I can still remember the compulsory course on Church Management that I took in my final year of the MDiv program. My major was Biblical Studies so I did not really consider the Church Management course as important as my major core courses. Furthermore, the denominational background of the seminary I attended is strong in the area of management so I do not have an urge to spend too much time on the course. I have no regrets but church management is one of the critical issues faced by churches in China today and as I reflect on this matter, I have to recall and refresh my limited knowledge on the inter-relationship among bible study, church growth and development, and church management. The concept of church management in China is still at a primitive stage. However, even though churches in China have limited understanding and practice in general and major Chinese seminaries place little emphasis on practical theology subjects (including church management), I noticed that some regional church pastors with clear and proactive foresight have stepped forward in renewing their concepts and practice of church management.
Traditionally, Chinese pastors have dissimilar perceptions of church management compared to their western counterparts. For Chinese pastors, church management refers to daily routines and the requirement to keep all the meetings and functions going without much thought on planning or evaluation. According to the responses I received from a group of regional church pastors, the most common feature in the church’s organization chart is a single line of responsibility. After reading these documents, I can imagine how difficult and tiresome for these church pastors to experience the rigorous change in management requirement over the years. Most of them come from typical and conservative church backgrounds so they have to take up administrative duties as well as all the daily operations of the church themselves. These tasks range from locking the church gates, buying raw materials for the holy communion, doing the accounts; visitations, delivering sermons in church services, weddings and funeral services to raising money for church construction projects, not to mention the need to attend the endless and tiring meetings with different people inside and outside of the church. They are not only the pastor but the parent of the church as well. The situation will improve tremendously if they could develop and lead a voluntary team to share their burdens. The lack of manpower may be the reason for pastors to delineate the one-man-band ministry philosophy after struggling alone for many years (how they have survived in the past), despite frequent criticisms accusing the pastor of too much power.

In order to balance the power within a church, some Chinese church pastors attempt to arrange or assign other leaders to different positions. This task requires a lot of courage and wisdom because it involves knowing and assigning the right people to the right post. The roles of pastoral workers and church administrators need to be clearly defined since the two sides have been integrated for a long time. Another consideration is to decide on which leadership model to adopt. Should it be ministry driven (by the pastor), administration driven (by the church council or board of deacons), or a combination of both, especially in China where denominations no longer exist? A clear division of labor is one way of responding to this issue. However it is not the only or best way to build effective communication channels in the church which is one of the crucial elements in management.
During the process of reviewing these documents and after becoming friends with these pastors, I made two major observations. Firstly, they began strengthening the staff team by recruiting young and well educated pastors who possess leadership development potentials. These young pastors will follow the senior pastors for an extensive period of time before they are assigned to specific areas of responsibility. The senior pastors will then know them well with respect to their character, Christian values and life goal. In addition, these young pastors will be asked to keep on learning new concepts and methods by taking courses or through overseas visits because they have to recognize the significance of teamwork approach. Currently, having a team of 10 staff or more is still very uncommon among the churches in China. However, in order to fund this staff team, the senior pastor has to secure a sustainable income support and to solicit the approval from the congregation to adopt this new form of church structure. In itself this is already a new venture in church management.

Secondly, the teaming up of pastoral and administrative staff will enhance the efficiency of the organizational structure. Through frequent interactions and in-depth discussions of ministry and administrative support issues among the staff members, the quality of pastoral care provided to the congregation will improve. Another common phenomenon among these churches is the use of smaller units (like small group approach) in setting up the pastoral care system.

This is only a very brief description of some recent observations of church management development in the churches in China. For a comprehensive understanding in this area, more studies should be carried out in the coming future.
Editor’s note: I recall the sharing by a female pastor from the mainland a little while ago: “I haven’t taken a single day of leave in a year, and this situation has persisted for some ten years. In the past few years, I was so exhausted in my ministry that I often burst out in tears, but felt guilty at the same time for my own weaknesses. I was in a miserable dilemma!” On the one hand, I held great respect towards this pastor’s dedication to the church, yet on the other was saddened that she has not taken good care of herself. In the vast harvest field on the mainland, stories abound where pastors are so committed to their ministry that their health is jeopardized (although there are also few cases of pastors “gone corrupt”). What went wrong? What are the problems with these pastors’ ministry concepts and attitudes or the external environment, pushing them to the brink of burnout?

To understand more about this phenomenon, we have interviewed Pastor Abraham Chan Hiu Tung, Director of Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre. He interacts frequently with mainland pastors and has been actively involved in the training for and studies on pastors and church leaders in China. In this issue and the next one, we will publish the interview as well as cases of mainland pastors experiencing burnout in their service to the Lord.

