

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **OF THE ETHOS TASKFORCE STUDY ON CHRISTIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LGBT**



## BACKGROUND

The ETHOS Taskforce was commissioned in late 2016 to conduct a study to assess the attitudes of Christians in Singapore towards LGBT individuals and LGBT activism. The population of interest for the study was the mainstream protestant Christian community of all denominations and backgrounds. There was also to be a special focus on Millennials. The aim of this study was to obtain information and insights which may be helpful to pastors and church leaders. Specifically, we wanted to gain a better sense of the Church's strengths and gaps in her response to the complex and challenging LGBT issues she is confronted with. This paper presents the summary findings of the study.

The key research questions were:

- (Q1) What are the Church's current perceptions of the LGBT issue?
- (Q2) How well has the Church equipped its congregation on LGBT issues?
- (Q3) How conducive are local churches to welcoming LGBT individuals into their communities?

## METHOD

### Church Leaders and Millennial Leaders

The taskforce identified a cluster sample of Churches. Church Leaders in the sample were first notified of the study by an official letter from ETHOS Institute. These leaders were engaged during the February to May 2017 period.

We invited the leader to do the following:

- (a) Complete a Survey Form for Church Leaders (or delegate this to a suitable leadership representative); and
- (b) Distribute a Survey Form to a self-selected set of Millennials aged between 16 and 37 (with a number proportional to the size of the church). These were to be people with more than average influence in their respective congregations. Findings from this sample may be generalizable to Millennials who are not nominal Christians, are relatively more active in ministry, and known to their leaders.

47 Church Leaders completed the survey. They represented churches covering all the denominations, as well as independent churches.

421 Millennials from 44 churches completed the survey. Of these Millennials, 147 were Young Adults (aged 28 to 37), and 274 were Youths (aged 16 to 27)<sup>1</sup>.

We received responses for **both Church Leader and Millennials** from 37 churches.

10 Megachurches (with membership of over 2,000) participated in the study.

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<sup>1</sup> In this report, "Millennials" refers to both Young Adults and Youths combined.

## Christians with Same-Sex Attraction

We also sought insights from Christians who experience Same-Sex Attraction (SSA)<sup>2</sup> and who regularly attended a mainstream protestant local church. For clarity and ease, we focused only on those with SSA. Christians with SSA were invited to participate either by attending a Focus Group Discussion or by completing an online survey.

We obtained responses from 28 participants. Of these, over 85% of them were aged between 19 and 35 years. All of them came from different churches.

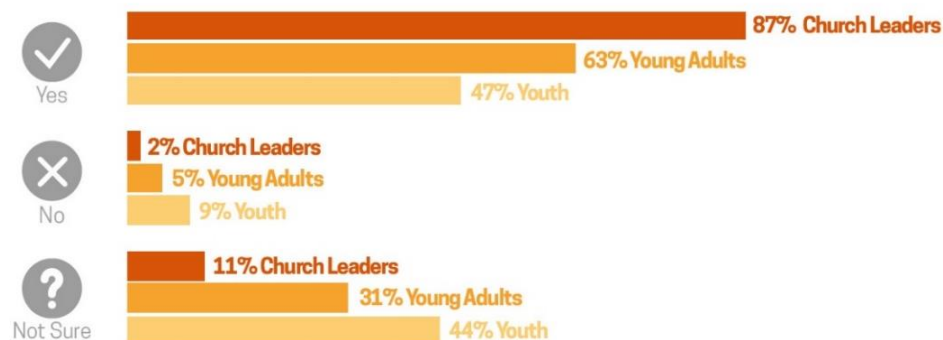
12 out of these 28 participants were classified as being not gay-affirming<sup>3</sup>, while 10 were affirming, and the remaining 6 were uncertain.

## PERCEPTIONS OF LGBT-RELATED ISSUES IN SOCIETY

First, we asked our participants about current societal attitudes towards LGBT sexual practices. Our findings suggest the general perception (75% of Church Leaders, 60% of Millennials) that Singapore society is presently “quite accepting” of LGBT sexual practices. A sizeable proportion (19% of Church Leaders, 31% of Millennials) said that society was “accepting” or “very accepting”.

A majority of our respondents (96% of Church Leaders, 85% of Millennials) also perceived a trend of increasing acceptance in society towards LGBT identities.

