

The Organic and Operational Structure of the Local Church

(Fellowship from Minoru Chen on November 15, 2020)

Prayer

Lord, we lift up our eyes to the heaven again. Lord, all we have is five loaves and two fish, wholly inadequate to feed the multitude. Lord, we look to the heaven for Your blessing. Lord, if this has Your blessing, the multitude will be fed. Lord, we don't trust in what we have. Oh Lord, we trust in an open heaven. We trust in the clear sky. Lord, we trust in the divine dispensing, the bread and the fish that You broke with Your own hands and took to give thanks to the Father. Lord, in these days, may all the saints be fed. Lord, may all of us be trained as Your disciples to know how to feed all the hungry people. Lord, do feed Your children in the church. Lord, we look to You for a word. We look to You for some new instruction. Just as you gave Your servant of old Moses a pattern on the mountain so he would know how to build the tabernacle, Lord, give us Your blueprint then we will know how to build up Your church today. Lord, may we know how to build up Your local church in Your recovery in these times. Lord, cleanse us with Your blood. Protect us from the attack of Satan. Lord, anoint us with Your Spirit.

Introductory Word

Brothers, I would like to continue our fellowship from these last weeks together. What I have been speaking weekly on the Lord's Days through January are an outline, because I do not have the time to deep dive into these things. Next year, when we start the Lessons on the Proper Church Life, perhaps that will be the time to deep dive for a year into these matters. I am even considering how and whether we will use that material, but we will look to the Lord. What is for certain

is we need His present speaking, and we need a way, a roadmap, or a blueprint to carry out the building up of a new church life in all these ten cities. My burden is not just for these ten cities, but that, in all the churches, we would have a new church life.

Brothers, do not be afraid of this. We need to be renewed essentially and constitutionally by the Holy Spirit, in mind, being, and inner man. Our church life also needs a renewal. We have been here in the US for over 50 years. That is a long time. Everything, even you and I, will get old in 50 years. I have gone from a teenager when I came into the Lord's recovery to an older person. I have become old, so I need a renewal. The churches, as the framework or the outward expression of the Body of Christ and even of Christ Himself, as a practical matter, will also age in time, weaken, become decrepit, or even die. Like our biological body, a church will decay, so we need a constant renewal of our church life. I beg you, brothers, please do not hold on to your present church life. I do not think any of us can be that proud to say that the church life we have today is the right kind of church life. Just look at the results. Look at our condition. It is still not up to the Lord's standard or even the biblical standard. We have the riches of the truth and the knowledge and even a measure of the experience of life. But as far as the church's testimony, the church's expression as the house of the living God, as the pillar and base of the truth, as a city that is set on a hill that all can see, none of us can boast, be satisfied, or be contented with the power, impact, or how prevailing the Lord's testimony is in the churches in the Lord's recovery. We need a renewal, even in the practice of our church life.

You will notice all my fellowship in these Lord's Days has to do with the practical building up of a local church. That is what concerns us. I am not sure that many of us brothers have ever thought about these questions: What is the blueprint? What is the construction drawing? How do we build? How do you lay a foundation? How do you put up the studs? How do you put in the electrical and plumbing? How do you put on the drywall? We just carry on habitually and routinely, based on a certain way from the past. Based on what is revealed in the Scriptures and based on what our Brother Lee and Brother Nee

spent much time to consider, I am not sure we know how to practice the church life today, according to God's economy, with a view to building up the Body of Christ. We need to look at the master builder. Paul said, "I am the master builder." Surely he had the blueprint.

In mainland China, in the late 30s and early 40s, Brother Lee took what Brother Nee considered as a blueprint on how to build up a local church to northern China, to his own home church in Chefoo. There he put it into practice. Brothers, we are here to put the things that we are taught into practice. Paul said to Timothy, "Practice these things." Do not be happy to just write it on a notebook. Do not just preach it. Practice it. Carry it out. In the same way, Brother Lee made a success in Chefoo because he had this mind to practically work out something. Brother Lee, the spiritually mature servant of God that he was, was not contented with just a blueprint. He said that the pattern of the tabernacle and the priesthood that Jehovah had given to Moses was for Moses to implement, to work out, to build into the tabernacle and the priesthood.