Interviewee: Pastor Abraham Chan Hiu Tung, Director of Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre (“Chan”)

Interviewer: Wong Yat Che (“Editor”)

Editor: Pastor Chan, you interact with mainland pastors frequently. Based on your observations and knowledge, what are the reasons for burnout among these pastors?

Chan: The word “burnout” is a very literal description of the conditions in which there are problems with a person’s physical, psychological and mental states, such as depression, anxiety, fear and other problems with the body and the mind. The reasons are manifold, which fall into two main categories: (1) a pastor's personal growth; (2) the external environment (including the communities to be served and the society).

(1) A pastor’s personal growth

(a) Hasty entry into church ministry

Most pastors serving in registered or non-registered churches have been trained only for a brief period (usually one to three years) before starting their service in the church. In their service, they have to undertake a diverse range of duties such as visiting the believers, providing pastoral care and managing the church (including even works like supervising a church’s renovation project), which can be very taxing. As a result, they serve under great pressure all the time.
(b) Lack of understanding of a pastor's role
Pastors begin their ministry after receiving three years' training, but may not have a full grasp of what is required of a pastor. They may possess a wealth of biblical and theological knowledge, but do they really understand how a pastor should lead his life or position himself? Do they know that a pastor needs wisdom, courage and vision? Indeed, many pastors start serving hastily without clearly figuring out the role they should play. As such, they are often trapped among different tensions in pastoring (including preaching, teaching, financial pressure and pressure from one's family, etc.). The pressure is further aggravated by the fact that most of them do not have a support network!

(c) Lack of further study opportunities
Many pastoral colleagues find it disappointing that they have virtually no chance of further study once they have left the seminary. This is because seminaries are short of resources and hence they are incapable of catering to the pastors' needs. As pastors work incessantly without any chance to rest or undertake further study as well as under long-standing physical, mental and spiritual stress, the problem of burnout can easily rear its ugly head!

(2) External environment
(a) The church's system and idea of spirituality
The external environment can also contribute to a person's burnout. For the past three decades, while churches in China have mushroomed and grown substantially, pastors possess only scanty knowledge on how to run a church, including establishing its various internal systems, management systems, support systems or salary systems for pastors. There is much room for improvement.

(b) Traditional concepts of a spiritual leader
For a long time, Chinese churches have embraced the traditional concept that the poorer the pastors, the more spiritual they are. The more they suffer, the greater is their glory. Pastors themselves are also reinforcing this belief subconsciously: for example they will boast about their poverty in their testimony and mention how God made timely provisions (such as bringing them a bag of rice or a basket of vegetables) at the most critical moments, thereby building a heroic image for themselves. Indeed, such acts would only underscore the fact that the notion of all-round care for pastors has not taken root in the church.

In fact, this “holy-secular division” concept is deeply seated in many pastors' mindset, so much so that pastors often find it difficult to candidly share their financial needs with the congregation. They fear that any discussion of these secular issues would be perceived as a “lack of faith in the Lord and a desire for worldly possessions”. Such kind of unhealthy teaching has already caused great harm to pastors. Moreover, pastors are also subject to various mental stresses brought about by the external environment. With pressure coming from within the church in pastoring and stress generating from outside in coordinating with different external parties, pastors have pressure from all fronts to bear!

Indeed, the reasons behind the burnout phenomenon are many and related to a pastor's personal growth and development. It is also common that a pastor experiencing burnout lacks an awareness of his/her own situation and does not know how to express his/her feelings.

Editor: To what extent do pastors in the mainland recognize the burnout problem?
Chan: They often come to know about it only after the problem has surfaced. From articles in the magazine Tianfeng, we learn that many capable pastors in their 40s passed away because of illnesses. This should be a serious warning to us. Some colleagues are experiencing a burnout, but their situation is not that serious. They may display the following behavior:
Hidden problems behind burnout

So it is evident that if a pastor does not seek renewal and transformation in his/her spiritual life through reading the Bible, praying and staying close to God, the problems accumulated from his/her life in the past would only exacerbate and lead to burnout. We often say that people may face different temptations and trials, but what are the problems behind these temptations and trials?

To the individual, it may be that one’s ego has not fully matured, and as such, temptations may take many forms. Some originate from a person’s character such as pride, a strong desire to control (which stems from a sense of insecurity), or an excessive sense of inferiority. Pastors may often identify themselves as the Lord’s “humble servants”, but are in fact lacking self-esteem and self-respect deep inside. There are many true stories of pastors who have fallen victim to such traps.

(We will publish the second part of the interview as well as cases of pastors experiencing burnout in the next issue. Do watch out for them.)

