the church will have to upkeep. Especially attractive are the programs that work well for megachurches referred to on page 9 of the report.
 - ii. Only 2 out of the 7 megachurches that were interviewed still work with missions agencies.
- B. Franchising Singapore Ministry Overseas
 - i. Compared to the study done in 2014, there is a 12.5% increase of Singapore churches working in missions fields without missional partnerships. Cross-cultural barriers are tedious to overcome. Cost/result driven expectations disregards the wealth of cross-cultural intelligence that missional partners offer in order to realise local church objectives.
 - ii. I cited the case of an Asian country sending out large numbers of cross-cultural missionaries because the indigenous churches are not able to employ local ministry staff. The majority of that country's missionaries are known to replicate ministry models from their own home resulting in many ministries (mainly church buildings) which nationals are unable to sustain. I hope that we will be careful not to do the same.

DAVID TAN

Executive Director, Wycliffe Singapore. Former Missionary

Dr David TAN is currently the Executive Director of Wycliffe Singapore. David and his wife Sharon, together with their two daughters, were involved in cross-cultural work overseas from 2003-2013. They lived among an unreached people group and pioneered the start of a Bible translation project. Upon returning to Singapore, David was the Missions Pastor at Queenstown Baptist Church from 2014-2015 before becoming the Executive Director of Wycliffe Singapore in 2016. In his previous career, David spent several years working in the air force, NUS and PSA Corporation.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide a brief response on behalf of mission agencies. If you know me, you would know that I am generally a straight talker, calling a spade a spade. I think Singaporeans can sometimes pat ourselves on the back a bit too much. So this evening I would like to give you my frank views, hopefully to give all of us a wakeup call, but first I ask you to forgive me if you find it a bit hard-hitting.

I suppose the first thing from the survey report that struck me were the signs of an ageing mission force. I think this comes about because we Singaporeans are pragmatic or “kiasu”. We tell ourselves and our children: pursue your career, build up a nest egg, and then serve God. So with that mindset, people are going full-time in their 50’s. Of course we want work and ministry experience, but we want them in their 30’s who can “cheong”. Our values need to be transformed first before we can honestly tell our young people to “remember and serve their Creator in the days of their youth.” (Ecc 12:1).

The challenge is - can our mind be renewed and values be transformed so that we can mobilize the next generation of young people to serve God in missions during the prime years of their lives?

Secondly, there’s the growth of missionaries who go out as professionals and other ways. I believe this is a good trend and we should leverage on it. My concern is whether these people are equipped and cared for adequately so they are effective in their ministries, and can thrive in the field for many years. I am hoping that churches and mission agencies can work together on this. Churches are stronger in mobilization and pastoral care, while mission agencies are usually better at training and sustaining missionaries. Together, we will be able to mobilize and equip a more ready missions force.

The challenge is – can we put aside competition, and think and act in more kingdom minded ways?

A third concern is of course the observation that missions are done more in maturing fields, rather than among unreached people groups or UPGs. I think this trend comes about as follows. On the one hand, UPGs are now usually located in creative access countries and more resistant to the gospel. The reality is that in missions today, there are probably no easy low-hanging fruit left. But on the other hand, Singaporeans are pragmatic, wanting quick results without pain, if that were possible. So, this naturally leads to missionaries and resources being channelled to maturing fields, thus leaving the UPGs to remain unreached.

The challenge is – are we willing to go to the hard places and people groups which will mean more pain and suffering, and which require a much longer time commitment before we can see results?

To sum up, I think the church in Singapore needs to be more counter-cultural with regards to our missions endeavour. Our young people need to stop thinking they can pursue their careers and financial security before serving God. Churches and mission agencies need to collaborate more instead of competing against one another. And we Singaporeans need to be prepared to suffer in order to reach the UPGs for Christ. If we want to be an Antioch of Asia, (and I hope it’s not too late), then we need to be prepared to pay the price. May God renew our minds and transform our values!

NG SU-LING

Associate International Director, Operation Mobilisation.

Su-Ling has been with OM since 2001. With her husband, Goh Han Teck, she spent nine years with OM Ships, first on the MV Doulos, and then as part of the pioneer crew of the Logos Hope. After some time in the corporate world as a business consultant, Su-Ling rejoined OM in 2014 to lead the Global South Initiative and later joined the Global Leadership Team, holding the portfolio of Strategy Implementation.

