

Toward a Maturing Chinese Mission

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At the 2nd CCCOWE (Chinese Coordinating Committee on World Evangelization) Women's Missions Conference held in East Malaysia (June 2005), Dr Tan Chui Eng, academic dean of Biblical Seminary of the Philippines delivered her paper on "New Trends in Missions". In it, she highlighted the worldwide growth of Christianity in the Two-Thirds World, including Asia and, in particular, the growth of the Chinese churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. According to the updated data provided by Cyrus Lam of Go International for Enoch Wan's article (2003), the number of overseas Chinese churches globally (i.e. not including churches in China) had grown from about 4000 in the 70s to about 8780 churches today. Yet Chinese Christians should be cautioned against complacency as the huge task of evangelizing the Chinese around the world and in China is far from over.

There has been an increasing awareness and involvement in evangelization and cross-cultural missions among the Chinese churches in Asia. From being mission-receiving countries, these Asian nations have become mission-sending countries. Indigenous mission agencies have sprouted from multiple centres in Asia. In 1978, there were only 110 mission-minded churches out of 4000 churches. Presently, there are 1000 out of 8780 churches (Tan 2005). Johnstone and Mandryk (2001:749) estimate the Chinese churches in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan to have 1,000 missionaries sent from 100 indigenously-based mission agencies. Furthermore, there is a greater maturity in these churches' understanding of missions. Instead of seeing a dichotomy between evangelism (caring for the spiritual needs of a person) and social action (meeting the physical needs of a person), they have begun to view missions more holistically.

We note the tremendous growth of the Chinese church in size and missions involvement over the past two decades. But as Chinese Christian mission faces the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, we need to reflect on the following areas:

1. Recovery of the Great Commission
2. Role of the church in a world in conflict
3. Resurgence of Asian religions
4. Review of missionary preparation programs
5. Retention of missionaries: member care and development
6. Reinforcement of global partnerships

1. Recovery of the Great Commission

What did Christ mean when he said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20)? Certainly he did not mean just evangelism. "Making disciples involves much more than encouraging people to accept certain truths about God and to begin attending church. It involves a total transformation of the heart and life that involves a righteousness that impacts not only individuals but families, communities and nations" (Engel & Dyrness 2000:22).

Dr Song Minho, formerly a professor of missions at the Asian Theological Seminary, Manila, lamented that in the Philippines, evangelical churches are quick to adopt a discipleship program or a bible study series popularized in the West but unless these materials deal with the real struggles and issues of Filipino society, they are unable to teach Filipino Christians how to live out their faith contextually. One example he gave was the problem of corruption in the Philippines. Every sincere disciple of Christ ought to ask, "How can I stay pure from the temptation of corruption?" and "What can I do to cleanse this society from the stain of corruption?" (Song 2005). Evangelism coupled with effective discipleship results should result in social transformation.

Similarly, as Chinese Christians and missionaries, we ought to re-examine the way we do evangelism and missions. Dr Enoch Wan, Director of the Doctor of Missiology program at Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon, evaluated the conversion of Peoples Republic of China (PRC) Chinese (including recent emigrants) in the past decade. He concluded, "The rapid church growth among Chinese resulted in an extreme shortage of pastors/shepherds. This shortage is one of the reasons why new Chinese Christian movements worldwide are subject to cultic/heretical influences. 'Making disciples' is the mandate of the Great Commission; not 'converts' nor 'church members'. Discipleship of new Chinese converts is commonly a 'missing link' of mission outreach to the Chinese and one of the most critical mission challenges to the Christian church globally" (Wan 2003).

Numerical growth in our local churches and their involvement in missions is important. However, we need to take heed lest we become preoccupied with numerical growth and neglect the spiritual formation of our church members and our converts on the mission field – spiritual formation that "prepares God's people for works of service" (Eph 4:12) and teaches them "to obey everything" (Matt 28:20) in His word.

So we need to ask: How effective are our discipleship programs and materials, if present, for new believers in our local churches and on the mission field? Do these materials address specific sins and temptations faced by Christians in their respective local contexts? As one Christian leader from Africa complained, "You missionaries brought us Christ but never taught us how to live."

Disciple making is a process that must continue until Christ returns. In other words, until the Great Commission is properly conceived as a call to make disciples, it can never be fulfilled.

2. Role of the Church in a World in Conflict

The number of major conflicts between nations and ethnic groups rose dramatically from 10 in 1960 to 38 in 2000. These 38 conflicts affected almost 21 million people in 35 countries: 18 in Africa, 9 in Asia, 4 in the Middle East, 2 in Europe, and 2 in Latin America (Myers 2003:29). We can now add to these figures the multiple conflicts generated in the USA, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other places as a result of the terrorist attack in New York on September 11, 2001.

