

**Missionaries proceeding through hardship
-- Visiting the villages churches of Hunan**

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A volunteer for China Church Ministry

Foreword

There are around 300 thousand registered believers in churches in Hunan province. These are mostly distributed within the core cities and village churches. Since the 20th century, urban churches have been growing rapidly. Even though the rate of growth has slowed in recent years, the depth of believers continues to increase. Intellectuals and elites make up an increasing proportion of believers. This has accelerated the development of Sunday school classes, and has increased the demand for higher, more professional pastoral care. Nevertheless, urban churches face a difficult challenge at this time, which is the lack of believers who are willing to commit to full time service. Meanwhile, village churches face greater difficulties whether in development or pastoral care. The national policy of urbanization has attracted large numbers of youth to work in the cities, leading to an aging of the village churches. Even so, on the trip to the churches in Hunan, God showed me that He still has not abandoned His people, nor has He forgotten the Church. What moved me deeply was that, even in this environment of difficulty and lack, His love still calls willing “pastors” who are willing to answer and commit themselves as an offering.



Pastors: A Heavy Weight on Their Shoulders

We faced heavy rain and winding mountain paths to come to the churches in the mountains. These village churches showed me passionate welcome and hospitality, even though I was still a stranger to them, and I developed a wonderful affection for them. Pastor Wang, who is about forty, has been serving for five years since graduating from Bible school. Her thin frame and the steadfast candour in her eyes drew me. Seated around us were old brothers who were experienced pastors, and old sisters who deeply loved the

church. They said to me with trembling voices and earnest looks in their eyes repeating, “You must help her! You must keep her!”

As it turns out, in the first year after graduation when Pastor Wang came to the church, it felt to her like what she learned in Bible school did not match what she needed to do. She was unable to implement what she had learned on pastoral care and teaching. With the added burden of family, she was almost crushed. In her second year, her husband had a car accident. Moreover, caring for the elderly and financial strains all added to her burden, leaving her completely overwhelmed. Yet with tears brimming in her eyes, she said



firmly, “I am thankful! Though my husband was injured, his life was kept! My brother had a sudden illness, and his recovery left him with the intellect of a five-year-old, yet his wife has not left him because of that! My mother’s death was sudden and difficult, but I am thankful she was never in any pain.....” In her pain and despair, her thankfulness touched my heart and surprised me. What is the power that makes her so steadfast in keeping to the mission?

Pastor: Renewing Strength

Because of her husband’s injury, Pastor Wang had to leave her church to reside in Shenzhen for a time while he coalesced. In that period of time, Pastor Wang attended a local church. It was as though God had given her a different sort of “church retreat”. The pastor’s wife at that church often studied the Bible and prayed with her, and never stopped comforting and encouraging her, causing Pastor Wang to pick up her life’s calling again. Her conviction and face to return to the village churches to serve was confirmed and strengthened.

Returning to Hunan, she found that the difficulties in finances and pastoral care had not ceased, but increased. Moreover, to make ends meet at home, Pastor Wang had to raise pigs and work for a living. But she is always fastidious when it comes to preparing her sermon. The old pastor said solemnly, “Now we rely on the serious preparation of Pastor Wang to care for us pastorally and strengthen us with God’s words. We old pastors did not receive systematic theological training. It is not enough now to just share our feelings after reading Scripture. So we must keep her, and help her and support her!”



These few short sentences encapsulated the difficulties of the village churches, and their needs: an aging church needs a new generation of pastors! There are not enough preachers in the pulpit of churches, and they need properly trained pastors! For those pastors who are struggling with difficulties on the frontline, the need for financial aid, and for other pastors and teachers to walk beside them in support and care is urgent and necessary!

I asked in my heart as I was leaving, how many Pastor Wangs are there in the mountain village churches, who are willing to face trials, hold fast to their mission and move forward with courage? They truly are the real “pastors”!

Pastor: Church Heritage

Following this was another two hours of journey by car. We reached a simple but solemn church building where we met Pastor Yu and the elders. From our conversations, we learned that earlier in life, Pastor Yu, along with her husband, had been busy professionally, and thus did not serve in the church. It was in 2012 when her husband’s business failed that she started to question God. Incredibly, even as she read her Bible and prayed daily, the business situation did not improve. Rather, she began to know her Lord and Savior. She responded to the Lord with action, and financed herself throughout the three years at Bible school where she received theological training. She graduated in 2015 and threw herself into serving the churches in the mountain regions.

