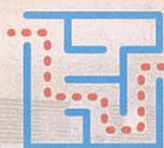


Walking Through the Valley: Supporting Youth Mental Health in Hong Kong



A recent tea gathering, “Facing the Inner Turmoil: Journeying with Youth Through Emotional Valleys,” hosted by the Hong Kong Christian Council (HKCC) Youth Ministry Group at The Ripples (Grace Baptist Church) on 23 April, addressed the critical issue of youth mental health and suicide prevention. The gathering underscored the alarming rise in youth suicides and the vital importance of genuine connection and understanding in supporting struggling young people.

Youth Mental Health: An Urgent Crisis

Heather Yeung and Louie Ikawa, social work students and members of a youth suicide prevention advocacy group, offered compelling insights. Yeung, initially focused on children’s rights advocacy, shifted to suicide prevention after recognizing the immediacy of the crisis. “Upholding civic responsibility requires accurately reflecting children’s realities and advocating for policies that meet their needs,” she explained. “While championing children’s rights to development, survival, and participation, I was constantly confronted with daily news of student suicides. I realized we must ensure they are alive before discussing other rights.” She highlighted the emotional weight of their work: “Interacting with students has profoundly affected us. These experiences strengthen our resolve and fuel our desire to transform this pain into a shared societal concern, prompting concrete action to prevent these tragedies.”

Ikawa added that “children’s rights” can feel abstract to many. Reflecting on his advocacy work, he realized many students are unaware of their rights and afraid to challenge exploitation. This led him to prioritize building genuine connections with students to understand their needs and raise awareness. He leverages platforms like alumni associations to advocate for

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change while also walking alongside students, offering support and guidance.

Beyond “Deviant Behavior”

The youth speakers emphasized the widespread misunderstanding of young people’s struggles by families, schools, and society. Common behaviors like smoking and drinking are often labelled as “deviant,” and schools tend to prioritize punishment over understanding. Even suicidal behavior may be met with incomprehension, leading to rushed counseling sessions or simplistic diagnoses of mental illness.

Ikawa highlighted the complex factors contributing to these behaviors:

“No one is born wanting to smoke or use drugs. These outward manifestations often stem from immense pressure, a lack of healthy coping mechanisms, or a desperate need for belonging that leads them to seek solace in peer groups where they may encounter harmful influences.” He urged society to move beyond judgment and embrace a posture of understanding and companionship. Recognizing the limitations of the current school system in addressing these issues, Ikawa actively engages with his alma mater through the alumni association, advocating for change and providing direct support to students, even late at night.

Yeung shared her experience of being supported by caring adult mentors during a difficult period in her life, emphasizing the importance of genuine connection over technique. “It’s not about being goal-oriented: playing video games today to talk about academics tomorrow, assuming they’ll magically mature after achieving certain goals,” she explained. Ikawa echoed this sentiment: “Young people don’t need you to give them anything; they just want to be heard. Building relationships isn’t about showing up only during crises; it’s about consistent care, being someone they can share their joys and sorrows with. When they’re struggling, they’ll naturally turn to you.”

Belonging in the Church

The discussion also touched upon the issue of youth leaving the Church. Ikawa attributed this to the Church’s structure, which can stifle individual autonomy: “It’s not necessarily about reforming the Church; it’s about creating a space for dialogue, where young people feel valued and belong. This sense of belonging will encourage them to participate consistently. When they face challenges, they’ll remember the Church and be willing to share their struggles and journey together. This can help them build social networks; otherwise, they’re just attending services and quickly leaving.”

Rev. Lam Yat-kwan Jenny, a former school chaplain, shared a poignant anecdote about receiving a call from a suicidal student. Responding with compassion, she rushed to the student’s location and sat together on a rooftop, offering a listening ear and genuine presence. This act of empathy proved transformative, and the student, now a teacher, hopes to pay it forward.

