

Making Faith Cool

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Youthful worshippers are prized by temples, churches and mosques here, determined not to lose a generation to godlessness, especially now with youth gangs in the news. Young people are also key to the survival or revival of ancient faiths. So religious leaders now strategically unleash youth-friendly programmes, from sports to social networking. They cheer on good students with iPods, and race online to connect with teenagers and young adults.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr Kwek Zeming, 26, a Singapore Buddhist Mission youth group adviser, sees the roots of gangsterism in ego.

'For us, we preach non-enmity. So if there's a situation to avoid, we avoid it. We try to show youth there is more to life, and you can put the welfare of others above yours. That puts away the ego and tones down their anger and hatred.'

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

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

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

'With technology, the young witness injustices that take place in the name of religion all over the world,' she says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning from Protestants

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

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

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

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

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

Protestant Christianity seems to be particularly successful at attracting young people. The Straits Times poll found that one-quarter of those surveyed turned to Protestant Christianity before they were 20 - easily surpassing conversions to Catholicism (11 per cent), Buddhism (7 per cent), Taoism (4 per cent), Hinduism (2 per cent) and Islam (1 per cent).

Such a conversion success rate has led other faiths to view Protestant Christianity as the 'benchmark', according to sociologist Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies.

'In most churches, young people are seen as energetic. They organise events; it's empowering. And fast-growing churches tend to have substantial numbers of young people.'

Christianity, with its long-time focus on pastoral work, has also been fairly successful with adolescents who need guidance, he adds.

Says Ms Madhu Vala, secretary of the Hindu Advisory Board: 'We are always very impressed with the Christians who train their young and organise well.'

The Hindus now stage lively 12-week Project Bakthi courses that make Hinduism hip with Amazing Race-like games, skits and quizzes. Like Sunday School, the classes are taught in English. Twenty youth volunteers double up as instructors and mentors to children aged four to 14 at six temples islandwide on Sundays.

The Muslims, too, have taken a leaf out of the book of visiting Christian youth workers from New Zealand, who were brought here to address religious and social organisations by the National Council of Social Service in 2007.

Instructors such as Ms Seri Qadijah Kamir, 27, head of education at the Al-Mawaddah Mosque, were inspired by how the Christian trainers make learning appealing and how much they believe in the young.

'It was an eye-opener,' she recalls. 'The course gave the trainees a sense of excitement and possibility - that it's not so difficult to reach out to teens and be close to them.'

The Muslims are now experiencing a 'youth bulge', with young people forming 33 per cent of their community last year. In contrast, those in the 15 to 29 age group make up only 21 per cent of the population nationally.

In its 2005 Mosque Convention report, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) vowed to harness both the 'assets' and 'aspirations' of young people to inject 'new dynamism' in the Malay-Muslim world.

Since then, it has hired 32 youth development officers who do youth outreach in mosques. It also rolled out interactive aL.I.V.E. classes for youngsters aged five to 24. The year-long weekend classes cover topics from Allah's 'oneness' and life skills to Islam in the news, and are held in about half of the 69 mosques here.

By all accounts, all these efforts at holding on to their flocks are paying off. The 2008 Straits Times survey found that 97 per cent of Muslims and Hindus still embraced the religion they were born into. Another 3 per cent of Muslims and Hindus were converts who made the switch in their teens and 20s.

In contrast, Taoism, once the bedrock of the Chinese population, is now trying to stem a youth exodus. Figures from Statistics Singapore chart its sobering decline: In 1980, about one in three people here, or 30 per cent, was a Taoist. By 1990, it was fewer than one in four, or 22.4 per cent. And by 2000, it plummeted to below one in 10, or 8.5 per cent.

To reach the young and sceptical, the Taoist Federation Youth Group was launched in 2007, followed by the Taoist College a year later. The youth group's 100 active members host leadership camps and weekly discussions. It also works with interfaith groups on environmental issues and supports the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association in its preventive work with young people, says Master Chung Kwang Tong, 26, its secretary-general.

