

THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON URBAN CHURCHES IN CHINA TODAY

David S. Lim

The COVID-19 pandemic that struck the world from China caused several complete lockdowns of cities and regions in its country of origin. This article describes the main lessons that China's urban churches – both the registered Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches and the unregistered “house church fellowships – have learned during this period since January 2020.

CHINA'S CITIES TODAY

Since 1978, China built so many cities and megacities so rapidly to become the second most prosperous economy in the world today. But in the past 2.5 years, she faced a triple whammy: struggles with its zero-Covid policy, a lagging economy that prompted its central bank to cut interest rates, and a punishing heat wave that has caused factories to shut down to save power. A major drought in southwest China has threatened water, crops and power. 19.9% of China's urban youth were unemployed in July, a new record. President Xi Jinping has rested his economic program on striving for shared prosperity, and Beijing now wants more cities to benefit, as *The Economist* wrote recently. But Xi's strategy faces headwinds, the magazine writes elsewhere: “The commitment to zero-covid and to ending China's housing excesses comes from the top. But as [Xi] prepares to secure a third term at a Communist Party congress later this year, those iron commitments have left the economy in a jam. The economic setting for the congress is not what Xi thought it would be. The Chinese dream of homeownership is crumbling; the economy could go with it. Even when Xi has emphasized rural development to balance economic growth, urbanization has continued. (At present China is already 60.8% urban). In 2018, the Chinese government announced a policy encouraging cities with populations under 3.5 million to grant migrant workers city household registrations. Some fast-developing provincial capitals (mainly those in second-tier cities) have started to absorb increased population to expand their size so migrants can live there more easily. This trend is going to become more and more obvious, and cities of third and fourth tiers will copy them.

In addition, due to a series of advantageous policies, such as revitalizing villages, alleviating poverty through development, encouraging migrant workers to return for employment, and so on, more villagers now choose to stay in their hometowns to work and even to start their own businesses. Yet there is still the continuous planting of more churches in the cities

or towns where migrant workers' original household registrations are or in other second- to fourth-tier cities.

CHINA'S URBAN CHURCHES TODAY

The springing up of urban churches is closely related to the population flow in China. Benefiting from the revival of Christianity in villages, migrant worker churches have been developing fast in cities since the mid-1990s. But during the pandemic, the first-tier cities have started to send migrant workers who were engaged in “low-end” industries back to the villages. So the size of many urban churches have begun to shrink gradually as those in low-end industries leave. But there are opportunities in the lower-tier cities.

The current strategies of church planting used by urban churches have mainly been through pastors who go with or among believers in the midst of the migration wave, guiding and encouraging mature believers to embrace the vision and burden of church planting as they arrived in the major cities. Even before these migrant workers transfer to new cities, they have been equipped and empowered to live out the Great Commission to make disciples and to start churches wherever they go.

New churches have started to reflect a mixture of people from cities and villages, permanent residents and migrant workers, middle-aged, seniors, younger generations, and so on. Diversity is also manifested by the areas of church planting. The core areas of church planting are cities with the biggest populations.

Since the 1980s, the composition of urban churches has been rather homogeneous, with the majority of the congregation being middle-aged and made of migrant workers moving from villages to cities. Rarely do these people settle down in cities, and it was normal for them to keep moving from one city to another. In recent years, the migrant population has grown younger and with higher educational background. In addition, the state has officially announced a policy to allow migrant workers to have their households registered in cities. Therefore,

migrant workers can have their families registered in the cities where they work. New churches have started to reflect a mixture of people from cities and villages, permanent residents and migrant workers, middle-aged, seniors, younger generations, and so on. Diversity is also manifested by the areas of church planting. The core areas of church planting are cities with the biggest populations. But based on the recent government policy to develop the smaller cities and rural areas, new churches have been spreading into neighboring satellite cities and towns. In areas such as Beijing-Tianjin-Shanxi Province, Yangtze Delta and Pearl River Delta with highly concentrated populations, church planters are using cities as their bases for planting diversified churches in neighboring areas.

