

## Research Proposal: Faith Formation or Faith Disruption?

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### 1. Provisional Thesis Title

Faith Formation or Faith Disruption?

Language, Christian Formation, and the Prospect of English-language Chinese congregation in Australia

#### Research Question:

What are the crucial ingredients of forming faith in children of Hong Kong Christian immigrants who are raised in Australia?

### 2. Outline of Proposed Project (2000 words)

#### 2a. Statement of its originality and significance

According to the VISTA magazine produced by NCLS, the profile of church attenders are aging, with only 13% in the 15-29 years range and 24% in the 30-49 years range in 2016.<sup>1</sup> These figures are much lower than the general population of Australia.<sup>2</sup> The aging profile of attenders has been a major concern for Australian churches for many years.<sup>3</sup>

Chinese churches also share the same concern of aging church attenders. I am an Australia-raised Chinese (ARC) from Hong Kong. I speak fluent English and Cantonese. I was converted as an adult through a Cantonese congregation in a large Chinese church (with English, Cantonese, & Mandarin congregations). I attended the same church for a total of 18 years, with 9 of those years as a pastor serving across the congregations. For those 18 years, many have lamented that “the young people are leaving our church.” Some parents

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<sup>1</sup> R. Powell et al., "Vista: Scanning the Landscape of Local Churches in Australia," (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2018), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> R. Powell and K. Jacka, "NCLS Occasional Paper 10: Moving Beyond Forty Years of Missing Generations," (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2008).

have shared with me their deep sorrow concerning their children's loss of faith in Jesus. Many of these children grew up attending Sunday school and youth groups.

Churches in general have attempted to remedy their aging profile through various ministries, including intergenerational family services, youth groups and youth services. Within an intergenerational family services, parent and children usually worship together for about 20-30 minutes before the children are sent to Sunday school. The challenge for ethnic Cantonese Chinese churches (Chinese churches) in Australia is compounded with the added complexity of two factors: language and bicultural identity. These two factors are briefly described below.

Firstly, people who worship in Chinese churches are generally first generation immigrants from Hong Kong who prefer to worship in Cantonese. Their children on the other hand (who have been brought up in Australia) do not normally have enough language skills to worship in the same congregation as their parents. It is therefore extremely difficult (if not prohibitive) to run intergenerational family services for Chinese migrants and their children. Instead, Chinese children (as young as two) are sent to English Sunday school assemblies and classes without participating in their parents' worship services.

As a way of ministering to their youths, some Chinese churches in the past have utilised bilingual services (English & Cantonese).<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, the remaining bilingual services in Sydney serve mainly the older generations. History has shown that using bilingual intergenerational services to minister across the first and second generation is no longer a

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Chinese Christian Church, Milson's Point and Chinese Presbyterian Church, Surry Hills

viable option. Instead, medium to large Chinese churches have relied on separate youth groups or services to nurture faith in their next generation. Due to lack of resources and attenders, many smaller Chinese churches struggle to make a separate youth ministry work. In comparison to the monolingual English context, Chinese churches need to overcome the extra complexity of language to nurture faith in their next generation. This prompts the question: *should parents give up worshipping in a Chinese church and attend an English speaking church?*

Secondly, the bicultural identity of these Australian-Born Chinese (ABC) or ARCs adds another layer of complexity. The ABCs and ARCs are Chinese but not quite Chinese; they are also Australians but not quite Aussies. Some ABCs and ARCs no longer feel that they can identify with or belong to an English congregation inside a Chinese church. Some have expressed that "I can't bring my friends to church." Some have moved to other Australian or multicultural churches, and some have even left church altogether. This prompts another question: *should Chinese churches make their intramural English congregations multicultural?*

Some Australian literature have sought to address the concern of aging attenders, including: *Hemorrhaging Faith: An Australian Response in Exile* by Cronshaw, Lewis and Wilson, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* by Kinnaman and Hawkins, and *Lost in transition* by Goodwin.<sup>5</sup> However, these literature do

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<sup>5</sup> Darren Cronshaw, Rowan Lewis, and Stacey Wilson, "Hemorrhaging Faith: An Australian Response in Exile," *Australian e-Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (2016); David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2011); David C. Goodwin, *Lost in Transition - or Not? : Addressing the Problem of Children Leaving the Church as They Make the Transition from Childhood to Youth* (North Richmond, N.S.W.: Kidsreach, 2013).

not adequately address the complexity of language and bicultural context of ARCs and ABCs in the Chinese churches.

