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Christmas Cheer Pervades China

"On Christmas Day last year, so many people came to participate in the Christmas Service that traffic broke down in the streets around our church." Rev. Li Hengquan's experience is far from unique. Like in Nanning, Guangxi, scores of the curious flock to church services in cities all over China. Many city churches hold several services on Christmas Day, some allowing admission by ticket only to avoid a dangerous crush.

But while such overwhelming curiosity has its problems, it also gives Christians a chance to witness to their faith. "There is no better evangelistic opportunity than Christmas," says Rev. Li, "people come because they want to understand what we Christians celebrate. It's a great chance to tell them about Jesus."

But big celebrations are not limited to the cities of China. Rural churches celebrate it as well, and with gusto. "Christmas - well, it's very lively at our church," says an evangelist in northern Jiangsu. "We have music, singing, dramatic sketches, a quiz... we celebrate all day long." In southern Zhejiang, Christmas celebrations include a common lunch and choir competition with dozens of participating groups. Christmas pageants are all the rage in churches all over the country.

Christmas preparations often begin as early as late October, with special choirs being formed for the occasion. Handel's Hallelujah Chorus seems a favorite with city choirs, as is Silent Night, Holy Night, but Chinese music also plays a big part. The text of a popular Chinese hymn is especially expressive:

"Wondrous news thro' the streets resounds,  
Glad praises fill every home.  
Poor man's Saviour, peasant's Friend,  
Comes today to Bethlehem."

And not just to Bethlehem - to China, too. [ANS]

Bishop Ting Calls For Better Church Work

Even though the three-self principle has been successfully implemented in the Chinese church, much work remains to be done to unite all Christians in China, says Bishop K.H.Ting, President of the China Christian Council. Speaking at a celebration commemorating the 45th anniversary of the founding of the Three-Self Movement on November 21, Ting said that unity among all Christians in China could only be achieved if the church was run well.

Ting said that over the last 45 years, the church in China had become independent and patriotic, shedding its image of a "foreigners' religion" and leading Christians into a post-denominational period. This development had won the China Christian Council respect inside and outside China. [OVER]
Bishop Ting Calls For Better Church Work...

Ting added that at this historical stage, more attention had to be given to running the churches well. This did not mean giving up the Three-Self principle, but rather deepening it. Ting called on the leaders of the TSPM not to be distracted by past disagreements, but to address the church problems of today. Only in this way could the masses of believers be drawn to remain under the banner of Three-Self.

Addressing the question of how to deal with infiltration from abroad, Ting added: "If we work hard at running our churches well, in a way that believers appreciate, if we do what the believers like and don't do what they don't like, we can unite the believers, and overseas infiltration will be ineffective."

There were differences of opinion about certain issues within the TSPM, Ting admitted, but in working to run the churches well such differences could be overcome. Running the churches well meant focusing on concrete problems like preaching, the development of theology, or the building of new churches.

One barrier to running the churches well was the dictatorial attitude of some local church and TSPM leaders, who never convened their church council or made their church accounts public, angering grassroots Christians. "Christians are not content with just going to church, they are the church body, and church affairs are their own affairs." To run the churches well, it was necessary that Christians were consulted, that they had control over church affairs and that they participated in decision-making processes, Ting said. [ANS]

The text of this speech is available in Chinese from ANS.

ANS 95.6.3

Standing Committee Of CCC/TSPM Meets, Discusses 1996 National Christian Conference

Preparations for the National Christian Conference planned for late 1996 are now going ahead at full speed, according to CCC acting general secretary Dr. Wenzao Han. But much time is still needed for consultations, Han told ANS during a recent visit to Hongkong.

The two Standing Committees met in Shanghai, November 22-25. According to Dr. Han, 52 of the 76 members participated in the meeting. Seven had passed away since 1990, and 17 were absent due to ill health or old age. "This poses a challenge for the CCC and TSPM to find younger leaders," Han said. In addition to the standing committee members, 33 observers, more than half of whom were under 45 years of age, had been invited to the meeting. Among the observers were the executive secretaries of the different CCC commissions, as well as delegates from provincial Christian councils not represented on the Standing Committees.

