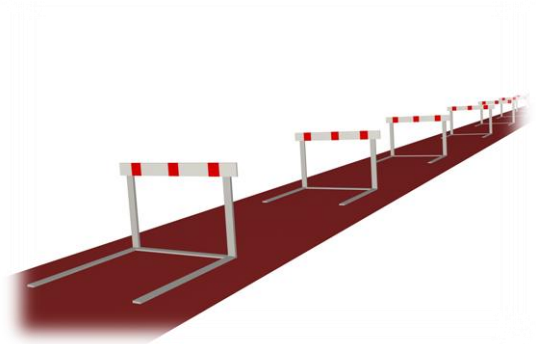


## **A Greater Challenge under the New Normal – Limitations and Inadequacies in Online Pastoral**

© Otto Lui  
Associate General Secretary (Training)



For quite some time, people hold the impression that the development of the China church is seriously hampered by the following: the demolition of the cross and churches, the ban on spreading the gospel in public, the prohibition of children's Sunday school, restrictions on Christian publications, the mandatory registration of gathering places, etc. However, the year 2020 tells us that the gravest challenge in fact comes from the pandemic, under which the church virtually came to a standstill.

Compared to Hong Kong, the mainland was affected by such a standstill for a relatively shorter period, and city lockdowns did not last long either. Despite this, gatherings of some city churches and seminaries have yet to resume, and pastors are still hosting online worships and teaching. The online mode of shepherding presents a great challenge, with some churches losing as many as over one-third of their believers (although the number of some others is still growing). I have tried to understand from mainland church workers the specific challenges they face and summarized them as follows.

### **Room for Freedom of Expression**

Those from overseas can hardly understand how the government monitors the people, knowing perhaps only that access to some websites is denied, that one should not talk about political issues and that evangelizing online is forbidden. Some church workers pointed out that the actual situation in fact differs from place to place, and the level of monitoring also varies across different provinces and cities. For instance, control is more stringent in Xinjiang than in Guangdong. This discrepancy may be related to the local political and economic situation as well as which network providers are providing the service.

Some church workers added that whenever sensitive words are used in online sermons, the network may be disconnected. However, the problem is that they have no clue which words are regarded as “taboos”. In response, pastors generally adopt two tactics: one is to set up a few accounts, switching to another account if one account is stopped; and the other is to subscribe to a more costly online platform to enjoy greater security. Yet some others resort to the voice message function of WeChat, whereby believers are organized into different WeChat groups to listen to sermons through the voice message function. Although each voice message can last at most for only two minutes, the recording can be done bit by bit, meaning that a 60-minute sermon will be carried in 30 voice messages.

## Stability and Quality of Online Network

While church workers are striving to overcome restrictions on the freedom of expression online, they are rather helpless when it comes to problems in network stability. A church worker said: *“When the signal is not stable or the network is intermittently disconnected, transmission is interrupted and the quality of the worship or training will be undermined. Moreover, as believers may be subject to interference in the environment they are in, it’s not easy for them to stay focused.”*



In some rural villages where most believers are middle-aged and old-aged, the situation is even more serious. While most of them go online via their mobile phones and do not have a problem using text and voice, viewing direct broadcasts and taking part in interactive sessions is another matter. The unstable network makes it difficult for them to concentrate, causing much frustration among pastors.

Owing to problems in technical equipment and stability of network signals in rural villages, believers find it hard to stay focused during online gatherings.

## Difficulties in Pastoring

While technical issues have affected believers’ level of participation, the biggest challenge to pastors is being unable to meet believers face-to-face for a prolonged period of time.

Firstly, online shepherding is practically a one-way process. Speakers who deliver a sermon can never tell how much the believers have grasped. Although this might also be the case in physical gatherings, pastors are still able to ascertain believers’ level of faith through caring for them individually or in a small group. In an online situation, however, believers cannot respond instantly, and pastors often fear that their messages have been missed. “In online worship, a sense of holiness is lacking. Some may not be listening to the sermon as scheduled, others may be doing other things at the same time when they are tuning in. Only a handful listen on time and respond accordingly.”

Secondly, cults may easily penetrate the church since pastors never know what messages have been received by believers online. Today, listening to sermons online has become a habit. For believers yearning for the truth but have low level of education or new converts without a solid foundation in the truth, it may not be easy for them to distinguish between the pure Word and cults. Pastors in many regions have reflected that some believers have left the church to join the cults.

