

Following the Spirit's Lead

THINKING AHEAD

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PROFILE: Ming Peng Gong

Pastor Prays for Healing of Man in Wuhan with COVID-19

“Experience the Spirit mainly through God’s Word,” says Ming Peng Gong. He quotes Jesus in John 6:63, “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” (NKJV) The Holy Spirit first revealed Jesus as healer to Ming Peng back in 2003. Since that time, he has experienced miraculous healings in his own life and the lives of others. He recalls “foolishly” touching a hot stove surface and burning his hand quite badly. Following the scriptural advice in James 5:14, he applied anointing oil to his hand and prayed for healing—immediately it stopped hurting.

In early February this year, a woman from Wuhan, China studying in Toronto, approached Pastor Gong in tears. She said her father, who lives in Wuhan, contracted COVID-19. Her father is older and has

diabetes. He was having trouble breathing and hadn’t eaten in several days. The man wasn’t being treated at the hospital because it was too crowded. The young woman, who attends one of the branches of Toronto China Bible Church planted by Ming Peng, was

very worried. She asked her pastor to pray. Ming Peng made contact with the woman’s parents through China’s social media platform WeChat. He instructed the mother, “Lay your hands on your husband’s forehead.”

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Church Profile: Following the Holy Spirit as a Leadership Team

Westview Bible Church

BY SANDRA REIMER

About three or four years ago something began to shift in the way Westview Bible Church does “body life and mission”. The leadership team of five elders and two pastoral staff noticed that the suburban Montreal congregation seemed “restless and hungry.” Evange Destounis, a Westview elder for 23 years, adds, “They wanted to roll up their sleeves and get busy with God’s work.” He says that at the same time, “The leadership team had a deeper desire to follow the Spirit.” Evange is noticing a general shift in North American and European churches from relying on human intelligence and strategies to discerning and obeying God’s voice.

An important part of the culture change at Westview was the faithful prayers of an ember group of prayer warriors who daily lifted the Westview leaders before God. “A growing prayer ministry has moved from the sidelines to centre stage,” says Evange. Heartfelt worship has also been critical in this shift as worship leaders “pour out their hearts before God” during services. As well,

relationships have been restored in response to an increased desire for reconciliation and authenticity.

Two years ago, the leadership team invited a speaker to teach them about listening to God during a retreat. “It was a powerful weekend,” says Rebecca Stymiest, a newer elder. The pastors, staff, elders and their spouses sensed the Spirit’s movement as Donna Jordan led them through a practical workbook. “She would stop and listen to God when we asked a question and then give us an answer,” says Evange. Donna balanced biblically grounded teaching with Spirit-inspired leading. That Sunday morning, Donna was incredibly well received by the Westview congregation. “There were streams of people going up to the front wanting to be prayed for,” says Evange. He believes the congregation’s response affirmed that the leadership team was in tune with the Spirit’s work among them.

Changing the way leaders interact and work together has helped the team cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Team members value and trust one another as they listen deeply to each other and to God. “Everyone’s voice

is important,” says Rebecca. “There is no voice that speaks over all the others.” Evange adds, “We take unity seriously. If we are not unified, we take more time to discern.”

The monthly elders’ meeting is not a “business meeting with prayer tacked on.” It usually begins with 15 to 30 minutes of prayer, often led by their prayer team. The co-chairs, Ted Sparks and Evange have an agenda but they put it aside when they believe God is asking them to take extra time on a topic. “During a meeting, we will stop to pray. We don’t want to rush to a human decision, we want to be led by the Spirit,” says Rebecca.

Westview is in the midst of a revisioning process and searching for a senior pastor and children’s ministry pastor. They have been grateful for VMC’s help as Mike Stone has led them through a strategic process. “As leaders, we need to be humble enough to admit when we don’t have all of the resources in-house,” says Evange.