The tabernacle and priesthood became the worship center, the center of the worshipping life of the nation of Israel. They were called out of Egypt, redeemed and saved out of Pharaoh's tyranny, to go into the wilderness to hold a feast unto Jehovah. Israel was a called nation, a kingdom of priests, to make worshipping the only true God Jehovah their national purpose, their meaning. Only one nation was like that, and that was Israel. Moses was given not just the law and commandments, but the pattern on how to build. I say again that these two things, the tabernacle and the priesthood, became the center of the entire nation of Israel. All 12 tribes surrounded this center of worship, this tabernacle of testimony. This was God's testimony on the earth. The tabernacle with the priesthood is surely a picture of Christ and the church. Today, in the New Testament, we are here to build up the house of the living God, the church. We are also here to build up a priesthood that would tend to this tabernacle, that would live around this tabernacle, and that would maintain this tabernacle of God's testimony. That would be our church life, our New Testament worship today.

A Review of the Four Areas to Build Up in the Church Life

Last week's fellowship was utterly important. I could spend months just on that. Recall the four areas that we need to build up in a local church. Number one, the preaching of the gospel, the witnessing of Christ. We are His chosen witnesses, His disciples. "You shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8b). This great commission is the commission of the church. This is the first thing we must do: we must build up a priesthood of the gospel among the saints. The church should be a priesthood of the gospel, where every saint is a priest and together, we are a priesthood, to offer Gentiles, sanctified by the Spirit, to God. Brothers, please take this very seriously.

Number two, we are here to shepherd. Towards the end of Brother Lee's life, his main burden was for the universal shepherding of the saints to shepherd one another, to shepherd the flock of God, to shepherd the sheep. In John 21, after the disciples came to the shore and ate the breakfast that the Lord prepared, the Lord spoke to Peter and asked him a question, "Do you love Me, Peter?" He asked him three times. Because Peter denied Him three times, the Lord made sure that He asked him three times. "Do you love Me? Do you love Me more than these?" Each time after Peter answered in the affirmative, the Lord would say, "Feed My sheep, feed My lambs, shepherd My sheep." This matter is not only an apostolic function for Peter. To shepherd the Lord's flock, the Lord's lambs, and the Lord's sheep, a shepherding church life, is a function that belongs to every believer, every brother and sister. Two weeks ago, I talked about a people-centered church life, rather than just a meeting-centered church life. Brothers, what church are we building up? It must be a shepherding church. Gospel preaching and shepherding should characterize our church life today.

The third thing we need to take care of is our meetings. The church is *ekklesia*, the assembly of God's called out ones from the world. As the church we meet, we are not to forsake our assembling together as the habit of some was in Hebrews chapter 10. We are a meeting people. We are not butterflies. We are bees or ants that colonize. We have a

corporate life within us. We love to flock together like sheep. We like to come together. That is the life we have within. Our meetings are an important part of the church life that we need to build up. I mentioned the Lord's table, the Lord's supper. First Corinthians says, "When therefore you come together in the same place, it is not to eat the Lord's supper." (11:20) The apostle rebuked them because there were divisions among them. The rich people had good food and the poor people had scarcity – that became a cause of division. The apostle did not like that. He said that they should have eaten in their own houses and then come together to remember the Lord at the Lord's table. The Lord's table is the one thing we must continue until the Lord comes back. To display His death until He comes, to continue to break the bread to remember Him is a great thing. This matter needs a revival in our midst. The Lord's table has become too common. The spirit in the Lord's table, the praise released at the Lord's table, the true remembrance, and the real eating and drinking need to be revived. Then I do not need to say much on the prayer meeting. The prayer of the church is the main ministry of the church. The prayer life of the brothers and sisters and the prayer meetings have to do with carrying out God's will, to bring His will to the earth. Prayer has to do with the bringing in of the Lord's kingdom, with warring with His enemy to defeat him, and with the accomplishment of God's economy.

