On Being An Evangelist In The Countryside

Huang Zhaoping

These days, young people don't like to become evangelists. One reason for this is that the home meetings don't have a lot of funds to pay for our salaries. Also, being an evangelist is not a profession that is very well accepted by society...

Life as an evangelist in the countryside is not easy. Everyday you have to go out and preach, because the Christians in the villages are waiting for you. In the mountains here, we have to walk everywhere, often 15 or even 20 kilometers at one stretch. But experiencing the loving kindness of the Christians always moves me very deeply. Though they are poor people, they would never cheat you - not like in the big cities where they cheat you if they don't know you.

Being an evangelist is hard. We share the simple life of the people in the countryside, our salaries are low. But God doesn't forget us. I have chosen this path - to become an evangelist -- and I know that I have chosen well. There are many jobs that have much more prestige, but they don't enable us to get to know God so well.

-- from an interview recorded in Fuzhou, October 1992

Huang Zhaoping is a woman evangelist who now teaches at Fujian Theological Seminary.
China Christian Council Concerned About "Christian Identity Cards"

The China Christian Council (CCC) and the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee (TSPM) have expressed their concerns about recent instances of county Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) issuing "Christian Identity Cards" to church members. This was revealed in the December issue of Tian Feng, the national Christian magazine, which printed a letter complaining about this new practice, as well as an editorial response. The letter reports that some county RABs require Christians to carry such IDs, the charge for which is two yuan, plus a 30 fen administration fee. The writer argues that if such an ID were indeed necessary, it should be issued by the churches instead of a government agency.

In the printed response, Tian Feng reports that it has received several letters detailing the same problem. According to its information, "Christian Identity Cards" had been issued in several counties in three or four provinces. The CCC and the TSPM have expressed their concern about such local regulations in a letter to the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council, requesting both a thorough investigation and the discontinuation of this practice. [ANS]

Guizhou Church Returned After Eleven-Year Effort

Hou'erguan Church in Shuicheng County, Guizhou province, was finally returned to its congregation in November 1992 after eleven years of negotiations. The church, built in 1908, had been taken over by a production brigade in the late 1950s and had since been used as living quarters for several families.

Local Christians had no place to meet, and had tried since 1982 to have the church returned to them. Since the local RAB refused to deal with the matter, the church subsequently made four appeals to the Liupanshui Municipal Government, the next higher government body. Although the city government investigated the problem each time, the matter could not be resolved. A fifth appeal was finally made to the Municipal Political Consultative Conference. It ruled that the Christians' appeal was legitimate, and that the United Front Work Department, the Religious Affairs Bureau and the county government should implement the policy of religious freedom and return the church's property. After three meetings with all organizations involved, a solution was finally found. On November 11, 1992, the families who had occupied the church moved out, having received suitable new living accommodations. [ANS]
Ordinations In Guizhou

The Liuzhi area of Guizhou province is mostly inhabited by national minorities. Of its 470,000 citizens, more than 2,800 are Christians who worship in 24 churches and meeting points. On December 13, 1992, three ministers, including one woman, and 12 elders were ordained at the Liuzhi Church to serve Christians in the area. At the same service, 42 new evangelists were also commissioned. [ANS]

First Lay Training Course Held In Southern Sichuan

The first lay training course for southern Sichuan province was held in late 1992. Fifty lay workers from 18 churches and meeting points in the area participated in the two week course which was jointly organized by churches in Luzhou and Zigong.

Southern Sichuan with its 47 counties has almost 30 million inhabitants. The 7,000 Christians in the area are quite isolated from one another, and many have not heard a pastor's sermon for years. In Gulin county, for example, 2,000 Christians are scattered in over 20 villages, but there is no regular meeting point where they can worship, and there is not a single trained church worker. Southern Sichuan has only 21 church workers, ten of whom are recent seminary graduates. The other eleven are over 70 years of age, and many are too frail to continue their pastoral responsibilities.

Initially, a training class seemed to be out of the question because of a lack of funds. But in early June, a Christian factory manager from Zhejiang visited Sichuan and pledged money for the project, saying that the success of his factory was a gift of God's grace and that he wanted to repay some of what he had been given. This pledge so inspired local Christians that the necessary funds were raised within a short time. Plans were finalized, and the course started in mid-October. Participants reported that cooperation between church workers from different areas was very good, and that lay workers in Zigong and Luzhou had done their utmost to make their time together a success. [ANS]

Triple Celebration For Sichuan Church

The Xichang Church in western Sichuan province has a pastor once again. The church had been without pastoral leadership since its elderly minister passed away in 1987. For six years, neither baptisms nor communion services had been held in the church.