The selection of delegates for the National Christian [OVER]
Standing Committee of CCC/TSPM Meets.../2

Conference was one of the main points on the agenda. According to Han, there will be quotas to ensure the representation of younger people and reduce the number of the very old at the conference. The CCC also aims at having at least 25%, and hopefully 30%, women delegates. Han added that he felt the selection of candidates was very important: "At the conference, we need people with a good knowledge of the situation of grassroots churches, people with hearts on fire for the mission of the church."

Additionally, the two Standing Committees designated the second Sabbath/Sunday in December as Bible Sunday and designated August 14-20, 1996, a week of prayer for world peace.

On November 21, the Standing Committee members and a large number of invited guests held a celebration to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the founding of the TSPM. [ANS]

Rural Church Work Stressed In Jiangxi Province

More than 80% of the Christians in Jiangxi Province live in the countryside. To serve them better, the Jiangxi Christian Council set up a Rural Church Work Committee in 1993, consisting mainly of young seminary graduates who are willing and fit to travel regularly to rural areas to do pastoral work there. Additionally, the more than 70 graduates of Jiangxi Bible School have been assigned to work in the countryside.

Lay training plays an important role in Jiangxi. According to as yet incomplete statistics, more than 140 lay training classes were held in Jiangxi this year, with 11,378 participants. A lay training center was recently opened in Shangrao County, with space for 80 trainees.

With uneven distribution of pastoral workers, some areas in Jiangxi have suffered from the so-called "three designates" policy of the government. This policy made it impossible to send pastoral workers from one county to a neighboring county which did not have any pastors or evangelists. To improve this situation, the Jiangxi Christian Council has encouraged the foundation of prefectural Christian councils which can serve as a counterpart to government offices and assign pastoral workers across county borders. After prolonged negotiations, most prefectures in Jiangxi have now permitted the setting up of such prefectural Christian councils. [ANS]

Huanjiang County in Hechi Prefecture, northern Guangxi, looks like a traveler's dream—that is, until one notices the roads. With picturesque limestone mountains far more spectacular than those of famous Guilin, little villages nestled in bamboo groves and crystal clear streams, Huanjiang is a beautiful place. It is also one of the poorest counties in China.

The county measures about 80 by 90 kilometers, and except for two paved roads, traffic from one township to the next relies on rough, winding mountain tracks which become impassable for all but four-wheel drive vehicles as soon as rain falls. And, as they say up there, "flat ground never extends as much as three square feet, and clear skies never last as long as three days." Many of the mountain villages, inhabited by the Zhuang and Maonan nationalities, can only be reached on foot.

There are 842 Christians in Huanjiang County, according to the department head in charge of religions at the County United Front Work Department. The Christians themselves would not know how many they are: The three churches and 17 home meeting points are separated from each other by days of travel. More than one third of the Christians are illiterate.

There is one ordained elder in Huanjiang, a 71-year old peasant with a beautiful smile on his weathered face. We met him in Xinan Township, about four hours rough drive from the county town. It takes him about two hours to walk from his mountain village to the little church here where he preaches regularly. Elder Tan is grateful for still being fit enough to work his terraced fields. He was ordained in 1992, after attending a lay training class in Guilin. A Christian since he was 17, he has nurtured his whole family into the church. His eldest son serves as his assistant, and his daughters with their families are among the most enthusiastic among the 80-odd church members.

The other churches and home meeting points in the county rarely get to see Elder Tan, though. He manages to visit each of them about once a year. "More is impossible," he says with some embarrassment, "because travel takes so long and I still have to work my fields."

Church services in Huanjiang are held around noon, and kept fairly short. Many Christians have to walk for hours to the next meeting point, and they need to return home before darkness falls.

