

Relationship-Building Forms Part of Pastoring

— Reflections on Pastoring Strategies in Mainland Churches

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One of the reasons why the mainland church could withstand so much pressure in the last century is the importance they attach to grooming believers' spiritual life. In other words, a good relationship with God can help believers tide over various difficulties. In mid-August, we conducted a survey among 160 mainland pastors and lay leaders, and found that the three most important pastoring needs were: "Bible teaching and training", "Pastoral nurturing and counseling" and "Establishing relationships with members of the church and valuing relationships". (For details, please refer to Issue no. 318 of "Pray for China".)

What do these needs actually mean?

What is Pastoring?

One of the pastors made this response: "What matters most for pastors is to serve alongside God, using the truth to shepherd our sheep. One should continue equipping oneself both spiritually and in God's Word, and strive to acquire new knowledge continuously."

Pastoring is about helping believers grow spiritually and in knowledge, so that a deeper relationship with and knowledge in God can be fostered. To achieve this, pastors themselves also need to grow. The pastor's comment above represents the thinking of most pastors in the mainland towards pastoring needs. These needs fall into three areas:

1. Bible Teaching and Training

In the survey among pastors, teaching ranks top among all pastoring needs. To pastors, teaching means delivering sermons, leading Bible classes, teaching Sunday schools as well as practising Biblical teachings in their daily lives. Their responses include:

- “Deliver the correct message.”
- “Cultivate in believers the habit of reading the Bible, praying and worshipping God on Sundays.”
- “Help brothers and sisters practise the Word in their daily lives.”



To lay leaders, their emphasis is somewhat different. What they expect includes:

- “Teach the truth correctly.”
- “Answer their questions on their beliefs in time.”
- “Share Biblical truths and characters in the Bible targeting the state of believers’ spiritual life to encourage them to love the Lord more.”

Apart from expecting pastors to teach correctly, believers also aspire that answers to their actual problems can be answered. This suggests that while the church may teach in a systematic way, it may fail to address believers’ actual needs. Believers aspire for more “down-to-earth” teaching and not just theories.

2. Pastoral Nurturing and Counseling

While “Bible teaching and training” is about knowledge cultivation, the second topmost need as revealed by the survey is providing support to believers spiritually and emotionally. Interestingly, church workers’ response on how to achieve this is conducting ministries like visits and fellowship gatherings. A pastor who understands believers’ needs most said, “We should encourage believers to do more sharings so that we know what their spiritual life is like.” He is one of the few pastors who stressed the importance of “listening”.

On the part of believers, they spelled out more specifically how support can be provided:

- “Help believers establish a relationship with God.”
- “What matters most is to identify believers whose spiritual life is at a low state and offer them timely assistance. Help to their actual life is also important.”
- “When a believer runs into difficulties, he can be offered help and care in time.”

Pastoring is much related to showing care to believers’ lives. Some even think that both are the same thing, and that care for one’s spiritual life is as important as care for one’s daily life.

3. Establishing Relationships with Members of the Church and Valuing Relationships

Different from pastors' response, lay leaders think that building relationships is the topmost pastoring need. Here are the pastors' responses which emphasize understanding and accommodation:

- "Understand the spiritual situation of each believer."
- "Listen to believers' views."
- "Put up with believers' shortcomings and appreciate their strengths."

Apart from understanding and accommodation, lay leaders also said:

- "Pastors and believers should love each other."
- "Pastors should truly understand me."
- "Pastors should accommodate, accept and encourage me."

Lay leaders believe that pastoring should not be a one-way process. Pastors may all along have neglected the importance of two-way interaction between pastors and believers. Concerning how love should be shown, acceptance and appreciation are the key.

Key on Supporting Mainland Pastors

The results of the survey show that there is not much difference between the needs of mainland churches and those in other places. As cited by some pastors above, while pastors should continue to upgrade themselves spiritually and in knowledge, they should not neglect the importance of cementing their relationship with believers. This does not mean that theological education and acquiring Biblical truth are not important. They are the foundation on which pastors should strive to meet believers' needs in a more targeted way.

1. Emphasis on Relationships

The Chinese culture is mainly about relationships. Today, people's relations are mostly of a functional nature. If a church is driven just by ministries and that training up believers is merely to further the church's ministries while one's spiritual relationship with God is neglected, the relationship among brothers and sisters will also become purely functional. The survey finds that many pastors just put the emphasis of pastoring on developing ministries with little regard on relationship-building. On the contrary, lay leaders place more stress on fostering closer relationships with pastors. Some even point out that pastors should understand their sheep better and walk hand in hand with them.