The bilingual Taoist priest - whose blog acts as a bridge between young seekers and the ancient faith - has a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Oklahoma City University, thanks to the sponsorship of his San Qing Gong Temple in Bedok North.

Upsized responsibilities

A key ingredient in attracting the young to religion is the handing down of responsibility.

The Baha'i encourage young people to perform a year of service abroad, such as conducting Baha'i study circles in Zambia, says Miss Sarih Leng, 21, director of the Baha'i Youth Office till last month.

Similarly, service is a key tenet of the Sikh faith. 'It imbues in us a sense of responsibility,' says Mr Jasbir Singh, 25, a juris doctor candidate at Singapore Management University and an active Sikh volunteer since the age of 14, when he helped run high-energy youth camps.

Roping youth into service also forms a major strategic plank at Singapore's largest church, City Harvest Church, which has an average weekly attendance of 33,000. Senior Pastor Kong Hee, a former youth pastor in Bethany Christian Centre, was just 24 in 1989 when he started the church with 20 young people.

Mr Lim, the youth pastor trainer, says City Harvest's success lies in how it 'challenges people to give of themselves'. Youngsters, especially, rise up to the challenge when they see that their contribution makes a difference.

It is a big mistake to leave young people in their comfort zone. 'I have seen struggling youth ministries that try so hard to make young people feel cushy in the congregation, and afterwards struggle to understand why they seem so apathetic and self-centred,' he notes.

He points to the example of Christ, who actively engaged his disciples in acts of service when they were still bumbling works-in-progress: 'Believe in young people even before they clean up their act.

'If you view them as rascals, they will meet your expectations. But if you see them as leaders, they will rise up to your vision of them.'

Cultivating deeper relationships with the young is also paramount. Pastor Chua of The City Church says 10 years working with young people has taught him that flashy lights and multimedia attract them only for a few weeks. 'But ultimately they value relationships and love - even the loving confrontation that brings change in them.'

Young people yearn for a strong family identity. So he offers good fathering and invites them to dine at his Tampines five-room flat. Other families at the 15-month-old church - 30 per cent of its flock of 200 are young people - also do the same.

Rap and rapport

Of course, successful youth ministries also engage with young people in their native languages: new media and popular culture.

For Muslims, that means youngsters trying their hand at songwriting contests that embody the Prophet's teachings with a surprise touch of rap, hip-hop or blues.

Mr Mohamad Helmy, assistant director of mosques at Muis, adds that imams embrace young people who show up with wildly coloured hair and denim for Friday prayers and youth programmes.

The Taoist Federation Youth Group hosts barbecues on the rooftop of San Qing Gong Temple. And questions can be posed to the bilingual Master Chung on Facebook.

On their iPhones and iPads, young people can read electronic books on how Lao Tze's wisdom applies to the workplace.

Master Chung, who was 16 when he started his discipleship with a visiting master from Hong Kong, says: 'Young people give Taoism a very fresh image. They can find ways to relate what Lao Tze said 2,000 years ago to present life.'

The Hindus are taking a fun, modern approach too. Recently, Hindu youth volunteers hosted an Amazing Race for children at the Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road, devising props with themes of good and evil.

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

For the past year, a group of 10 to 15 Sikhs have been discussing Sikh literary works and contemporary issues over tea at a campus canteen, says Mr Singh, who graduated in July and is now working at the Defence Science Organisation.

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

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

In August, during the Youth Olympic Games, Mr Chua and other youth pastors mobilised several churches to host the families of athletes. They also staged a Loudfest youth festival that included bicycle stunts and bands at Ngee Ann City.

Just a phase?

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

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

Sociologist Dr Mathews, who has studied church growth here for many years, notes: 'Among young people who go to church, conservatively, at least half drop out.'

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

Many religious leaders prefer to overlook this possibility and say the infusion of life that the young bring to any place of worship should be prized - whatever its duration.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Over the next 10 years, they outpaced the growth of the adult church,' he says. Now, the church has 1,250 members, with youngsters exceeding adults fourfold.

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

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

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