Like everybody else here, the Christians in Huanjiang are poor. "I love the Bible," one old woman tells us. When we ask her whether she owns one, she points at her pants and jacket: "These are the only things I own. How could I ever afford a Bible?" The church building in Xinan as well as the one in the county town are extremely simple, and could only be built with the help of a donation from Macau Christians. In Minglun Township, the congregation ran out of money before the church building could be finished. "All we need is 3,000 yuan," says Huang Meifu, [OVER]
Guangxi Mountain Christians Scattered And Poor.../2

a middle-aged woman who leads the congregation, "but we don't know how to raise it." The average yearly income in Huanjiang is 480 yuan, an amount that leaves peasants little money to spare for anything other than the bare necessities. [ANS]

ANS 95.6.6

Serious Lack Of Full-time Pastoral Workers in Guangxi

The number of Christians in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwestern China has grown from about 7,000 in 1949 to between 80,000 and 90,000 today, most of whom live in the countryside. This growth was in no way matched by a similar growth in the number of full-time pastoral workers. According to Rev. Timothy Yu, chairman of the Guangxi Christian Council, there are only 22 ordained pastors in the region, of whom only four are younger than 60.

All of these pastors are located in towns and cities. Rural congregations are usually too poor to pay a salary for a full-time church worker, leaving many meeting points and home meeting points without trained leadership.

Lay training classes are regularly held on the provincial, prefectural and county level to alleviate the Guangxi churches' need for trained leadership. But many small, scattered congregations still do not have a single person who has undergone even short training.

Just as an example, Hechi Prefecture in northern Guangxi, a large, mountainous area, does not have a single ordained pastor. As travel on the rough, unpaved mountain tracks is painfully slow, pastors from other areas seldom find the time to visit.

"There are many congregations in the mountains who haven't seen an ordained pastor in more than 50 years," says Rev. Li Hengquan, one of the four younger pastors in Guangxi, who travels frequently in order to call on such groups.

Despite these problems, ordinations of young pastors have been few and far between. There are currently 60 young seminary graduates at work in Guangxi who have not yet been ordained. Many of them have worked for longer than the three years that are the minimum required to qualify for ordination. [ANS]
At first sight, the 44 students in the cramped room have little in common. An assertive young woman in a fancy Puma track suit sits next to a portly man in a faded Mao jacket. An old peasant woman is helped by a bookish looking young man. In one corner huddles a group of giggling young girls hardly out of their teenage years. Next to them, some serious-looking matrons frown in concentration.

This is a peixunban, a lay training class, one of the hundreds run by Christian Councils on all levels in China every year. They train China's future grassroots church leaders, who, due to the lack of full-time pastoral workers, will bear the major burden of church work in China well into the next century.

This particular class takes place in Nanning, capital of Guangxi, and brings together students from all over this autonomous region. About half of them are Han Chinese, the other half belong to the Zhuang nationality.

This morning, the class is following the travels of the Apostle Paul in Acts. The teacher, an elderly pastor from Nanning, takes the students through the text, paragraph by paragraph, teaching solid Biblical knowledge. Students take copious notes - there are few books, and what they learn here will be the treasured basis for many sermons in the years to come.

On other days, the class studies the Gospel of John, Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans, the Pentateuch and the Psalms. There are also lessons in evangelism, catechism, hymn singing and church administration. The students' daily studies begin with morning devotions at 7:30 a.m., and end with evening devotions at 6:30 p.m. Living conditions are basic: There is one dormitory each for men and women, with closely spaced bunk beds. Simple meals are served in a bare hall that doubles as a table tennis room in the evenings. But nobody minds. After all, the class only lasts for two months, a time many students find far too short for their needs.

Almost all of the students are peasants, and leaving their fields during harvest time has not been an easy decision. "Other Christians are helping my family to bring in the grain," explains one middle-aged woman, "otherwise, I couldn't be here. But all of them will benefit from what I learn here, so they encouraged me to come." Some of the students have come at their own initiative, others were sent by their local church. "I wanted to come so badly," says one young woman, "that I put up the course fee myself." To keep these fees low, the Guangxi Christian Council only charges for food, about 6 yuan (US$ 0.72) per day a person. Even so, some rural churches find it hard to raise the 400 yuan (US$ 48) to send one person to the course and need to rely on special help from the Council. After all, Christians in some areas of rural Guangxi have a per-capita income of less than 500 yuan (US$ 60) per year.
Lay Training Class: An Example...

About half of the students come from congregations that meet in private houses. Especially in isolated rural areas, Christians cannot afford the roughly 10,000 yuan (US$ 1,200) to put up a simple meeting point. This is now becoming a problem in some counties, where government officials refuse to grant registration to home meetings, stating that private homes did not qualify as a "fixed place" of worship according to the registration regulations. Unequivocally, students in the peixunban call the lack of church buildings the biggest problem they encounter.

