

“THE SPIRIT OF LAUSANNE LEADERSHIP: HUMILITY, INTEGRITY AND SIMPLICITY”

An Interview of Dr. Michael Oh

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INTRODUCTION

Many say LEADERSHIP is influencing others. And when it comes to influence, the Lausanne Movement is a huge one to church and mission. The Lausanne Movement is an influencer itself. It is a worldwide mission organization that impacts missions, churches, businesses, young generation and other areas in the Christian sphere. Being a leader and influencer in missions, Lausanne spearheads many mission and leadership trends. And a lot of mission and church leaders look up to it when it comes to leadership.

We are fortunate to have Dr. Michael Oh, the Global Executive Director and CEO of Lausanne Movement to have his profile interview on our pages on this 71st issue of Asian Missions Advance. Though busy, he mentioned that he attends almost 10 hours in virtual meetings a day, he granted us some time for an interview to share his thoughts and practices on leadership in Lausanne Movement even under the CoVid 19 pandemic.



How did you begin your ministry in the Lord's mission?

My father was a medical doctor for many years and delivered over 3000 babies, so I was tracking to become a doctor as a pre-medical student along with my wife Pearl, her brother, my sister, and her husband. Between the 5 of us we have 15 college and graduate degrees from institutions including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, and others. For Asian parents who are holding onto hope in the American dream we were a success story.

But God had other plans. We all became missionaries rather than medical doctors. No longer were we a story of success, instead we were even looked down upon by some. I even had Asian parents who didn't want their children to talk with me or listen to my speaking lest they get off of their pursuit of glory through education and wealth. Initially, it was difficult for my parents as well, but they grew to be incredibly supportive of our calling to serve as mission leaders.

During college the Lord put in my heart a desire to make my life count for eternity. And I knew that there were only two things that lasted for eternity – God's word and people. So I began to pray about how God might want me to serve Him and live a life that would count for eternity. At Urbana 1990 I learned about Unreached People Groups and was enthralled by the preaching of Ajith Fernando. After a few short mission trips to Korea, Philippines, and Japan, the Lord won my heart over to missions.

After college, graduate school, teaching in public school for a few years, and then seminary, my wife and I moved to Japan for 2 years. That led to the vision to plant a theological seminary that eventually became Christ Bible Seminary and the umbrella ministry of CBI Japan which I led for 11 years.

When did you begin as the CEO of Lausanne? What are your reasons for accepting the calling of the Lord to lead Lausanne Movement?

March 1, 2021 marked the 8-year anniversary of my leading the Lausanne Movement. I followed in the footsteps of another Japan missionary Doug Birdsall. I remember fondly being there in Pattaya, Thailand at Lausanne's 2004 Forum when Doug was installed.

Even being there was a God-ordained anomaly. Not only was I a last-minute registrant, there is no question that I didn't deserve to be there as I was a 31 year-old president of a seminary that didn't yet exist! That led later to speaking at the 2006 Younger Leaders Gathering, joining the Lausanne board in 2007, and then eventually the invitation to lead the movement in 2013.

My wife Pearl and I both wrestled through what we describe as "the most disruptive call of my life." That describes not only the call that Doug made to me to ask if I would pray about being his successor, but most certainly the call that the Lord gave. Pearl and I knew that God was going to have to do a big change in our hearts in order to say yes. One night though as we both lay down to sleep she looked over at me and said, "I'm so proud of you." I knew at that moment that God had changed our hearts and that I could say yes.

What leadership principles do you believe and apply in your leadership roles in missions, particularly Lausanne Movement?

One of the highest values of Lausanne is "listening and learning." And in 2013 as a 41 year-old leader of a global movement founded by Billy Graham and John Stott I had nothing much to offer except a heart to listen and learn. But perhaps that was what the movement needed. Rather than a leader coming in who had all the answers, perhaps in this season of Lausanne it was the right time for a leader who had the right questions and an open heart to listen.

Another value that I have held throughout my years of leadership is to find great people and then figure out what to do rather than vice versa. That has allowed our Japan ministry to thrive (even more) since I handed over leadership (than under my own). It was one of my hopes and dreams and goals from day one with Lausanne to have Global Associate Directors from Africa and Latin America/Caribbean, and having Nana Yaw Offei Awuku from Ghana and Dr. Las Newman from Jamaica by my side is one of my biggest honors and joys. Having Lausanne's Theology Working Group led by Dr. Victor Nakah (Zimbabwe) and Dr. Ivor Poobalan (Sri Lanka) as our co-chairs is an amazing blessing, and it is also a demonstration of this season where the Majority World is stepping up in global leadership.

Were there hardships/obstacles you faced as a mission leader? What are they? And what do you think are the blessings God gives to those in leadership positions like yours?

The biggest obstacle is me! My sin. My blindspots. My weaknesses. My self-righteousness. My pride. My impatience. Every way that I lack Christ-likeness.

I can trace every mistake, every misunderstanding, every relational conflict, and every shortfall at least in some portion back to myself. It is so easy to blame other people and circumstances, but a leader must be the biggest critic of his/her own self not only as an example but because this is truly the arena where we can affect the greatest change, where we have the most responsibility before God and how we can best benefit others.

Are there blessings from God for those in leadership? Certainly. Both unique suffering and unique blessing. There are days when I ask God, "Why me?!" as I complain about a crisis going on or a day with 10 hours of zoom calls. But then there are days when I ask God, "Why me?!" after seeing the hand of God bring a gospel breakthrough or come out of a meeting with amazing, godly, global leaders.

What do you think are the characteristics of a Leader in missions that will result to success in the ministry?

