

## Experimenting with Christian Education for Mainland Chinese Immigrants

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### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on fifteen years of church-planting experience among Mainland Chinese immigrants in Calgary, Canada, with a focus on our teaching ministry. While recognizing the uniqueness of our experience, I present it as one potential approach for those working with Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada. Furthermore, I intend to highlight this study as a ministry strategy, one that entails astute discerning of the context, humble learning from others, courageous exploring of new avenues, critical self-evaluation, and ultimately, reliance on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The central question driving this study is how to effectively teach Mainland Chinese immigrants about Christian *learning and living*. My study consists of three sections: first, a close examination of the congregation at hand; second, an exploration of five relevant approaches from the Christian education field;

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and lastly, a proposal of an eclectic discipling model with its five components.

## **II. THE DESCRIPTIVE MOMENT: REFLECTING ON MY MINISTRY EXPERIENCE**

In this section I first describe the profile of the congregation I pastored and then reflect on my teaching experience there, sensitive to who I was and how I related to my congregation.

### **The Profile of the Congregation**

No one can describe the profile of any people group without risking oversimplification. While aware of this risk, I identify three influences impacting my congregants' perception of Christian learning and living and some challenges in teaching them.

#### **1. Influences on Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Calgary**

Calgary is Canada's center for oil and gas production and engineering service, so it attracts many Chinese professionals. I joined our new church in 2001, which included international graduate students (like myself), visiting professors, and skilled workers. Many immigrants had never read the Bible or attended a church service. All members except the missionaries came from Mainland China, especially northern China. Three key influences on this group impacted their view of Christian teachings: Chinese tradition, dialectical materialism, and modernism.

Chinese tradition and culture maintain a significant influence, despite the attacks on Confucianism and Taoism by progressive Chinese scholars and social activists in the twentieth century. Taiwanese scholars' critical studies of Chinese philosophies offer two important insights into this enduring impact. First, these Chinese traditional philosophies center on relationships among humans (Confucianism) or between humans and nature (Taoism). Although ancient literature mentions a divine being, Confucius's humanism and Laozi's naturalism

replaced this idea.<sup>2</sup> Abstracted from these two schools of thought, Chinese tradition stresses inner peace and personal cultivation, as well as harmonization among humans and between humans and nature.<sup>3</sup> Generally, Chinese culture is group-orientated, and literature often represents ideal Chinese people as compliant, relational, and practical. Second, Dong Zhongshu modified and promoted Confucianism as *the* ideology in the Han dynasty (around 150 BCE). He institutionalized the feudal ethical code that became the norm to regulate social order for the following two thousand years.<sup>4</sup> This ethical code legitimizes hierarchy and defines honor and shame—i.e., something is honorable when it is proper according to the code. So for two thousand years, the Chinese people have based ethics not on justice but on *propriety*.

From my preliminary study of Chinese culture, two relevant implications emerge. First, the Chinese usually employ a traditional teaching model that tends to transmit knowledge as information without

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<sup>2</sup> Youzhong Shi, "Zhongguo de chuantong," [Chinese tradition] in *Zhongguo zhexue sixiang lunji: Zonglun pian*, eds. Weixin Xiang and Fuzeng Liu, Mutong wenshi congshu 15 (Taipei: Mutong, 1976), 1:35-48; Shi Hu, "Zhongguo zhexue li de kexue jingshen yu fangfa," [Scientific ethos and methods in Chinese philosophies] in *Zhongguo zhexue sixiang lunji*, 1:2-34. Hu ("Zhongguo zhexue li de kexue jingshen yu fangfa," 1:10) writes, "The ancient concept of 'Heaven' or 'God,' implied in ancient literature such as *Shijing* and *Yasong*, is a sovereign over humanity and cosmos. He knows, feels, loves, and hates. Besides him, there are all kinds of spirits that control the fate of humanity." (my translation from the Chinese)

<sup>3</sup> Shi, "Zhongguo de chuantong," 1:35-48. Cf. Yutang Lin, ed., *The Wisdom of Confucius*, trans. Yutang Lin, The Modern Library (New York: Random, 1938), 6. He writes, "To put briefly, Confucianism stood for a rationalized social order through ethical approach, based on personal cultivation. It aimed at political order by laying the basis for it in a moral order, and it sought political harmony by trying to achieve the moral harmony in man himself. Thus, its most curious characteristic was the abolition of the distinction between politics and ethics." Confucianism promotes a positive view of humanity with self-actualized morality considered possible.

