

Doing What Is Important and Essential — Needs of the Mainland Church After the Pandemic

© Otto Lui
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Many people would agree that the year 2020 was an important watershed in our times. For the mainland church, the past year has also been most special with new and old challenges confronting the church. This article will discuss five major issues.

What ministries should the church resume after the shutdown is over?

Amidst the lockdown in the wake of the pandemic, online pastoring became the new normal early this year. The lockdown began during the Spring Festival holidays and church workers had all returned to their hometown. The ban on travel meant that they were compelled to stay home for a few months. As a result, WeChat was the only avenue for them to connect with their sheep. Online worship, personal counselling, Bible study and training classes were all carried out online. Sermons were also recorded regularly every week for dissemination to believers.

Like Hong Kong, some believers had got used to worshipping online during the pandemic. So even after physical gatherings resumed, online gatherings continued. According to mainland church workers, fewer middle-aged and young believers now attend physical

worship. How to continue pastoring this group poses a new challenge to the church. Non-official, unregistered churches are still holding small-scale gatherings, but it is almost impossible to organize large-scale public gatherings. Some of them are now just meeting online.

As the pandemic gradually subsides, worship and gatherings have returned to normal. We have yet to wait and see whether online small group gatherings and teaching will continue. A challenge for church workers is to evaluate and learn from the video shepherding experience in the past few months. Meanwhile, based on the experience during the shutdown, they must also learn to distinguish essential ministries from the non-essential ones which can be given up. This is a golden opportunity for the church to reflect on its traditions.

How to further develop leadership training?

A yet bigger challenge lies in the ministry of leadership training. For years, the mainland church has relied on the support of overseas trainers in theology training. Although the number of trainers from overseas entering the mainland to conduct training has dwindled in the past six years, the number of mainland church workers going out for training has increased continuously. It is not difficult to find mainland church workers studying theology in places like Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, North America and Europe. However, as the whole world virtually shuts down and travelling comes to a halt during the pandemic, online teaching has become the only way to teach.

During the pandemic, classes at seminaries and Bible schools were suspended. After the pandemic, resumption of classes was also delayed, with some classes restarted only towards the end of the year. In other words, practically no class was held throughout 2020! Meanwhile, in Bible schools in remote places, the pandemic had made it impossible to enroll new students. As a result, the schools could not offer any programmes in the new academic year. There was no way for the schools to make any adjustments, given the current strict government policy.

As fewer church workers now go overseas to study, leadership training in the mainland church is inevitably affected. In recent years, some church workers, upon completing their study overseas, have returned to China to serve, but they are only in small numbers. They might have completed studies for a master's or doctor's degree, but are no longer considered as the "elites" these days. In the past, they have busily occupied themselves with church ministries, and have engaged overseas teachers to assist in training programmes. This is quite understandable given their extensive overseas connections. Yet, these teachers from overseas often find that their students' standards fall below their expectations. Many students just possess very basic Biblical knowledge, and some even doubt whether they have been saved! Despite such difficulties, overseas teachers remain

faithful to their task. It is a pity that they are only assuming teaching duties which can be readily taken up by local teachers.

Such a situation means that there is wastage on two fronts: the expertise of the overseas teachers is not fully utilized, and church workers who have undergone training overseas are not giving fully play to their potential. Today, running out of support from overseas, these church workers must reset the priorities of their ministries. Indeed, in many regions where the church is well-developed, leadership training is already being conducted by local pastors. For churches which have excessively depended on overseas training support, it is high time for them to reconsider how to make the best use their existing talents to further develop leadership training.



Can the local church shoulder more?

Heavy flooding in the latter half of the year highlighted the severity of the wealth gap in China. The pandemic has plunged the world economy into recession. Although the economy in China is faring relatively better, regions hard hit by the flooding and the poor grassroots remain in dire straits. In the middle of the year, Premier Li Keqiang proposed the concept of “Street stall economy”, highlighting that there are still 600 million people in China making less than RMB 1,000 per month despite the economic boom.

What about the situation in the church? For churches in regions hit by the double whammy of the pandemic and the flood, funds are lacking to repair the damaged buildings. In the southwestern regions, income has also dropped drastically because of poor crop yield. It is common for church workers in rural and county churches earning less than RMB1,000 each month. Seminary students who used to count on overseas financial support have also seen such support ceased for various reasons.



With less external support, can local churches shoulder more? The answer is of course in the affirmative. In churches in the richer eastern and northern regions, workers are earning a reasonable salary. Many years ago, we invited churches in the eastern regions to visit the southwestern regions to facilitate exchanges among them. Church workers from other regions were also invited to share their latest situation. When some churches expressed that they lacked resources, pastors in the eastern regions were quick to offer assistance.

We believe and hope that when overseas financial support is decreasing, mainland churches that have the means are willing to render greater support to others.

How to deal with long-standing family problems?

