



# Gospel! Culture! Kingdom!

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The background of the entire page is a dramatic oil painting. It depicts a sunset or sunrise over a turbulent sea. The sky is filled with thick, textured clouds in shades of orange, yellow, and blue. Bright rays of light emanate from the horizon, cutting through the clouds. A white dove is shown in flight, its wings spread, positioned in the upper center of the image. The ocean below is dark and choppy, with white foam from the waves contrasting against the darker water. The overall mood is one of hope and divine presence.

# ARISE



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## Contents

■ From the Editor's Desk: Arise For This Generation!	1
■ Becoming A Healthy Leader: An Interview with Rev. David Doong, General Secretary of CCCOWE	Abby Xu 2
■ On the Road: A Chinese Missionary's Perplexity and Reflection	Wenji 11
■ "Caged" College Students: The Present and Future of Campus Ministry in Post-Pandemic China	Jiu-yue Lin 18
■ The Secret to a Young Church: Investing in Campus Ministry An Interview with Mrs. Helen Liang, founding pastor of UCCCC in Philadelphia	Yaying 27
■ How Can We Shepherd the New Generation with Increasing "Heart Sickness"?	Grace 34
■ Raising Up Future Leaders: An American Youth Pastor's Vision and Challenges	Luke Chow 41
■ Call For Articles	50
■ Writing Format Guidelines	52
■ From Our Readers	53



# From The Editor's Desk

## Arise For This Generation!

For the Christian believers in China and around the world, we are now standing at a delicate yet pivotal turning point in history. While the external political and economic environment brims with tension, the internal spiritual life of the church also experiences weariness and anxiety. The traditional pastoral model of the church is changing, while the younger generation seeks a new vocabulary to express their faith. In this day and age, how can the church continue to press forward in her mission? And what is God doing in our generation?

In this issue of *Gospel! Culture! Kingdom!* our theme is “Arise!”—we aim to explore God’s transformative work in this generation, with a special focus on young leaders, missionaries, college students, and youth. “Arise!” includes six articles:

“Becoming a Healthy Leader”: Rev. David Doong candidly shares his story of personal growth, highlighting how God’s love transformed his inner life. He testifies to the love and wisdom of God in raising up spiritual leaders for this generation.

“On the Road”: A Chinese missionary reflects on his mission journey in Tibet and Cambodia, from facing external challenges to receiving internal spiritual transformation. God is not only raising up cross-cultural mission work in China, but also nurturing believers who can carry out this mission in the end times.

“‘Caged’ College Students”: Campus workers keenly observe the changes among college student communities in post-pandemic China, calling for adaptation to these “seasonal” changes in student ministry.

“The Secret to a Young Church”: Drawing from the campus ministry experience of a North American Chinese church, this article shows that, when churches are faithful to God’s vision and calling, journeying with the students in all seasons, young people will be willing to commit to the local church and contribute to the vibrance of church life.

“How Can We Shepherd the New Generation”: The author calls parents and youth ministers to let go of the lenses shaped by our specific backgrounds (e.g., cultural, family, etc.), so we can “see” both young people and ourselves from God’s eyes in love and in truth, and fix our eyes on Jesus for healing and growth.

“Raising up Future Leaders”: Confronting the harsh reality that more young people are leaving the church, the author, an American youth pastor, envisions young people as future spiritual leaders and shares his experience of discipling them through life companionship. He further examines the various challenges in youth ministry and urges churches to reform and pave the way for the rise of the next generation.

Dear readers, we hope that through these articles you may see God’s faithful and mighty works amid today’s turbulent world. As a result, “Arise” would become a call for you and your church to repent and recommit all aspects of your life to the Lord. The 2024 Lausanne Congress called for the global churches, including the younger generation, to proclaim and manifest Christ jointly. Indeed, let us cry out to the Lord together: **“Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.”** (Isaiah 51:9; ESV)





# Becoming a Healthy Leader

An Interview with Rev. David Doong,  
General Secretary of CCCOWE<sup>1</sup>

Abby Xu

## Author's Note:

I first met Rev. David Doong, the current General Secretary of CCCOWE (Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism), at the CMC (Chinese Mission Convention) hosted by AFC (Ambassador for Christ) in December 2024. Rev. Doong was one of the main speakers, and I was deeply moved by his sermon, “The Incomparable Gospel”. Though he is a young pastor born in the 1980s, he presents God’s vast and profound love in a concrete, authentic, and vivid way. This sparked my interest in interviewing him, and I was eager to share his insights with the readers of this journal.

1. Rev. David Doong was born in Taiwan. After graduating from university, he moved to the United States to pursue theological studies. He earned a M.Div. degree in 2008 and a Ph.D. degree in Theology in 2015 from Fuller Theological Seminary. Previously, he served at the Evangelical Formosan Church of Los Angeles and Shih Pai Friendship Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. He is currently the General Secretary of the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (CCCOWE), where he hosts *the Missional Discipleship* podcast. He has authored *Practical Theology as Discipleship* and *Missional Discipleship: Unleashing a Diverse and Innovative Generation of Disciples*, and edited *Missional Discipleship @ Workplace*, among other publications.



## 1. Moments Touched by God's Love

**Question:** Rev. Doong, in your recent sermon, “The Incomparable Gospel,” you explored the profound depth of the gospel, particularly highlighting God’s love as it penetrates our hearts and transforms our emotions. Your certainty and joy in preaching made it clear to me that this message was not just based on theological knowledge but likely the fruit of your personal experience. Was there a specific moment or event in your faith journey that gave you this unparalleled understanding of God’s love?

**Doong:** Three events significantly shaped my understanding of God’s love.

The first significant event occurred when I was studying theology in Los Angeles, around 24 or 25 years old. On the surface, I was a passionate and God-loving young man, but deep down inside, I knew there was a huge gap between my outward appearance and my inner reality. An older brother at church named Scott cared for me deeply. Yet, because of my deep sense of unworthiness, I had always rejected his kindness and help, including his offer to cover some of my tuition. I feared that he would be utterly disappointed if he found out what kind of person I really was. After a year of struggling, I felt I had to be honest with him.

One day at church, I mustered up the courage and said to Scott, “Thank you for caring for my wife and me, but I want you to know the true state of my heart.” Then I revealed many shameful aspects of myself



that I had kept hidden. I stared at the floor when I finished speaking, afraid to look up at Scott. To my surprise, after a few seconds of silence, Scott said, “David, let’s kneel and pray together!” He laid his hand on my arm as we prayed, and tears started to stream down my face. It was the first time I truly felt accepted as a sinner. As a seminarian, in my mind, I believed God accepted sinners, but emotionally, I had never felt I could genuinely be welcomed into His family. Through such a specific act of acceptance from Scott, God gave me a real taste of His complete love.

The second event occurred after I graduated from seminary, when I was around 30. By then I had begun pastoring, and I



worked diligently. However, I was not able to make any big decisions because I feared my father would question my judgment. Ever since I received my calling to ministry, my father, a church elder, would always ask me when some church issues came up, “David, if you were a pastor, how would you handle this?” I deeply respected my father, yet at the same time, I was afraid of disappointing him. It was such fear that crippled my decision-making ability. As time went on, the mix of love and fear I felt for my father eventually grew into bitterness: I resented living in his shadow!

During a church service, as I closed my eyes in prayer, a vivid image appeared in my mind: my father stood tall while I crouched

beneath his shadow. In pain, I prayed, “God, what should I do? I love my dad, but I can’t escape his shadow.” Right after my prayer, the scene quickly zoomed out like a movie lens. Then I was stunned to see another image: my father was also living under his father’s shadow! The image was so powerful that I could not help but cry. Deep in my heart, I suddenly realized that I thought I was serving God, but I was actually trying to please my father, a sinner like me, saved by grace, and terribly needing acceptance and healing. Amazingly, such realization did not lessen my respect for my father at all; instead, it deepened my empathy and love for him. He was broken, yet striving to give me his fatherly love, even though his journey of





learning came at a cost I had to bear. Through this experience, God taught me to love my father more, as well as other church leaders, especially peers I once saw as competitors.

The third event happened when I was 37, pastoring a loving church and teaching part-time at a seminary. CCCOWE invited me to serve as the General Secretary, but I was initially reluctant to accept the offer. There were two main reasons. First, I didn't want to risk my reputation. Former General Secretaries of CCCOWE, regardless of how capable or spiritual they were, were always subject to criticism—no matter how they handled things, someone would always be dissatisfied. I valued my reputation, and the thought of an imperfect sinner like me under the spotlight, scrutinized by all, was terrifying. Second, this position required frequent travel worldwide, and I couldn't bear the thought of leaving my two young sons.

While I was hesitating, God reminded me one day: "You care so much about your relationship with your children and whether your sons love each other, but have you ever cared about my concerns as a Father? When church brothers, sisters, and leaders compete, fight, or even attack one another, how heartbroken is the Heavenly Father?" From then on, this reminder kept resurfacing. Whenever I thought of the Father's heart, I was overwhelmed with emotions and could not stop crying. It was a cry of repentance: "Lord, I am so selfish, thinking only of myself and never considering the pain of the Father when He sees us acting selfishly." It was also

a cry of gratitude: I felt that God was inviting me to step out of my self-centered life and follow Him on a path of self-sacrifice, which would lead me into His fatherly heart.

This experience was crucial. Today, no matter what setbacks I face in ministry, when I reflect on the Heavenly Father's heart, worldly disputes, discomforts, criticisms, or misunderstandings seem far less significant.

## 2. Spiritual Practices of Opening to God

**Question:** The three experiences you shared seem to reflect three stages of growing in God's love: first, learning self-acceptance; then, accepting others, especially authority figures like your father; and finally, shepherding God's people with the Heavenly Father's heart. What a beautiful journey of life growth! On the one hand, your experience of God's love deepens; on the other hand, your capacity to love expands. But as they say, "dripping water wears through stone"—it is not a one-day feat. In your growth journey, are there any daily spiritual practices that helped you keenly sense God's love at these key moments?

**Doong:** These three events were more like awakening moments. My life was not instantly transformed into something magical; instead, it was being gradually shaped in God's hands. Healthy life habits—what we often refer to as "spiritual practices" in the church—are indeed vital for life transformation. The most impactful practice for me has been observing the Sabbath, which

began when I was 30.

At that time, I was pastoring full-time, pursuing a Ph.D. in theology, and becoming a new father—all occurring in the same year and keeping me constantly busy. One night, I fainted twice; my body just couldn't take it anymore. The doctor found no physical cause and then asked me what I did for a living. "I'm a pastor," I replied. "Ah! That's it!" Staring at me, he said, "This is overwork! Burnout!" It shocked me: a non-Christian doctor diagnosed a pastor with "overwork"! What kind of testimony have I given? Pastors are the ones who know best how to receive rest from God, yet I'd become a restless, overworked patient!

I confessed my struggle to a seminary professor: I could hardly let go of any ministry opportunity, fearing I'd miss God's invitation. In response, he told me that over 20 years, he'd declined about hundreds of opportunities, regretting only two. Earnestly, he said, "David, you're overthinking! You're not that important!" At that moment, I woke up and realized that my restless anxiety stemmed from what the Book of Hebrews says: "so we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19; ESV). In short, I didn't believe God was in control! In the pulpit, I preached God's sovereignty, but in life, I acted as if God needed me to do more for His work to make progress and for His kingdom to stand firm.

From then on, I began strictly observing a full Sabbath every Monday by setting aside church duties and seminary work. In the mornings, I would walk in the park,

meditating on the Bible and talking with God. In the afternoons, I would help my wife with chores at home, such as gardening or weeding in the backyard; then in the evenings, I would dine with my wife and spend time with family. This Sabbath routine lasted ten years and benefited me greatly. Many moments of self-awareness and inner healing, brought about by God, occurred during these rests.

A few years ago, after becoming CCCOWE General Secretary, I entered a new rhythm of sabbath observing. Ministry travel often put me on planes on Mondays, which made it impossible for me to keep the Sabbath as consistently as before. Thankfully, the CCCOWE Standing Committee leaders thoughtfully suggested that I take four weeks of sabbatical leave every year, saying: "David, you must rest! What you are doing is a marathon, not a sprint!" Their care deeply moved me.





