

ESG and Church Development

Introduction

“ESG Leadership” is the theme of this year's Leadership Forum. Workplace Christians should not be unfamiliar with this topic, but it is unheard of for churches in China. We have been talking about “Business as Mission” for years, why should we introduce this concept to China churches now?

What is ESG? ESG is an acronym for Environmental, Social and Governance. The United Nations first started to use the acronym ESG in 2004¹ to advocate corporates' responsibility to give adequate consideration to these three aspects in the course of expansion and development. Since then, the business sector often makes claims about implementation of ESG and related indicators in management practice, regardless of whether it is a genuine commitment or merely a slogan for enhancing corporate image. **We as a church should closely examine the relevant content and make use of it to propagate the Great Commission entrusted to us by the Lord in this world.**

The Church's Environmental Protection Practices

We believe that God created the heavens and the earth, human beings, as His stewards, should assume an active role in looking after the earth, this is in line with the Christian view on creation. The question is how do Christians today live out this belief? Churches are not at the forefront of environmental protection, yet can we integrate environmental protection practices into our churches' daily management and operation? In the case of China, the government encourages civil organizations to contribute to environmental protection. I know of cities where groups of believers are actively involved in the waste collection and recycling industry, in return the local government grants them more space for public activities.

The Church's Social Responsibility

Social responsibility is not limited to issues such as social justice. Community service is an important means to gain a foothold and initiate missionary work especially in Creative Access Nations. This may include addressing the various needs of society, such as fair trade. More churches in China are also participating in disaster relief and poverty alleviation

¹ *Who Cares Wins – The Global Compact Connecting Financial Markets to a Changing World.* chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/280911488968799581/pdf/113237-WP-WhoCaresWins-2004.pdf

projects. Some churches are even conducting marriage and family courses based on Christian ethics and values. All these are opportunities through which churches can enter the public service arena and take up active roles. We are not encouraging churches to participate “in disguise”, serving society is indeed one of our objectives. A workplace Christian should not only abstain from unbiblical behavior, but rather proactively shoulder the needs of society, always strive to exceed expectation so as to pave the way for evangelism.

The Church’s Organizational Governance

Organizational governance involves management and leadership wisdom. Management used to be regarded as a secular discipline that churches need not learn. In recent years, this view has changed among some churches in China. Regardless of whether a church runs its activities publicly or not, good internal management is a reflection of discipline and Christian faith, in addition to good stewardship. There can be no good governance without discipline, not only do churches need to balance human and nonhuman factors, but Christian entrepreneurs also have the same responsibility should they wish to bear witness to their faith in the business world. The Chinese society values relationship, it is not easy to achieve effective governance, thus it is necessary to experiment different practices in order to identify those most fitting to our own situation.

Conclusion: Specific Recommendations for Action

Here are some suggestions for achieving ESG leadership in the church:

1. **Teach believers not to see our world as either secular or spiritual; the entire world is created and loved by God.** Believers should not only love the world, but they also have the responsibility and mission to restore the created order, including the environment, human relationships, and other aspects.
2. **Evangelism can be achieved directly and indirectly; they are equally important.** The gospel is spread not only by words of mouth, but also by living it out. This is especially the case in the Creative Access Nations where one can hardly share the gospel publicly, thus friendship evangelism is often done, and corporates can bear witness to the gospel through assuming social responsibility to a more prominent extent.
3. **Ongoing communication and continuous learning.** It is important for church leaders to maintain ongoing communications with Christians in the workplace. While workplace Christians know the society and its needs well, they may not always be able to give prompt responses in line with biblical truth. Church leaders should listen to them first and then explore opportunities for evangelism with them together under the current social climate.

In summary, church leaders do not need to “spiritualize” the ESG mission; rather, they need to work with lay Christian leaders to identify appropriate projects that they can engage in. Church leaders should support and encourage believers to live out their calling through their application of ESG concepts, such concepts can even be applied to church planting projects which can perhaps spark new opportunities for church development.

The Conundrum Between Two Generations

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Although Pastor Li grew up in a major city in China, his master to doctorate education in theology were completed overseas. Is “Western” theology able to help Pastor Li (a post-80s senior pastor of a church) tackle his imminent situation? Without thinking too much, he responded, *“It’s very difficult and requires deep reflection.”*

Churches similar to Pastor Li’s are not common, yet they are not unique in major cities in China. Over the past decade or so, there has been a steady increase in the number of churches having similar characteristics in first-tier cities, and it is possible that this will become the mainstream of urban churches in the future. These churches are characterized by having most of their pastoral staff possessing overseas degrees, and their children are either receiving education in private schools or studying abroad. The church members are young, highly educated, making lucrative incomes, have lived in foreign countries before, and have very broad contact bases.