<sup>4</sup> Yingshi Yu, "Fanzhilun yu zhongguo zhengzhi chuantong" [Anti-intellectualism and the tradition of Chinese politics], in *Zhongguo zhexue sixiang lunji*, 1:135-50. Ancient Confucianism tends to limit the ruling class's power and advocate a policy of benevolence: rulers must attend to their subjects' needs, and the people must respect their rulers. According to Yu, Dong Zhongshu drew on another school of thought, Legalism (Han Fei), and constituted the so-called "Three Doctrines": (1) subjects must submit to their monarch, (2) sons, to their fathers, and (3) wives, to their husbands. These doctrines underlie the Chinese traditional ethical code that predominated China until the 1900s. Dong probably also revived the use of "sons of God" and applied it to the sovereignty of monarchs.

encouraging critical thinking. Second, although Chinese culture emphasizes respect for teachers, it tends to honor male elders while expressing skepticism towards young or female leaders. As a young woman, I needed to work harder to earn my congregation's respect and trust.

The second influence is dialectical materialism (e.g., Marxism and Maoism). Without presenting the whole history of modern China here, I will describe one observation during my research on Chinese traditional philosophies. To compare different perspectives, I read studies from both Mainland China and Taiwan published between 1976 and 1981.<sup>5</sup> Without exception the Mainland group employed a dichotomic framework of materialism and idealism to evaluate each school of thought. Mainland historians shared highly similar, if not identical, interpretations of Chinese traditional thoughts. I found the cause of this dominating voice in the preface of a 1980 edited volume.<sup>6</sup> In 1979 humanities scholars from the top universities, such as Beijing University, met and discussed *approaches to* the history of Chinese thoughts. They agreed to use (sinicized) Marxism and Maoism as *the* conceptual framework to study history. Since then, Mainland Chinese scholars have conducted official studies of philosophy and history subjects through *the* hermeneutical lens of dialectical materialism. As a result, history textbooks portray Christianity as tied to Western imperialism, so they label it the "spiritual opium" (using Marx's words). Therefore, most modern Mainland Chinese embrace materialism and regard Christianity as mere superstition, if not a Western weapon to invade China. Mainland Chinese, in general, approach Christian teachings with a hermeneutic of suspicion.

<sup>5</sup> 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution. For Taiwan sources, see, e.g., Weixin Xiang and Fuzeng Liu, eds., *Zhongguo zhixue sixiang lunji*. For Mainland sources, see, e.g., Kong Fan et al., eds., *Zhongguo zhixue lishi* [The History of Chinese Philosophies], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Xianbang Yang et al., eds., *Zhongguo zhixueshi fangfa taolunji* [The Collected Essays on the Methodology of the History of Chinese Philosophies] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science, 1980).

The third influence is modernism and scientism. Chinese intellectuals who studied abroad introduced these Western Enlightenment ideas to China in the 1900s, even though the officials denounced whoever promoted Western thoughts during the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping reopened China and provided space for Western ideas after becoming Chairman in 1978. Mainland Chinese remember Deng's pragmatism and determination to modernize China by encouraging scientific research and technological development.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, STEM subjects became popular in college overnight. Productivity became the driving force behind intellectual inquiries, and material wealth became the predominant pursuit. As a result, philosophical reflections on the importance of life and ethics became marginalized as science and technology became *the* solution to social problems in Mainland China. This marginalization led to China's drastic decline in morality. But the promotion of modernism in China provided STEM students opportunities to study abroad or immigrate to Canada as skilled workers at the turn of the twentieth century, hence our Calgary church plant.

In summary, Christianity is a foreign faith to the people we minister. While embracing a materialist worldview and the Marxist view of Christianity, they tended to suspect the Christian faith. Immigrating to Canada, however, they encountered challenges that shook their confidence in materialism and self-competence; such challenges often pushed them toward spiritual inquiry. Understanding these influences on Chinese immigrants has a direct bearing on our ministry if we want to teach them effectively. We must not *simply* apply any teaching model used in a traditional church in Hong Kong or a house church in Mainland China to these immigrants in Calgary. Next I will discuss the opportunities and challenges of teaching them about the Christian faith.

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese credit Deng with "opening the door of China." His "open-up" policy encouraged the West to reenter China. His most known slogan is, "A cat, no matter black or white, is a good cat as long as it catches mice." The Chinese interpret this slogan to mean that anything, whether of capitalism or socialism, is good as long as it is productive. Deng's leadership brought about economic reformation in China. But he became more controversial after the Student Movement in 1989.