Typically, during my annual sabbatical leave, I'd be sick in the first week—probably my body unwinding after a year's strain. In the second or third week, I'd spend four days at a monastery for a silent retreat, engaging in dialogue with God and writing spiritual journals. My mind usually buzzed with tasks on the first day, unable to settle; by the second or third day, I'd slowly enter deep rest with the Lord. After the retreat, I'd maintain a healthy daily routine: an hour of morning devotion by reading Scripture and writing down my dialogue with God, followed by a jog along a nearby river—continuing my conversation with God during exercise. After that, I would read some good books and spend time with family once they woke up.

I believe that every Christian, not just pastors, needs a secret garden to be alone with God. The key is finding what fits you. I once envied those spiritual giants who prayed in closets, but for me, that secret garden is the riverbank while jogging. Running empties my mind, relaxes me, and keeps me attentive to God. I don't always hear God's voice, but several major life decisions came from God's promptings when I was running along the riverbank.

**Question:** Rev. Doong, I am genuinely glad that you have built healthy habits, and I hope your experience inspires busy pastors who struggle to pause. I also noticed that you wept each time when God's love touched you in those three key events. What advice would you give to those who long to deeply experience God's love but find it difficult,

especially to Christian men?

**Doong:** Brothers, like sisters, can be emotionally touched by God. However, Chinese culture often encourages brothers to suppress their emotions. The saying, "Men don't shed tears lightly", affected me greatly. As the only son of my family, I was taught from childhood that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. Before I was 18 years old, I not only could not cry in worship services but also looked down on those brothers who shed tears and mocked them as too girly. These gender stereotypes were not intentionally ingrained but rather shaped by culture. Yet, after a while, I began to envy my fellow brothers, and secretly I prayed, "God, could You move me to tears in worship? I long to express myself freely before You like them!" About one or two years later, I started weeping often in worship or while reading Scripture.

For brothers or sisters seeking an emotional breakthrough, I would suggest:

First, humbly ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the cultural chains that make us resist emotional expression.

Second, humbly pray and wait for God's grace, acknowledging that emotional openness is the work of the Holy Spirit and takes time.

Third, learn to express emotions. Many brothers feel moved in worship but struggle to find words to describe it. This takes practice—you may start by sharing with your spouse or a close friend, taking it one step at a time.

Fourth, renew your theological understanding of emotions. Chinese churches in general value rationality over emotions.

However, God made us with both rational minds and emotional feelings, and human fallenness distorts both reason and emotion. If we say that emotions are unreliable, then so is our reason. Hasn't God redeemed both? Don't we respond to salvation with both mind and heart? Clarifying this theological understanding could reduce our resistance to emotions. As long as we are willing to open to God, the Spirit will renew our emotions in a specific way.

### 3. Bearing Abundant Fruit in Love

**Question:** Thank you, Rev. Doong, for your advice and reminder! I'm curious: once you opened up your emotions, how did it enrich your knowledge and experience of God?

**Doong:** Once we can feel and respond to the subtle process of the Spirit's moving, our spiritual life will be profoundly enriched.

First, emotional openness expanded my interaction with God beyond formal settings—like Sunday worship—to every aspect of life, including when I shower, run, drive, and more. Even when I was arguing with my wife, I'd tell my wife with a sense of humor from God, "Okay, my dear wife, I get it! This is who I am, but maybe God is refining me through you!" Like a two- or three-year-old, I come to God authentically, without polishing myself, simply expressing joy, anger, sorrow, or delight.

Second, emotional openness deepened my understanding of God's Word. In the past,

I approached the Scripture with a logical and analytical mindset, seeking fresh insights. Now, I just choose a verse, chew on it, and reflect on it throughout the day. I may not have much feeling about the verse during my morning devotional time, but encounters with people or events throughout the day often spark sudden insights and move me emotionally, and inspiring a heartfelt awe of Him.

Third, emotional openness showed me that much of our knowledge of God comes through lived experience. For example, becoming a father and interacting emotionally with my sons helped me understand more about a father's heart. God used this to deepen my sense of His fatherly heart: If I love my sons so much, how much more is the Heavenly Father's love for us? As a man, I once found the concept of "Christ's bride" awkward. Yet as my emotions for my wife grew richer, although I still couldn't fully relate to the role of a bride, I began to understand from a groom's perspective how much God loves His bride, the Church, fully accepting our immaturity and embracing our constant struggles.

**Question:** Opening up your emotions has really brought you closer to God in many ways. That is indeed aspirational. Then, on your spiritual journey, have there been times when you couldn't feel God's love? How did you navigate those spiritual dark nights or dry seasons?

**Doong:** Dry seasons are inevitable! There is a certain paradox in those times: in



the moment, God seems absent, but when you look back, He was never gone. A great temptation in that moment is when you feel so lonely, crying out to God with no response, it's easy to go down a vicious cycle—seeking substitutes to numb yourself, then condemning yourself as you know they are vain, yet overwhelmed by the loneliness, seeking substitutions again...

Usually, I cope in two ways. First, I would review my past spiritual journals. I may not feel God's presence now, but I can recall what it's like before, as the psalmist says, "I will remember Your wonders of old" (Psalm 77:11, ESV). Second, I would do my best to maintain healthy habits during dark times. This is like continuing to eat when we are sick, although we have no appetite. For me, my healthy habit is keeping my morning devotion, spending time talking with God.

#### 4. Sharing the Fruit of God's Love

**Question:** Rev. Doong, lastly, how have your experiences of God's love impacted your current ministry at CCCOWE?

**Doong:** CCCOWE is a movement connecting overseas Chinese churches. It started 50 years ago. As the General Secretary, I interact with Christian leaders worldwide. Through my personal experience, I know leaders are often lonely. We share God's message of love and strive to love others, but many times we don't feel loved. Many do not realize how this loneliness and insecurity affect us in ministry, causing us to lean on

"doing" instead of "being", constantly striving to prove through work that we are worthy and lovable.

Recognizing my inner emotions has given me a perspective of love toward my ministry at CCCOWE. I may not be able to accomplish great things, but at least I can do one thing: love every leader God brings before me. Whether they are older, about my age, or younger, I am willing to learn to love my brothers and sisters for who they are.

I believe this ties closely to the Great Commission. The gospel is not advanced just by "what we do" but also by "who we are"—living a life touched and changed by Christ. If the leaders of today's churches, seminaries, mission fields, and workplaces can, as Jesus said, welcome a little one in love, the impact of the gospel through them might far exceed that of big events and programs of evangelism.

Moreover, my ministry at CCCOWE involves delicate interactions with all kinds of people. Practicing emotional awareness helps me learn to process negative feelings before God. Specifically, I usually ask myself five questions whenever negativity arises:

1. ***What happened?*** Identify the trigger.
2. ***What are my emotions?*** Name them (e.g., feelings of isolation, contempt, rejection, attack).
3. ***What story am I living in?*** Explore the narrative behind the emotions.
4. ***How does the gospel challenge this story?*** Find the key for transformation.
5. ***How should I respond to God?*** Act on it.

For example, when I first became the General Secretary, inviting prominent speakers made me anxious, as I feared rejection. I started to realize that I was living in a false narrative (survival-of-the-fittest in the jungle of the Christian world). I believed that securing prominent speakers made me significant, while rejection meant being belittled. But the gospel reminded me that the incarnated Jesus has overturned the jungle law of this world through the Cross. I serve in ministry, not by the jungle survival rule, but by imitating my Lord's humble sacrifice.

Working through these five questions typically transforms at least 90% of my negative emotions into renewed passion in following God. However, I am still learning, much like a toddler, taking three steps forward and then one step back.

## Postscript

Thanks to Rev. Doong for openly and sincerely sharing his heart and life journey. We believe that his ministry as CCCOWE General Secretary will become increasingly fruitful as every Chinese leader he encounters feels his love and the love of Christ. We are also confident that the readers of this magazine—pastors serving in China, who are currently beyond CCCOWE's care—will be greatly inspired to live healthy lives of being God's beloved sons and daughters, and thus draw more people to Christ.







# On the Road

## A Chinese Missionary's Perplexity and Reflection

Duoji<sup>1</sup>

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24; ESV)**

### Introduction

It is February. Phnom Penh is filled with brilliant sunlight, with heat pressing in, though it does not feel as suffocating as it did last year. This is our second year in Cambodia, and we are gradually becoming familiar with the country and adjusting to the city. This year's Spring Festival was more festive than last year's, as we wrote and posted couplets on the doorframe of our rented home. We are basically settled in here, slowly finding our rhythm and pace in our language learning and ministry collaboration. Our missionary journey is unfolding step by step.

1. Duoji is a post-1980s Christian from mainland China. He lives and serves in Cambodia with his wife and their daughter and son.



## 1. My Missionary Experience

Over a decade ago, while I was a university student in Zhengzhou, I frequently attended campus fellowship group meetings, praying and studying the Bible with my brothers and sisters in Christ. Our understanding of missions was limited back then—mostly based on a few missionary biographies that were circulated among us. Young and fearless, we yearned for far-off mission fields, deeming it a sacred honor to be called by the Lord as missionaries—even if only once in our lifetime. So, we prayed earnestly for it. I remember that at one meeting, as we sang the hymn “Lord, Send Me”, I was deeply moved, vaguely sensing—

however faintly—that one day I might step out into the mission field.

In 2009, I quit my graduate studies and became a full-time worker in a house church. At that time, I did not care about prospects or consequences. I had only one desire—to be crazy for the Lord. I was afraid that I would end up like the rich young man in Mark 10, entangled by worldly affairs and unable to respond to the calling. Later, I attended a three-month Bible training camp during which I prayed fervently for God's guidance on which mission field to enter. After the training ended, the church honored my personal desire and sent me to the remote area of Tibet.

Nevertheless, not long after I arrived at the field, I realized that missions were not just





about having passion. Tibet's unique high-altitude climate, intense religious atmosphere, and tight social controls posed great difficulty for my adjustment to life here. The team seemed unaware of the challenges of cross-cultural missions, and disagreed among themselves constantly on ministry direction and strategy. No one paid attention to the fact that I was a newcomer, and I thought I could handle everything on my own and push through. After a year of language study, I transitioned into bi-vocational ministry, only to find myself quickly drawn into a whirlwind of interpersonal conflicts, unable to break free from such poor conditions. Mission work moved forward slowly with little fruit.

That same year, I got married, and had to face new challenges of family life and marital tensions. Entangled in storms from all sides, I realized that what I had imagined as a passion-filled mission on the Tibetan plateau had unexpectedly turned into a lingering nightmare. In despair, I found myself counting down to the day I would collapse—the moment the nightmare would end. It was only later that I realized that I did not have to be so hopeless. It was true that my spiritual life was in crisis, but it is never too late to leave the field and return to the homeland for further training in missions.

In 2018, I applied to a domestic seminary and enrolled in an intensive M.Div. program. After eight years in Tibet, I brought my family back home. Around that time, there was growing interest in Christian education, and I was invited by a church in Zhengzhou to help

start a Christian school. Then, in the following few years, my life went through a painful yet joyful transformation. I learned to enjoy the study of Biblical truth, to accept the real state of my spiritual life, and to discover new paths for spiritual growth. At the same time, being involved in Christian education led me to care more deeply about the next generation and reflect on how to cultivate in them a holistic faith grounded in church traditions. Gradually, a new picture began to form in my mind: whether in Christian education, spiritual formation, or cross-cultural mission, we are all embarking on a journey of pilgrimage and homecoming.

After a few years in Zhengzhou, my family arrived in Cambodia at the end of 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic had just subsided, yet economic downturns had significantly impacted the church—my church and school were facing financial strain. After visiting Cambodia and much prayer, my colleagues and I unanimously decided to come there for mission, and three families set out together first. After arriving in Phnom Penh, we spent almost a year settling down. By now, we have begun language learning and joined in ministry collaboration. Nevertheless, though we have found our footing in this new land, our journey as missionaries is only just beginning.