The Westview elders lead with humility and transparency. When they notice God doing something within the congregation, they bless and empower what is happening without controlling it. “We want Jesus to be glorified. Not everything that God does [in the church] will go through our hands as leaders and that needs to be ok.” He adds, “We are not the gatekeepers of the Holy Spirit.” In their services, anyone can give a testimony or read a scripture. “Our desire is for visitors [to Westview] to know the truth of 1 Corinthians 14:25, ‘Surely God is among you.’”

According to Evange, the Holy Spirit has been drawing “the nations” to Westview. “This happened over the last few years without us doing anything intentional as leaders,” says Evange. The congregation is a “collage” of people from different races, religions, and economic backgrounds. A CEO could be sitting in the same pew as a newly arrived refugee. “It looks like the kingdom of God,” says Rebecca. “We are a cornucopia of colour and flavour.” The congregation, which includes pre-believers, new Christians, and mature believers, reaches about 300-500 people on a Sunday morning. Evange adds, “One of the ways we know God is working at Westview is the level of unity among people who are so different from each other.” He notes that it’s nothing they could ever bring about on their own. It’s a sure sign of the Holy Spirit among them. ■



A Westview Bible Church leadership retreat.



Ming Peng Gong (far right), his wife Tian Mei Wang and son Samuel.

COVID-19...continued from cover

She did so and Ming Peng prayed. That afternoon she messaged her daughter to say that the father had eaten a big bowl of noodles. The next day, the man went to the doctor who confirmed that the fever was gone. The man was healed of COVID-19!

The Holy Spirit has been active in Ming Peng's life from the beginning of his spiritual journey. He was a student at the University of Waterloo

The Holy Spirit first revealed Jesus as healer to Ming Peng back in 2003. Since that time, he has experienced miraculous healings in his own life and the lives of others.

in Ontario when someone from the Navigators ministry reached out to him and his wife. "He taught us English using the Bible," says Ming Peng. One weekend, the Christian leader took three Mandarin-speaking couples from Waterloo to a retreat in Pennsylvania. "On the way to the retreat all seven of us saw a cross in the sky made out of two pieces of cloud." Early the next morning, Ming Peng saw a vision in the sky of the same cloud-cross with a glowing light behind it. "Later, when the retreat leader was speaking the Lord opened my eyes ... I realized that if Jesus blood did not cleanse me that I deserved hell." Ming Peng invited Jesus into his heart that day in September 1996.

The man who disciplesd Ming Peng

and his wife taught them to memorize scripture and "keep it in their hearts." Ming Peng is mindful of the "subtle inner voice of the Spirit through God's Word." As he makes decisions, Ming Peng also pays attention to the peace of Christ ruling in his heart (Colossians 3:15a).

Since he became a Christian, Ming Peng has been passionate about sharing his faith with other Mandarin-speakers living in Canada and China. God

has used him to plant eight branches of Toronto China Bible Church (TCBC) over the last two decades. He remembers discerning with his team whether they should plant a church among students at York University.

Concerned about thousands of Chinese students on the campus who did not know about Jesus, he and some others began praying, "God what do you want us to do about this?" Despite many obstacles and the disillusionment of some of the other leaders, Ming Peng persisted because he had a "burden" from God to reach these students. There were no Chinese churches in the nearby Jane-Finch neighbourhood—which is known for crime and poverty. Eventually they planted a self-sustaining branch of TCBC.

The Spirit continues to speak to Mandarin-speakers in Canada and China through Ming Peng. During this COVID-19 crisis, he preaches online to his congregation in Canada on Sunday mornings and to a congregation in China on Saturday nights. ■



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Personal Transformation for Leaders



BY VANIA LEVANS
Pastor at Marineview
Chapel, Vancouver

Many of us have been part of a sports, business, or other team, on which one member is perceived not to be a strong contributor. Often, others compensate for the weaker member, rushing to the rescue if the ball is in their part of the court.

How often do we treat God like the weaker team member—convinced that if we don't rush in, and fix things, all will be lost? We forget Moses, who obediently raised his staff so that God could part the waters. Instead, we furiously scoop water trying to part the Red Sea ourselves.