Since 2013, Christians in China have come under renewed pressure when the Xi regime implemented repressive religious policies and regulations. Security forces have been intensifying their crackdown on various house churches that have operated secretly to avoid harassment by the authorities. This has been a big shift from the relatively democratic freedoms (including to gather for religious practices) which they have enjoyed since Deng's reforms in 1978.

Just before the end of August this year, at least three house churches were raided by the police, with their leaders being arrested and detained on trumped-up charges. Authorities raided the Xi'an Abundant Church, the Linfen Holy Covenant Church, and Changchun city's House of Light Church. This latest series of crackdowns come a week after Chengdu-based (the capital of Sichuan province) Early Rain Covenant Church and Beijing Zion Church saw their members arrested during a Sunday service.

It is still unclear why Beijing has launched this new wave of crackdowns on these urban churches.

THREE URBAN CHURCH TRENDS AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

Against the tightening of the regulations on the religious sector, the resurgent COVID-19 outbreaks and the normalization of pandemic prevention measures, many significant changes have taken place in the form and function of the urban churches in China.

According to the China Source Team, more small groups, more household-oriented and more online are the three dominant observations that have been made by a number of pastors from churches in different parts of China in recent months when they were asked to describe the current situation and trends in their churches since the pandemic began in the early 2020. These leaders have been pastoring churches of varying sizes, some are doing outreach work among various groups, and some are engaged in theological education alongside their pastoral ministry. It is the recovery and renewal of the ecclesiology that the essence of the church is "two or three gathered in the

name of Jesus (Matt. 18:18-20).

Small group meetings and emphasis on family gatherings have existed in previous years, dating as far back as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). But the situational changes brought about by the 2020 pandemic have prompted these three phenomena to become more important and crucial in urban church life. It can be observed that these three trends have become more prominent because of the public health lockdowns, and that these dramatic changes in the external environment have contributed to these developments.

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These trends are not confined to small, scattered meeting points, but are also increasingly evident in large churches all over the country that have over a thousand members and have had difficulty in meeting in person consistently over the last two years or so due to pandemic control measures.

The phrase "more small groups means to move in the direction of meeting as groups of less than 10 adults. "More household-oriented means increasingly characterized by meeting and fellowshiping in a particular believer's home. And more online refers to the phenomenon of more and more worship services, meetings, and training being conducted via the internet.

The reality is that the whole congregation could not meet in person, and pastoral care needs have to be addressed and strengthened. So "more small groups, more household-oriented, more online has become the response. Its practical outworkings have included: large churches have begun to value operating small groups; there has been a greater emphasis on returning to the house church and valuing the family, while at the same time more and more Christian families have learned to value family devotion/worship; and online meetings and training courses have also been growing significantly compared to the pre-pandemic period.

It is unclear how long the current conditions will last and how long these trends will continue. It is possible that if in-person congregational meetings become stable and regular once more, then these trends

may diminish significantly among urban churches, especially those that have stable assets and meeting venues.

Yet these church trends brought about by the changing circumstances have already led so many churches to discover the pastoral improvements brought about through small groups, put more value on the model of the early church, as well as the inescapable contemporary opportunity of making good use of the internet. Even if in-person congregational meetings are restored, the influence of these trends on their thinking and practice may well not diminish, but rather get stronger.

“More small groups: Pastoral care through cell groups

Foremost may be the rediscovery that small groups bring about marked improvement in the pastoral care of churchgoers. The common challenge for many churches in the city is how to pastor a congregation of thousands when it is difficult to open the church doors or gather in person.

The aftermath of the 2020 pandemic has not been easy for churches anywhere. Thanks to the pandemic itself and the related control measures, church doors have been closed more than they have been open. One church in a north-eastern city with more than 1,000 members counted the number of days the church was open: for the past 828 days, the church had switched continually between “double suspension and “resumption of in-person meetings and had only been open for 157 days.