## 2. Reflections on Mission (First Stage)

Looking back on my past missionary experience, this journey feels both real and

unreal—It is somewhat regretful to see that I seem to have left few footprints on the path I have walked. I have met many missionaries; among them, Chinese missionaries often carry a sense of both solemn heroism and quiet uncertainty. Early this century, churches in China buzzed with visions of global missions. Now, that voice has faded, and missions have become an awkward topic. I have been reflecting on the lessons and experiences of my fellow missionaries, as well as the opportunities and challenges we face today, hoping that what we have learned might guide and help Chinese churches move forward on this mission journey. My reflections on mission have unfolded in two stages, with the first stage focusing on identifying problems among the Chinese missionaries. These problems include the following:

First, Chinese churches in general are not very responsive to the call to mission and lack sufficient awareness of the challenges in cross-cultural missions. Issues such as environmental and cultural adaptation are largely overlooked. Frontline teams and mission work remain constrained by home churches. Mission strategies often lack long-term planning and appear to be quite random. When missionaries face practical difficulties, they receive neither timely care nor effective support. Some were even abandoned by their sending churches, which chose to withdraw entirely when their long-term investment of manpower and resources seemed to yield little visible fruit. As a result, many missionaries are lost, with some remaining in the field as

scattered lone rangers working independently. This is not an isolated case but a widespread issue.

Second, Chinese missionaries often lack a kingdom perspective and mostly operate independently. In the same mission field, missionaries sent by different churches or from varying denominational backgrounds tend to have little communication or mutual understanding, let alone trust or collaboration. Overlapping ministries not only lead to the wasting of mission resources, but also undermine the gospel witness in the field. What's even worse is that differences in mission strategies are often misconstrued as essential differences in principles and subjected to criticism. Consequently, conflicts between and within teams often escalate into severe strife and even mutual attacks, making the mission work unsustainable.

Third, most Chinese missionaries are not well educated and poorly equipped in Bible knowledge. Many entered the mission field with the mistaken belief that engaging in work alone would provide them with valuable experience and naturally shape them into effective missionaries. The reality is that the mission field is not merely a workplace but a battleground. Once initial passion fades, personal flaws begin to surface in teamwork and family life. Heavily shaped by their traditional cultural values and personal experiences, many missionaries tend to habitually hide their shortcomings and avoid directly confronting those of others. Sadly, despite their efforts to cautiously navigate all



these relational tensions, most of them would end up being entangled in the conflicts of the field and the pressures of taking care of their families. As a result, they can neither meet the demands of mission nor face setbacks. Many missionaries struggle in such spiritual lows, with some drifting away from their original calling, turning their mission work into means for personal gain.

Fourth, since arriving in Cambodia, I've noticed that we often rely too much on foreign mission resources. Yet, many foreign organizations seem to have a wait-and-see approach toward missionaries from China. So, a key challenge we now face is how to humbly learn about missions and collaboration from experienced mission organizations and individual missionaries.

### 3. My Reflections on Mission (Second Stage)

The above were my earlier views. It still feels heavy to revisit them. For a long time, I was deeply dissatisfied with my mission experience. All I could see were the myriad challenges facing Chinese churches in their mission work. These challenges weighed on me, becoming my burden and lament. My experience in Tibet, in particular, left a lasting shadow that I could not shake. When I first arrived in Cambodia, I could hardly identify my role in the new mission field. I could not understand God's leading in the past, and feared that my experience serving in Tibet would repeat itself here.

In the midst of confusion and unease over the past few months, I began revisiting and examining my past with Jesus through spiritual exercises. This review has given me a fresh perspective on my missionary journey. I no longer feel the need to add new problems to the list above or to propose specific solutions. Instead, as I reflected on cross-cultural mission work along with my experience in Christian education and theological training, I discovered that spiritual formation is essential to all of them. What I mean by spiritual formation is that it goes beyond traditional personal devotion; rather, it involves companionship with a spiritual mentor (or a spiritual companion). Through this companionship, we together discover God's presence in daily life and discern the work and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the inner person is nourished in God's love day by day, we begin to grow steadily and gain the strength to confront life challenges. Without a doubt such spiritual formation is what Chinese churches need today in order to raise up mature and effective missionaries. This insight is the fruit of what I call my second-stage reflection.

Once again, I must recount my own experience. Before, I used to often feel trapped



in spiritual lows, drowning in emotional helplessness with no escape. But now, with the guidance of a spiritual mentor, I have re-examined the foggy path from the past and realized that even at those low points, God placed within me a deep longing for Him, and helped me make choices that drew me closer to Him. Under His guidance, I was like a bee gently moving from flower to flower—sipping nectar from each bloom, then moving to the next—neither fighting nor dominating, neither fixating on flowers from the past nor envying other bees. It is this image of the bee that frees me from my Tibet experience and teaches me how to view each of my co-workers around me. Indeed, Tibet is no longer a brutal battlefield I tried to avoid but a flower I once visited—a station in my life growth journey. It is precisely through many stations like Tibet that God has shaped me into the person I am today, able to stand confidently in His presence.

Rediscovering my place before God was a remarkable spiritual breakthrough for me. I used to think that zeal alone was sufficient for living out my faith and engaging in mission work, unaware of how deeply social and cultural influences—along with life experiences—had shaped me to the point that I felt as though I were constantly living under the harsh gaze of others—and even of God. Now I finally realize that what we truly need is not to strive to do better but to become like children, resting in the loving arms of our Heavenly Father. In His loving gaze, we simply enjoy being His children, as well as

His gifts of family and work. Mission fields can be tough, but as long as our lives are rooted in the Holy Spirit, the self-awareness and discernment we receive from Him will free us from the rigid beliefs and emotional turmoil, and empower us as to flourish and bear fruit.

Cultivating such intimacy with God is also crucial for developing healthy relationships with the church. In the past, I used to passionately urge churches to participate in mission work and easily got frustrated and even resentful of their slow response. But now I understand that the Chinese church may not be ready or mature enough for the heavy task of global mission. Her strength is still very limited and she is growing slowly. In the last 20 years, she rushed into the mission fields with expectation that were too high, and thus put excessive pressure on herself when her initial zeal was tested and worn down by the difficulties of cross-cultural mission. She is now calming down and humbly seeking to find an appropriate place and role in the global church family. There is a long way to go for Chinese missionaries to become the main force of global mission. We need to be patient with ourselves.

Mission work often comes with difficulties and challenges. It is urgent for Chinese missionaries to recognize and accept our limitations and foster discernment and sensitivity to follow the lead of the Spirit to press forward. The spiritual life has always been central to Christian faith and mission.



To vitalize the Chinese church's mission work, we need a type of spiritual formation that can transform head knowledge of God into heart-level intimacy, fostering our deeper relationship with Him. In a sense, pastors preaching from pulpits, theologians training students in seminaries, or Christian teachers guiding children in churches or schools can be a way of formation as long as they provide step-by-step guidance tailored to the actual needs of those they serve. This involves patiently cultivating in them self-awareness of the soul, understanding of the essence of spiritual life, and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

The above reflection is just my personal missionary experience and insight. However, I think it speaks for many co-workers to some degree. In Cambodia, as we live and serve, we also learn to care for our spiritual lives. We may be immature right now, but we are growing toward maturity. There are certain stages of growth in life that we cannot—and should not—skip. We as a team are on the missionary journey, growing alongside the Chinese church. We pray that God may be gracious to Chinese churches and missionaries and help us accept who we are and where we are. Like humble pilgrims, may we each focus on every step along the path, journeying forward and growing all the while.





## **“Caged” College Students:**

### **The Present and Future of Campus Ministry in Post-Pandemic China**

Jiu-yue Lin<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to be “caged”? On the one hand, it refers to the physical isolation imposed by political pressure and pandemic control measures. On the other hand, it also refers to mental and spiritual confinement. Over the past decade, restrictions on the Christian faith in China have intensified, even to the point of persecution. For Christian college students, they may be denied graduation due to their faith; therefore, many of them are forced to give up sharing the good news. During the pandemic, China's “dynamic zero-COVID” policy further tightened control over university campuses, leaving students “caged”.

Now, over a year post-pandemic, what are some lasting effects of COVID-19 restrictions on this generation of college students? How have pastoral care and outreach strategies evolved since the pre-pandemic era? What are some of the new challenges that campus ministry faces today? To answer these questions, I, Lydia from Southern China, invited two fellow staff members serving on the front lines (Peter from Northern China and Moses from Central China) for a roundtable conversation. We had an in-depth discussion reviewing the changes among students in the past decade, reflecting on the current situation, and looking to the future.

1. Lin is currently pursuing an Th.M. degree with a focus on the Old Testament. She has been actively involved in campus ministry for the past ten years. Lin previously studied in the M.Div. program founded by Dr. Jonathan Chao, where she was profoundly impacted by his “Threefold Vision”. She feels a strong calling to both theological education and campus ministry.



## Outreach and Discipleship

**Moses:** There are many students in the city where I live, but the percentage of Christians is very low. One local university surveyed<sup>2</sup> its dormitories and found that Christian students or those interested in the Christian faith added up to less than 0.1 percent of the student population. Currently, most of the students we encounter are second- or third-generation Christians, and they are in a fragile spiritual state. Last year, we met 20 to 30 new Christian students, but fewer than one-fifth had an active spiritual life that included reading the Scriptures, praying, and participating in group Bible study, etc. Most students are willing to participate in fellowship simply for the sake of social connections or entertainment.

In the past, junior and senior students could disciple freshmen and sophomores, but now it is very difficult even for graduate students to do discipleship. The current Christian student body generally lacks depth and breadth in their faith, and many are not clear about the basic beliefs of Christianity. For instance, other than the most familiar faith statement, “Jesus Christ was crucified for us sinners”, they barely know about doctrines of creation, eschatological hope, or the Trinity, etc. Furthermore, like their

fellow non-Christian students, they like to immerse themselves in the online world, or as the current buzzword goes, “lie flat (and do nothing)”. It takes a long time to reach their hearts, making discipleship more difficult.

**Peter:** With the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, physical “confinement” is gradually ending, but students now “cage” themselves. Since the pandemic, they have become accustomed to playing with their phones. Unwilling to interact with others, they live in their own world and do not care what others say. This type of “cage” becomes a “wall” that separates them from the outside worlds, not just physically, but also mentally and spiritually.

Overall, we have now moved away from the era of “quantity” in student ministry. This is the era of “quality”. We can only reach those who can be reached and disciple those who can be discipled. We cannot be too eager for quick success; we are in a “trough” stage, where we need to slow down the pace of ministry and accept our current state.

Nevertheless, as the pandemic drew to a close, I could still see hope for student ministry. First, although churches and fellowships were “scattered” during the pandemic, many Christian students returned after the pandemic. Second, the “White Paper Movement”—the trigger for lifting the

2. In the past, most universities in China could conduct faith-related surveys or door-to-door visits in dormitories to find Christian students or those interested in Christian faith, a method known as ‘sweeping the building’. However, due to changes in management policies and stricter restrictions, this method is used in fewer universities today. The situation varies across schools.



nationwide lockdown—was entirely initiated by college students. After that, Christian students had deeper thoughts about how faith should respond to society.

**Lydia:** I strongly agree with you. I would like to add that students used to be more open and willing to build relationships with others. They would take the initiative to share their faith with their classmates and invite people around them to participate in faith activities. However, since they began to “cage” themselves, students have shown a decreased ability to handle interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it takes a lot of one-on-one follow-ups and companionship to disciple them, which requires much more time and energy from staff.

### Pressure and Obstacles

**Peter:** The pressure from the larger external environment is actually manageable. Overall, student ministries in larger cities tend to have less pressure, given that there are

many more issues drawing the government’s attention, and church support is more readily available. In contrast, those in inland small cities usually face greater pressure.

The primary obstacles to student ministry stem from the tension between churches and student movement teams or student fellowships. In my city, many pastors are willing to support student ministry and have a good understanding of it (as many of them have benefited from the student movement themselves). However, tension still arises between pastors and student ministry teams. The main reasons are:

**1. Negative preconceived notions about student movement**—some churches have reservations about student movement teams due to negative experiences from previous collaborations (e.g., students attended fellowship but skipped church Sunday services).

**2. Conservative mentality**—some pastors question why student ministry should be conducted by external teams rather than by



local churches.

**Moses:** Churches and student movement teams have different ideas about student ministry, which can be traced back in history. Thirty or forty years ago, student movement teams were born out of Chinese churches' mission efforts and established by staff sent from different churches across China. However, now staff on these teams generally come from similar theological backgrounds and no longer have strong ties to local churches as they once did. Student movement teams focus on fueling movements, building legacies, and discipling students to be both carriers of legacy and witnesses to the gospel. In a student movement team, the staff's understanding of the student community often comes from their own past experiences as students. In contrast, some local church pastors may have a heart for young people, but they tend to approach students as outsiders and often fail to address what they are truly concerned about.