The elders said to us, “The church is short on resources. In order to help with church-building and other ministries, Pastor Yu currently does not take an income. When we visit families, it is brothers and sisters who reach into their own pockets to buy gifts. This is a ‘church tradition’ and a sacrifice for following Jesus!” I couldn’t help but think whether these church “traditions” have seriously stifled lay leaders from participating and serving, and resulted in a deficit of talent in the church, which then led to failure in ministries to launch. Is this way of doing things reasonable and acceptable? Should this “tradition” continue? “The labour deserves his wages” is a Biblical teaching, but is it not valued because of the impoverished state of the church, or because of church-building and other ministries?



Just then, Pastor Yu replied categorically, “For the future of the church, if anyone is willing to receive theological training, then our church must support them financially. The ‘traditional’ way of doing things must end in my generation! For the next generation of the

church, for the advancement of church pastoral care and other ministries, we must pass the flame on!” Indeed, believers deserve to be taught the truth and receive proper equipment, so that every life can grow deep roots and bear fruit. The most urgent task truly is to train young spiritual leaders, improving the quality of life in believers and earnestly preparing the next generation of the Church to inherit it!

Conclusion

On the way back, I thought of all the difficulties that the churches in Hunan face: the resistance of traditional culture to the Gospel, the deep influence of folk beliefs, and the atheistic environment that the youth have grown up in, all of which will have a huge limiting effect on the Church’s ability to spread the Gospel. This is a spiritual battle! We must unite our efforts and never cease praying!

Moreover, we saw that local Bible schools have taken up the important task of training grassroots church pastors. In the last two years, schools have targeted their training based on the actual situation in churches. Firstly, they have improved their teaching courses, opened new libraries, and raised their teaching standards professionally. Secondly, they have designed full-time intensive courses to respond to the needs of rural volunteers, to help finish their basic theological training within half a year. Thirdly, the dropout rate of theology students has come under scrutiny in different schools. Thus there are plans put in place for deepening courses, retreats, care groups and working groups for alumni.

Seeing the needs of village churches, witnessing the selfless sacrifice of pastors, hearing that Bible schools spare no effort in training new leaders; all these have touched me deeply! Through continual prayer, pastoral exchanges and further training, and real financial aid, all of these are the best things we can do to respond to the needs of the churches in China. I hope that we can all do our part in making an effort!

Are you willing to stand with Ai Lin in supporting the needs of church workers in the mainland? Take action right now:

In 2017, CCL has supported 23 church workers from cities and villages according to their real needs and local standards of living. The target budget is US\$102,000. As of mid-November it is still US\$32,000 short. If you feel moved, please donate to “Supporting Church Worker”. Thank you!

1 Volunteer partner Ai Lin and our worker visited those church workers receiving subsidy in Hunan in September.

Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Giving

Let life speak the message – boost the quality of teaching and learning!

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Associate General Secretary (Publishing)

Response to All Changes by Self-Changes

The number of mainland Christians has increased from 340 thousand from a century ago to over 40 million at present. The rural-urban population distribution has also been changing. Based on the year 2015 statistics¹, there is an estimation of 56% of the population living in urban areas. Moreover, the national education level in general has been rising, with 8 million university graduates projected for 2018². From this, it may be deduced that the bringing up of church members is also changing with the flow. The increase of information flow and the influence of different trends of thought in society and values impose higher and more specialized demands on church ministries. Problems with increasing complexity related to belief, career, family, etc. call for pastors' attention.



In contrast with this situation, ordained clergies in public churches only add up to a little over 3000 people. Though the seminaries are training new candidates each year, it takes time for the fresh pastors to be strengthened both in resolution and experience after they enter the ministries. Full time pastors have a wide salary spectrum but in general are underpaid. The fast-changing social environment and ministry demands push the churches to seriously review such matters as: how to provide backup resources for the frontline workers, and how to nurture them, so that they become experienced, fully committed to their calling and willing to lead a life of simplicity.

Research, Read and Reflect

Young pastors (3rd / 4th generations of leaders)³ have much better capabilities in information research, further learning and digesting both Chinese and English literatures. However, ministry is life education, as reflected by Phillips Brooks in his homiletic work, *Lectures on Preaching*: “preaching is the bringing of Truth through Personality The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips..... must come through

his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being.”⁴

Life that can accommodate the truth needs to be nourished with the grace of the Lord amongst daily living, in studying and reflection on classic works, and in services to the community.

Three Lines in Parallel

Thanks to God’s provision and donors’ support and prayer, from the year 2012 up to now, CCL has provided over 15,000 sets of Pastoral Pack to seminary graduates. Some of these graduates are ordained in churches and some have returned to the seminaries as teachers after gaining much experience. Our goal is targeted at supporting the graduates in their first 3 to 5 years of ministry in handling expository preaching week in and week out, disciple training, family and children services and even heretic challenges.

