

# Challenges brought to the British church by the mass migration of Hongkongers

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I am Rev. Chi Wai Wu. I retired last December. In mid-March this year, like many Hong Kong people, because of Hong Kong's new political reality—the National Security Law and the subsequent events, my wife and I were exiled to the UK.

I have been attending a nearby local Baptist church for more than 5 months. Because I have retired, I do not plan to become a pastor again in any church. Retirement, for me, is to step down from position and power, yet not to stop serving. In the past six months, other than preaching in wedding events, I have preached on Sundays and funerals, performed the sacraments, and baptized patients. I also regularly minister online and in person for my former church members who have settled here in different cities. I am now a voluntary pastor, without attachments to any churches nor organizations.

I am among the mass immigration. In the first half of this year, an average of more than 30,000 Hong Kong residents were granted British BNO visas. It is estimated that at least 100,000 Hong Kong residents will come to Britain this year.

If there are at least 100,000 Hongkongers moving to the UK, in which 30% of the population are estimated to be Christians (broadly speaking). We can picture from the beginning of this year to 2022, there will be 30,000 Christians scattered in different cities. This will bring a great challenge to the churches in the UK.

## **1. Disunity VS Unity**

Some scholars estimated that there are about 160 Chinese churches, fellowships and organizations in the UK in 2020. Rev. Henry Lu mentioned 170 when he spoke in this conference. His statistics shows that there are about 10,000 Chinese believers at most, gathering in different regions. If one-third of the 30,000 new Christian immigrants attend local Chinese churches, we expect to see a significant growth of many congregations.

This is especially true for churches in cities which are popular among the immigrants. From the perspective of marketing, this indeed is a good opportunity on the one hand. On the other hand, I doubt whether local Chinese churches can assimilate them in the long run. I have a pessimistic view towards this.

My opinion is, unless the church is newly formed, failure is expected. The reason is simple: Church leaders tend to minister in the way when they immigrated in the old days. Moreover, the congregation is usually made up of the Cantonese-speaking, the Mandarin-speaking and the English-speaking. There are differences between the two or three groups, especially after the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-extradition protests. Prior to the influx of immigrants in 2021, there were already splits in some congregations. It was reported that some Mandarin-speaking groups left. I believe that in the days to come, this kind of division will repeatedly happen.

Imagine this: There is only this Chinese church in a city. It has the longest history and its congregation is the largest, which is constituted of Hongkongers, those from Mainland China and Malaysians. Everything was fine until the church invites a pastor like me to preach. At once, some earlier immigrants become suspicious and disapprove of this controversial pastor, criticising that the church has changed her political colours. They then start a new church nearby.

Another scenario: Certain new Hongkongers came to the church, they were critical towards the service and gave some suggestions. However, these perceived as disrespectful to the church leaders. This will lead to a division. Before long, a new church of the Hongkongers starts in the same city.

If we analyse how Chinese immigration churches developed in other countries, like those in USA, Canada, Australia, church-planting happened because of divisions. Today, the Mandarin-speaking congregations in Europe appear to be constantly in division as well. This is to be expected also in the UK.

To Chinese churches, it's hard to tell whether this is an opportunity or a disaster. It depends on the mindset of the church leaders. I sincerely hope that Chinese church leaders accept the reality that people do come and go. There maybe a possibility that five to six churches co-exist in the same city within a short period of time.

The unity of the church is by no means the uniformity of churches in structure and organisation, but mutual respect and cooperation, albeit their differences.

Facing a pluralistic society, Chinese churches can manifest themselves in a diverse way. Some may be liturgical in service, some may be praise and worship. Some stress on dogmas and preaching, others inclined towards charismatic and cell groups. Some provide services to different age groups, others serve specifically for a particular audience.

I suggest that if a Chinese church is affluent, the congregation can consider to multiply by adding Cantonese service or start another new congregation. The church may employ additional pastors from Hong Kong to work part time or during weekends. The church may consider recruit not-yet employed ministers to teach Sunday school or bible class. Reasonable honorariums should be made to the labourers. These redundant pastors are not cheap labourers.