Lastly, we need to build up the various levitical services in the church, the practical areas of service. Within a community of believers, of disciples, the church life has various needs. Because we are still in our human bodies, there are still all kinds of needs among the saints. These four areas need to be built up among us.

The Organic and Operational Structure of the Local Church

Today, I must make a turn to continue to outline for us how to build, looking at another very important aspect of the building up the church. I am going to talk about how we gather, how the church meets. Let me back up to give a broader description. How does the church function, or how does the church operate? It says in Ephesians 4 that the Body builds itself up in love. It also says that the members, the saints who are in the church, are being perfected by the gifted

ones. The gifted ones will themselves do the work of the ministry unto the building up of the Body of Christ. From chapter four of Ephesians, you see that the building of the church is not done directly by the apostles. The apostles may establish a church, but the building of that local church is not directly in their hands, neither is it in the hands of elders. No, it is in the hands of all the members, all the believers. It is the Body that build itself up. As we talk about this matter of the operation of the Body, we are talking about a situation, an environment, a church life, that is conducive, facilitates, and encourages the release of the organic function of all the believers, all the saints. They need to be perfected. They need to grow in life. They need to learn to function. When all the believers function, the Body builds itself up. This is a very important point.

When we talk about this matter, we have to consider how the saints would function. What kind of situation or environment do we need? How should the church “organize” itself? I put *organize* in quotes because we do not like organization. The Body of Christ is not an organization, it is an organism. Doctors, physiologists, biologists, and other people who study the human body will tell you that this very complex organism of the human body is the most organized among all the organisms, because it is the top organism. Look at the various systems of our body: the cardiovascular system, the nervous system, the skeletal system. The body is highly organized. It is not chaotic or freestyle. No, it is very ordered, as God has made the human body to be. This organization or this structure of the human body is not humanly engineered. It is animated by the divine life and maintained by Christ’s power in His word. The human body is a beautiful structure: the bones, the skeletal system, the muscles, the veins, the vessels, and the various organs. The skin, which is an organ, is impenetrable, a place where excess moisture would vaporize, and protects us against wounds. It is intricate, profound, and just beautiful.

We should not say that the church is just a bunch of people. There is no order there, nothing organized, nothing structured. That is a wrong concept. It is organic. It is not humanly fabricated or manufactured. Nevertheless, it is divinely organized. What I am driving at today,

brothers, is the organic structure of the church. How is the church organically structured? I go back to the studies that Brother Witness Lee did in the 1980s when he went back to Taiwan. Among other things, he paid a lot of attention to this. Today I would like to synthesize what he had discovered through his re-study of the Bible in this matter of how the church should meet and how the saints should function.

The First Level: The Individual Member

In our human body, the most basic structure are cells. We have billions of cells in each human body to form the organs and the tissues. The basic *cell* or unit of the Body is the member, the believer, the individual saint, the disciple of the Lord, the Christian. That is the smallest unit. The Bible talks about the members and many members are in one Body. Each one of us is a member. We are the disciples of Christ. We are all a branch in the vine: every branch that bears fruit, every branch that does not bear fruit. Each individual is that unit in this Body, like a cell. In this smallest unit, the Body starts to function. If we want to build up a local church, that is where we should start. You start with one. You start with yourself. You help the saints to start with themselves. When Brother Lee gave the training on The Vital Group in the early '90s, he said that the vital group starts with one saint, one saints who is desperate for the increase of the recovery. It has to start with one – that is how God works. We need to perfect every saint. We need to shepherd and pray for every saint. We need to look to the Lord for the Lord's growth in every saint. We would like to see every saint revived, vital, living, and active. That is why I like Paul's word in Colossians 1:28: warning every man, teaching every man, presenting every man. Paul knew that it is every man. Every man, every member, counts. If a member would rise up to be revived, living, active, and vital, the whole church will become vitalized. This is not a top-down thing. Building up the church is from the “cellular” level, from the member level.