On-campus students receiving suitable help will gain many benefits. In the past few years, through God’s grace, CCL has shared with donors the needs and succeeded in adding an average of 1000 books in each of the libraries of over ten seminaries or Bible schools. It enables the students to make reference with high quality and up-to-date books during a 2-3 year curriculum.

The core of education lies in learning as well as teaching. CCL actively urges seminary teachers to prepare handy teaching materials, in order to meet the huge demand and teaching burden. How blessed we are that a donor has funded the publishing of the *New Morning Mercies* of Paul Tripp, a renowned pastor and author. The book helps some 900 teachers to practise daily devotion to the Lord and meditate on life through concise and compelling messages.



Extracted from the Feedback of the Teachers:

“Despite bold and frank words in the articles, they make one feel intimacy without distance, close like face-to-face shepherding, hand in hand coaching” (a teacher in the North West)

“Although each note is short and simple, it lets me fall into deep thinking, recalling the call of God to us, to give up our own personal kingdom, to turn to the great King” (a teacher in the Central South)

The Lord in His great kindness has used CCL to supply those teachers and graduates with spiritual resources. We hope that the Lord sends more and more workers to deliver His message through their renewed lives and leads them through the changing environment!

References:

1. Year 2015 population data according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China. (<https://goo.gl/NQwouJ>)
2. China each year has about 8 million university graduates, who face great pressure in finding jobs (<https://goo.gl/7s3ihR>)
3. Concerning the “background and characteristics of the fourth generation leaders”, please refer to “Clamor for Fourth Generation Leaders” in issue no.284 of “Pray for China”.
4. Phillips Brooks, Lectures on Preaching (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1907), p.5.

Please support year 2018 Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Giving Plan

We plan to offer each of the 50 seminaries / Bible schools / training centers around 100 sets of Pastoral Pack (subsidy per pack as US\$64) for their graduates in 2018, amounting to a funding of US\$320,000.

May the Lord encourage you to help the China churches and donate to the plan! You may take action by donating to the item of Publishing Mission and putting down a remark of “Seminary Graduates Book Giving 2018”. Thank you!

Prayers

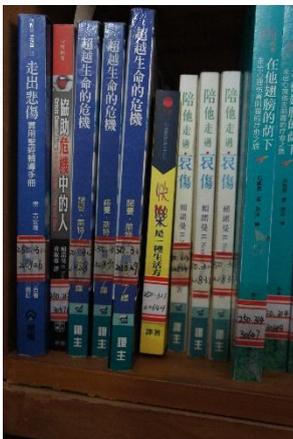
1. Shrinking rural churches

Under the urbanization policy, a large number of rural residents have flocked to the cities for work, causing rural churches to be left with elderly believers. The average age of rural congregations is 60, while middle-aged and young believers make up only 20 per cent of the congregations. An urgent priority of preachers nowadays is to cope with the falling number of believers.



May the Lord equip rural preachers with spiritual truth to help them develop the children and youth ministry, to nurture young spiritual leaders. Pray also for the Lord's provisions for the churches so they can develop various ministries.

2. Spiritual reading



Teaching and learning is the key to nurturing, and spiritual reading is the vitamin for nurturing. Besides learning from teachers, learners also need inspiration from reading spiritual literature. Pastors and seminary teachers can gain renewed strength from reading and reflecting on Christian literature.

May the Lord keep the continuous supply of Christian literature of various themes to enable seminary teachers, students and frontline workers to be impactful with their faith.

3. Balance between economic development and environmental protection

The National Energy Administration has recently published an implementation plan to expedite the enhancement of energy supply in heavily impoverished areas to foster economic development there.



May the Lord help the administration pay attention to environmental protection and people's health, e.g. avoiding the spread of smog, while

carrying out the plan. Please pray that residents of heavily impoverished areas can share future economic success, rather than being exploited by large enterprises.

4. Wise development of bicycle co-sharing



As more and more mainland enterprises launch bicycle-sharing projects, lured by their huge potential profits, the order of traffic in the cities has suffered as a result. Transport officials in Shanghai revealed earlier that they had cleared 500,000 co-sharing bikes over the past 2 months since new measures against poorly parked bikes were implemented on August 18.

May the Lord help people be reflective, to cease blindly following trends and focusing on making money alone, so that a balance can be struck between enjoying the convenience of bike-sharing and proper management of resources.

~ THE END ~