I believe one of the most pressing needs in the North American church today is to treat God as if he is real and to make space for him to play on the team. As those who are yoked to Jesus, we need to grow in learning to join God in his work, and on discovering Christ's "unforced rhythms of grace." (Matthew 11:28-30 NIV, MSG)

As children of God, we are called to the freedom of living life by, and in the Spirit (John 10). And yet, at times, we allow ourselves to be propelled by voices other than the Good Shepherd's. We can be driven by our own expectations and fears, and by those of others.

Often, we think we can lead people without spending time in the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33:6-8). We forget that in order to lead our congregations into any lasting spiritual growth,

we need to be transformed daily by the Living God. It is impossible to lead our congregants to places that we have not taken the time to go.

We forget that Jesus, the perfect Son of God, who preached good news and healed the sick, often set aside time to withdraw to lonely places and pray. (Luke 5:16) How else could he say so definitively that he only did what he saw his Father doing if he was not listening to and observing his Father? (John 5:19)

Too often as pastors, we neglect to surrender to the wisdom and leading of God, by dismissing the spiritual discipline of Sabbath-keeping. In taking Sabbath rest, we remind ourselves that we are not at the center, but God is, and we look to him to hold things together. Sabbath-keeping, like tithing, strengthens our faith in God to be present



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and active in real life circumstances. When we are too busy and too important to enter the rest God calls us to, we deceive ourselves, and lead our congregations in the way of striving and restlessness of the world, not the way of Christ.

When we refuse to retreat from the world in silence and solitude to hear from God, we rob not only ourselves, but those who follow us. We cast off the repentance and rest that is a means to our salvation, and we stifle our capacity to discern well. (Isaiah 30:15) Instead of doing the good works prepared in advance for us to do, we end up doing whatever comes up first, or is most attractive, or least

intimidating. (Ephesians 2:10)

It is only in listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd that we can follow where he leads. (John 10: 14-18) It's why sitting in the presence of a spiritual director, someone who is trained to help people listen and pay attention to how God is at work in their lives, can so often open more way for spiritual growth.

It is remarkable that God invites us to join His team. May we be granted grace, to treat him as the stronger, more responsible, and important team member that he is. May we grow up in Christ, and for his glory, enter into the fullness of what working with God really means. ■

Personal Transformation Resources for Leaders



BOOKS

Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership

by Ruth Haley Barton

Let Your Life Speak

by Parker Palmer

Sabbath: Finding Rest Renewal, and Delight in our Busy Lives

by Wayne Muller

Out of Solitude

by Henri Nouwen

The Emotionally Healthy Leader

by Pete Scazzero

The Voice of Jesus: Discernment, Prayer and the Witness of the Spirit

by Gordon T Smith

PODCAST

Pete Scazzero

www.emotionallyhealthy.org/podcast

MP3

Class, Regent College
Gordon Smith

Spiritual Discernment

www.regentaudio.com/products/spiritual-discernment

Vision Ministries News

Doing the COVID Pivot

Vision Ministries Canada responded quickly to the pandemic and we continue our efforts towards church vitality and multiplication under current lockdown conditions.

By early April we had:

- Closed the office and arranged for staff to work remotely
 - Cancelled travel and transitioned all meetings online
 - Cancelled the Thinking Shrewdly national gathering and initiated a refund process
 - Connected with Advisory Council partners via Zoom
 - Connected with Regional Coordinators via Zoom
 - Drafted a 90-day plan, which was affirmed by staff and board; the plan includes salary reductions if unable to access government subsidies.
- Prayed and discussed best practices with 16+ international leaders
 - Continued consulting with several churches
 - Continued coaching two cohorts of church planters
 - Completed a church constitution handbook
 - Implemented a "story" initiative to update and encourage leaders
 - Initiated plans for an online event: What COVID is Teaching Us About Being the Church
 - Convened the following gatherings via Zoom:
 - Advisory Council meeting to discuss future planting
 - Regional Coordinators to assess needs in regional networks
 - Staff vision and strategic planning – 3 sessions
 - Development of future church consultants – 2 sessions
 - Gathered several regional networks to support, learn and collaborate