Asked about their congregations, students talk about vastly differing situations. Some cities, like Liuzhou, have large, established churches with hundreds or even more than a thousand Christians. But churches in the countryside are usually small, with believers widely scattered over inaccessible, mountainous terrain. Some students say that they have a hard time participating in the life of the nearest meeting point, being several hours from it by bus. "It's not just the time," complains one elderly peasant woman, "it's also the money. We simply cannot afford a bus ticket every week."

Two thirds of the students are first generation Christians. They first heard the Gospel from friends, colleagues or fellow students. One woman became a Christian after listening to Christian radio broadcasts from Hongkong. All students agree that evangelism in Guangxi is not easy. "Where I live, people are making a lot of money," says a young woman from a county close to Nanning. "People are busy getting rich, so they are not interested to hear about God." In the poorer, remote regions, the reasons are different, though. "People still cling to a lot of superstitions," explains a woman from northern Guangxi, "they need to liberate their thoughts before they can accept the Gospel." The students say that evangelism is easiest amongst one's peers: "When a congregation has a young leadership, this attracts a lot of young people," says a young man from Heping County.

Lay training classes are the backbone of theological education in China. Guangxi has about 90,000 Christians, according to Rev. Timothy Yu, chairman of the Guangxi Christian Council. But there are only 22 ordained pastors, of which only four are younger than 60 years. In a province where traveling 50 kilometers can take half a day, and where most congregations are too poor to afford a salary for a full-time church worker, the church cannot survive without the dedication of trained lay people. [ANS]

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Provincial Lay Training Class in Nanning, Guangxi, October to December 1995.

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Church Leader Calls Lay Training Classes "Crucial"

Lay training classes are "crucial" for the improvement of rural church work in China, says Rev. Zhao Zhi'en, a leading member of the Rural Work Committee of the CCC, in an article in the November issue of the church magazine, Tian Feng.

Zhao quotes a few examples to illustrate the need for lay training: For the more than 200,000 Christians in Heilongjiang Province, there are only 24 pastors, four of whom are older than 80, and six of whom are over 60 years of age. Huaiyin Prefecture in Jiangsu Province has 250,000 Christians, with only seven pastors. Wenzhou Prefecture in Zhejiang Province has 20 pastors for more than half a million Christians, but Cangnan County in this prefecture does not have a single pastor for its almost 70,000 believers.

According to Zhao it is not only the lack of full-time pastoral workers that establishes a dire need for lay training courses. There are also other problems, among them the large number of new believers and first-generation Christians with an often sketchy understanding of what their faith is about. It is therefore not surprising that sects and heretical teachings are found in many places.

[OVER]
Church Leader Calls Lay Training Classes "Crucial".../2

To improve the lay training work already done on all levels, Zhao urges organizers to choose their trainees carefully, paying close attention to their educational level, age and fitness. He also says that more should be done to find good teachers for lay training classes. Finally, careful consideration should be given to the course curricula, differentiating between short term and long term courses, and between classes in the city and the countryside. [ANS]

Consultation With International Evangelicals "A Step Towards Improved Relations"

A group of 17 evangelical leaders from 11 countries met with representatives of the CCC in Nanjing, December 2-7, for a consultation on the church in China. According to Chen Xida, one of the organizers from the CCC, the "very good" consultation marked "a step towards improved relations" with evangelical groups abroad.

According to Chen, the consultation was conducted in a very open and loving spirit. Werner Burklin, the former head of Campus for Christ and leader of the evangelical group, told CCC representatives that they had "not come to criticize, but to learn."

The program of the consultation included briefings on the situation of grassroots churches, the witness of the churches in society, overseas relations of the CCC and religious policy as interpreted by the CCC. These were followed by intensive group discussions.

Members of the evangelical delegation showed themselves amazed at the amount of work the CCC had done in China in recent years. "Before, we only heard about the needs of China. Now we can see what is already being done, and we can see that God's grace is at work there," said one of the guests. Others praised the financial integrity of the CCC, and the involvement of younger church workers in the consultation.

