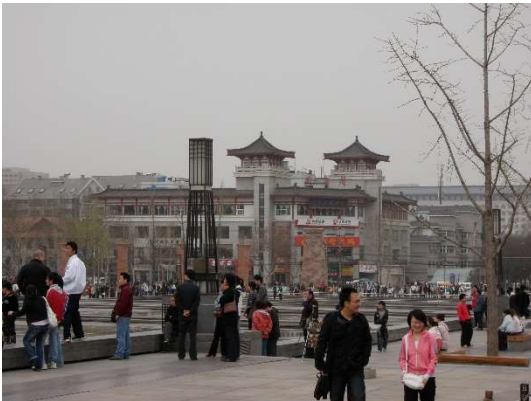


**From the Village to the City:
Current Developments in House Churches**

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This year in June, I led a team of pastors, elders and deacons from Hong Kong on a retreat to Israel. While we were having a sharing beside the Sea of Galilee, a young couple came up to us and sat down to listen. It turns out they were on a Holy Lands tour from a church in Beijing. They saw us holding our Bibles, scribbling notes as we listened to each other, so out of curiosity they sat down even though they couldn't understand Cantonese. After our sharing

session, they talked to me for a while.

They were a Christian couple of younger than thirty years of age. Since their church did not present many opportunities for learning, they listened to sermons on the internet, and bought many devotional and theological books themselves. This brother had eagerness and learning ability to match it. He also had some understanding of Reformed theology, and made some insightful observations and questions.

You may have imagined that this brother is from a house church. Many people have the impression that believers from house churches in the city are young and driven, pursuing spiritual growth in an environment that is poor in resources and not-ideal for congregating, and who often face pressure from the government and so cannot openly proclaim their faith.

House Churches Today

Are today's house churches as mysterious as they were in the past? Let us look at the definition from Baidu in the mainland:

"Chinese house churches are typically Christians who specifically use the home of a family as a gathering place to worship God together. Because some Christian organizations are not officially registered with the relevant government department, some are called house

churches, and some are called family fellowships or congregations.” Baidu Baike

House churches in China today are diversified. In the past the government denied that house churches existed. Later on they were tacitly recognized, but never openly discussed. Finally today, we can see some brothers and sisters openly confess at their workplace or on the internet that they attend certain house churches. In all this we can make the four following observations about the changes that have occurred.

1. From the village to the city. In the past, house churches were concentrated in villages in



the Henan and Anhui provinces. Some churches have over a million believers, and their organizational management would reach a certain size. Their theology was mainly influenced by fundamentalism. Rapid urbanization in the last twenty years have caused village house churches to make changes: pastoring believers who have moved to find work in the cities and planting churches in urban areas. Yet, with the experience of

pastoring in a rural setting, their understanding of city life, and the “parental” attitude of rural churches has led to many conflicts. In recent years, a new generation of church workers from the cities have matured, and the issues have also evolved. With a new generation of urban house churches being led by campus fellowships, they no longer garbed in the traditions of rural churches. Moreover, the next generation of leaders have had opportunities to receive theological education from outside China.

2. Growth from the Grassroots. After rural churches entered the cities, those whom they encountered who were willing to be pastored were generally farmers and workers of lower levels in cultural learning. The next generation of these people had increased opportunities of receiving education, which led to an increase in the acceptance of Christianity in society. The number of believers from different social classes increases. In the house churches today there are more young intellectuals and professionals, it is not even rare to see entrepreneurs, university students and even university professors.



3. From Indigenous to International. In the past, the focus had been on local missions. Believers brought money for transportation and instant noodles, and went through the provinces to preach the Gospel. Year 2003 saw the rise of the “Preaching the Gospel Back to Jerusalem Movement”. Some believers had a dogmatic understanding of “Do not bring a purse...” (Luke 10:4a), and bought single-trip air tickets to the Middle East without learning the local language or religion and culture. In the last two years, the central government has been pushing greatly for the “One Belt One Road” initiative, while workers in the house churches come up with a plan for 2030, preparing the way for missionaries to evangelize overseas.



4. Towards Plurality. Church development has become more diversified. Churches have become more willing to spend resources on training, even to the point of financially supporting young workers to receive theological education overseas. Many of them go on to receive PhDs.