## **2. Opportunities and Challenges for Teaching Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Canada**

The challenges faced by new immigrants allow our church plants to minister to them. When faced with challenges and feeling helpless, these immigrants often seek the church for emotional support, social relationships, and practical help. Their spiritual hunger opens a door for evangelism. But their needs introduce alternative agendas for the church, such as helping immigrants settle in Canada, as immigrant associations do, instead of discipling Christians. In our Chinese ministry, we often struggle to balance meeting people's practical needs and teaching them about God as their Lord. Moreover, we face challenges in teaching immigrants from Mainland China due to the influences mentioned above, such as suspicion of religions in general and Christianity in specific.

Our churches serve professionals such as university professors, medical doctors, and engineers who have immersed themselves in materialism and modernism in China. Although they enjoy Christians' friendship, they question Christian teachings. Initially, most of them scorn any idea that is not "material," "rational," or "scientific," thus requiring a rational presentation of Christian thought. Formal Bible studies, however, often remind them of studying Mao's Red Book, so Christian ethics seem like yet another code system. Having left an authoritarian environment, they naturally resist restrictions. So they yearn for spiritual power and sincere love, but their modernist minds keep doubting the supernatural; they think highly of Christian values but do not want to let us disciple them toward Christian living. Therefore, we must remain flexible and patient, willing to meet them where they are without forcing conversions.

Notably, all these influences—Chinese tradition, dialectical materialism, and Deng's modernism—share one characteristic: practicality. The Chinese are *practical* people concerned with issues pertinent to daily life. Most Chinese people would consider eternal life irrelevant if they could not find jobs today. Many Mainland Chinese immigrants, even after becoming Christians, consider spirituality

intangible, knowledge of God abstract, and submission to God impractical. They find life transformation insignificant compared to successful lives in Canada. In many cases, life crises provide the only doors to Jesus. So Christian teachers must intentionally seek opportunities to make disciples when offering practical care. Next, I will state the theological lesson I have learned from encountering these challenges in Calgary.

### **III. REFLECTION ON MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

When I partnered with missionaries and became the Chinese leader of my Calgarian church, I was 25, a woman, and the youngest in the adult congregation, and I had been in school all my life. To the people I taught, I was a kid from an ivory tower without any life experience or practical wisdom.

An informal yet intentional, care-oriented approach— instructing to make disciples while sharing life with people—helped me in my context for several reasons. For instance, seeing teaching as making disciples attends to one's way of life instead of just transmitting head knowledge. Through intentional (but not manipulative) relationship building, those involved build trust and begin to share their struggles. Disciple-makers observe their learners' lives and help them reflect on their experiences. They address more specific questions related to faith. They question assumptions behind their disciples' questions,<sup>8</sup> challenging them to rethink their presuppositions. I find it easier to mentor someone to read the Bible and pray when I can do that with her regularly, building an intimate relationship by attending to personal concerns.

Most challenging, the disciple-maker must remain sensitive to the Spirit's leading and flexible in scheduling. I have learned to pray, "Lord, show me where you are working so I can join in your work"

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<sup>8</sup> Teachers can question disciples' assumptions more easily in one-on-one time rather than in a group meeting to avoid publicly shaming people.

and then wait and see. I keep learning that the best teaching does not occur through classroom lectures but through "a series of teachable moments."<sup>9</sup>

After my years in Calgary, I identify with Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:10: "But by God's grace, I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Paul trusted in God's grace, yet he worked hard. Many question, "If only union with Christ matters and Christ's ministry itself redeems people, why must we *do* anything?" But if we understand "by God's grace, I am what I am" and trust that his grace triumphs, we will not want to sit back but to join in his work. Paradoxically, our honesty about our weakness shows his power (2 Cor. 4:7; 12:1-10). This personal experience deepens my understanding of God and myself. As a teacher I must usher God's people to the Teacher, meaning that God and I journey together. I must guide those under my care but do not have *the* authority for the final say. My reflection on experience shapes my theology of teaching—teaching concerns not merely curriculums and pedagogy (or andragogy) but, most importantly, ***how to be a teacher*** who fears God and follows Jesus Christ.

Up to this point, I have reflected on my teaching experience in a particular context: Mainland Chinese church plants in Calgary, Canada. Having done this, I also want to demonstrate that effective teachers must exegete their teaching context and understand their potential contribution and limitation. Beyond this, effective teachers must also become life-long learners of teaching, continuing to learn about "***teaching to change lives.***"<sup>10</sup> In this regard I turn to the second stage of my project: searching for Christian education approaches.

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<sup>9</sup> Howard G. Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives* (Cleveland: Pathway, 1987), 44.

<sup>10</sup> Hendricks, *Teaching to Change Lives*.