**Peter:** It takes wisdom and a balanced approach to handle the tension between churches and student movement teams. I would suggest the following:

**1. Advance ministry practically**—both churches and student movement teams should avoid measuring ministry outcomes with grandiose slogans or Key Performance Indicators, such as a certain number of students reached or a certain number of leaders trained in the coming year, etc. Instead, use more practical or down-to-earth approaches to do student ministry.

**2. Calmly face tension**—both sides should approach the tension honestly, be mindful of each other's sensitive bottom line, and maintain low-profile collaboration within their own domains.

**3. Enhance communication**—both sides should avoid self-isolation, communicate more openly, and seek better ways to advance student ministry together.

## Change and Challenge

**Moses:** My team consists of staff from different age groups, and each generation is deeply shaped by the historical and cultural context of its era. Those from the 1960s were shaped by the “Red” era, having developed a worldview characterized by political struggle and critical thinking. The 1980s generation was influenced by the Reform and Opening-up policy as well as the pop cultures of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The post-1990s generation embodies postmodernism. However, those born in the 2000s are almost completely disconnected from these cultural legacies, largely because proper values were not passed down through their families. Such “rootlessness” is especially evident among Christian students educated in public schools.

Growing up within such a forced education model, post-2000 Christian students, in general, lack conviction as they mature. Even though they were taught with Sunday school materials similar to those used in the 1980s and 1990s, they appear largely indifferent to faith and spiritual

matters. In fact, they almost lack motivation in everything, including pursuing higher education, improving their financial situation, or even committing to marriage and family. This poses a significant challenge for pastoral care, making it difficult to find an entry point to connect with them.

Regarding interpersonal relationships, there is another peculiar dynamic among students today. Female students often experience tension with each other, so they end up hanging out with male students, and vice versa. This leads to ambiguity in male-female relationships. Therefore, pastoral care also needs to guide them in navigating interpersonal relationships and setting proper boundaries.

Overall, the concept of pastoral care may seem simple: to delve into the students' deepest and most genuine needs. However, achieving this is extremely challenging. Without addressing their inner needs, both pastoral care and sharing the good news are unlikely to be effective.

**Lydia:** So how can we “delve into” their deepest needs?

**Moses:** We can start with the surface-level issues they care about most, such as studies, families, relationships, and future careers. Particularly, in the post-pandemic era, increasing financial and work pressure have intensified their anxiety. That can also be an entry point. Student ministry aims to guide students back to their hearts and to seek God's will. We may try to help them develop habits such as being still before God, practicing

spiritual disciplines, cultivating emotional awareness, and expanding their capacity for acceptance. While these methods are effective, maintaining these habits can be challenging. Students tend to merely participate in these “ministry activities” arranged by staff, without actually actively seeking a closer relationship with God.

**Peter:** Indeed, there is currently no effective approach to addressing this issue in student ministry in China. Nevertheless, I still believe that it is essential to dedicate more time to accompanying students. This is not about maintaining the status quo but about accepting their current state and gradually influencing them. Much like the changing seasons, this is a unique “season” for student ministry.

## Resources and Acquisition

**Moses:** Our greatest need is to recruit young staff, especially recent graduates. They are closest to the current students and understand them the most. The role of senior staff is to mentor these younger ones, guiding them to influence students through relationships thereby leveraging their strengths. However, senior staff are more likely to be bound by their own experiences (some of which may no longer be relevant to the current situation); therefore, it's critical to walk alongside recent graduates with a learning mentality. Moreover, traditional criteria for full-time ministry often include a clear calling and a stable spiritual life.



However, these young people may not have yet discovered their callings; they simply have a burden for students and a desire to serve. To nurture these young staff, we need to walk alongside them, broaden their horizons, encourage reflection, and foster critical thinking. It is essential to give them the time and space to discover their own vision and calling. After six months or a year of serving, we can then ask them about their understanding or how their sense of calling and vision has evolved.

We need to be aware that two things can be particularly damaging to young staff. One is treating them as tools to accomplish ministry tasks. The other is lacking trust in them. Therefore, do not pressure them into full-time ministry just for the sake of the title.

**Peter:** Post-2000 generation staff bring both strengths and weaknesses, highlighting the need for training. Theological education is essential for them, but it does not automatically lead to their spiritual growth. We need a training and support system that provides them with spiritual companions on their life journey. This is something currently lacking in China.

**Lydia:** I agree entirely. The young staff in my fellowship, including myself, committed to full-time ministry after attending a dedication meeting for student leaders organized by the team. The passion and willingness to surrender to God's calling during college years are genuine and have the power to shape our entire lives. However, the problem is that not all students who

experience this initial passion end up pursuing full-time ministry. Some students, despite their passion, may feel uncertain about their calling or struggle to reconcile their passion with the harsh realities of life, causing their enthusiasm to gradually fade. “Igniting” this fire at a dedication meeting is easy; the real challenge lies in helping these individuals sustain their fire for the Lord, experience ongoing spiritual growth, and discover their specific place to serve based on their unique gifts and personalities.

## Vision and Preparation

**Moses:** In China, apart from churches, student ministry is primarily influenced by two different approaches. One emphasizes evangelism, while the other focuses on contextual awareness, training, and reflection. The directions of these two approaches are gradually converging within today's pluralistic contexts, creating potential for integration. Nevertheless, variations exist across cities, necessitating case-by-case handling.

**Lydia:** Both approaches have influenced the student ministry in my city. To better help students to grow, our staff need first to understand the specific context and needs of our student population and then explore how to integrate the strengths of both approaches.

**Moses:** This touches upon the issue of contextualization. Our student ministry has been heavily influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan, but it is difficult for us to become as deeply rooted in our own local culture as



they are. For instance, the Taiwanese student ministry emphasizes practicality, stemming from its pragmatic culture. Hong Kong, on the other hand, prioritizes reflection that arises from its context of theological inquiry. The question is: Can we find our own path, which aligns with our own team's unique characteristics and cultural context? If we aim for a reflection-based approach, we need team members who are capable of deep theological reflection; otherwise, it will be hard to implement.

Methodologically, student ministries in Taiwan may provide concrete approaches, such as small group dynamics and inductive Bible study, while those in Hong Kong tend to emphasize leveraging students' existing strengths and spiritual gifts without relying on specific methods. Therefore, in the next five to ten years, our student ministry should

focus on addressing the practical needs of the student population we serve while remaining open-minded to various approaches. If we simply replicate others' innovations without developing our own methodologies, we will not achieve any meaningful breakthroughs.

**Peter:** I believe we need to explore how to contextualize our understanding of student ministry and “urbanize” it, or make it relevant to the specific cities we are located in. This requires a deep understanding of our specific urban culture and the developmental needs of student ministry.

**Moses:** For example, college graduate ministry in Hong Kong emphasizes vision and calling. However, in our context, we need to address practical concerns such as how college graduates can navigate the initial years in the workforce, survive in companies, and interact with bosses. Pragmatism still dominates



Chinese culture. While we can adapt experiences from Hong Kong and Taiwan, grounding our approach in the local context is essential. Tension arises if we fail to truly understand the real needs of students. We will need more young staff in the future, but the proportion of full-time staff might decrease. Focusing on how to raise up volunteers to care and serve in campus ministry may become the new trend.

### Volunteer and Staff Training

**Lydia:** What distinguishes campus volunteers from “bi-vocational” staff?

**Moses:** Campus volunteers differ from small group leaders who have entered the workplace after graduation. They journey alongside students, provide training in Bible study, offer counseling, and engage in ministry that closely resembles the work of full-time campus staff. They essentially function as “part-time” campus staff. These volunteers typically live or work near campus and focus on student ministry instead of serving within the church. Therefore, it is essential for them to have clear communication with their churches.

**Lydia:** “Student staff development” emerges as a significant need and challenge. First, churches and student ministries often operate with different philosophies. Second, training student ministry staff cannot rely solely on fixed curricula or materials. In reality, there are only a few student staff in each city, and specialized training for them is

scarce. Many staff navigate this path without a clear roadmap and turn to seminaries for theological education. In the long run, student ministry itself may become another form of “theological education”. How can we integrate theological education with staff development?

**Moses:** I completed my theological education a long time ago. Based on my understanding of accessible seminaries in China, most still adhere to a traditional, lecture-based, knowledge-transfer model. They primarily equip church preachers but rarely cultivate individuals capable of deep reflection. This also stems from the education model in our cultural context. Conversely, our current student ministries provide theological training and general lectures designed explicitly for ordinary believers. These might be more practical than seminary education because they prioritize inspiration and critical thinking. Without that initial spark, education in Sunday school, seminary, university, or even homeschooling inevitably becomes trapped in a model of rote memorization. For example, a coastal city in eastern China has twenty to thirty seminaries; however, due to the lack of genuine transformation in students’ thinking patterns and receptivity, the impact of theological education remains quite limited.

**Peter:** Some student ministry staff return to China after completing their theological education abroad. Many find it too challenging to adapt to the hostile domestic environment for ministry and end up pursuing careers in the marketplace instead. This highlights the need to consider how to digest and apply what we



have learned in school to real life. Otherwise, it is like pouring new wine into old wineskins.

**Moses:** From another perspective, fragmentation is a key characteristic of postmodernism, and it is often criticized by modernism, which values wholeness. Students today often experience life as a series of fragments. The purpose of our training and equipping is to help them find a connecting thread through these fragments. Life is inherently fragmented, but if we can guide someone navigating these fragments to experience God and return to His embrace, then these fragments gain meaning, becoming a compass that points toward a deeper journey of knowing and experiencing God.

## Conclusion

The student population we are shepherding now is no longer one that is “caged” by outside pressure but one that actively chooses to “cage” itself. As frontline workers, we often yearn for students to mature quickly and grow alongside us. However, we may forget that the proper way of shepherding is first to be with them, enter into their situation, and walk with them. That is actually what God is always doing—He promises to be present with His people.

Due to the differences in various cities and in backgrounds of staff teams, student ministry in China is multifaceted. While this discussion cannot cover every aspect, we hope these reflections will inspire and benefit pastors, student ministry workers, and readers alike. Additionally, we hope to encourage more discussion and collaboration on student ministry among churches and teams, both within and outside of China.



# The Secret to a Young Church: Investing in Campus Ministry

An Interview with Mrs. Helen Liang,  
Founding Pastor of UCCCC in Philadelphia

Yaying

## Editor's Note:

The University City Chinese Christian Church (UCCCC) is a young congregation in Philadelphia's West District. It is considered young not just because it recently celebrated its twentieth anniversary but also because it comprises a vibrant group of students, scholars, young professionals, and families from China and Southeast Asia, with teens and children making up over half of its members. This stands out distinctly among North American Chinese churches, where aging congregations are increasingly common. How does UCCCC maintain this young vitality? We interviewed one of the church's founding pastors Mrs. Helen Liang.

Pastor Helen is from Shanghai and is a fourth-generation Christian in her family. Her grandfather was a minister, and both her great grandfathers were pastors. Yet, she only began to know the Lord after coming to the U.S. in 1980. In 1985, Helen and her husband, Tony Liang — now a pastor at UCCCC—were both baptized on Easter at the Philadelphia Chinese Christian Church. In 1989, the couple joined a team to establish and lead the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) campus fellowship group, focusing on sharing the gospel with mainland Chinese students and scholars. By 1995, they helped establish the church's Mandarin congregation. Then in 2004, they were sent by the church to plant UCCCC in University City, where they have been laboring diligently for twenty years. In recent years, they have stepped back to a supporting role, continuing to care for students while remaining committed to raising up younger leaders in the church.



## 1. A Church with a Vision for Campus Ministry

**Question:** Pastor Helen, what prompted you and Pastor Liang to start the campus ministry?

**Helen:** After “the Tiananmen Square Incident” in 1989, many mainland Chinese students flooded into the church. Back then, our church primarily held services in both Cantonese and English, with most attendees from Hong Kong and very few from the mainland. I am from Shanghai, and Pastor Liang is from Guangzhou, so we felt an undeniable duty to begin a ministry for Chinese international students.

Though Pastor Liang was an electronics engineer, then his first degree was in physics. He loved to discuss science and faith with others, which happened to be the topics that interested many Chinese international students and scholars at the time. So we began campus ministry by hosting group discussions. In 1995, our church launched a Mandarin Sunday service. Initially, there were only 20 attendants, but by 2002, attendance had grown to 130 or 140, including students, young professors, and even some illegal immigrants.