On November 15, 1992, two ministers sent by the Sichuan Christian Council ordained two young seminary graduates, a man and a woman who had already been working in Xichang, and baptized 21 new believers. The newly ordained ministers then proceeded to celebrate communion with a joyful congregation. [ANS]
Chinese Church Magazine Reports On Problems In The Implementation Of Religious Policy

Note: Tian Feng, the Chinese Christian monthly, frequently reports on difficulties experienced by churches because of the inadequate implementation of religious policy. This past Fall, the CCC and the TSPM organized separate inspection teams to look into policy abuses in Henan and Anhui provinces. The following report is from a member of the delegation which visited Anhui. It mentions the issue of the "approval" of meeting points. The whole process of government approval of meeting points is inconsistent in China. Although registration is required in some places, there is no national policy, and both the CCC and the TSPM have been addressing the issue in a variety of ways. This translation has been slightly adapted for ANS readers, based on the report which will appear in a forthcoming issue of Tian Feng:

"...we visited churches and meeting points in more than ten cities, townships and country villages. In the process of our inspection, we saw that although many government cadres spared no effort in their implementation of religious policy and in the opening of churches and meeting points to enable Christians to enjoy a full religious life, there were still problems in the implementation of religious policy in some places which deserve careful attention. Here I wish to express my opinion on the undifferentiated banning of so-called "private meeting points" and "self-styled evangelists" in some areas.

"The church has developed rather rapidly in this province in recent years, and many so-called "private meeting points" and "self-styled evangelists" have emerged. "Private meeting points" are those which have been set up but have not yet received government approval. One important reason for the spread of "private meeting points" is that too few churches have been opened or that churches are inadequately distributed. In one area there are twenty or thirty thousand Christians, but only two places of worship. In other areas meeting points are separated by up to a hundred kilometers, and this far from meets the needs of Christians. Another important reason for the spread of "private meeting points" has to do with the image of local church leaders and Three-Self representatives. In some cases, they have a bad working style and are not held in high esteem by local Christians. Christians therefore leave the church, not necessarily because they oppose Three-Self, but because they oppose certain individuals in the Three-Self organization, or they oppose the way some leaders handle church affairs. A third reason is that the church is not itself united. Some local church leaders are out only for their own interests; they form their own cliques and struggle for power and hence there is no way they can get along with one other. This results in a disunity which causes many Christians to leave the church and set up their own meeting points. A fourth reason for the spread of "private meeting points" is related to foreign infiltration, anti-Three-Self forces in China and the illegal activities of certain individuals. The "Full Scope Church," the "Yellers," the "Life Church," the "Born Again Church" and a variety of other groups, many of which are heretical, are active in many places, cheating well-meaning and innocent Christians and [Over]"
causing divisions in the church. There is a very small number of such heretics, and we should be able to unite with and win over the majority.

"The term "self-styled evangelists" refers to people who go out on their own to evangelize without the recognition of the church. They need to be looked at case by case in order to differentiate among them. Many are motivated purely by a strong faith, but have not had proper training. Only a very small number want to create confusion, cheat and confuse people, and oppose the government and Three-Self. In the course of our inspection, I discovered that the majority of these evangelists support the government, respect the law, and conscientiously discharge their responsibilities to the nation. In their religious activities, they consciously resist heretical teachings from the outside. In their meetings, they use Bibles, hymnals and magazines which are published by the CCC and which they have purchased from Shanghai and Nanjing. They eagerly hope to be able to open churches and meeting points in a reasonable way, and to establish healthy church organizations devoted to normal religious life.

"I believe that "private meeting points" and "self-styled evangelists" are not all of a piece. They need to be looked at case by case in order to differentiate among them. Those which are engaged in illegal activities or have been infiltrated from abroad should be dealt with strictly according to the law. But not all "private meeting points" and "self-styled evangelists" should be banned. The approval or non-approval of existing meeting points should not be grounds for saying that they are legal or illegal. It is clearly not in accordance with government policy to say that "private meeting points" are without exception illegal and should be banned. I hope that this problem will be given careful attention by the government so that such practices can be corrected." [ANS]

Work Started On New Church For Pukou, Jiangsu Province

In 1980, when Christians first started to meet publicly again in Pukou, just north of the Yangzi river, there were about 30 believers who congregated on Sundays. By 1986, when East Gate Church in Pukou was opened, the congregation had swollen to more than 200 members. Even then the church was small, with a sanctuary of only 75 square meters. By 1992, there were more than 2000 Christians in the Pukou area and the church was terribly crowded, with people overflowing into the courtyard and even out onto the street. Because there wasn't enough room in the church, many Christians had to meet in small home worship gatherings scattered around the town.