Unity is to admit that the recent immigrants from Hong Kong are different from the previous immigrants. They have expectations for the church to voice out against injustice. I appreciate the Baptist church I have been attending. The sermon, the call to worship and prayer always address injustice events around the world. Unity also implies the church to do supplications for climate change, environmental issues and other churches in the same city. I find the name of a Chinese church regularly mentioned in the prayer list of the church I attending. I wonder how many Chinese congregations will do the same to pray for other local churches. Personally, I find that most Chinese churches usually pray for their programs and ministries, also for individual members of the congregation. I wonder how many Chinese churches prayed for the needs of Afghanistan or made donations, when the news of this nation went onto the front pages of the press?

Unity agrees that my Chinese congregation is only part of the churches in the UK. Cooperation is an obligation, the Chinese churches should work in partnership with local churches. We must 'think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned' (Romans 12:3). We must have a reasonable conception and sound judgment of the realities of British churches in the UK.

The Church of England predicts that 368 of its churches will have to be permanently closed in five years. This figure does not include churches of other denominations. Unity is by no means selfishly anticipating other churches to decline so that Chinese churches can purchase their properties at a low cost, thereby achieving the vision of church growth.

For Chinese churches, the practice of unity connotes that there exist other newly formed congregations by Hongkongers, or congregations by mainlanders in nearby areas.

Church leaders should have this inclusiveness: The body of Christ is comprised of a diversity of Hong Kong believers. They may have their opinion on traditional practices or ministries. This inclusiveness enables cooperation. This is the 'unity' we are speaking of.

## **2. Disputes VS Hybrid**

To new Hongkongers, their challenge is to choose between disputes or hybrid. Supposedly, 30,000 Christians have arrived or will arrive in the UK (if my estimation is correct), I predict that many pastors and believers are eager to form churches of Hongkongers. The demand is huge. Yet forming a financially self-supporting church is easier said than done. Church-planting is costly. Without the support of mission agencies or mother churches in Hong Kong, it is difficult for the church to fully support the remuneration of the pastor.

Therefore, I don't encourage pastors from Hong Kong to form new churches too soon. They should embrace the mentality of missionaries—allowing themselves enough time to learn and integrate into the local culture, before actually getting involved in ministries. The reality is, most pastors emigrated from Hong Kong cannot get employed by Chinese churches or related organisations. My guess is: Around one-tenth of them may move and settle in established churches. Some former pastors may find employment in warehouses, supermarkets, restaurants or offices. We should not label them 'loving the secular world' and giving up their calling! If I were ten years younger, I would do the same. The ecology of Chinese churches here are quite different and backward comparing to Hong Kong. Most churches cannot afford to employ full-time pastors.

Those who arrived UK before 2021 are more fortunate. They do not have to face speculations on their motive for doing mission in the UK. Whereas for the new arrivals, they have to face these concerns and doubts inevitably. I suggest that different denominations and missionary societies in Hong Kong review their mission strategies and way of supporting. For example, they can financially support three local pastors with the same fund they used to support one missionary.

Mega churches or denominations in Hong Kong may recruit contract or part-time pastors by subsidising their living expenses or transportation. These pastors will provide pastoral care to their church members now settling in the UK.

Around ten families, who were from the church I used to minister to, residing now in the UK. I minister them with Zoom conferencing every month. Another

support group has been formed to give advice and help those planning to move to the UK. This group contains around 30 people. I also plan to visit church members in different cities. I have no intention to start up a new church, because I'm retired. But I'm willing to help others to start new churches and new ministries.

I wish to express my empathy towards former pastors who recently moved here. I understand your hardship and know that some church leaders and members may criticise them abandoning the flock in the political crisis. These pastors have to endure at least two to three years. I encourage you to see this as a time of preparation for long-term ministry service in the future.