While serving at the Mandarin congregation, Pastor Liang began his theological training in 1998. In 2000, at the Stephen Tong Cross-Century Evangelistic Convention, Pastor Liang dedicated himself to full-time ministry. At that point, he simply offered himself to the Lord without knowing exactly what he would do next. Over the



following years, he earnestly sought direction. For instance, his passion for theology once led him to consider becoming a seminary professor. Yet after much searching, he realized that God’s calling for us was to carry on campus ministry. This has become a vision that we cannot put off ever since.

Once God’s calling was clear, we formally approached the church in 2003 to request a temporary leave from church ministry so that we could concentrate on developing the campus ministry. After nearly a year of communication and prayer, the leadership committee and deacon board of the church unanimously agreed in early 2004 to commission us as missionaries to University City, evangelizing Chinese students and scholars.



## 2. A Church Growing Alongside the Student Community

**Question:** Pastor Helen, you and Pastor Liang have been involved in campus ministry since 1989—over thirty years now. What changes have you noticed in the Chinese international student community during your years of service?

**Helen:** The changes have been significant. Around 1989, most Chinese international students were funded by the government. Following the 1990s, as China's Reform and Opening-Up policy progressed, the number of self-funded students gradually increased. These students were often hardworking and interested in intellectual discussions on topics like evolution, philosophy, and social phenomena. Prior to their encounter with Christians, they often dismissed church people as “foolish,” believing themselves to be intellectually superior. However, when they came to our church and found that many among us were accomplished in philosophy, arts, and academics, their misconceptions or stereotypes about the church started to shift.

Students born after 2000, however, are less interested in big topics like politics or philosophy. At most, they would engage in discussions on comparative religions—such as the differences between Taoism, Buddhism, and Islam. Many of them come from single-parent or complex family backgrounds, often carrying strong feelings of antagonism and defensiveness toward others. Such rebellious

and mistrustful mentality deeply influences their views on life and marriage. For the church, helping them build trust, especially in social relationships, is a huge challenge.

Nevertheless, loneliness is a common issue across all generations. Many students struggle to form close relationships due to differences in cultural and family backgrounds. In recent years, emotional issues have become more prominent among Chinese students. For instance, the growing sexual liberalism in China has led some to seek sexual partners to combat loneliness, but this often leads to emotional attachments that end in painful breakups. If we can build relationships with them and create a safe space for them to share openly, we will have the opportunity to help them.

**Question:** Given these recent changes in the Chinese student community, how has your church adjusted its strategies to share the gospel with them?

**Helen:** The shifts in the student community made us realize that we need to build personal relationships first rather than immediately jumping in to preach the gospel. For example, a postdoc student at UPenn was initially uninterested in the gospel, but I remembered his name. Three years later, when we met again, I greeted him by his name. He was deeply touched because he could tell that we genuinely cared about him. Only after building that relationship could the seed of the gospel take root.

Relationship-building often begins with welcoming newcomers. When new students

arrive, we pick them up at the airport, take them shopping, and help them settle in. Then, we host welcome events—like summer barbecues or fall trips to Princeton to see the autumn leaves. While these may seem like social activities, they are key to forming bonds. Students in a new environment long for companionship. Some struggle with language barriers, academic challenges, or even depression—which has especially high rates among female Chinese international students at UPenn. In our fellowship, we organize themed activities based on these situations. By inviting them to meals and group events, we help them gradually become more willing to join and be part of our community.

Second, we have also shifted our focus to building an open and authentic faith community where people feel a sense of belonging. In small groups, we share our weaknesses and how faith provides answers. Such authentic sharing helps the students see that we are not lofty “preachers” but friends who genuinely care about them. Building close relationships is vital. This can happen in small groups or through one-on-one talks. For instance, while I was sharing on the topic of family-of-origin problems in a college group, a student stood up and talked about his parents’ divorce and the emotional turmoil it caused. His openness instantly resonated with a dozen others. This not only helped him release long-suppressed emotional burdens but also encouraged others with similar experiences.

Another example that deeply moved me

was about a Chinese student from Temple University. He was very laid-back, caring about nothing. Until his father suddenly passed away, he then hit rock bottom. It was the brothers at church who walked alongside him through that difficult time. Even though he has not yet come to faith, he faithfully attends Friday and Sunday services. This highlights the importance of creating a sense of belonging and offering friendship and the warmth of family to these students.

Last February, our church held a Chinese New Year celebration. Some students were initially hesitant to participate, but once we started making dumplings, they found it fun and joined in. At our table, there were seven non-Christian students. When they learned that my husband is a pastor, one student asked, “How did you accept Christ? Why do you believe?” This wasn’t a situation I could have intentionally created. It came from their genuine desire to understand the Christian faith. Even now in 2024, students are still asking these questions. This makes it clear that the door to the gospel remains widely open. We just need to foster an atmosphere of love and care so they can feel our genuine love. We love not because we are so great, but because the Lord loves through us.

### **3. A Church Collaborating with Campus Ministry Organizations**

**Question:** Many churches in China are unsure about investing in campus ministry. Should the entire church focus on campus



ministry, or should campus ministry be a part of the church's overall ministry?

**Helen:** Our experience shows that campus ministry is hard to sustain by itself without church support, as students typically leave after graduation. When campus ministry is effectively connected with the church, it fosters in students a sense of belonging and a heart for the church. If they stay in the city after graduation, they usually continue serving in church, which helps ensure our steady supply of co-workers for the church.

Many churches wrestle with how much to invest in campus ministry, and the key consideration is weighing the input-output ratio. It is true that stand-alone campus ministries have a high turnover rate, which can appear to be a poor investment on the surface. However, our campus ministry is rooted in the church. This helps us avoid the disconnection seen in some campus fellowship groups, where no one cares where students go or what teaching they receive on Sundays, leading to a loss of students after graduation. Our experience suggests that students with a “church mindset” tend to maintain their faith at higher rates, whether they return to China or relocate elsewhere. Many of our students grow into young professionals with faith, even becoming core church members. After graduation, they not only stay involved but also bring friends or other students to church. This model creates a self-sustaining cycle. For those returning to China, their “church mindset” prevents them from staying at the level of fellowship. Instead, they actively

commit to the local church, and that is absolutely crucial.

Additionally, as graduates start families and bring their children to church, the church remains young and vibrant. Young people attract more young people—some even drive an hour from the suburbs to join us. Therefore, campus ministry is not just a part of the church—it is a key force that brings lasting vitality to the church and strengthens its unity. It is not just a short-term evangelistic endeavor, but also a long-term commitment to nurturing believers and building up the church. In order to enhance the effectiveness of our campus ministry, we collaborate with organizations such as Ambassadors for Christ and China Outreach Ministries.

**Question:** I’m curious—how do you collaborate with these campus ministry organizations? Do they handle evangelism and Bible studies and then bring people to your church on Sundays, or do you work together on these ministries?

**Helen:** Our collaboration model is relatively unique. The staff members of these organizations with whom we work must be members of our church—meaning they are both part of the church and the organization's team. This dual role allows them to fully tap into the organization’s resources. For example, if you are a minister with Ambassadors for Christ, you can utilize their resources to lead a ministry team, comprised of co-workers from our church.

**Question:** That is an interesting model. So, what specific resources do these

organizations offer to the church? After all, organizations often rely on church support.

**Helen:** Indeed, the church usually supports organizations in various ways such as regular missionary offerings or providing venues. However, organizations may also offer resources that the church cannot provide, mainly in the following areas:

**1. Focused Training:** Organize systematic, intensive training for church co-workers.

**2. Targeted Funding:** Organizations may offer specific funds for campus ministry. During a time when we were experiencing financial difficulties, some organizations' support really helped us pull through.

**3. Fundraising Ability:** They can raise funds from other churches or regions—something our church alone cannot easily do.

The collaboration is a two-way partnership. Organizations provide professional resources and training, while the church offers spiritual community and tangible support. This model has not only strengthened our ministry (the church), but also made their (the organization's) work more grounded and impactful.

#### 4. A Church That Holds Fast to Its Calling and Vision

**Question:** Campus ministry is not easy. How has your church persevered for so many years with limited resources and people?

**Helen:** Since it is God who has called us, we must not turn away from the vision.

God has caught us, and we trust that He will lead us. A pastor likened the process of campus ministry to “eating twenty dumplings until one feels full.” That means it takes time consistency, and patience before you see real fruit. Nevertheless, every dumpling of progress along the way builds toward the harvest. With this mindset, it becomes easier to stay steady and not be swayed by gains or losses. Every effort lays the groundwork for the final fruit. We don't focus on immediate results but press on by faith.

Do not rush—take it slowly and cultivate it patiently. If you lack co-workers, just do what you can. The key is holding onto the calling God first gave you. God will provide the rest! When we started planting the church, we faced great challenges—we had no co-workers and no venue. While searching for affordable meeting spaces, a doctoral student stumbled upon a Catholic activity center by accident. He told the priest we had little money and asked if we could rent the place. The priest said he had long been praying for someone to use the space—anyone connected to Jesus, regardless of background, was welcome. From then on, we used it at no cost. God continued to show His grace in small ways. When we began building the current sanctuary, we needed over a million dollars, but we only had \$50,000. Former students and visiting scholars who had been a part of the church donated generously. As a result, a 30-year loan was paid off in just 10 years—truly a miracle from God!

In sum, for campus ministry to bear fruit,



the following elements are key:

**1. *Hold fast to God's Calling:*** No matter how difficult the circumstances may be, we must remain faithful to our mission. If it is God's will, He will bring it to completion.

**2. *Proclaim Testimonies and Truth:*** We must persistently preach biblical truth to inspire and challenge students, and at the same time, share testimonies with them. This is not only a way to give thanks for God's work, but also an important means of encouraging fellow co-workers.

**3. *Foster a Sense of Belonging:*** Cultivate a warm and welcoming community where people feel accepted and cared for.

**4. *Strengthen Teamwork:*** Ministry is not about one or two individuals—it requires the collective effort of many.

## Final Thoughts

Finally, I would like to share a few words to encourage pastors and co-workers in China who are engaged in campus ministry. When facing setbacks, do not view them only as failure, but remember that God is working among us. Whether your team consists of one, two, or hundreds of workers, as long as you walk God's path, the gospel will surely bear fruit. We believe that once this generation receives the gospel, it will bring profound transformation to China. So, do not lose heart—be filled with faith, trusting that God will use us to accomplish His will.



# How Can We Shepherd the New Generation with Increasing “Heart Sickness”?

Grace



**Editor’s Note:** The current new generation is facing unprecedented psychological challenges. How should the church, as a spiritual home, respond to these deep needs? This article explores the causes of the new generation’s mental health problems, helping us understand the predicaments young people face, challenging us to care for them with the eyes of Christ, and providing shepherding guidance from the perspective of faith.

After obtaining a doctorate in psychology, Grace, the author of this article, pursued further studies at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, earning a Master’s degree in Biblical Counseling. She is currently a licensed counselor in Pennsylvania. She has served for many years in the biblical counseling ministry of her home church in Pennsylvania. She actively participates in counseling and shepherding work in Chinese churches across various regions. Combining her professional background in biblical counseling and psychology, Grace hopes to offer a perspective from biblical counseling to help the church provide more holistic care and support in the shepherding process. We hope this article can spark reflection, helping the church reconsider how to shepherd the new generation with “heart sickness,” and may the church continuously renew herself.



**A** was sexually abused by a relative in childhood and was later diagnosed with schizophrenia<sup>1</sup>. Sometimes, she is violent toward other people. However, she has received long-term and comprehensive care from the church. She enjoys her fellowship and appreciates the pastor's guidance on matters of faith.

**C** is an outgoing leader of the young adult fellowship. He is caring and loyal but tends to be forgetful and has difficulty concentrating. He often feels targeted by others, leading to anger and conflicts with co-workers.

**E** is a high school youth at a church school. Due to domestic violence issues, his parents are contemplating divorce, division of property, and child custody. Every time when the school or the church contacts his parents, E gets beaten after he returns home. He rarely talks at school and exhibits behavioral problems.

