

China Church Ministry Strategy 2018

© Otto Lui
Associate General Secretary (Training)

The implementation of the newly amended "Religious Affairs Regulations" began to take effect in February 2018. The government will soon put relevant measures into concrete practice. Though the path ahead will not be easy, the churches of China have weathered many years of difficult climate in the past. Let us make a simple review of the changes in China churches in the last 40 years. From there we will explore the trends of future development and feasible ministry strategies.

Forty Years of Change

There is a continual change in the development of China churches. However, as China is a vast landscape, it is difficult to generalize their development from a single viewpoint. I write with many year's worth of observation in mainland China and make some conclusions about the changing face of China's churches.

- 1. House churches becoming open: In the past, house churches were thick with mystery in order to avoid official restrictions. The trend has been becoming more open to the public. Moreover, each province has different regulations regarding house churches. It is currently difficult to differentiate Three-Self churches from house churches based only on church buildings, congregation arrangements or church governance.
2. Proliferation of information on Christianity: In the past, information on Christianity was difficult to find and understand. However, in the Internet Age it is easy to find literally thousands of links on Christianity on Baidupedia. Nevertheless, it remains the case that it is often hard to distinguish true information from false, and so the information found online is not entirely trustworthy.
3. The Church is becoming younger and more professional: With economic growth in the mainland, Chinese believers are no longer



a group merely supported by Western missionaries. Urban churches trend towards a younger demography, and has on average greater knowledge than in the past.

4. **Joining in global missions:** In the last century, missionaries came to China from the West. Now this has slowly changed to mainland churches forming mission groups to send locals on cross-cultural missions. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Chinese mission work is mature. There are still many variables and its maturity will depend on developments in this coming decade.

5. **Extreme inequality in resource distribution:** In the past several decades, the difference between urban and rural economic development has led to an extreme inequality when it comes to resource distribution among urban and rural churches. Urban churches are able to develop various ministries, and have the financial capacity to fund the training of their own leaders. Conversely, rural churches lack resources and manpower. Its development is arrested, and in fact is declining.

Future Trends

Now I will try to assess possible future trends based on what I have traced in developments in national affairs in the mainland over the last forty years.

1. **Chinese nationalism immersed in churches and their teachings:** Some practitioners in China ministry have commented that the dominant political ideology is more Confucian than Marxist. The church is no exception to the popular notion of China's manifest destiny. For example, one of the slogans of the Back to Jerusalem movement started in 2003, saying that the Chinese churches have received the last mission baton until the second coming of Christ.

This may be a hint of the future, when President Xi launches his China Dream and asks for the sinicization of the Christian churches. Sinicization is not indigenization. The main purpose is to get rid of foreign influence in the areas of church leadership, doctrines and even church models. It may not be a surprise to some of us that the national anthem of China is now played in the church.

2. **Indigenization:** Compared to sinicization, indigenization is more positive. This is a process to cloth Christianity with Chinese cultural expressions, without sacrificing core beliefs and doctrines. Even though protectionism has been practiced in China for about 200 years, the process of indigenization is slow. The Chinese government's propaganda has always denounced Christianity as a western religion. It gives good reason for the

authorities to adopt radical sinicization. Therefore, in the near future, the process of indigenization should be speed up. The Christian churches have to reflect deeply on how to present Christianity as a non-western religion in appropriate ways.

3. **“One Belt One Road” leading to new forms of mission:** Along with the “One Belt One Road” initiative, it has become easier for missionaries of different careers and origins to travel to different regions along the belt. There has been a new wave of mission works with high participation of young professionals, businessmen, entrepreneurs and charity workers. Business as Mission (BAM) may be more spoken of and further developed. Social enterprises and NGOs may also take part in mission.



4. **Regionalization of development:** It is a cultural tradition to describe China according to regional differences. Phrases like “North vs South”, “East vs West” are found everywhere and every generation. The influence of national TSPM/CCC on local churches is diminishing. For example, starting from 2018, all provincial theological seminaries can officially send their faculty to study abroad, it is not necessary for them to apply through national TSPM/CCC as they did in the past.

CCL had long ago started to develop local regional networks to receive church workers from each province and city. This will help in the ministries related to leadership training and the gifting of books to theology graduates.

5. **City churches becoming the mainstream:** As aforementioned, young professionals have become a new force of driving church growth. We now call them the third wave or third church. They are neither registered TSPM churches nor traditional underground house churches. Under the new Religious Affairs Regulations, many of them prefer to register and enjoy the legal status.



In addition, as the gap between churches in the city and in the rural areas becomes wider, the rural churches will not be able to expand due to the lack of trained leaders. City churches are able to support and give resources. As a result of all this, city churches may become the mainstream, while churches in rural areas gradually decline.

