

Shepherding in the Internet Era from Version 1.0 to 3.0

© Otto Lui
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Prior to the pandemic, believers often focused their attention on sermons delivered by pastors from the pulpit or sharing by brothers and sisters during fellowship meetings. Today, however, even though physical gatherings have resumed in the church, the pastoral approach has undergone significant change. The online shepherding model has not only emerged as the new normal, but also kept changing all the time. From the initial version 1.0 to cope with emergencies during the pandemic, it has evolved to version 2.0 and even 3.0. Online shepherding comes with both pros and cons, and it is incumbent upon mainland pastors to look carefully at the possible problems and ways to address them. By doing so, they can safeguard the bonds among believers and cushion believers against any detriment arising from the new shepherding model.

In the Online Leadership Forum this year, we had the opportunity to hear from mainland pastors about the changes and needs in pastoring during the pandemic in the past year. Thanks to the Forum's new discussion format, over 100 participants had in-depth exchanges on site or through online groups. They also spoke about their own situation and received the speakers' prompt advice. In such exchanges, we discovered that the pandemic sparked drastic changes in the church, including the way online platforms was used.

The Inevitable Realities

1. Perplexities of Online Gatherings

Physical gatherings only resumed gradually after they were suspended for over half a year. During the suspension period, most pastors held worships, group sharing and individual pastoral sessions online. While physical gatherings have totally resumed in some regions, travel restrictions in some provinces are still in force making travelling difficult. Consequently, online gatherings are still being held in various formats.

Indeed, reading information online and communicating via social media have become part of believers' everyday life. However, not all feel comfortable worshipping, learning and sharing with fellow group members online. Meanwhile, how the online network is being monitored differs from region to region, but pastors can always find ways to deal with it. Where online devices are concerned, believers generally go online via their phones. Not only does their network speed vary, some believers just dislike listening and talking to many people online, adding to the difficulties in holding online small group gatherings.

Another challenge highlighted by most pastors is that believers find it hard to concentrate. While students have got used to online lessons, the church's online gatherings are not particularly appealing. Delivering a sermon or leading small groups online is not just about placing a camera in front of oneself. Adjustments have to be made to the length and format of the sermon, and these present no small task to pastors.

2. Church Members Gradually Drifting Apart

At the initial stage after the church resumed physical gatherings when the peak of the pandemic was over, there was generally a drop in the number of believers returning, with the reduction in number ranging from 30% to 70%. Conversely, however, the number of believers in some churches has grown. For those living in remote areas, online gatherings are much preferred as they can be saved an exhausting journey to church. Other believers have got used to staying away from church and fellow believers. Some others who are struggling in their faith have put aside church and their faith altogether for the time being. In Chinese culture, face is a matter of great importance. For some believers, leaving the church because of suspension of church gatherings seems reasonable, sparing them the need to give too much explanation.

3. Difficulties in Differentiating Between True and False Teachings

The mainland church has already acquired good capability in dealing with cults. In particular, in some city churches, the small group pastoral model has matured, and incorrect teaching can often be stemmed in time. However, following teaching being shifted online during the pandemic, just when both the teachers and students were familiarizing themselves with the new teaching mode, a massive amount of dubious "Christian" websites and materials surfaced online. Some believers failed to distinguish between true teachings

and wrong teachings such as those from “Eastern Lightning”. This was a cause of great concern to many pastors.

Adjusting the Pastoral Model in the Internet Era

Although problems arise from pastoral online, it does not mean that we have to make compromises. There are many ways in which we can cope with the challenges.

1. Need for Small-Group Shepherding

On a closer look, it can be found that the needs of the church have changed in the past year. There are no more big gatherings, and instead personal and small group care have become the dominant pastoral model. Face-to-face pastoring has been replaced by video communication, which took some time for church workers to adjust to. Viewed from another perspective, this arrangement enables pastors to cut down on their time spent on visits, making more frequent online gatherings possible. If personal and small group care ministries can be conducted properly, deeper relationships can be forged between pastors and church members and among church members themselves. The quality of pastoral care can be enhanced.

2. Witnessing to Family Members

During the lockdown period, families often underwent changes towards two extremes: some have become closer together while others have seen escalated conflicts. Pastors who used to pay little attention to family problems found themselves at a loss in face of such issues. On the contrary, churches which have been carrying out family ministries such as counselling on couple relationship or parenting have found loads of opportunities to serve. Some have even organized evangelical gatherings targeting families and seen a growing number of believers as a result.