“This is a generation of distrust,” Rev. Lam admitted. “Young people don’t trust us.” She cautioned against condescending approaches, which can add to the pressure young people already face. Speaking about the role of pastors, she noted that young people often perceive them as organizers of activities aimed at converting people to Christian faith. However, she believes the true essence of pastoral care lies in emulating Jesus by walking alongside young people and helping them find their purpose in life. She pointed out that Jesus didn’t demand belief from his disciples but guided them towards the path of the Kingdom of Heaven.



Finding Faith in the Fight: Churches Advocate for Migrant Worker Rights

Rev. Joram H. Calimutan

Head, Institutional Administration and Finance Unit (IAFU), Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants
Lead Convenor, Asia Pacific Interfaith Network for the Rights of Migrant (AP INFORM)

In addition to my role as an ecumenical co-worker with the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), I also pastor a small congregation of Filipino migrant domestic workers, the UCCP-HK Fellowship, hosted by the Kowloon Union Church. We hold worship services every Saturday and Sunday in the Upper Room and KUC Space of Kowloon Union Church. One Saturday, a member of the fellowship approached me for counseling. This is her story:



“O God, I did what I think is right and just, I trust it all to you.”

Sophia (not her real name) had worked for a South Asian family for six years. She was hired by a young couple with two children and worked alongside another domestic worker who had been employed by the family for several years. Barely a month into her employment, Sophia revealed a disturbing situation: the family lacked a dining table and chairs. They used disposable plates and utensils for every meal, eating while standing, sitting on the floor, or even on their beds.

Adding to her concerns, Sophia and her co-worker were not permitted to use the refrigerator. Leftovers or ingredients for future meals were stored in plastic bags and hung near the garbage bin. Sophia learned that her co-worker, accustomed to this arrangement, primarily subsisted on canned goods.

The indignities continued. Sophia's employer forbade her from using the washing machine for bedsheets, blankets, and other heavy items, claiming it might damage the appliance. Furthermore, even two years into the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, her employer insisted that Sophia and her co-worker bathe immediately upon returning home from errands like taking the children to school. This rule, however, did not apply to the employer or their family.

After nearly a month of enduring this humiliation, Sophia considered terminating her contract. However, as a single mother supporting her son's college education, she felt trapped. The fear of being labelled a “job hopper” further complicated her decision. She was torn between her dignity and her family's survival. After praying, I encouraged Sophia to speak to her employers, urging them to consider her perspective: “Sir, Ma'am, would you be comfortable eating meals standing up, using disposable plates and utensils? Would you find it appetizing to eat food stored in a plastic bag hanging next to the garbage bin? Wouldn't you find it difficult to wash heavy laundry without a washing machine? How would you feel if you were discriminated against and treated as a virus carrier?”

Following the conversation, Sophia prayed, “O God, I did what I think is right and just, I trust it all to you.” The next day, Sophia and her co-worker were granted access to the dining table. The employer purchased plates, glasses, and utensils for their use. They were also allowed to use the refrigerator and kitchen utensils. Sophia observed a positive shift in her employer's attitude. While not perfect, the improvement was significant.

Sophia then turned to her fellow domestic worker: “Older sister, they listened and understand our situation. Why did you endure such humiliation for many years?” Her co-worker replied, “I am afraid to lose my job. Thus, I have no choice but to endure it.”

Migrants in pursuit of an abundant life

Jesus promised an abundant life: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10 NRSV). For many forced migrants, this promised life is a daily struggle for survival, for decent work, and humane treatment.

The Asia Pacific region is a major source of migrants. Of the 281 million migrants globally, one-third originate from this region.¹ Approximately 48.4 million migrants reside in various Asia Pacific destination countries, most of them labour migrants. Within this larger context, these migrants are often commodified [in exchange for billions of dollars in revenue through remittance] and exploited as a source of cheap and docile labour. They endure prolonged separation from their families, inhumane treatment, abuse, exploitation, and discrimination, driven by poverty, unemployment, landlessness, low income, lack of basic social services, and even political persecution in their home countries.

In Hong Kong, according to research conducted by the Legislative Council Secretariat in February 2025, there are an estimated 368,000 foreign domestic helpers. Fifty-five percent are from the Philippines, 45 percent from Indonesia, and the remainder from other South and Southeast Asian countries. The treatment of these migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong reflects in how they are labelled as “foreign domestic helpers” instead of “migrant domestic workers.”

