

The Evolving Online Learning Model - “Leadership Online Forum 2021”

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Online pastoring presents a formidable challenge. As some churches have lost over one-third of their members, others are however still continuing to grow.¹ How can one leverage on the advantages of online platforms while averting the pitfalls? This is a major discussion topic at the 2nd “Leadership Online Forum” hosted by the teaching team of our China Church Ministry.

The Importance of Adaptive Leadership Under the Pandemic

It was over one year ago when activities in the mainland virtually came to a standstill because of the pandemic. While everyday life and the economy gradually restored to normality in the latter half of last year, some city churches and seminaries are still conducting their pastoral and teaching online. However, our Heavenly Father’s grace is bountiful, and the constraints associated with online learning has not dampened mainland church leaders’ zeal to be equipped. Realizing the importance for mainland church leaders to be adaptive in face of the pandemic, our teaching team organized the “Leadership Online Forum 2021 – Adaptive Leadership” on 22-24 March this year. The activity saw a total of 105 pastors and believer leaders from 12 provinces/autonomous regions studying from and having exchanges with the teaching team.

After the Forum ended, the teaching team received enthusiastic responses from participants. Through candid dialogue in the Forum, participants reflected on how mainland churches had exercised flexibility and advanced with the times during the pandemic in 2020. They also conversed on challenges and opportunities in online gatherings and ways to make further adjustment and improvement. A common comment goes like this: “We have learned how to empower ourselves and our team to adjust to radical changes in circumstances, and to focus on genuine needs.” The overwhelming response to the Forum has led to an additional session held in May to serve yet more mainland church leaders.



Dr. Otto Lui shared with participants the topic: “The Process of Embarking on Continuous Changes”.

Very much alive to the challenges in online learning, the teaching team shared their observations on discussions at the “Leadership Online Forum 2021” as well as experiences on training and learning under the new normal.

Teachers Also Adapting to New Learning Mode

Teacher Leung was one of the teachers at the “Leadership Online Forum 2021” and shared at the three morning sessions. Heeding the teaching team’s suggestions and based on the team’s materials, he produced teaching materials well-suited to the needs of mainland church leaders. Sharing how he prepared for the teaching, he said: *“Naturally, the speaker for the three online morning sessions has to consider the connection among the three sessions. This is a grave challenge to me! Yet such an exercise has given me new insights. I deemed it a precious opportunity for me to slow down amidst the hurly-burly of everyday life under the pandemic to do some soul-searching and reflections on life under the ‘new normal’. I have gained new inspirations. Instead of calling it a teaching session, I’d rather say it is a time for me to ‘relish’ the messages together with the participants, since I, too, am a ‘recipient’ of the messages.”*



Teacher Leung enhanced the quality of online learning with the aid of a multi-user application software.

Participation in the online forum has also impressed upon Teacher Leung the importance of teamwork. Learning from the experience of the 1st “Leadership Online Forum 2020”, the teaching team hoped to enhance interaction and exchanges with participants in the 2nd forum. Such is also a challenge posed by online learning and pastoral not easy to overcome. Yet, the teaching team has grasped the nettle, trying out a multi-user application software (ThinkHub²). To provide high-quality direct broadcast, the whole team must work together seamlessly. Teacher Leung said: *“You may only see me on the screen sharing PowerPoint slides. But behind the scene at the direct broadcast site, six to seven colleagues were busily using body language to communicate and worked with one heart and one mind to ensure that the direct broadcast went without any hiccups. I was immensely encouraged by the professional spirit of the team behind the scenes.”*



Backend support staff on site focused on controlling the direct broadcast operation.

A leader must embrace a forward-looking vision. While the right software and a good team for creating the best online learning environment may be there, to make the most out of online teaching, the teacher himself must also continue to adapt and learn. Teacher Leung

said: *“When I used ThinkHub for the first time, it was very challenging. Perhaps this is something that I have to go through under the ‘new normal’. As a professional teacher, it is important for me to learn new things. From using PowerPoint on the computer as a teaching aid, we are now returning to the old ‘blackboard + chalk’ days. It’s just that the blackboard and chalk have been digitalized today! Going forward, teaching brothers and sisters on the other side of the globe without stepping out of your home or office will become a ‘new normal!’”* Leaders in various regions must also come to grips with the fact that the digitalized blackboard and chalk will emerge as the “new normal” in teaching and learning.