### Q: IN YOUR OPINION, IS THERE AN LGBT AGENDA IN SINGAPORE SOCIETY?



We also asked participants whether they thought an ‘LGBT agenda’ exists in Singapore society. The majority of Church Leaders (87%) and Young Adults (63%) perceived the existence of an LGBT agenda, but among the Youth, only 47% said “Yes”, while 44% were “Not Sure”. These differences between the groups are statistically significant, with the largest gap being that between Church Leaders and Youth.

<sup>2</sup> We used the term “Christians with Same-Sex Attraction” as it implies the lowest common denominator and makes no assumptions on the extent to which the person has acted on his or her attractions.

<sup>3</sup> This classification was based on participants’ self-report on what they think the Bible says about homosexuality.

We asked Church leaders and Millennials who said “Yes” to the existence of an LGBT agenda, to describe their perceived objectives of this agenda. The most frequently occurring points were on normalizing the LGBT ‘lifestyle’ and obtaining equal rights for LGBT persons leading to the eventual legalization of same-sex marriage.

## Attitude towards Legalisation of Same-Sex Marriage



The great majority (between 83 and 98%) of participants across all groups disagreed with the proposition that “*Same-sex couples in Singapore should have the legal right to get married*”.

We asked a further question to see if our respondents believed that “*Christians can support legal marriage for same-sex couples and also affirm the Church’s traditional definition of marriage between one man and one woman*”. As before, the majority of participants (82% to 98%) disagreed with the proposition.

For both questions, there was a significant difference between the views of Church leaders and both Young Adults and Youth, with the former more likely to disagree compared to the Millennials. There was no significant difference between Young Adults and Youth.

These findings suggest that while societal attitudes have been perceived to be shifting towards greater acceptance of LGBT, these attitudes are not shared by a large majority in our groups of interest. Nonetheless, Millennials are more open to the idea of legalizing same-sex marriage, compared to Church Leaders.

Why is there a difference between Church leaders and Millennials? One reason that our data suggests is that churches’ equipping and teaching efforts are inadequate for the task of helping young people make sense of public morality issues, against the shifting tides of societal attitudes. When it concerns LGBT, in some instances churches did not appear to even be talking about it. Church Leaders may need to individually and collectively reflect on these issues and equip the Church better to be a witnessing people of God in a secular plural society.

# EQUIPPING IN CHURCHES AND PERCEPTIONS OF ADEQUACY

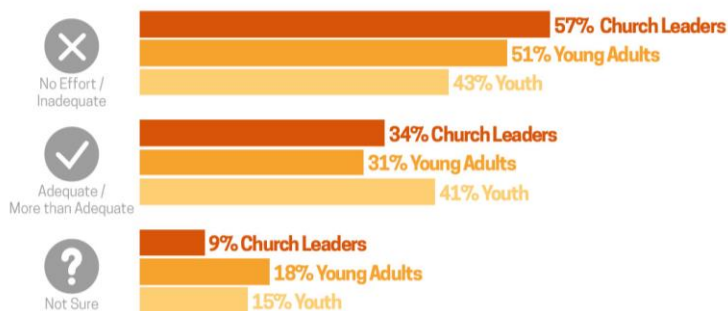
## Church Equipping

We began by asking what each group understood as the objectives of their churches' equipping efforts<sup>4</sup>. The weight of church equipping efforts has been on what the Bible says about marriage, family, and sexuality, which includes whether or not homosexual acts were biblical. There is less effort given to biblical teaching on gender. This was perceived by all groups. Noticeably less attention has been paid to the "how" of equipping – practical skills and knowledge for responding to LGBT issues in the public square, welcoming LGBT individuals in the church, and witnessing to LGBT individuals. The objective that was given the least attention was that of equipping the church to witness to LGBT individuals.

## Perceptions of Equipping Adequacy

For all groups, more respondents rated their church's equipping efforts as being "inadequate" (or "no effort being done"), compared to those who rated it as "adequate" or "more than adequate". There was no significant difference between the groups.

### Q: HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE ADEQUACY OF YOUR CHURCH'S EQUIPPING EFFORTS ON LGBT ISSUES?



In some churches, in particular non-megachurches, there was a gap in perception between the Church Leader and the Millennials, where the Leader perceived the equipping effort to be adequate, but the majority of Millennials from the same church thought otherwise. This is useful feedback for these churches and gives cause for more dialogue. Church Leaders may need to be more on a "listening mode" and stay in closer touch with "the ground".

