

## **Pastoring Needs to Make a Big Difference!**

— Different views of pastors and believers in the mainland



© Otto Lui  
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In recent years, many people have expressed concern regarding the rising restriction of their involvement in serving mainland churches. Many coworkers from Hong Kong churches have been forced to discontinue their ministry in mainland churches. Though the work of CCL has also been somewhat affected, under the gracious guidance of God, the majority of our ministry is still able to continue, and we are proceeding cautiously. We always keep in mind a principle, which is to respond to local needs appropriately so as to build a sustainable ministry.

Focusing on the present situation, opportunities to participate in China ministries seem to have decreased; however, this might be an important moment for us to reflect upon what we should really do. Should we consider shifting our focus from direct contact evangelism, church planting, etc. to personal caring ministry and becoming spiritual partners to the local church communities?

In order to have a clear understanding of the pastoral needs of mainland churches, we conducted a survey in August this year. The survey involved about 160 mainland pastors

and Christian leaders. We hope to understand what they regard as the most important pastoral needs. They were asked to list and rank their top five most important needs. Respondents came from various regions throughout the country. They were randomly selected to be surveyed. There was no predetermined response description or category. They could freely express their opinions. At the end of the survey, opinions from the respondents were classified into the following 12 categories<sup>1</sup>:

## Pastoral Needs From the Pastors' View

Integrating responses from the pastors, out of the 12 categories, the top five most important pastoral needs, in descending order, are:

Order of Importance	Item	Percentage (%)
1	Bible teaching and training	41.4
2	Pastoral nurturing and counseling	12.1
3	Worship, prayer and personal spiritual formation	9.3
4	Continuing education for pastors	8.6
5	Establishing relationships with members of the church and valuing relationships	6.4
5	Church administration, development and vision propagation	6.4

Table 1: Pastoral needs regarded as most important by mainland pastors

From the survey results, it is apparent that “Bible teaching and training” and “Pastoral nurturing and counseling”, when taken together, already exceeded half (53.5%) of all responses, with **“Bible teaching and training”** being considered as the single most important need. Pastors regard equipping believers with biblical truth as their top priority; this is the essence of pastoral care. This thinking is actually related to the church development process in the mainland. In the past, the church was in her phase of rapid development. There were three main characteristics, which render teaching and training the foremost priority of pastors. These characteristics include: 1) many believers but few shepherds, there is an urgent need for workers who are able to lead bible studies and preach; 2) lay believers generally are not highly educated, they are vulnerable to being influenced by heresy, solid biblical teaching provides protection on the foundation level to preserve pure faith; 3) under the circumstance of shortages in educational resources, preaching and various training courses are the only options that can be chosen.

**“Pastoral nurturing and counseling”** ranked second. According to the respondents, pastors provide spiritual and psychological counseling to believers. They pray, comfort and encourage believers according to their individual needs. Such ministry requires linkage on the level personal relationships. When further enquired about how they define this aspect of pastoral care, certain workers elaborated that their spiritual relationship with believers can

in turn deepen the believer's individual relationship with God. Whenever a believer is having religious problems or lacking faith in God, it is only reasonable that the pastor will always take it very seriously.

**“Worship, prayer and personal spiritual formation”** and **“Continuing education for pastors”** ranked third and fourth respectively. Pastoral care is built upon long term relationships; believers bring with them various problems when they come to the pastors. In the past, they might be satisfied with having the pastors respond by praying for them earnestly. Nowadays, believers are facing problems far more complicated than those a decade ago. At the same time, in recent years, there are increasing opportunities to study overseas as well as online. The pursuit of continuing education is a popular trend. Although continuing education for pastors is not a direct pastoral need, it is still given a high ranking because to a pastor, it is an important refuelling tool that enables him/her to continue serving effectively.

**“Establishing relationships with members of the congregation and valuing relationships”** and **“Church administration, development and vision propagation”** both ranked fifth in the order of importance. The former concerns the relationship aspect between the pastor and the believers to whom s/he is tending, the latter involves the projection of church tradition on leader expectation and requirements. Chinese culture puts a great deal of emphasis on relationships, pastors regard highly the importance of knowing their congregation well. Understandably, it is through having a good relationship with members of the congregation that the pastor can motivate them to get involved in various ministries.

## Different Expectations of Pastors and Believers

On the other hand, what are the opinions of Christian leaders/believers? Out of the 12 categories, the top five most important pastoral needs are as follows:

Order of Importance	Item	Percentage (%)
1	Establishing relationships with members of the congregation and valuing relationships	29.4
2	Bible teaching and training	21.8
3	Pastoral nurturing and counseling	16.2
4	Identifying members who are gifted and recruiting them into the service team	6.6
5	Worship, prayer and personal spiritual formation	5.6

Table 2: Pastoral needs regarded as most important by mainland Christian leaders/believers

From Table 2, we can see that what Christian leaders/believers identified as the most important pastoral needs converged on the first three items which comprised more than 60% (67.4%). The ranking differs from that of the pastors', the most obvious difference being the top item. **“Establishing relationships with members of the congregation and valuing relationships”** is regarded by Christian leaders/believers as the most important element with 29.4% respondents selecting it as the number one pastoral need. In the pastors' view, however, only 6.4% identified this item as most important. Believers gave it a ranking even higher than “Bible teaching and training”.