#### IV. THE LEARNING MOMENT: SEARCHING FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION APPROACHES

After an interpretive description of our ministry context, we must consider this question: what approach(es) can we use to instruct these people about Christian learning and living? Admittedly, when doing ministry in the real world, few pastors care about abstract academic discussions; we *experiment* with our best knowledge or instinct and *adjust and adapt* as we go. But when searching for answers to my question as a theologian now, I must engage in Christian education dialogues and learn how practical theologians categorize and assess practices. Yet understanding academic discourse on Christian education is challenging. For instance, practical theologians and Christian educators share no consensus on how to *think about* Christian education, much less on how to *practice* it.<sup>11</sup>

Two factors add to this complexity. First, different scholars define the term "Christian education" differently. Some scholars use it for teaching ministry in the church while using the term "theological education" for teaching religious subjects in universities. Other scholars, especially those in the US, use "Christian education" for undergraduate Christian religious education and "theological education" for graduate (and seminary) studies. Second, Christian teaching-learning includes multiple facets, such as teaching content, goal, pedagogy (or andragogy), and theological justification. Therefore, any classification of Christian education will inevitably cause a reduction and distortion of this complexity.

Due to these difficulties, I must limit my scope of inquiry. In this project I focus on ecclesial teaching ministry and merely seek to construct a *working* taxonomy relevant to my Chinese experience to

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Wilkey Collinson, *Making Disciples: The Significance of Jesus' Educational Methods for Today's Church*, Paternoster Theological Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 145-61. She names some of the difficulties of researching Christian education approaches.

position diverse ways of practicing Christian education in the church. In what follows I will briefly describe five approaches:<sup>12</sup> religious instruction, faith community, spiritual development, mission, and reproduction of discipleship training.<sup>13</sup>

### **1. Religious Instruction**

This approach aims at passing on the community's *tradition* and thus focuses on content. It asks this question: what do we believe? Churches use a variety of ways ranging in formality to conduct religious instruction. For instance, liturgy, the creeds, and theology-laden hymns continue to play roles in teaching tradition, albeit more often found in conservative high churches. Some churches, high or low, continue to use *catechesis* for baptism preparation. In addition, many long-established traditional churches in Hong Kong and Taiwan prefer *Sunday school classes* with professionally published curriculums as their primary teaching model. The education department of a denomination used to produce curriculums for their churches. But with the decline of denominational commitment and the increasing demand for technology to keep children interested, many churches turn to more professional publishers. Churches lacking the resources for well-structured Sunday school classes use informal yet ordered learning to pass on their traditions. For instance, one of my Chinese minister friends teaches Christian doctrines in her one-on-one time with interested seekers. Her format, albeit informal, aims at doctrinal instruction. Therefore, her format exemplifies another type of religious instruction.

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<sup>12</sup> Scholars reach no consensus on using such words as "models" (or "paradigms"), "approaches," or "methods" in classification. For instance, Collinson refers to "schooling" and "discipling" models (Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 145-61), while Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller name their groupings "approaches to Christian education" (Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller, eds., *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1982]).

<sup>13</sup> Seymour uses these names: religious instruction, faith community, spiritual development, liberation, and interpretation (Jack L. Seymour, "Approaches," in *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education*, 11-34). I modify their taxonomy to better account for my Chinese experience.

When advocates of small-group ministry question formal teaching's usefulness in cultivating faith *as life*, they tend to judge traditional teaching as indoctrination.<sup>14</sup> These advocates provide checks and balances for the religious instruction approach's overemphasis on the cognitive dimension of Christian education. But if we distrust ordered learning, we easily risk promoting anti-intellectual ethos. Today, as post-Christian ideologies invade Christian academies and churches, we must revisit these earlier critiques of ordered learning and question the limit of de-indoctrination.<sup>15</sup> When working with Mainland Christians who grew up without Christian tradition, we must instruct them on Christian beliefs and values *at a certain point* of their Christian journey so they will mature intellectually and resist cultural waves (Eph. 4:14).

## 2. Faith Community

This approach aims at nurturing believers through communal activities, with the perception of the church as God's people *experiencing life together*. Compared with religious instruction, the faith community approach shifts the educational focus from the cognitive dimension of faith to a more holistic consideration. Due to its focus, this approach often starts with revisiting ecclesiology, asking, what is the nature of the church? Different answers to this question might lead to various methods of Christian education.

For instance, Andres Tang argues that Sunday worship should become Christian education's primary space and time.<sup>16</sup> Worshiping together, Tang maintains, will move the *church community* toward

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970); Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Ministries Resources Library, 1975); Harley Atkinson and Joshua Rose, "The Small-Group Ministry Movement of the Last Four Decades," *Christian Education Journal* 17 (2020): 547-59.