Dear brothers, building up the church is not making schedules or giving announcements in the meetings. Building up the church is not just arranging certain things. Building up the church starts with

building up each and every saint. We need to have a heart for that. We ourselves have to take the lead. I hope we do not care for positions, ranks, or titles. We need to be a living, functioning, and normal member in the Body of Christ, building the church, serving the Lord. If we are like this, we will inspire, help, and lead others into this. Take care of the individual saints in a fine and particular way, one-on-one. We ourselves need to be that individual saint who rises up to do something, whether it is prayer, the gospel, or shepherding. Let us start with ourselves, “building up yourselves upon your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit.” (Jude 20) Do not look down on the individual. That is where it starts. When one sister is built up in prayer, she will soon affect another sister or a group of sisters. “Draw me; we will run after you.” (Song of Songs 1:4a) Draw *me* first, then there will soon be a group that will run after the Lord.

The Second Level: The Twos and Threes

The second level in terms of the gathering of the saints for their function in the church to build up the Body are the companions. The basic unit is each individual saint, the believer. However, in the Body, we are not supposed to do everything by ourselves. The church is corporate, and our services and functions are also corporate. We may start with the individual but which we should never be individualistic. Soon, we need to have companions. This concept is there in Song of Songs. I mentioned “Draw me; we will run after you.” The *we* here were the positively affected ones, and they became the companions. Brother Lee said that a vital group starts with one, but this one will be led by the Lord to find another saints then a third saint. They will become this vital unit or this group of vital companions.

I love the word *companion*. I use this term *twos and threes*, which is used a lot in the Bible a lot and in the ministry. When we say *twos and threes*, we are not legally saying that we cannot have four. The principle is a handful of saints as spiritual companions. They are the next level of a functioning unit or a building unit. The principle is always there. Moses needed Aaron. Joshua had Caleb. The three mighty men of David went to get water from the well of Bethlehem to quench the thirst. There are many other instances in the Old

Testament. Economically, even God is three. Why does God have to be three? It is for operation, for economical move. Essentially, God is one. Economically, God is three: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. What a full picture is that. Even God is “companionized” in terms of His operation and move.

Brothers, the next thing we build up in the churches are the twos and threes. In this matter, it is better to not arrange the twos and threes. Do not do that. We practice it first, then encourage the saints. The Lord will lead us. For elders, it could be another co-elder or not. It could be another brother in your neighborhood or small group. One brother can also have two or three groups. You do not have to be stuck with just one. It depends on the situation.

We have to read Matthew 18. In the first mentioning of the local church life by the Lord Jesus Himself, He mentioned twos and threes: “Where there are two or three gathered into My name” (v. 20). Is that not a unit? Why did the Lord not say four or five, five or six, five or seven? Why not fewer than two or three? Because then it will be just one person and there will be no *midst* for the Lord to gather in. When you have three, there is a *midst*, a middle, where the Lord would present Himself with us. Brothers, I hope that this will give you some light. I am not giving some manual or something legal, this is in the word. This is also in our experience.

Another twos and threes in Matthew 18 is when two are in symphonic harmony on the earth, what they bind on the earth will have been bound in heaven and what they release on earth will have been released in heaven. That means that there is the authority of the Head, the authority of the Body, when even two would pray in such harmony.

The third mention of twos and threes in Matthew 18 was in the shepherding of a brother who sins. “If he does not hear you, take with you one or two more” (v. 16a) to shepherd and to restore this brother in twos and threes.

The first application of the twos and threes is to pursue the Lord's

presence, to enjoy His riches, His presence in our midst. The second is prayer by twos and threes. The third is in our care for people, whether in the gospel or in shepherding a stumbled or backslidden one. There is a wonderful footnote in that chapter in Matthew. Brother Lee said that is how the Christian should meet. That was how they met in the church, by twos and threes. When I ask a saint, "Who are your companions?" I would like to hear them tell me, "This one and that one. We pray together twice a week. We contact people together on Saturdays. We get together by Zoom to pray as companions for the Lord's interest." They look out for each other. They have each other's back. They pray with one another. They support one another. It is a little support group. It is not only for their support, but for the active work of the Lord: gospel, shepherding, service, prayer. The twos and threes, brothers, are absolutely powerful. That is the next level of an operational structure of the church.