## Problems in Fostering Relationships

Online pastoring also brings about challenges to relationship-building. When everything goes online, believers, especially the elderly, may feel that they have not been adequately cared for. To them, real care can only be provided through home visits and not telephone calls or text messages. A church worker said, *“To many believers, offering care via online means is not considered care at all. It is important for pastors to visit believers at their homes or wherever else they are. Only face-to-face visits and prayers are deemed to be a form of care. Pastors not visiting believers at home will be accused of not abiding by God’s instructions in caring for His sheep.”*



Online groups often lack the sharing and exchanges.

In addition, online groups have also failed to effectively strengthen fellowship among brothers and sisters. Some very common and frequent feedback from pastors is as follows:

*“Without believers gathering physically together for worship, a sense of connection among them is lacking. The bond among them is weakened, and their relationship is not as strong as that during the times when they meet each other frequently.”*

*“Online teaching usually comes with little interaction. Interaction is the force cementing the ties between pastors and believers and enhancing the atmosphere during gatherings.”*

## Important Role of Group Leaders

A direct negative impact of online pastoring is the drop in the number of church members, and a way to address the problem is to strengthen training and shepherding of small group leaders. Currently, in some churches, believers are organized into small groups based on their age and background, and pastors focus on training the group leaders who will be equipped with Biblical knowledge and skills in leading Bible studies. Although some of these churches have yet to re-open, informal small group gatherings are held on a day-to-day basis, during which group leaders and members often have fruitful exchanges.

An example relates to a church worker in the northeastern region who uses the “Living Word” materials to lead small group Bible studies as well as preparing sermons. She said that her church has continued to grow in the past year and even new small groups have been formed. This is a good example of how a church which attaches importance to Biblical teaching and training for small group leaders can achieve success.

## Conclusion: Pressing on Despite the Challenges

The challenges arising from the pandemic are a real test of whether our seeds have been sown at the roadside or in good soil. It shows clearly the importance of teaching the truth in the Bible. Whatever challenges lie ahead, church workers must reflect actively on whether they have adequately equipped believers with the truth.

In talking to these church workers, I found that they have not ceased serving when confronted with difficulties, but rather are always seeking breakthroughs. This comment is the best summary of their attitude, *“We will press ahead with our ministries no matter what difficulties we face. We will not flinch and are prepared to overcome all odds.”*

May God continue to use them and guide them in exercising their God-given creativity to conquer even greater challenges!

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# Life is transformed after engaging in the Living Word Curriculum Series

© Xiaodong  
China Church Ministry Frontline Worker

During the 2020 pandemic, churches in the northeastern region began studying the books of Exodus and Leviticus using the Living Word Curriculum Series to sustain the effort of providing bible teaching to believers. By the second half of 2020, with the pandemic alleviating, minister Yau arranged outdoor gatherings as extension activities to reinforce group members' learning experience. At present, the church has resumed in-person gatherings for more than half a year, the Living Word study group is moving on and is currently using materials developed for studying the book of Jeremiah. How effective is their study?

## The message of Jeremiah concurs with students' needs

First, from the situational perspective, Jeremiah lived in the era when Judah was about to perish. The country was threatened by waves of political turmoil. Invasion by a strong enemy was imminent. Minister Yau saw similarities in our present situation with that of Jeremiah's in that we were inflicted by disasters one after another. Earthquakes and famines were frequent, and plagues ran rampant. When the group members studied the book of Jeremiah, they were inspired and made up their minds to take action to respond to the needs of our era. Minister Yau explained, *"Our group members were not scared when the pandemic emerged last year; on the contrary, they networked together to pray for the disease to end, for the pandemic-heavy regions as well as their personal repentance."*

Second, from the spiritual life perspective, during the time of Jeremiah, the Israeli people turned away from God and worshipped idols. They bowed to pagans while at the same time pretended to respect and fear the true God. They never rid themselves of internal corruption. Nowadays, the believers' community is bombarded on all sides by mass media propaganda; the temptations of money, power, status, and sex are formidable. Minister Yau shared the life-changing witnesses of her group members. She said, *"The group members are willing to deny falsehood and accept the truth, and strive to lead a pious life. As they understand the mercy and righteousness of God, they become willing to take responsibility for their sins. They pray for repentance, they read the bible and have their quiet time before God. The overall quality of their spiritual life is refined,*



The Living Word group members are studying diligently and discussing earnestly.



