

# **Walking Faith in Yau Ma Tei**

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## **Introduction**

I first got in touch with my informant, Preacher Lo in mid-September 2021 and we met in late September in a local coffee shop. I got there first, scanned the LeaveHomeSafe app and the waiter assigned me to sit beside the windows so that I could look at the view outside. This cafe was cozy, they played Cantonese pop songs as background music. Most of the customers were not couples but groups of friends hanging out, or insurance agents meeting their clients. Preacher Lo chose the place to meet; he did not have his own office at work, so I could not reach him at any regular office. Instead, we met in cafes or restaurants.

I sat down, looking at the entrance, waiting for the right person to come in. My heart pumped fast and I felt nervous about meeting new people. Until a man waved his hand to me, underneath his mask, I believed it was a friendly smile. I did not recognize him at first, but he came to my table and introduced himself as Preacher Lo, a friend of Louis. We chatted for a while, and he inquired about my background. I honestly told him that I was interested in his job now, not as a parish worker, but as a social connector, which means that he did not belong to any of the traditional churches and was not paid regularly.

Before the meeting, I learned about his profile online when searching for information about a “wall-less” church in Yau Ma Tei. Several Christian newspapers had interviewed him before. He stated firmly that he did not want to be interviewed just for the sake of promotion. However, he was interested in my project after I explained what I intended to study: to find out about the real situation in the Yau Ma Tei community and how “wall-less” churches connect with the local Yau Ma Tei residents.

After having an interview with Preacher Lo, it made me wonder what kind of church this “wall-less church” is when there is no regular Sunday Morning Service. How does a church like this engage with the Yau Ma Tei community? What difference is there between a traditional church and a non-traditional church in evangelization? I also wondered how under Covid-19 these churches interacted with local residents. This is where my field visits began.

In this paper, I first focus on the “wall-less church” that Preacher Lo formed. Through participant observation, I obtained first-hand observations of what a “wall-less church” is like. Following Preacher Lo, I also connected with my other informants and understand their livelihoods. To have a more comprehensive view of Yau Ma Tei churches and the lives of local residents, the scope of the study will include not only traditional and non-traditional churches, but also faith-based organisations. I am also interested in knowing which churches may have the closest relationship with residents. In the later part, comparisons between the three organisations will be made for understanding how they interact with Yau Ma Tei residents and how effective such connections are under Covid-19. To begin with, let me share the background information on Covid-19 in Yau Ma Tei.

### **Covid-19 in Yau Ma Tei**

Under the current Pandemic situation, there have been quarantines and social distancing in Hong Kong since January 2020. Yau Ma Tei was a district that suffered greatly under Covid-19. According to Lee (2021), during the pandemic, there has been a high unemployment rate and many people have lost their jobs (2021: 13). The problem was especially severe among lower-social-class residents and grassroots families (Lee 2021: 13). Moreover, the panic buying in the first outbreak in February 2020 caused conflicts like the pharmacies raising prices for the sale of masks and alcohol for sanitizing (Yuen 2020). This adversely affected the elderly who live alone and could not go outdoors and buy daily necessities. Thus, there was an urge to create a network among organizations to help the poor.

There were churches and faith-based organizations involved. As for the traditional church, which I call, as a pseudonym, M Church, they provided different programmes for alleviating the burden of family and working parents who did not hire domestic helpers, by recruiting volunteers to help, along with donations from their congregation. They aimed at caring for local Yau Ma Tei residents and evangelizing through helping. My focus was on one of the programmes, the Children Tutorial Programme. For faith-based organizations, the Pray Campaign, in Yau Ma Tei established various activities in giving support to the underprivileged. The provision of resources and redistribution slightly lowered the burden for expenditure on daily necessities. This faith-based organization aimed at aiding the poor and lowering the burden on families without a strong sense of evangelizing. It worked as an intermediary in aiding the community by collecting resources and donations and redistributing them to people in need. The Pray Campaign believed that they must “walk with faith,” which means that Christian belief should not just be in the spiritual stream, but should also be seen in one's acts and behavior in everyday life. It shared a rationale similar to that

Preacher Lo believes, that churches should not just care for their own congregants but should engage and penetrate society. Preacher Lo introduced me to the Pray Campaign when I sought other churches that shared a close relationship with Yau Ma Tei residents.

It might be argued that since there is government aid, then there is no point in providing extra resource distribution or extra services. The main difference between the government's aid and church aid, including the traditional M church, the non-traditional church including the Pray Campaign, and Preacher Lo's local tours, was that they did not have any income and asset test in sorting out who was eligible to receive aid from these organizations. In order to receive government aid, people must pass an income and asset test. The churches' aid provision was not based on black-and-white regulations, but on the bonding between organizations and residents which was established through the time they spent with each other, the time they met, and through conversations to know their target group more deeply.

Apart from poverty issues, social unrest in recent years has caused social conflicts and arguments, which has disrupted the relationship between residents and churches. A minister from one of the traditional churches in Yau Ma Tei quit his pastor job and became involved in social movements, as he felt that churches had become separated from the community and did not respond to the needs of the community. Churches at the time were not involved in social movements, such as the 2019 protests, which led Preacher Lo to rethink the role of churches in the community.

Preacher Lo began contact with Yau Ma Tei residents in 2012. During the pandemic, he worked on a magazine he had established, *Happy Land*. Within the magazine, there were feature articles reporting the lives of people growing up in Yau Ma Tei, including the famous director, Kiwi Chow who filmed *Beyond the Dream* and *10 Years* (Ng 2021). Serving as the

coordinator of the magazine, he got the chance to connect with different people within the community.

The magazine was mainly for local Yau Ma Tei residents to read, and especially for those who cared about social issues. In one of the feature articles regarding the redevelopment of Jordan Pier, Preacher Lo shared his bonds with the pier. As mentioned, Preacher Lo was involved in social movements in Yau Ma Tei, such as the redevelopment project and political movements. He aimed at responding to the needs of the residents instead of simply urging the residents to come to church and attend the Sunday services. It was his ideal vision that churches should be set up for the community. Given the current situation in Hong Kong, with the inadequacy of subsidies to lower-income families and the unemployed, and little support for the needs of residents, different types of churches have been trying to help people in need in the community. This has impressed me to study about his relationship with Yau Ma Tei residents.