Obviously, a new church building was needed, and church leaders started negotiations with the Pukou prefecture United Front Work Department in 1987. Despite the conscientious efforts of this department, it took several years before a suitable plot of land was finally given to the church. Several plots were turned down by the church, for they were either too small or too far from town for the majority of the Christians.
New Church For Pukou/2

Construction of the new church, fairly close to the city center, finally started on September 28, 1992. Most work is being done by the Pukou Christians themselves, and there are even some eighty-year-olds who lend a hand. Although the congregation still lacks about RMB 30,000 in funds, they expect to finish the new church soon. [ANS]

Classes Suspended At Yunnan Theological Seminary

Classes have temporarily been suspended at Yunnan Theological Seminary in Kunming, ANS has learned. Earlier reports from Yunnan indicate that there had been internal disputes among the seminary leadership, including one incident in which a faculty member was beaten. The current situation is unclear, although the China Christian Council has been involved in mediation efforts. [ANS]

Witness Bearing Leads To Church Growth In Henghu

Amity Staff member Gotthard Oblau recently visited the newly opened church in Henghu, Jiangxi Province, which we reported on in our last issue (See ANS 92.6.7). He filed this report:

The exemplary practical witness bearing by Henghu Christians has led to the continuing growth of the church in this part of rural Jiangxi. As Ms. Zhu Fengqi, an ordained "teacher" and full-time leader of the church in Henghu, pointed out, witness bearing through deeds by ordinary believers strengthens the church and makes it attractive to people in society. "Christians with a low quality faith are just like anybody else," she explained. "But as believers we are clearly different from the rest of society. That is why God in his grace has turned so many hearts to the church and has protected us Christians in so many wonderful ways."

Activities of the Protestant Church in Henghu contribute to this witness. They include weekly witness meetings at which people are invited to stand up and give testimonies about how they experience the grace of God in their daily lives. In a rather spontaneous way, participants also share Bible passages, pray and sing hymns with one another. [ANS]

Church Children's Orchestra First In China

Trinity Church on Gulangyu Island, Xiamen, Fujian province, has recently formed a children's orchestra. The first of its kind in China, it consists of 42 members, the youngest of whom is only six years of age. Several of the children attend a special school for the musically gifted, and they all come from families who belong to the congregation. The orchestra's instruments were donated by a church member who now lives in Canada. Trinity Church has a tradition of accomplishment in church music and its renowned adult choir, now numbering more than 90 members, was revived after the end of the Cultural Revolution era, in 1979. [Over]
Church Children's Orchestra/2

The choir and orchestra gave their first joint performance on Christmas Day 1992, singing and playing both Chinese and Western Christmas music. They gave a second concert for Amity teachers meeting in Xiamen in January 1993, following the wedding of two teachers in Trinity Church. [ANS]

International Exchanges

The Nanjing office of the China Christian Council reports that in 1992, it received 30 groups from overseas and sent 18 groups on visits to foreign countries and regions.

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At the invitation of the China Christian Council, the Hong Kong Salvation Army Band visited several cities in China in early December, giving concerts and meeting Christians in many churches. This was the first visit of the band to China.

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Rev. Chen Zemin, Dean of Studies at Nanjing Theological Seminary, is lecturing at the Theological Faculty of Hamburg University, Germany from January 10 to February 14, 1993.

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"Statement On Theological Scholarships For Study Overseas"

K.H. Ting, President, China Christian Council

Recently, there have been direct invitations to persons in our theological schools and other church institutions for taking up jobs or further study abroad, with the stated purpose of helping the church in China or enriching exchanges within the worldwide Christian community, and usually offering sizable financial support in comparison with income in China. We grant that both the donors and the recipients have their freedom to give and to accept, but we want to request them to take into consideration that, after the lapse of all these years, the China Christian Council is now able to work on building up the church, for which we need to rally all possible resources. We are experiencing an acute shortage of talents and younger colleagues because of so many years of completely inadequate work in leadership training. It is only with very great difficulty that we are able to provide training to a small number of younger colleagues in China and abroad. If those who have received training are then to be drawn away from their work in China by generous overseas offers to them as individuals, the agenda of the China Christian Council is upset. Would the donors then be helping the church in China, or would they be jeopardizing our work? We ask that friends outside of China respect our principle of self-administration and offer such assistance in consultation with the China Christian Council.