The Third Level: The Small Group

The next level is the small group. I do not want to call it a home meeting. The home meeting is simply the venue, the place where you meet. I say *small group*. That word *small* implies the number. It is not a big group, but a small group. How small is small? I cannot tell you. If I am pressed to give a number, I consider that when the Lord was on the earth, He had twelve disciples. Twelve is a very important number, but I will not get into that now. Twelve is a very good sized group but do not take this in a legal way. The saints in a neighborhood, the saints in the church who share the same burden for a specific item, say the campus work, or the saints who feel they belong together and can know one another mutually and more intimately are some examples. The twos and threes are different from a group of 10, 12, or 15. Let me give a testimony. Here in Irvine, 15-20 years ago, we took out time and very deliberately built up the church's small group life. This small group is not just a group that meets on Friday, someone bringing salad and another bringing roast beef and potatoes. We were meeting like this for years and nothing happened. It was a routine. This small group is active, living, and caring for people. It is a group that is an entry point for new ones into the church or to recover the dormant saints. It does not meet in the hall, but in somebody's home. In this group,

there are all kinds of people: couples, single saints, college-age, high schoolers. It is a miniature of the church. The two or three cannot say they are the church, but a group like this can be the miniature of the church. Today, they are local churches with just that many people – 10, 12, or 15 people. A small group like that can really have the beginning of that expression, of that function of the church as God's family. In all these years, we have benefited very much in Irvine by this kind of small group life. We emphasize not only the small group meetings on Friday or Saturday evenings, but a small group life where this group is almost like a family that live and do things together. They even go and visit another church together. They are very mobile and flexible because of their size, yet there is that element of a corporate church, a family. That sense of belonging is very important even to us, brothers. We need that sense of belonging with some saints in a definite way.

These small groups, just like the twos and threes, can change, say, every year. Many of our groups would reassess the situation. Sometimes a group has grown big and it multiplies to become two groups. In some cases, there would be some in one group who have a burden to start a new group or to strengthen another group as the Lord leads and as the fellowship goes. It is not a permanent thing. It is very real and practical. There is just that mutuality there: mutual care, mutual shepherding. In this kind of a small group, the gospel can be preached and new ones can be cared for, perfected, and brought in. Brother Lee spent a lot of time building up the small groups in Taiwan. I can testify how practical this is in building up the church.

The Fourth Level: The Church / District of a Church

Finally, the next level in this organic structure of the church is the church / district. This is the church or a district of the church, depending on the church size. In the church in Irvine, there may be 50 to 60 small groups, 9 or 10 districts, and 3 halls. Several districts are in one hall. This practice of the districts started in Taipei in 1988 or 1989 when Brother Lee began to promote the prophesying meeting to replace the practice of one man speaking on Lord's Days. There used to be just one man speaking on Lord's Days, but the prophesying

meeting according to 1 Corinthians 14 replaced that. In order for more saints to be able to prophesy, we reduced the number of the gathering on Lord's Days. In Taipei, they broke up the very large church into many districts. The district is the place where the saints can all function. That really is like a little church.

Most churches in the USA are that size or smaller. What size am I talking about? Brother Lee was never legal – he used different numbers at different times. At one time, he said 70 to 100 people is a district. Other times he said 40 to 50 people. Other times he even said smaller than that. Today, some verses came to mind that I would like to share with you, brothers. These are all based on what Brother Lee had used. Let us look at the Gospel of Mark chapter 6. The Lord was feeding the 5,000 men, not including women and children, with five loaves and two fish. The disciples did not have much money to buy food, and eventually they did not even need to buy anything. The Lord "said to them, How many loaves do you have? Go and see. And when they found out, they said, Five, and two fish." (v. 38) Then the Lord did this: "And He ordered them to have all recline by companies on the green grass. And they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties." (vv. 39-40) Have you ever paid attention to these two verses? They are very interesting.