Members of the evangelical delegation included Dr. Tom Houston of the Lausanne Committee, Rev. John Song of Far Eastern Broadcasting Corporation in Korea, Dr. Wilson Chow, President of the China Graduate School of Theology in Hongkong, and Dr. Ernst Vatter of the Liebenzell Mission in Germany.

On the Chinese side, 23 mostly young and middle-aged church workers participated in the consultation, among them CCC acting general secretary Dr. Wenzao Han, provincial Christian Council chairman Rev. Zheng Yugui (Fujian) and Rev. Deng Fucun (Zhejiang). [ANS]
Chinese Christians Impressed By Church Projects In The Philippines

Chinese Christians could learn a lot from their Philippine brothers and sisters when it comes to organizing social projects. This was the conclusion of a delegation of Chinese Christians who visited church-run projects in the Philippines in late October. Led by Ms. Gu Xiuhiu, in charge of church-run projects at the Amity Foundation, the delegation brought together three pastors from Jiangxi, Henan, and Wenzhou, a lay woman who heads a church cooperative in Fujian Province, and a reporter from the church magazine, Tian Feng.

According to Gu Xiuhiu, the group was most impressed by housing and slope protection projects run by the Southern Christian College in Mindanao. "The College program itself was very impressive, too," Gu added. "We in China could learn from how they train their pastors not just in theology, but also in basic health and agricultural work." [ANS]

Chinese Bishops Participate in Hongkong Consecrations

Bishop K. H. Ting and Bishop Wang Shenyin participated in the consecration of two new area bishops of the Anglican Diocese of Hong Kong and Macao on November 30. The Hong Kong Diocese is in the process of being formed into a province, and the consecrations of Bishop Louis Tsui and Bishop Thomas Soo at St. John's Cathedral are a step in this process. Ting and Wang, the last two bishops of the former Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui/Holy Catholic Church of China (Anglican), were among the eight bishops who were at the service for the laying on of hands. [ANS]

Sister Jiang Peifen Dies In Nanjing

Sister Jiang Peifen, President of the Jiangsu Christian Council, died in Nanjing on October 31, after a long illness. She was 81 years old.

A distinguished church leader and well-known preacher and evangelist, Sister Jiang was a role model for many younger church women.

Sister Jiang was a member of the CCC delegation which attended the Montreal Conference, God's Call To A New Beginning, in 1981. This conference was the first ecumenical conference involving Chinese Christians since the early fifties. [ANS]
An increasing number of Bibles from the Amity Printing Press are now available from privately owned book stalls in many different parts of China. While state-run bookstores are not allowed to sell the Bible, private booksellers simply buy Bibles from one of the church-run distribution centers and resell them, often with a 100% mark-up in price.

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There has been an annual lay training class in Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, since 1982. Almost 1,500 church workers have undergone training there since that time.

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Among the new church buildings recently opened in China is the church in Zhuozi Banner, Inner Mongolia, which seats more than 1,000. *** The first church in Niyi Township, Wuwei County, Anhui Province was built in 1980; it was 100 square meters. It became too small, and in 1990 it was replaced by a new building of 170 square meters. As the congregation continued to grow, this building was torn down at the end of last year. The newly built church now measures 500 square meters.

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The fourth provincial lay training class was recently concluded in Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. It lasted for forty days. The course had 52 participants, plus another fifty "auditors", church workers from in and around Xining who took the chance to improve their Biblical knowledge. The class was taught by two local pastors, one aged 87, the other in his early 30s. The participants' age ranged from 20 to over 60 years.

***********

Putian Church in Fujian Province celebrated its 80th anniversary, October 29 and 30. The church building, which seats more than 3,000 worshippers, is one of the largest in China. Among the guests of the extended anniversary celebrations were representatives from more than 100 Fujian churches, as well as Amity's Lois Cole, whose grandparents had been Methodist missionaries in Putian for over 40 years. [ANS]
ANS Feature: A Letter To Henry Brown, Mennonite Missionary To Puyang (1911-1947)

Myrnl Byler, director of the inter-Mennonite China Educational Exchange, visited the re-opening service of the newly renovated Puyang Church in Henan Province in October. The church had originally been built by Mennonite missionary Henry Brown.

