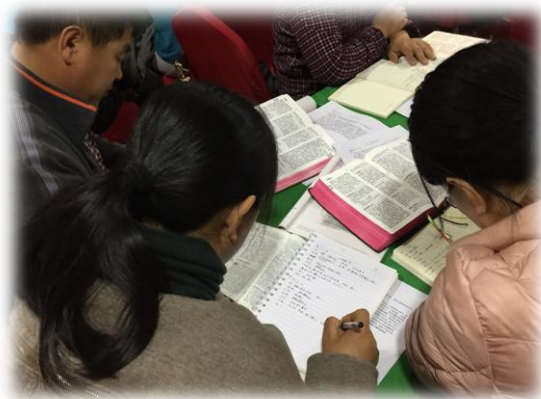


Learning Valuable Lessons from the Mainland Church

© Otto Lui
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I wrote about the subject of “New China-Hong Kong Relationship” in Issue 325 (June 2020) and Issue 327 (August 2020) on how Hong Kong churches can continue participating in China Church Ministry under the latest circumstances. This article is an extension of that discussion, exploring how we can look at the mainland church from a different perspective and learn from its experience in the changing environment.

The Watershed in 2014

In 2014, some church crosses were demolished in the Zhejiang province, kick-starting a shift away from the open policy towards the church after Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. From restrictions on church buildings initially, controls were extended to cover church management, external connections, pastoring, teaching and other areas. Calls were made to sinicize Christianity, and churches in some regions were even asked to hang the national flag and sing the national anthem. There were also rumours that the government would edit and translate the Bible afresh to make it more “Chinese”.

While specific policies were implemented and isolated sinicization incidents did happen, other purported acts were only rumours. In any case, the room for church development is markedly different from that in Hu Jintao’s era. Mainland churches might not be

experiencing the great hardship of the 50s to 80s in the last century, yet the new-generation church workers must be as well-prepared as their predecessors in bracing for grave challenges.

In Hong Kong, the “Occupy Central Movement” took place in 2014, posing an extra hurdle to China-Hong Kong exchanges. Over the years, Hong Kong churches have to a certain extent taken part in social movements, which has occasionally sparked concerns of Chinese authorities about the interaction between churches of the two places. Since the beginning of “Occupy Central”, some denominations and individual pastors were actually “named” by the Chinese authorities which indicated directly or indirectly that they were not welcomed. Churches in some mainland regions declined to receive them and their contact with unregistered churches were also restricted. Meanwhile, the younger generation in Hong Kong was harbouring increasingly negative sentiments towards the mainland, making it more difficult for Hong Kong churches to take forward their China Church Ministry.

Over the past six years, China-Hong Kong relationship has seemingly changed. The two places are drifting further apart and the walls between them are also becoming higher. However, we believe that God may be opening a new door in adjusting the positioning of the two places and ushering in a new era of our relationship. Going forward, Hong Kong churches may have to take on a new angle in viewing the mainland church. We should perhaps look into why the mainland church has thrived despite the immense pressure it faced over the years. Let us explore the following four aspects.

Single Objective and Diversified Development

For many years, spreading the gospel has been the sole objective of church ministries in the mainland. Whether you are building a relationship with someone or engaging in poverty alleviation work, spreading the gospel has always stood as a central theme. Evangelizing is an activity that is relatively free from constraints in terms of timing and location. It does not necessarily have to be in the form of an annual evangelistic gathering, but can be carried out at any time, in any place and any format.

The various church training programmes also aim ultimately at spreading the gospel. It does not mean that all the training programmes are ways and methods to evangelize. Rather, participants are always encouraged to spread the gospel when they attend various training programmes. Equipping themselves with the Truth will help believers defend their beliefs, and most of the sermons are either on the subject of spreading the gospel or motivating believers to spread the gospel. In the process, believers do not discuss much “whether it is possible to spread the gospel”, but only on “how to spread the gospel effectively”. This explains why the mainland church is still flourishing after going through so many adversities.

Flexible Responses to Government Policies

Overseas organizations may be concerned about how religious policies and laws may impact and restrict church activities, yet mainland church workers instead focus on how the policies are implemented. Legal provisions written on paper may be one thing, but more crucial is how they are enforced. Overseas churches have a tradition of the rule of law and believe that we can only do whatever is written as permissive in the law. The mainland church instead focuses on the implementation aspect and identifies things not set out in the law; one is allowed to do whatever is not written in the law. This is a different way of interpreting the legal provisions.

Moreover, the formulation of policies is, to a certain extent, a response made to events which have already happened. Take the demolition of church crosses in Zhejiang province as an example. It started out with enforcing the policy to redevelop old urban areas and tear down unauthorized structures. In enforcing the policy, even structures not unauthorized like church crosses were also torn down. After that, the legal provisions concerning church buildings were promulgated, giving one the impression that enforcement came before legislation. Legislation was put in place to legalize what had already happened. As such, believers tried to find ways to get around the law, as for example by putting up a smaller instead of a big cross or erecting a statue of Jesus instead.