Family problems have become particularly poignant during the pandemic. Families in China have seen long-standing problems in relationship between the couple, parenting, and children's education, etc. During the shutdown for half a year, family members were forced to face directly problems which they have avoided for a long time. While relationships in some families have improved, the problems have worsened in a lot more families.

Like believers, pastors are also beset with family problems. A single female pastor returned to her hometown during the Spring Festival. She stayed home the whole time during the holidays because of the lockdown, and was pestered by her mother to find someone to get married. Her mother also voiced great dissatisfaction over her ministries in the church. Another example is a pastor couple who were kept busy in the normal days, but while they stayed at home for a long time, their problems surfaced and they had quarrels every day. Pastors and believers are confronted by such problems alike.

Of course, there are also pastors who made use of their longer time at home to host worship and meditation sessions together as a family. Relationships between couples, with their children and with God had got closer. During the busy days in the past, church leaders focused only on church ministries and often neglected their families. Now, they were given the opportunity to mend relationships. As things return to normal and they are busy again, will they once again evade their family problems or cherish the improved relationships? Perhaps it is time for them to rearrange their priorities in life.

How to face greater restrictions on the church?

This is the most difficult question to answer as it relates to the future development direction of the church. In face of the increasing constraints on the church, how should the church develop? In resuming activities after the pandemic, churches and seminaries were lagging far behind other organizations in terms of the timing. More restrictions have also been imposed in certain regions. In fact, well before the pandemic, those without an identity card were already prohibited in going into the church. Now, for anti-pandemic reasons, the number of people allowed in the church is further limited. There are also more restrictions to the publication and sale of Christian literature. Christian books have been banned in certain sales points of churches, and it is expected that the supply of Christian publications will decline in the future.

Moreover, there have been efforts to sinicize Christianity, including watering down the "western" tone of Christianity and adding Chinese elements in sermons and teachings.

Some church workers accept such changes, while others resist them. Some pastors talk more about Chinese traditions in their teachings, while others avoid doing so. Upon returning to the church after the pandemic, church workers must consider how to cope with the rising pressure from various restrictions and calls to sinicize our beliefs.

Conclusion: two reactions

First, at the ministry level, while pressure is mounting on various fronts, there is yet a lot that pastors can do. Overall, online gatherings are allowed, although individual gatherings might be subject to restrictions. As noted above, important tasks for the future include maximizing the use of online teaching, leveraging on small groups to further nurture leaders, and using small group leaders for frontline pastoring.

On a personal level, a leader should ask, what ministry is most important? What can be given up? The answer may just be very simple: love the Lord and love your neighbours. If there is only one thing left that you can do, it is to love, which means going back to the basics. An analogy can be drawn between this and a pastor couple who are capable of withstanding immense external pressure, but cannot deal with their own relationship problems. If they can go back to the basics and appreciate each other, their relationship can be rebuilt. If the church can go back to the basics in human relationships and attach less importance to carrying out ministries, maybe it can be more resilient to the impact of the external environment.

*“And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.”
(Philippians 4:19)*

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# Walking Alone Yet Never Lonely, Sweetness Amid Hardship——

Support frontline ministers who serve the ethnic minorities

© Xiao Dong  
China Church Ministry Frontline Worker



There are many mainland ministers who serving churches in remote areas, often working alone. As frontline workers based in Hong Kong who focus on China church ministry, we have established close ties with the mainland ministers because we have been in touch with them for many years and fully understand their struggles with loneliness. At present we are unable to go to the mainland, yet our Heavenly Father's provision is always abundant. In the past few years, we have provided training to a group of young bible teachers in the mainland. They have now become important members of our team. In August 2020, when the pandemic was attenuating, the young teachers set off for the southwestern region, an area also tormented by flood at that time. On the one hand, they could show their loving care to the local ministers; on the other hand, the young teachers could provide the local ministers with biblical advice according to their needs. Liao is one of these teachers. He visited ministers not only in the provincial and the municipal districts but also those in the rural highland villages.

The rainy season was not yet over when teacher Liao, treading on a muddy path, visited churches hit hard by the flood.

Teacher Liao's first stop was a visit to his student, minister Lin. Lin has been serving the municipal church in the southwestern region for 13 years. During this period, he had the opportunity to receive biblical training conducted by teacher Liao, and since then they have been in touch with each other. Teacher Liao is older than minister Lin and their relationship is not only teacher and student but also close friends. Minister Lin's church is located in a township where the ethnic minorities dwell. People living in these areas are receptive to

having different religions flourishing among them. However, it is hard for them to give up their ancestral faith and replace it entirely with believing only in Jesus Christ. This creates many challenges both in evangelism and in biblical teaching. Minister Lin has been in such situations and served his community devotedly for the past many years.