*their yearn for truth soared, even their sensitivity towards sins is much enhanced!"*

## **The Living Word group members have grown indeed!**

Sister Zhou has learned to closely observe the Lord's words. She shared, *"In the past, I listened to the Lord's words, yet I forgot about them quickly. I neither read the bible, nor loved to pray. Though I accepted the Lord, my spiritual life remained stagnant. Through studying the books of Leviticus and Jeremiah, I became aware of God's commandments, laws and orders. Thank you, Lord! Through thorough analysis of the biblical texts, I know now that if I follow them, I will be blessed. He is the Almighty God. I am willing to come before Him, admit my sins, repent and allow Him to rule me from within my heart."*



Sister Xu described herself as someone having awoken from deep sleep, she said, *"I joined the Living Word study group in 2013. At that time, I had been a believer for over a decade, yet I did not understand what this faith meant to me. My heart felt lost, yet I dared not expose my true feelings. But ever since I joined the Living Word group, everything is not the same anymore. While going through the Living Word study, I have incessantly experienced the presence of God. I have obtained true freedom, I have repented and learned to follow God's words. My life has completely turned around. I used to throw tantrums easily, now I have become gentle. I used to be self-centred, now I learned to be considerate. I used to be arrogant, now I can humble and lay down myself. Thank you, Heavenly Father!"*

We are thankful for the minister and believers, the northeastern church is ablaze with the beautiful blossom of these individuals' life-changing witnesses! Of note, we must express our appreciation to minister Yau. For the past many years, not only has she been using the Living Word Curriculum Series to strengthen the biblical foundation of believers, she has also been developing group leaders, preparing them to be teachers of others. Besides performing verse by verse exposition, minister Yau has been recruiting group leaders. She made clear to them the learning objectives, explored ways to trigger participants' motivation to learn, and shared tips on how to enhance interactive discussions in the small group setting. Minister Yau even conducted mock practicum sessions to help new group leaders ease their pressure. She also recruited deputy group leaders. The deputy group leaders were assigned to lead occasionally so that they could acquire practical experience. Minister Yau's service vision and scope enable the church to grow with increasingly more emerging leaders on its reserve. May our Heavenly Father continue to guide and bless them!

## **The Living Word Curriculum Series publishing funds needs your support**

Mainland churches rely on the Living Word Curriculum Series to provide biblical teachings to believers. In the past few months, CCL published “Five Small Scrolls” and “Job” of the Living Word Curriculum Series to meet the shepherding needs in the frontline. Please remember the “Twelve Prophets, Part 2” and “Revelation”, whenever donations reach target, these two books will be published. The yearly budget of this ministry is USD 96,154. Please remember us in your prayers and offer your donations. Thank you!



# Prayers

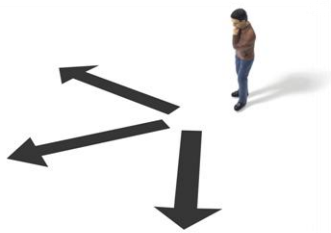
## 1. Tackling difficulties in online ministry

Due to difficulties in ministering online, mainland pastors have decided to strengthen training for small group leaders to equip them for helping members learn about Biblical truths, and facilitate deep sharing among themselves.



May the Lord bless pastors so they can find opportunities amid the crisis, mobilize and build up more servants in Christ, help them achieve breakthrough from the inadequate learning and distant relationships of an online environment.

## 2. Quitting full-time ministry for a living



With inadequate church resources and impacted by the pandemic and floods, preachers in remote regions are under heavy financial pressure. A pastor in the southwest shared thus, *“Several seminary graduates this year have decided to go elsewhere to work to support their family. This is a pity but since full-time ministry cannot support their living, they won’t be able to*

*concentrate on ministering; may the Lord show mercy on them!”*

May the Lord bless the ministry and livelihood of preachers, send believers who are financially better off in surrounding regions to make more donations to those churches so their preachers can have sufficient income and serve Him without worries.

## 3. Ward off cults through prayers

The pandemic has hit churches, causing believers to lose faith and leave the church. Cults infiltrate into the congregations, putting believers’ faith at risk. Besides teaching, mainland pastors have also devoted themselves to prayers to protect their flock. A pastor shared, *“In the face of such great challenge, I insist on praying in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Despite the heavy church work, I spend five hours praying every day, using God’s power to ward off cults and heresies.”*





May the Lord accept pastors' prayers, strengthen spiritual protection for believers and give them the wisdom to identify cults and heresies.

#### 4. Fight against excessive overconsumption



Recently some Internet financial platforms have targeted university students, luring them to make excessive overconsumption, causing some to fall into heavy-loan traps. This has aroused the concern of the mainland authorities. In the middle of March, a supervisory management notice has been issued on further regulating university students' taking out online loans.

May the Lord use the relevant authorities to effectively monitor and revamp companies' luring marketing tactics.

May the Lord also protect university students, bless them with proper concepts about money, to avoid falling into the vicious trap of excessive overconsumption.

~ 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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