An understanding of the above will explain why the mainland church still continues to grow and develop various ministries despite the implementation of many restrictive policies over a long period of time. The reason is obvious: believers always find innovative ways to circumvent the policies. As to whether such ways are reasonable is a separate matter.

Leveraging on Relationships to Launch Flexible Ministries

Flexibility has been the buzzword among mainland church workers. The importance of leveraging on relationships to launch flexible and innovative ministries cannot be over-emphasized. Such relationship-based culture comes with its own pros and cons. The cons include the need to go through the back door get things done and perhaps even engage in bribery. But are there any merits to such an approach? Whether you agree to this approach, you have to admit that the severity to which government policies are enforced hinges on relationships.

In the mainland, Communist Party members are not allowed to be Christians, but many family members and schoolmates of Communist Party members are believers. Under this circumstance, they will express explicitly or implicitly what ways can be used to get around certain policies and how to be flexible. When policies are implemented, the extent to which they will be implemented will depend on your relationship with the officials in charge. Many church ministries will still be allowed as long as they are carried out in a way that enables these officials to submit to their superiors a report showing superficially that the relevant

requirements have been met. For instance, in the case of a ban on children Sunday schools, there have been cases where such Sunday schools were still organized since they were not held publicly in visible classrooms in the church causing embarrassment to the officials. (Of course, such Sunday schools are not allowed today.)

In other words, apart from setting our eyes on what is prohibited, we should also explore what can be done at what time and at what place. Flexibility and innovation mean identifying areas to maneuver instead of halting everything in face of a prohibition order.

Praying, Praying and Still Praying



The last and most important thing is prayer, which is often neglected by overseas Chinese churches. It is not the case that we do not pray, but their fervor in praying pales beside their mainland counterparts. The Chinese hymn, “Praying at Five in the Morning in China”, has moved thousands of believers for its portrayal of devout Chinese believers who get up at five in the morning to pray and entrust everything to the Lord before starting the day. It takes place not

once a week, but every morning. Before you do anything, entrust it to the Lord first. Prayer is not a procedure to go through, but an earnest request made to God.

For prayer meetings in the mainland church that the author has participated in, the usual posture of believers is kneeling down or laying prostrate, and for at least one hour. The mainland church started developing in villages where church leaders and believers had low education attainment. It was impractical to ask them to hold meetings to decide on the best church plan. What they did was they just prayed and got on with the work, sometimes achieving success and sometimes ending up in failure. Instead of holding review meetings, they just kept on praying. That was how the church developed over the years.

The four areas above would inspire us to think again the journey that the mainland church has traversed and how it has continued to prosper through thick and thin. The watershed in 2014 has steered the church back to the basics. In Hu Jintao’s time, the church might have carried out ministries based more on their wealth and a more relaxed policy environment. Now when restrictions are more stringent, church workers have come to depend more on God and be more innovative. If someone thinks the freedom for Hong Kong’s churches will be subject to further constraints in the future, should we consider learning lessons from the mainland church?

Extension Study in the Post-Pandemic Era

—The “Living Word” Small Groups are Flourishing

© Xiao Dong
China Church Ministry Frontline Worker

As the coronavirus pandemic is easing up in the mainland, church gatherings are gradually resuming. Yet in the post-pandemic period, leaders of mainland churches are met with new challenges. They are juggling between resuming conventional physical gatherings and continuing the newly emerged norm of virtual meetings. Achieving an appropriate balance in the utilization of both of these ministerial means can optimize the nurturing of believers. Minister Yau in the Northeast shared her attempt.



Beginning this year, online bible study has been initiated at minister Yau’s church utilizing the “Living Word Bible Teaching Series” to continually equip believers with solid biblical knowledge. Now that the pandemic has alleviated, minister Yau began coordinating outdoor extension activities for the Living Word bible study groups to reinforce contents of the study materials as well as strengthen relationship among participants thereby facilitating their interactions on the spiritual and daily living levels.



As the church has resumed physical gatherings, why is there still a need to host extra outdoor events? Minister Yau responded by saying this, “Mainland believers are adapted to learn by the one-way didactic lecturing mold. The “Living Word” small group bible study

format is an all new experience to them. Conducting the bible study outdoor in nature is yet another breakthrough experience. Immersing oneself in nature triggers entirely different sensations. The outdoor temperature in summer is generally high, yet it is still beyond compare to the burning heat of Egypt. Studying the book of Exodus in such condition is likely to give the sweating group members a deeper understanding of the Israelite slavery experience. Moreover, the online programs have attracted a number of new recruits during the pandemic. These new members are only acquainted with their group leaders and fellow group members. They are largely unknown to pastors, elders, not to say that they probably consider the church a remote entity. If they are requested to attend physical church

meetings, they may not adapt to the arrangement immediately. Outdoor gatherings serve the purpose of a viable transition option. New members can share, discuss and mingle with others in a lively and stress-free environment. We have deliberately included pastoral sharing, communion and potluck to provide new members some initial experience of a fuller church life.”

