

## **Writing in this Great Era**

- A Reflective Essay on Mainland Youth Ministry

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Mainland Youth Ministry Mentor



The purpose of this essay is not to introduce, analyze or even assess youth ministry in the mainland. This is because the scope of that essay (even if you take into account the differences in ages would make to such a definition), characteristics of the ministry (Gospel-centered, mentorship, discipleship, evangelical), strategies and points of entry, could not possibly be clearly delivered within a short essay. Moreover, it is beyond my abilities as a writer. I only have a small wish, that in the next 5-10 years, the Lord will raise fellow-sojourners who will act in faith to cross the divide between churches, organizations, and ministries, and be of the same mind whether they are in the frontline or supporting from the back. This way, they will break through this constrained environment, and numerous restrictions, to open a new window for innovative youth ministry.

### **The Limitations of Youth Ministry within the Church**

Also, this essay will not be a record of the author's wishes and dreams. In the last century, the Lord has called excellent spiritual forebears from Europe and America to Taiwan and Hong Kong. They gave birth to, ignited and carried out many different forms of

campus Gospel work. These include one-on-one discipleship training, campus Bible studies, personal evangelism, university fellowships, and evangelical movements. The opening up of China brought with it bi-directional exchanges. Many overseas Chinese students, and those who repatriated to China after their studies, became ambassadors for campus ministry. These forebears all confess that God is true to His word, and that the doors He opens will not be closed. Likewise, with the opening up of China, revived churches everywhere began running thriving Sunday school ministries.

Naturally, how the faithful passed on their faith to the second and third generations became a challenge faced by pastors in churches everywhere. Everyone could see and admit that the reality was the development and speed of change in the country, society and economy were far greater than the development speed of youth ministries. Moreover, most returnees and pastors ordained around the millennium lacked experience of pastoring in their own childhood. Under the influence of these two currents, it was common for younger generations in the church to have tension with and be estranged from their more traditional forebears. Campus ministry stayed mostly on campus, and would not easily be approved, accepted or supported by church groups (unless the church was a development of a campus ministry). Church communities often lacked the additional resources needed to promote youth ministry.

I watched this second and third generation grow up in the blink of an eye, yet their faith lacked care and nourishment. I believe that this estrangement and tension is similar to many in Hong Kong Christian communities, or perhaps they are even all in common!

### **The Arduous Journey of Campus Ministry in the Mainland**

I believe that, whether the campus ministry founder or promoter is from overseas, Hong Kong or Taiwan, their first calling and heart is pure. Moreover, these ministries began to thrive under a relatively open and free environment. In addition to concentrating on each one's own ministry, their attitude of respecting, accepting and helping each other created an environment that showed the beneficial network effect of diversity. However, once the ministry becomes relatively solitary, when the work is restricted and the nation becomes less open, not only do the attitude and strategy need adjustment, the basic methodology and communication methods need to be reassessed. In other words, different varieties of

youth ministry modes tend towards each becoming a system that is not easily replicable elsewhere. On the one hand, there is diversity everywhere; on the other hand, though there is mutual respect, exchanges are scarce. Where the ministry can create fertile soil for the seed of the Gospel to be sown and grown involves no natural advantages, but only the personal grace and providence of the Heavenly Father.

The community that those committed to youth ministry serve has many distinct characteristics of its own. Most secondary and tertiary students, unless they are living on campus, have little control over their time and living habits. Moreover, with powerful thought education, even coastal cities and other major cities have seen a reduction in the ability to join religious activities in the past couple years. Elites who can enter a tertiary institute after the National College Entrance Examination still pay the price of having to leave their neighborhoods, ethnic groups, or families to pursue their chosen profession.

Being paid personal attention everywhere, students who enter university campuses may not even have had solid faith from their secondary school days. They find it difficult to choose between fellowships offered by different organizations and groups. Often they are pressed into service, or even mentored as leaders before they have even found their footing. The result is that campus ministry often becomes very function-based, utilitarian and lacking in coherence. They would focus more on activities, and less on personal care and pastoring; strong on teaching, but neglectful of the practice of faith in everyday life. A few factors that are essential to this phenomenon are that, under this environment, most students are without “roots” or a sense of belonging. They form an attitude of mobility, nomadism, and passing-through. They do not know where they will work after graduation in 3-4 years’ time, or where they will find a spouse. This instability of the heart and soul is not easily stabilized by ministry alone. In addition, it is often difficult for campus ministries to find long-term support from local churches. As their ministry networks are geographically spread out, they often face manpower shortages.

