

Young, trendy-and a 'preacher'

Yen Feng

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Elijah Ng, 15, was only 12 when he first preached at City Harvest Church. Today, he is nicknamed 'Pastor Kong Junior', after the church's founder Kong Hee. More young people are taking on leadership roles in religious groups here, following the trend of teen celebrity preachers in American Christian evangelical groups.

ELIJAH Ng's legs felt like jelly. It was, after all, his first time preaching in church.

Then, there was the fact that he was only 12 years old.

'I am up there, I look down, and it hits me. I am in the pulpit - like, wow,' he recalled.

He is 15 today, and exudes so much confidence that he has earned the nickname 'Pastor Kong Junior', after Mr Kong Hee, the founder of his church, City Harvest.

Like Mr Kong, Elijah has taken to the pulpit with pizzazz.

He has a personal hairstylist. He posts regularly on Twitter and Facebook. When he talks, the teenager holds forth with statements about the human condition as easily as he recalls the names of the designers he wears, like Ed Hardy and Christian Audigier.

An example: 'People are like porcupines. Sometimes, we have to give each other some personal space.'

The phenomenon of teen celebrity preachers is happening mainly within Christian evangelical groups in the United States. There, larger-than-life, pint-sized preachers - some as young as four years old - go from city to city, and can command fees of thousands of dollars for a single sermon.

Now, there are signs of an emerging trend in Singapore, of teens thrust into roles of religious leadership.

They form the apex of a larger development: Teenagers here are more active in religious circles than ever before.

This is especially so of Christians and Taoists. Between 2000 and last year, the number of people between 15 and 19 years old who professed to be of either faith both grew by three percentage points: Christians, from 7 per cent to 10 per cent; Taoists, from 5 per cent to 8 per cent.

Only one in five Singaporeans aged 25 and under says he or she has no religion.

In line with this demographic trend, young preachers are getting younger. While the idea of celebrity preachers remains largely a Christian phenomenon, The Straits Times found a handful of young priests of other religions who were ordained as teenagers and have gained widespread appeal.

Some go beyond the youth constituency, conducting prayers and rituals for followers of all ages. They write their own sermons. They have become familiar faces in their communities, and many have represented Singapore in international religious gatherings.

Mr Chin Kwee Yong, a 22-year-old Taoist priest who is now doing national service, was ordained when he was 17.

His father was a Taoist community leader in Malaysia. 'For as long as I can remember, I have been curious about Taoism,' he said.

Zeus Percy Khambatta, 18, was ordained as a Parsi-Zoroastrian priest four years ago, at age 14.

The Anglo-Chinese Junior College student, whose father and brother are also priests, said he knew he wanted to join the religious order when he was seven.

Mr Muhammad Syamir Jamalludin, 22, a celebrated Quran reader, won his first trophy when he was nine years old. He has since collected 29 more.

At 18, he began leading the afternoon prayers every Friday at the Sultan Mosque in Kampung Glam. Next month, he is off to Jordan to study Islamic law.

These faithful prodigies share many similarities. Almost all described a yearning to learn about their religion from a very young age. They also have at least one family member who is a known faith leader.

While family background seems to provide a head start, there is also the national trend of rising religiosity among Singapore's young.

Churches, temples and mosques have, for some years now, been using social media to broadcast their teachings to attract younger members to their faith.

Sunday schools today are no longer run only by churches. These days, teenage Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus and Muslims are also attending weekend and holiday classes in record numbers to learn about their religions' dos and don'ts.

Instructors are getting younger, too.

Ms Ye Meifang, the principal of the Kong Meng San Monastery's Sat Sun School, said that the number of Dharma teachers under the age of 30 has gone up about 30 per cent since 2006.

Its youngest teacher is 20 years old. Other faith groups have noted younger volunteers stepping forward as well.

'We are online, in advertisements, in magazines,' said Ms Ye. 'We are opening more doors. We want younger teachers. Teens relate better to them.'

But some commentators remain wary about fast-tracking teens into positions of influence.

Dr Lai Ah Eng, a researcher of religious trends in Singapore, wonders if the emphasis on the young 'entertains more than enlightens'.

Young religious leaders, she said, may be too inexperienced to lead whole congregations across generations.

'At best, they could be leaders of teenage religious groups - much like student leaders,' Dr Lai said.

Other sociologists pointed out that so-called celebrity preachers would have a limited audience in Singapore, as religious people here are still mostly conservative.

'In Singapore, the majority are concerned about how legitimate the leader is,' said Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. 'Prior training and age may be important.'

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser warned that while religious people can be supportive of teen preachers, followers should also be discerning listeners and not believe everything they see or hear.

'It is important that people are discerning and not gullible. They must evaluate what they hear carefully,' he said.

In other words, the proof of the pudding is still in the eating - or in this case, the preaching.

zengyan@sph.com.sg