We thank the Lord! The outdoor events were met with great enthusiasm and participants thoroughly enjoyed the fellowship. Members were encouraged to share what they learned from the “Living Word” curriculum. Under the clear and bright sky, one of the bible study group members, Yin, shared, “After joining the group, I started to learn more and more about the Old Testament and increasingly love the Old Testament. I realized that the books of Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus are foundations upon which our spiritual life grows. Now I know I should devote my whole life pursuing the Kingdom of God with Jesus in the core of my heart, and I even have the ability to show care and concern to the unlovable people.” This is immediately followed by a great round of applause by her group members expressing their appreciation. The clapping is no longer a palm icon on the screen but audibly loud and clear.



Zhang is a new bible study group member also eager to share, “Through studying the book of Leviticus, I learned about how God teaches the Israelites to be holy and to respect Him. By offering various sacrifices, repentance was reckoned, sins were cleansed and the Israelites’ relationship with God was reconciled. This helps me understand how Jesus Christ once and for all becomes the permanent redemption sacrifice and how much we are blessed when we can become children of God through believing in Jesus Christ! The small group bible study allows me to understand the stringent requirements that need to be complied with delineated in the Old Testament and the gracious hope of salvation sparked in the New Testament. Thank you, Lord!” Capitalizing on the opportunity, Minister Yau made use of her spare moments to continue sharing and discussing with Zhang.

The post-pandemic period is a time of great challenge not only for minister Yau. It calls for combining the use of traditional and virtual venues to provide pastoral care. Pastors and ministers across the country are in similar situations and face similar challenges. May the Lord give them wisdom to properly utilize online and physical occasions to build up the spiritual life of believers!

**Please support the
“Living Word Bible Teaching Series”Publication Fund**

Mainland churches are evolving into a new pastoral mode in the post-pandemic era. “The Twelve Prophets” (Volume 1) of the “Living Word” curriculum has just published to meet the needs of mainland churches. We thank the Lord that the preparation of “Five Small Scrolls”, “The Twelve Prophets” (Volume 2), and “Job” is completed and can be printed as soon as the required donation funding is reached. The editorial review of “Revelation” is also completed and will enter the phase of pre-printing preparation. The publication fund budget is USD96,155 this year. It is all the more urgent for us to have your prayer and donation support during this post-pandemic period in order to respond to need of building up mainland church leaders. Please take action to donate. Thank you!



Prayers

1. Room for Ministry

As a result of various incidents, recent years have seen adjustments in exchanges between mainland and Hong Kong churches, which now are exploring their way forward.

May the Lord give wisdom to Hong Kong church leaders in supporting the spiritual growth of their mainland counterparts, and help them be aware of what they can do at this time. May they have creativity and flexibility and focus on the room available for them to walk together with mainland churches.



2. Online and Offline Ministries



As the pandemic eased in the mainland, churches leaders there have tried hard to strike a balance between online and physical ministries. A preacher in the Northeast shares: “In the past six months, churches preached and had Bible study online, and some new members have joined. Now as the pandemic has eased, we are organizing outdoor gatherings to foster exchanges among believers, and also help new members know more about church life

through communions and meal gatherings.”

May the Lord help believers take part in physical gatherings after past half year online contacts, and guide pastors to minister to congregations effectively both online and offline.

3. Ministering Amid Difficulties

Due to the pandemic, floods and lack of resources etc., seminary graduates serving in remote areas are having a tough year. A teacher at a seminary in the Southwest shares: “Some of our 74 graduates this year who are from ethnic minorities have returned to their hometowns for ministry. But some of their churches were damaged by floods; some have had reduced support from



believers who have stopped working, while other believers are traumatized by the loss of their family members to the pandemic or flooding.”

Please pray for the graduates, may the Lord give them wisdom, help them make good use of limited resources in the midst of challenges and difficulties; May the Lord bless them with companions, be it church pastors, teachers, fellow students, intercessors, etc. so they won't be alone.

4. Never be complacent



Thank the Lord that the pandemic in the mainland has eased, but the need remains for churches and people in the areas bordering Southeast Asia to stay vigilant. A preacher in the Southwest said in a prayer request: “The situation in Southeast Asia, e.g. Burma, is still serious, putting villages and counties at the border area at risk. May the Lord keep the health of the people!”

While vaccines are being developed, may the Lord bless people in various areas to take strict precautionary measures, reduce the number of infections and deaths.

~ 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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