Lausanne has a 4-fold vision and the 3rd part of that is "Christ-like leaders for every church." And we often refer back to Cape Town 2010 where Dr. Chris Wright gave the challenge for the leaders of the global church to be HIS leaders, leaders of Humility, Integrity, and Simplicity. I can't think of a more appropriate summary of what the church needs today. Leaders of pride, corruption, and greed bring tremendous disrepute upon the gospel and the church. But leaders of humility, integrity, and simplicity bring hope to the next generations.

How is your organization coping with the pandemic? How affected are your ministries?

For Lausanne it's remarkable how the Lord has used the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic to actually INCREASE opportunities for us to connect and collaborate - more often than expected, with more people than expected, from more places than expected, and we hope, toward greater IMPACT than expected.

Lausanne has always been a relational platform where influencers connect on the basis of friendship, conviction, and mission, but this past year that platform has become even more effective as we have grown as a virtual convening platform. Compared to a typical year we have hosted about 10 times as many gatherings.

In this pandemic, how did you cope as a mission leader? What helped you and what did not help you in leading your people and your organization?

This year we have prayed more and listened more than ever as a movement. Our first response to the pandemic was to gather each of our 12 regions for bi-regional prayer times. We also have begun to have monthly global gatherings "simply" to listen to God's word together. And as a part of the "global polycentric process" of Lausanne 4 we have had a "listening and learning" gathering for each of our 12 regions. Praying to God, listening to God, and listening to each other. It's quite a simple (and powerful) strategy!

Under the pandemic situation, What do you think are necessary (to change, to give up, or to add) for mission organizations and for the leadership?

We need to stop focusing on what we can't do because of our COVID situation and focus on what we can now uniquely do. For every 10 things that we can no longer do there are now 20 new things that we can do. But we need to open our eyes, we need to pray for wisdom/discernment, and we need to listen to and learn from each other.

This is a new wineskin opportunity. If we insist on recovering the past or preserving the old wine we might miss out on some glorious new opportunities and some delicious new wine!

With the current circumstances under Covid 19 in the world, what changes did you do and do you plan to do in your organization?

We did some organizational shifting to help us to be more mobile and agile in a virtual world. This included having new "virtual convening" teams that included people across different departments. This was actually exciting for our global staff to work in new configurations.

We shortened meetings but also increased touchpoints. It's easier to connect more often virtually but the appetite and attention span for longer meetings decreases over zoom.

We also went "old school". In this post-COVID era I find that people appreciate even more a hand-written letter or a phone call. I find myself doing both more this year than ever before.

How can you encourage and what can you suggest to other mission leaders all over the world so they can face the changes/transitions in their ministries?

These are great times for soul-searching and strategic planning. With this respite from traveling, we get to steward more time and more energy. First of all, take care of yourself. Lausanne actually has a small booklet by Pablo Martinez, "Take Care of Yourself: Survive and Thrive in Christian Ministry." I run 10-15 kilometers per week not because I enjoy it but as a ministry to myself. It clears my mind, and it helps me steward my body. Second, maintain boundaries. With no travel these days and home as the sole base of ministry it is easy to work any time and all of the time. We need to create clear boundaries of space and time when there is little variety in our post-COVID lives. Third shepherd your family. Pearl and I have said so many times to friends during

the pandemic that “every day is a gift from God.” I have been able to have more significant conversations with each of our 5 children this year than any previous year. Not easy conversations, but ones critical to my faithfulness to the call to disciple not only the nations but my children.

How can we pray for you and other leaders in missions?

Thank you for asking this question. I’m not sure about other leaders, but I find myself sometimes becoming a little cynical about the prayer habits of Christians. I can become a little discouraged as I think about prayers that are too seldom or too shallow. When people ask about how they can pray for me there is no greater gift or encouragement than prayers that are truly DEVOTED (Colossians 4:2) and committedly on-going/without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). So that would be two examples of the manner in which people can pray.

Then in that same manner the substance of prayer can start with prayer for Christ-likeness, gospel-centeredness, and a dear/near walk with the Lord. And for me I often say that if you do nothing but pray for my family that is extremely strategic. I tell people, “If my family goes down, I go down. And if I go down, this ministry could go down.” Of course, God is ultimately the one who sustains, and even if the Evil One attacks ferociously God can turn it around for good. But after God, family should come first in our hearts. And praying for the protection and love and blessing of a leader’s family is a great place to start.

CONCLUSION

I met Dr. Michael Oh during the 2013 AMA Triennial Convention in Incheon, S. Korea. He was the newly ordained Global Executive Director/CEO of Lausanne Movement. After his presentation of Lausanne Movement at the plenary, Dr. Luis Bush got up and invited everyone in the Convention to stand up and pray for Dr. Michael Oh, who was a young mission leader compared to the mission veterans we had in that convention. Dr. Bush said, though he maybe young as a leader of world mission, let us welcome him for just like us, he was God’s appointed and needed prayers to face the big responsibility ahead of him.

After eight years in Lausanne Movement, Dr. Oh has become a seasoned mission leader himself. What he was and what he is and what the Lord taught him he shared with us in this short interview. Dr. Oh mentioned that he came to Lausanne as a leader with the right questions and the heart to listen. In the Bible most servant leaders when they were called had questions. Moses, Gideon, and Isaiah had questions and doubted on how would they lead God’s people. And all of them found the answers from God! The best way to lead is to seek God for answers. Dr. Oh is asking the right questions and listening from his team and from God, leading Lausanne according to its spirit: Humility, Integrity and Simplicity.

Our take home reminder from this interview is that every leader in God’s mission is called, prepared and strengthened to walk in God’s direction in the example of the Lord Jesus Christ’s humility at the simplest form of prayer, obedience and submission. With or without pandemic, God’s anointed leaders continue to serve with a purpose and a heart to serve God and accomplish His will.



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