<sup>15</sup> For benefits of ordered learning, see Edward Farley, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Andres S. Tang, "Teaching in the Church-Community from the Perspective of Sanctification," *Hill Road* 19 (2016): 59-74.

sanctification as they learn to distinguish themselves from secular cultures. In contrast, in 1970 Laurence Richards proposed a *family-groups-congregation* model to help the church transfer Christian education back to Christian parents' hands.<sup>17</sup> Richards's justification includes two major points. First, formal learning—e.g., Sunday school, sermons, and weekday clubs—cause parental irresponsibility. Second, Christians learn and practice the Christian faith more holistically in real-life situations such as regular gatherings at home. Harley Atkinson and Joshua Rose focus on small groups, noting how they prevailed in American religious life in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Although they think positively of small groups' usefulness, they question what small groups might produce and wonder whether their popularity reflects (American) pragmatism.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990s Robert Wuthnow addressed similar concerns. Based on his research on small groups and spirituality, Wuthnow concludes that "small groups cultivate spirituality, but it is a *particular* kind of spirituality."<sup>20</sup> What small groups tend to cultivate are "me-first religion," an "anything-goes form [of] spirituality," and "cheap-grace spirituality." However, Anna Clare Creedon notes two key factors that will hinder or facilitate a small group's transformative function: clear purpose and intentional leadership.<sup>21</sup> She implies that whether small groups can be effective in fostering Christian transformation highly depends on their leaders.

By comparison, house churches in Mainland China face different challenges. Whereas open societies deliberately choose small-group

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<sup>17</sup> Richards, *A New Face for the Church*.

<sup>18</sup> Atkinson and Rose, "Small-Group Ministry Movemen of the Last Four Decades." Cf. Robert Wuthnow, ed., *"I Come Away Stronger": How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Atkinson and Rose, "Small-Group Ministry Movement of the Last Four Decades," 552.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Wuthnow, "The Small-Group Movement in the Context of American Religion," in *"I Come Away Stronger"*, 356.

<sup>21</sup> Anna Clare Creedon, "An Analysis of the Small Group Processes That Hinder or Facilitate Transformative Biblical Engagement" (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2019). Cf. Joel Comiskey and Jim Egli, *Groups that Thrive: 8 Surprising Discoveries about Life-Giving Small Groups* (Moreno Valley, CA: CCS Publishing, 2018).

ministry, house churches prevail in Mainland China for survival. When the Chinese Communist Party shut down all church buildings in the 1950s, Mainland fundamental Christians went underground throughout the 1960s and 70s to continue their gatherings.<sup>22</sup> Even after the government allowed Christian churches to re-open in the 1980s, these house churches remained hidden from the public.<sup>23</sup> Despite their faithfulness in the face of persecution, underground churches lack thoughtful Christian education. Yet, since the hostile environment sifts weeds away from the wheat, Chinese house churches rarely produce me-first religion or cheap-grace spirituality. However, they may fall into the anything-goes form of spirituality, albeit for a different reason than American small groups—Chinese house churches lack robust theological training.

### 3. Spiritual Development

This approach aims at *individual* faith development (or spiritual formation). It draws on developmental psychology and emphasizes nurturing children to faith. Compared with the first two paradigms, spiritual development shifts its priority from the church community to individual believers; hence, it asks, what is human nature? Some churches employ a schooling model using professionally made curriculums with age-appropriate activities, whereas others use more informal models such as pastoral counseling or support groups. Regardless of what format one prefers, users of the developmental approach must watch the tendency of theological liberalism that favors Christian existentialism and prioritizes insights from psychology over theology. Although pastoral theologians often draw insights from other disciplines, we must remember the lesson neo-orthodox theologians learned after the Wars—we must ground theology on God's revelation.

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<sup>22</sup> Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Fuk-tsang Ying and Ka-Lun Leung, *The Three-self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s* (Hong Kong: Jiandao Seminary, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> I belonged to a house church in the 1990s and have occasionally gone back to train house church leaders during the last two decades.

Some Mainland ministers told me that the government did not allow teaching children religion even in the Three-self churches (government-approved churches). But when I trained ministers in a Chinese underground seminary in 2012, the seminary president's wife wrote children's Sunday school curriculums, so house churches must have conducted children's Christian education to a certain extent. By comparison, Christian parenting and pastoral counseling are innovative ideas to Mainland churches. Recently, urban Christian ministers have become more interested in integrating psychology with pastoral care. Last year one of my Christian friends, who helps with children and youth ministry in her house church in Zhejiang, called me about training materials about developmental psychology. This year a Mainland pastor couple indicated that they had appropriated psychological skills in their pastoral ministry in the past ten years. Therefore, I believe churches in Mainland China have adopted this developmental approach to Christian education.