Contrary to the terminology used by the Hong Kong government and many destination countries, the International Labour Organization (ILO), through the International Domestic Workers Convention or C189 of 2011, categorizes domestic workers as workers. C189 clearly states that domestic workers are entitled to the same rights as local workers, including minimum wage, regulated working hours, security of tenure, and humane treatment.

Defining migrant domestic workers as “helpers” instead of “workers” is problematic. It implies discrimination, vulnerability, and ill-treatment, rendering them invisible and their significant contributions to the economic development of destination countries unrecognized. In many destination countries with high demand for migrant domestic workers, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Middle East, they lack the same rights as local workers. In Hong Kong, policies like the minimum allowable wage, the live-in arrangement policy, the two-week rule, and the lack of defined working hours specifically govern migrant domestic workers and do not apply to local workers or other migrant groups.

These policies subject migrant domestic workers to curfews, despite the legislated 24-hour day-off. A study by the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) found that the average working hours for migrant domestic workers range from 11 to 16 hours per day, with 24-hour on-call availability. The mandatory live-in policy, implemented in 2003, increases their vulnerability to abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and modern slavery. The undefined “suitable accommodation” clause in the Foreign Domestic Helpers Employment Contract² further compromises their well-being, with some forced to sleep on sofas, with their wards, with pets, or in kitchens, balconies, and toilets.³ Given these conditions, it's understandable why migrant domestic workers choose to leave their employers' residences during their day off, even during severe typhoons.

The minimum allowable wage (MAW) of HK\$4,990 per month is discriminatory, described by the Asia Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB) as a “slave wage.” This amount falls far short of the minimum wage for local workers, which is HK\$42.1 per hour or HK\$336.8 per day. With the high cost of living and transportation, migrant domestic workers earning HK\$166.33 per day with a HK\$1,236 food allowance per month are subjected to slave-like treatment, forced into submission while supporting their families, contributing to the nation's economy, and constantly fearing job loss.

Locals often avoid difficult, demeaning, dangerous, and dirty (4Ds) jobs, the very jobs migrant domestic workers perform for the well-being of families and society. Given a choice, migrant domestic workers would not work in

1 See World Migration Report 2024, <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/>; Asia Pacific Migration Report 2024, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/25-001_es-cap-2024-rp-apmr-2024.pdf.

Hong Kong, separated from their families, enduring conditions that diminish their God-given dignity. Working abroad is often a matter of survival for them and their families. While caring for their employers' families, their own children back home yearn for their care and protection. Providing for their families and their children's future is their primary expression of love, care, and protection. This explains why, like Sophia's co-worker, many endure inhumane treatment, prioritizing their families above all else.



Empathy, compassion, and solidarity: Building a more humane Hong Kong

The Prophet Jeremiah exhorted the Israelites exiled in Babylon: “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” (Jeremiah 29:7). Despite their vulnerability, many migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong acknowledge that their conditions are better than in other destinations like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Middle East. Rights are, to some extent, protected and upheld, including the right to a day off, service, and protection.

However, these rights and protections were not easily won. They are the result of decades of struggle for migrant rights and well-being, persistently championed by various migrant organizations, associations, and fellowships such as the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-Migrante-Hong Kong), established in 1985, and the Assosiasi Buruh Migran Indonesia (ATKI), established in 2000, along with Nepali, Thai, and Sri Lankan migrant organizations. Under the banner of the Asia Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB), they continue to advocate for the welfare of migrant domestic workers, reaching out to both migrants and locals.

Faith-based communities, including churches and ecumenical organizations, have played a vital role in amplifying these campaigns. Through partnerships and cooperation, they have helped establish migrant-serving institutions, providing services and protection, and empowering grassroots migrants through advocacy, campaign training, and network building. Organizations like St. John's Cathedral, which helped establish the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW) and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) in 1981 and 1984 respectively, and the Kowloon Union Church, which has hosted the Bethune House since its establishment in 1986, exemplify this commitment.

