

Stepping Down to Step Up

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A letter to the congregation



Succession and leadership development is an area that we do not typically dedicate significant time to as a movement. Perhaps because of how sometimes we see it as an impossible task to fulfill successfully. Just dealing with today is always a bit easier than planning for tomorrow. At least that is what I find.

But last year when there was all this talk about 2020 I decided to sit down and make a plan for the next three years of my life. It is interesting that when we take the time to make clear plans and achievable goals we start to become more in control of our future.

It is one year on since I sat down and set some priorities for myself.

Here is an account of what has been going on in my heart and mind and why I would like to step down as the main pastor.

Firstly, I would like to develop who I am, both in a spiritual and professional context.

I have worked in our movement for most of the last 15-20 years of my life. It has given me so much, and most of the time it has been a joy. Until a couple of years ago I didn't ever see myself doing anything else. I was ambitious to serve God as one of our local pastors and to grow our local church.

However as an organization we don't provide people with any professional or vocational training, and although that isn't everything in life, at a certain level and at a certain point it becomes quite essential. I feel like I keep hitting my head on a glass ceiling, which is hard to reconcile with my ambition.

While I am in my 40s I would like to develop a deeper range of resources within me, which I hope will allow me to do more with my life than I am able to do at the moment.

Recently I was reading a speech of Rev Moon's where he is talking to a large group of leaders in our American movement back in the 1970s. He says to them that to become the best you can be as someone who is leading others, you need to look around you and see who is really the most successful in their leadership role, and observe and learn from them.

When I look around for those role models I see many more outside of our movement than I do within. That is not meant to be a harsh criticism of us but rather a simple expression of the reality that we need to come to terms with. I sense we are struggling to find the resources within our movement to reform and move forward, and I see many of the answers to bringing some of the reformation we need lying outside; in places where people are practicing principles successfully, having tapped into the benefit of the age that has come with all that God is doing in the world.

I am happy to remain involved in supporting the new leadership of our local congregation, but I would like to be a volunteer again and without a big formal role, in a sense rediscover something that I used to have more of, like when I first came to find my relationship with God. Part of me wants to be able to care and serve just as everyone else does, and not because it's my remit, my job, or because I am being paid. It will be good for me, and revitalizing.

This need for change is also connected to Chieko and I working out our spiritual path together, and discovering what it means to find our mission as a couple. I think we would like to discover how we could be more of a team in what we do beyond our family. For some time now she has also felt she would like to experience not being 'the church leader's wife' in the Unification Church. It's always important to listen to my wife's heart.

I have a hope that we will be able to contribute much more to our community and movement as a result of exploring together more as a couple.

There is another side to all of this, which is less about my future and me, and more about a trend I hope our particular local community can avoid.

As I mentioned at the start, many communities and Unification Church bodies are failing to successfully tackle the difficult question of succession and passing on of leadership. Leadership has reverted back to people who have previously done it over many decades, mainly because there is no younger leadership being cultivated and sometimes a general unwillingness to delegate significant responsibilities and decision-making power.

I have seen a whole raft of young people who I have worked with over the years in our church movement simply move on. They haven't found it easy to remain actively involved or to find the space to shape our future. That is a collective challenge rather than a stick to beat people with. At least I know I can see several instances where I have lacked the sensibility to nurture leadership around me, and even can point to some instances where I have stopped short that interest others have had in leadership. At least our mistakes make us wiser.

It is often the ultimate test of successful leadership: being able to raise up new leadership.

What about our 43LG community? We have done a lot over the last few years together, and I think many things that we have accomplished have made a positive contribution to our neighboring Unification Church communities. But we always need to ask the difficult questions: how much is our future secured, do we have longevity, how do we see the future?

Probably our most valuable asset we have in our community is the friendships people have nurtured with one another over the years. That will be a massive factor on how much of a future we have as a congregation.

But we are an unusual community in some respects and our Sunday attendance numbers have dropped off a bit in the last year or so.

It is a good time to start to have this conversation, and give ourselves some time to create a good process for succession of leadership and decide how we want to do it; to work out how we can ensure that we have a culture that is values and vision centered where God can be free to work, rather than centered on a particular person.

One of the first questions to ask is what kind of leadership are we thirsting for? What aspect of our community needs stronger leadership? Probably it isn't so much in the area of what we do on a Sunday morning. Already there is a committed team of people helping to lead in that respect. So, is it in the area of pastoring? Or possibly in the area of making faith relevant to people's working lives? Or is it something else?

I would like us to get started this month and either by the autumn or the start of winter to have a plan and process in place for some transfer of leadership to take place in our community. And certainly by our next local church AGM in February I would like us to be in a position to feel confident that we could formally announce a positive handing over of leadership responsibility to a new pastor or a new leadership team.

Already last Sunday I got some helpful feedback, and so I hope as many of you as possible who feel connected in some way to our 43LG community will get involved in the process and put forward your opinions and views and maybe even yourselves.