Peter W.H. Tsai: A Tribute

1913 - 1993

The Rev. Peter Wenhao Tsai (Cai Wenhao), Vice-President of the China Christian Council, President of the Zhejiang Christian Council and Chairman of the Zhejiang Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee, died on 24 November 1993 following a lengthy illness with lymphatic cancer. He is survived by his wife, Eleanor Lufu Yang, their five daughters and grandchildren.

Rev. Tsai was born into a Christian family in Suzhou in 1913. He studied literature at Shanghai University and pursued further studies at the Yanjing School of Religion in Beijing and at Nanjing Theological Seminary. In 1946 he went to the United States to do graduate work in ecumenics at Princeton Theological Seminary under President John A. Mackay and Professor Joseph Hromadka. He also studied rural church ministry at Drew Theological Seminary.

Rev. Tsai returned to China in 1948. Shortly after Liberation in 1949, he became Acting President of the Jiangsu-Zhejiang Bible College, Executive Secretary of the Zhejiang Conference of the Church of Christ in China, and Deputy General Secretary of that church's national body. Rev. Tsai was involved in the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) in the early 1950s and in 1958 he became Chair of the newly organized Zhejiang TSPM. Throughout this period Rev. Tsai's commitment to building up the Church on Chinese soil never wavered. But he also saw that Christians must be patriotic citizens as well. "We must participate in political life in a way which is in harmony with Biblical truth," Rev. Tsai observed in the early 1980s.

During the Cultural Revolution era, Rev. Tsai was severely criticized by Red Guards in Hangzhou. He was held in detention for a time and at one point was paraded through the streets past jeering crowds. In later years, he never dwelled on this experience, but instead preferred to speak of what he learned from lay Christians during this ordeal:

I saw during this period that my own faith was weaker than that of many lay Christians. It is they who have now become the motive force of our church. We would not have survived without the laity during the Cultural Revolution. We were weak, but they continued to do evangelistic work. We were pushed forward by our congregations. God was still at work during this time. We saw the Holy Spirit active in our midst. As a result, more lay workers now share our ministry.

As a result of his experience during the Cultural Revolution, Rev. Tsai was drawn closer to the simple faith of Chinese Christians at the grassroots. This enabled him to play an important bridge-building role in the reorganization of the church after the reimplementation of religious policy. [OVER]
Tribute To Peter W.K.Tsai/2

In 1979, both in China as a whole, and in Zhejiang Province in particular.

In 1980, Rev. Tsai was elected Vice-President of the newly-organized China Christian Council (CCC) and President of the Zhejiang Christian Council. He also served on the Standing Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Rev. Tsai's participation in the CPPCC showed that he was held in high regard outside of church circles. This enabled him to speak up for the church (something he has been doing all his life), and his voice would be heard.

Rev. Tsai was nurtured in the Reformed Tradition, but he was instrumental in bringing people from diverse Christian backgrounds together. He worked tirelessly for reconciliation with groups outside the CCC and TSPM. He was a strong believer in evangelism and in building up the church as the Body of Christ. Rev. Tsai would often speak of the church as a "golden lamp stand" (Rev 1:12). He also worked patiently to encourage the church in Zhejiang to accept ordination of women pastors, and although their number in Zhejiang is quite small, a beginning has been made.

Under Rev. Tsai's leadership, the church in Zhejiang grew from less than 200,000 Christians in 1950 to at least 1.2 million today. The province now has the highest percentage of Christians on the China mainland, and they worship in hundreds of newly-built churches and thousands of meeting points.

Zhejiang Theological Seminary stands as a legacy to Rev. Peter Tsai's concern for theological education. On the national level, he headed the committee which produced the "Church Order For Trial Use" now being promoted throughout the Chinese church. His leadership in church work was marked by a democratic style and a concern for "ordinary" Christians. On visits to churches throughout the province, he sought opinions from a wide variety of people, and often stayed with local Christian families, joining in their family Bible readings and prayers.

Nearly 1,400 people attended the memorial service for Rev. Tsai held on 7 December in the Sicheng Church in Hangzhou. Those present at the memorial service were deeply moved by the singing of the hymn "Be A Good Shepherd," one of four hymns in the New Chinese Hymnal with words by Rev. Tsai and music by his wife Eleanor, an accomplished musician.

When we first met Rev. Tsai in 1981, we were impressed by his gentleness, his sense of humour and his strong commitment to the church. He spoke to us of the enormity of the task now facing the Chinese church: "We must do the work of two years in one year, but we believe in the eternity of the church as much as we do in the eternity of God. To doubt the future of the church is to doubt God. This is our faith and the measure of our trust in the power of God." It is also the testimony of a faithful servant of Jesus Christ.

Janice and Philip Wickeri