The Lord was actually training the disciples on how to feed people. In Acts chapter 2, on the day of Pentecost, within one day 3,000 were added to the Lord. On another day, in chapter 4, there were added 5,000 – exactly this number of 5,000 men were added to the church in Jerusalem. All these people needed to be fed. They had all things in common at that time. How did they feed the 5,000? The Lord already trained them. The Lord had taken the bread and the fish, He had broken them and blessed them. Then He did not just throw them into the air and ask the disciples to come and get it. The Lord was much more orderly than that. Dispensing food requires a lot of planning and order. He had trained His twelve. He had ordered all these 5,000 people to recline, to lay down, on the green grass – it sounds like Psalm 23 to me – by companies. The footnote in Mark 6:39 says that this word *by companies* is like dividing in a banquet, where you divide

people into tables. Once they were gathered like this, by companies, by tables, they were fed. The food – the bread and the fish – was probably put into the center and they distributed it among themselves, just like they were in a party or in a banquet. The picture here is one of spreading a feast. This is the feast. That eating is a beautiful picture of a feast, where all these people were the guests. This is in the footnote in verse 39.

Verse 40 then says, “And they sat down in groups.” What does *in groups* mean? In the footnote, it says that this literally means garden plot by garden plot. In order you have a garden, you have different plot; this is for the tomatoes, this for the cucumbers, and this is for the chilies. Literally that means they set garden plot by garden plot. Here we have another picture. That picture is a growing garden or a farm, where all the vegetables and plants were arranged in plots in the garden. The “plants” in this case are not plants, but people arranged in an orderly way. They probably sat in square blocks, and they looked like flowers or plants. This is a wonderful picture of the flowerbeds, of the garden plots, for growth in the garden. This is another picture of the church life. The church is not only the banqueting house, the church is also a garden. We are God's building. We are God's farm. It is in this farm where the saints are fed like at a feast and where they grow as flowers, spices, vegetables, or fruit. This is the picture.

Verse 40 also said, “by hundreds and by fifties.” I am not taking these numbers legally but it is very interesting. We start with 5,000 men. 50 times 100 is worth 5,000. They had groups of hundreds and groups of fifties within the hundreds. You have the rank of fifties and the file of hundreds – this multitude was in rank and file of fifties and hundreds. This is not division. This is not organization. This is for dispensing and for growth. This is for feasting in an orderly way, in an adequate way. The Lord did that. Then of course, there were 12 basketfuls remaining. I think that the apostles, when the church life started in Acts, remembered this, in both how to feed the needy believers physically and even how to feed them spiritually.

When you have a group of 50 or 150 or whatever the case may be, that is like the size of a church or a district of a church. Again, please do not take this legally. In 1 Corinthians 11, when the whole church in Corinth gathered together in one place to have the Lord's supper, many Bible students think that there were somewhere between 50 and 150 saints. They believe that the size of the church in Corinth was about that number. Among us today in these ten cities, we are more or less around those numbers. These hundreds and fifties can be likened to churches or to districts. Coming back to the example in Irvine where we have so many saints, the saints are broken up according to where they live, such as in a certain district, neighborhood, or area of the city. This is not arranged legally, but this is very organic and according to the Lord's arrangement and leading. Some of you are in bigger cities, and there could be a clump of saints here and another clump there. It is the right thing to do for us to have such districts. These districts are really like small churches, not administratively – there is only one local church in one city, but in terms of the saints' functioning and gathering.

If you ask me what a good number is for a district, I would say 50 to 100. If you have 50 saints, that is a good size. In Taipei, they have 10,000 saints and they do not have that many meeting halls. They live in high rises with smaller dwelling units, where a living room cannot hold that many. Hence, some districts in Taipei have fewer than 50 saints. We are not legal about this, it depends on the situation. During the ten days before Pentecost, 120 saints were meeting in an upper room to pray for so many days. This tells me that those houses were not that small. At least the upper room was not small to fit 120 there. That was the start of the church in Jerusalem.