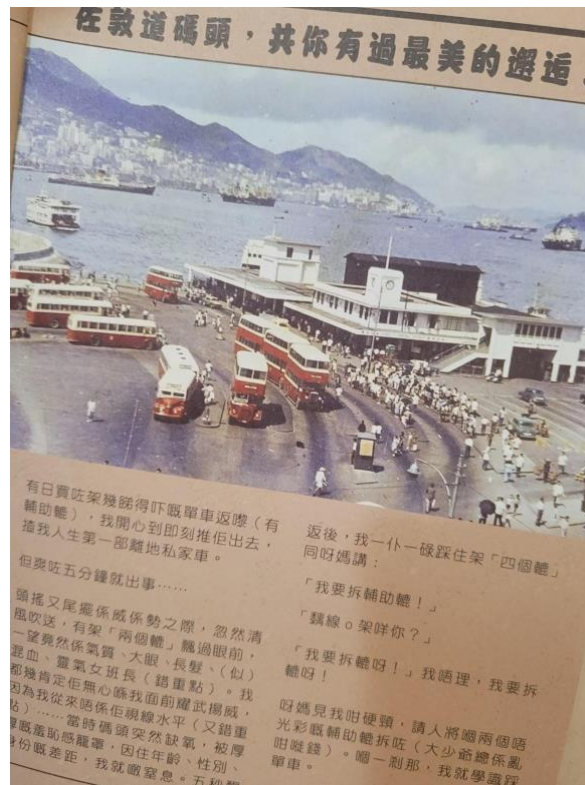


Fig 1 The Happy Land Magazine: Jordan Pier and a Memorable Encountering"

## Methodology

### Participant Observation

The research was conducted through several methods. Participant observation allowed me to get first-hand information from the field. I entered into the field of Pray Campaign, a regular resource-distributing activity. It was founded at the first outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. It is held every Wednesday evening to distribute resources like daily necessities: food and lunch boxes, and anti-epidemic tools such as hand sanitizers and surgical masks. I joined informants in such programs to understand what they were doing and get first-hand information and observe their initial thoughts and actions. This method allowed me to work along with other more experienced volunteers. It also allowed me to get a closer look at what their routines are: helping to combat poverty. My field visit to the Pray Campaign stopped when social distancing measures tightened in February 2022 since it became illegal to gather

with a group of more than 2 people (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2022).

I also entered the Children Tutorial Programme at Yau Ma Tei M Church. I contacted the coordinator, Erica, and spoke with two tutorial class teachers and two primary school students, age 10, who both have special needs in education; I received first-hand experience of how the Children Tutorial Programme runs. Through participant observation, I gained a more comprehensive view of the connection between Yau Ma Tei M church and the local community, for instance, how it helped the local community and specifically the working-class parents who have children doing online classes at home. Although my formal data collection ended in early February, I still participate in the programme, as I would like my bonding with M Church to continue.

Beyond this, I followed Preacher Lo in his work of aiding the Yau Ma Tei community.

Preacher Lo allowed me to participate in his local tours, which have diverse themes like introducing local history and stories of murder cases in Yau Ma Tei, and exploring where the homeless live in Yau Ma Tei and their own experiences. In each of the tours I joined, since it was required for every participant to briefly share their thoughts, I as a researcher also shared my thoughts and feelings. Such sharing also allowed me to have an immediate reflection while conducting the fieldwork.

### Interviews

I interviewed one of the preachers from the Pray campaign, Helen, and gained a more in-depth understanding of how the campaign helped and could not help the local community, especially in dealing with poverty. Helen is the founder of the Pray Campaign; her purpose in

founding the Pray Campaign was to reduce the burden of lower-income families.

Interviewing her helped me get a clearer picture of how the Pray Campaign formed relationships with locals in Yau Ma Tei. From snowball sampling, I also got in touch with one of the volunteers from the Pray Campaign, YY, who was an experienced volunteer in helping distribute resources to people in need in Yau Ma Tei. She was aged about 60 and was not living in Yau Ma Tei. She helped every Wednesday and was well-informed about people with or without real need in the community. Interviewing her helped my research in knowing the perspective of helpers and her feelings about participating in voluntary work and her relationship with the local people.

Moreover, I interviewed Preacher Lo several times in a bid to get a holistic understanding of how The Pray Campaign is helping to alleviate poverty in Yau Ma Tei and understand their religious belief from these activities. However, Preacher Lo did not fully participate in the Pray Campaign in distributing resources. Thus, he might not be able to know fully about the campaign. I have thus used the interviews as a reference in my study, but not as a primary source. Apart from learning more information about the Pray Campaign I interviewed Preacher Lo for what he did: his bonding with the Yau Ma Tei community and his vision of establishing more localized and down-to-earth Christianity inside Yau Ma Tei.

I interviewed two of the tutorial class teachers from the Children Tutorial Programme in order to help my understanding of their relationship with the local community. One of them is the coordinator of this programme and another is locally born and grew up in Yau Ma Tei. I interviewed them about their experience in interacting with the church and their frequency of contacting non-believers in the local community. This helped me understand how Yau Ma Tei Church gets involved in local events and contacts non-Christian local residents.



## **Literature Review**

To embark on my research, I sought to find out the definition of churches in Christianity. Thus, I utilized an article about the definitions of “wall-less” churches from a Christian newspaper. The article described “wall-less” churches as having no architecture, no differences between various churches, and no separation between the world and the church (Da He 2013). This article captured the ideal of going into the community for preaching instead of staying inside the church. This helps to build up relationships with the community between churches and non-believers and within a larger context of the world. Many churches spend much money on decorating, redeveloping, and expanding their size with the aid of the congregation (Da He 2013). But although churches may be built luxuriously and attract people to come, this does not help in improving social problems in the community like poverty and inequality.

This article was useful for my research in explaining the wall-less situation that Preacher Lo aimed at bringing about. It also discussed the issue of churches’ hierarchy, a problem that Preacher Lok mentioned in our first interview. The church emphasized the power relationship, with the priest's decision being the highest, even though the congregation might disagree. Avoiding such hierarchy was a substantial reason why he chose to stay in the community instead of working in church only.

I also checked on the background information of the Pray Campaign and how it affected the Yau Ma Tei community. There was a Facebook Page for the Pray Campaign, which was useful for my research in understanding more about their background, although I will not disclose the link and name of the Facebook page here as I hope to protect their identity. There have been earlier research on faith-based centers and campaigns in helping local residents in

Hong Kong, such as that of Hamrin (2003), which I consulted.

I also reviewed other countries' studies on their local aid activities under Covid-19. A journal article (Deguma, et. al. 2020: 363-364) examined the Philippines Catholic churches. During the pandemic, many people suffered from unemployment, and they could not make their own living. The article examines the function of the Catholic Church and its responsibility in helping with social problems like alleviating poverty financially, socially, and spiritually (Deguma, et. al. 2020: 363). Poverty was created through the injustice of society caused by the exploitation of authority or dominant power, and the study raised the question of the "duty" of the church to diminish such inequality in society (Deguma, et. al. 2020: 365-367). Inspired by this, I too will reflect on social problems and their causes underlying the issues faced by the residents under Covid-19 in Yau Ma Tei.

I have also used an article on the comparison of how different faith-based charities and churches help their own community and their mission in doing activities for locals in the U.S. (Bielefeld and William 2013). This article discusses the differences between faith-based organisation and secular organizations and the relationship between faith-based organizations and the U.S. government. The situation is similar in Hong Kong, in that social services providers mostly are faith-based organizations as in the U.S. (Bielefeld and William 2013: 469). Faith-based organisation as service provider correlates to the religious doctrine that they have the mission of evangelism (Bielefeld and William 2013: 470).

Volunteers in this article were mainly from churches and worked without any payment. There was a similar situation in the Yau Ma Tei Pray Campaign, which recruited helpers from different churches and even non-believers to contribute to their own local community. One

question raised in the article was about the funding by the government and how they utilize that funding (Bielefeld and William 2013: 469). For the Pray Campaign, funds of the KT Church were from congregations' donations. Resources were collected in the nearby market such as leftover fruit and lunchboxes from a wholesale market, so they collected these resources and redistributed them to the residents. Faith-based organizations' activities sometimes attract more participants than those of secular organizations. One reason raised by Bielefeld was that people were more collective within the same religious background, so they were more willing to join activities held by faith-based organizations (Bielefeld and William 2013: 473). Indeed, many people who got donations from the Yau Ma Tei Pray Campaign also joined the church events together.

