

Creative Access Mission – Lay Leadership Training in Asian Context

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Introduction

According to *Operation World* edited by Patrick Johnston and Jason Mandryk, Asia is the most populous but the least-evangelized area of the world (2001:39-41). Among the East Asia countries, more than 80 percent of the population resides in limited-access regions (Prescott 2001:3-4). “Limited-access regions” are countries where there is a political barrier to missionary entry and missionary service. These governments seek to prevent or restrict efforts at evangelization from foreign support; in particular, they deny entry to those identified as missionaries. However, although limited-access regions may be closed to traditional forms of mission, they are rarely closed to all foreigners. Many lay professionals have found ways to access these regions creatively as professionals in secular fields, such as English teachers or medical doctors. Though direct proclamation of the gospel in this context may not be possible, the way these lay professionals live in a non-Christian world has a significant impact on non-Christians’ perception about the gospel of the kingdom. It

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is not by word or act alone but also by their presence; sometimes their presence is itself a threat to the government. Perhaps in these situations overt witness is severely limited and a witness by life becomes the primary means.

Lay professionals are on the missionary frontier in the twenty-first century creative mission. They have the primary responsibility to share the good news of the kingdom to the needy. Consequently, a widespread need for better formation of lay professionals in the faith becomes increasingly clear in today's churches. However, the complexity of today's life in this world has made it difficult to design and establish an equipping ministry that is effective and manageable. This rapidly developing mission trend needs to be presented as both challenge and invitation to all lay professionals as they begin to be equipped for mission.

In the Asian context, the spontaneous expansion of the Chinese church forces us to rethink the strategy of training local leaders. Many lay pastors, with limited theological training, have taken major role in leading churches in Mainland China. Due to limited resources, these lay pastors have to work to support their ministry. The need for equipping these lay pastors is urgent. On the other hand, the traditional hierarchical Chinese culture limits the potential of church growth and multiplying church leaders.

In the past, mission responsibility in the church has been limited to a small number of specially trained and specially "called" professional missionaries and/or ministers. The underlying mentality has rendered God's people passive. For the rest of this paper, we attempt to unfold the difficulties in releasing the underdeveloped resource of laity in the Western church. The rapidly expansion of the Chinese church forces us to rethink the strategies for lay leadership training in a more relevant context. Developing a conceptual framework for a more inclusive curricular design that is theologically rigorous and contextually appropriate for these lay leaders (lay professionals serve in China and the local church leaders) who have a heart for the

Great Commission is urgently needed in response to the rapidly developing Asia creative-access mission in this century.

Under-use of Lay Resources

Four difficulties in releasing the underdeveloped resource of lay professionals have been identified in the church by Po (2004:59-60):

Passivity of the laity. One of the regrettable characteristics of the church today is the passivity of the laity. Many Christians just let others take up responsibilities while they themselves remain passive and disinterested in church business. The pastors are hired to get certain jobs done in the church. Apparently this problem is widely recognized by pastors and acknowledged by the laity. There are many reasons for the passivity of the laity: hierarchical organization in church offices, domination by intellectual meritocracy, and common misunderstanding of Christian vocation in the church.

Hierarchical organization. There has been a mounting criticism that the church has adopted hierarchical structures, similar to many secular organizations. Thus, there are some people who are perceived to be more important than others. This criticism is particularly true in the Chinese culture, where relationships such as teacher-student and employer-employee are hierarchical. The church will not get far in equipping the whole people of God for mission in such a hierarchical organization. Domination by intellectual meritocracy. The criticism that church leadership is dominated by intellectual meritocracy is more widely heard among laypersons than among the clergy. In many churches, status is earned by knowing. Ted W. Ward has rightly criticized the situation in most mainline denominational churches: "Once a magic bag of merit is in one's possession, it can be traded for honor and prestige (plus

a salary) at the friendly local church, and thus one maintains oneself – career and salary – more in terms of what one knows than what one is” (1996:29).

Misunderstanding of Christian vocation. Both the clergy and the laity tend to limit their understanding of Christian vocation as a call to the priesthood or religious life. In other words, pastors are called to full-time service in churches, and missionaries are called to serve cross-culturally. Ministry outside the church is rarely recognized and seldom rewarded. Ordinary Christians do not know or at least they are not taught that their daily work ought to be undertaken as a divine service to the glory of God. Consequently, the impact by the laity to witness for Christ at work is diminished.