6. **From merely obtaining a degree to striving for knowledge:** In recent years, it has become

increasingly easy to obtain a degree in theology. Hundreds of seminaries in different levels and quality are now operating in various cities. The degrees they offer vary from bachelor to master. Only very few obtained accreditation and they are mostly joint courses with foreign seminaries. Many pastors came to HK to study for a higher degree, DMin or PhD. Some of them may look only for a degree. It may become less prestigious to simply acquire a master or doctoral degree, but more so to strive for theological reflections, develop practical models instead.

7. **The emergence of young theologians:** Following #5 and 6, we observed that many young Christians who have international experience are becoming city church leaders. They may have the capacity to receive higher theological education in the west. The current popular theological topics are systematic theology, historical theology, and pastoral theology. One of the major reasons why they choose these topics is language. Chinese materials in these areas are plentiful. In the future, theologies of mission, biblical studies, and counseling may attract more students.

Suggestions for overseas ministries

Facing upcoming trends in development, cultivating leadership will be our main line of ministry in serving churches in the mainland. Below are a summary of the main ministry strategies:

1. **Start from cities instead of rural areas:** From villages surrounding the cities, to cities entering the villages. We emphasise training leaders in the mainland. “Living Word” training concentrates on lay leaders from high school up, so that they can bring what they learn to use back in their own churches. We encourage our students to absorb what they learn, simplify the material and teach grassroots believers to learn and live out the Truth.

2. **Mentoring instead of lecturing:** We emphasise life-changing mentoring relationship in nurturing spiritual leaders. Mentoring has a long history in Chinese educational culture. Many of the young leaders are asking, for a mentor who can give guidance and timely advice, and walk along in their joyful as well as hard times. Instead of teaching biblical or theological knowledge, focus more on relationship. The ways Jesus related to his disciples are what the young leaders longing for.



3. **Improve theology research resources, from relying on the West to a more local theology:** We understand the situation of the churches in the mainland. We provide for the

need for excellent spiritual books through translating to simplified Chinese, digital books and gifting books to seminary graduates. At the same time, we care about the requests of young “theologians” to publish books with certain depth. , for example, through China Graduate School of Theology · CGST Theology for the Church Series.

4. **Strengthen hermeneutical studies, Christian education, counselling and work theological training:** We have convened a Professional Diploma in Christian Education course (Putonghua) for developing more workers in Christian education in the churches in the mainland. This will help individuals, families and churches to develop steadily.



5. **Organise more theological conferences:** Through exchanges and discussing theology and relevant ongoing church topics, local theology can be developed. International links can then be established. We promote exchanges with young native scholars through journal magazines and digital books, etc, to broaden their horizons.

6. **Hand over rural church work to locals:** Through the recommendation of theological colleges and Bible schools, we find workers in rural areas who have the heart and the potential. Then through training and subsidies for their needs, we support rural workers to take up the Gospel work for rural churches.

7. **Set aside poverty alleviation, scholarships and other finance-based ministries, push the concept of “shared resources”:** Let mainland churches from wealthier cities encourage individual members to take up the responsibilities of caring for the poor, establishing Christian ministries that serve as a witness and model for local, national needs.

To conclude, from the perspective of just in the last few years, it may seem quite worrying for the churches in China as many overseas churches may not be able to continue in many ministries. Nevertheless, from the perspective of historical trends, God has never given up on the churches in China. We must pray to God and seek guidance on what we must carry on and what we must give up, on what changes we need to make in response to His will and desire.



Seizing Hold of Opportunities

- Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Giving Plan 2018

© **Matthew Fung**
Associate General Secretary (Publishing)

This is the seventh year of our book giving programme. To ensure that we make the best use of the opportunities available to us, our book giving team started liaising with seminaries and Bible schools half a year before the graduation season. To meet with mainland seminaries' demands, this year we will donate books to 5,000 graduates in 50 seminaries and Bible schools all over the mainland. Yet, we face unprecedented challenges with regards to the approval, delivery and production of the books.



Approval procedures

Mainland churches have all along been subject to the influence of cults. Members of the cults would make friends with believers and snatch away believers who were not too grounded in their faith. Moreover, they would use online means and publications to propagate wrong messages that are not the truth. They exercise great influence on believers, similar to that of church leaders. Doubtlessly, the hermeneutics publications and other books on leadership training, discipleship and marriage and family we publish are in line with the Word and can help build lives. However, some seminaries still insist on vetting our books in accordance with the relevant requirements. We fully understand their concern and respect their system. The approval process is usually complicated and we can never be sure whether approval will be given. Therefore, every time our publications are approved, we give thanks to the Lord, taking it as confirmation that we are walking in His will.