One positive outcome in spending more time with one’s family members is the heightened opportunities to spread the gospel to them. Believers who attend online gatherings may do so alone via their mobile phone or together with their family members via the computer. Some church workers have reflected that more family members of believers have been converted during the pandemic. Even though there are some who have yet to believe in Jesus, they have nevertheless learned more about Christianity. Many have actually joined church gatherings after the pandemic. Further still, some pastors said that new gathering points had to be set up after the pandemic to cater to the greater numbers of believers. This is in a way unplanned “church planting”.

3. Enhancement in Pastoral Skills

Owing to such changes, the teaching mode and content of ministries have to be adjusted. Some pastors would perhaps wish to master the use of different online platforms and skills

in online teaching, but what they need in fact should be enhancing their communication skills in two aspects: person-to-person dialogue, and sermon preaching and teaching.

Listening and two-way exchanges are most crucial in communication in the internet era. The younger generation can adapt to online small groups more easily. Some pastors said that one-on-one video conferencing can better open the heart of the believers, and in the course of doing so, pastors can get to the “inner person” of these believers. Perhaps the fear, isolation and conflicts brought about by the pandemic have triggered believers to do more soul-searching and reflect on the meaning of life which they would have little time to do during busier days. In such churches, pastors and the more veteran believers have been most willing to lend a listening year to these believers. Meanwhile, those from the outside often think that the gravest challenges to the mainland church are the curtailing of religious freedom and online monitoring by the government. While such challenges can be readily overcome through various ways and means, the genuine difficulty for the church lies in meeting believers’ needs. In this connection, there are not many very good solutions.

Regarding sermon preaching and teaching, the traditional culture used to put emphasis on a top-down approach. Teaching is often done one-way by teachers who possess the truth, and believers can only follow and submit themselves. As times have changed, the education level of believers has risen and resources on the internet have become more plentiful, such one-way communication approach is not as effective as it used to be.

Conclusion: Adjustment in Mentality and Communication Approach

All in all, online pastoring has become the new normal in the internet era, and not just a temporary substitute during the pandemic. In face of various difficulties, mainland pastors and believers may sometimes feel frustrated. However, if they can view such challenges as opportunities to drive and implement constructive changes, they will certainly find a good way out.

The mainland church used to attach importance only to help believers acquire Biblical knowledge, and such knowledge which often remains only in the “head”. The pandemic has made pastors and believers realize that they must also put God’s words into practice. In the internet age, while people will become more distant from each other, closer and more in-depth shepherding is also possible. Whether this can be achieved will hinge on whether pastors can seize hold of the opportunities for change. Today, pastors face challenges stemming not only from government restrictions, but also from whether they can adjust their own mentality and communication approach. Perhaps more thought should be given to how, in this internet age, we can forge closer ties with believers and facilitate them in wielding greater spiritual influence in different circumstances!

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## Enhance “Target oriented” Shepherding

### - Flex the pastoral care muscles tactfully

© Minister Zhou  
Pastor in the southern central region

*Editor’s remarks: Many mainland church ministers shared that starting from this year’s Labour Day holiday week in May, the daily life of believers has been gradually normalizing. Yet believers did not resume their church life, the situation is worrisome. How would pastors ever expect the pandemic could cause such devastation on the church’s communal relationship? How would they ever imagine certain believers could be losing their enthusiasm in church life? One of the recipients of the Living Subsidy for Mainland Evangelists, Minister Zhou<sup>1</sup>, who is from the southern central region, has been facing this situation. Yet she did not allow herself to be paralyzed by worries, she chose to tackle the issues assertively by providing more “target oriented” shepherding.*



Minister Zhou visited a believer’s family to provide “target oriented” shepherding.

During the pandemic, in-person gatherings were restricted. The church involvement of believers was limited by factors such as the individual’s own attentiveness (the psychological factor), the availability and speed of the internet (the physical environment factor), etc. Even more concerning is the fact that the online biblical teachings provided by pastors lack comprehensiveness and have definite shortcomings. What pastors worry about the most is the declining faithfulness seen among believers who attend online worships. More and more believers are becoming too at ease in their respectfulness towards God. They regard online church meeting simply as one of their daily life routines. We, as pastors, do not wish believers to be just meeting attendees but rather as active and lively worshippers of God. We thus contemplated upon the situation and asked ourselves: How could we make our ministry more fitting, help believers to become more unifying, motivated and overcome the physical barriers?

Starting from this year’s Labour Day holiday week in May, the society at large has been allowed to reopen and resume normal activities. Churches reinitiated in-person gatherings. We thought church life would soon resume its previous patterns. However, what happened is that some believers did not come back to church. They have become lukewarm and distanced themselves. Pastors are worried that this situation may continue or even deteriorate. Thus, we decided to modify our strategies. We would not passively wait for believers to return nor rely upon regularly scheduled visitations. We proactively initiated “target oriented” shepherding. Targets are not limited to believers, but also extended to

their non-believing family members. It is hoped that through such family-oriented ministry, the entire clan can somehow be reached and new opportunities can be identified.

