

## **The Balance of Academic Research and Practical Spiritual Life**

- A Glance at Mainland Theological Education



© Editing: Yin Qing

Since the reform and opening up of the Mainland, there has been an increase in the quality of theological seminaries in terms of the hardware of school facilities and the software of the teaching faculty. Nevertheless, theological education in the mainland is still on the journey of holistic development. It needs to focus special attention on balancing the development of academic knowledge and practical spiritual living. Only in this way can graduates respond to the changes and needs of the pastoral ministry and culture in the church; and in this way Christianity will not be separated from our living experiences, and the truths of the Bible will not become ossified.

The development of theological education in the mainland is still a long journey, and many aspects require support. We have especially interviewed a pastor from Hong Kong who has been involved in the forefront of theological education in the mainland for many years. We invited him to share his observations and experiences about the ministry of theological education in the mainland, and the challenges and difficulties faced during training and equipping Christian workers.

### **The Heavenly Father Opens this Door**

After Reverend Song (alias) was educated and equipped in the seminary in Hong Kong in the 80s, he ministered at Christian organizations and churches while also caring and participating in ministries in China. A little over ten years ago, the Lord moved him and his

wife to enter the northern part of China to serve. He became part of a local church pastoral team, with a focus on pastoral training among local believers.

Our Heavenly Father opened the way for Rev. Song to minister in the mainland, and he was invited to be a guest lecturer at a seminary in the mainland. Since then, he started to be on the frontlines, joining in teaching work at seminaries in the north, northwest and north eastern regions of China.

## The Difficulties Facing Theological Education

Rev. Song has been continuously involved with theological education for more than a decade. Not only is he sturdily equipped in theological education, he also possesses rich pastoral experience. With his teaching experiences of a decade on the frontline, he observes that theological education faces the following difficulties:

**Courses lack comprehensiveness:** When seminaries in the mainland were re-opened in the 80s, they were overly focused on hermeneutics to combat the heresies and misinterpretations of scriptures at the time. This type of curriculum design has had a deep influence in causing seminaries to over-emphasize classical academic theological education (including theology, church history, Biblical research, and anthropology) as well as the traditional preaching style. It also led to the neglect of modern practical theological education (including ethics, pastoral studies and Christian education). Seminary graduates learn only to emphasize expositing from scripture, but they are comparatively weaker in the combination of theory and practice. They often feel helpless when faced with the needs of frontline pastoral ministry and church development.

**Teachers of theological seminary are too young:** At present, many teachers at theological seminary and Bible schools become teaching staff after having only completed a bachelor's. There is still a lot of room for academic improvement, yet they need to take up teaching duties immediately. What's more, these young teachers lack pastoral experience and are unable to guide theology students in preparing for future pastoral services. Additionally, as believers in churches become more diverse, with intellectuals and returned overseas students, as well as believers in the workplace and business, the challenges facing Christian faith become more complex. A young teacher may not have much grasp on current situations, such as adapting to Chinese church styles or workplace ethics, making it difficult for them to instruct students to guide the believers.

**Lack of teaching materials and inappropriate classification:** Even if teachers want to teach practical theology subjects, it is not easy to find suitable teaching materials on the subject in the mainland. There is a severe shortage of teaching materials on Christian education, ethics and spiritual growth. Moreover, many seminaries don't have a proper sorting system for their library reference materials, and lack a clear concept of library



management. Sometimes, public books in the library become books that are privately used on a whim.

### Retirement is not Resting from Training Others

Rev. Song retired from his pastoral post of the mainland church several years ago, but he has not put down his ministry in theological education. He is dedicated to his calling to train Christian ministers. Not only has he personally been involved with this ministry, he has also demonstrated the ability to connect with many others on the same path. He sets strategies with his team in hopes of building up and equipping more seminary students.

**Support in Teaching:** Rev. Song gives priority to assisting seminaries that are still not qualified for the four-year undergraduate (Bachelor) program. By optimizing the teaching and management of the library and the amount of books, the school can promote undergraduate courses (upgraded) and enhance the quality of equipment for the students. At the same time, he connects with supporters to finance teachers to go to neighboring regions to study for a master's degree or PhD, in order to expand their horizons and invest in the long term improvement of faculty members. At present, 10 teachers are undergoing further studies, while 10 others have already completed them.