Ninety percent of the casualties in today's conflicts are civilians. Over 540 million children are estimated to live in unstable or violent conditions. 300,000 children have been conscripted as soldiers. The long-term effects of these traumatized young men and women as they become adults are unimaginable. These upheavals contribute to increasing numbers of internally displaced people and refugees (Myers 2003:29,78).

What is the role of the Chinese Church in this wounded and divided world? The answer is clear when we ask the popular question: What would Jesus do? He would do as he had done when he was on earth: teaching, preaching, and healing, with compassion for the harassed and helpless (Matt 9:35, 36). Furthermore, in John 17, his prayer for his disciples is not that the Father should disconnect them from the world, but that they may be one (a reconciled community), as the Father and Son are one, so that the world may know that God has sent his Son to love them.

The work and teachings of Jesus challenge us, His people, to be a healing and reconciling community in a wounded and divided world.

First of all, we need to have compassion in our evangelization and mission. "To discuss whether we should evangelize or promote social action is worthless. They go together. One without the other is evidence of a deficient Christian life. So we must not try to justify service for our neighbour by claiming that it will help us in our evangelism. God is equally interested in our service and in our evangelistic task" (Escobar 1972:98,100).

I was told that after the tsunami hit Aceh in December 2004, the churches in Jakarta responded immediately by sending aid and relief workers even before the government could get their act together. Although this was not a case of human conflict, it was a beautiful example of Christian compassion. Our Western brothers and sisters have also modelled the compassion of Jesus through their sacrificial service as humanitarian aid workers in dangerous war zones around the world.

Secondly, as Christ's ambassadors, we are to bring the message of God's reconciliation to the people of this world (2 Cor 5:18, 19). For Christ alone is our peace, who has "destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...He came and preached peace" (Eph 2:17). Theologians such as Vinoth Ramachandra (1999) and Miroslav Volf (1996) have articulated new ways of understanding mission as responses to the problem of racism, ethnic division and religious wars. Chinese churches can make significant contributions not only by crossing cultures, but by intentionally acting as bridge builders in the midst of racial and religious divisions. Do we match our concern for people's souls with equal concern for victims of social and political conflict in the world?

But in order to be trusted ambassadors and messengers, we need first to be reconciled to God (in a right relationship with God) and to one another (in complete unity) in Christ. News of Christians failing morally, churches splitting, and Christians taking one another to court is so common that we have become a laughingstock among non-Christians. Our witness has lost its credibility.

Moreover, as Christians we ought to watch our attitude towards other races. History has shown that a sense of ethnic superiority has often led to ethnic prejudices, then to ethnic hatred, and finally to ethnic conflicts. Chinese worldwide are known for their ethnocentrism and pride. In a very candid evaluation, Samuel Ling said, "...if we compare every nation and people in the world, how would the Chinese people rank in terms of ethnocentrism and pride? I dare to guess that we would be among the top ten" (Ling 1999:201). For Christ's sake, we hope that Chinese Christians have a better record.

3. Resurgence in Asian Religions

Despite 200 years of modern Protestant missionary work in Asia, missiologists agree that Christianity has not successfully penetrated the world of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and

traditional Chinese religion. In the 21st century, there remain about 1.2 billion Muslims, 811 million Hindus, largely in India, and 784 million people who are Buddhists or who practice Chinese traditional religion (Myers 2003:24). Graduate programs in Asian religions have mushroomed in most secular universities and Asian study centres. Chinese Christian missions should seek to benefit from these studies on Asian religions and cultures in order to understand the underlying belief systems and worldviews of the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Chinese folk religionists. This would better equip us to engage with them in street-level evangelism, family-kinship approaches, cultural interaction and worldview encounter. My brother-in-law is a learned Buddhist monk. Whenever we meet, I always feel inadequate talking about religious beliefs; so we never do.

Chinese churches need to produce a new generation of scholars who are well-grounded in biblical texts and trained in ancient Chinese philosophies and literatures. Past approaches that dismiss these Chinese religions as demonic and superstitious have not helped us to challenge their underlying belief systems. For example, we have yet to produce a substantive theology of ancestral worship, or an integrated view of filial piety. We need experts in Islam, in Buddhism, in Secularism and Post-modernism who are able to articulate, in the Chinese language, apologetic material that addresses the specific issues faced by Chinese churches reaching out to Asian religious adherents.