**Adaptation is key to effective shepherding:** If a believer appears to lack responsiveness to a pastor's direct care and concern, an alternative strategy is to try showing concern to this individual's non-believer family members. To give an example, sister Li's husband is a non-believer. When visiting the family, the pastor brought all the ingredients necessary to make a meal for all to share at their home. The family was then invited to visit the pastor in return and share meal together. After multiple gatherings, not only has the relationship between the pastor and sister Li's husband been built up, sister Li was also encouraged by the pastor that she should continue her pursuit in faith and maintain her ties with the spiritual community. Gradually sister Li attends the church more regularly and her husband accompanies her as well. How wonderful is the grace of God!



Minister Zhou prayed with the family of sister Li before having dinner together.

**Vigilantly pray for the church that she might subdue tribulations:** Our church is not unique. Many other churches face similar situations after the pandemic. The number of attendees dropped, believers lost their eagerness to join church gatherings. Moreover, since many believers lost income during the pandemic, now that the pandemic situation has alleviated, their top priority is to find work and increase earnings. Therefore, the number of people attending church is less than that before the pandemic. Furthermore, during the time when churches were closed, through the zealous effort of the cultic activists, heretical beliefs found their way into the heart and mind of Christians. Many believers were mesmerized by the cultic teachings causing severe damage to the Christian church community. May the Lord have mercy on the church, enable us to defend against cultic attacks, help pastors and church administrators to be willing to listen to each other, be in one mind to formulate the direction to pursue, and be flexible in making adaptations. May the Lord give wisdom to the pastors, help them identify the shortcomings in the traditional shepherding pattern, evaluate and balance the differences between the online and in-person congregations, and utilize appropriate ministry strategies to meet their needs.

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<sup>1</sup> Minister Zhou has started receiving the "Living Subsidy for Mainland Evangelists" since March 2020.

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## **Please Support the Living Subsidy for Mainland Evangelists**

Pastors are trying hard to be flexible in their shepherding strategies hoping to help believers regain their desire in following God. Are you willing to partner with them so that they can be more focused in their frontline ministry?

In 2021, CCL is supporting 30 evangelists who come from the southwest, northwest, eastern and southern central regions. Based on the actual needs and the living standard of the respective areas, the evangelists are given living subsidy and ministry support. The required budget is USD115,385. As of end July, USD51,282 has been raised, USD64,103 is still outstanding. We sincerely invite your donation support. Thank you!

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Prayers

1. Enhancing interactive communication

Under the new normal of ministering online, mainland pastors could remain detached from their congregation if they rely on the hardware, for example, live streaming or videotaped sermons, without adjusting the software (communication).



May the Lord give them wisdom to communicate in this Internet age, not rely on the traditional, one-way, top-down communication approach but go for real-time interactive exchange. Pastors should not limit their sharing to the purpose of learning but rather express care for believers' personal, family and workplace lives, providing targeted Biblical teachings and guidance to help them practice their faith.

2. Not giving up on attending church



A pastor in a church in the southern central region shared: "Physical church gatherings have resumed, but the size of the congregation has decreased, because many believers whose income were affected by the pandemic put looking for work as a priority now that the pandemic has eased a lot. Worse still, some have lost their passion for congregating!"

May the Lord strengthen believers' faith, help them learn to pray to Him for work. May He also give wisdom to believers, let them understand that attending church is not for socializing but to mutually support and care for each other in a community yearning to grow and be close to God, to practice living out the commission, and to consolidate their strength in impacting on the society spiritually.

3. Challenges of new preachers

June and July are the time when students graduate from theological seminaries, with foundation training in theological training, Biblical interpretation, preaching and music worship etc. But seminaries generally lack practical courses, such as couples and family ministry, church management, etc. It is not easy for fresh graduates to deal with believers' real-life situation.



May the Lord lead the fresh graduates, give them wisdom in adjusting to the mixed mode of online-offline ministering, converting their knowledge into practical Biblical teachings applicable to real lives. May the Lord also prepare for them useful books and online resources, help them tackle ministry problems through materials on case sharing, analysis of problems etc.

4. Sports training for physical well-being



In April the Ministry of Education issued a notice on strengthening students' health management. It asks schools to arrange for at least one hour of sports activity inside and outside school respectively. A recent survey on more than 1,500 students and parents found that only 20% of parents ensured that their children received at least two hours of sports activities inside and outside school.

May the Lord show mercy, let parents understand the importance of sports to teenagers' healthy growth, the training of their will power, not be overly focused on tutorial, music lessons seen as important to their children's academic development.

~ THE END ~

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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