### **Ethical Concerns**

I used pseudonyms for preachers, my interviewees, volunteers, and churches' names to protect their identities, I also pseudonymize the organizations' names. The non-traditional churches included the Pray Campaign for resource distribution to underprivileged groups and the local tours by Preacher Lo, and the traditional church included the Children Tutorial Programme. Under Covid-19, there was a social gathering ban prohibiting groups of more than four people from gathering, but during the research, there were often residents gathering outside to wait for the resources' distribution. People must wear masks properly when entering public places from July 15, 2020, onward (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020). Some residents did not wear their masks and smoked in the public area; they may cause legal issues, so I did not include any residents' photographs and backgrounds in my research.

For the Pray Campaign, people who received the services are also given pseudonyms as they

may not want to expose their identity in public and would be concerned about affecting their job and reputation if it was known that they received aid from the Pray Campaign. We also visited homeless people and where they live will not be mentioned in my research in a bid to protect their living place and avoid disturbing them. For the Children Tutorial Programme, in order to protect the children and families, I use a group name for each family unit. Most of the students are from the Yau Ma Tei district, so I will also hide the school name of my students, as it would be easy to find out the students' identities if the schools are included. Two of my students have special needs in education, and I will only describe their interaction with the church but not analyze their behavior during the programme.

For local tours held by Preacher Lo, the participants were previously homeless people, and associations related to homelessness and rehabilitation, so I put the focus on how Preachers Lo connected to these associations and homeless people. During the interaction between residents, there were sometimes critics of the government. I avoid this area in my study and focus mainly on interactions between a traditional church, a faith-based campaign, preacher who forms the wall-less church and poverty-stricken residents of Yau Ma Tei.

### **Adjustment of My Research Questions**

I was originally interested in how churches interact with their congregations under Covid-19, as there were legal prohibitions on gatherings. There was similar research done in 2020 to investigate the connections among congregations and churches in virtual worship compared to real-life services. However, I encountered difficulties conducting my research, which relates to my familiarity with the field as an insider and the boundary of knowing more in-depth conversations among the seniors in my church. Therefore, I changed to a new field and altered the focus to non-traditional churches, evangelizing not inside the church building but

through acting out faith in the world. Preacher Lo, my main informant, who has set up a non-traditional church within the community, is also cooperating with different non-faith-based organizations in Yau Ma Tei. My initial question was: How does the non-traditional church interact with Yau Ma Tei local residents under Covid-19? It shifted from concentrating on the local tour by Preacher Lo to gradually participating in two different programmes in Yau Ma Tei. The first shift in focus was through Miss Helen, the coordinator of the Pray Campaign, and the second was through Yau Ma Tei Church, which ran the Children Tutorial Programme.

In September 2021, I first contacted Preacher Lo for more information about how he quit the traditional church and participated in social movements, and his current work in aiding local associations working for the self-reliance of homeless people. Preacher Lo offered me a tour to know more about the community. On my first visit to Yau Ma Tei, I met a group of “post-homeless” people from one of the homeless associations in Yau Ma Tei. They were friendly and talkative. After I introduced myself as a final-year student majoring in Anthropology, one of them joked about he was also studying in the “university of society” (社會大學). They did not belittle themselves even though they had not acquired any degree. Preacher Lo delivered lessons and equipped them with knowledge to guide local tours so that they could earn their living by themselves.

I participated in several tours and interviewed Preacher Lo, but by participating in the visits alone, I could not fully understand the situation of the local Yau Ma Tei community; most of the time the focus was on the Preacher himself and post-homeless people but not a broader target group, such as lower-income families. Therefore, I adjusted my focus to be no longer just from the point of view of the Preacher, but a more diversified perspective, in reaching

out to more groups of people who needed help in the community, and thereby sought to better understand the differences between traditional churches, non-traditional churches, and faith-based organizations interacting with local Yau Ma Tei residents.

### **Research Area**

My research was set in three different areas. The first was focused on the interaction between Yau Ma Tei M Church and local residents who frequently contacted M Church. The second area focused on the give-and-take between faith-based charities and Yau Ma Tei people in need. The last area was the connection between non-traditional churches and Yau Ma Tei residents. My data collection took half a year, from September 2021 to February 2022. I received access to non-traditional church sites and Preacher Lo's contact through my own church pastor and contacted Preacher Lo on 1 September 2021. The research started after I gained permission to study his work. There was no fixed site for this study; when I interviewed Preacher Lo, each time the venue changed. We met on the street and he brought me to a nearby cafe to conduct the interview.

I also was involved in the local tours, which always began with Yau Ma Tei MTR Station Exit A1, or outside KT church. Preacher Lo promised through these tours to bring me to see another side of Yau Ma Tei residents. This was the busiest place in Yau Ma Tei, particularly the Yau Ma Tei Wholesale Fruit Market, with the trolley hustle and bustle, and the sellers yelling frantically at customers to come and see their fruits. However, my biggest surprise was not the retailers nor the customers; rather, I was stunned by the cardboard boxes lying outside the market. Preacher Lo told me that the sellers at the market donated those boxes of fruits for the Pray Campaign.

I also studied the interaction between faith-based organizations, the Pray Campaign, and Yau Ma Tei residents, especially people in need. My field visit started in October, every Wednesday, in a church, Yau Ma Tei KT Church. The Pray Campaign resources distribution events lasted from 18:30 to 20:00. The route I attended consisted of three stations. The first one was next to an old Western-style building where homeless people were living. The second station was a clinic, and the target group was the patients. The third station was the largest point where there was always a long queue of approximately 25 people lining up for resources. Volunteers from different churches engaged in this route. My aim in taking the route was to see the situation of the underprivileged in Yau Ma Tei and their connection with the organization.

In the course of this research, I changed the focus from concentrating solely on Preacher Lo to not only the Pray Campaign but also studying the interaction between a traditional church, Yau Ma Tei M Church and Yau Ma Tei residents in the programme called the Children's Tutorial Programme. In one morning service at my own church, I was flipping through a leaflet and found a familiar face. One of the former church staff transferred to M Church, asking congregations from different churches to offer help for the Yau Ma Tei community. The programme was held inside the M church in Yau Ma Tei. The church has been serving the community since 1954 and is still serving the local community today. The M church had its own social welfare center in helping to alleviate poverty as a faith-based organization. I have participated in the programme since December 2021.

## **Problems Revealed in Yau Ma Tei under COVID-19**

### Specific Situations Encountered by My Informants

Through my site visits and interviews with the coordinators and volunteers of the M Church

and Pray Campaign, I found problems encountered by Yau Ma Tei residents in two groups:

(1) the elderly and (2) lower-income families.

#### Elderly who needs help

After finishing all my field visits in the Pray Campaign, I set up an interview with Helen in order to understand the situation of the poverty-stricken in the Yau Ma Tei community. I asked her, “how do you know your ‘target audience’ who needs help?” Helen replied “They will come when they know we distribute resources. Also, sometimes their friends will spread the news so that their peers can get aid too. Most of them are originally from the church. You know our church has a lot of elderly and they would bring more people with them and introduce this campaign to people in need. So, the Pray Campaign did not do much promotion to advertise itself, but still, it could attract lots of people to get resources.” She added, “Our Pray Campaign was built on the trust between the people who come and us. We do not use their income each month as a standard to sort people, because the relationship is based on trust. When we discovered lots of elderly who could not go out in the beginning of the COVID outbreak in early 2020, we formed groups among our church gathering to help those elderly. For example, those elderly living alone cannot go out without a mask, but they still need to buy daily necessities. They were our target group to help in the beginning.”