### **Pastoring continuity in “Youth” Communities**

The way for youth to belong to reliable, nutritious soil requires an environment, time and process with a purpose, where they can be stabilized and condense their experience to understand the root of life. Psalm 1 provides a picture for guidance. The plant that is

blooming in leaves and bearing much fruit is rooted in a healthy environment where there is sunshine, water, air and soil, which care for each stage of its growth, in germination, budding and bearing fruit.

The 2017 “Medium to Long Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025)” published by the State Council <sup>1</sup> points out that “this plan defines youth as the age range between 14-35 (where life plan involves marriage, occupation, and protected age for minors, the age definition of youth is in accordance with the relevant law)”. Clearly the churches should see that it is worth referencing what the nation has defined as the age of human development termed ‘youth’, whether in continuity or supporting fields. In contrast, for whatever reasons, youth ministries tend to separate into secondary and tertiary stages, resulting in discontinuity (not to mention the lack of care before junior high school, and after graduation). Likewise, the churches in Hong Kong and China can use this time of “rest and respite” to actively reconsider and explore a holistic pastoral ministry strategy for and the position of “youth” ministry. They may even intentionally pioneer multi-lateral exchanges between church organizations.

The healthy ecosystem in Psalm 1 is, of course, the will of our Heavenly Father. He has prepared all the necessary resources in creation. How this environmental continuity and balance is implemented organically in church communities and ministry organizations in different cities and areas is a wide-open space of development that is full of challenges and anticipation.

Space is limited and though I put my pen down here, this is not the final destination. I hope to continue this thread in the near future in articles and face-to-face discussions.

Note 1: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-04/13/content\\_5185555.htm#allContent](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2017-04/13/content_5185555.htm#allContent)

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# Filling the Publication Gaps

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The environment for Christian publications on the mainland is becoming harsher and harsher. While we are still allowed to publish, we must be prudent in selecting the right books for publication. Our aim is not to enrich the mainland Christian publication list, but to fill gaps in publication materials in support of frontline pastors' ministry!

## Help Building a Solid Foundation for Marriage

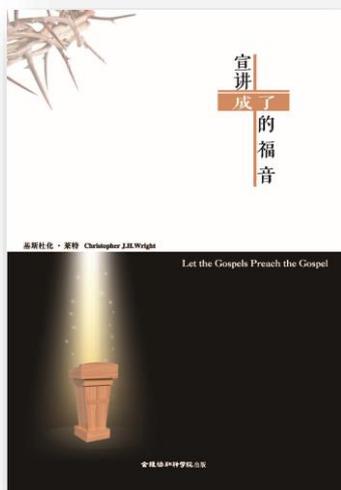
According to 2018 statistics, there were some 3.8 million couples in the mainland who were arranging divorce, which is double the number from a decade ago. A number of believers in city churches are also facing marriage problems. However, many pastors have not received training on marriage counseling or family education in the seminary. There aren't enough reference materials on the subject either. Very often, such materials also come from overseas, resulting in a problem of cultural gap while using them.

In light of such publication gaps, CCL has authorized the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary to publish the book titled "Integral Pre-marital Counseling" (authored by Bess Tom Choi and Annie Pan Yi Jung). Teacher Liu of the seminary worked as the editor for the book's mainland edition. She had this to share about the course of editing the book. "I am grateful to be involved. 'Integral Pre-marital Counseling' is the first set of counseling materials published by our seminary. I started offering pre-marital counseling in 2003, and have all along used overseas materials. These are good, but as they were written with a western cultural background, adjustments had to be made to the contents of the books as well as how to put the teaching into practice. However, this book was written by Chinese pastors, stressing whole-person counseling. Different subjects are explored based on Biblical teaching. There are also devotional materials to



allow newly-weds to have in-depth spiritual sharing. I look forward to the book's publication to help mainland pastors in their ministry!"