On a different note, when faced with the situation of Christians concentrated in rural areas, where there is a lower standard of culture and faith, there is also an urgent need to help grassroots believers build a stronger foundation of Christian living, as well as materials for practical, pastoral and discipleship training. Thus, Rev. Song and a few experienced pastors teach practical theology, such as discipleship training, small group studies, church management, pastoral leadership training, church ministry development, premarital counseling, Christian family training, pastoral studies, and pastoral counselling, at different seminaries in order to equip seminary students for practical work.

### Promoting small group learning for spiritual growth courses:

With the help of Rev. Song and his team, over the years the 12 theological seminaries have changed the way they implement their teaching. From a weekly lecture by a professor, they have now changed to intensive courses with practical sessions. This method not only allows teachers to reach more students across different regions, but also strengthens the pastoral application that students learn. Intensive courses are still taught by teachers, but the practical section is led in conjunction with students who have already completed the course. Because the courses are carried out in different schools, the teaching modes have been adjusted. For example, during teaching, Rev. Song has tried to partner with teachers from mainland schools, allowing them to assist in teaching. The main responsibility for teaching is given to the mainland teachers after their exposure to the course as assistants. At another



school, a group of third-year students who had finished the course were divided into groups to teach volunteer groups that were three times their number.

**Improving teaching material and library management:** Rev. Song and the team strive to promote the publication of appropriate teaching materials. The topics are chosen and edited on the principles of spiritual life and attitude, method and technique, truth and theory. They connect donors and authorize mainland groups to legally publish materials. At present they have published 13 teaching publications on spiritual growth and maturing, and are currently in the process of publishing another 3. Regarding the problem of library management, they have mobilized manpower to help 6 different theological seminary libraries to sort their collections and computerize their management. Moreover, in the past years, they have donated over 30,000 books and materials to over 10 libraries to enrich their teaching resources.

### **Continuing on the Road of Theological Education**

Through the many changes in the religious environment in the mainland, Rev. Song and his team pray that God will protect them as they continue on the road of theological education. Facing the future, Rev. Song says with hope, “We hope that in the future theological education in the mainland will develop in two aspects, that in pursuit of academic research they will also emphasize spiritual life and practicality. Teachers in the mainland lack pastoral experience, so I hope that retired pastors from Hong Kong will come and walk with them and spend their retirement well. Moreover, as the costs of running an actual campus increases, in the age of 5G, we hope to explore and develop more of virtual campuses. We believe that this method will bring about many breakthroughs. Finally, establishing a central digital library is very important, so that seminary students and teachers have a platform to read more precious texts and access more audiovisual resources.”

We ask that the Lord himself empowers Rev. Song and his team in their work, and we pray that the Lord will open new ways for more pastors from Hong Kong to be willing to join in mainland theological education ministry in order to equip more Christian ministers in the mainland! Moreover, as graduates leave the school to enter the workplace, they are no longer under the constant guidance and tutelage of their teachers. We pray that, in light of the ever tightening regulations on publications in the mainland, we are still able to provide these graduates and pastors with spiritual books on hermeneutics, apologetics, discipleship, family, marriage etc. that can supply their needs and help them face their battles in the field of pastoral work.



## From Learning the “Living Word” to Walking with Church Workers



© Xiao Dong  
Frontline worker in China Church Ministry

While the “Living Word” course comes in the form of three- to five-day intensive classes with limited time for familiarizing with the participants, we still maintain contact with some church leaders and gradually evolve to be companions in their ministry.

A young leader in her 20s, sister Yang is now studying in a seminary in central-southern China. In the past two years, apart from meeting her at Bible classes, we have become her companion in supporting her in her ministry.

### Getting to know her through “Living Word” classes

When sister Yang was in her first year of study in the seminary last year, she was introduced by her senior to the “Living Word” course, learning the “Book of James, I Peter, II Peter and Judas”. When she first came across these Bible teaching materials, she sensed that the learning experience from this class was vastly different from that in the seminary. She devoted herself entirely to the study and was very inspired by the learning model whereby the teaching was lively and small group interaction was emphasized. God’s teaching went straight into her heart and her life. After the classes, she reflected deeply on what she had learned (including correct interpretation of scripture, student-centred learning, appropriate life application) and studied God’s Word diligently. She discovered that this would not only result in a better relationship with God, but also with others.