We are aware that a number of younger Christians from mainland China are already studying theology or are employed abroad after being approached individually and without the endorsement of the Chinese church. We request theological institutions and churches abroad to see that, in spite of certain difficulties, it is in China that the value of their pursuits can be best realized. We urge these institutions and churches to consult with the China Christian Council before engaging individuals from our church for work or study overseas.

We value highly the help churches in Canada, the U.S.A., the U.K., and Germany have given us in supporting our student-sending program for theological training abroad in recent years. Their return rate is far higher than average. They are now contributing greatly to the building up of the life and work of the church in our country, and are at the same time witnesses to the goodwill and care for the Christian cause in China on the part of Christians in these countries. We are planning to send out theological graduates on a regular basis again beginning in 1993. We thank churches and schools abroad for their kind cooperation.  

January 5, 1993
ANS Feature:

A Church For The Village

The majority of the Protestant Christians in China live in the countryside: On the loess plateau in central Henan, in the fertile valleys of coastal Zhejiang, in the mountains of impoverished Anhui and newly-prosperous Fujian. Their churches are among the fastest growing in the world. Precisely for this reason, they face a plethora of problems: The most serious are a dire lack of trained personnel to teach new believers about the basics of faith and to lead churches; all kinds of divisions, heresies and infighting within the churches; and religious affairs officials who are sometimes ignorant of or even openly hostile to Christianity.

The Fifth National Chinese Christian Conference, which met in January of 1992, therefore put church work in the countryside at the top of their agenda. The monthly magazine of the China Christian Council, Tian Feng (Heavenly Wind), has since been filled with articles on how to deal with the problems of rural churches. In July, a young graduate from Nanjing Theological Seminary reported on a church in rural Fujian that he thought could serve as a model to others. (See Tian Feng 7/1992, pages 19-20)

Rev. Claudia Währisch-Oblau, Associate Editor of ANS, thought that the church in Xiyang village was worth a closer look. She went there in October 1992, together with Huang Shaoping, a young woman evangelist from the area (see also cover piece), and filed this report:

There is no real road to Xiyang, only a winding gravel path that leads up into the mountains above the Luoyuan sound. Public transport to the village takes the form of handtractors, their trailers tightly packed with standing passengers who bounce up and down to the rhythm of the potholes.

To a European eye, this is beautiful countryside: Small, terraced fields contouring the lines of mountains topped by rocky outcrops, beautiful wood-and-mud houses in little villages surrounded by bamboo groves, women of the She nationality in their colorful headgear drying grain in their courtyards. But the local people have little eye for the beauty of the land. Terraced fields to them mean back-breaking work to yield even a small amount of grain. And the rough terrain forces the two evangelists who itinerate in Luoyuan county to walk narrow mountain paths to many of the villages where there are Christian communities.

Across the pass, we reach Xiyang, a somewhat larger village inhabited by Han Chinese. So isolated is this community that local people could not recall ever having seen a foreigner, even in the years before the revolution. Nestled into a wide valley, surrounded by fields and orchards, sit traditional wooden houses. A new church stands prominently on a little knoll. There is a growing Christian congregation in this village never reached by any foreign missionary, where before 1978 not a single Christian was to be found.

The young evangelist I am traveling with tells me the amazing story of how the Gospel came to this remote place. Some time in the mid-seventies, a young woman from Xiyang was sold into marriage to a place some hours away - a practice common in many poor areas of the Chinese countryside. While the girl was on her way to her new in-laws, her prospective husband suddenly died. Normally in such a case the man's relatives would have blamed the bride-to-be for bringing bad luck. Not so this family, which happened [Over]
to be Christian; they took the woman in with such loving care that she became a Christian herself before long. And with the evangelistic fervor so typical of Chinese Christians she decided to return to her home village to spread the Gospel.