Empathy, compassion, and solidarity are crucial for transforming individuals and groups from abusive, exploitative, and apathetic to humane, understanding, and engaged. Faith communities are challenged to provide platforms for migrants to share their stories of sacrifice, hope, and struggle.

Transformative programs, such as Christian education and nurture, must recognize that not all migrant domestic workers are like Sophia. Many suffer in silence, like Sophia's co-worker. Churches should speak the truth: while migrant domestic workers fear losing their jobs and endure hardship for the well-being of families, employers also fear losing their migrant domestic workers, who enable both parents to work and improve their family's standard of living. Society benefits mutually from treating migrant domestic workers justly and humanely, recognizing them not as slaves but as integral members of the family, embraced with empathy, compassion, and solidarity. While there is still much work to be done, we must remain mindful of this goal and continue working towards a more inclusive, just, and humane Hong Kong society.

2 For “Employment Contract for a Domestic Helper Recruited from Outside Hong Kong”, see <https://www.im-md.gov.hk/eng/forms/forms/id407.html>.

3 See *Pictures from the Inside* published by the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW), 2017: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/CFI-COVID/SubmissionsCOVID/CSO/Pictures.pdf>.

Union Church's New Home Fuels Ministry Growth

John Tanner

HKCC English Communications Coordinator

It's been said many times that a "church" is not a building, but a gathering of people to worship God. Wherever they gather – be it dedicated space, a rented assembly hall or a field – that's where the church is.

That said, the physical location of the church can also shape the ministry of that congregation, as well as opportunities for new ministries.

For example, when Union Church Hong Kong officially dedicated its new building on 22A Kennedy Road in September 2023, it marked more than a return to its old site after six years in Wan Chai – it also heralded the start of a new chapter in UC's long history of ministry in Hong Kong.

"Parable of the Talents"

Founded in 1844 by the Reverend James Legge, a Scottish member of the London Missionary Society, Union Church existed in several locations on Hong Kong island before moving to the Kennedy Road site in 1890. The building was destroyed during World War 2 and rebuilt between the late 1940s and 1970.

However, says one leader at Union Church, while the congregation at the time did their best in rebuilding the church, "the building material then used wasn't great and as time went by, it needed ever more costs to maintain."

Another issue was that the UC congregation was growing beyond the ability of the physical church to serve its needs.

"We were busting at the seams at the time," recalls one congregation member. "Sunday school classes were held in tents in the upper and back courtyards, with inadequate portable A/C and wet feet in the rain. The kitchen was tiny for the amount of catering we do. Youth and all kinds of meetings were being held in the manse."

By the mid-1990s, the congregation decided to redevelop the site with a new and larger building with apartments on top that could make the most use of the land.

"The Parable of the Talents was in our mind," says another church leader. "How can we make better use of God's gift to us, and generate surplus to go towards worthy causes and ministries?"

A multitude of challenges

While the decision to redevelop the UC site was made in the mid-90s, it would be over 20 years before work actually began. UC faced numerous challenges to get the project off the ground, from getting the congregation to agree on a to finding a developer willing to pay for the re-development and on terms that would allow UC to get its land and building back in full in 99 years.

Meanwhile, over the course of time after UC received its development order in late 1990s, rules and regulations for land development kept changing – for example, one rule stated that redevelopments higher than three storeys were not permitted on the 22A Kennedy Road site. Meanwhile, church leaders had to decide on a design they liked that would also be approved by the regulators for redevelopment.

Then there was the question of where UC would meet while the site was under redevelopment. It would take close to six years to finally settle on premises in a commercial office build-





ing in Wan Chai. UC held its last service in the old building in August 2017 and moved to its temporary home while work began.

Six years later, in September 2023, the UC congregation was finally able to move back to 22A Kennedy Road, with the official dedication service held in late November.

Expanding ministry

The redeveloped venue offers several practical advantages, such as parking (which the old site didn't offer), but

more importantly, the new site has expanded UC's abilities and opportunities for ministry.

For example, senior pastor Rev. Dr. Michele Bland says, it's enabled UC to expand its Alpha course offering.