Helen mentioned that the relationship with them was closer as they spent more time together during these 2 years of Covid isolation.

The interview with Helen reminded me of the time I also joined one of the resources distribution campaigns. I found that there were several volunteers who originally were receivers of aid, but who eventually joined the activity of distributing the resources for others. They love chatting with both the volunteers and receivers. I approached one of the



volunteers and asked her how she had learned about this campaign. She told me that she was the one who needed help at first, but once her situation became settled, she would like to go out and help people instead of staying at home alone. In KT Church, there are numerous people one can talk to and receive care from. She was afraid if she stayed at home alone, no one would notice her if any accident took place.

In January and February 2020 there was a long period of panic buying in Hong Kong due to the outbreak of Covid-19. The inadequate supplies of surgical masks and rumors about compulsory quarantine caused panic buying of daily necessities like staple foods, cup noodle, canned food, and tissue paper (Yuen 2020). In January, in Kowloon districts, all surgical masks were sold out in over 30 pharmacies and there was no exact time or date for restocking. Although supermarkets had some stock in food, the prices increased during panic buying. This reflected the situation that elderly could not go out without others' help such as distributing products such as masks and food.

#### Staying home 24/7 with children

Erica, one of the coordinators of the Children Tutorial Programme in M Church, told me about why they set up the programme. She mentioned there were lots of parents feeling drained and tired in their work, and teaching their children at the same time when the government prohibited afternoon face-to-face schooling. Parents who could not hire domestic helpers needed to stay at home to take care of their children or seek help from relatives or neighbors to look after their children. Working parents often could not have a flexible timetable of work. Moreover, working-class parents sometimes encountered homework they did not know how to answer, so they needed to learn it for themselves, which was inefficient and time-consuming. Working-class parents needed to take care of the family and do chores

at home so they would rather spend time resting; but when their children did not know how to do the homework, they had to help them.

Besides, more quarrels occurred between parents and children during the pandemic. When the parents had to teach their children homework, the children may be daydreaming or not paying any attention. I experienced the same in the programme. It was a family of five. My student has two siblings, and his mother would always stand by with his two sisters whenever they had any Zoom tutorial classes at home. Sometimes she would scold them in front of the camera when they did the homework wrongly. My student talked back to her mother and the situation became worse. It was not easy to stay at home all day long without any conflicts. In general, according to Lui (2021), there has been a proliferation of parents asking for social workers' intervention and help in managing their children and controlling their own tempers and pressures. Parents not only need to take care of their children but also their natal parents, so they may bear extra burden psychologically (Lui 2021). Under Covid-19, parents of working-class status need to carry very heavy pressure.

### Homelessness and unemployment

The unemployment rate increased under Covid-19. In February 2022, the unemployment rate rose to 4.5% due to the tightening of social distancing policies, as recorded by the Census and Statistic Department (Magramo and Westbrook 2022; The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2022). The unemployed could apply for a government subsidy if they had been (1) jobless for 30 days, and (2) earning below HKD30,000 between October and December 2021 (Cheng 2022). The requirement was also applicable to gyms and beauty salons which stopped due to the tightening of social distance measures (Cheng 2022).

Although it was immediate financial aid to deal with everyday meals, the amount was not

enough for rent in Hong Kong, and some people were threatened with homelessness.

Homelessness has been a long-lasting issue in Hong Kong. Walking across the street while I was following Preacher Lo in one of the local tours, I did not even notice there was a corner where homeless people gather. At that time, the coordinator Helen assigned our team to the first stop where homeless people stayed, with umbrellas and cardboard covering their properties. People would not even notice them when passing by. Opposite this street is a private housing estate: the gap between rich and poor is highly visible.

In October 2016, there were fires under a bridge where homeless people live in Yau Ma Tei, and their property was burned. However, the government did not provide any compensation or aid in helping them (Wong 2016). The homeless people saw the culprits who set fire to their homes, but they could not fight against the suspects (Wong 2016). Because the homeless encampment had been deemed a fire hazard, there were different actions taken by the government to expel the homeless from the area, creating a “safer” environment for people.

Overall, although there was some help from the government, the aid was far from enough. Thus, the churches worked as an important channel in helping low-income families, the unemployed, the homeless, and the elderly. Traditionally, churches have been viewed as a place where Christians gather in services held by priests for congregations. But the three fields I visited did not engage in this.

### **The Meaning of Churches in Yau Ma Tei**

#### Preacher Lo’s Construction of a Wall-less Church

Preacher Lo, currently working in the Yau Ma Tei community, has no office. He meets people on the street, in the local shops, in the community. I followed him on his route. Let me describe one such encounter. I exited the Yau Ma Tei Mass Transit Railway (MTR) station, and passed through a few local shops, such as grocery stores and pharmacies, and saw people walking in hustle and bustle. On the street, there were always people around me, next to me, passing me. This area was totally unfamiliar to me. Following Preacher Lo, I was brought to a local traditional church in Yau Ma Tei. The building was stunning, painted in white; its big silvery metal gate was set in the middle of the entrance in order to prevent outsiders from seeing inside.

When we arrived, a few church staff were sitting in the reception, next to the gate, chatting with the other staff. The staff stopped us from entering, then called the office, and asked us to stay outside the gate until the pastor came. As it is a traditional church, everything needs permission from the pastor and everything should follow a clear bureaucratic rule. Without reservations, without connections with the church, people cannot pass through this gate. Outsiders and insiders were plainly separated. If I was not following Preacher Lo, I would have been rejected, or I would simply have walked past this building.

The pastor came. Preacher Lo and the pastor chatted for a while and then he explained to me that he met the pastor a long time ago before he quit his job as a parish worker in KT church and had cooperated with this and other churches several times in the past. After experiencing various social demonstrations, and witnessing numerous poverty issues in the Yau Ma Tei community, especially the homelessness problem that he did not pay much attention to in the past even though homeless huts were next to his own church, he decided to fully engage himself in community services. He said to me in one of our interviews: “Yau Ma Tei

churches did not work enough for local residents and did not connect enough with the community.” Through the gaps of the gate, I gazed outside. The churches and residents are separated.

Once I asked Preacher Lo about where his workplace is, and he answered “Here,” on the street. He led me to a lane that was further away from the main street. He stopped in front of a herbal tea shop. “A lemon barley water please,” he said, a local brand. The shopkeeper looked at me and asked what this ‘little girl’ wanted to order. The shopkeeper giggled and recommended a sweet flavor herbal tea for me. The prices were not stated, and I could not find it anywhere, but Preacher Lo took out \$30 to pay, without any change.

We grabbed the drinks and continued our way. Preacher Lo stopped again, in front of a shop. The shop window displayed a traditional Chinese wedding gown with red packets stacked on top. When we entered the shop, Preacher Lo immediately greeted the boss' wife and the boss came out too. They were in their sixties or early seventies. The boss' wife was cutting the leftover threads on the clothes and preparing the gowns for renting out. Preacher Lo was their neighbor in the past and they befriended his father a long time ago, I was told: They took care of him when he was growing up. Preacher Lo asked directly if he could have a metal box for himself. The metal boxes were for storing gowns, stacked beside the cupboard decoration. A box was about the size of a 15-inch laptop, but 3 inches wide. The boss held a gown case up, handed it to Preacher Lo, and said, “Anything you want, but do come here more often and chat with us.” This showed how close the relationship was between Preacher Lo and the storekeepers.

