

**August 22/23, 2020**

**From the Pastor's Desk**

**Rev. Simon Lee**

**Church without walls 1: Cell groups and online worship**

Dear brothers and sisters of RCAC,

How you all doing during this pandemic? As there are signs of a second wave, I hope you are safe, and not only surviving but also thriving as a result the challenges we face, with the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. May the peace of God be with you. Personally I am trying to “work harder to make up for the lack of wisdom” (以勤補拙), and finding more time to walk even closer to God and reflect on what it means to be a “pastor without border” and lead RCAC to be a “Church without border” that is headed by Christ Himself.

In the past weeks I have shared that due to the COVID pandemic we are now in “the new normal” as we are slowly reopening. Therefore we need to learn to be a “**Church without walls**” (August 1/2) that requires the Church to be “transformed” in three important ways:

**1. Transform and buildup the Church with more cell groups**

(「化整為零」：轉化教會建立小組)

**2. Transform and equip members to be “ambassadors of Christ”**

(「基督使者」：轉化信徒人人皆兵)

**3. Transform our Church community to a “Community Church”**

(「社區教會」：轉化群體深入社區)

We will consider these three ways one at a time, the first “transformation” being “**Transform and buildup the Church with more cell groups.**” Before doing so, I must hasten to say, these ways are actually not newly invented ways, but newly applied ways, brought on by the pandemic. In pre-pandemic times, we have carried on “doing church” in the old ways, notwithstanding some “reforms and renewal” from time to time, but now we need real and radical “transformation.” (Rom. 12:1, 2) We have been forced to rethink what it means for us to be “the church of Christ.” Churches, ours included, can no longer hang on to the status quo and we can no longer rely on the “well-established” venue, structure and programs that we have built up throughout the years. But to me, this could in fact be a blessing in disguise, as it may help us to return to biblical Christian living.

### **The biblical pattern of house meetings**

If we go back to life in the early church, we see the Spirit of God adding to the early Church new believers by the thousands at a time (e.g. 5,000 men, Acts 4:4, cf. 2:47), but the new converts did not have churches to go to like today, big or small. Luke tells us that there were two modes of Christian life in worship and gatherings: one, **communal worship**, and two, **home fellowship** groups. We read, “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:46, 47)

First of all we note that the Christians did not practice their faith only on Sundays, as Christian living was a “daily” practice. Being a Christian is not just about “going to church” but “living as the church,” that is, living the Christian faith daily within the community of believers. The key elements were: devotion to the **apostles’ teaching** which included Jesus’ teaching (2:42). Top on the list was the study of the Word of God and the apostolic teaching (as taught by Jesus). The other key element was **fellowship** (*koinonia*, sharing), sharing in both spiritual things and material things. Then there was the **breaking of bread** (2: 42, 44) which included both the Lord’s Supper and a large fellowship meal, a major part of their sharing when they come together at home (unlike the “communion” reserved for our modern day worship service). Notice also that they were really joyful as they shared generously their food and fellowship. Needless to say **prayers** was very much integrated into everything they did in the broader context.

In such a context they were “praising God and having favor with all the people,” vertically they were worship God heartily and horizontally they were building loving and caring relationships. That was the “normal” Christian life in the early church, when everything was starting from nothing. By necessity, a lot of things happened in the homes of the believers (e.g. the church in Philippi met in the home of Lydia in the beginning, Acts 16:11-15). Growth of the church came as a result of powerful preaching and this type of communal life, worshipping God and fellowship with one another. The pandemic has inadvertently moved us into this mode, and the question is not only “are we adapting well” in this new normal, but whether we are *returning to the basics* (the old normal) as practised in the Early Church. While times are different, the principles are the same.

### **Brief History of Churches in the West and the East**

Since the period of the Early Church, the Church has grown and waned over time. When I travelled in Europe, I was always fascinated to see the prominent place of Christianity in the history of the different countries. As the church developed into institutions, the key elements of the Early Church became different traditions as a result of theological, historical and geographical reasons. Small churches were built in the villages, and big churches and cathedrals were built in the towns and cities. Many Christians started “going to church” instead of being the church.

As history shows us, the western churches have declined not for the lack of places of worship, but for the lack of good “teaching” and communal fellowships among the Christians. Today as the Western countries go into a post-Christian era, many churches are empty, but some have thrived by going back to the Biblical model with solid biblical teaching and close “body life” which includes Christ-centred worship, prayer, Bible studies and good fellowship.

Very often, the Church thrived and grew even when she faces persecution and challenges. For example, if we fast-forward to the recent history of the growth of the Church in China, we know that the number of Christians were less than 1 million when the Communist government took over in 1949. When all the churches except for two were closed, Christians in fact started to meet in the “house churches” and instead of dwindling, the number of Christians miraculously grew to an official (conservative) estimate of 20 million today (other estimates are as high as 60 million or more). This phenomenal growth came despite of the adverse socio-political situation, as the house churches multiples through following the pattern of the house meetings in the Early Church. In the past I had the privilege of visiting in some of these “house churches” and witness the vibrancy of the Christians in China. Some met literally in the homes, but many in the

cities some have moved to bigger venues, with numbers of congregants in the thousands. Now that many open churches are reopened, some are also worshipping in them.

### **Communal Worship and fellowship under COVID**

It is our conviction that at least for the near future, we will not be able to go back to the old normal. Especially due to the restrictions as a result of the pandemic, the church can thrive only by going back to the basic elements of the Christian life using house meeting model of the Early Church. *One way is to develop even more cell (care) groups and combine that with good use of online worship services, for example after the online worship services (on Zoom), the breakout rooms can be a venue to create more regular virtual sharing, interest and focus groups, that is, moving from worship to fellowship.*

Heidi A. Campbell (2020) has summarized three strategies of doing online Church. (“What Religious Groups Need to Consider When Trying to Do Church Online”) They are 1. Transferring; 2. Translating; 3. Transforming. By transferring, the strategy is to transfer everything we do offline to online. By translating, we try to modify the worship “rituals” (rundown) and space to fit onto a limited screen, much like a talk show format (as we are already doing in some of our fellowships). By transforming, we mean using the online platform in real time (followed by broadcast) and change worship into a “fireside chat” format where the pastor enters into dialogue with members in need.

Obviously these strategies are most adaptable to the North American churches. Nevertheless, I find the comments of Heidi Campbell insightful. She believes that “Successful online communities and church experiences are those that cultivate social relationships and investment from their members. Churches should see the move to digital worship as an opportunity to create a unique space for conversation, care, and encouragement that focuses on affirming the relationships and people within their faith community. Instead of offering a one-way, broadcast-focused church service, the interactive features of social media and digital platforms can be used to create deeper personal connections between church members and leaders. Instead of pastors being the source of wisdom, digital media can be used to create intimate and empathetic communication, allowing both members and leaders to share words of encouragement and biblical insights on how to navigate this uncertain time.”

I believe that apart from returning to the basics of Early Church house fellowships, we need to also make good use of digital technology, but there should be a balance. There is also a cultural and social factor to “being the church,” today and there is no “one size fits all.” *Because of our demographics at RCAC we have unique and distinct language and age groups and congregations, each group therefore must work out what is best for them, forming more cell groups and maximizing the use of online worship. Despite the differences in the Christians in the Early Church, there was unity in Christ and in the Spirit. Let us also pray that we will work towards these goals in unity.*

Your servant in Christ,

Pastor Simon Lee