The Needs and Concerns for Next Generation Leaders

The new generation of house church leadership is relatively young, educated and more willing to bear the burden of leadership. They mostly have not experienced direct persecution from the Three-Self churches or the government. Though many are against having contact with the government, still others choose a more open attitude. Theologically, they have slowly moved



from a fundamentalist theology to one that is closer to the international definition of the church tradition of Evangelicalism. There are at least four concerns and needs that next generation leaders must pay attention to.

1. Registration and Public Activity Spaces. The amendments to the “Religious Affairs Regulations” might allow registered house churches more legal room to operate, yet there are those who suspect that it will lead to greater limitation for the Church. Leaders in the past had a tendency to split everything into sacred or secular, and would consider registering with the government as being too worldly. The new generation of leaders strive to allow open expression of faith, so that churches can have more developments in evangelism and the social mandate. These leaders are exploring how to obey the rules of the game set by the

government, while still being a good witness as a church and developing different ministries.

2. Transformation of Urban Ministries. The main ministry of traditional rural churches was evangelism and disciple-making. The social contexts they faced upon entering the cities were far more complicated and ever-changing. In recent years, the government has been encouraging the formation of local NGOs to respond to the different needs in society. Churches have used this as an opportunity to set up different services, while sharing the Gospel with those whom they serve. With environmental protection groups, poverty relief foundations, educational organizations and others being set up, churches have seen their ministries diversify.



3. Local and International Evangelism. With the government coming down strongly on external influences in religious affairs, local workers see their own responsibilities and mission more clearly than ever. Along with organizing observation teams to learn overseas, some local house churches have successfully established non-Chinese churches in the Middle East. Many house churches, whether small or great, are looking to do more cross-cultural evangelism and ministry.

4. Theological Education. Theological seminaries attached to house churches have sprung out like grass after spring rain in each major city. There are those which are founded and staffed by local believers, there are those “local campuses” set up by overseas institutions, and there are those started by foreign workers which, after many years of training, are handed over to the locals. These schools provide courses which range from short-term ministry training, to Master’s degree programs. However, the standards of these schools are disparate and uneven. In the past, many had to compete to enter the seminary. Nowadays, with the ever increasing numbers of theology schools, online courses, and numerous intensive courses overseas, the number and quality of students who apply for a local program is are the same as before.

The issues mentioned above are just a portion of the issues house churches face today. Nevertheless, churches that are outside of China but wish to help need to pay attention to the following: many young people these days do not care much for whether a church is Three-Self, a house church, or a government-registered “house church”. They believe that they should go to the church of whomever brought them to the faith, whatever that church might be.

The young couple I mentioned at the start of this article actually came from a Three-Self church. They asked me with discontented looks in their eyes, “Why are there teachers from outside China who ask us if we attend a house church or a Three-Self church?” Perhaps the tone in which the question was posed caused them to feel unsettled, but we must know that the Church is the body of believers, and it should not be defined by whichever denomination or political stance it takes. Our acquaintance, contact, and partnership with house churches and Three-Self churches are due to the unique status of the city of Hong Kong. No matter what mission God gives us, or what role He assigns to us, we seek always to be faithful and obedient servants.

Passing on the Baton to the Next Generation

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A new batch of trained leaders

In the mainland's context, talent nurturing talent means more than just a process of imparting knowledge, but also the shaping of a person's character and temperament. The new generation of pastors and seminary teachers grew up during the 1990s and 2000s and are now in their 20s and 30s. They have enormous potential to grow to be more knowledgeable and better in character. This year, we met with this group of new teachers and pastors in various institutions.

These teachers and pastors always greeted us warmly, and loved recalling when and where they had met us. Despite our brief encounters, we discussed a lot. They shared with us their challenges and difficulties in shepherding, the pressure they faced in teaching and their personal struggles. I recall a teacher of the minority groups telling us when and where he graduated, and giving thanks for the books we donated which helped him serve believers who had problems in their marriage, family and relationships. The books offered useful advice for this teacher's own marriage too. We count on such graduates to evangelize to minority groups. Indeed, it is crucial to have teachers who have profound knowledge and a good character as well as willingness to lead their daily lives by the Word in order to nurture good students.



"Thank you for donating books to me upon my graduation. I have put to use these books in my pastoring work and teaching!"

I am grateful to have met Brother Lo again at a Bible school in southwestern China. Brother Lo, who used to be a student, has now become a teacher!

Keep learning and being renewed all the time

What are the typical needs of a graduate? Learn to be....