Online Learning Evolving Continuously

To augment leadership capability, it is important for one to learn together with the team, accumulate experience and rise to challenges of all kinds. Like what Teacher Leung said, whether online teaching and learning can be effective hinges a lot on good teamwork. Xiao Dong took up a unique role at the “Leadership Online Forum 2021”. He was a frontline staff, well-acquainted with the participants (before the pandemic, he travelled frequently across different regions to visit and support leaders; during the pandemic, he was using communication software to walk hand in hand with church leaders). At the same time, he was also a member of the backend support team taking up miscellaneous tasks during the direct broadcast. On the online learning model, he has this to share: *“Since we started preparing in January for the online forum, the first and foremost challenge was to familiarize ourselves with online conferencing tools. I was under tremendous mental stress, and got worried over everything, such as not being able to display teachers’ powerpoint slides properly and transmit their voice clearly, participants failing to connect and interact with the teachers through our equipment, participants incapable of learning together as they were scattered in different locations, etc.”* The team must face such challenges together and work shoulder-to-shoulder to surmount them.

A leader must work with a heart as well as with unwavering faith in himself, his team and the Lord. With the Lord’s guidance, everything went smoothly under the team’s impeccable collaboration: from sending out invitations to producing guidelines on the use of production equipment, enrolment and participation fee collection, organizing rehearsals for group leaders and kicking off the forum on 22 March. Xiao Dong shared what made the deepest impressions on him during the online forum:



Participants responded enthusiastically, and the teacher carefully read through their instantaneous messages.

“1. Lively interactions among participants: I was absolutely amazed when I saw on the screen the teacher interacting with over 100 participants. This is a far cry from the monotonous, mundane learning model in the past. Everybody was keen to speak and interact.”

2. *Deep reflections: participants reflected on how mainland churches were different under the pandemic in 2020. What are the challenges and the way forward for online gatherings? How can we build a united and harmonious team?*

3. *Teamwork: Colleagues in different positions worked together seamlessly, with each committed to his duty yet complementing each other throughout the entire event, in various tasks like taking attendance, assigning participants to small groups, operating the camera, projecting the PowerPoint, switching among various screens, introducing publications, etc”.*

Summary: There may be constraints in online learning, yet through the sharing by Teaching Leung and Xiao Dong, we come to realize that the online learning model is evolving and breakthroughs and enhancements are possible. We are convicted that given God’s abundant grace, teachers will be empowered to maximize the use of different platforms to help mainland church leaders who yearn to be quipped.

¹ Extracted from Issue 336 of this newsletter: “A Greater Challenge under the New Normal – Limitations and Inadequacies in Online Pastoral”; Author: Otto Lui

² ThinkHub is a multi-user application software which can facilitate effective collaboration and planning within a team. It is a tool carrying different visual solutions and capable of creating a more dynamic conference environment.

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## Astute Adaptation is Key to Staying Current and Keeping Pace with the Society

### - A pastoral team from the northeastern region shared his post-webinar reflections

© Pastor Guo  
Pastor of a church in the northeastern region

*Editor's remarks: Recognizing the significance of the adaptive capability of leaders in helping churches cope during the pandemic, the teaching team conducted a "Leadership Online Forum 2021 - Adaptive Leadership" in late March. A total of 105 pastors and Christian leaders participated in the online forum to discuss pertinent issues and share experiences. Some of the invitees even mobilized other members of their respective service teams to join the webinar so that they could have follow-up discussions on what they learned and more effectively take appropriate actions in their local churches thereafter. One church in the northeastern region delegated altogether 8 members to participate in the webinar. Upon completion, the team's pastor shared with us how mainland churches have been bombarded by the pandemic as well as what his team has gained and been inspired through attending the "Leadership Online Forum".*



A church in the northeastern region delegated 8 members to attend the webinar.

After having participated in the webinar, my mindset has undergone significant change. The pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges to the shepherding ministry of the church. Many churches have been too used to serving their members through physical means. When the pandemic hit, these traditional mechanisms became utterly inapplicable. Why were they so unprepared? It is because leaders lack preemptive planning and risk management. Despite having the awareness that we are living in the rapidly growing cyber era, mainland church leaders have not yet considered such changes as opportunities nor have they the intention of trying out innovative models. Last year's pandemic left churches with no choice but to make adaptations in their shepherding modes. Why haven't we made contingency plans during "normal" circumstances to prepare for "abnormal" circumstances? Apparently changes only occurs when being "forced".