Since then we have:

- Sustained critical financial and administrative systems
- Sustained support for 20 in-trust churches
- Advised churches regarding online giving
- Prayed and discussed best practices with 50+ "partner" pastors

VMC FINANCIAL UPDATE

Year Ending June 30, 2020

We're grateful to our friends and partners who faithfully support VMC's mission to plant and invigorate churches.

Here's an update on the financial challenges we're facing:

YTD Results (Jul-Dec 2019)

Overall revenue is down 35.4% vs previous YTD.

Church giving is up 77% vs previous year, but not enough to compensate for a notable decline in individual giving.

Total expenses are down 13.6% vs previous YTD.

A Slight Improvement in the Third Quarter

Total giving for Jan-Mar is down 17% vs previous year but better than Jul-Dec.

Current projections suggest a loss for our fiscal year, which ends June 30th.

Our precarious times present challenge and kingdom opportunity:

- We continue to plant churches—Citizens Church in April and two more before summer
- Anxious about the future, irreligious people are open to spiritual conversations
- Those who've never attended church are listening in online
- Seniors and those with mental illness feel more isolated than ever
- Frontline health workers need practical support

We realize many are facing financial challenges during this pandemic.

For those who are able, please consider a gift to help churches step into these kairos opportunities as we coach, consult with, and resource their leaders.

How To Give

During the COVID-19 crisis, please use one of VMC's on-line giving options which include PayPal, CanadaHelps, CHIMP, ATB Financial, and Tithe.ly.

To donate online, go to www.vision-ministries.org/donate

Nursing a Church Back to Health

BY SANDRA REIMER

In the late 2000s, the future looked uncertain for Saanichton Bible Fellowship (SBF). With a faithful core group, committed elders rode out the storm after enduring a difficult season in the church. SBF's elders carried the ministry load on their own for 2+ years and then recognized they needed outside help.

Outreach Canada connected SBF leaders with two retired pastors to help them manage Sunday mornings and to care for the congregation. "This created an opening for me. The congregation was ready for structural renewal, which is what I do," says Don Crawford. Vision Ministries' Jay Gurnett tapped Don on the shoulder to help this sister church on Vancouver Island. A long-time elder and former associate pastor, Don had helped facilitate revitalization at Lambrick Park Church in Victoria.

Simmering tension at SBF had taken its toll on the congregation. "They were feeling beat up and there had not been a lot of healing or closure," says Don. As Don and pastor Dennis Scott worked alongside the elders and some key lay people for two years, the congregation



Don Crawford

Dennis nodded. They had an excellent working relationship and cared deeply for the people of SBF. "This intentional leadership in a caring package gave them hope," say Don. As interim pastors, they also provided a fresh perspective. SBF's leadership team appreciated having two pastors added to the team. Dennis took care of preaching and pastoral care, while Don handled the organizational renewal. "It is a rare church that has the resources and in-house expertise to navigate a significant transition like SBF's," says Don.

Don's outside perspective helped the church remember who they were. Early on, Don hosted a "fireside chat" and gave the congregation his first impressions. He reminded them, "Your DNA is outreach." Don describes the

began to feel hopeful. Don remembers a pivotal meeting when a congregation member said, "It seems like you enjoy pastoring us." Don and

revitalization like "turning a battleship around," but it happened. "They started to believe God is not done with us. The congregation began to feel like "our best days are still to come."