4. Review of Missionary Preparation Program

As we note the Chinese churches' increasing involvement in cross-cultural worldwide missions, we also need to recognize that few Asian missionaries have served for more than 20 years. Due to poor preparation and lack of training, a large number of missionaries do not continue after their first term; some even leave after one or two years (Loong 1998:55).

The WEA Missions Commission launched two comprehensive studies, one in 1994-1996, ReMap I (Taylor 1997), concentrating mainly on personal reasons leading to missionary attrition (premature return) and a second in 2003, ReMap II (Bloecher 2004:12), focusing on missionary retention (what keeps them in ministry) and agency practices (organizational factors that contribute to this). It is interesting to note that in both studies, the adequacy of pre-field training, effectiveness of on-field orientation and language learning for new missionaries, seem to be some of the major factors affecting attrition and retention. What is certain is that Asian missionary movements need to pay serious attention to the issue of missionary training.

Pre-field training

In Asian countries, pre-field training is generally short in duration (1-3 months) and inadequate in coverage. For example, among Hong Kong missionaries, formal academic missiological training averages 0.24 years, practical pre-field missionary training averages 0.19 years, and structured cross-cultural missionary internship or apprenticeship averages 0.16 years (Hung 2004:63).

We do not have many established Chinese models for pre-field training. One good model I personally experienced was the Cross Cultural Training course conducted by Dr Titus and Helen Loong under the Hong Kong Association of Christian Mission. This was a four-week community living program with a holistic approach. Classroom lectures were combined with group dynamics activities and field visits. Informal counselling and mentoring by the trainers were most helpful to the trainees, addressing their deeper spiritual needs. Chinese missionaries who were invited to share and mingle with the trainees served as their role

models. All the trainers were Chinese, as Dr Loong believed Chinese trainers would understand the needs and challenges unique to the Chinese trainees. However, he thought it ideal to have at least one trainer or a couple from another culture to explain their feelings about the Chinese culture. This would increase self-awareness of the trainees in the cross-cultural context (Loong 1998:59).

This holistic model has been expanded to a three-month program as offered in the Asian Cross Cultural Training Institute in Singapore. The Singapore Discipleship Training Centre's April 2005 newsletter stated that the Centre was considering the possibility of shifting their focus from general theological education to theological education geared towards cross-cultural missions. In addition, the Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang, Malaysia, is planning to offer a doctoral program in missiology (D.Miss). All these are encouraging developments that will better equip Asian missionaries. I believe that, ultimately, a balanced approach that integrates both mission theory and practical missionary training would be ideal for preparing Asian missionaries effectively.

Although we still have much to learn from our Western colleagues in this area, we need to put more effort into designing programs and using materials suitable for Asian missionaries. As a new and significant mission force from China emerges (an estimated 100,000 house church Christians), there is an urgent need to consider how best to prepare them for the task. Presently, there is a lack of critical resources even for leadership training, let alone resources for missionary training. We often speak about contextualizing the gospel. Perhaps it is time to seriously consider contextualizing missionary preparation for Asians. One priority should be the training of Asian trainers and the publication of training manuals written by Asians.

On-field Training

As the teams on the field are increasingly international and the trainers and leaders are still predominantly Western, how do we develop this contextualized training principle to on-field training? Mission leaders should give careful attention to the diverse needs of new workers, especially in the non-Western minority.

One positive lesson from Western partners in mission is their commitment to learning the local language for long-term effectiveness. "Many Western missionaries have been committed to an immersion in local cultures which required living for years in remote village locations, entering deeply into local life and crucially, taking the time and effort needed to master indigenous languages" (Smith 2003:95).

"Back to Jerusalem" is an indigenous Chinese mission movement motivated to bring the gospel through the Silk Road back to Jerusalem. With regard to this movement, Miriam Adeney expressed her concern that despite their enthusiasm, these Chinese evangelists did not learn the language of the indigenous people when bringing the gospel to them. She quoted a gentle missionary with over a decade of experience in West China: "For thirty years house church Christians have served in Northwest China. Yet scarcely any has learned the local language. To the indigenous people, these Chinese missionaries appear to be just one more arm of the imperialistic Han" (Adeney 2005:5). We criticize the Western missionaries for imposing their cultural forms on the people they evangelized. Similarly, Chinese missionaries with no language and cultural learning could make the same mistake of passing on Chinese forms meaningless to the host.

If Chinese churches want to be effective and responsible sending churches, we cannot neglect the adequate preparation of our missionaries.

