

Deep and Wide

Some observations & reflections on “Hemorrhaging Faith”

Pastor Sam Chan

Once there is a story about a mother waking up her son and telling him that he needs to go to church. The son asked, “Why do I need to go to church?” His mother told him, “There are 3 reasons that you need to go to church - firstly, today is Sunday; secondly, you are forty years old, you got to get up and go to church; lastly, you are the pastor of the church, you have to go to church.”

We have to agree that it is not easy to make people to go to church and sometimes even ourselves. People need to be motivated to go to church.

Andy Stanley asked in his book: What is that helps Christians mature and what makes you continue to stay in the church, and eventually offer yourself to serve God? After collecting the responses from the leaders, he summarized into 5 key factors that when a church have, then not only the young people will stay in the church, they will also grow to be mature Christians and eventually devote their lives to Christ, and even serve Christ full-time.

I want to use the 5 key factors to focus on the young adults of our church. I believe the key purpose of Young Life Ministry and even the purpose of the article “Hemorrhaging Faith” is not focused on how to keep the children and young adults in the church, instead our concern is how to minister to them so that they will become disciples. How to help them to follow Christ? How can we build the church in such a way that we can disciple young people? This is one thing we need to put correctly.

In Richmond Hill Christian Community Church, we call it Young Life Development (YLD) Ministry. Young life development is the modern term for discipleship. We are looking at how to disciple the young people in our church.

So what are the 5 key factors to build a deep and wide church? What makes a Deep & Wide church? How deep is our love for God? How wide is our heart for people, especially the young people?

Key Factors of building a Deep & Wide Church

I. Practical Teaching on Authentic Faith

1. Meaning of the Gospel – We have to tell our young people that the gospel is good news. Why is it a good news? It is not just personal salvation, or personal life change, the good news is that God accepted us and God is bringing in His kingdom which is the new world. The good news encompasses not just today, just me, but the whole world. We need to explain the meaning of the gospel to them.
2. Teaching to change life: Information & Transformation
Information is important, but after we teach the knowledge of the Bible, we need to see life transformation. We need to tell them what God’s perspective on different things. From information to a perspective to conviction, and life is transformed there.

3. The Essential & Non-Essential

It is essential for us to go into theology if we want to build up the faith of the young people. There are something called essential doctrines, there are also something we called non-essential doctrines. Authentic faith is built on essential doctrines which are the core values. If we build our children's faith on nonessential things, that is things that can debate about, e.g. children baptism, women in ministry. When our young adults hang on to these things as the foundation for their faith, once they step out of the church and their faith is challenged by others, their faith will be easily demolished. On the contrary, we need to teach the core values which are built upon essential things...the things that will not change and everyone would agree upon, e.g. God Himself, who Jesus is, the Bible, how to get salvation, how to get eternal security as well as eternity. There is an old saying: "In essential doctrines, we have unity, in non-essential doctrines, we have liberty, but then in all doctrines, we have charity." When we teach, we need to have this understanding. Having said that, I am not implying that nonessential things are not important as most of the times, nonessential things are the practice of our church or lifestyle statement of our church, they are not what authentic faith is based on. Young people need to be taught to differentiate the essential and the nonessentials.

4. The Absolute & the Non-Absolute

Some young people would say that they do not want to be Christians anymore when they study geology at university. They would say that their church and all parachurch organizations believe that the earth is young earth (Young earth theory believes that the earth is only 6000 years old.) The Bible did not say that the earth is 6000 years old, it only tells us that God created the earth. However, when we say that it is absolute that the earth is 6000 years old, the faith of the young people will shake when they look at science and it seems they prove otherwise. As a church, we should not teach something as absolute if we are not certain that it is indeed the biblical absolute. In 16th century, Galileo was persecuted by the church because the church held that the planets evolve around the earth while this mathematician figured that the planets evolve around the sun instead. Again, it is significant to build our young people on the absolute that leads to authentic faith. When something is not absolute or if we are not certain about it, simply say that there are different ways to discuss it or admit that we do not know.

5. An openness to discuss difficult questions & challenges

When there are special things going on, we need to help our young people to discuss it, or offer special seminars to address the issues. Children or junior highs watch too much TV these days, they tend to mature sooner than we expect them to be, they also know about things happening in the world faster than we do. Therefore, it is important that we have the openness to discuss difficult questions like is Christ the only answer, why there are sufferings, etc. Teach them how to understand these things and walk wisely. In the past, I thought that a pastor needed to have authority and have the answer for every question, so for some answers I gave, I treated them as absolute answers even though they are not. I now realize that it does not need to be so. For things that we know it is certain, we can say that the scripture says so, yet for things like how to deal with certain issues, I think it needs to have a space for

discussion. Honesty and integrity will impress the young people. Even pastors whom they consider very knowledgeable, there are still things that they do not know.