In response to the trends of rapidly developing Chinese church, we need to rethink the strategies of training leaders in the new century. Unlike the leadership training in the West which is dominated by intellectual meritocracy, many church leaders in the Chinese church are from grass root. They have minimum education and limited theological training but they take up important role in leading the church. Many lay pastors work in the secular world and serve in the church. The theological understanding of Christian vocation and the meaning of “calling” need to be addressed in a cultural appropriate way. The rapid development of house church movement further flattens the hierarchical structure of the church. There is a great potential of releasing the underdeveloped resource of laity in the Chinese church. In the next section, we attempt to address several issues related to equipping lay leaders in the Asian context.

Curricular Variables for Equipping Lay Professionals

A holistic equipping approach for laity requires an ongoing process of decision-making to keep the process theologically sound and contextually appropriate.

WHY

The purpose of lay leadership training is the first question to be answered. The answer to the question of “why?” then becomes the principal guiding value along the way. The purpose of training lay leaders is to equip them for serving in limited-access regions. One of the main goals of lay leadership development is to multiply emergent spiritual leaders. As emphasized by the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy, he committed to Timothy the task of entrusting what he had learned to faithful men who would teach others also (2 Ti. 2:2). Paul repeatedly demonstrated the importance of this expectation of leaders in his own ministry. Thus, the equipping of lay professionals for mission should focus not only on expanding God’s kingdom, but also on the lifelong development of individuals.

However, education is geared to the political and economic ends in Chinese culture. Individual needs are not regarded as an area of high priority. As pointed out by Daniel D. Pratt, for the Chinese, human rights are derived from the society; there can be no such thing as individuals claiming rights against the society (1991:294). Rights are presented as privileges that can be granted or withheld by the state, depending upon the political or economic conditions. In addition, the emphasis within China on superior-inferior relations, obedience and order, and the maintenance of stability at the expense of individual rights indicates a good deal of external control and sanction which affect people’s identity (1991:295). This is obviously different from the Western culture in the sense that education is the expression and cultivation of individuality. As a result, the Chinese education system is more rigid than the Western ones. The difference in the Chinese culture and the Western culture helps us to reexamine the aims of equipping lay leaders.

WHO

When applied to training lay professionals, the learner selection functions as a confirmation of one's calling. It is important for the leaders of the church to broaden their theological understanding of missionary calling, not only limited to a special group of professional missionaries doing church planting and direct evangelism, but also recognizing lay professionals teaching English in the third world as bi-vocational missionaries of special calling and special training. These lay professionals have been welcomed by the government in limited-access regions to work as medical doctors, engineers, social workers, English teachers, and others. They can make use of their natural abilities, acquired skills, and spiritual gifts to serve the local people in limited-access regions and can bring new opportunities for service to the kingdom. The role of lay professionals in the marketplace will be strengthened if they reckon all gifts and talents to be blessings from God.

The rapidly growing Chinese church has forced the leaders to rethink the strategy for training lay pastors to serve cross-culturally. These lay pastors are called to follow Jesus and they may not have rigorous theological training. Due to limited resource in the church, many lay pastors have to work in the business world (tent-making) in order to reduce the financial burden of the church. Many of these lay pastors are called to serve cross-culturally, ministering from one province to another.

WHAT

The content of any Christian leadership training program is the whole gospel and the obedience it requires. The focus should be on the long-term effectiveness of the person who is serving rather than just a short-term engagement (Elliston 1999:247). For equipping lay professionals, an often neglected area in the Chinese Church is the practice of the "cultural mandate." The "cultural mandate" often refers to "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it," recorded in Genesis

1:28. Many leaders of the Chinese Church assume that equipping their members is mainly a “spiritual” ministry. They have invested most of the resources in training Bible study and personal evangelism leaders; for example, though these areas should not be neglected. Facing the tremendous changes in the twenty-first century “creative-access” mission, the Chinese Church needs to reevaluate the feasibility and suitability of the current lay leadership training program. In particular, the training program must include a wide range of content, such as spiritual formation, development of relational skills, Christian vocation, theology of work, theology of presence, ethics in the workplace, lay leadership training, and spiritual gifts in order to address issues that have long been overlooked.

HOW

The delivery system provides the mechanism for conveying missiological education to the learners. To have an optimally effective delivery system, one needs to balance contextually three basic training modes² and to give attention to the educational media and technologies to be used. The delivery system also serves as a significant formational influence on the learner. Elliston suggests some variables of the delivery system that need to be tailored to the local context: (1) the balance between self-directed learning and teacher-directed learning, (2) the balance between extraction from the ministry setting and extension of the learning to it, and (3) the focus on the dominant learning styles of the students (1996:248).