For those who are financially capable, I suggest applying for local seminaries to do further studies. This will expand your social network and get connected with people in the field.

When the opportunity comes, some may start a new church. There is no need to start English Sunday school or services for children and youth. There has been numerous failed attempts in Chinese diasporic churches in Europe, USA, Canada and Australia. We don't have to repeat the same mistakes. The second generation of immigrants can easily connect with peers in local English-speaking congregations.

There are numerous and vast needs of the immigrant population. Churches targeting new immigrants do not need competition by providing all kinds of programs. Some churches may outreach to the youth, while some are for the whole family. We should be cautious not to copy the paradigms and models of ministry from Hong Kong—this will not do good to the growth of the local immigrant church. Age-differentiated programs do not work successfully here. The traditional church-centred approach to ministries is not feasible now because of COVID-19.

Due to having limited resources, it is not necessary for all churches to do welcome class. As long as we are addressing specific needs, there can be a great variety of ministries. Just find your niches, do not compete with others by offering the same programs for new comers.

In conclusion, we should avoid vicious competition and slanders, keeping in mind that the migrant Christians do not belong to a particular church, they are members of the whole body of Christ. This body has different ministries, thus different manifestations. Christians grow into maturity through the ministries provided by local churches, seminaries and parachurch organisations. Unity is achieved by hybridity, and there is no single way of doing church.

### **3. Separation VS Cooperation**

We have discussed the challenges and opportunities brought to the church. I'd like to point out that native churches also face these challenges.

Chinese churches should be aware that they are rooted in British soil. My general observation is, however, that most Chinese congregations relate to native churches merely for letting or borrowing properties to hold their service.

UKHK recently subsidises Chinese churches to launch immersion classes. It encourages the cooperation between Chinese and native churches as a prerequisite for application. When the congregation of most native churches are ageing population, young immigrant families from Hong Kong can become a new source of rejuvenation.

I have been attending a native Baptist church since mid-April. At first, there were only my wife and me—two Hongkongers. It happened once in the service, there came a dozen Hongkongers, comprising a quarter of the congregation. The average attendance of most local churches is below 70. It is also a challenge to native churches to outreach and serve the growing number of immigrants.

It takes time to build relationships and rapport. I get to know some Baptist pastors and deacons from my church and others. They invited me to tea or dinner, so we can know each other better. In July, I proposed to launch English conversation class in a downtown Baptist church. Thirty people joined the class for six sessions ( six weeks ) , in which half of them were non-Christians.

Native churches have plenty of resources. Pastors or church leaders must be aware that we are not to build our own kingdoms here. Instead, we should be partners in mission in helping native churches to become multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, so that people in many tongues will worship together and grow into the Body of Christ. I advise parents to help their children assimilate into society by taking them to native churches.

To sum up, Chinese churches or Hong Kong churches should not become associations of fellow provincials. We must have the mindset of the Kingdom of God. We need to put down our fences and work in solidarity with native church leaders!

## **Conclusion**

The immigrated Christian population will go to Chinese churches, Hong Kong churches and native British churches in different proportions. A small number will be unchurched Christians. If church leaders do not handle the new immigrants with wisdom and sensitivity, there will be splits, disputes and separation. If they are ready, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they will be able to maintain unity, knowing that the growth of any parts of Christ's body is the concerted effort of all pastors and church members. It is my sincere wish that we can foster cooperation with native churches, enhancing the development of British churches in the future.

## ***About the author:***

Revd. Chi-Wai Wu was the senior pastor of Yuen Kei Alliance Church(1984-2000) and the director of Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement (2000-2020) He is familiar with the church health and church planting in Hong Kong. Also, he contributed much to Christianity development in Hong Kong. Now, he has been in the UK and helping local churches for offering hospitality to Hong Kong migrants. And, he has not stopped his service even he has retired. He is still very active to speak and spread out the message with his professional and theological knowledge.