II. Personal Discipline & Family Collaboration

1. Hearing the Spirit through the Word & Prayer

The Bible tells us that when we become a Christian, our sins are forgiven and we will receive the Holy Spirit. It is through receiving the Holy Spirit that our life can be changed. It is important that we learn to hear the Holy Spirit through God's word and prayer.

2. Parents who are nosy about their spiritual life

We need parents who are "nosy" about the devotion of the children. Christian Smith, a sociologist from Notre Dame University, wrote a number of books. After interviewing many kids, he found out 2 things: First, a lot of kids remain faithful to their faith if they were taught how to do daily devotion when they were young. Pastors usually want to impress children by preaching a good sermon without teaching them how to do daily devotion. The problem is that once they are not with you, they do not know how to study the word of God by themselves. Their faith will eventually fade. Second, Christian Smith said parents who are "nosy", i.e. checking on their children's devotion and discuss about it during dinner time or family alter time helps tremendously. Regis Joyner, the author of the book Orange, said it is extremely important that parents are nosy because their kids want to hear from their parents and other adults about what they believe in. It is important to have people of older generation to help them, especially their parents.

3. Counsellors/ Mentors/ Older Adults that care

After I was baptized, for 3 years I was fortunate to have 3 counsellors to help me after I became a Christian. One counsellor was especially nice to me and cared a lot about my spiritual growth. After I moved to Toronto, the founding pastor of my church, Rev. Dr. John Kao showed a lot of interest in me and wrote to me even when I was away working elsewhere, informing me of what is happening in the church and encouraged me to keep following Christ. When we have people who love us, care for us and build us up, it is not that easy for us to fall away.

III. Purposeful Ministry

A Church that focuses on practical teaching and authentic faith, provides spiritual discipleship and mentors will help to build up young people in their faith. However, they also need purposeful ministry in which children or young adult are taught to serve in a purposeful way, not just doing something for the church without a purpose.

1. Love God, Love Others & Love P.E.A.C.E. (Mission) – Gracious, Generous & Go!

RHCCC has been using this theme for a number of years and it is helping young people to know what it means by loving God and loving others. To love God is to serve God, to love others is to serve others. We love God by serving people, through serving people, we are actually serving God. In missions, we teach them to be gracious, generous and to go. We are convinced that all these are helpful to build up our young people to serve God in a purposeful way.

2. Unselfishness & Submission can be learned and modeled
 The Hemorrhaging Faith report finds significant number of young people leave their faith after going to Junior High. My understanding is that in Chinese church, more of our young people will leave after going to university. It may be because they are afraid of their parents or their parents would not allow them to do so in junior high. Some kids are angry and complain that no one from their junior high fellowship cares for them. They are developing in many ways and they need people to love them and accept them. We need to help them to accept themselves and one another. The key thing is to help them how to build friendships, how to listen. When we want to build true friendship, we need to listen to people. There is a book called “Irresistible Evangelism”, it teaches about how to listen. It will be helpful to teach our young people how to build friendship, how to listen to friends and find out what their friends laugh about, cry about, fear about, dream about... it is when you begin to learn these things about a person, you begin to love that person. We need also to teach our children submission. Freedom and authority are not opposite concepts, but rather, they go hand in hand. Someone has used an example to describe freedom as a train. A train is built to run on rail, if you build a good train and a good rail, the train will run like a bullet train. Authority can actually give us protection and a smooth way in which we can zoom along.

3. Vision & Mission of missional church – Vision-led, Team-based & Missional-directed
 I find that young adults and adults would want to stay in a church that has vision. They want to know what they and the church is heading in the near future if they stay in this church, where the pastors are leading them into in the coming years. Even for deacons and leaders, we need to understand that a ministry is with purpose. Having a vision and mission in a missional church which is vision-led, team-based & missional-directed is important.

IV. Providential Relationship

1. Community – Friendship, Mentor, Small Group, Inclusiveness, Youthfulness, Camps
 John Bowen, author of Growing Up Christian: Why Young People Stay In Church, Leave Church, and (Sometimes) Come Back To Church, did researches and wrote about how to minister to the kids. He agrees that community will help young people to remain in the church. Friendship, mentoring, small group, inclusiveness, camps and youthfulness are all significant for them to stay in the church. Leaders ministering to young people should be youthful in how we dress.

