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A (Beautifully) Imperfect Gathering of a (Beautifully) Imperfect Family Hosted by a (Beautifully) Imperfect Movement: An open letter to those who will lead the global church in 2050

Michael Oh

'When's the Fifth Lausanne Congress?'

To be perfectly honest my heart drops a bit when I hear this *very* common question! After a nearly five-year journey that led to the Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul-Incheon, South Korea, I am not quite ready to think about tackling another incredibly joyful but incredibly weighty challenge!

But I am also incredibly thankful that so many are asking and wanting another Lausanne Congress. That certainly beats people saying that neither this one nor another is wanted or needed!

The only statement that outnumbers the times I have been asked about a fifth Lausanne Congress is the response that people share to describe their experience in Seoul:

'Life-changing!'

While we are so deeply grateful for this (as we see it as the answer to years of prayer), at the same time we are reserving judgment.

I can't tell you how many times David Bennett, who so faithfully served as Congress Director, and I shared about our resolve that Seoul-Incheon 2024 not be 'merely' an

historic gathering full of experiences and stories that would last a lifetime for all who gathered. We wanted the Fourth Congress to be history-making.

World-changing impact and blessing through the global church taking up her call to strategically and collaboratively address the greatest gaps and opportunities of the Great Commission was the vision, prayer, and hope for this Congress.

In that sense, the Congress itself wasn't the focus. In another, we are recognizing more and more post-Congress that the real hopes and goals for 'world-changing' might not so easily happen without 'life-changing' experiences at the Congress itself. So, we are deeply thankful to the Lord for so powerfully working by his Spirit in the hearts of the 5,394 Congress participants from 202 nations.

Some are describing the Congress as, 'the most global gathering ever.' I much rather prefer and long for the Fourth Lausanne Congress to one day be known as, 'the most globally-impacting gathering ever.' The reservation of judgement is waiting to see how we who have had 'life-changing' experiences will steward these toward 'world-changing' love to our lost world. That, however, will only happen by the grace of God, and it will take years to see such fruit. But, if and when we see it, it will have all been worth it.

That is why this letter is written especially to my beloved brothers and sisters who are younger leaders of the global church. More than 2,100 (about 40 percent) of the Congress participants were in their 20's, 30's, and 40's. We, as a Movement, talk so much about our commitment and desire to help prepare for and even help shape the world in 2050. The reality is, however, that while we have opportunity to influence that world, we are not the ones to lead it. You are.

I was 41 years old when I was asked to lead this movement. Perhaps not much older or even a little younger than many of you. Nearly 12 years now have passed since taking on a challenge that was so clearly so much bigger than me or anything I could have imagined. Since day one, the prospects and weight of eventually taking on the leadership of the Fourth Lausanne Congress were heavy upon my shoulders, but the Lord enabled it.

My hope is that you all might be better and more faithful, effective, and beautiful than the generation before you. Toward that end I want to share not only some of the many reasons to praise God for his hand upon the Fourth Lausanne Congress but also some of the heartaches and challenges for your encouragement and benefit. Just like what my wife and I hope for when we pray for our five children, that's what so many of us in my generation of leadership humbly hope and pray for you as you steward leadership into the future.

An Imperfect Gathering of an Imperfect Family hosted by an Imperfect Movement

As I shared at the Congress opening night, my hope was that all of us might have the posture and heart that many had already expressed to me: 'I don't deserve to be here.' With 35,000 nominations from which we prayerfully discerned more than 5,500 invitations to gather 5,394 participants from 202 nations, so many could genuinely say and believe, 'I'm here only because God wanted me here.'

And so many actually made it to Seoul because so many around the world also wanted them there. More than four million US dollars in scholarships were awarded to support nearly two-thirds of the participants. 2,000 hotel spaces were sponsored. That was possible because of God's work mobilizing God's resources that had been entrusted to God's people. This funding came in more like 'daily bread' than a professional sports 'signing bonus'. Having felt the weight of the fact that the three previous Lausanne Congresses ended in momentum and movement-challenging debt, our firm conviction and commitment from the start was, 'we're not going to spend money we don't have!' But the money the Lord did provide we shared broadly and generously. However, after round after round of awarding scholarship funds, we had so many still uncertain if they would be able to join in Seoul even a few weeks before the Congress. So we praise God for the releasing of generosity day by day up to the very start of the Congress that ultimately enabled more people than we could have ever imagined to make it to Seoul! It really felt like a miracle. And to end without any debt was certainly another!