Participating in one of the local tours and one of the non-profit organizations of the homeless,

I realized that wall-less churches can indeed be visible. Preacher Lo organised a local tour about Yau Ma Tei murder cases that happened in the past, after being invited by the homeless association to lead the tour. There were some 12 participants, aged 60 or above; I was the youngest participant in the tour. They were friendly to me and curious about what I was studying. Preacher Lo explained to me that they used to be homeless in the past and some were from a very complicated family background; everyone attending the tour has had their own history.

Meanwhile, on the way to the second stop, I asked Preacher Lo to describe their relationship and he answered that he was like their coach. Preacher Lo believed that they should have the chance to earn their own living and not always rely on others to feed them; he should not simply give the resources to them continuously but teach them how to earn their own money. They meet every Saturday to have some training and report about their current situation. The church was formed when the groups gathered together with the coach (Preacher Lo): this is how the wall-less church becomes visible.

#### Pray Campaign as another form of wall-less church

The Pray Campaign started in 2020, with the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Hong Kong. Helen, one of the former church fellows in KT church, organized it. According to Helen, it originated in one of the little group gatherings in KT church, and sought to deal with the problems Covid-19 brought to the community, including unemployment, and lack of sanitizing materials such as hand sanitizers and masks. Helen emphasized that some of the elderly who lived alone, without care from their family, were afraid of going outdoors. There was inadequate support from NGOs or the government to take care of their needs. Some lower-income families lost financial support because of unemployment during the pandemic.

They needed to rely on charities such as the Pray Campaign distributing lunch boxes, cakes, biscuits, and fruit, as well as daily necessities including second-hand clothes, washing soap, and tissue rolls, in order to reduce their financial burden in daily life.

When I joined the campaign for the first time, there was a middle-aged woman who introduced me to the team at KT church. Preacher Lo was busy on that day and I did not know anyone. Understanding my background and my purpose for joining the campaign, the team asked me repeatedly if I had any questions about anything in the campaign that they were willing to answer. I sat next to Shannon, who told me that she attended less frequently in 2021, as she was busy with her own work on poverty-related aid in Yau Ma Tei, but she joined this time because of me--Preacher Lo had urged her to take care of me. Before we started the work of resource distribution, we had to fill in the Health Declaration Form and follow the guidelines of disinfecting ourselves. For example, it is necessary to use hand sanitizer to clean our hands. If the person was responsible for distributing lunch boxes and fruits, they must wear gloves. To begin the campaign, there was a big trolley full of goods that had to be carried down the stairs because there was no lift. The men carried all the heavy stuff. One, about 65 to 70, walked five times up and down in order to take the materials downstairs. I asked if I could help, but they kindly rejected my request and asked me to wait downstairs with other women.

At our first stop, a 40-year-old man was lying on the ground on a cardboard mat napping. He was wearing a wrinkled shirt and, and jeans, with no shoes. He opened his eyes when Shannon stepped forward, squatted down, and introduced us. He then stretched out his arms to support himself sitting up. There were five people in the inner part of the street, with trees separating them from the eyes of people outside the spot. They used umbrellas as a shelter to

cover their belongings and themselves. Their belongings, like the cardboard, umbrella, and newspapers, were scattered around the site. They came out and took the resources, including the lunch boxes, fruits, hand sanitizers, and a pack of surgical masks. They used newspapers to create their own table. They could simply sit on the cardboard mat, so it was not necessary to own a chair. They had plastic bags, with disposable cutlery, among their possessions. The man thanked us and smiled. He put aside the lunchboxes. Helen knew that some of the homeless people may store the food we gave them because they were afraid that the next day, they would be starving again. Thus, they would separate the meal into more portions so that they could guarantee they could have at least a partial meal later.

Moving to the next stop, I saw many people aged 40 to 70 queuing up in the park waiting for the distribution of resources. I asked Helen about how they met these people, and Helen just answered that they came because they knew the Pray Campaign would come here every Wednesday. Helen confirmed to me that the Prayer Campaign did not have any promotion or advertisements to notify people that they were distributing things; but people in the area knew that every Wednesdays the resource distribution campaign would take place, While I was standing in front of the line and distributing the plastic bags to the residents, one of the volunteers kept murmuring: “hey, this aunt has taken the resources twice, don’t be greedy, take once only.” She stood beside me and told me that some of them were actually rich. They just took advantage of the Pray Campaign and did not have an actual need for this resource. She told me that some of them even sold the resources to other elderly to earn extra money. She believed that many receivers hate her because she stopped people from taking the resources twice, but her role is to ensure the fairness of the distribution. Helen believed that the Pray Campaign allowed the residents to connect more with different churches, as each week the Pray Campaign would recruit various volunteers from different churches in Hong



Kong. Receiving resources was also open to the public; no registration was needed to take the resources, unlike in traditional churches, where recipients may have to make a commitment to the church and attend regularly in order to become a member of the church. The Pray Campaign that gathers every Wednesday collects donations and transfers the resources to people in need. This wall-less church aims to serve people in need and connect with the community; they shared their love and care during the pandemic.

#### Traditional church—Children’s Tutorial Programme

In the Yau Ma Tei community, a traditional church called M Church has served the community for over 15 years. My own church is linked to this church as a sister church. In one of the morning services, the priest introduced some of the community services that they were doing during the pandemic period; one of them is the Children’s Tutorial Programme. This programme targets families who have difficulties arranging for children to study at home, since the government prohibited in-class schooling in the afternoon. This disrupted the routine of parents as some of the parents have to work late. One of the coordinators, Erica, who is also the church staff in M church, told me that this programme aimed at alleviating the burden on parents and could help children to finish their homework after school. Erica added on that the church worked as a babysitting center and a community center to provide activities and educational support for families in Yau Ma Tei. I participated in this programme starting in December 2021 and continued for two months of face-to-face teaching and two months of virtual tutorial classes. Before I joined this programme, I sought out the views of tutors about how the programme went in the past and what they thought of when they participated in this programme. One tutor, Gigi, also studying at CUHK, took the initiative in talking to me on my second time joining the programme. I asked her why she joined this programme, and she simply said that because she loved children. She hoped that

the children could come to church more often so that they could play together. Gigi was active in participating in Saturday's gathering when the tutorial programme mainly focused on bible learning and playing. She knew that many children were non-Christians and she hoped that through her influence she could build more sense of belonging to the church for the children.

Stepping inside the side hall in M church, I waved my hand and said hello to the students. There were four children there, sitting two by two, opposite each other. They randomly spread the worksheets, textbooks, and homework exercise books all over the long table. In the same hall, there were two tutors working together. I partnered with one of the other volunteers from my own church. Before the tutorial classes, Erica warned us that our form is a bit special because there were several students with special education needs. Two of them were in the same group that I would be teaching. To be honest, it was a challenging task for me. I have tutored several children in my past four years as a university student, but I had never taught children with special needs before. One child hated school but her mother forced her to join this programme in order to complete her homework there.