At first, few people in Xiyang were interested. Over the course of several years, no one but a few old women became Christians. This changed when a young boy fell into the village pond. By the time he was rescued he was unconscious. Medical care was too far away to even be considered. While his parents gave up hope, the group of Christian women stayed with the boy and prayed for him throughout an entire day and a night. On the morning of the second day, he woke up, and his recovery opened the doors for the Gospel. Many people became very interested in the Christian faith, and of the 200-odd families in Xiyang, 43 now belong to the church.

Long Muhua and her husband Deng Qingjian are the leaders of the congregation. The young peasant woman with the big smile preaches every Sunday. Where did she learn to do that? "Oh, I don't have much education," she answers. "I am just a simple woman. But I did go to a training course for lay church leaders in the county town for a couple of weeks."

In some respects, the church in Xiyang is typical of so many rural churches in China. Throughout the countryside, congregations are growing because the sick have experienced healing. In many of these churches, the leaders, like Long Muhua here in Xiyang, have had only minimal training. In many other ways, however, the church in Xiyang is extraordinary.

The Christians in Xiyang are a very closely-knit community. They have established a Visitation Committee that keeps in regular contact with all Christians, especially those in the surrounding villages. Deng Qingjian explains why this is so important: "We have many new Christians here, and almost all of them are young people. They are not yet very firm in their faith, so they need help and guidance." The Visitation Committee also makes sure that anybody who falls ill gets visited. Long Muhua reports that faith healings are frequent.

Church Activities

Nobody in Xiyang has a television. Instead, the Christians meet for church-related activities almost every night. There is the choir, Bible studies, prayer meetings, committees... Sunday services are long. "If I preach less than two hours," the itinerant evangelist from the area tells me, "they will urge me to go on for another hour at least. They can never hear enough!"

But Christians in Xiyang are not a group mainly concerned about themselves and the salvation of their own souls. "We have learnt from the Bible that as Christians, we should love our neighbors," stresses Long Muhua. Therefore, in 1989, they started the Know-How Committee: Seven young Christian peasants were sent to the county town to learn how to grow oranges and mushrooms. Now they pass their knowledge on to anyone in the village who wants to learn from them, Christians and non-Christians alike. [Over]
The results are impressive: The orange trees in the groves around the village are weighted down by ripening fruit, and mushroom growers proudly show their produce: Some specimens were bigger than the palm of my hand. The average income of the peasants has increased dramatically and all over the village there are signs of incipient prosperity. Long Muhua's kitchen wall is adorned with cut-out pictures of the New York and San Francisco skylines, symbols of a dream for a better future.

The orange groves and mushroom nurseries are individually contracted from the state, and the money families make from them is private income. But there is a high degree of mutual help: The Production Committee assists with field work when someone falls ill or is too elderly to cope alone. And the Building Committee, made up of a large group of young men and women, has constructed not only the new church but also an irrigation system that serves the whole village.

And beginning in 1992, the Christians of Xiyang went a step further along their unusual road: All 43 Christian families organized themselves into a cooperative. During the winter months when there was little work in the fields and orange groves, they cleared 520 mu (about 170 acres) of mountainside and planted new lychee, longan and other fruit trees. Work is shared, as will be the income from the church cooperative.

Positive Feedback

While helping peasants to get rich is nothing out of the ordinary in a province that is committed to reform, forming a cooperative at a time when everyone else is turning to individual production is a thought-provoking step. Comments Deng Qingjian who is in charge of the cooperative: "The people in this village like it that we Christians are so united. Mutual help wasn't common here before we started it."

"We also get very positive feedback from party cadres!" adds Long Muhua. "Before there were Christians in this village, it was really a poor and hopeless place. There were lots of fights, and some people even turned to crime because they didn't know how else to make a living." But now the church has given the whole village a new perspective on how to overcome poverty and the county government appreciates this. As I found out later, the Religious Affairs Bureau in Luoyuan county actually has a rule that only places which originally had churches are allowed to construct new ones. As Xiyang had no Christians, of course it had no church either. But as the local cadres saw the good influence of the Christians there, they made an exception and granted the congregation some land on which to erect their church. Until then, the almost 200 Christians had met in Long Muhua's and Deng Qingjian's barn.

The bright, friendly new sanctuary in Xiyang was put up by the congregation's Building Committee, with the help of many of the other members. Looking out from the church, the village is framed by the caption above its door: "Peace to those who go out." In Xiyang, this is much more than a pious phrase. [ANS]
Provinces, Cities and Counties mentioned in this issue

Abbreviations used in this issue: CCC, China Christian Council; TSPM, National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China; RAB, Religious Affairs Bureau