Reflections on the Diversity of Pastors’ Background and Needs

Differences in training needs: As pastors of churches in major cities have very different background, the teaching, operation, and management principles that they apply are significantly different from those who shepherd traditional churches. In recent years, CCL noticed this difference in leadership training. Each year, the Leadership Forum embarks on a different theme and invites specialty speakers to address pressing issues that affect church development. During the pandemic, the Forum was held online and focused on the theory of “adaptive leadership”, “virtual worship/meetings” were advocated to illustrate application of the theory. Pastors from urban churches showed positive responses. They found it useful and continue to meet online up till now. On the other hand, those leaders who were older and came from rural areas found it irrelevant. They did not see the needs to discuss how to face “changes”. After listening to Pastor Li’s sharing, I believe that the differences in background between the two groups of pastors is the major cause.

Tension in administering pastoral care: One can put it this way, a source of Pastor Li’s struggles originated from some older, more conservative “senior generation” co-workers or elders in the church not sharing the same view. The younger generation’s certain behavior is considered by them as “unspiritual” which includes a lack of faith in God leading to an overstress of human intervention, a lack of thorough understanding of the Bible leading to

an over-concern for human sentiment, and a lack of obedience to leaders leading to a tendency to challenge traditions. The younger generation Christians have frequent access to foreign media and even speak good foreign languages, they may be regarded as being influenced by the “liberals” if ever they query traditional doctrines.

Pastor Li once attempted to introduce devotion practice traditions other than the Protestant Reformed tradition framework. As these devotion exercises have their roots in the Catholic church, the pastor’s attempt drew a lot of criticism from the “elders”. Yet Pastor Li understands that the younger generation is under a lot of pressure from work and family, and they long for spiritual meditation practice, they want to personally “feel” God more and not just unidirectionally being “taught” by others the knowledge of God. The pastor is caught in a dilemma when facing situations like this.

Conclusion

It is thought that other Chinese pastors who have received “Western” theological education also face similar situations and share similar feelings as Pastor Li. Times are changing, and the congregations shepherded by pastors are becoming more and more diverse. Pastoral care and training require increasingly complex consideration and adaptation.

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Contemporary Church leaders in China can be grouped into the following generations  
(Simple Classification)

| <u>First Generation</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <u>Second generation (over 60 years old)</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They started serving at the church in China when it was reopened and was in need of a major overhaul</li> <li>• They became Christians before the Cultural Revolution</li> <li>• They received basic training (provided by western mission organizations)</li> <li>• At the beginning of China’s reform and opening up, they led the church, tried their best to spread the gospel and plant churches</li> <li>• Now these leaders have either retired or rested in their heavenly home</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They grew up during the Cultural Revolution, had minimal education, and attended churches in rural areas</li> <li>• They started serving at the church in the 1980’s</li> <li>• They learned how to preach and nurture the congregation through apprenticeship with older pastors</li> <li>• They witnessed the rapid growth of the church</li> <li>• Most of them have now retired</li> </ul> |

| <u>Third generation (41-60 years old)</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <u>Fourth generation (30-40 years old)</u>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They were born in the 1970's and grew up in the city</li> <li>• Most of them have a college degree, some even have a Master of Divinity degree or higher</li> <li>• They have difficulty adapting to the traditional (apprenticeship) mode of training</li> <li>• They are often busy juggling work and academic advancement</li> <li>• They are the current church leaders</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most of them were born in the 1990s and are mostly the only child in the family</li> <li>• Many of them have travelled or lived abroad or have exposure to foreign churches and access to theological information through social media</li> <li>• They have no experience facing major political campaigns against the church of any kind</li> <li>• They have a strong desire for role models and peer support</li> </ul> |

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### Leadership Development Ministry

The annual "Leadership Forum" aims to nurture leaders.

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Step 1: Broaden participants' horizons and stimulate their thinking

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With the passage of time, it is hoped that a positive impact can be brought to the local church and community.

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- *Resources:* Publishing one set of "Living Word Bible Teaching Series" and producing 12 teaching videos.
- *Online and offline training:* about 300 "Living Word" Bible teaching training sessions and about 120 workplace, family, and church leadership training sessions.

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***Thank you!***



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~ The above is part of the content of PFC issue385, if you would like to read the full newsletter,  
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