<sup>4</sup> Note that responses do not indicate relative importance between the objectives. They simply indicate what participants have identified to be an objective of their churches, regardless of how much attention or priority has been given to it.

When asked what more needed to be done by the church, the following themes were most frequently mentioned:

- (a) More focused teaching and dialogues on LGBT related issues in general (as opposed to remaining silent on the matter).
- (b) More practical skills to equip church members to discuss LGBT related issues with their friends, to welcome and bear witness to LGBT individuals, and to respond to LGBT events in the public square.
- (c) Concerning the welcome of LGBT individuals – this needs to take place at the individual level as well as at the church culture level. Indeed, we found that participants ratings of adequacy are correlated with their ratings of how open or welcoming their church was to LGBT individuals. Interestingly this is a poignant issue for Young Adults, with their ratings of adequacy strongly correlated with their ratings of openness. The relationship between adequacy and openness was also correlated for Youths, but it was not significant for the Church Leaders. This suggests that where equipping is concerned, the openness of the church community is a key consideration for Millennials, but less so for Church Leaders.

## **CHURCHES AS WELCOMING AND HELPING COMMUNITIES**

The question of church being a welcoming and helping community has important implications for engaging the LGBT community as a witness and sometimes even as family (the latter for Christians who experience same-sex attraction or who have gender identity issues). It gets to the heart of being evangelical.

### **Known LGBT individuals in the Church**

The first thing we sought to know was how aware participants were of LGBT individuals in their respective churches. The median was one (range of 0 to 100) for Church Leaders, and zero for Millennials (range of 0 to 10).

A large proportion of respondents from all groups, especially Millennials, did not know of any LGBT individual in their church. In all the very small churches (less than 200 members) surveyed, no one knew of any LGBT individuals in their congregation. Even in megachurches, the average number of LGBT individuals known was only .89 for Young Adults, and .47 for Youths.

### **Presence of Help Channels**

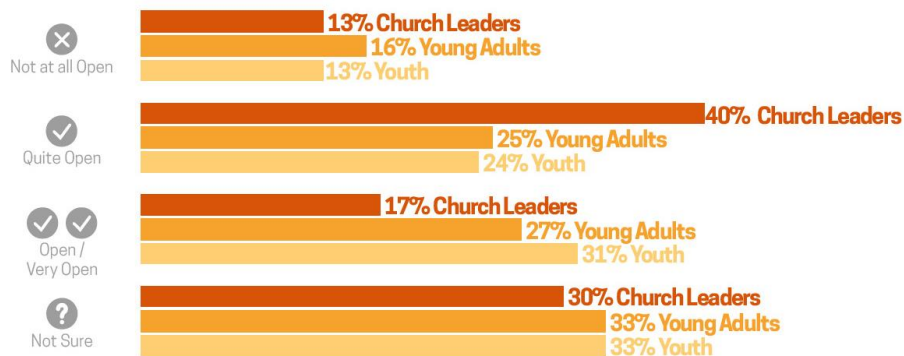
We asked the Church Leaders about the presence of help channels for LGBT individuals in their churches. The most frequently cited related to Counselling, Discipleship, Healing and Deliverance, and Peer Support. Churches with programs available tend to be the large ones (1,000 members or more).

The majority of the churches (64%) did not report any help channels.

## Perceptions of Openness

The following question sought evaluations of how open churches were to welcoming LGBT individuals into their community life.

### Q: HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE OPENNESS OF YOUR CHURCH COMMUNITY IN WELCOMING AN LGBT INDIVIDUAL INTO ITS COMMUNITY LIFE?



There were generally positive assessments of openness across the groups. However, a sizeable proportion was “not sure”.

This assessment depended partly on whether or not they were aware of the presence of LGBT regular worshippers in their church, and whether they have heard positive testimonies of LGBT individuals in their church.

For Millennials who gave a positive evaluation of openness, the key criterion was a generally welcoming (or hospitable) church culture. About one third as many respondents pointed to the presence of LGBT individuals in their church. We also found that those who knew of more LGBT individuals in their church were more likely to rate their church as being “Very Open” or “Open”. Indeed, the data suggests that if individuals knew of *at least one* LGBT individual in church, their ratings were more likely to be “Open” or “Very Open”, compared to if they knew of none.