In the context of equipping lay professionals, if they participate in the design of the learning, they will learn to design. Upon receiving the calling from the Lord, these lay professionals become highly motivated and highly independent to learn,

² The three basic modes are formal, non-formal, and informal training (Clinton 1984:133-219; Merriam and Caffarella 1999:26).

they should be able to learn by themselves with minimum supervision. Thus, incorporating some kind of self-directed studies into a formal training setting seems feasible to meet the needs of these lay professionals for their lifelong development. In addition, since the high-technology media is accessible to these lay professionals, they can complete the studies in the mission field without being extracted from the ministry. Finally, lay professionals need to break with their old passive learning styles and adapt themselves by seeking a more self-directed approach to equipping in response to their calling to serve in limited-access regions.

WHEN

To optimize effectiveness, timing is an important issue to consider when designing training programs for lay professionals. Flexibility in timing within the training programs reflects a contemporary value that affects virtually every dimension of modern life. In other words, how can the timing be adjusted to best accomplish the purpose, given the constraints of these other variables? (Elliston and Kauffman 1993:159-160)

The non-formal and the informal modes of training are typically more flexible and shorter in terms of individual learning segments. They often fit better with in-service training. This is perhaps the trend of training lay leaders to serve cross-culturally in the Chinese church. However, Elliston rightly reminds us that the Apostle Paul's formal education was put to a very good use for the strengthening of the church (1999:250). One should not, therefore, totally decry formal education. Sherwood Lingenfelter also suggests a way to return the university to the service of the Church and the kingdom by refocusing on mission (1999:123). In the Chinese Church tradition, lay ministry has been the most under-developed area in the past. Many lay professionals who serve in the mission field and many local lay pastors do not receive formal training, and thus they are considered to be the second class to a

group of professional missionaries with special calling and special training. With flexible design in the training programs, these lay leaders can pursue formal training without interrupting their service in the mission field and the church.

Universities and seminaries should be able to make some significant timing adjustments, such as offering evening or weekend classes, one-week intensive courses, or self-directed learning programs, to allow students to complete a formal degree. Some degree programs even relax the residency requirement so that students can get the degree without coming to the campus. The training program, a combination of course work and fieldwork, structures the offering in such a way that lay leaders can complete the degree according to the individual's time span.

WHERE

The venue for equipping lay professionals is the mission field, the community and the workplace. The general principle is that the venue where equipping is done should be as similar as possible to the projected ministry environment and the local people to be served (Elliston and Kauffman 1993:161-162). Flexibility and creativity with the venue may be fostered in many ways, including offering intensive courses, extension courses, and self-directed studies through the use of advanced telecommunications technologies. Many on-the-job training are offered to equip lay leaders in the Chinese church.

Conclusion

Looking toward for the trend of leadership development in Asia in the twenty-first century, the laity becomes the mission frontier. The equipping of lay professionals from the West requires a paradigm shift in order to release the full potential of the laity in the church. In the context of Chinese house church movement,

the tremendous church growth requires rapid multiplication of leaders and mutual equipping. However, this shift from authoritarian to shared participation may be threatening to the existing leadership hierarchy in the Chinese culture. It challenges the leaders' spiritual authority. Though the mission tasks are many, the following recommendations center on the people to be developed.

1. Develop An Integrated and Lifelong Learning Perspective

Acknowledging the difference between Chinese and Western culture, the leaders of the Chinese Church must place greater emphasis on the lifelong development of lay professionals according to an individual's potential.

2. Implement Self-Directed Training

Self-directed formal training is desirable for lifelong development of lay professionals. Lay professionals can receive a formal training in intercultural studies in a self-directed learning mode in a few years while serving in the mission field. This approach to learning combines the advantages of the other two training modes—informal and non-formal; namely, practicality and flexibility.

3. Exercise Mutual Equipping and Empowerment in a Cultural Appropriate Way

Empowering others requires working beside them without holding them back. The Biblical leadership figure is Barnabas. When Barnabas and Paul went to Cyprus, the people observed that Barnabas was in charge (cf. Ac. 13:1–13). After leaving, Barnabas continued his growth-encouraging role by following Paul. Barnabas empowered Paul and was not afraid to see Paul lead. No longer were they referred to as “Barnabas and Saul,” but now as “Paul and Barnabas” (Ac. 15:36). More leaders like Barnabas are needed in today's church.

4. Undertake Research and Development in Creative-Access Mission

The Chinese church needs to invest more resources towards research and development in Asia creative-access mission so that it will not establish a long term

dependency from the West. The commitment is high, as much as the commitment to take up the cross and follow Jesus Christ.

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