Understanding the part in the whole

Having a study like this done is immensely informative and helpful as we consider the engagement of the Singapore church in missions. As this study focuses exclusively on statistics relating to the Singapore church, it's important for us to view this report through the context of the "Whole" –the whole being the global church with the whole gospel to the whole world. The church in Singapore is one part of this whole system. As we look at this report through the part-whole lens, a question worth asking is what do Singaporeans uniquely bring to the global table? In what ways has God uniquely gifted Singaporeans and the Singapore church to serve the global body of Christ as we work out the great commission together?

Embracing multiple pathways

The decline of career missionaries is a sobering statistic and as well the ageing missionary force: 60% aged 50 and above. The bright spark in this scenario is that there is some indication that these numbers do not mean less engagement in missions, but rather different forms of engagement. Christians, particularly the younger ones, are exploring different pathways in missions, and certainly technology and the social networking infrastructure we have today is enabling different ways of doing missions.

So the message to us mission agencies is to pay attention to the growing reality that there are multiple pathways into missions (beyond the career missionary option). Mission agencies are traditionally set up to recruit and place career missionaries. If this is a declining breed, what might be the agency role to support missionaries of the future? How can we help inspire, equip and connect churches and individuals into missions without them necessarily having to send people through us? I think this could be quite a liberating approach to take because mission agencies are also limited in our capacity to send out and support members.

Paying attention to long term sustainability

While innovation in how we do missions is very much welcomed and needed, it is also important to pay attention to what it takes for long-term sustainability for field workers and for the work. While missions engagement may increasingly take on different forms, there are some enduring principles on what it takes to be sustainable out in the field. How can we avoid people crashing and burning out? How can we ensure identities are not compromised? How do we pay attention to the social context and do church planting in a way that is culturally relevant – and not just reproducing a Singaporean model of church?

Perhaps this is an area that can see better collaboration between churches and agencies (who have built up know-how in this area).

We need a theology of suffering

One thing that troubles me in the report is the limited take up of UPG work in the last 6 years. This requires further investigation to dig down into all the reasons why, but I do wonder if part of it is that we have lost the theology of suffering in the Singapore church. It's not a reality that we here in comfortable and secure Singapore are used to. How can we help our younger generation in particular comprehend that suffering and persecution is part and parcel of the call to missions, as was reflected in the model of the early church? How might we reframe our mission policies if we understood that embracing risks is part of the commitment to go to the unreached?

YOUNG PEOPLE IN MISSIONS

Caleb Leong assists with cross-cultural revival and the equipping of pastors and marketplace leaders under Frontierworks.

Matthew Tan is an evangelist with a healing ministry.

Kenneth Heng runs a social agency called solve n+1, facilitating projects with missionaries for social good.

Heidi Tan has worked in the education and social sectors for the past eight years - on the ground, and in policy and strategy roles. Her heart is for the nations, particularly for refugee work.

Staying Relevant to the Next Generation

Currently, there's a disconnect between how the Church/missions organisations traditionally function and how the younger generation is involved in missions work. The world today is more connected than ever before, and missions is able to take even more forms and expressions.

If churches are slow to engage and mobilise their young people, this emerging wave of young missionaries may find other channels to fulfill their missional call. E.g. churches risk being irrelevant to the next generation.

Succession in Missions Work

In the same vein, missions philosophies and policies need to evolve to embrace a wider range of work. One of the key concerns for churches with long-standing missions philosophies is that of succession. If the bar to qualify for missions work remains high and exclusive, it will be difficult to facilitate the development of the next generation's call for missions.

Availability of Information on the Effectiveness of Missions Work

We notice that information on the effectiveness of existing missions work locally and internationally is not as forthcoming. The Church needs to honestly evaluate whether our missional efforts are meeting the felt needs of the targeted community.

As the Church in developing nations matures, are we adapting our strategies to their shifting spiritual, geopolitical, economic and technological contexts? Are we empowering and transforming the community to be a voice of influence like the Acts church? Or are we just giving these communities what we think they need?

What does it look like to be partners and family in the global body of Christ? When the time comes, are we willing to let go?