New Book Release

Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs

Author: Bill Hybels
Publisher: China Christian Council
No. of pages: 312
Price: Rmb ¥20
Publication date: December 2011 (First edition)

The China Christian Council has been authorized by Christian Communications Limited, the original publisher, to publish the simplified Chinese character version of the book in China.

Synopsis:

“Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs” is a much celebrated volume on the subject of leadership in which the author, Pastor Bill Hybels, shares his valuable experience in leading the most influential church in the United States in the past three decades. Using succinct language and real-life cases, Pastor Hybels has come up with 76 axioms of leadership. While these insightful axioms can benefit one for a lifetime, each takes less than 10 minutes to read through. For pastors striving for the growth of the church, the book is like a stream in the desert, bringing to readers joy and enlightenment shared by a peer who “has seen and gone through it all”. Pastor Hybels’ account of his success in building the Willow Creek Church will undoubtedly bless church leaders in their endeavour to realize their vision, build a strong pastoral team and serve with integrity.

At a time when mainland churches have stepped into the golden age of leadership grooming, the book offers timely advice and help on pastor training.

The book is available from bookstores on the mainland as well as bookstores of the China Christian Council in China. Enquiries can also be made with Jireh Bookstore in China.

Website: http://www.jireh.cn E-mail: book@jirehbookstore.com Tel: 86-571-85178519
Role models – pray for ethical standards on the mainland

A resolution was passed in the 6th plenary session of the 17th CPC Central Committee meeting held last October endorsing the Follow Lei Feng campaign. Lei was a model figure known for his spirit of serving others sacrificially, helping others willingly, and striving to work hard, make self-improvement, and to be perseverant and frugal. He was someone who served the people wholeheartedly. His attitudes reflect high expectations for his own ethical standards and are a cause of reflection for many today. (combined reports)

Prayer: The spirit of Lei Feng emphasizes a priority to serving others, or putting other people at the centre. But in today’s society, economic gains come first, and people put personal interests before group honour. They would rather take advantage of others to avoid losses. May the Lord change such atmosphere, enhance people’s ethical standards and give them the perseverance in abiding by those standards. May the Lord help churches be His light and lead people to the truth in an apathetic society.

Impact of civil loans on believers – pray for believers who are also guarantors

A debt crisis happened earlier in the city of Wenzhou, in which quite a number of lenders lending at very high rates ran away with their money or committed suicide. Some Christians who had acted as guarantors also fled. A full-time church worker who was a guarantor for his brother in law who had fled being unable to pay off his debts was made responsible for them ultimately. Because of that, he had to stop his ministry for one year to work elsewhere to earn money. This had an impact on his church’s development. (sharing by a pastor in the East)

The issue of circulating loans on the mainland has triggered all kinds of crisis to lenders and guarantors. The above co-worker dealt a blow to his ministry by being his brother-in-law’s guarantor. The Bible teaches us to be prudent in financial matters such as becoming a guarantor; may the Lord alert believers to possible financial traps and keep them blessed by walking in His truth. (sharing by a pastor in the East)

Lack of teachings on marriage – pray for believers in love

“The brothers and sisters in our church do not quite understand the Bible’s teachings about marriage; some had “trial marriage”, or co-habitation, before getting married in church. This is due to not just negative social influences, church co-workers found, but also the lack of teachings about marriage. Believers are unaware that trial marriages are unibical.” (sharing by a church co-worker in the East)

The average Christian may think that trial marriage is unibical but in some urban churches, brothers and sisters do not think so. Along with rapid social development, secular values and social atmosphere have infiltrated churches, believers’ hearts and minds, confusing their values. May the Lord keep believers’ hearts so they can be immune from secular influences and that He can help pastors explain Biblical truths to believers to keep them from falling into traps unknowingly.

Enhancing the ability for pastoral care – pray for full equipment for pastors in a new age

“I am now pastoring and nurturing intellectual leaders in many urban churches. It is good that these young people have committed themselves to full-time ministry after graduating from university. But I found that lacking life experiences, they do not understand the situations some believers are in and fail to offer adequate pastoral care. We have therefore strengthened our leadership training; apart from biblical knowledge, we have to impart to them skills in understanding different people and the world, to help them have a better grasp of the situations believers are in, so they can provide them with appropriate counseling and biblical guidelines. (sharing by a pastor in a church in the East)

As the mainland society becomes more complicated and believers’ educational level increases, believers are no longer satisfied with one-way preaching. Churches also have much higher expectations for pastors than before; apart from spiritual knowledge and wisdom, they also want pastors to have the wisdom to help believers cope with the challenges of a secular society. May the Lord raise up more such pastors.