There was absolute wonder on people's faces from opening night to closing, and the active work of the Holy Spirit was so evident session by session and conversation by conversation. For many it was the truest and most inspiring experience of being a part of a timeless and global body of Christ that they had ever known.

Stories of persecution in the world today reminded us that the Great Commission was given not long after the crucifixion and to a church that was born in the fires of persecution. We were reminded that suffering is not something to be avoided, but it is, for many, an inevitable consequence, and dare we even say, blessing, of faithfulness to gospel witness.

We were reminded that the gospel is simple, yet powerful. And that simple gospel speaks and works powerfully in the lives of complicated people who live in complex societies in a fallen world.

And we were reminded, perhaps most of all, that there is gospel work to be done. The challenges and nature of that work need to be more clearly understood. The plans and collaboration for that work must be more strategically engaged. And our commitment to it as the body of Christ must be more passionately affirmed and expressed. That is why we are so excited for the 'Report on the State of the Great Commission'¹ and the 'Collaborative Action Hub'² launched from Seoul.

The hope for the Fourth Lausanne Congress was, from the start, for the body of Christ to understand more clearly: 1) what must be done in the world, 2) where it must be done, 3) who must do it, and 4) how it can actually get done. The theme of the Congress must continue as a rallying cry—'Let the church declare and display Christ together!' The challenge and ambition that we embraced as we planned the congress, as well as every initiative to be launched out from the Congress, were to be *biblical* and *prophetic*.

And this is an exhortation that I give to you, my dear brothers and sisters who will lead the church and the charge in 2050. Being biblical and prophetic, as was clearly and powerfully shared at the Congress, will lead to suffering and persecution from

the world. But it will also lead to attacks and discouragement from within the church. And this will many times be an even greater weight or challenge to the mission and your leadership than persecution. It may be that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, as Tertullian said. But back-stabbing and mean-spirited in-fighting within the family of God might be Satan's best strategy to kill the church. The number one reason for missionary attrition isn't persecution, it's relational conflict as seen most often within mission teams and Christian communities.

Add to this the megaphone effects of social media where anyone can say anything about anyone with little to no consequence or accountability. The louder and more controversial and critical the statements the more attention is attracted (which is the main vacuous goal of social media). We need to figure out how to better get our house in order as the family of God and also be prepared for what leadership can and should look like today and toward the world in 2050.

Concluding Advice: Four Strategies

So I share with you my dear younger leader friends four strategies for how *not* to respond to this ugly and inevitable reality.

1) By staying silent

To be biblical and prophetic requires a voice. To speak up. To have convictions. And to take a stand. The clearer and more courageous you are, the louder and harsher the responses may be. Shutting up or being shut down just amplifies the voices of others who may not be as biblical or prophetic as the church needs. My mentor from seminary, the missiologist Paul Hiebert, used to say, 'Write, then duck.' In other words, speak up. But be prepared for criticism. That is certainly magnified in a social media age. In fact, someone said to me, 'Congratulations on surviving the first Lausanne Congress in a social media age!'

If you receive only a handful of criticisms in about equal measure from both the right and the left like the Fourth Congress, you can be encouraged that you are probably on the right track!

2) By taking things personally

First of all it is a wonderful thing when people have high expectations of you! It's much better than the opposite! The problem is when criticism is lacking in grace or love. In that case their critical words and critical spirit say much more about them than you.

Second, believe the gospel you preach. You are neither defined by nor measured by your real failures or the fair or unfair accusations of failures by your siblings in the family of God.

3) By getting distracted or dragged into the mud

Don't worry about voices that are jealous of you or obsessed with competing with you or beating or tearing you down. Focus on the vision and calling and convictions that the Lord has given you. Hear his voice and drown out the noise of 'flies' buzzing in your ears.