This is not an isolated example. TSPM churches in over ten provinces faced these problems to a greater or lesser extent. In May 2022, churches in some provinces, such as Jiangsu and Zhejiang, began to resume in-person services, but pandemic prevention controls in Hangzhou and Zhejiang, for example, require possession of a nucleic acid certificate within 48 hours of attending and generally only allow gatherings of 50 people, and at the maximum limit of 300 people. This means that for the many churches in the city with several thousand members, at most only 300 people can attend a regular in-person Sunday worship service.

Hence over the past few years, many churches have already begun to show a great deal of interest on how to put small-group church into practice. Various small group meetings and meetings in homes have begun to take shape, dividing the church into groups of around 10 people for small-scale gatherings and for pastoral care. In the process, many pastors have found that doing small-group fellowship has allowed for a more individualized pastoral approach than the previous feeding of the whole congregation all together.

A team of researchers has recently spent a rewarding time observing a few small group meetings in homes. They found that such meetings were relatively small in size, with as few as three people, and as many as six or seven, gathering in believers’ homes, sharing

in fellowship, talking about faith or the next steps in church work and other insights, and cooking together after the discussion. All of these greatly improved interpersonal relationships, and everyone had fun in the process.

There have also been many challenges. For example, some churches had too many small groups and the church could not manage them well. There have been cases where group leaders have drawn away members. Also there have been cases where cults have infiltrated the church and cult members have become group leaders so as to lead believers into heresy. In view of this, many churches are placing more and more emphasis on training group leaders and co-workers.

Because of these changing circumstances, more and more churches are placing more emphasis on the training of core church workers and the building up of group leaders, rather than on the size of the church building or the number of people.

Pastor W, a young pastor in his 30s serving in eastern China, said in March 2021 that the pandemic had not affected his church very much, “because half a year before the pandemic started, we had already begun to implement a kind of small group pastoral care. They did not immediately withdraw from renting the meeting place previously used by the church, so that believers still felt “at home and had a sense of belonging. After all, they had been meeting in the hall for many years. “At the same time, we pastored online. When pandemic prevention was less intense, we combined online and offline meetings. The small groups take turns coming to the main church hall for Sunday services.

Small group pastoral care is about focusing more on the lives of believers, so that believers can build a relationship not with the church or with the pastor, but with God, so that they can live in the presence of God no matter what circumstances they are facing.

“More household-oriented: Renewal of “house church ecclesiology

Arguably one of the biggest changes in recent years is that the emphasis on venue size and congregational numbers is changing. More churches are emphasizing the internalization of faith and personal relationship with God. Thus, church leaders and members are gaining a deeper understanding of their view of the church, which actually is a revival of the “Little Flock (Brethren) ecclesiology of Watchman Nee, that was the theological framework of the “gospel explosion in the early 1970s to early 1990s in China.

Pastor X, a middle-aged pastor in Beijing who has been pastoring an emerging church in the city for many years, said that one of the greatest realizations brought to them by the pandemic was about ecclesiology. “The church is not the building where the congregation meets, but the ‘gathering of two or three in Jesus’ name’ – that’s the church.

A similar view was expressed by Pastor Y, who pastors a group of migrant workers in a second-tier city in eastern China. He prescribes that in the post-pandemic era we need to move away from “temple-centrism, because this kind of focus on sacred space will hamper the church from making progress in a more restrictive religious environment and in the post-pandemic era.

The dominant church paradigm, with its models of worship and community identity, perpetuates a temple-centric theology. The concept of church is therefore centered on the church building. Sooner or later the church must materialize in a particular place or concentrate in a particular place. Because a church building is for gathering, once gatherings in the building cease, the church effectively falls apart. Gathering requires a physical space, hence the identity centered on a church building. The physical gathering, which is centered on and hosted in a particular building, means that the church is necessarily visible to society in public fashion. Gathering becomes the primary way to express the existence of Christianity.