Some overseas literature can be found concerning ministries to second generation immigrant Chinese.<sup>6</sup> Relevant Australian literature concerning of the loss of young adults in Chinese churches are scarce. Here are two examples. *Chinese young people and Spirituality* by Chung provides an insightful portrait of the distinctiveness of the spirituality of the second generation Chinese Christians.<sup>7</sup> It takes into account of the cultural dimension of these Christians and sheds light on how churches can encourage the development of their spirituality.<sup>8</sup> *Intercultural Competence* by Chu takes language and cultural differences into account and provides insights on the working relationship between first and second generation pastors in Chinese churches.<sup>9</sup> This work sheds light on how to retain younger pastors in Chinese churches, which may in turn facilitate an improvement in the aging profile in Chinese churches.

Despite the added complexity of language and bicultural identity, some ABCs and ARCs have become committed disciples of Jesus. The faith formation journeys of these disciples may give us clues to the “success factors” and provide valuable insights for ministry. The

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<sup>6</sup> Examples: Brian Hall, "Social and Cultural Contexts in Conversion to Christianity among Chinese American College Students," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 2 (2006); Kenneth Tak Nin Kwan, "Building a Two-Generational Chinese Immigrant Church for World Mission" (D.Min., Biola University, 2016); Helen Lee, "Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?," *Christianity Today* 40, no. 9 (1996); Matthew Todd, "A Biblical and Theological Approach to Retaining the Next Generation in Canadian-Chinese Diaspora Churches and Doing Mission," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 18, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Mei Ling Chung, "Chinese Young People and Spirituality: An Australian Study" (PhD thesis, Australian Catholic University, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Michael K. Chu, *Intercultural Competence: Cultural Intelligence, Pastoral Leadership, and the Chinese Church* (Macquarie Park, NSW: Morling Press, 2019).

proposed study seeks to explore and analyse the faith formation journeys of ABCs and ARC Christians with the following aims:

- i. To understand how faith is formed in the target group
- ii. To draw ministry insights from this exploration.

In the course of the study, the influence (or lack of influence) of language and bicultural identity will be given due attention. This study is a modest attempt to contribute toward small pool of literature concerning the ministry to the ABCs and ARCs in Chinese churches. The study has the potential to inform future strategies of Chinese churches concerning their ministry to their next generation.

## **2b. Description of the proposed methodology**

The research question will be answered through the following five phases: background data collection, literature review, faith formation journeys data collection, data analysis and presentation of findings with discussions.

### **i) Background data collection**

This phase will involve the collection of data on:

- a) Chinese churches and their current ministries to the ABCs and ARCs
- b) Hong Kong immigrants and their next generation (include various issues faced by them)

### **ii) Literature Review**

This phase will review various theories of understanding faith formation with the purpose of identifying an analytical framework for the study. Many theories and frameworks have

been put forward to understand the process of faith formation or conversion.<sup>10</sup> For example, Rambo put forward a seven-stage model consisting of: *context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences*.<sup>11</sup> McKnight modifies Rambo's model slightly and advocates for a pattern of six dimensions of conversion: *context, crisis, quest, encounter, commitment, and consequences*.<sup>12</sup> Taylor describes conversion in the context of a secular age and uses concepts such as *immanent frame, social imaginary, and cross pressures* to describe the process. Fowler sees conversion as an ongoing process with a *series of important moments* of perspective-altering convictions and illuminations – through which people gradually bring the lived story of their lives into congruence with the core story of the Christian faith.<sup>13</sup>

The dimensions/elements of each framework draw attention to different features of faith formation, but at the same time overlook other features. Not all frameworks will take into account all the particularities of the faith formation of ABCs and ARCs (e.g. language, bicultural context, living in a secular age, generation z). A working framework of analysis will be developed with the aim of covering most of the particularities of the target group of participants. The resultant working framework may be one of the existing frameworks, a hybrid of them or even a combination of existing theories applied one after the other.