## Building the Integrity of Preachers



Many seminary teachers have to shepherd church believers in addition to teaching. Teacher Xu, editor of the mainland edition of “Let the Gospels Preach the Gospel” (authored by Christopher J. H. Wright) is no exception. She was just ordained as a pastor in a church and has to deliver sermons every week. Given the present environment, her messages have to be adjusted, like adding socialist core values<sup>1</sup>. She is fully aware of the difficulties of pastors in preparing sermons.

Teacher Xu said she has benefitted a lot from the book. “The book helps me reflect upon preaching and the gospel. I deliver a sermon every week as a pastor, but am I really preaching the gospel/good news? Preaching is not merely done on the pulpit, but carries a deeper meaning of serving with your life! Real preaching is really about a minister modelling after Jesus and being eager to serve others. Moreover, the author has interpreted familiar Bible verses through a new perspective and way of thinking, like actually going into the scene in the verses to analyze the feelings of the different characters. This is something brand new to pastors here!”

Teacher Xu said that publishing this book in the mainland was no easy task. She explained, “Given the current religious environment, the title of the book ‘Let the Gospels Preach the Gospel’, is in itself a challenge. Preaching is already a way of spreading the gospel! This book is most valuable to mainland pastors. We thank the Lord for his grace. The book vetting process took a few months and we had to get approval from one unit after another. I personally visited the relevant departments several times to explain that this book was written based on a correct theological stance.”

It is God's grace for us to be able to publish various books in the mainland! Every editor is faithful, and endeavors to look for opportunities to publish books as well as to work

patiently with different units in the course of production. They have stayed steadfast to God's guidance and their valuable publications can certainly help frontline pastors in their service!

*Note 1: socialist core values: prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, fairness, rule of law, patriotism, devotion to work, integrity, friendliness.*

The Nanjing Union Theological Seminary was authorized by CCL to publish "Integral Pre-marital Counseling" and "Let the Gospels Preach the Gospel". These two books are gifted to seminary graduates under the 2019 Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Gifting Project. With faith in the Lord, CCL carries on with our Book Gifting Project this year, with offerings received from individuals and organizations. To date, US\$224,359 has been raised, and the shortfall is US\$96,154. Please make an offering in support of the expenses on book production and delivery yet to be paid. Thank you!



# Prayers

## 1. Giving Young Believers the Time to Grow

Ministering to mainland youth is not easy. Growing up in an atheistic environment, few have the chance to hear the gospel. Even for youths who attend church gatherings, their religious foundation is weak because being busy with their studies has kept them from attending church regularly. Yet many churches are grooming these young believers to be future leaders.



May the Lord give youngsters adequate time in exploring their faith, seeking and experiencing changes, and guide churches in providing them with mentors who can help them grow spiritually and mentally before entering ministries.

## 2. Filling the Publishing Gap



With tight control over publications in China, it is increasingly difficult for churches to find Christian books or Bible commentaries. But thanks to God's grace, theological seminaries are publishing relevant materials to support the pastoral ministry and preaching of frontline pastors.

May the Lord guide seminary teachers and give them continuous opportunities to compile and edit suitable books. May the Lord also bless the vetting and production of these books so they can be made available to pastors and believers.

### 3. Christian Education Begins at Home

Sunday School has always focused on children, neglecting the primary role of family in Christian education. Now as children's Sunday School is banned in most mainland churches, a group of preachers trained in Christian education has begun a parental education ministry, organizing parent groups to raise parents' awareness about nurturing their children's spiritual growth, and offering them practical lessons.



May the Lord bless the parental education ministry, lead the preachers in equipping parents to help their children build proper Christian values. May the Lord raise parents who are willing to bear the responsibility of teaching their children.

### 4. Protecting Children's Eyesight



In late May, the National Health Commission together with the Education Bureau held a publicity campaign in Beijing on preventing short-sightedness among children and adolescents. Parents were urged to co-operate with kindergartens to protect children's eyesight by involving them in outdoor activity for more than 2 hours each day. Children today are busy with studying, homework and glued to their smartphones in their spare time, hence the eyesight of those with short-sightedness will deteriorate more rapidly than adults.

May the Lord give wisdom to parents and teachers to protect children's eyesight by arranging reasonable studying, reading time for them, and preventing them from fixing their eyes on the screen, getting the kids to sit properly under adequate light and having outdoor activity etc.

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