Ensuring that believers understand well what the bible says regarding marriage and death is something minister Lin considers to be of great importance. He shared this with teacher Liao, "There was an ethnic minority believer who accepted Jesus during the time he felt sick. Later on, he passed away. I tried very hard to explain to his family members how we should remember their deceased relative in a Christian way. Thank the Lord! His family accepted my advice and even expressed their willingness to know more about the Christianity. As of now, there is only one member in this family who has not yet accepted Jesus as saviour." Teacher Liao told minister Lin that his work was admirable and he was filled with gratitude for what happened to this family. Moreover, minister Lin also utilized innovative means to reach out to the community. Few years ago, minister Lin rented a space opposite the church to establish an outreach platform targeting the younger people in particular. Music, books and drinks are shared in this venue to facilitate building up relationships and subsequent evangelism. Teacher Liao encouraged minister Lin to pay attention to needs of different groups so that he could tailor the contents of his biblical teaching accordingly.

Minister Lin has been serving for more than a decade, he has come through a great deal of difficulties and setbacks. Teacher Liao understands how difficult it is for one to be always fighting the battle alone without comrade support. Teacher Liao therefore invited minister Lin to set aside some time to accompany him on a trip to visit a highland church. This was an opportunity for minister Lin to interact with other ministers and support each other. Teacher Liao could also make use of the travelling time to listen to and resolve problems minister Lin might have encountered when he was teaching the bible.

Teacher Liao and minister Lin travelled to the highland area inhabited by the ethnic minorities whom minister Hu<sup>1</sup> serves. The domestic and economic conditions there are harsh and trail behind the rest of the country. The uphill foot path itself is already a big challenge, the unrelenting rain made the journey even more difficult. Every step of the way was frightening. When Hu saw them arrive, she was deeply touched. The pandemic and the flood had shut off most communications, this face to face gathering of Christian workers was truly invaluable. Minister Lin and minister Hu both serve the ethnic minority groups. When they sat together under the roof of Hu's simple living quarter sharing stories about how believers' lives were changed, the difficulties in administering pastoral care and nurture, their inner worries in ministry, etc., teacher Liao listened attentively and offered teaching or admonition based upon their individual concerns.



Christian workers having fellowship, encouraging and motivating each other to press forward together fervently!

Time indeed flew, soon it was time to bid minister Hu farewell. On their way down, teacher Liao also had to say goodbye to minister Lin. Teacher Liao continued his trip to visit other places in the southwestern region caring and supporting individual ministers who have been serving single-handedly in various remote villages.

*Note<sup>1</sup>: Minister Hu has been receiving a stipend from “CCL” since 2014.*

**The “Leadership Development Ministry” needs your support!**

We thank our Heavenly Father for the teamwork of the Hong Kong frontline workers and the mainland teachers. They provide astute support to mainland ministers according to their individual circumstance. We pray to the Lord for leading the teaching team in achieving their annual goals in 2021 which include equipping 25 life mentors and 76 team coaches so that they can in turn provide training to 168 shepherd leaders and support 461 disciple makers. We sincerely invite your prayer support for smooth implementation of all planned activities. Please also remember our ministry needs of USD115,385 and respond by rendering your donations promptly. Thank you!





# Prayers

## 1. Local Leadership Training

As the number of overseas workers providing theological training in the mainland dropped in recent years, more locals have gone overseas instead for training. Those who have completed their training now lead church ministries, leaving the training of believers done by teachers recruited from outside. Yet due to lockdowns, overseas helpers cannot come to China and the mainland churches have to re-organize their manpower deployment, asking local leaders to carry out leadership training courses.



May the Lord use the workers trained abroad to nurture believers, equipping them to become church leaders.

## 2. Spreading the Good News Anytime



Some families and production work affected by the flooding earlier have been restored. Yet in some damaged churches in remote areas, it will take time for rebuilding work to be finished. Yet as shared by a preacher in the southwestern region: “Thanks to our Heavenly Father! Although we cannot have full gatherings, believers are driven and active in spreading the good news! We have just baptized ethnic minority people in a river in our village!”

May the Lord bless the rebuilding needs of churches in remote areas, and continue to help believers to spread the Gospel in whatever circumstances!

## 3. Face-to-face Learning

Mainland theological seminaries varied in when they resumed classes and in their teaching progress. Face-to-face learning, however, does foster exchanges between teachers and students. As one teacher shared: “Thank God for helping teachers and students adjust to changes. Students have gradually resumed learning in a physical setting and shared their spiritual lives and learning needs with teachers.”



May the Lord bless seminaries which are catching up with their curriculum, and lead graduation ceremonies rescheduled which were postponed by the flooding and pandemic. May each graduate receive blessings from their teachers.

#### 4. Walking with the Poor



“Street stall economy” was an economic policy raised in June 2020 by Premier Li Keqiang, with the goal of easing the rising unemployment caused by the Sino-US trade war and the pandemic. It is said that in China, about 600 million people earn only about RMB 1,000 a month. In a country with a serious wealth gap, “street stall economy” can help revive the economy by creating small shop owners.

May the Lord show mercy to the grassroots, help more make a living through appropriate economic policies. May He also send churches to serve the poor, be sensitive to their needs, e.g. by giving them warm clothes and food in winter time.

~ 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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