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<sup>10</sup> The term “conversion” is used in many models/theories. In this study, the term “faith formation” is preferred over the widely used term “conversion” because the term “conversion” can at times convey the impression that it is an event.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis R. Rambo, “The Psychology of Conversion,” in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008), 62-64.

<sup>13</sup> James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (Blackburn, Vic.: Dove Communications, 1984), 140.

### iii) Faith formation journey data collection

Data will be collected using in-depth interviews based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is chosen because it will facilitate the examination of how participants make sense of their faith formation journeys without imposing predefined categories.<sup>14</sup> IPA will also facilitate the examination of similarities and differences across the cases.<sup>15</sup> Within this study, qualitative research will adopt a theistic epistemological framework in which human experience is seen as a phenomenon which emerges in response to the redemptive actions of God.<sup>16</sup> IPA is utilised simply to provide a *thick* description of the current situation, which will in turn facilitate further analysis, reflection and discussion from a ministry perspective.<sup>17</sup> This study will also take an idiographic approach which presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences. The small sample will represent unique perspectives rather than a population. Notwithstanding, the study can still claim a degree of transferability, to the extent that it raises issues and offers insights that reach beyond the particularities of the situation.<sup>18</sup>

Research participants will be recruited through Chinese and non-Chinese churches, and the researcher's network. The interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured manner using an interview guide containing a mixture of open and closed questions. The interviews will be audially recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Prior to conducting interviews, an Ethics Protocol will be submitted for approval. A Participant Information sheet and a

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE, 2009), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, Second ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), 11, 87-88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Consent Form will be used to obtain informed consent for each interview to be recorded, transcribed, analysed and reported. Anonymity will be preserved through the use of codes, pseudonyms, and masking. The foreseeable potential risks are low - they may include inconvenience, tiredness from the interviews and a possible sense of vulnerability during sharing.

Approximately 20-30 participants will be interviewed, with the following demographics (to be fine-tuned):

- professed Christians, ABC and ARC between the age of 20-39
- regularly attending church for at least one year (Chinese or non-Chinese churches)
- with at least one Christian parent who is/was first generation immigrant from Hong Kong
- these interviews can be supplemented with written testimonies from these participants
- For practical reasons, the participants are likely to be from NSW.

#### **iv) Data Analysis**

The transcribed interviews will be analysed using the working framework developed in the previous phase. The analysis will involve repeated engagement with each transcript, making exploratory, identifying detail that fall within the working framework and details that fall outside the working framework. All discoveries will be noted for later discussion. After analysing each case, similarity and differences across cases will also be identified. Selected details in the analysis will be further discussed.



#### **v) Presentation of findings with discussions**

The findings will be presented with quotations from the interviews and discussed based on the working framework. Details that fall outside the framework will also be discussed and if necessary, a new framework may be proposed. Implications for ministry to ABCs and ARCs will be drawn. Suggestion for further research will be included.