**G** grew up in the church and continued attending a church near his university. However, after sharing his struggles with gender dysphoria<sup>2</sup> with a co-worker, others did not know how to continue interacting with him. Gradually, G felt that everyone was talking behind his back. He even experienced

panic attacks at church, fearing being attacked.

The young people in these examples may be among us. They could be believers, seekers, or those who waver between faith and doubt.

### **Why Is There a Trend of Increasing “Heart Sickness” Among the New Generation?**

According to a 2021 report by the World Health Organization, about 13% of adolescents aged 10-19 globally have mental health disorders. This represents an increase of over 12% compared to ten years ago. Among those aged 15-29, suicide ranks as the fourth leading cause of death.

Many often wonder if our way of life today is much more convenient, given the ever-increasing material abundance and ever-advancing technology, so why aren't people happier? People often say: “Back in the day, our lives were much tougher! Compared to then, today's kids are pampered.” Then, why are more of our younger generation experiencing “mental illness?”

With advancements in behavioral sciences, the classification of mental illnesses has become more precise. Today, the fifth

1. Schizophrenia is a chronic mental illness with complex causes. Patients experience issues with thinking, perception, emotions, and behavior, potentially exhibiting delusions, hallucinations, disordered thoughts and speech, and an inability to correctly judge external stimuli, thus affecting daily life functions.

2. Gender dysphoria refers to the distress and discomfort a person feels due to a mismatch between their gender identity and the physical sex characteristics they were born with.

edition of the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM-5) records nearly 300 disorders, whereas the second edition in 1968 listed almost 200. Disorders that were previously grouped together now have distinct labels and descriptions. As mental illnesses become more widely recognized and the number of professionals increases, the number of clinical diagnoses increases correspondingly.

Moreover, the younger generation has their unique stressors and risk factors. Adolescence and early adulthood are peak times for the onset of mental illnesses, which may result from the interaction between genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and individual-specific risk factors.

**1. Genetic Predisposition**—Many mental illnesses are influenced by genetic factors. Unhealthy behavioral patterns can also affect genetic variations in the next generation. No one’s genetic makeup is perfect, but genetic factors do not entirely determine the onset of diseases.

**2. Environmental Factors**—It often takes environmental stimuli to trigger genetic influence on human behavior.

**1) Starting from the prenatal environment.** There are many potential teratogens (environmental pollution, harmful diets, drugs, and prolonged high stress can all affect fetal development).

**2) Personally experienced or witnessed traumatic events**—such as domestic violence, peer bullying, cyberbullying, and PUA [pick-up artist manipulation]—all cause wounds to

the soul. Increased population mobility, the absence of one or both parents, loss of family or friends, and the challenges of adapting after relocation or immigration can also lead to traumatic stress. Additionally, media reports of natural disasters and human-made calamities worldwide can cast a shadow of fear over some young souls, even if these events may not happen in their physical vicinity.

**3) Pressure from Social Competition**—Unequal distribution of resources and social comparisons can create stress. The internet has significantly broadened the scope and increased the intensity of social competition. Even highly accomplished young people may suffer significant setbacks due to shortcomings in certain areas.

**4) Tendency Toward Social Isolation**—More people have realized that they can complete all necessary work and life duties without face-to-face interaction for days. The digital age makes it easier for young people to engage in less social interaction and less physical activity, which may lead to unhealthy lifestyles and even various addictive behaviors. Social separation may lead to heightened loneliness as young people miss social support and understanding.

**5) Culturally Related Risk Factors**—Social culture has deep structures that subtly shape people’s thinking and behavior patterns. For example, Confucian ideals in traditional Chinese culture emphasize self-restraint and propriety, defining individuals through relationships with others, which can limit young people’s exploration of personal



growth. Chinese Legalist ideals emphasize the flaws of human nature and, therefore, the importance of external constraints. This is reflected in parental and teacher authority (including corporal punishment, public humiliation, strict control over time and activities, and pressure to marry). Meanwhile, modern Western cultural trends may exalt excessive individualism and introspection. They sometimes advocate for personal feelings as the ultimate criteria for self-identity, demanding that societal norms be reconstructed accordingly. These influences may make young people acutely aware of the tension between self-expression and societal pressure.

### 3. Individual Risk Factors—

Individuals are not merely passive recipients and outcomes of genetic and environmental factors. For instance, the cultural element of “saving face” may affect people differently. Some people may avoid seeking medical help due to a desire to hide their illness or to avoid exposing family problems. This may lead to delays in treatment, worsening conditions, or complications. However, more and more people no longer view mental illness as a personal stain or family disgrace. Many public figures even openly share their struggles to help others.



## How Can We Shepherd the New Generation with Increasing “Heart Sickness”?

### 1. Viewing Them Holistically from God’s Perspective

People with “heart sickness” may not always appear lovable on the surface. When facing stress, they might resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as avoidance, aggression, numbness, people-pleasing, or addiction, which can harm themselves and others. Young people are also easily labeled as “immature” or “abnormal,” leading to them being marginalized, mocked, and isolated.

As parents, teachers or pastors, when we sow seeds and water them, do we choose them based on our perspective? Are we worried that investing time in nurturing these young people might yield little result? If so, perhaps we need to adjust our perspective. We should not select whom to serve based on our human judgment but view them holistically from God’s perspective.

First, be willing to invest time and energy to understand the specific suffering person before us. Jesus incarnated in a “specific” body to enter our world, seeing and hearing our struggles and pains. The Holy Spirit explicitly applies Jesus’ salvation to our hearts, guiding us toward sanctification in our daily lives. Therefore, we should also have the heart of Christ, learning to enter their world and empathize with their specific suffering. Understand their particular diagnosis, symptoms, medical history, and medication

situation. Obtain relevant knowledge of specific illnesses to understand how they may affect their body, mind, life, and work (for example, depression may manifest differently in different individuals).

Second, understand their struggles from the “heart.” Look beyond their prickly exterior to understand their deep inner motivations, desires, fears, and objects of worship. Encourage them to accept the gospel at the heart level and find rest, help, and renewal in Christ.

Furthermore, see not only suffering and sin in them but also the image of God and God’s grace. If they already believe in Jesus, they are saints with the indwelling Holy Spirit, just like us. If they have not yet believed, we can still appreciate their unique talents and acknowledge God’s grace in them.

## **2. Reflect and Remove the Beam from Our Own Eyes**

Shepherding the new generation with increasing “heart sickness” might be our own form of suffering. In the face of such challenges, what are our fleshly reactions? Are we bound by negative emotions and behaviors such as avoidance, denial, catastrophizing and despair, hypersensitivity, defensive aggression, or bitterness?

Like Job’s friends, do we think suffering is solely due to sin, thus neglecting the bigger picture of redemptive history? Have we forgotten that the real enemy in our battles is the Devil? Do we end up condemning and attacking without offering encouragement

rooted in heavenly hope?

What is the foundation of our reliance? Is it reputation, achievements, relative comfort, or self-righteousness? Are our hearts at rest in Christ? Are we wearing the full armor of God and standing firm in the battle?

If we have authority in relationships with a power structure (such as parents, pastors, or leaders), do we sometimes misuse our authority out of our flesh? Do we intentionally or unintentionally ignore their needs, causing harm or retraumatization?

Do we genuinely love these young people with “heart sickness”? Lord, do we know that You love us? Are we “loving” them too much by excessively pleasing them and compromising on truth? Are they idolizing us, leading to unhealthy dependency on authority?

Are we living out Jesus’ message, methods, and character to be His ambassadors? May the Lord teach us to trust and obey His promises and guidance so that we can find hope, grace, and strength in Christ amidst challenges.

## **3. Living Out the Church of Christ**

When shepherding the new generation with increasing “heart sickness”, our focus should not be limited to cultural shifts or the new characteristics of the flock, because God’s will transcends culture. Our goal is to return to Jesus’ objective: the unity of individual souls with Jesus and the unity of the church in Christ which bears witness to Christ in the world in diversity and love (1 Corinthians 12-14).





Firstly, we ourselves must rest in the gospel and establish a Christ-centered church culture in grace. Sometimes, our examples can influence young people more than our words. Jesus has justified us by faith, making us children of God. His precious blood is sufficient to cover all our weaknesses and guilt. God's power is made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Are we afraid to expose our weaknesses, differences, and struggles in the church? Are we afraid to let others know we need help? Are we persistent in prayer? Are we willing to learn, grow, and seek help from others instead of relying solely on ourselves?

When using God's Word, is our purpose to argue and win, or to pursue peace? Is it to condemn or to lovingly exhort? Is our attitude one of anger and anxiety, or one of gratitude and forgiveness? Are we conveying a church culture of grace to the young generation?

Secondly, guide young people to unite with Christ. Broaden their horizons and lead them to see beyond various stressors.

Encourage them to witness the vastness of God's creation, the unfolding of God's promises in the redemptive history, and the power of the gospel of Jesus. Guide them to reflect on their various reactions and behavioral patterns, to see the wonder of God's creation in us, to understand the impact of the Fall on our body, mind, spirit, and human society, and to recognize the deep motivations and battles within our hearts. Lead them to trust in Jesus' great love, that He sacrificed Himself to be our friend, and that we can always seek help from God in prayer. Guide them to be confident in their identity in Christ, to put on the full armor of God in adversity and battle without fear.

Furthermore, respect differences and find unity in diversity. Respect their differences. Some physical and mental characteristics may take time to heal and grow, or they may remain lifelong characteristics (e.g. such as the insistence on routine processes in some of those with autism spectrum disorder). We do not need to excessively control or





enforce uniformity. Instead, we can encourage and learn to respect each other's needs and listen to each other's appeals within the church community. As we humbly seek justice, mercy, and love sincerely in grace and truth, we may learn to appreciate and collaborate with one another.

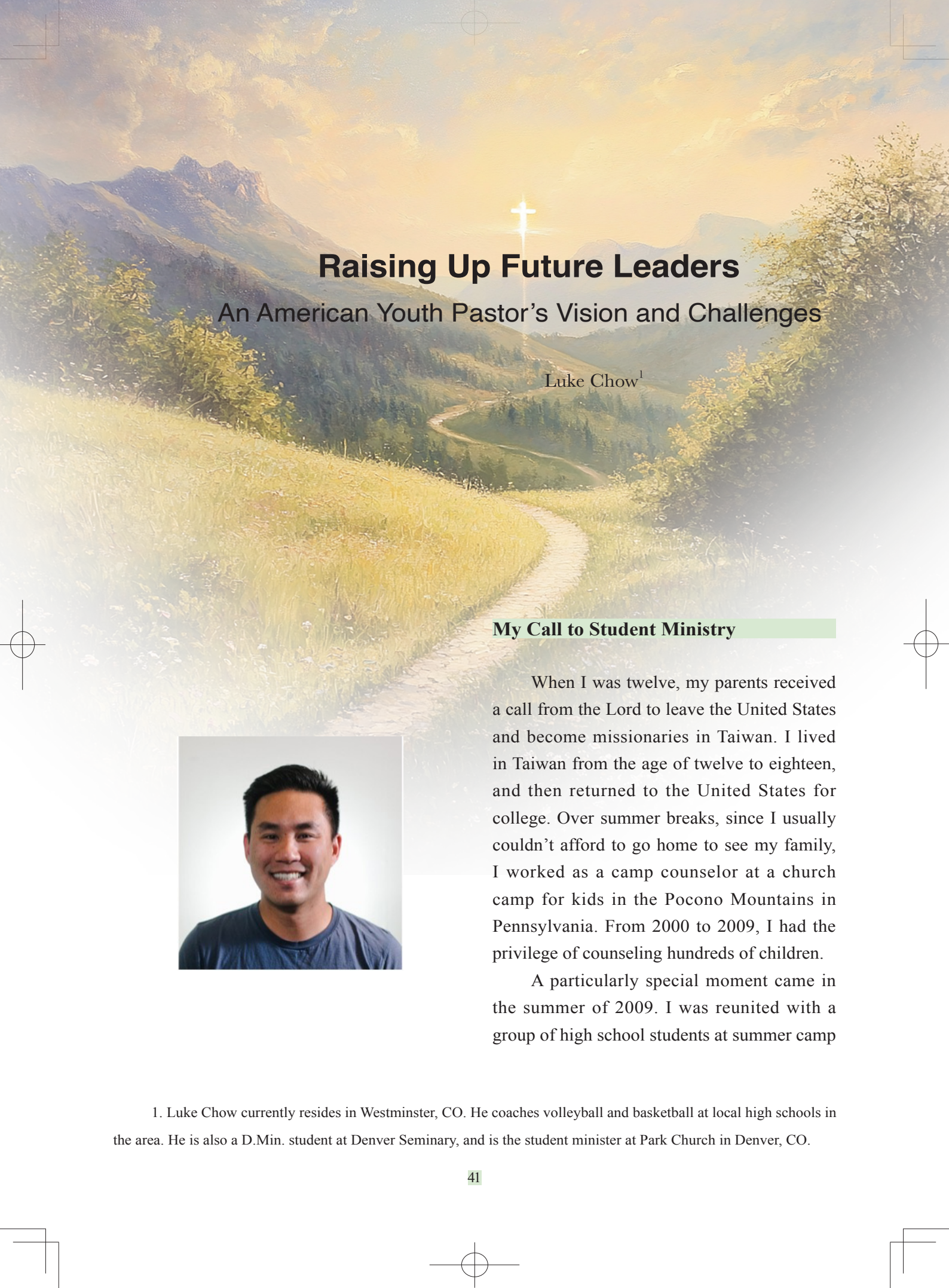
Finally, build the church family of Christ in love, helping to replace and transform the risk factors young people face while providing stable long-term support for them. For example, the young person with schizophrenia mentioned at the beginning of this article found long-term, comprehensive care in the church. Not only did the church refer her to a reliable psychiatrist and a biblical counseling organization, but the fellowship also became her second family. This year, she has grown significantly in her understanding of the gospel and trust in Christ and has already started attending baptism classes.