I laughed as I read a few articles in response to my closing Congress talk³ where I encouraged leaders to be more like bees who see beauty than flies who seek filth and stench. The reason I laughed is that the flies did what flies do—they acted like flies.

Scrutinize your own heart as you write and certainly before posting criticism. Please don't say anything in public about someone that you haven't said person to person. Pray about the potential impact of what you write before you casually click and post something caustic.

When others write and post pieces that cause my heart to drop, I say to myself, 'Better a little humiliation than to fall into a little pride.' We can be thankful even for ungracious and mean-spirited words.

Keep your eyes on the flowers and enjoy the garden and the Gardener.

4) By failing to listen

There is something to learn from most criticism. And listening will always serve you well. Listening comes from the heart of a learner—and that's what it means to be a disciple.

The Seoul Statement that was prepared by the Lausanne Theology Working Group⁴ is beautifully biblical and prophetic. The interaction about its content has been vibrant and healthy. It's what we need as the family of God. We don't need nor expect unanimity. We need gracious, deep, and humble engagement by listening to criticism. What was mishandled by me and Lausanne was the processing of that interaction.

Every third Sunday I have a 'check-in' time with my wife Pearl. The single question that we ask each other is, 'How can I love you better?' It is, first of all, an acknowledgement that we want to love well, but we don't or didn't love as well as we wanted. It's also an expression and commitment that we want to change and learn how to love better. We hold ourselves to high expectations in our love for each other, and we rely on God's grace without which it would be impossible to progress toward that. We also seek to extend that same grace to each other. This asking and listening has served us well during our 30-year marriage.

Similarly for the Seoul Statement processing and the many imperfections of the Fourth Lausanne Congress, let's respond with God's grace. You may know some of them, but I can say confidently that I know many more! For every way that I or Lausanne didn't love you as well as we should and wanted, please forgive us!

The Fourth Lausanne Congress was an imperfect gathering. And we're trying to learn all that we can from as many voices as we can. The lessons learned, though, will be most important for you all as you lead us into the future. The only way this Congress could have been a perfect gathering is if those who gathered were the perfect family. And we're not. The disagreements and divisions seen during the Congress were not caused by the gathering. However, the Congress was the context that revealed them.

If there's a possibility of some disagreements and arguments occurring during a family reunion, is it better to just not have one? Or is that exactly why the family needs to be together . . . to work through our divisions, discouragements, doubts, and disunity?

That, my friends, is why the Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul-Incheon was a beautifully imperfect gathering of a beautifully imperfect family hosted by a beautifully imperfect movement. It was more imperfect than we even knew. And more beautiful as well. And that is only because our beautifully perfect God makes beauty out of our imperfections.

Endnotes

1. 'State of the Great Commission,' Lausanne Movement, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://lausanne.org/report>.
2. 'Lausanne Action Hub,' Lausanne Movement, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://collaborate.lausanne.org/>.
3. Michael Oh, 'Bees and Flies: A Call to See the Beauty in the Global Church,' Lausanne Movement, accessed January 6, 2025, https://lausanne.org/accelerate-summary/c_5e18f0f73c.
4. 'The Fourth Lausanne Congress: The Seoul Statement,' Lausanne Movement, accessed January 6, 2025, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>.

Author's Bio



Dr Michael Young-Suk Oh has served as global executive director / CEO of the Lausanne Movement since March 2013. He is of Korean descent, born in America. He received his BA, MS, and PhD degrees at the University of Pennsylvania. He also completed an MDiv at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as well as an MA in regional studies, East Asia, at Harvard University.

Michael, his wife Pearl, and their five children served as missionaries in Nagoya, Japan from 2004 to 2016.

Meta Description

This article is a reflection on the Fourth Lausanne Congress in Seoul-Incheon, South Korea by Dr Michael Oh, the CEO of the Lausanne Movement. In the article he shares the challenges and joys of putting together the Congress and gives advice to younger leaders on how to handle the inevitable criticism that comes with leadership well.

SEO Title

The Joys and Pains of the Fourth Lausanne Congress: An open letter to younger leaders of the global church