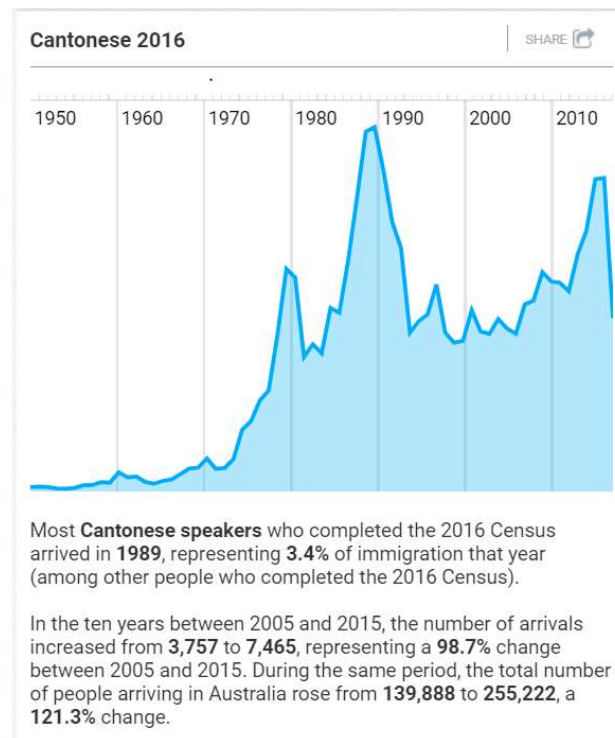
#### **Proposed chapters:**

1. Introduction/Background
2. Methodology
3. Understanding Faith Formation Journeys
  - 3.1. Literature Review on Existing Theories
  - 3.2. Working framework for analysis
4. Faith Formation Journey of the Participants
  - 4.1. Overview and Highlights
  - 4.2. Framework Dimension 1 and discussion
  - 4.3. Framework Dimension 2 and discussion
  - 4.4. Framework Dimension 3 and discussion
  - 4.5. ...(the number of chapters will depend on working framework)
  - 4.6. Conclusion
5. Implication for ministry
6. Further Research

## 2c. Statement of the anticipated benefits of the research

There are currently over 100 Chinese churches in the Greater Sydney region.<sup>19</sup> According to the SBS Census Explorer, there were two major spikes in the graph of Cantonese arrivals (see Fig 1).<sup>20</sup> The first spike was 1988-90 and the second spike was 2014-5.<sup>21</sup> The first spike was likely to be triggered by the 1989 Tiananmen massacre and the second 2014-15 peak in the arrival graph was likely to be triggered by the 2014 pro-democracy protests.<sup>22</sup>

FIGURE 1: CANTONESE SPEAKERS ARRIVAL YEAR



<sup>19</sup> Chinese Christian Mission Australia, "Church Index - New South Wales," accessed 10 Nov 2019, [http://www.ccma.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=110&Itemid=71&lang=au](http://www.ccma.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=110&Itemid=71&lang=au).

<sup>20</sup> SBS, "Census Explorer: How Your Australia Is Changing," accessed 20 Oct 2017, <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/census-explorer>.

<sup>21</sup> 1988 (8568), 1989(8678), 1990 (7647); 2014(7438), 2015(7465). Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Katie Hunt, "Hong Kongers Look for an Exit 20 Years after Handover to China," accessed 19 Oct 2017, CNN, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/26/asia/hong-kong-handover-exit/index.html>.

More protests were sparked by the introduction of extradition law in June 2019.<sup>23</sup> Protests have now persisted in Hong Kong for 24 weekends with no sign of dying.<sup>24</sup> It is very likely that a greater number of immigrants from Hong Kong have already arrived or will arrive in Australia.<sup>25</sup> This means the number of Chinese churches will continue to rise and there will be a greater need to minister to ABCs and ARCs in Chinese churches as a consequence.

This study will benefit the current and future Cantonese Chinese churches concerning their ministry to their next generation. The findings from this study will also benefit the Mandarin Chinese churches since their ministry to their next generation bear much resemblance and face similar complexity of language and bicultural context. Other diasporic ethnic churches in Australia are likely to bear some resemblance to the characteristics of Chinese diasporic churches. It is envisaged that other ethnic churches in Australia will be able to borrow insights from this study for their ministry to their next generation.

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<sup>23</sup> BBC News Services, "The Hong Kong Protests Explained in 100 and 500 Words," accessed 10 Nov 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695>.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Doherty, "More Hongkongers Look to Move to Australia Amid Growing Political Unrest," accessed 10 Nov 2019, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/26/more-hongkongers-look-to-move-to-australia-amid-growing-political-unrest>.

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