At the end of each tutorial session, we would have a briefing and reflection and we could know how the other classes were doing. There were in all thirteen children from primary 4 to Primary 6. The tutors were all university students. Erica hoped that between the church and the parents, there would be more communication, so Erica jotted down some special situations that have to be reported to the parents and discussed possible solutions to help the children. Erica believed that under the pandemic situation, church aid to families is important. She said, "We will try our best to lower the burden of the parents. Sometimes they are annoyed as they don't know how to educate their children already." 「有陣時啲家長都向

我地訴苦，如果係功輔班做曬啲功課就好。佢地唔洗咁吃力。」。

While the children were participating in the tutorial programme, Erica would invite the parents to join the church gathering while waiting, so that they could have a better connection with the parents and the parents could form trust in the church as well. Traditional churches such as M Church share a similarity with the wall-less church in that they are both based on trust in the connection between churches and local residents. However, the target groups were different in these three fields, compensating for each other in catering to different scopes of people in need.

The wall-less church and the Pray Campaign mainly aided low-income families and the elderly. Preacher Lo helped the homeless to become self-reliant and reintegrate into society. For the traditional church, M Church, its target group was working-class parents whose children were home due to the government policy of afternoon-class suspension. As mentioned above, Erica invited the parents to join group gatherings that the church staff organized. The M Church thus had the implicit purpose of evangelizing through opening the Children's Tutorial Programme for outsiders, and non-congregants. This contrasts with the wall-less churches, which show their faith through their actions instead of evangelizing.

In the next section, I investigate the roles of churches in Yau Ma Tei, to find out the connection between the local Yau Ma Tei residents and the churches, traditional churches, faith-based campaigns, and wall-less churches.

### **What Are the Roles of Churches in Yau Ma Tei?**

#### The role of the traditional church for YMT working-class families

Browsing through Google Maps and searching for the right exit from the MTR station, I was on my way to M church to have a briefing about the Children's Tutorial Class. It was not far from the station, a 10-minute walk. Plants and fences surrounded the church, and on the wall, there was a painting with a big red cross, which indicated that God will be the guide. There is a candlelight figure painted on the wall, which signifies lighting the way in the dark.

Although the church is fenced in, its main gate is wide open. There was no reception beside the main gate. I messaged the parish worker, Dan, that I had arrived, and he said he would arrive in five minutes. I did not dare to go inside alone, as I did not know where I should go and whom I might encounter, so I waited for him. He led me to the lift and took me to the conference room, a small meeting room more like a storage place. He put the bag inside his office beside the conference room and entered the password on the digital lock. This was different from my own church. People do not need to enter a password when entering our church office. Perhaps because M Church was more open to the public, since they opened the gate for the public to enter, they must ensure that only the staff could enter the main office where the most important documents were stored. As Dan was not in charge of the programme, he introduced me to the new coordinator.

My coordinator entered the room. She introduced herself as Erica. She is in her mid-thirties, and is talkative and caring. She said that she is currently studying for a Master of Theology. She thanked me for coming and helping with the Children's Tutorial Programme. I honestly told her that I was coming to learn more about the church and Yau Ma Tei residents' interactions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Wood and Bloch (1995) discussed how many traditional churches have aimed at helping to alleviate poverty in society (22). Erica seems to share this vision. She believed that churches should cater to people directly in need before them. As for the M church, they started the programme after the second outbreak of the

pandemic in late March 2020. They aimed at providing a place for children to hang out and play with each other as they were having only virtual classes, so they lacked the opportunity to socialize with other children. Erica pointed out that many parents needed to find a reliable organization to babysit their children, so the church founded this program for that purpose as well. In the pandemic, many parents faced hard times with their children, and Erica believed that when they need mental support, the church should provide it to them. Besides the programme, Erica introduced me to a gathering for parents to join when they were waiting for the children to finish the tutorial classes.

What Erica said in the interview is supported by scholars' research; peers are of paramount importance in children's development, including interpersonal relationships, communication skills, and leadership and interpretational skills (Charney, Camarata, et. al. 2021). It was not easy for the children to stay at home 24/7 with their parents as it increased the arguments and conflicts between children and parents (Tso, Wong, et. al. 2022). There was a case when a child drew her own mother as a monster because she was enraged while she taught her daughter at home (Tso, Wong, et. al. 2022). The problems encountered by the parents were similar to the parents Erica mentioned, and thus Erica worked to ensure the Children's Tutorial Programme was a lubrication between children and the parents to lessen the conflicts between them.

When I was helping in one of the tutorial programs, I could understand the hardship most parents faced when teaching their children. "Hey Tim, sit properly!" I said. Tim was lying down on the table and procrastinating in doing his homework. He was a child with special education needs. Although he requires special care, he is a smart, outgoing and talkative kid. He just did not like writing. I stood beside him, correcting his homework. Meanwhile, he kept

asking me different questions unrelated to the homework. When I was teaching another child, he pulled his chair near me and eagerly answered the questions that another child asked. I looked at him and put my finger on my mask “shhhhhh, don’t give her the answer”. This was repeated countless times. If I were a parent, who worked for 8-9 hours a day, being very tired, but I still had to teach my children homework that they did not pay attention to and were not willing to do, I probably would also be enraged. Yet, I was a helper in the program who only offered 2 hours a day in teaching 2 to 3 children at once, so the burden would be much lower than those parents. If I could teach them homework that they did not know how to do, it could further decrease the workload for the parents.

Having the face-to-face Children’s Tutorial Programme by the M Church alleviated pressure on the parents. Parents dropped their children off at the church and could continue their work or have some free time. At 6 p.m., they could go home together and have family time. The separation of school and home could be divided because of the tutorial programme, with the church acting as an intermediary in helping working-class families. It was a tailor-made programme for working-class parents who could not help with their children’s homework and the interaction between church and parents was close because they could rely on and trust the tutors and Erica in taking care of their own children.

### **Roles of Non-traditional Churches**

#### The Wall-less church led by Preacher Lo

I followed Preacher Lo to the bridge near the site where the homeless lived. But when we arrived at the bridge, looking down the street, there were no homeless people there, but trucks going in and out. So, where did the homeless go? They were forced to scatter as the government renovated the street as a recreational park and put handles on benches. This

prevented homeless people from lying on the benches, forcing them to leave the park. Flipping through a pile of photos of what happened in the past, Preacher Lo said that churches should bear the responsibility to take care of the community, including the homeless people. He continued to talk about the story of this street. An ethnic minority man used to live there. He was from Pakistan; he lost his job and could not easily find one as he did not speak Chinese. At that time, he did not know any organizations which could offer meals to him. He was starving, and feeling hopeless. He wrote “God Help Me” on a wall. Preacher Lo emphasized that he had not noticed someone in need until he saw these big words just opposite to the place where Preacher Lo worked. It completely shocked him. When he was working as a parish worker in a traditional church, he did not know there was someone so near him that needed help.



Fig. 2: The only way to survive was to write out “God Help Me”

The help was not just about giving and taking, but also listening and sharing. From what Preacher Lo mentioned about the situation of that ethnic minority man, it reminds me of a

similar story from Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa refused to force others to do something they did not want to do but decided to listen to the needs of the poorest to take care of them (Slavicek 2007: 48). Thus, no matter who they were, from which ethnicity, churches should bear the responsibility to take care of someone who is “your neighbor.” “The neighbors” in the church's point of view were those who related to you, or people who live near you, but not bound by religious belief: they did not need to be Christians (Lo 2002).