Considerations in Moving Forward

With the above in mind, there are important questions that churches can consider:

1. Are there more creative access places the Singapore Church can seek the Lord to support/send additional missionaries to?
2. Can there be more coordination and partnerships between missionaries/churches especially in places with higher saturation of Singapore church ministries?
3. Should there be more platforms to update and build relationships across churches on a regular basis?

Our answers can be seen in how missionaries operate with one another in the fields. Convergence of missional efforts on a national level allows us to witness a more coordinated and united community of believers operating for His Kingdom. This means more strategic placements of operatives for collaboration or pioneering movements as One Body. This may be tough, but is perhaps a messy necessity.

Conclusion

The previous generation's ceiling is the next generation's floor. The Church is designed to go further and achieve greater with every generation. However, the next generation can't do without the support of those who have gone before. There's a visible hunger for fathers, mothers and mentors. Young people require the resources and platforms to mature into the call that the Lord has positioned them for.

We call for churches and missional organisations to be open to hearing the hearts and passions of the young people; and to intentionally invest in these emerging missional expressions. We are excited to see what intergenerational effort will look like in reaching the world.

ANDREW PEH

Lecturer in Missions, Missions History and World Religions
Trinity Theological College (TTC)

Andrew is an alumnus of TTC and Asbury Theological Seminary, where he did his doctoral studies. Ordained as a minister in the Chinese Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Singapore, Andrew's research interests are in colonial mission history of Southeast Asia (Singapore), the mission history of East Asia (particularly Japanese Christianity) as well as the intersection between globalisation and mission praxes in our current context.

I am grateful to SCGM in taking the lead in this effort to gather information regarding the state of missions involvement among the Singapore churches. This information is indeed helpful in providing a basic starting point to better appreciate the manner in which the church in Singapore is involved in the mission of God in this part of the world.

It is heartening to note two positive developments from the data gathered. The first is that the younger generation (millennials) are generally not disinterested in missions. (Note: the double negative is intentional). There is also a trend towards engaging new strategies in light of socio-political developments to in this part of the world, especially through business as missions (BaM).

The findings raise some potential concerns, the first of which is the ubiquity of short term missions (STMs) among the churches surveyed. The almost faddish and uncritical adoption of these trips has been the subject of quite a few studies and many publications. I recommend Brian Howell's Short Term Mission and Timothy Tennent's incisive article (<https://timothytennent.com/2010/04/29/top-ten-mission-trends-in-the-21st-century-pros-and-cons-of-short-term-missions/>). The current preoccupation with STMs is symptomatic of the underlying malaise of a fixation to get to an 'instant solution' without the necessary dogged diligence of a long-term commitment. The corollary effect is a decrease of partnerships with missions agencies in the sending of long term missionaries. The data seems to support such a disturbing trend. My caution is this: with regards to STMs, there is no need "to keep up with the Joneses", there is no need to be 'kiasu'! Ubiquity does not necessarily define utility; prevalent and popular is not to be uncritically assumed as principal and profitable!

A second concern is the trend of going and doing it alone. With the rise of independent and megachurch movement, this has weakened the partnership with the mission sending agencies, and even among the local churches of the mainline denominations, there is a growing incidence of sending their local missionaries instead of developing partnerships. All this raises the potential of fragmenting the body of Christ in our preoccupation of building local chapters of our individual churches rather than establishing the kingdom of God, through partnerships.

A more worrying concern is the issue of inadequate theological and missiological preparation for those involved in missions in the local church. In a context where the exigencies on the mission field seem to rule the day, pastors and church leaders respond to meeting those needs with short term measures, such as dispatching more STMs or even sending long term missionaries who are inadequately prepared for the mission field. What is perplexing is that if partnering with God in missions is important, why are we not investing in more rigorous theological education (such as an MDiv) to better equip them missiologically? Why are we content to shortchange the people we are ministering to on the field by sending people who may be passionate but are perhaps ill-prepared for the challenges in the mission field? Would we ordain candidates as pastors, who are similarly ill-equipped for pastoral ministry; thinking perhaps a 3-month training or a year-long evening course should suffice? If not, what is stopping us from investing our best to equip the missionary with a more rigorous equipping, such that we send only our crème de la crème? To opt for any less is perhaps shortchanging the One who calls us to His mission.