However, once the social space is restricted, then this building-centered gathering encounters challenges. When believers become accustomed to defining their faith and identity in terms of the gathering in a church building, pressures on social space also mean that the church is unable to manifest itself and the space for its very existence is restricted. The result inevitably is to struggle for the existence and expansion of actual physical space by any means possible, which inevitably generates conflict with the reality of the secular state. Indeed, many of the ideas of the church today come not from Jesus, but from traditions that Jesus opposed (John 4:21-24) and that were also rejected by the early church (Acts 7:48; 17:24). This is also one of the main reasons for the plight of the global church today.

So Pastor Y called for the model that Jesus started: the model of a free Christ-centered communion, a union that is not limited in number or gender. It could be two or three people, or a dozen people. In this way, in a more meaningful way, a few people come together to learn and grow, to change themselves, to change their families, to make the world a better place. “By this shall people know that you are my disciples: if you love one another (John 13:34-35). This is not an objection to church meetings, but to a temple-centric ecclesiology. These extraordinary days, when space for activities is curtailed, are a time for Christians to accept and respond to myriad changes, a time for Christians to be molded and to mature, and this is the best way for the Christian faith to be a witness in the present.

Before the pandemic, many older pastors of Chinese churches believed that the key to the development of house churches in China was following the example of the early church, the “house church. The turn away from large venues to small group meetings is seen by many house church pastors as a return to the spirit of

the “house church.

The answers given by traditional churches regarding the definition of the church have mostly focused on the perspective of holiness and sanctity, emphasizing the boundary between a community of Christians and the secular world. However, while this definition of the church is certainly consistent with the teaching of Scripture and the nature of the church, it also has a weakness, namely that this positioning itself alienates the church from society and thus diminishes its willingness to actively influence society. However, in the teaching of Jesus, the church is first and foremost not a holy organization, she is a community – a community formed by Jesus and his disciples for the purpose of the highest good, for the exercise of God’s commands on earth. The church enters the world but does not merge with it. This is the purpose of the community of Jesus, and that is the supreme good.

Some pastors are concerned that the increasingly fragmented way of meeting will lead to the dissipation of the essence of the church, and in this context some pastoral workers and other Christians emphasize that the essence of the church is being a community. This concern about fragmentation has highlighted the challenge of building consensus on the foundations of orthodox Christian theology.

A cautionary note is sounded by Pastor Y, who has long paid attention to theological education in house churches. He believes that the formation of a shared foundation of orthodox Christian theology across denominations and churches is crucial at this time, because, at the moment, churches are forced to meet as families and in small groups, which makes it hard for problems to be brought out to the open. In this sort of situation, heretical teaching and cults are bound to make trouble. So, while there is still time and opportunity, a comprehensive system of theological education needs to be established urgently. If there is no unity of thought and the churches continually divide, in time they will become a scattered mess.

So Pastor Y insists that orthodox theological foundations need to be disseminated and established as soon as possible. Otherwise, as churches go underground, run themselves and develop individually, they will result in all sorts of chaotic things coming to the surface once times become more open again. Thus it is very important to unite everyone around orthodox doctrine. First, and as quickly as possible, we need to all be clear on unity around the great principles of our faith. The rest of pastoral care is a secondary matter. Once the broad principles are in place, anything can be done. Otherwise, it is likely that the Chinese church will be entangled in heresies and internal schisms. (For me, the “Apostles’ Creed is good enough as our orthodox theological foundation worldwide).

“More online: Fraught with tension

Five or six years before the 2020 pandemic, Teacher Z

in Hangzhou had already started pastoring believers through QQ, WeChat, and other means. At the time he found that many people were skeptical and critical of his approach, with many pastors believing that “the internet is the devil and trying to keep away from it. But during the pandemic, the difficulty of meeting in person gave rise to a boom in online meetings. At one point, some believers would receive links to more than three online meetings per day.