## **Conclusion**

Before God, we are all afflicted. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He approached and touched to heal all kinds of sick people, including those who seemed hopeless.

May we all see the great physician Jesus, receive grace, and be healed. May we also become the church of Jesus, embodying His Heavenly Kingdom message, methods, and character. May more young people of the new generation be united to Christ, be rooted and built up in Him, and find a home and grow in His church.





# Raising Up Future Leaders

## An American Youth Pastor's Vision and Challenges

Luke Chow<sup>1</sup>

### My Call to Student Ministry



When I was twelve, my parents received a call from the Lord to leave the United States and become missionaries in Taiwan. I lived in Taiwan from the age of twelve to eighteen, and then returned to the United States for college. Over summer breaks, since I usually couldn't afford to go home to see my family, I worked as a camp counselor at a church camp for kids in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania. From 2000 to 2009, I had the privilege of counseling hundreds of children.

A particularly special moment came in the summer of 2009. I was reunited with a group of high school students at summer camp

1. Luke Chow currently resides in Westminster, CO. He coaches volleyball and basketball at local high schools in the area. He is also a D.Min. student at Denver Seminary, and is the student minister at Park Church in Denver, CO.



whom I had counseled years earlier when they were in second grade. They were now juniors and seniors in high school. Although I only saw them once a year during summer, the connections I formed with them over the years through Bible studies, chapel times, campfire conversations, and games were profoundly impactful. It was clear to me that I was fulfilling God's calling on my life: I was gifted in working with students, and I also found myself loving them as if they were my own. To this day, I still connect with them. In fact, in about two months, I will be officiating one of their weddings!

That experience, among many others, solidified my sense of purpose. That year, I began my seminary studies, and four years later, I became a youth pastor.

### **My Vision of Raising up Future Leaders**

Over the past decade of youth ministry, I have come to believe that this generation of young people is the most gifted, talented, and called generation of believers in the history of the world. They seem to already have an intuitive, supernatural understanding of the things of God. For example, I recall teaching a baptism class a couple of years ago, during which we encountered a challenging passage in the book of 1 John. It was a difficult text, and I never really understood it until one of my professors explained it to me in seminary. However, before I even began explaining it to my students, one kid raised his hand and said, "I think this passage means this..." He then began to explain the passage better than what I





had written in my notes. I was stunned! What he said was entirely accurate, even though he had never read the book of 1 John before.

This is not an isolated incident; I have witnessed many students displaying a supernatural understanding of God's Word and His nature. It may sound unbelievable, but I have come to the conclusion that God has called this generation of children to lead the church in unprecedented ways. As the future leaders of the church, they will break down barriers and approach ministry differently, and I believe much better than we have.

This perspective has profoundly shaped my vision for student ministry: student ministry isn't just glorified babysitting, where we teach kids Bible stories. Student ministry is the training and raising up of a generation

of leaders whom the Lord has called to break the back of darkness. I am genuinely excited about passing the torch to these kids and cannot wait to see them become the future leaders, ministers, missionaries and pastors who will accomplish incredible things for the Kingdom in ways the world has never seen.

### **Discipleship: The Essential Way to Raise up Future Leaders**

The goal of raising up future leaders has shaped the way I do youth ministry. In light of 1 Corinthians 11:1— "imitate me as I imitate Christ," where Paul emphasizes the importance of following Jesus through the example of others, I am convinced that discipleship is the essential way to help



young people develop the character and skills they need for Christian leadership. With this conviction, in 2021, I left a megachurch in Southern California where I had served as a high school minister for several years. The church focused on creating spectacular events featuring incredible worship, great music, exciting speakers, and impressive laser lights and fog machines. While I enjoyed serving students in this vibrant environment, I began to notice a concerning trend: due to our eagerness to entertain rather than to disciple, approximately 70-75% of students walked away from their faith after graduating from high school.

I left the megachurch to become the student minister at Park Church in Denver, Colorado. I was the church's first youth

pastor. When I first started in 2021, we had only about a dozen students; today, in 2025, there are about fifty students. However, I came here because I was granted the authority to implement a discipleship program that cultivates a culture of genuine discipleship and mentorship. While we still value and enjoy big, flashy events, the core of our ministry is much more relational than event-driven. Our discipleship program emphasizes the development of authentic, sustainable faith rather than merely creating an entertaining youth group experience. We still host exciting events such as summer camps, winter camps, and mission trips, yet one-on-one and small-group discipleship are always at the core of everything we do.





Our adult leaders begin discipling students when they are still quite young—in sixth and seventh grade. The goal is to establish discipleship as a normative experience. Many kids today, once they reach high school, tend to think: “My parents are out of touch; the only people who understand me are my peers.” As a result, they often seek counsel from their friends, who don’t always provide the best wisdom or advice. Our goal is to instill the habit of seeking guidance from trusted adults early on.

In those early years, particularly in sixth and seventh grade, discipleship often looks like sharing ice cream, hanging out at coffee shops, and simply enjoying each other’s company. The first couple of years are primarily about building relationships and establishing rapport, trust, and friendship. This foundation is crucial as it sets the stage for deeper conversations later on. At this early stage, it is essential to have 100% support from the parents, as they still have complete control over their children’s schedules. From the very beginning, I communicate to parents that as their children transition from fifth grade to sixth grade—leaving Park Kids and entering Park Students—they are entering a new phase of their spiritual journey. Therefore, parental support is critical for this to be effective. I emphasize to them that our leaders will be connecting with the kids for one-on-one discipleship, which we believe will help foster a lasting faith—one that goes beyond simply enjoying youth group because it is fun. At the same time, I encourage parents

to discuss our discipleship program with their children in a way that empowers them. We want our students to feel like they are deciding to get discipled so that they may take ownership of their faith and commit to the program voluntarily, not because their parents require them to do so.

By the time they reach eighth or ninth grade, discipleship meetings tend to get a little more serious. At this point, we start suggesting more structured studies, such as exploring a specific book of the Bible. Based on our previous interactions over the last couple of years, we generally have a good sense of what they might be struggling with and how they can grow. Often, our mentor team collaborate to develop a tailored curriculum that meets the individual needs of each student.

While we have standardized curricula for small-group and large-group gatherings, discipleship is highly personalized. For example, if a student is having difficulty relating to their parents, we might choose a book that addresses that issue. Throughout our studies, we also encourage direct engagement with scripture. We might say, “Let’s dive into the Gospel of Mark together,” reading and discussing a chapter at a time.

By the time these students reach their junior and senior years—around 16 to 18 years old—one-on-one discipleship has become a regular part of their lives. They are not only engaging with Scripture but also exploring theological concepts together. At this age, they are in the midst of what sociologists call the “second individuation process,” in

which they are owning their beliefs and values independent of their childhood influences. At this stage, discipleship conversations often revolve around larger questions, such as where they should attend college, what they should study, who they should date and marry, and the like.

To be sure, discipleship is not merely about participating in Wednesday youth group gatherings or Sunday church services once a week. My inspiration comes from Jesus' approach to discipleship with his twelve disciples. Indeed, Jesus had classroom-like teaching moments, such as the feeding of the 5,000 and the Sermon on the Mount, among many others recorded throughout the Gospels. These moments were all significant and impactful. But Jesus's focus was never on the crowd: he would always disperse them after he was done! Instead, his focus was on the twelve: they lived in constant connection and communication with him. They followed him everywhere, sharing life with him in a way that was intimate and ongoing. I often wonder about the hundreds of campfire and dinnertime conversations they had together that weren't recorded in the Scripture. I would argue that this is the true heart of discipleship: being incarnational. It is walking together in faith, learning by example, and growing through shared life together. It resonates with my summer camp experiences years ago when we were constantly in community together.

This is what we aim to model: discipleship as a way of life, not just occasional events. We hope that the students

not only see me and my team walking with Jesus while at youth group on Wednesdays but also witness how we walk with Him outside of that context. We enter our students' lives by attending their extracurricular events like sporting events, recitals, and plays. But we also welcome them into our everyday lives as well. For example, one of my leaders recently had a baby, and she has been inviting kids over regularly to meet the baby, help babysit, and simply hang out with her and her four-month-old. It is a huge time commitment, but it reflects the model Jesus set: discipleship through close, consistent proximity. It is about apprenticeship: walking together for the long haul and being present in each other's lives.

We strive to embody the example set by Jesus, embracing an incarnational model of ministry. In a sense, we are called to be the presence of Jesus among those we serve. This commitment can be challenging. For instance, I might receive a phone call at midnight from a parent in distress, asking for help because their child is in the hospital. In those moments, I respond without hesitation, recognizing that true discipleship often disrupts our lives. If I were to compartmentalize my life, these disruptions would feel overwhelming. Yet, I believe that this is the model Jesus set forth for us: one of incarnational ministry, where we are fully present in the lives of others.

### **Challenges to Raise up Future Leaders**

I would argue that several challenges face the youth ministry today.



### Competitive Force of Idols

The first is the competitive force of idols. Many of my students here in America sacrifice the things of God on the altar of athletics. My students frequently say: “Sorry, I can’t come to church because I have club volleyball,” or “I won’t be able to attend youth group on Wednesdays because I have basketball practice.” Busy schedules leave little room for discipleship, with extracurricular activities filling their every waking moment. Today’s kids are often overwhelmed with numerous commitments, leaving them too busy for God.

Battling against the idols of this world requires the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. When students are constantly tempted to believe that worldly things are superior, my prayer is that these idols ultimately let them down. I pray that they may experience what the Prodigal Son experienced in Luke 15, that they encounter the brokenness within these worldly structures. If basketball becomes a student’s idol, I ask the Lord to intervene and show them that he is greater than basketball. Just as the Prodigal Son wished he could eat the pods he was feeding to the pigs, I hope that my students also remember that their Father’s house was better, which would cause them to come to their senses and turn to Jesus.

This is the positive side of our mission: to create opportunities for students to recognize that what we offer is not only valuable but also more enjoyable and enriching. While playing basketball is great, it pales in comparison to walking with Jesus. I also aim to show them that the friendships they cultivate in the youth

group are deeper, healthier, and more fulfilling than those with their secular friends at school. However, the reality is that their everyday lives are often spent in public schools and environments that are not very healthy. The world they live in is filled with distractions that pull them away from God. My constant prayer is: “Lord, please protect them and help them see that Jesus is better than everything else.”

### Influence of Parents

The second challenge is the influence of parents. Children tend to mirror their parents’ enthusiasm; they will be about 50% as excited about something as their parents are. For example, if parents are passionate fans of the Philadelphia Eagles, their children are likely to share that enthusiasm. If parents prioritize academics, their children will feel compelled to do the same. The same applies to athletics and other pursuits. I have observed that when it comes to church attendance, if parents attend church 50% of the time, their children may only attend 25% of the time or less. Parents often believe that attending church two or three times a month is commendable, thinking: “I’m at church 50% to 75% of the time! That’s a lot!” However, what they may not realize is that their children are observing their actions. When kids see their parents being only somewhat serious about church, they may conclude that attending church once a month—or even once every six to eight weeks—is sufficient.