In one of the lunch-box distribution activities on Christmas Eve, there were several organizations distributing *siu mei* rice 燒味飯 to homeless people throughout the day: non-governmental organizations, charities, faith-based organizations and churches. One of the homeless people told Preacher Lo that he was receiving the fourth Cha Siu Rice (BBQ pork rice) on that day, he was afraid of getting the same again. Preacher Lo asked him what he would like to eat, and which cuisine style suits him best; Preacher Lo obtained it for him, as a means of preserving his dignity.

#### The Wall-less church led by the Pray Campaign

During the pandemic, the Pray Campaign continued resource distribution for the underprivileged groups. The Pray Campaign was founded with the outbreak of Covid-19. From Helen's perspective, there was not enough support for low-income families from the government. The aid from the government was financial, like helping shops with rent (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2020). In one of our interviews, Helen expressed her concern for the elderly and lower-income families that government funds may not fully support. Thus, Helen and her fellows formed a group and each week they would go out and distribute resources to locals. I asked Helen, “how would the Pray Campaign know who should receive aid?” Some were the elderly, who liked to



gather in the park and chat with their neighbors, but some of them are total strangers. When they know where to collect free resources, they come. It became more popular among the residents because they would share with their friends and they would join the queue too. Without any advertisements, word of the Prayer Campaign spread, and they could indeed find people in need.

Preacher Lo brought me to the place where volunteers gathered. When I first entered the room, there were many cardboard packages around, stacked up, full of fruits, countless boxes of surgical masks, different shapes of soaps, and some boxes of biscuits too. At the main table just opposite the front door, there were many bags. YY, one of the volunteers of the Pray Campaign, said that those bags were for the people who regularly contacted the church for more resources and YY was waiting for them to come and collect them. I looked at one of the fabric bags which they reused. The bag has been used so many times, as it is for distributing resources and people would come to take it a day and return it another day for another round of distribution. YY could not count how many times they have used those bags. On the handle of the bag, there was a piece of paper attached. "For LYT", LYT is a person's name. Inside the bag included a box of surgical masks, two bottles of hand soap, two bags of bread, and a can of milk powder. They arranged the exact time for LYT to come and collect the bag. It was an efficient way to avoid people from gathering under Covid-19.

Churches in Yau Ma Tei were not simply for evangelizing. They were not just inviting people to join church services. The M Church, The Pray Campaign, and Preacher Lo's Wall-less Church aimed at lending a hand to local residents. They were building relationships, and trust with the residents, and not abruptly dragging people to church and listening to the teaching. In the next section, I will explain how the M Church, The Pray Campaign, and

Preacher Lo's Wall-less Church interacted with the local residents and in what way these were effective or not.

## **Analysis of the Interaction Between Churches and Residents**

### Connection with residents

The connection level with Yau Ma Tei local residents is different among the three institutions I have analyzed. The strongest connection is the community church constructed by Preacher Lo. He was born in Yau Ma Tei and grew up in the local community. His parents also lived in Yau Ma Tei for over thirty years. Thus, the neighborhood knows Preacher Lo, including local shopkeepers, other churches' priests and pastors, welfare organization coordinators, and homeless people, as he was also a former pastor working in one of the local churches. In the first site visit, Preacher Lo talked with the local shop owner whose shop sells traditional Chinese wedding gowns for brides and grooms. They talked about things related to livelihood but not related to anything religious. Preacher Lo also knows well the custom of paper offerings. He can talk about Daoist rituals for offering to ancestors and he can share his thoughts on fortune-telling.

He quit his job of being a pastor, as he wanted to serve the community not bound by bureaucratic rules. He has more time to spend with locals rather than just staying inside the church building and handling paperwork. He can now spare time chatting with his neighbors. He participated in the redevelopment of Yau Ma Tei and published his community magazine, *Happy Land*. He aimed at taking care of the local community through preaching. Nonetheless, his way of evangelization was not just telling members of the local community to believe in God and giving sermons but being with the local community. Preacher Lo coached post-homeless people. He did not stop contact with them after helping them to get a

job; he still kept the connection with them. Even though Preacher Lo quit his job as a parish worker in his previous church, sometimes he still went back to his own church, KT Church, and left his magazine *Happy Land* so that people could take it free. He gained connections with local people through different activities.

For the traditional church, the M Church has the most stable connection to the locals, particularly parents. Due to the Children's Tutorial Programme, there is consistent contact with parents; the M Church provided gatherings for parents including non-believers. Their children also keep going back to having group gatherings every Saturday. The coordinator, Erica, will follow up on their children's situation and report to their parents. This helps the parents to build trust towards the church and allows their children to remain in church after school. In the church, children form friendships, and they play collective games during recess time. However, they will not be involved aside from going to the Children's Tutorial Programme. Nonetheless, parents ask Erica for help when they encounter any difficulties in dealing with their children. As Erica has registered as a social worker, she can handle family quarrels and provide emotional support to parents, as she has often had to do.

The connection between children and tutors is not solely based on tutorial classes. The Children's Tutorial Programme has aimed to provide a babysitting place for children to come and finish their homework at church rather than staying at home without their guardians' care. However, the main difference is the tutors. The tutors in the Children's Tutorial Programme will not scold the children and force them to complete all the homework. Tutors were told to help the children to complete the most difficult homework first in each session, which was the writing or mathematics homework, and easier homework came later, like the grammar exercise or Chinese comprehension homework. Apart from tutorial classes, the

tutors also attend the Saturday gathering with the children. However, the connection to the children cannot be fully formed without parents' permission, and children are picky in choosing their own tutors: they want tutors who are more energetic, outgoing, and less demanding, rather than tutors who are shy and less talkative. Tutors who seldom attend the Saturday gatherings are less close to the children as they spend less time playing with the children and only spend time tutoring their homework.

The shallowest connections are those in the Pray Campaign. Volunteers will have some interaction with recipients when distributing the resources. But within the Pray Campaign team, there are various volunteers in each session, and the people who take the resources mainly just grab and go, without a follow-up or a longer conversation. Receivers are always criticizing my informant who is on the management team, as she has to stop the people from taking the material more than once. The receivers know her and are afraid to contact her directly. It is a hindrance to their relationship, as the role of resource distributor requires everyone to be fair in taking the resources each time, but the receivers may want more. This conflict disturbed her connection with people in need. However, in general, the Pray Campaign has a sustaining and consistent relationship with the people who take the resources, as they consistently come every Wednesday night.

### **Self-reliance**

Second, self-reliance is strengthened in the non-traditional church more than in the faith-based organization and the traditional church. Preacher Lo has provided the means of making a living for formerly homeless people. According to Hibbert, Hogg, and Quinn (2002), it is better to provide homeless people with the knowledge to earn their own income instead of simply giving them resources (2002: 289). Social enterprises in Scotland advocate training as

it can empower homeless people to earn for themselves (Hibbert, Hogg, and Quinn 2002: 295). This idea echoed Preacher Lo's idea that providers should not only give what the receivers immediately need but also address their long-term needs: the knowledge and skills for the receivers to be self-reliant in the future. Preacher Lo provided this through the training he gave the homeless in participating in local tours, in cooperation with the Yau Ma Tei Homeless Organization.