The difference in ranking order probably reflects that in the minds of Christian leaders/believers, the personal relationship with their pastors is very important. They expect pastors to spend time with them, they desire to have an in-depth understanding and enjoy fellowship life with their pastors. Relation preceding function is a major characteristic of Chinese culture. Perhaps Christian leaders/believers do not have the same pressure as pastors pertaining to achieving service goals, thus their views on pastoral needs differ significantly. **“Bible teaching and training”** and **“Pastoral nurturing and counseling”** ranked second and third respectively. These two items can collectively be categorized under teaching and nurturing and are considered general needs of mainland churches.

**“Identifying members who are gifted and recruiting them into the service team”** is an item not particularly outstanding among responses from pastors—it did not make it to top five. However, this item ranked fourth in the responses of Christian leaders/believers. Pastors see a general need to equip believers in terms of their fundamental theological doctrines, biblical truth and messages for evangelism and spiritual revival, etc. In the view of believers, collaboration among members of the spiritual group according to individual capability is of relative importance. In order to do so, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of individual members' gifts and coordinate the service team accordingly.

## Overall Observations

Through this survey and coupled with the experience of our coworkers, we were able to identify the pastoral needs of mainland churches.

From the perspective of mainland pastors, teaching and pastoral care is of utmost importance. Christian leaders/believers, on the other hand, desire an in-depth personal and spiritual relationship with their pastors. This is also the situation we often encounter in recent years. Younger workers and believer leaders tend to emphasize building up a strongly knitted service team while the senior generations tend to emphasize the building up of personal spiritual virtues.

In the survey results, we also see the respondents' expression of the objective of pastoral care. The major predisposition is that pastoral care is targeted towards church growth and development. Among the younger generation, the outright emphasis on

“suffering for Christ” is diminishing when compared to the older generation. The younger generation tends to concern relatively little for their own and other believer leaders’ individual physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. Those who mentioned family relation were even fewer in number. Does this mean the mainstream opinion is still very much task-oriented? This is even more so for the pastors. To them, ministry and spirituality are closely related and, to a certain extent, even their own continuing education is all targeted towards attaining church development.

Bible teaching is of course essential. While acquiring knowledge, it is also important to maintain a holistic approach to effectuate Christian values and mission. We can do it by utilizing a mentorship approach that targets not only teaching knowledge but influencing lives. It is not to scale down the conveyance of knowledge, but it is through better utilization of the knowledge conveyance process. With experience sharing appropriately integrated into the knowledge conveyance process, it will help mainland pastors and Christian leaders distinguish what is most appropriate to be applied in their individually unique ministry situation.

## **Recommendations to Ministry Teams Who Served China Churches**

In the past, our team gained a certain level of understanding of the pastoral needs of mainland churches. It was acquired through direct contact during the process of individual care and while providing group training. This is the first time we gathered information using a survey. The survey facilitated them to express freely what they have in mind. We must understand that in a culture where interpersonal relationship plays a pivotal role, when groups from outside the mainland are involved in the ministry of mainland churches, feedbacks from the mainland coworkers tend to be generally positive. Though they might have dissatisfaction, they would not reveal it explicitly.

Targeting the pastoral needs listed above, can the survey result help us reflect upon and readjust our focus in ministry? In the past, the approach undertaken by ministry teams was primarily direct evangelism. Now that channels for such approach are becoming increasingly obstructed, should we consider alternative approaches? Will the personal caring and mentorship models that target the spiritual needs of the local ministry providers be feasible alternatives that will allow the ministry teams to continue serving the mainland churches?

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*Note 1:*

- (1) Bible teaching and training
- (2) Pastoral nurturing and counseling
- (3) Establishing relationships with members of the congregation and valuing relationships
- (4) Identifying members who are gifted and recruiting them into the service team
- (5) Continuing education for pastors
- (6) Pastor's and believer's family life and personal well-being
- (7) Developing personal virtues and establishing oneself as role model
- (8) Worship, prayer and personal spiritual formation
- (9) Evangelism and mission
- (10) Church administration, development and vision propagation
- (11) Social service and tribute to the country
- (12) Others



## The Power of a Book



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Member of the Book Gifting Team

Gifting books to seminary graduates in the mainland in person was certainly an exciting experience, but even more gratifying was the chance to talk to these novice pastors to understand their aspirations and struggles as they entered full-time ministry. As we lived in different places, it was not easy to see them again after each meeting. We were grateful, however, to be able to stay in touch with some of them who shared with us how they served on the frontline.

### Pressure Faced by Single Female Believers

Recently, I had the opportunity to read the sharing of two graduates, Pastor Guan from the northwestern region and Pastor Zhang from the eastern region, both of whom had just started full-time ministry. Despite the fact that their churches were miles apart, their sharing was somehow similar in that both talked about using a book we gifted to shepherd young, single female believers. After reading their sharing, I could not help but thank the Lord. “Thank you, Father, for using this book to bring joy and comfort to the hearts of single female believers!”