5. Retention of Missionaries: Member Care and Development

Member care

The findings and analysis from ReMap II reveal a significant direct correlation between the time and finances spent on member care and the missionary retention rate (Bloecher 2004:18). Member care involves:

- (i) Personal care, e.g. time for annual vacation is provided; emphasis on maintenance and growth of personal spiritual life. Asian churches may at times impose on missionaries a Confucian work ethic – one that promotes hard work at the expense of rest and renewal – as exemplified by Chinese missionary heroes such as John Sung, Watchman Nee and Wang Ming Dao.
- (ii) Family support, e.g. financial and moral support for missionary parents; appropriate education options for missionary children. This area is particularly important to Asian missionaries as filial piety is distinctive in Asian culture and cannot be ignored. Most Asian missionary children study either in MK schools or International schools in the field. These offer curricula based on Western education systems and do not prepare these children to return to their own education system, language and culture in their home countries.
- (iii) Support on the field, e.g. missionary teams providing each other with mutual support; effective pastoral care (preventive and in crisis) at the field level; counsellors available to help resolve interpersonal conflicts in a timely and appropriate manner.
- (iv) Pastoral care from home and at home. Home churches are encouraged to be involved in the lives of their missionaries when they are on the field and when they return for home assignment. Professional counselling and consultation services should be available to missionaries when they return home. The WeCare Centre in Hong Kong is a good example. Helen Loong, a counsellor at the Centre commented, “The greatest need of a woman missionary is not money, status, not even marriage. Her greatest need is to be understood and be affirmed” (Loong 2005:265).

Member development

When missionaries are provided with opportunities for continuous development of gifts and skills, they tend to stay longer in their ministry. In 1997, OMF started a member development program with a view to increase the capacity of every member. The response is very positive when members realize that the program is not just designed to train and develop potential leaders - although leadership training is a key component of the program - but to involve all workers in personal development (Harrison 1997:265).

The result of member development should be more effective and productive workers who have greater job satisfaction. However, the benefits depend on various factors such as content, length, purpose, expected outcomes of the training, and quality of trainers (Harrison 1997:269).

Chinese sending churches and missions agencies should consider giving higher priority to the care and development of their missionaries if we are hoping that they will stay longer on the field.

6. Reinforcement of Global Partnerships

Johnstone and Mandryk (2001:711) note that “the growth and expansion of the church worldwide has built up such momentum, and grown in complexity, that close cooperation at every level has become essential. No longer is the missions movement Western, but global, and the potential for disastrous confrontations and relationship breakdowns grows greater.” They warn that too many churches, agencies and theological schools “go it alone” in seeking to fulfil the Great Commission to the detriment of the wider body of Christ.

Chinese Churches are interested in networking in missions mobilization and evangelization through international conferences. Meeting at big conferences, however, is only the first step toward networking. Paul Borthwick (2005) in his recent article “Reflections on the Lausanne Forum: Seven Questions Concerning Global Christian Gatherings”, urged Christian communities to evaluate the significance and effectiveness of such gatherings. Are we promoting a global gatherings culture rather than real mission work on the field? Do we address the question of where these conferences lead?

There is much value in global gatherings when they result in genuine work groups and longer term partnerships for the furtherance of God’s kingdom. I also hope to see a further step in networking with all other evangelicals, both Western and non-Western. This would promote the sharing of resources, minimize duplication, and allow us to build on one another’s strengths. Paul Hiebert says, “The future of missions is based on the formation of international networks, rather than multinational organizations. Networks build up people, not programs; they stress partnership and servanthood, not hierarchy” (Keyes 1991:12). As current mission structures tend to maintain the dominance of wealthy Western partners and do not express the international and intercultural character of mission, high priority should be given to designing structures for sharing mission resources and engaging in joint planning on a regional, national, or local basis. This is especially necessary in the case of Western sending agencies and growing churches of the two-thirds world (Scherer 1987:238). Likewise, Chinese missions should take heed of this potential pitfall in our partnership with other Asian missions. A global church developing new partnerships for mission faces an impossible task, but that is a tangible expression of the biblical vision of the church as described by the Apostle John on the island of Patmos in Revelation 7:9 as:

A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

Conclusion

As a Chinese who has lived outside of China and worked in world mission I would like to summarize my recommendations to the Chinese Church as they seek to go forward and fulfil their full place in God’s mission:

- Obey the mandate of the Great Commission: make disciples of all nations.
- Be a truly healing and reconciling community in our broken world.
- Commit to study and understand Asian religions and cultures on their own terms, not through our own coloured lenses.
- Be an effective sending body: equip our missionaries adequately; partner to start world-class missionary training and mission study centres for Chinese mission.

- Be responsible for our workers: pay serious attention to member care and development.
- Develop a cross-cultural networking mindset: remove racial prejudices; build bridges with Westerners and non-Chinese Asians; consult with one another; share our resources, all for the sake of the gospel and God's Kingdom.

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