Let's hear some words of encouragement offered to graduates and seminary students by pastors with frontline pastoring experience:

Learn to be a teacher: As a theology teacher, passing on knowledge and preparing meticulously for classes are just the basics. The real challenge lies in whether you serve with all your heart, respect your students, and live as a model for them.

Learn to be a preacher: A pastor has great responsibilities, and should lead by both his words and his deeds.

Learn to be a learner: As a lifelong learner, one should seek renewal of one's spiritual life all the time.

Learn to be a team player: As a good team member, one should know how to partner with team members and complement each other's strengths.

Learn to be a disciplined servant: As a disciplined servant, one should stand ready to take up responsibilities and serve humbly and faithfully.

Learn to be a successor: As a successor, one should pass on faithfully what he has learned from predecessors and teachers to the next generation.

Good trees bear good fruits

As the Bible says, good trees bear good fruits. Students' growth is a good reflection of whether their teachers have put in hard efforts. This year, I had the opportunity to have exchanges with students on the subjects of reading and serving in the church. I also briefed them on how e-books can support pastoring work, facilitate preparations for classes and enhance one's spiritual growth. In our exchanges, they also shared how some devotional literature has brought impact upon the growth of students' spiritual life and their calling from the Lord. Moreover, they also discussed how Biblical tools have equipped them for their work in evangelism. Students also instantly downloaded some e-books, including the "Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible", a Biblical tool, as well as one book on the preaching of the Old Testament "Sweeter Than Honey" and another on continuous growth of leaders "Six

Leadership Essentials”. These books can certainly help them in their ministry after they have graduated.

We have completed a certain phase of our Book-giving Plan, and it opens up a new chapter of ministry for mainland church workers. We appeal to you to walk hand in hand with these church workers through your prayers and offering.



The first stage of the 2017 Mainland Seminary Graduates Book-giving Plan ended in May, and 40% of the required funds have been raised. We need an amount of US\$155,000 in the next stage. If you are moved by the Lord to support us, please fill in the offering envelope and select “China Church Literature Ministry” and mark “Book-giving Plan”.

Thank you!

Prayers

1. A new understanding of mainland churches



Because of kinship and geographical reasons, churches in Hong Kong have been supporting house churches and 'Three-Self' churches (they are the officially recognised ones) in China. But Hong Kong churches need to understand that with the rise of a young generation of leaders, changes have occurred in the demographics, management, and nurturing style of the mainland churches.

May the Lord guide Hong Kong churches' partnership with mainland churches, help them to no longer see mainland churches as spiritual babies but rather to partner with them in cross-cultural ministry, to make disciplines of all nations.

2. The development of commercial/industrial fellowships

As the number of businessmen and workplace Christians increases along with the growth of urban churches, commercial/industrial fellowships meeting at nighttime have also sprung up. A small number has joined hands with churches to invite pastors to preach or serve communion each time. Still, many fellowships are still at an infancy stage.



May the Lord strengthen the commercial/industrial fellowships, give their leaders / core teams a clear and long-term plan, and help them assist their members in witnessing for Christ in their workplace.

3. Fake advertisements



Cure rate is 100%!

In mid-July, the State Administration for Industry and Commerce revealed that 52 % of the 11,200 advertisements examined in the first half of the year were fake. In addition, 48 % of the fake ads were found on the Internet. Besides undermining consumer confidence, such ads also caused

victims to suffer financially and emotionally.

May the Lord maintain justice in this age of common fraud on the Internet, such that unscrupulous traders get the penalty they deserve. May He protect consumers from being cheated online.

4. Wisdom, height and holiness

The education system is competitive in both Hong Kong and the mainland. In Guangzhou, a record 1,500 people registered for a nursery class, having increased from last year's 634. Some parents even paid up to 10,000 RMB for 'intensive lessons' for their children. The reason, they said, was to prepare their children for an examination-oriented education system.



May God have mercy on the young generation. May He spare them from losing their joy and innocence under a distorted system. May He use churches to nurture children with love and Christian values, to help them grow in 'wisdom, height and holiness'.

5. Tackling food wastage



Mainland media has in recent years reported on the huge food wastage at lavish wedding banquets. Packing leftover food home is rare in China.

Despite official campaigns to prevent overconsumption and food wastage, much more needs to be done to encourage food saving.

May the Lord remind affluent consumers to learn to treasure what they have and be willing to share food with others. May He guide mainland churches to help believers set a good example.

~ THE END ~