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The Future of Christianity in China: An Internal Reflection

Xiaoqiang and his wife Fen started a house church (Canaan Church) in their rented apartment in T City in northern China about two years ago. They themselves had come to the city for job opportunities not long ago. The Canaan Church started to grow almost immediately as they ministered among the migrant workers around them. In time, the Canaan Church grew so big that it had to split several times in order to accommodate the increasing attendance. Throughout the week, Xiaoqiang and Fen made itinerant visits to the churches they established. Today the Canaan Church has grown to more than twenty house churches with over 1,000 in regular attendance.

Canaan Church represents an emerging kind of church presence that is closely associated with China's economic growth and urbanization process in recent years. Traditionally, churches in China were often categorized into two bodies, namely, the TSPM church and the House Church. TSPM is the government sanctioned organism that was created in the 1950s to supervising the affairs of the Protestant churches in China. All churches were then required to register with the TSPM. Those churches that have been registered with the TSPM since the early 1950s are then officially TSPM churches. The House Church represents those churches, home or community, small or large, that are not registered with the TSPM and are therefore subject to interference from state or local government. These two church bodies have grown separately and are responsible for 70-80 million baptized Christians.

In recently years, however, with the socio-economic change in China, the church body has become diversified. Christian presence has been more and more evident in multiple layers of society among the urban poor, intellectuals, artists, business circle, and even party members (cf. Aikman 2003:245-62). Stories of transformed lives and communities are often heard amidst news of persecution and prayer requests for imprisoned Christian leaders. Perceiving the future, three issues stand out that will be closely relevant to the church in China: Urbanization, Christian education, and registration.

Urbanization

Urbanization and economic growth in China has seen a phenomenal migration of rural population into the cities. Statistics show that more than 100 million young and adult from rural population have moved to urban areas since the 1980s when China adopted market economy policy. This has created both a crisis and opportunity. When young adult believers, including some in ministerial positions, had to leave for cities for job opportunities to support their families, rural churches inevitably experienced an immediate impact in all aspects of ministry: decreased attendance, inadequate pastoral care, and shortage on evangelistic teams.

On the other hand, this migrant Christian force can create, if not already, great opportunities in terms of the future of Christianity in China. At the moment, most urban churches, both the TSPM and house churches, seem to be limited in their ability to provide adequate care for the incoming rural believers. Cultural differences only add to the limitation. We have seen, however, cases of effective ministry established among the migrant community. Canaan Church is one of the examples. Typically, this kind of migrant church retains much of the rural church characteristics and is able to address the specific needs of the community. Missiologically speaking, migrant churches have the natural advantage of reaching their own, taking advantage of the natural affinity toward the migrant community. In the initial stage of development, migrant church community is growing slowly but steadily. In time, a significant Christian movement may well be ignited among the urban poor.

What's more, as some rural believers gradually settle in the urban churches, they bring with them fresh blood and vitality. Ripples of renewal may well extend through these rural believers to the urban churches.

Theological education

Both the TSPM and the House Church community are and will be in great need for more trained pastoral personnel to care for their increasing congregations. Since the 1980s, the thirteen TSPM seminaries have produced approximately 3,000 graduates, an obviously inadequate number contrasted to the 20 million members within the TSPM churches. The House Church community, on the other hand, especially in central China, started the intensive short-term training for pastoral and evangelistic ministry in the mid 1980s. In just three to six months the underground seminaries were able to graduate trained workers into Christian service (cf. Chao 1993:92). In urban area there are also some training centers that offer more formal seminary courses for students to undergo one to three years theological education.

The challenge for operating these underground seminaries, however, has been ever present. Above everything else, these underground seminaries do not have legal status and are therefore subject to opposition. Secondly, shortage

of qualified teachers has been a constant reality. A lot of the underground seminaries depend on overseas church and organization to supply teaching personnel, which has not been timely and reliable. Thirdly, coordination among the house church networks has not been as prevalent as desired. In recent years, however, a trans-regional coworkers' meeting was established for the sake of coordinate ministry across the House Church community, which has helped in areas of underground seminary training.

How the churches, both the TSPM and House Church, respond to the challenges in theological education will be directly relevant to the total health of the Chinese Church. The House Church community has come to the realization, after years of very successful evangelistic effort in the pervasive rural China regions, that they need to consolidate the new churches through Christian education. Some house church networks have since been re-appropriating their workforce to meet the needs.

Returnees (those who studied in the West and were trained theologically) are making a great difference. They tend to attract urban young adult and educated group, taking advantage of the experience and training they received in the west. Overseas churches have helped and can continue to help in terms of supplementing training personnel and materials. It will be, however, a task primarily of the Chinese Church itself, that believers prayerfully find ways to meet their own needs for the best advancement of the kingdom work in China.

Registration

In official terms, registration means a house church gets legal status, is better guarded against false teachings, and receives better support in terms of Christian education. In the eyes of the House Church community, registration means restriction, limitation, and compromise. Historically, the House Church community has always been antagonistic toward the officially sanctioned TSPM church. One can trace the feud as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century when two Christian camps started to emerge onto the China scene: the Fundamentalists and the Modernists. When some from the Modernist camp settled in the newly created TSPM leadership in compliance with the new Communist government, while some from the Fundamentalist camp were persecuted and imprisoned for refusing to join the TSPM, the division became further widened. Today, even when the theological differences have already become much blurred with most of the first generation leaders from both camps gone, some house church leaders reject TSPM outright on the issue of registration. It becomes more complicated when a house church network, such as the Word of Life Church, has a trans-provincial membership of millions, with underground seminaries in operation in various areas of the country and trans-regional/provincial missionary activities.

Some smaller house church groups are trying out registration. One of the Little Flock church in southern China registered with the TSPM a few years ago and was granted permission to use the TSPM church facilities for worship and other ministry use. They have been able to retain much of their theological and ministerial tradition within their own community. Other urban house churches, without registering, cooperate with the local officials by means of participating in social charity work, making their presence and love felt in the community.

Conclusion

The Church in China has been through tough times and good times, particularly during the past century. History has witnessed how God graciously sustained his church even in the darkest period of time in history, and how believers followed the signs of the Spirit of God, identifying opportunities and responded in faith. In the perceivable future, the above discussed three issues are among some of the essential challenges as well as tasks that the Church needs to face squarely. How Chinese Christians meet the challenges and embrace the opportunities that have set before them for the sake of the gospel will make a great difference in the future development of the Church in China.

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