The mainland church has entered a new stage, transiting from high-speed development to relationship-building, with an emphasis on quality over quantity. As there are now fewer

opportunities to hold open gatherings and that it is difficult to bring in overseas teachers to conduct training, it is perhaps time for mainland pastors to change to teaching in small groups or on a one-on-one basis. A mentor-mentee approach can be considered. The focus is not on imparting knowledge, but influencing others through sharing one's life. We have seen how the church grew so rapidly in the 80s, which might be attributed to the re-opening of the church and that people were in a spiritual vacuum at that time. Another critical factor, though, was believers' strong spiritual strength after ten years of oppression during the Cultural Revolution. During those ten years, what believers did was teach children at home and pray overnight in the deep mountains. They attached more importance to establishing a relationship with the Lord and each other rather than developing ministries. Their spiritual life had thus been groomed, helping them bring tremendous changes to the church in the following thirty years.



It is now time for us to adjust our strategies and pace.

2. Emphasis on Entering Each Other's Lives

To avoid a relationship built based just on cooperation in developing a ministry, it is important for believers to link up with each other in their daily lives. In the early days of the church, believers lived, served and suffered together. They had frequent interactions. In the past, when we visited mainland churches, pastors did not run so many ministries, and often spent time chatting with believers, and inviting each other to home visits whereby intimate relationships were established. Back then, pastors were paid meagerly, yet they never lacked anything because believers would often offer pastors their farm products. Pastors did not have to worry about their living at all.

Today, however, pastors are so busy that chatting with believers becomes a luxury and a waste of time. They work all the time and do not have a personal life—but understanding believers is not done through gatherings or ministries. The survey reveals that lay leaders need to be listened to. It is just a simple demand, yet has become an extravagant wish when the pastors's life is so busy.

However, it does not mean that work is not needed, and only holding fellowships should suffice. The value of mentor-mentee relationships lies in the fact that while you work and learn, you also learn to continuously reflect upon yourself. After the mentor has assigned the mentee some work, he will observe how the mentee is doing and assess the mentee's strengths and weaknesses so that teaching can be custom-made to suit the mentee's needs. In the survey, lay leaders' wish in this respect is very clear.

Conclusion: Re-thinking about a Holistic Mission

It will be good if the mentor can lead by sharing his experience, vision and knowledge. However, what is more valuable is for the mentor to listen and to pray and reflect inwards together with the mentee. Church workers overseas generally embrace a wider perspective and can enrich the lives of mainland pastors in walking alongside them. If we look at how God created the world, we would understand that God has a holistic mission for man, covering man's building a relationship with God (gospel, mature spiritual life), man's responsibility of managing the earth (environmental protection, poverty alleviation, doing justice, etc.), man's interpersonal relationships (family, fellowships) and man's relationship with oneself (man has the image of God). However, the church nowadays carries out a lot of functional ministries. Although their overall aim is to help man establish a relationship with God, yet the focus often falls on the success of the ministries themselves, and their objective has been forgotten.

If we merely set our eyes on ministries, our relationships with man and with God suffer, and we will not have room for reflecting upon our spiritual life. It takes time to fix these problems. If overseas churches cannot carry out large-scale ministries today as they did in the past, should they shift their focus to working on personal relationships which have been neglected most in the past? It seems that God has closed some doors to further developing ministries. Should we venture into doing more on caring for the individual? This is in fact one of reasons why CCL has managed to walk alongside mainland pastors on this narrow path over the years!

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# Remove the Taoist robe, Put on the Cloak of Truth

—From a Taoist priest to a minister

© Xiao Dong  
Frontline worker in China Church Ministry

This is the extraordinary story of Minister Tang.

Minister Tang first became acquainted with Taoism in 2002 and had once considered the “way” to be the most precious thing he could ever pursue in the world. Consequently, he became a Taoist priest and had been in this role for five years. He was responsible for performing rituals in funerals that supposedly could release souls from purgatory. How then did he come into contact with Christianity? Everything is in the hands of our Lord! The work of a Taoist priest could not provide a steady income, so he also worked as a supervisor in an internet café. The owner of the internet café is an elderly Christian woman. In the past, Tang felt uncomfortable seeing anything related to Christianity. However, while working in the internet café, he was surrounded by posters with the word “love” and the crucifix icon displayed on the walls, and found himself gradually changing from within. The Christian elderly sister discussed with him nearly everything in life, including her faith.

## Let Go of the Past, Surrender to the Lord

The elderly Christian sister noticed the changes in Tang. She boldly invited Tang to come to church. To her surprise, Tang immediately gave a positive response. Pastor Tang recalled the incident and could not quite figure out why he agreed to the invitation so quickly. He only knew that he was very puzzled at that time and was eagerly wanting to find answers. He punctually attended the church service. The church coworker gave him a Bible, CD with the gospel message and prayed for him. He continued to attend the church service again and again.

In 2008, Tang decided to give up his vocation of a Taoist priest. He repented and turned back to the only one true God. He said this sternly, “In the past, I was seeking the ‘way’, so I became a Taoist priest. Not until I read John 1:1 which says, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (‘Word’ was translated ‘way’ in Chinese). All the puzzles in my mind were resolved. The ‘way’ that I had been earnestly seeking was God! This is too amazing. The ‘way’ had been knocking on the door of my heart, it’s just that I never ever opened it.”