LAWRENCE KO

National Director, Singapore Centre for Global Missions

The NMS 2019 saw the participation of 158 churches, with less than a third of the churches in Singapore responding including those from some denominations and traditions that are active in missions. However, it is heartening to note that most of the mainline denominational churches and a significant number of megachurches responded, contributing to a good sample of the diversity of churches in this study. The absolute number of career missionaries sent from Singapore continues to elude us and will require another exercise to gather and analyse this data.

Generally Singapore churches have been responsive to missions, beginning with the development of missions-active churches in the 80s to missionary-sending churches in the 90s, to an increase in missions participation through partnerships and sending short-term teams. A conservative estimate will be at least 10,000 Christians sent out from Singapore on short-term missions per year which is significant. This could achieve the desired outcomes of increased missions awareness, cross-cultural exposure, partnerships with local churches in host countries and the development of a missionary calling among some participants. Short-term programmes are welcomed if they are crafted well as service learning programmes that enable greater contact with local communities and their leaders (other than local Christians) and an immersive experience of the social, economic and political challenges in their contexts.

Singapore churches have responded to the challenge of reaching the Unreached People Groups (UPGs) since the 1990s when SCGM was then the clearing house for the UPG research and facilitation of UPG adoption programme working with mission agencies. Since then, most of the emphasis has been on evangelising the UPG communities and church-planting among them. There is a decline as most churches which have started over the past 20 years seem to have no exit strategy after placing missionaries and investing in church-planting. The encouragement is for these churches to use their experience and expertise to reach a new UPG and not only replicate but multiply their efforts. This is an area which churches and mission agencies can develop together.

The increase in missions involvement in the category of “Others” and “Missional Professionals” especially among the younger age-groups is a step in the right direction as the missions movement has grown with an emphasis on holistic or integral mission. The longstanding mindset of clergy and church-planters as the ones who are doing the real missionary work with educators, social service professionals, administrators, and other support staff as the second-class missionaries must be changed. Business leaders and professionals along with clergy and mission workers who are adequately trained, must be seen as serving in missions at the same level responding to the calling of God in the field, touching lives and transforming communities as they reveal the glorious gospel of Christ. This is especially so in the changed contexts of the 21st century where foreign missionaries who are merely preachers and church pastors are no longer welcomed, with most locals having access to higher education and information in a globalised world.

This comes down to the key challenge of thinking about the role of the Singapore church in missions. The Singapore church like any church is called to missions, to be messengers of the gospel and model of hope and faith in God in the world. We need to model faith in God and hope in the gospel and use the blessings and resources we have been given to participate in missions in greater and impactful ways beyond what we are doing now as stewards of God’s gifts and calling.

This calls for a different way of life and ministry, beyond pietistic church activities (of bible studies, conferences and fellowships) to more social and community engagement; from a westernised, middle-class, affluent church which reflects western church culture to be a more Asian, cross-cultural, generous and gracious church which seeks to learn from the Asian churches around us. The posture of mission partnership needs to be changed from one of giving (especially financially and western-oriented biblical teaching) to one of receiving and learning from our neighbouring churches (from Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, India, China etc) especially as they grapple with contextualising the gospel in their local contexts.

To be effective in reaching Southeast Asia and beyond (including East, South, Central and West Asia, Africa and perhaps the former Eastern Europe) where we can still make a difference in missions as the Lord calls us, we need to enlarge our mission vision to the issues of global missions. Pastors and lay leaders of churches need to be adequately informed and trained so that they can equip the saints for ministry and missions. The mission force of Singapore needs to be better trained, integrating the many highly educated and specialists among the pews for the work of urban missions, diaspora missions, missional business, medical missions and growing social issues especially in the changing milieu of the 21st century.

Younger Christian workers will do well to respond to the call after a good stint of training in the professions and market place so that they enter the mission fields well placed to contribute with their work experience. They can leverage on their understanding of technology and media in missions, which is greatly needed in missions, especially from Singapore, a highly wired smart nation.

We need not lament about the so-called “ageing missionary force”, but welcome their continued service, including those who respond to be career missionaries in their 50s after their early retirement, if they are still in good health and can be adequately trained and placed to deal with the challenges of issues in an ageing society in many countries. The 50s are the new 40s as they say, and the splendour of the older folks with gray hair are especially welcome in Asian societies.

The challenge is therefore how the Singapore church can be well led with a mission vision and model ourselves as a missional church and a faith community which not only preaches the Word of God but practises faith based on the Word of God.