A district, in our experience, functions like a little church in terms of service, meetings, and coordination. It provides a wonderful "playground" for the saints, for the brothers, to be active in. When you have a church with several hundreds or thousands, you could kill the function of the believers. The more we give the saints room to "play" – to function, be active, and serve – the more they will grow and become useful. I have been in churches that over the years have

become old with no growth, no burden to raise up brothers or sisters. Things there are very centralized. That is not the way to grow or build up a church.

Concluding Word

There is one eldership, one administration, and one fellowship in each locality. However, in terms of the function, the operation, the exercise of gifts, and the direct building up of the Body, the saints need to be given room, given space, and be encouraged to serve. You will then have so many brothers and sisters who are busy and functioning. When the number is smaller, there will be much more mutuality. Brother Watchman Nee released a book called *The Assembly Life* in the '30s. That became a precursor of the famous book *The Normal Christian Church Life*. In *The Assembly Life*, Brother Nee talked about *roundtable meetings*. The Chinese have round tables, not square or rectangular tables. Brother Nee said the roundtable meetings should be the Christian meeting life. It should be very mutual. There is a lazy Susan and everybody eats together, very corporate and very family-like.

I am not telling you to start cutting or dividing up your church. I am putting forth a view of how a church can operate in an environment that is conducive for the saints to serve, to function, to grow, and to dispense Christ to another. This situation will provide entry points for new ones to come into the church life. They will not have to come to a big meeting. They are firstly attached to twos and threes, then brought into a small group, before they are eventually brought to a big church. I hope you will not consider this as being too mechanical. Such a vision helps. It was a big part of Brother Witness Lee's work in Taiwan. Brothers, I can only testify to you that this way – if done right – works. Many things – gospel, shepherding, meeting life, and to some degree, even the practical affairs – can be spread out and carried by so many saints, so many brothers. That is our experience.

In places where you begin to have saints who have migrated coming or have come to your city, there is a need to immediately shepherd them. It is easy to get lost. When saints move to a new place where

they have no connection and no one cares for them, it is easy for them to get lost or to disappear. A lot of shepherding is needed right away. During this abnormal time of the pandemic, we have to consider what I talked about today. How can these twos and threes and these small groups be a way to care for the saints and keep them? We can help the saints have a sense of belonging in a family within the church and be built up with other saints at those different levels.

Questions and Responses

Because of the pandemic we have been isolated. I was wondering if there is a way to reach the saints in a loving way. How do we deal with this during this time?

How do we shepherd or reach the saints in these pandemic times? There is no “magic” solution. Caring for people will always require labor, patience, and persistence. What this means is that it requires a lot of heart and a lot of burden to carry it out. I heard today that Dr. Fauci, the COVID-19 czar, predicted that this country will not become normalized until the second or even the third quarter of 2021. Even with a vaccine coming out, we will likely still be in some condition of lockdown. The only way we can reach one another then becomes the telephone, email, or Zoom. Brothers, we just have to use this technology and reach these dear saints. Greet them and welcome them. Check in with them to see how they are doing. Introduce or connect them to other saints. If you find time and they are open to have a regular contact for morning revival, to read some ministry, or to pray, it would be good to begin to build up that relationship. I do not think we should wait for them to take the initiative. Typically, the host or the receiving church would have to take the initiative. If there are saints who are close to where they live, it would be even better if those local saints have the burden to reach out and get connected to them. The migrants are all in different conditions. Spiritually, some are stronger, others are weaker. Humanly, they are all in different situations. Therefore, some may take more time to settle down, some are ready to go. By contacting them, you need to really find out where they are and how they are. It is no different than taking care of the new ones.

Brother Minoru, you shared about the growth and splitting of the small groups or districts from one to two, and that it has to be done organically. We have come across this before. Can you share some experience on how we practically split the small groups or the districts. Some of the saints would make the choices to go here or there, but that is not necessarily the best way. Can you share something with us on this matter?