#### 4. Mission

This approach aims at learning to follow Jesus through *doing missions together*. It has an outward focus and asks, what is the church's mission? Like the religious instruction and life community approaches, the mission approach emphasizes the church community instead of individuals. Jack L. Seymour names this approach "liberation."<sup>24</sup> When used in the West, this approach orients toward social justice. Unlike Seymour, I use a more generic phrase, mission, because Chinese churches rarely conceptualize the church's mission as liberation (a notion reminiscent of Marxism). Chinese evangelical churches, both in the Mainland and in the West, tend to avoid social subjects, owing to their fear of conflicts and traditional understanding of soteriology. But even those concerned about social injustices—e.g., Hong Kong progressive evangelicals and Mainland Christian

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<sup>24</sup> Seymour, "Approaches," 11-34.

human rights lawyers—pursue different justice issues than mainline progressive Christians in the US do.

Even though the majority of Chinese evangelical churches pay less attention to social sins, they remain active in gospel-centered missions and humanitarian work. Some churches intentionally employ this approach for Christian education, such as those who adopt a church-planting church model or happiness group model. The former model seeks to disciple the congregation by calling and sending families to another area to plant a new church. The Canadian Chinese Christian Mission and Alliance churches often use this model, although whether they deliberately use it to educate their church members remains questionable. Regarding the latter model, the Blessed & Blessing Church in Taiwan first developed and introduced it to Edmonton Chinese churches in 2019. The congregation I used to pastor experimented with the happiness group model during the pandemic.

Although the happiness group model employs many techniques the small-group movement has used, it differs from the previous home group model because it focuses on not believers-doing-life-together but believers-working-together-to-evangelize. It focuses on mission. Still, a happiness group aims at not only evangelism but also discipleship through working together.<sup>25</sup> The leaders of my Calgary congregation indicated that the church kept baptizing new believers even during the pandemic because the members employed this model and continued to participate in evangelism through Zoom during lockdowns. Without denying the usefulness of this model, I question its overemphasis on human emotion and experience. If the happiness group substitutes other approaches, I worry that the church would keep a shallow understanding of a rich Christian tradition and that its members would remain vulnerable to cultural ideas or the confusion of ideologies

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<sup>25</sup> Introduction to this ministry can be found on their official website, <<https://www.happinessgroup.org>> (accessed 14 August 2022).

when interacting with those they attempt to offer a different interpretation of human brokenness and remedy.

## **5. Reproduction of Discipleship Training**

This last approach aims at multiplying disciple-makers. Likely no Christian educators would deny that making disciples is one important goal of Christian education. But Sylvia Wilkey Collinson argues that *discipling* best describes Jesus's educational methods and that Protestant circles have ignored it; she names her Christian education model "discipling." She defines Christian discipling as "an intentional, largely informal, learning activity in which two or a small group of individuals typically in a community holding to the same religious beliefs, make a voluntary commitment to each other to form a close, personal relationship for an extended period of time, to enable the disciples to learn from the other."<sup>26</sup> Collinson's work articulates what characterizes the *discipling act*, e.g., being relational, intentional, mainly informal, typically communal, reciprocal, and centrifugal in focus. Her model describes most closely what I have experienced in my Christian journey in Mainland China, but the Christian learning and living I experienced in China emphasized *reproducing discipleship training*.

After my friend and I became Christians, a Christian who converted one year earlier than we did formed a group for us. She became our mentor and walked us through a series of discipleship materials. Eventually our number grew to ten. As described by Collinson, we became committed to each other by frequently sharing meals, hanging out, and praying together. However, going beyond Collinson's description, our leader shared her vision that we would "reproduce" her work. So a year later I began a new group with a new believer and shared this vision with her. This way multiplied quickly.

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<sup>26</sup> Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 161.

But we met difficulties when we wanted to ***do church***. First, the model never taught us what to do as a church. Missionaries told us that we did not need to have our own church, suggesting we attend a Three-self or house church for Sunday services. Despite knowing little, I questioned the notion of church implied in their suggestion. Second, the model never taught us beyond ***basic*** gospel truths. Missionaries gave us the Bible to read. But no one taught us how to interpret or meditate on it for spiritual growth, so I remained superficial in my faith.