Delivery subject to tightening requirements

Approval takes time and will inevitably affect the delivery arrangements. Yet, the real challenge lies in the lead time for long distance delivery. The seminaries' approval does not mean that books can be smoothly delivered. Books may be subject to clearance at the customs, and in the case of long



distance delivery, weather may also be a problem. Even if the books are sent into the mainland, extra checks may be conducted. Of the 100,000 volumes of books sent last year, a vast majority arrived before the graduates returned to their hometown. Only a very small quantity was held up by the customs. We understand it is not guaranteed that books will be delivered smoothly, yet we are grateful that a large number could arrive at their destinations in time. Looking ahead, the challenges in delivery will only increase, but we trust that the Lord will carve out a way for us according to His timing, making it possible for us to donate published and electronic books to respond to the graduates' needs to pastor in different regions and to progressively raise the ratio of books published on the mainland.

Challenges of publishing on the mainland

In order to supply books to mainland churches steadily over a long period of time, we will take the important step of asking mainland units to publish titles which are of relatively greater influence. However, the publication of devotional literature in the mainland has in recent years been subject to many restrictions. Looking back at the past six years, with God's protection, individual volumes were published in the mainland, making it possible for church leaders to have further study. The discipleship materials that we have long waited for, i.e. the series on "Discipleship Essentials"¹, were officially published in the mainland. We are most grateful to the Lord. This series will be part of the list of books to be donated, and will be helpful to graduates in grooming spiritual leaders and shepherding their teams. In the package of books donated to graduates, the number of those published in the mainland has risen. However, there are still difficulties ahead, especially in the publication of hermeneutics and Bible teaching materials.

There is a saying that "every single grain is the fruit of hard work". Our testimony is that "every single book represents the grace of the Lord". We started with giving books to six seminaries six years ago, and we are connecting with 50 seminaries this year to donate 5,000 set of books. Every bit of achievement comes from God's grace and provision. Let's seize hold of the opportunities that we have in giving books, walk with the Lord and give praise to him even in times of difficulties and challenges!

1 This series includes "Leadership Essentials: Shaping Vision, Multiplying Influence, Defining Character", "Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ", "Witness Essentials", "The Essential Commandment".

Please support year 2018 Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Giving Plan

We plan to support 50 seminaries, Bible schools and training centres in 2018, each turning out an average 100 graduates. Each graduate will be given a pastoring package (subsidy per pack as US\$64). A total of funding US\$320,000 is needed.

Pray that the Lord will touch you and inspire you to walk alongside the graduates, support the publication of our books, and bless the graduates' ministry. Please act now by donating to the item of Publishing Mission and putting down a remark of "Seminary Graduates Book Giving 2018". Thank you!

Prayers

1. Discovering new opportunities

China's churches have experienced constant changes over the past 4 decades. Even bigger changes and challenges are to be expected in 2018, in areas like pastoral care, preaching, training, Christian literature publishing. Locals have arisen to take responsibility for most ministries, unlike the old days when mainland churches relied on overseas support.



May the Lord raise up more mainland church leaders who can help believers become rooted in Biblical truths and develop a deep relationship with our Lord. May they also discover new opportunities to share the gospel with non-believers.

2. Seizing hold of opportunities of book giving



Our book giving ministry has entered its 7th year. To cope with the massive need in frontline ministry, the ministry will be expanded to reach 5,000 graduating students in 50 seminaries across the country this year. Yet that means we will be faced with an unprecedented challenge, particularly regarding book screening, transportation and production etc.

May the Lord bless the book donation team and the publishing and marketing teams behind, such that they can complete the necessary procedures smoothly and raise enough funds to deliver the books to the students before graduation.

3. The spiritual needs of students who studied abroad

Chinese students studying abroad are mostly 18, 19 year-olds who are the only child in their families. In the past, overseas churches reached out to them through caring for their daily needs,



but as they come from affluent families, many of these students today don't need such help from churches. For those who accepted Christ overseas, many found it hard to adjust to the church style in China upon their return. Some even lost their faith in the end.

May the Lord give overseas churches the wisdom to evangelize to mainland students using different strategies; may He also lead mainland churches to cater to the needs of those who studied abroad, and bless the returned students in their integration with local churches.

4. Workers' exploitation



Ordering food delivery on mobile phone is highly popular in China. To protect consumer rights, shops have set up an evaluation system to let buyers rate the delivery service. But poor ratings have been used by the management to withhold wages. Delivery staff have no option but to quietly accept it when their wages are suppressed due to unsatisfactory ratings.

May the Lord have mercy on delivery service workers, help them provide quality service, receive fair evaluation, and be given fair wages. Pray that they will not be exploited by the management and can enjoy basic security for their living.

~ THE END ~