2. 3M – Multi-Cultural, Multi-Lingual, Multi-Generational
 Multi-Cultural meaning the acceptance of different cultures and ethnicities. If we have a Cantonese, Mandarin and English congregation in our church, we are already multi-cultural. Build the church on the base that we are all equal in the house of God and let everyone know that the church is the house of all nations. We may line up all the flags of the nations to remind people that God wants the Chinese to start up a church, but He does not want it to remain that way. The church should welcome everybody.

A lot of studies have shown that it is a dangerous thing if we separate the kids from older generations and do not give them opportunity to relate to older generations. Rev. Alvin Lau talks about 5 adults minister to 1 kid. If Youth Pastor goes away, the kids will not be affected as much since there are other adults to take care of them. If our church is multi-generational, the kids will gain by seeing things with more perspectives. The church should seek to provide opportunities for them to serve adults or vice versa, so they will build relationship with other adults.

3. Longevity of church leadership – Consistency, Stability & Familiarity
If the pastors, leaders and volunteers can serve the group with a long period of time, it will help build consistency, stability and familiarity for the young people. When we talk about all these things, we have to pay attention to the structure of the young adult ministry. If the structure is not right, a lot of the things we have been talking about will not work. You may ask when should the children ministry merge with youth ministry? About 12 years ago, RHCCC changed its system. The children ministry was led by the Cantonese speaking group back then, whereas the youth ministry is looked after by the English speaking group. We realized that the Cantonese speaking people brought the children up in one way which was more conservative and the English speaking congregation taught them another way once they moved up to be juniors. The church then decided to scrap the 2 systems to create a department that would see the children into youth. We called it the Young Life Development (YLD). The YLD overarches the ministries for children and youth. The pastor for this department is like the principal for a private school who oversees both the children and youth ministries. It will be important to form such kind of structure so that everybody can contribute and everybody can serve everybody for the glory of God. This structural change has enhanced the building of relationship among people.

V. Pivotal Environment, Circumstances & Defining Moments

There are important and vital environment, circumstances, even defining moments where people's lives are changed. We need to look for these moments if we want to build a deep and wide church.

1. The style & content of worship service/ Not ashamed to bring friends
We start with looking into the content and style of our worship service. Many young people said they left the church because they could not stand the worship service of their church any more. There may be different reasons, but when kids said that they are ashamed to bring friends to the worship service, that tells why they leave too. We need to humble ourselves to talk to the young people and find out how we can design a worship service in such a way that we can honor God. I do not mean that the service has to be entertaining, but every service, including the preaching need to have biblical theology into it, because biblical theology is the true redemptive interpretation of the gospel. If we do music and everything right, it will be exciting for people and they can sense God's presence. Just imagine that if the kids are saying that they are proud of their worship service, you know they will also bring friends and they will remain in the church.
2. Understanding why young adults are leaving church truthfully

The Hemorrhaging Faith report has identified 4 special spiritual types in young people: engagers, fence-sitters, wanderers and rejecters. It talks about the reasons why they are classified as such. However, we need to ask why young adults leave the church truthfully. When we do survey with them, they may express that they do not like certain leaders, or they want to bargain with the church for something and they are granted, but these may not be the real reasons. We need to understand the real reasons for their leaving. I suggest that we do not just look at our church, but look at it from outside as there are influences from outside that is shaking their faith. Here are some examples:

- (1) The Postmodern influences – with that influence, they start to question the Bible story when they go to school. We called the metanarratives which everything is built on the big story. If they do not trust the big story, they are not interested to listen to the proof of creation or resurrection, etc. They will say they have their own thinking. Therefore, instead of always telling them the biblical story first, we need to tell them other stories of our life, then we relate it back to the bible story, the biblical fact. After my children went to graduate school in the States, I realized that they have changed. The way of their thinking has changed because the teaching of the school has influenced them. Though they still go to church and still love the Lord, they have doubts that I need to discuss with them.
- (2) The Hurtings – some leave the church because they are hurt. We cannot just tell them that God loves them. C.S. Lewis once said something like this: When you court a virgin, and when you court a divorcee, you have to love them, but you speak your love differently.
- (3) The Modern “Dawkins” disciples – Richard Dawkins and Christopher is the New Atheist and he has much influence on the young adults because they read about these new atheist books. They are not the postmodern, they are the modern people. We need to know what to say to them and how to answer their questions.
- (4) The New Age & Neo-Pagan spell – We have to be aware of the New Age and the Neo-Pagan spell which are those who belong to the new movement that worships the nature. It is a type of spirituality going on in the world today.
- (5) The Moral & Spiritual Rebels - are the ones who want to party and so they leave their faith. But because of their parents and the mercy of God, they may eventually turn back. Both Billy Graham and Louis Palau lost their sons and got them back eventually. Therefore do not be disappointed if your kids seem to be leaving, do not condemn them with the Bible, but continue to love them and pray for them. When they come to their senses, they will want to return. Spiritual Rebels are those who are very proud in their hearts. They do not want God to govern their lives, they are like the parable that Jesus told about that the tenants rented the vineyard, but did not want to be controlled by the landlord.
- (6) The Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) drifters
Christian Smith defined the MTD people as drifters. A lot of our kids are drifters. They have not sin vigorously, but we have pushed them in such a way that because we ourselves have not followed Christ wholeheartedly, they become MTD. We believe that there is God, but we don't need Him until we are in trouble. We believe that everybody will go to heaven, nice people go to heaven and God wants us to be happy. A lot of time, Christians in the church portrait our faith to be like that. This is why our kids believe that way. They

thought it really doesn't matter that we sin a little because we can always repent. Therefore, some people drift away when they get older because there is misunderstanding what it means by following Christ.

3. Not defensive to help young adults & the church to make changes

Not being defensive, but to help our young people to understand the following: David Kinnaman commented that Christianity has a bad reputation in the world. He is the President of Barna Group that did many researches about Christians. He said in the outside world, there are six critical perceptions of Christianity of the outsiders:

- (1) Hypocritical – Christians say one thing, but do another thing.
- (2) Too focused on getting converts – not just focus on finding converts.
Christians need to learn to be more loving and love them genuinely.
- (3) Anti-homosexual – Is God anti-gay? What does it mean by accepting and approval? Can we accept without approving or vice versa? The world and the young people see that we are anti-homosexual. We need to make it clear to them that we can love them even though we do not approve homosexuality.
- (4) Sheltered & out of touch with reality – we may need to leave the four walls of the church to be involved in different things, e.g. community events, politics sometimes, in the right way. We need to express our care for the community by getting more involved.
- (5) Judgmental – the world always see the Christians as not gracious nor generous, this is why we teach our young adults to be gracious and generous.
- (6) Too political – they want to use legislation to change people. The world will not love us as they see us as too political.

Pastors need to be bold enough to answer these questions if they are raised by our young people.

4. Pray & look for the defining moments of “heightened receptivity”

“Heightened receptivity” is the moment when the young adult that have left and found themselves ready to talk to us about their challenges and issues. We need the Holy Spirit to help us to understand and affirm them, how to discuss with them and how to bring the gospel of Jesus into their lives. Pray that God will grant us those “heightened receptivity.” Finally, it says in John 10:10 “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” A lot time, we only talk about the second part of this verse, we often have forgotten about the first part: the thief comes only to steal, to kill and destroy. Satan destroys our first love for Christ, it takes away our young adults. Let us pray that God will restore the things that Satan has stolen from us, our love for God, our love to serve, our energy to be zealous for God, our kids and young people. We need to pray to Jesus that continue to believe in Him that He is the one that gives us life.

These are the things that we can build in our church and make it a deep and wide church. How deep is our love for God? How wide is our heart for the church? Do we care for the children and young people in our church? By the work of the Holy Spirit, may God changes us and makes us a shining light that other people will be attracted to come to know Him. Those who are drifted away will come back, and those who are not here before will be attracted to come.

When we truly pray and devote ourselves to do it, God will send people and resources to help us.

References

Drew Dyck. Generation EX-Christian, Why Young Adults Are Leaving The Faith...And How To Bring Them Back. Moody, Chicago 2010

John P. Bowen. Growing Up Christian. Why Young People Stay In Church, Leave Church, and (Sometimes) Come Back To Church, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver 2010

David Kinnaman. UN Christian. What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity and Why It Matters. Baker, Grand Rapids. 2007

Christian Smith. Soul Searching: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005

Christian Smith & Patricia Snell. Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009

Andy Stanley. Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love To Attend, Zondervan, 2012

Andy Stanley. The Seven Checkpoints. Seven Principles Every Teenager Needs To Know. Howard Books, NY 2001