Years later, when I heard of Ying Kai's ***Training for Trainers*** (T4T model), I recalled my experience in China.<sup>27</sup> Scholars who have never experienced overseas missions tend to overly praise or criticize Ying Kai's model.<sup>28</sup> My missionary friends associated with Ying Kai offered more insight in evaluating his model. They say Ying Kai's pastoral experience and theological depth contributed to his success using the T4T model in the mission field. As implied, Ying Kai's "followers" might not repeat his success if they lack his pastoral experience and wisdom.

Even though I realize the limitation of reproducing discipleship training, I include it in this list of Christian education approaches. For I believe working with immigrants who have no background in the Christian faith requires skills required of missionaries, such as flexibility and courage to experiment with different methods. Now I turn to the last stage of my project.

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<sup>27</sup> See Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-revolution* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources), 2011.

<sup>28</sup> For critiques of the T4T model, see Adam Coker, "A Strange Sort of Orthodoxy: An Analysis of the T4T and CPM Approach to Missions," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 59 (2016): 77-87; John Henry Serworwora, "The Ecclesiology of Training for Trainers: The Issue of Method and 1 Timothy 3:6," *Great Commission Research Journal* 6 (2014): 91-114; George A. Terry, "A Missiology of Excluded Middles: An Analysis of the T4T Scheme for Evangelism and Discipleship," *Themelios* 42 (2017): 335-52.

## V. THE PRAGMATIC MOMENT EXPERIMENTING WITH AN ECLECTIC DISCIPLING MODEL

I have examined the context in question, reflected on my personal experience, and studied how practical theologians talked about Christian education for the church, I now come to the pragmatic moment, namely, what approach I propose for teaching Chinese immigrants about Christian learning and living. But before then, I want to recap that these five approaches—religious instruction, faith community, spiritual development, mission, and reproduction of discipleship training—have different focuses: passing on tradition, cultivating community life, developing individual faith, conducting missions together, and multiplying disciple-makers. Correspondingly, each approach has its focused question: What do we believe? What is the nature of the church? What is human nature? What is the church's mission? What is disciple-making? Seymour notes that Christian education approaches are not mutually exclusive.<sup>29</sup> They all have their uses in specific contexts and purposes. Regarding Christian learning and living, we need both knowledge and experience, tradition and (re)interpretation of tradition, inward community discipleship and outward missions. The question is, what must we do *here* and *now*? In other words, teaching ministry takes wisdom to discern the context. In hindsight I understand why our Calgary ministry team needed to experiment with different methods and sometimes adjust. Also, I understand why my mentor encouraged us to prayerfully discern *together* where God is working and what we must do to follow the Spirit's movement.

Given my understanding of the context of Chinese immigrants in Calgary, I propose an eclectic discipling model as the most suitable approach to conduct Christian education in the Calgary context. Discipling, more than a "model" to conduct teaching per se, first conceptualizes teaching as one life impacting another life. Practically,

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<sup>29</sup> Seymour, "Approaches," 11.

this model encompasses five components we have found effective under our circumstances, focusing on making disciple-makers. Now I will explain the five major components.

### **1. Discipling in One-on-One Time**

The first component focuses on one-on-one time. The teacher must listen, discern, build a trusting relationship, and identify God's activities in the disciple. The Spirit will lead disciple-makers to know what to do with everyone as the disciple-maker seeks his guidance. For instance, sometimes I describe what I perceive God is doing in an individual, something she cannot see. Sometimes I train new believers to meditate on Scripture or listen to the Spirit during Scripture-prayer time. Sometimes I answer questions, but mainly I listen to the assumptions behind their questions and challenge them to critique their thinking. When they yield to the Lord in their lives and experience his grace and power, I celebrate with them. However, one should not force one-on-one discipleship or plan it as long-term since either might result in unhealthy co-dependence.

### **2. Discipling in Small Groups**

The second component helps believers participate in small groups such as home groups. We note the importance of creating a safe and meaningful learning community where disciples care for and learn from each other. In Calgary our church rents space only on Sundays, so we hold many church activities in homes. Homes help nurture a learning community and fit Chinese culture. When people open their homes to others, they let down their guards, so private homes often create a safer environment for people to share their lives. Small groups, however, also involve chaos and risk. I have had many awkward moments when I entered a home and immediately knew that the couple had just fought. But teaching the whole person also means participating in the messiness of human lives. In his incarnation Jesus enters our lives' messiness to love us. As disciple-makers we should share Jesus's love for messy humanity—each of us included.