First of all, let me underscore one point again. By sharing these things with you today, I do not mean that you should go and do these tomorrow. I am giving you an outline of the structure of a church life that produces an environment for the church to have a way to grow, increase, and function. Someone just commented that this requires a lot of prayer. Absolutely. In Irvine, when we implemented these things at different times, we never did anything quickly. It was not looking at the list and then grouping them by throwing pins on a map. We needed to have a knowledge of the whereabouts of the saints, where they lived, what their situation was. We needed to know these things in order to administrate the church. We spent much time to pray and to consider before we acted. But we did something, we did not just sit there and do nothing, but we took our time to pray and to fellowship. In terms of my experience with groups or districts, I would not use the word *split* or *divide*, let us use the word *multiply*. I would like to give you my own experience. When my wife and I came to Irvine 25 years ago, we started to have a small group. I do not know how many iterations or multiplication we have gone through. We are a couple and we would typically have two other couples, usually younger ones, with us. They would stay with us and watch how we function and how we bring in new ones. We lived close to the campus, so our group catered more towards college-age and full-timers. There were other districts and halls that were more community-oriented. For years and years, that is what we did. For example, we never kept the couples that had been with us forever. Our view was always for them to watch, learn, and either strengthen another group or start another group. Couples moving to another group has happened countless times. Some of those couples are now doing the same thing in other churches, other places. It takes some of us who have a particular

burden to do that.

In terms of how to multiply, usually every half a year or at the most every year, we encourage every church to have a reassessment or re-evaluation of where things are in the whole church. Some need to move from one group to another for this or that reason. Some, as I said earlier, are ready to start their own small group. You can start with half a dozen people in a small group. You do not need to start with 10 or 12. You can start with a smaller number around the dining table and you grow from there in a very organic way over time. I cannot tell you exactly what to do. This is just one person's experience here.

Brothers, it is a matter of enterprise. If you do not have the view that we are enterprising, building, and growing, then everything is just maintenance and you just come every Friday and meet. Not much will happen that way. I hope this helps. Every situation has its own situation. I do not know your particular situation, so I cannot tell you what to do. Yes, some saints have preferences. Sometimes we need to just let them have their preference. Some saints are very open to fellowship that, because of their portion, their age, or where they live, they would be open to be in this group or in that group. The situations are all different. We have to really look to the Lord and fellowship to take care of the situation.

I have question about the content of the meetings in the small group. When you start meeting in the small groups, what is a good ministry portion or even Bible portions to get into to train or help the saints to grow and even see the vision of the small groups? Maybe they can practice it after they have been in the small group for a year or two, or even half a year. What is something that you and your small groups have used? Do you go over the same thing? Do you have a topic or a specific outline that you cover?

Brother, you are now deep diving into the matter. As I said, I am just giving you an outline. There is a lot to say and I have many outlines. We have trainings that we have done to help the saints to build these

groups up. But I will answer your question about content. In the end, we found out that, at least in a big church like Irvine, we cannot unify content where everyone is in lockstep on some Life-Study or other material. Why? It is very simple – we have different languages, different age groups, and different needs. Never forget that we here to be people-centered. Even the content that we use would depend on the needs of the people. For example, in our small group, there were times when we prepared to cover something but two new ones showed up. We had to change. We could not just say, “Forget you. We will go on reading this book.” The whole time with these ones would turn into a gospel time, a gospel fellowship. Sometimes a new one or a seeking one would come with a certain question. We answered that question and that led us into another line of fellowship. So while we may prepare something or have a kind of a line, either as a Bible study, a book, or booklets, we are very flexible. That is the beauty also of these gatherings in homes in small groups – they are very flexible. They can change. They are mainly there to meet the need. It depends on what the need is in that small group. There are a lot of things I have to say here, but I just do not have the time. We have gone through so many evolutions, and we have had failures in these small groups. To keep a small group living, flexible, fruit-bearing, and increasing, there needs to be a lot of fellowship and perfecting in the coming days.