Sister Yang studied in the “Living Word” course

## Interacting with her outside the classroom

This year, sister Yang went onto her second year of study in the seminary, and joined the learning of the Book of Levites in the “Living Word” course. We looked forward to meeting her again. However, she was different this time. Throughout the course, she was not concentrating and felt depressed, and did not participate actively in class discussions.

After the classes were over, her situation was still very much on my mind. I then learned that she would come to Hong Kong shortly for another learning course. I invited her to visit our organization and try to find out what bothered her.

## Becoming her companion in supporting her

During the visit, we were chatting while walking around the different display areas. When we came to the display area for our China ministries, sister Yang watched the displays for a long time and saw some photos of herself learning the “Living Word” last year (she identified herself among a group of participants). At that moment, she suddenly became very high-spirited and said, “Looking at the scene back then, it became suddenly clear to me that I have been nurtured with love and care for a big mission and responsibility.”

What were this mission and responsibility? She pondered for a while. We continued with our visit and I shared more about the problems our team faced and how we pressed on in face of the difficult religious environment on the mainland. We did not flinch. On the contrary, we devoted more time and effort to find ways and means to bring leadership training to mainland regions where such training was lacking. She listened carefully... and seemed to identify her way forward.

Then, we entered another display area, where she saw a three-dimensional map of China hanging on the wall. She seemed to have figured it out, and said firmly, “I see my own mission! I see my future direction! And that is to preach the gospel all over China. I am thrilled with excitement! I believe that God has given me a big mission and responsibility. I should stand up to be that leader and help more people become leaders!”

Sister Yang’s passion flared up once again! Thank God for using the visit and our dialogue to rekindle her heart to pursue and spread God’s Word, not only in the seminary, but also in the church in the future. She will rise to be a spiritual leader and help more believers through teaching God’s words!

Teaching the “Living Word” is not just about passing on knowledge. It offers an opportunity for us to enter into participants’ lives and inspire them. Pray that the Lord will use us to support even more leaders, in particular young leaders, and help us become their companions and life mentors!

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**Please support the Mentoring based Leadership Training**

In 2019, through teaching and exchanges in Hong Kong and the mainland, we hope to equip 115 team coaches and 340 shepherd leaders as well as support 460 disciple makers. Please pray for our ministry and our need to raise US\$167,000 required. Please act immediately to support us. Thank you!

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# Prayers

## 1. Personal and social credit system

In early July, the Guangdong provincial government unveiled the three-year action plan for facilitating the development of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (2018-2020). It includes a plan to expedite the development of the social credit and market monitoring system, which triggered much online debate among Hong Kong people worried about the system being implemented in the city. The Hong Kong SAR Government later clarified that the system would not be used in the city.



May the Lord give relevant departments wisdom to handle the matter properly and may the Lord give Hong Kong people peace and keep them from being gripped by fear.

## 2. Mentors of young pastors



Compared to older pastors, pastors and seminary students of the post 80s and 90s generation have better educational level and theological training. And yet they lack life mentors who accompany and discuss issues with them in their journey.

May the Lord use teachers of Living Word, that in each learning session, they can share personal struggles and life lessons with students besides imparting Biblical knowledge and skills. May the teachers continue to maintain contacts with the students, give them guidance and encouragement after the course is over.

## 3. Marriage Counselling and parent-child education

As the social environment gets more complicated, believers are facing a host of family issues, from extra-marital affairs, homophobia to sex education. Yet due to a lack of training and the dearth of relevant books, many pastors were ill-equipped to tackle the issues.

May the Lord open the way for more exchanges between mainland pastors and experienced scholars; may He also lead



mainland theological seminaries to find suitable teachers and materials to help seminary students and serving pastors further their knowledge in various issues, and help believers tackle them with Christian values.

#### 4. Prevention of addiction to Internet games



The National Health Commission announced in mid-July that children and adolescents are at high risk of falling victim to game-related diseases. Many are addicted to internet games and put games above daily activities and other interests. Children addicts are spending less time on outdoor activities, less time with parents and teachers, while being glued to their mobile phones.

May the Lord lead parents and teachers to join hands and pay attention to parent-child exchanges, while helping children and adolescents develop healthy interests.

~ THE END ~

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#### Pray for China

Published since 1974

~ Pray for China publications can be served as a platform to express the latest situations and needs of churches and leaders in the mainland.

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