After converting to Christianity, Tang actively studied the bible. A year later, Tang was recommended by the church to go to the provincial city for further study of the bible. He also went to the Guangdong province for a 3-month training. During this time, he attended classes conducted by famous overseas pastors and theological seminary teachers. After the short-term study, Tang resumed his supervisor work at the internet café during the daytime and led small groups in the church in the evening. After serving for a few years, Tang was convicted of the need to respond to his call. In 2013, Tang entered the bible school in the Central Southern region and underwent three years' seminary training. In 2016, Tang graduated and chose to return to the village to serve the church there.

## Challenges are Numerous, yet the Lord's Grace is Sufficient

The first challenge after embarking on fulltime ministry was leading the church to undergo transformation. As the number of believers grew to over 100, there was a need to divide the initial singular group into four smaller groups. In the process, it was necessary to look after the pastoral care needs of individuals from different age groups as well as provide instructions and guidance to new group leaders. Moreover, the new groupings also generated communication and interpersonal issues that needed to be carefully tackled. By the gracious guidance of our Heavenly Father, Pastor Tang overcame the obstacles.

On the personal side, when Pastor Tang came back after graduation, he served for 3 months without subsidy from the church. Life was becoming too difficult to get on. Tang acquired a skill in order to make a living—the skill of making bean curds (involving the processing of soy beans, soy paste, etc.). On a normal work day, he travels around and sells the bean curds while at the same time he carries out his ministry (by doing visitations and leading small groups). On Sundays, Tang takes turns to preach together with other coworkers.



Pastor Tang sells bean curds and soymilk to sustain his basic living.

Pastor Tang does not think his full time service is giving him any hardship. He recounted the Lord's grace, "The Lord healed my asthma. When I first entered Bible school, I weighed 85 kg, my asthma was severe. Now after my asthma became alleviated, I was able to press a lot more bean curds, from an initial 10 kg to now up to 30-35 kg. My weight has dropped to 60 kg. I am thankful for God's healing which has given me more strength and stamina to serve Him."

Looking back at these ten years, Pastor Tang concluded, "Thank you, God! In Exodus chapter 14, God told Moses that there is no need for Moses to beg for help, all he needed to do was to ask the Israelites to keep going forward. This verse gave me motivation to continue serving. I have experienced God's guidance, and I have seen 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided'."

Postscript: Pastor Tang did not mind doing labourious work to sustain his basic living in order to continue his ministry. We are actively raising funds with the hope that starting this year we can provide subsidies to Pastor Tang to support his basic living needs. In 2019, CCL has planned to provide support to ministers in the Southwestern, North-Central and Central Southern regions according to their actual needs and the local living standards. The target is to raise US\$102,565. As of the end of September, this target is still short of US\$43,590. We would like to invite your response. Please remember the pastors and donate. Thank you!





# Prayers

## 1. Holistic training for small group leaders

In the past decade, more and more mainland churches have ministered to their congregation through small groups, which helps strengthen ties between members. Yet while building ties, some groups have neglected Biblical teachings and spiritual growth.



May the Lord give pastors wisdom and prepare for churches different types of teaching resources so they can train up small group leaders, such that their members, while being cared for, can understand the scripture, live out Biblical teachings and bear witness for the Lord.

## 2. Alternative choices for mainland youth



Having grown up during the past 30 years of rapid economic growth, Chinese youth are deeply influenced by materialism, at the expense of spiritual civilization. Nonetheless, this generation of youth is not totally lost. Their values can change when they are touched by the gospel.

May the Lord move churches to seize the opportunity to spread the gospel despite the multiple constraints in the external environment, and guide youths to make alternative choices in pursuit of spiritual richness and the true meaning in life!

## 3. Caring for elderly and disabled believers

Due to their difficulty in walking, some churches in counties do not require elderly and disabled believers to attend Sunday service regularly. The well-intentioned move, however, has lessened those believers' chances of building relationships with their church and fellow churchgoers.



May the Lord give wisdom to church leaders, so they can make suitable arrangement, e.g. encouraging the elderly and disabled believers to attend the monthly Communion, asking preachers and

fellow Christians to visit them at home, encouraging believers to take them to and from church, or serve them in love through action.

#### 4. The irreversible trend of data collection



In recent years, quite a number of mainland cities have actively developed facial recognition technology and social credit on the basis of consumption record. Big data collection and analysis has spread to all levels of society and seems to be an irreversible trend. To determine a person's future or even worth through social credit is controversial.

Under the current tight religious policy, church leaders are also worried by the big data trend. E.g. given the authorities' concern about the influence of "external forces" on churches, will pastors be targeted for making contact with overseas workers? Is it necessary to stop all links with overseas brothers and sisters to keep safe? May the Lord give overseas and mainland pastors wisdom to help them find the right solutions.

~ THE END ~

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#### 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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