**The prerequisite of keeping pace with the society is to adopt an open mind to learn and change.** Through attending the webinar, I was reminded that if I do not change, I cannot keep pace with my time. Yet inertia is human nature. “Surfing on the pandemic tide” is a topic of the webinar. It has given me new insight, that is if the external macroenvironment cannot be changed, I have to try changing my individual microenvironment. I have learned to look at things from different perspectives. The key is to adjust my mentality and identify opportunities. The mission cannot change, but tradition can. If one wants to keep pace with time and with the society, one needs to learn to adapt.

**The “Leadership Online Forum” enhances our capability to reflect upon oneself and upon the organization.** The discipline of “Adaptive Leadership” helped me discover that there are far too many areas that I need to learn and adapt in. With just some basic analysis, what one initially regards as “technical” aspects can already become adaptable options. With more meticulous examination, one can even uncover hidden treasures. Man makes improvement through constant exploration, and constant improvement contributes to perfection. Leaders need constant enhancement, they need to have a broad and comprehensive perspective, they need to know how to see far and with precision. These are key elements of leadership. This is like constructing a building. First there has to be a drawing (a comprehensive architectural layout), then the workers (the team) are deployed to carry out the actual construction. Leaders need not lay their hands on every task but should share the vision, mission and ideas with appropriate individuals and delegate suitable tasks to them to accomplish it. Leaders should constantly express trust, support and acknowledgement of these individuals during the process. Entrusting the right task to the right team member will maximize efficiency and outcome.

**The instructions provided by the teaching team are very practical and could enhance leaders’ analytical skills.** The teachers reminded me that being a leader, I have to listen to voices from various levels. If I have an open ear, my mind will be crisp. If I shut off certain noises, my mind will be dim. A leader has to try to understand the characters of his team members, differentiate to which major type each member belongs, whether he/she is assertive, lovable, expressive or analytical. Then it will be easier for individual team members to become willing to share candidly and thoroughly with the leader. The leader also has to learn to take a step backward at appropriate times in order for him/her to see things more clearly. The leader also should seek opportunities for growth of team members with different capabilities. Be sufficiently patient, provide adequate support and encouragement. All these will work together to nurture a unified and harmonious team.

My sharing above is some highlights of what I have learned from the webinar. I thank the teachers for the valuable instructions delivered during these three days. You must be exhausted!

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**Please support the Leadership Development Ministry**

We thank our Heavenly Father for making use of the webinar to help mainland pastors! In 2021, through the 104 planned virtual and in-person sessions, the instructors' team intends to serve 730 leaders who in turn are taking up different roles to meet the various needs of mainland churches. We sincerely invite you to pray for the smooth implementation of the planned activities. Please also remember our needs to raise USD 115,385 for operating costs. We sincerely invite your prayers and donations support. Thank you!

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Prayers

1. Constructing two-way online learning

Over the past year, mainland churches and theological seminaries have used live-streaming in small groups or study sessions. But they face the challenge of how to enhance interaction among participants. A mainland pastor shared: “During online learning, I am not sure if the participants are listening or how much they understand unless they respond.”



May the Lord lead pastors and instructors in making new attempts, help them learn about more different application software, and develop an interactive atmosphere for a two-way online learning environment.

2. Replace criticism with communication



As the mode of ministering changes in today’s changing times, misunderstandings could arise among different age groups. A mainland pastor shared: “Recently, more and more churches ministers hold Bible study in small groups. The choice of venue is also more flexible, not necessarily in church. Most congregations do join actively. But some older believers stick to their belief that believers must gather at church, and be taught collectively, rather than in groups.”

May the Lord show mercy, so that believers from different generations can through frank communication understand that the venue is not the most important, but rather how believers can transcend constraints in developing a heart to grow in Him. May they be willing to listen to one another.

3. Nurturing believers who cannot attend Sunday services

At the start of last year’s pandemic, mainland churches quickly moved worship services online. Now that the pandemic has eased, many churches still maintain the dual mode of having physical and online services. A mainland partner church shared: “We have kept the taped online services so those who could not attend



due to family or work reasons can watch them.”

May the Lord bless mainland churches, help them take advantage of the online mode to nurture different believers. May the Lord give pastors wisdom to see the needs of believers who cannot attend church physically.

4. Hosting live-streaming shows



More and more of the post-90s, post-00s generations regard being the host of live-streaming shows as an ideal job, considering it to be fun, meaningful, and a quick way to make a fortune. They would enroll in training courses covering areas such as mobile live streaming, speaking skills, post production work, script writing etc.

May the Lord bless mainland youth, help them discern who the host of their life is, and that during their training, they can understand what they really want in life, whether they are fit for the work and find room for continuous learning.

~ THE END ~

Pray for China

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~ 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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