"Since we moved back in September 2023, we've offered Alpha in English three times, in Chinese three times, in Tagalog three times and one for youth," she explains. "The Alpha course typically runs for ten weeks and provides a safe place for people to explore Christianity. We have never offered Alpha this many times and will be offering a new series in multiple languages again this September."

Also, she adds, "Alpha typically involves offering full meals, which we can now do with a full kitchen."

The new venue has also enabled UC's Filipino service and ministry to expand to Saturdays and well as Sundays. UC has also added new Bible studies and new discipleship groups, as it can support more classes during the evening and on Sunday mornings. The church also has two worship spaces for weddings and funerals – the sanctuary for a larger group and a chapel for smaller ones. Additionally, there are smaller meeting rooms where UC's Stephen Ministers can meet their 'care receiver' one-on-one during the week.

There is also now an entire floor dedicated for children's ministry, Rev. Dr. Bland says. "It's specifically designed for children – smaller tables and chairs, small rooms and a large room for bigger groups. We offer Sunday School twice each Sunday and this summer during the week we will be offering, for the second year, a kids' camp for three weeks."

Community outreach

Meanwhile, the redeveloped site has also empowered UC to expand its outreach for the community by offering space on a regular basis, she adds. "For example we make the space available to many NGO's, ministry partners and organizations on a daily basis. We hold regular meetings, classes, conferences, dinners, receptions and concerts, etc. We regularly host weddings and funerals. In fact, we have hired a staff member to accommodate these ministries."

Rev. Dr. Bland notes that among UC's core values is to be not only missional, but also welcoming.

"We love hospitality, and we have BBQ facilities which enable us to reach out to a younger crowd, like university students," she says. "We have also established a baking ministry and have used our kitchen to gather bakers to bake for a local NGO. We have a bi-monthly gathering for coffee and conversation – typically for those who are retired. Additionally, we use our fellowship hall to develop a sewing ministry."

Rev. Dr. Bland added, "It is a joy and a privilege to have this space, and we are indeed grateful for the ministries that have grown and started since our return to the



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HKCS Wins Multiple Awards at Champions for Good Ceremony

HKCS is honoured to have received multiple awards at the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) Champions for Good Awards Presentation Ceremony on 21 May. The awards include:

- FamNexus – Empowering SEN Parents via Connecting Holistic Needs within Family System of Preschool Rehabilitation Service (EXCELLENCE IN DRIVING CHANGE - Excellence in Users Co-creation Award & EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE - Excellence in Family Service Award);
- Community Helper – Support for Elders with Emigrant Families (EXCELLENCE IN SERVICE - Excellence in Elderly Service Award).

In addition, CLAP@JC, a joint application by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, Caritas Hong Kong, Hong Kong Children and Youth Services, Hong Kong Young Women's Christian Association, SideBySide, and HKCS, won the EXCELLENCE IN DRIVING CHANGE - Excellence in Impact Award.

The inaugural Champions for Good Awards recognize the achievements and contributions of the social service sector within the community, particularly in addressing society's evolving needs and emerging trends.



S+ Summit cum Expo 2025: Co-creating a Sustainable Society with HKCS

HKCS successfully concluded its participation in the two-day S+ Summit cum Expo 2025", organized by the HKCSS, on 21 May.

This year, under the theme "Agether – All Ages Together", HKCS transformed the booth into a simulated age-friendly cafe. Visitors experienced inspiring stories of service users and learned how cross-sector collaboration promotes social inclusion and supports people of all ages and backgrounds – truly putting the spirit of "Agether" into practice.

HKCS also showcased two additional booths:

1. Story Factory: A creative space filled with stories and possibilities. Service users, including elders, women from diverse cultures, young mothers, and youth, expressed their life journeys through handmade crafts, art, and design, challenging stereotypes and showcasing their unique voices.
2. Employee Assistance Programme (EAP): An interactive experience of demonstrating how EAP supports work-life balance and helps companies build positive and supportive workplaces.

HKCS looks forward to continued collaboration and exploring new possibilities for service users, benefiting more people in need and co-creating an inclusive society.