I wonder what the people thought when you began building this church in what was then their small town. Perhaps there were comparisons to the foolishness of Noah and his ark. After all, who would come and fill your building, thus identifying themselves with this religion of the West?

But on this Sunday morning, 78 years after the building was completed, I just thought I would tell you that you really should have built it a bit bigger. Even though I was a half-hour early, I had to struggle and be pushed forward to the front of the church. How many people did you intend for this place to hold, anyway? Since the sermon got rather long, I took a few minutes to do a rough estimate of the size of the crowd. Yes, there were really about 700 sitting and some 300 standing in the aisles for the four-hour church service.

Just a word about the courtyard. You could have made that larger as well. They had to shut the front gate because there is no more room there either. I think the overflow is gathering by the school you helped build across the road.

I'm not sure if you are aware of all the things which happened to your church after you were forced to leave by the Japanese occupation in 1941. After the Communist forces liberated the area in 1944, things didn't go so well and eventually the church building began to serve other purposes. Then in 1978, things began to change in China, and the government attempted to return church properties which they had taken over. But in a small community (for China) like Puyang, it took a long time for this to happen. After all, where should the students go if they were using the church as their dormitory?

In 1993, the local government finally returned the building to the local believers. They had been meeting in homes, not great in number, but faithfully remembering and keeping their faith alive. Yes, there was even someone whom you baptized who spent 15 years of his life in prison because of his faith and association with the Mennonites. Despite poor health, he is also here this morning, scrunched into a corner on the bench beside me, his eyes speaking loudly of what this worship service means to him.

During the past few years those of us who followed you to China, some 50 years after you had to leave, have visited here a few times. When the church was returned several years ago, the place was a mess. The roof leaked so badly that services had to be canceled when it rained. No one had bothered to do anything to maintain the building, and even such a fine structure [OVER]
slowly gives way to time and abuse. And while the Christians who remained were happy to have their building and some land returned, they had little money to do any repairs. They raised a few funds, and then asked their Mennonite friends in North America if they could assist them.

All across China poor Christians are giving out of their poverty, building new churches and repairing old ones. So we encouraged the believers in Puyang to do the work themselves, even if it did seem impossible. A few token gifts were given, and then the believers had a major fund-raising campaign. They do it a little differently than we do in North America. Instead of appointing a director of development or some such person, they spent a lot of time praying. Through great sacrifice (most farmers in the Puyang area earn less than US$ 300 a year) they raised about $5,000. This was still far below what was needed for a new roof, so the Commission on Overseas Mission (COM) of the Mennonite General Conference decided to make a donation of $12,000 so that the renovation work could be completed. We even published the good news in a press release earlier this summer.

So here I am, with $12,000 in traveler's checks in my pocket, all prepared to give some much-needed assistance. Funny thing happened, though, they told me they didn't need our money. Earlier this summer they decided to spend some more time praying, and then the 7,000 believers in Puyang and the surrounding areas began to give, and in 50 days they raised $10,000.

Now there is a metal roof over our heads, a sparkling ceiling complete with overhead fans, and we are sitting on newly constructed benches, although they do get a little uncomfortable after four hours. If it wouldn't cause a major disruption in the service, I would give my seat to one of the many elderly ladies who have been standing for the same amount of time.

Yes, the crowd here is larger than normal. They are here to celebrate the renovation of their church building. Sorry Henry, it is no longer yours. But as I read the stories of your work in Puyang, that is what you intended all along. And yes, they already have further plans. They want to build a small training center for the many Christians in the countryside who want to come to the church to study the Bible. No, they haven't asked us for funds. It will take some more time and prayer, but I have no doubt they will get it done.

I'm not sure what will happen to these 12,000 dollars I have here. The fellow by my side, (Larry Kehler, COM Asia Secretary, who is a bit uncomfortable because there is only room for half of him on the bench), has agreed with the church elders to give $1,000 to purchase a piano for the church. I think this is a good gesture on our part and something you would approve of as well.

I'm not sure what will be done with the rest of the money, but for now I am more curious as to how the four visiting choirs which are outside the church will get inside. You don't think they would cut a hole in their new roof and lower them in, do you? [ANS]