One major difference from social enterprises is the evangelism in Preacher Lo's tours. Every tour Preacher Lo conducts has at the end a briefing session that allows him to summarize his tour and to help participants reflect on the events; it always ends with prayer even though some participants may not be Christians. Participants enjoyed sharing in the briefing session. One formerly homeless man talked about his own feelings after Preacher introduced the scenes where people got murdered, and it was due to how the stories correlated with his own experience. Preacher Lo told me in an interview that different religious elements will be added to each local tour, but he claimed that he did not only focus on Christianity.

As for the traditional church, it does not have a self-reliance programme for families to join, but does aim at giving relief to working parents while their children are babysat by tutors from the church. This was for immediate help to people who cannot afford to hire a domestic helper. However, the Children's Tutorial Programme shifted from being a babysitting space to one where children play and form friendships. As Erica mentioned, this space is for not only helping children with homework but also improving their attitude toward study and their ability to socialize. During the pandemic, they had over one and a half years of having online lessons and may thus have lagged in schoolwork and not have a good social network. The Children's Tutorial Programme attempted to address that problem.

In order to strengthen their skills and regain their ability to study for themselves, Erica provided extra exercises for the students to do, and also provided leisure time with other classmates once they have finished their studies. However, the effectiveness was not high. Many students continued to have low motivation in studying; one of the students claimed she gradually hated coming to the Children's Tutorial Programme.

M Church shifted the whole programme online after January 2022, because of increasing numbers of Covid-19 cases in Hong Kong. I helped with the programme every Thursday. I was talking to 3 black boxes on my screen and I could not know whether they were even present or not. The children did not turn on their cameras even though Erica encouraged them to do so several times. Communication became harder, and the attention span of children clearly dropped while having the online tutorial programme.

The faith-based organization has the least provision for self-reliance among recipients. Every Wednesday, they distribute resources only, and there is no training or skills delivered to help strengthen the ability of recipients to earn for themselves. Although the provision of resources was sustained over several years, people in need cannot fully rely on those resources provided to survive. The poor may need to earn a living on days other than Wednesday. They did provide welcome aid for those in poverty. But this did not help the poverty-stricken to be able to earn on their own.

### **Welfare Organizations and Hong Kong Society's Problems**

Third, society's structure causes reliance on welfare organizations. Church became a community center space to take care of children and babysit. It became more diversified instead of just for worshiping God. Primary School students could not stay at school for

classes in the afternoon due to the Prevention Measures of COVID-19 executed by the government in order to prevent masses gathering around to have school lunches (The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2021). Most students go to the tutorial center only. However, office workers need to go back to the office and cannot work from home to take care of their children. The Government did not provide enough support for the families. Thus, the provision of the Children Tutorial Programme worked as an immediate buffer for these families.

The problem of wealth redistribution cannot be fully addressed by the faith-based organization or the non-traditional church, as they can only provide partial support. They cannot make full subsidies or provide assistance for recipients' whole lives. However, Helen, coordinated with other housing property owners and rented a place for the underprivileged people to get a safe place to live, called the P Building. This aid is, however, also temporary allowing the tenants to rent for one year. The rents are cheap compared to other subdivided flats. Yet, the subdivided flats' rents per square foot are very high compared to private housing, and it is not possible for the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) subsidy to compensate for that (Chan 2021). Even though Preacher Lo can provide skills and knowledge to homeless people to earn a living for themselves, they may not be able to rent such expensive places. The government did not provide enough aid, and also people had to wait at least six years on average in the queue for public housing (Hong Kong Housing Authority 2019). Thus, the embedded problem is not the subsidy provided by the faith-based organization, but the embedded social stratification, widening the rich and poor gap.

The churches in the Yau Ma Tei community can be an immediate aid to alleviate problems of basic needs, such as daily necessities, and tutors taking care of schoolchildren, but for the

long-term problems of social stratification, the churches cannot change the overall rich/poor disparity. However, the churches may still be influential to the residents because they can help build up long-term relationships. Thus, in the future, when the residents need help, they can continue to find support from the churches. It was no longer a closed door for non-believers to connect with churches; rather, it is possible to connect outside the church's walls.

### **Conclusion**

Walking through Nathan Road in Yau Ma Tei, I counted how many local stores were left on the street. Preacher Lo introduced me to the community starting from a local store; and he brought me to the local herbal tea shop and chatted with the shopkeepers. Preacher Lo greeted a man from a local grocery store which was relatively old without a fancy window display or fancy door, and when Preacher Lo went to the local wedding gown rental store, he simply walked in and started the conversation naturally with the storekeepers. I then realized that those long-existing local stores existed; earlier, I would not have noticed.

Within the same Yau Ma Tei community, there have been many different social groups ranging from the affluent residents living in the newest private housing estate to the homeless living on the street. People like me would not notice the existence of the poor and the homeless, just as Preacher Lo earlier in his life did not notice; only after seeing the desperate sign I showed earlier (figure 2) did he start his community work holding local tour and coaching the underprivileged homeless. His vision was not just to provide immediate aid but rather long-term help in improving their abilities and qualifications. He was trying hard to interact with more diversified residents, but mainly now he focused on the "old neighbors" he was familiar with.



I was still doing the Children Tutorial Programme for M Church as I could not leave the church abruptly and they still needed tutors to teach once the social distance measures were lifted in April 2022. Therefore, my field visit did not stop after the end of my scheduled site visit period. Shifting to the online program and having a special holiday for the primary and secondary school students, the M Church did not stop the tutorial program, but they made it virtual, as we have discussed, since the tightening of social distancing measures in February 2022. The special arrangement limited the function of this programme as a community center to babysit the primary school children whose parents needed to work in the afternoon. Since the programme's purpose was to alleviate the burden of working-class families, when children could not attend the face-to-face tutorial classes, the parents took back the duty in caring for their children in the afternoon; the programme became ineffective in alleviating the workload of the parents. But the traditional church was indeed effective in building bonds with the parents, as the parents were willing to put their children in the programme and attend parent gatherings. They trusted that the church could help them look after the children. It was a long-term relationship linking the M Church and the families who joined the Children Tutorial Programme.

Finally, yet importantly, the Pray Campaign continued to function as an immediate aid for lower-income families and individuals. The distribution has lasted nearly two years since the first pandemic outbreak in February 2020. The donations were stable from the nearby wholesale fruit market in Yau Ma Tei and also the fund-raising by the congregations from the KT Church, which helped sustain the campaign. The Pray Campaign provided aid resources and attracted the attention of other Yau Ma Tei residents when implementing the programmes. They also attracted people to join volunteering. Their vision was "walking in faith" in real life, not just staying inside the church building.

With all three sites I studied, walking faith in Yau Ma Tei was achieved gradually within the community as they have all connected to the community and listened to residents' needs instead of just providing funds with asset and income tests. They have not had a traditional way of evangelizing, but rather penetrated into the community and helped people in need. Their relationships with the residents were built on trust. Churches were not just buildings but rather offered help for residents in the community, not just one-time help, but in an ongoing relationship.

I left the crowded Yau Ma Tei MTR Station area, walking past a narrow and dim lane beside the station where Preacher Lo showed me before, to the park where residents could get resources from the Pray Campaign. The line was long. Helen was giving out fruits to the residents, YY was standing beside the queue to prevent people from getting more resources, and many other volunteers were helping distribute the resources; I, though, was no longer inside the scene.

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