Don recalls the emergence of an outreach ministry during this time. SBF already allowed nurses and nursing students from the nearby hospital to park in their parking lot for free. Someone suggested starting a "hump day" ministry early Wednesday mornings serving free coffee and muffins. Healthcare workers came before their shift and over time some were open to receive prayer. Don and Dennis saw this resurgence of the congregation's "outreach DNA" as a sign SBF was returning to health. Eventually, Don and Dennis brought SBF to the place that they were ready to hire their next pastor. "They were healthy enough to attract a high calibre guy like Chris Yue. He has been there for 10 years."

From that experience, Don developed a transitional ministry for non-profits in his consulting practice. He encourages churches that are feeling tension or have lost their vision, to ask for help sooner rather than later. ■

Tips for Churches in Transition

- Don't be an island, as an individual, a leadership team, or a church.
- Build relationships with neighbouring churches and with churches within your network but outside your area.
- Learn everything you can about change dynamics/leadership. (See William Bridges' book, *Transitions*)
- Don't be too proud to ask for help. Letting things fester only makes the renewal/reboot harder.
- Understand your church's and your leadership team's unique context, dynamics, history, and hopes/fears.
- Be faithful, results belong to God. (See *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* by Eugene Peterson.)

Contact VMC at mike.stone@vision-ministries.org for a referral to a transitional pastor or church consultant.

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Holy Spirit Empowerment for the Ordinary

BY MIKE STONE

The 15:17 to Paris is a film about three young Americans who foiled a terrorist attack on a Paris-bound train from Amsterdam. The story focuses on Spencer Stone, one of the three heroes. Raised in a single parent home, Spencer struggled with academics early on, spent most of his adolescence overweight and failed to pass the entrance exam into a military pararescue program. His life was anything but spectacular.

However, it was this ordinary young man who made a difference when the occasion required action. Recognizing the terrorist threat, Spencer sprinted toward the assailant, overpowered and disarmed him without being shot.

Miraculously, the gun jammed as the terrorist attempted to fire it—the odds of which are less than one in a thousand.

The acting was so dreadful that I nearly turned it off after a few scenes. Later, I discovered that producer/director, Clint Eastwood, initially considered using professional actors but decided to cast the real life heroes as themselves. This decision ultimately illustrates the story’s main point—ordinary people are capable of extraordinary impact. In his gospel, Luke focuses on a similar theme but with a twist—ordinary people, filled with the Spirit, are capable of unimaginable impact.

In the opening scenes of his nativity narrative, Luke contrasts Zechariah with Mary. Zechariah serves as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem—the zenith of religious and political life. Mary is a nondescript teenage girl growing up in two-bit Nazareth, the epicenter of humdrum. Both are promised a miraculous birth, Zechariah and his wife in their old age and Mary without means of a human father. Zechariah doubts and demands proof, Mary pursues deeper understanding.

What distinguishes Mary is her openness to a divine visitation. When she asks how it is possible that she will conceive without a male partner, Gabriel responds, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you (Lk. 1:35).” Mary becomes the theotokos or God-bearer, a conduit of the incarnation—in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Annunciation carries the promise of the Holy Spirit for Mary and subtle allusion to her future sorrow.

Too often our preoccupation with the indwelling of the Spirit has focused on religious spectacle and spiritual ecstasy. Luke wants us to realize that struggle and heartache sometimes accompany the Spirit’s working; the Baptist lost his head, Stephen was stoned, and Peter was crucified upside-down. Partnering with God in the work of salvation eventually proved painful for Mary but years earlier she surrendered to the Divine invitation—come what may.

In the fullness of the Holy Spirit ordinary people can become powerful partners in God’s redemptive purposes. Peter received the Spirit and three thousand responded to his altar call. Paul received the Spirit and planted churches from one end of the Empire to the other. “Christians in modern times—from Rosa Parks to Corrie ten Boom—were also filled with the Spirit and they transformed the world for God. Like these believers past and present, may we say yes to the Spirit’s invitation—even if it means suffering. ■

Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient, often short-lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul—short life? In me there dwells the Spirit of the Great Short-lived, whose zeal for God’s house consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God.”

– Jim Elliot

THINKING AHEAD



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