Now, more than two years have passed. The importance of online pastoral care is increasingly felt by pastors and churches, but tensions are still evident. For example, the debate on whether to have “online communion has been going on for more than a year, and although some TSPM churches do openly practice “online communion, whether it is a valid sacrament or not is still a very controversial and divisive topic among the house church networks.

Online pastoring represents a considerable challenge to an ecclesiology that has an in-person understanding of the church. Some pastoral colleagues have warned that as the church becomes more and more fragmented in its gathering, there is a risk that its very essence will dissolve. In order to resolve this issue, it is vital to develop the biblical vision of the church from a perspective of community being a community or family/household of God.

The use of the internet and social media will still be through natural relationships between individuals, but not institutional. The government has imposed rules on religious matters, and more strictly recently. For instance, there have only been a few reports of successfully acquired Internet Religious Information Services License. Among the first was the Xin'en Church in the City of Yiwu (Zhejiang), which acquired the license on April 18. The licenses are issued by the provinces. In Guangdong Province, “Guangdong Catholicism, that is, the two official Catholic governing bodies of Guangdong Province - the Patriotic Association and the Commission for Church Affairs - was the first successful religious entity, which received the license on April 28, it was followed by the Protestant Guangdong Union Theological Seminary, which received its license on April 29. Meanwhile, courses and exams for prospective “religious information verification personnel continue - the organization applying for a license must prove that it has such qualified verifiers.

Yet individual use of online communication for ministry has been proliferating. A Korean missionary who has been training pastors and church-planters in China for the past twenty years told me recently that the pandemic has brought a “multiplier effect” to their ministries. All was routine even after they began to have online classes in 2015. But when the lockdowns started in early 2020, the alumni and the students have reported to him that their churches and ministries have “gone viral,” beyond their control, as small groups multiplied in-person as well as online.

CONCLUSION

China's fight against extreme poverty may be over, but the urban-rural divide lingers: revitalizing rural areas has mixed success, and many still struggle to find their niche. There are still about 280 million migrant workers, the majority of whom flow into the second- and third-tier cities in recent years. This provides China's Christians with some references in terms of locations to prioritize for multiplying urban churches, perhaps moving from first-tier cities to those of second, third, and fourth tiers.

Gladly what the Xi renewed persecution has failed to do, the pandemic has been instrumental to make evangelism more convenient for Chinese believers. Because of this public health crisis, the church has to function in “underground” and “informal” forms, which has enabled the church to grow faster and more broadly.

In a recent survey on “How Chinese become Christians” conducted just before the pandemic, 74.6% come from Christian background (2nd generation). The primary reason that actually led urban Chinese to trust in Christ is personal evangelism or, by various channels, to hear and agree with what was heard about the gospel. The second is to solve practical needs that cannot be solved, such as illness. The third is to enter into a fellowship of Christian love, to study the Bible, and worship God. All these were made more personal, relational and contextual by the pandemic, which has enhanced effective ministries and effected church multiplication and expansion beyond human expectation.

The internet has not become the main tool for the conversion of Chinese people's beliefs yet. One major factor is the government's vigorous control of the internet. Radio and video products also have limited impact, due to other factors. In the past, the most important media that influence Chinese people to become Christians are the Bible and other Christian writings. This shows that the choice of media by the Chinese is closely related to the educational status of Christians in urban China. It also shows that the traditional culture of “writing is for conveying truth” still regulates the Chinese mindset. Hence the need for Bible printing and distribution persists for the growth of the Chinese church.

Yet despite all the tensions, there seems to be a growing consensus among most pastors and churches that online pastoral care is important, especially in the ongoing pandemic context, even if on-the-ground and in-person meetings are still more important, indeed irreplaceable. More and more church leaders have been organizing their ministries with “more small groups, more household-oriented and more online. May they also shift clearly towards “house church ecclesiology as they move into the post-pandemic era.

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