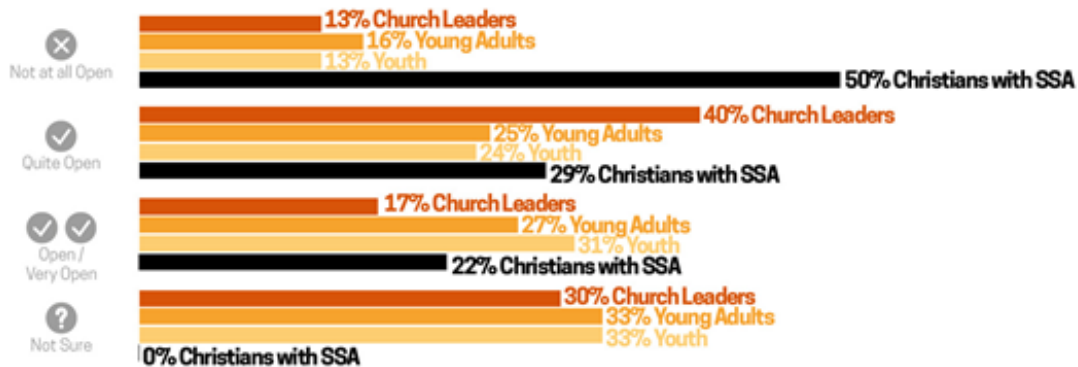
For Millennials who gave a negative assessment, their key criterion was to do with the church culture – whether or not the issue gets explicitly addressed and whether people would know how to engage LGBT individuals. Finally, the absence of LGBT persons in the church was an indicator of non-openness.

These ratings of openness should be compared to the responses to the same question provided by Christians with SSA (see below).

# PERCEPTIONS OF CHRISTIANS WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

## Church as Welcoming and Helping Communities

### Q: HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE OPENNESS OF YOUR CHURCH COMMUNITY IN WELCOMING AN LGBT INDIVIDUAL INTO ITS COMMUNITY LIFE?



On the question of how open their church was in welcoming an individual with SSA into its community life, 50% said “Not open at all”, 29% said “Somewhat Open”, and 22% said “Open” or “Very open”.

Among the non gay-affirming<sup>5</sup>, the distribution was fairly similar, at 42%, 25% and 33% respectively. This finding stands in contrast to what our other survey respondents said.

75% of our participants said that they did not feel safe sharing their experience or struggles with same-sex attraction to their Church Leaders (“No”).<sup>6</sup> Among those who were non-gay affirming, 67% said “No”.

71% of our participants said that they did not feel safe sharing their experience with non-leaders in their church (“No”). Among the non-gay affirming, 67% said “No”.

86% of our participants said that their church did not have any ministry or help channels for people with SSA. Among the non-gay affirming, the proportion was similar, at 83%.

92% of the respondents said that it was important (15%) or very important (77%) for the church to teach its members about responding to LGBT issues in the public square. 4% said it was “not important” and another 4% said it was “quite important”. Among the non-gay affirming, 80% said that it was “very important”.

<sup>5</sup> This classification was based on participants’ self-report on what they think the Bible says about homosexuality.

<sup>6</sup> Church leaders: pastors, ministry leader, cell group leader.



## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings suggest that the Church is by and large orthodox in its beliefs concerning same-sex marriage. The Church has also been active in teaching biblical marriage, family and sexuality.

However there appears to be a need for Church Leaders to further engage with the Youths and Young Adults in their congregation on issues related to LGBT. Insofar as there is such a thing as an LGBT agenda in society, then more awareness needs to be raised about it. The scope of equipping also needs to be expanded to include communications guidance (e.g. how to talk about LGBT related issues with friends or on social media) as well as pastoral guidance (e.g. how to respond to a church member or family member who has come out). Such practical handles appear to be especially important yet lacking.

The engagement needs to go both ways. Church Leaders may need to listen more to Millennials to better understand how they perceive the church's response to LGBT issues and individuals.

Finally, Church Leaders need to be aware that there are almost certain to be LGBT individuals in their congregations. Sadly, the Church Leaders and Millennials' positive evaluations of their church's openness stand in contrast to what Christians with SSA themselves have said: Whether gay affirming or non-gay affirming, the majority rated their church as being "not open at all" towards LGBT individuals. There clearly is a need for the shifting of church culture to be more open and welcoming to LGBT individuals, as well as for the provision of help channels to those who struggle with sexuality and gender identity issues. All this, while affirming the orthodox view of marriage, family and sexuality.

Submitted for the Church's prayerful consideration.