Parents sometimes unintentionally set

precedents for their children through their own behaviors and values. It's interesting to note that young people from non-Christian homes can often be more serious about their faith than those from Christian families who attend church sporadically. This dynamic highlights how parental attitudes can significantly impact a child's spiritual development.

Faced with this challenge, my approach begins with building good relationships with parents. For children from non-believing homes, I strive to come alongside their parents and be friendly. I ask about their children, share how impressive they are, and express what a blessing they've been. I often ask, "Have you noticed any changes in your child's life?" Parents might respond with observations like: "Yes, our child is different now. He's washing the dishes without being asked and doing his chores. He gets upset but then apologizes afterwards." Interestingly, it's often the child who brings their parents to church, leading them to faith through their own transformation. I've witnessed this happen multiple times.

Sadly, I have also observed that the hardest group to minister to are prideful Christian parents who think they are setting a good example for their kids but actually are not. These are the parents who go to church most of the time and assume that they are doing great with their faith, so undoubtedly their kids will do great too. Nevertheless, many parents are unaware of the gaps in their own daily walk of faith. Ministering to these families is a delicate

process because you can't openly criticize them, even if their approach to faith is flawed. You have to handle it with grace, love, and patience. Of course, if there's direct sin or abuse involved, that's a completely different situation requiring intervention. In most situations, we can only pray for the parents and maintain positive relationships with them so that we can continue to engage with their children. We must trust that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of both parents and students. However, the good news is that in these situations, something interesting usually happens around the student's junior or senior year of high school. The students start to notice an incongruence between how their parents practice their faith and what Scripture teaches. This realization forces them to wrestle with an important question: "Am I going to simply copy my parents' faith, or will I take ownership of my own faith and walk with Jesus in a way that's authentic to me?"

### **Numbers and Attendance**

The third challenge is that the American church often makes numbers and attendance its metrics of success while neglecting long-term discipleship. We often celebrate numbers—"Look, there are 700 kids in the youth group! We must be doing a great job." But for me, the numbers don't matter. The bigger question is: how many of those kids will continue walking with Jesus after they graduate? I would argue that the lack of effective discipleship in student ministry is a primary reason why 70% of millennials and



Gen Z leave the church after graduation. The responsibility for this trend lies more with us, the church, than with the youth themselves. We have built our foundations on sand, and when challenges arise (like COVID-19), everything collapses because we haven't built our ministries on the rock of Jesus' life and ministry.

### Church Organizational Structure

The fourth challenge is the organizational structure of the American church, specifically regarding the place of the youth pastor. Although I've been a full-time youth pastor for 12 years, my role is still viewed as an entry-level, junior position. The youth pastor is not considered a "real" pastor. The reality is that most youth pastors don't actually want to be youth pastors; they see the job as a stepping stone. Most seminary graduates want to be lead pastors or teaching pastors, but since the youth pastor is the church's entry-level position, they take the job for just a few years while they wait for their opportunity to "level up." The average tenure of a youth pastor is just 18 months. That means that, on average, a student will have five youth pastors from the ages of 12 to 18. What are we communicating to kids when their spiritual role models abandon them every 18 months? This is a systemic problem that has become the norm. When discussing youth who walk away from

the faith, we must consider the possibility that the reason they are leaving is that they haven't had consistent Christian mentors during the most formative years of their lives. To many youth group students in America, their youth pastors seem more concerned with career advancement than with their well-being.

### Conclusion

Adolescence is the most pivotal time in a person's life. Studies show that 80% of a person's values are formed and solidified by the time they reach eighth grade. I recognize that changing our current ecclesiological systems will be incredibly difficult, especially since they have been ingrained in our church culture for decades. However, if we truly want to invest in the church of tomorrow, we will need to begin making systemic changes today. My prayer is that the church will not only recognize the need for effective student ministry but also have the courage to revolutionize its current ecclesiological systems. I believe that if church leaders are willing to change, innovate, and effectively contextualize their ministries for the sake of their students, the next generation of youth will not just be a "remnant" but will instead revolutionize the church and do things the world has never seen.

## Call for Articles—*Gospel! Culture! Kingdom!*

### I. Purpose

This non-periodical journal primarily explores strategies and methods for implementing the "Threefold Vision" in Chinese and global churches. We welcome submissions from:

- Church leaders both within and outside of China
- Missionaries with first-hand experiences in missions to China
- Researchers
- Theological educators
- Pastors
- Missionaries sent abroad by Chinese churches
- Business professionals engaging in missions

If you are a believer with meaningful insights into the "Threefold Vision," we also warmly welcome your contributions.

### II. Content Solicited

***Evangelization of China:*** We welcome multi-faceted research on the lives and spiritual condition of the Chinese people, especially regarding:

- Their mental states
- Collective consciousness
- Spiritual traumas

We aim to explore how to deepen evangelism, moving from external social aspects to biblical inner healing and renewal.

***Kingdomization of Church:*** We encourage the exchange of experiences, challenges, and the exploration of diverse ministries from both churches within China and global churches, including:

- Pastoral care
- Missions
- Theological education

***Christianization of Culture:*** Our aim is to distinguish the nuanced, but fundamental differences between:

- Christianization of Chinese culture
- Sinicization of Christianity

We invite reflection on how traditional Chinese and Communist cultures influence churches in China, and through this reflection, we seek biblical pathways for cultural reconstruction and



spiritual renewal.

We look forward to your contributions.

### III. Article Requirements

**1. No Simultaneous Submissions:** Submissions must be original, unpublished work that has not been submitted elsewhere for publication, either in part or in full.

**2. Language and Length:** Articles should be written in either Chinese or English, with a maximum length of 5,000 words.

**3. Submission Format:** Please submit an electronic file in Word format (.doc or .docx). Include the title of the article in English, the author's name in English, and a brief author biography.

**4. Writing Style:** Please adhere to the journal's "Writing Guidelines" for formatting and style.

**5. Translation and Online Publication:** This journal is published bilingually in Chinese and English. Unless the author provides both the Chinese and English versions of the article, the author grants the journal the right to translate the work into the other language. In order to broadly promote the "Threefold Vision," the journal offers online access to its content. If you do not want your work to be available online for readers to download, please inform the journal in advance.

**6. Copyright Responsibility:** Writers are solely responsible for obtaining any necessary permission for copyrighted material used in their articles, including but not limited to figures, tables, and lengthy quotations. The journal is not liable for any copyright infringement issues arising from published articles. Any plagiarism, reproduction of others' work, or other infringement of intellectual property rights is the sole responsibility of the author.

**7. Copyright and Reprint Permissions:** Accepted articles will receive a modest honorarium. While the authors retain their moral rights, the journal holds the copyrights to published works. Any future reproduction, republication, translation, or other use of the published work, except for the author's personal compilation of their own works, requires prior written permission from the journal.

**8. Article Submission:** Please submit all articles to [journal@chinaministriesinternational.org](mailto:journal@chinaministriesinternational.org).

## Writing Format Guidelines of *Gospel! Culture! Kingdom!*

1. Numbers, English texts, and symbols should be in Times New Roman font.
2. English book titles should be italicized, and single article titles should be enclosed in quotation marks (“ ”).
3. The headings in the article use I. A. 1. a. in order.
4. Font sizes are as follows:
  - \* Article title: 20 pt
  - \* Author's name (usually the same size as the medium heading): 14pt
  - \* Large heading: 16 pt
  - \* Medium heading: 14 pt
  - \* Small heading: 12 pt (If a fourth level is needed, bold the small heading; if not bolded, it can be used again for the next level).
  - \* Body text: 11 pt
  - \* Footnotes: 10 pt
5. For paragraph spacing, use single line spacing and increase the spacing before and after paragraphs. Do not use blank lines between paragraphs.
6. Scripture quotations should list their Bible version. For example: “*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*” (1 Cor. 15:55; ESV)



## From Our Readers

### Feedback from a Sunday school teacher in Toronto, Canada:

I was deeply moved while reading your interview with Dr. James Houston, the spiritual mentor over one hundred years old. Every sentence spoke to me directly and expressed exactly what I wanted to hear. It is rare to find such a moving interview, whether online or in print in Christian publications. I absolutely love this interview!

What moved me even more is that this eminent theologian radiates the authenticity of Christian life! His spiritual vitality, profound thinking, sharp discernment of reality and history, and distinguished spiritual insights are all worthy of our admiration and imitation.

I particularly love the conversational and impromptu style of this interview. It feels like a gentle stream of storytelling, rather than a lengthy theoretical essay. Many precious insights flow like a gentle stream, quietly quenching thirst and nourishing hearts.

This article addresses many of the critical issues facing churches today, such as the “wilderness of language,” singing hymns without engaging hearts, and the distinction between “being church” and “doing church.” These insights call us back to the right path.

What resonated with me most was that theology has thoroughly become purely theoretical. I’ve felt this most acutely in my study and interpretation of Scripture. In recent years, I have made efforts to counter this tendency. For instance, when I mentor those preparing to lead Bible studies or teach Sunday school, I always remind them that we must move beyond rigid theoretical “theology”! Everyone must encounter God’s words directly to experience their life-changing power. If God’s words have not come alive in your heart, you cannot possibly bring out the power of the gospel in preaching or teaching. What we proclaim must be the Jesus revealed in the Bible, not the one we imagine or define by theological terms. Thank God—this interview has further strengthened my conviction on this.

### Feedback from a pastor in Philadelphia:

The journal is beautifully designed and deeply insightful. Great job! I have read through the first three articles and found them immensely helpful. I even felt the need to read them several times to digest and absorb them fully. After reading, I gained a deeper understanding of Rev. Jonathan Chao’s Three-Fold Vision. He was truly a great servant of God. It is a pity I had so little time to get to know him.

I have not carefully read the remaining three articles yet, but I really enjoyed the article in interview format with Dr. James Houston.

This is a high-quality Christian journal; maintaining such a high standard is no easy task—the content is incredibly rich and insightful. May God grant you and your co-workers strength. I’ll also pray for CMI’s needs and share this new e-journal with my church members.

### **From a Christian leader in China:**

Today I finished reading these four articles and was deeply moved and encouraged. In the first article, Rev. Chao's proactive response to God's calling is a great role model for me. The reminder in the second article is especially timely as the upcoming AI era approaches—"emotion" will play a key role in addressing AI as "the ultimate embodiment of rational intelligence." The third article is straightforward and genuinely presents the faith journey of the older generation of church leaders. The fourth article sets another beautiful example of a missionary filled with love and vision. The perspectives and structure of these four articles are all very grand, and the content is solid and rich. I greatly enjoyed and benefited from the journal and have shared it with my coworkers here.


### **From a pastor in China, particularly responding to the interview article with Dr. James Houston:**

Thank you for sharing the journal. I finished reading it and felt deeply grateful to hear the call of "being church". I remembered how I was suppressed and persecuted for many years for advocating for it. And now hearing someone making this call stirs up complex emotions in me. I have a deep love for the church, but it is mixed with fear, anxiety, and alienation. The brutal treatment I received in the church is no different from that in the outside world. That is somewhat ironic and frustrating.

Indeed, it could be fatally poisonous if Chinese culture kidnaps the Christian faith. That must be the tomb of the Pharisees that Jesus spoke of. The seminary from which I graduated has a spiritual formation course. The first assignment for incoming students in that class is to write about the "wounds" and "highlights" in their lives. The teacher would explain that the "wounds" may become burdens in your ministry, the "highlights" may reflect your gifts, and the two may merge. I can't remember the exact words, but that is the main idea.

I think God may allow something to happen and even use darkness to fulfill light. Lu Xun used to say that his generation could not do much, but they were willing to hold up the falling lock gate of darkness so that the next generation could enter the light. Although he did not accomplish the enlightenment mission and the critique of Chinese culture, his writings became popular again during the pandemic. Many used his words to critique our present age. Today, I am very grateful to read this article and believe that the new generation has started a new focus. This is hopeful. May the church become a place full of love. I am assured that "being church" instead of "doing church" is the right direction to press forward.





**Awake, awake,  
put on strength, O arm of the Lord;  
awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.  
(Isaiah 51:9; ESV)**