In the churches of these pastors, two young sisters from different regions had lots of struggles within their hearts and prayed earnestly for the Lord to provide them with a God-loving other half. This indeed might also be the prayer of many young female Christians in the mainland. Pastor Guan from the northwest said, “No matter how our economy has boomed, in Chinese culture, single females who have reached a certain age and not yet married are often under pressure from their peers and their parents. Given especially the imbalance between the number of men and women in the mainland, how should these sisters deal with the situation?”

## Speaking to the Heart of Single Female Believers

To address the spiritual needs of these two single female believers, the two pastors coincidentally made use of the same book, “Ruth & Billy Graham - The Legacy of a Couple”<sup>1</sup> to help them. The tips in the book served as a good reference for the two pastors so that they could walk hand in hand with these sisters, and help them embrace the future with full confidence in God’s provision.

Pastor Zhang from the eastern region said, “The book describes how Ruth Bell, i.e. Ruth Graham, prayed for her other half and how she later met Billy Graham. This was a most encouraging experience which strengthened the sister’s confidence in the Lord. She came to realize that meeting a life partner was something which could really happen and not merely a dream, just like Ruth’s experience as mentioned in the book. It was a promise by God towards His children who were devoted to Him. The sister was much encouraged. She was also determined to learn more about her own self and be prepared to be someone’s life partner, while waiting for God’s provision.”

Not only did these two pastors guide single female believers on how to choose life partners, they also, through the marriage life of Ruth and Billy Graham, taught them that marriage was not as what was depicted in a fairy tale which often ended with the phrase “and they lived happily ever after”. Pastor Guan from the northwest said, “There are bound to be challenges and difficulties in a married life, but God had used the Graham couple’s ups and downs in their marriage to bless other people. The sister as a result developed greater confidence in God, believing firmly that her marriage would be in God’s good hands. Her wish was to glorify God in her marriage.”

## Conclusion

Thank the Lord for using these two novice pastors who had leveraged on the experience of senior spiritual leaders to bless and teach young sisters and address their questions and worries about seeking a life partner. It is believed that God will use books other than “Ruth & Billy Graham - The Legacy of a Couple” that we have gifted to support the needs of front-line pastors!

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*Note 1* : “Ruth & Billy Graham - The Legacy of a Couple” (Simplified Chinese version), author: Hanspeter Nüesch; 416 pages in total. The book is on the list of CCL’s Book Gifting Project, and was published in May 2018 by the Jiangsu Provincial CCC/TSPM.



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# Prayers

## 1. New pastoral approach

Times have changed and sermons alone are not enough to meet believers' spiritual needs or foster their spiritual growth. While pastors consider teaching and pastoral care to be both important, many Christians are yearning for closer and deeper ties with their pastors.

May the Lord lead pastors to listen to and understand believers' needs more, and integrate their knowledge and experience in walking alongside believers in their life journeys.



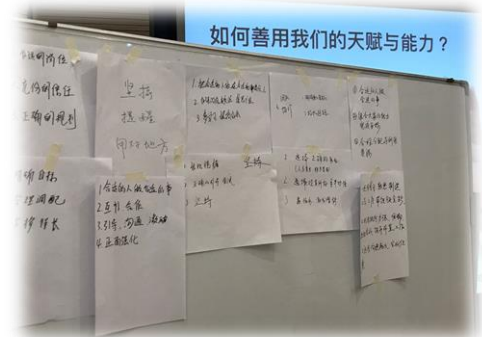
## 2. Unperplexed by activities



The religious environment in the mainland is deteriorating, and some churches have been asked to include socialist core values in their Sunday sermons. Since August, some churches have been encouraged to hold various non-religious activities, e.g. singing contests, calligraphy and photography shows etc.

May the Lord give church leaders wisdom to teach Biblical truths despite external constraints. May He also protect believers from being confused by the variety of activities and help them think and make judgement based on their core belief.

## 3. Equipping and mobilizing workplace leaders



Due to the lack of teachers capable of teaching workplace issues from Biblical perspectives, many Christian workplace leaders' spiritual needs are not met. There are indeed vast ministry needs in fellowships for working adults in churches and in enterprises.

May the Lord lead the development of workplace ministry, get more talents and resources connected to serve more provinces and cities, churches, enterprises and workplace leaders. Through equipping and mobilizing workplace leaders, hopefully more people in the labour force can be influenced by Christian values.

#### 4. Quality extra-curricular life

The Chinese Children Development Report 2019 - Children's Extra-curricular Life was released in mid-August in Beijing found an imbalance: children living in urban areas have more time for pursuing an interest, physical exercises, or other outdoor activities whereas those from townships and villages spend their time mainly on watching TV, playing video games and housework. Because of financial constraint, rural children have limited extra-curricular activities.



May the Lord move well-resourced urban churches to organise healthy activities for the children together with rural churches to broaden their horizons.

~ 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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