### 3. Discipling in Classrooms

The third component takes us into ordered learning. In proposing the eclectic model, I never intend to diminish the value of ordered learning. While I do not believe indoctrinating people necessarily transforms lives, I want the Chinese to learn Christian doctrines worked out in church history so they can correct their wrong conception of Christianity. But teachers must deal with expectations attached to structured learning in a Chinese context. As mentioned above, due to the influences of Chinese tradition and Marxism, the Chinese habitually transmit mere head knowledge. Most Chinese Christians I have discipled expect me to give them the correct answers or instruct them with steps a, b, and c to understand God's will—a functional view of God that assumes correct answers or methods must lead us to know God. I refuse to teach that way. Instead, I ask people questions to provoke thinking, seeking to lead them into a personal dialogue with Jesus.

### 4. Discipling in Life Crises

The fourth component concerns not a location but a life stage. Through my experience in Calgary, I have realized that the title of Pastor does not automatically build *trust* among the Mainland Chinese. Modern Chinese people do not assume trust, especially after the Revolution. The pragmatism promoted by Deng has pushed them even further away from each other because material gains have become more critical than human souls. Serving my church in Calgary, I learned that I must earn the trust of the congregants, not by impressing them with my biblical knowledge or teaching skills, but by remaining sincere and transparent. They do not need someone to preach *at* them. So, to disciple the Chinese in life crises, I recount my own life crises and invite them to witness what Jesus is doing in me so they might learn about his trustworthiness. I have found that life crises provide the best opportunity to teach people to pray, "Lord, have mercy on me!" Living through crises eventually deepens our knowledge of God's power and helps us grow stronger in our faith.

## 5. Discipling to Reproduce

Finally, the fifth component ensures that disciple-makers do not lose sight of their goal in discipling. Learning and teaching form a circle. The best way to learn is to teach, and the best way to improve teaching is to keep reflecting and learning. Of course, I do not mean to diminish the value of God calling individuals into leadership. I believe, however, in the priesthood of every believer (1 Peter 2:9). The discipling paradigm eliminates control in a hierarchical culture and allows believers gifted by the Spirit to lead and teach. Disciple-makers must not draw those they are discipling to themselves. Instead, they must point them back to their Master and trust that in union with Jesus, they will share in Jesus's ministry of discipling wherever the Spirit leads, e.g., in their workplace. As a pastor and teacher, I seek to assure people of Jesus's work in them and equip them for works of service (Eph. 4:11-13).

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this essay I wrestle with two questions: How can we understand Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada? How can we conduct effective Christian education (i.e., Christian learning and living) for them? After interpreting the congregation at hand and searching for Christian education approaches, I propose an eclectic discipling model encompassing five components: discipling in one-on-one time, in small groups, in classrooms, through life crises, and for reproduction. In hindsight this model would have worked better for our church *plants*. After our Calgary church grew to over two hundred people, we met new challenges. For instance, some decried the lack of pastoral care or mediocre quality of worship services. These Christians eventually left for a more established church that offered more structured worship and Sunday school classes. Some left the church when challenges arose because we did not help their faith take root in our Christian tradition. Conversely, others left the church when life got so smooth that they no longer needed the Christian God or fellowship. And today our Calgary

congregations meet new challenges. The leaders told me that younger newcomers have a different profile from the earlier immigrants. So the leaders continue to understand the changing context, search for approaches, and experiment under the Spirit's guidance, hence the happiness groups during the pandemic. To conclude, conducting Christian education requires our commitment to God's church and willingness to understand, learn, and adventure with God.

## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an eclectic model drawing on different approaches to Christian education for Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada. It wrestles with two questions: How can we understand Mainland Chinese immigrants in Canada? How can we conduct effective Christian education (i.e., Christian learning and living) for them? I first "exegete" the congregation at hand, seeking to understand my context. Then I research the Christian education field for effective approaches. Finally, I propose an eclectic discipling model that encompasses five methodological components aiming to make disciple-makers.

## 摘要

儘管聖經提供了基本原則，但在實際操作中，基督教會的事工應該靈活多樣，根據時機和情況來決定。二十一世紀初，移居加拿大卡爾加里城的大陸新移民主要是技術移民。他們既缺乏基督教背景，又深受唯物主義的影響；即使對信仰有渴求，也因要重新建立在異國他鄉的新生活而疲於奔命。新移民容易被基督徒的友善和教會提供的各種免費活動吸引而加入教會，但要教導他們委身於基督徒和教會卻異常困難。針對這類移民羣體的教導事工必須考慮到這些羣體的特性，不應簡單地複製大陸家庭教會或香港台灣傳統教會的模式。本文作者總結和反思了在卡城植堂和牧會經驗，旨在探索加拿大的大陸移民事工如何以建立信徒生命為核心，進行福音傳遞以及培訓其他信徒能夠成為傳道的使者。