Zhejiang Campaign Against Illegal Religious Buildings "Won't Influence Churches"

(ANS) A campaign against illegally erected religious structures such as tombs, temples and churches, currently under way in Zhejiang Province, will not affect genuine church activities. According to Rev. Deng Fucun, General Secretary of the Zhejiang Christian Council, the campaign is aimed at protecting legitimate religious activities.

The operation, which was launched in March and will run to the end of April, is mainly directed against the illegal construction of tombs. According to the China Daily newspaper which announced the campaign in early March, officials in Zhejiang believe that the decrease in grain output recorded in the province since 1991 has been caused by the appropriation of large areas of arable land to construct graves. As any visitor to Zhejiang, especially the southern region of Wenzhou, can testify, whole hillsides are often occupied by large numbers of ornate tombs. Similarly, the construction of new temples can be observed in almost every village.

Nevertheless, the campaign should not be seen as a crackdown on religious activities, said Rev. Deng. Churches that had been erected with government permission would have no problems. Christian congregations that had built churches without government permission could apply for such permits during the campaign, and in this way become legal, Deng told ANS. The campaign was rather aimed at churches and temples that had been erected to attract tourists and not to serve genuine worshippers.

[236 words]
Jiangsu RAB Official: Registration Process Completed Satisfactorily

(ANS) The process of registering places of religious worship has been satisfactory to believers, churches, and government officials alike. This view was expressed by Sha Guangyi, head of the Christianity Division of the Jiangsu Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), in an interview with the church magazine, Tian Feng.

According to a report based on this interview and published in the April issue of Tian Feng, Jiangsu Province had 890,000 Christians in 1995, up from 800,000 in 1993. Three quarters of these Christians are concentrated in the north of the province.

Sha said that in order for the registration to proceed as smoothly as possible, the RAB had set up a special registration office in cooperation with the provincial United Front Work Department, the police and the Civil Affairs Bureau. Wherever the registration process was started, government officials explained it on local television and in newspapers to help avoid misunderstandings and unnecessary fears.

Local Christian Councils had cooperated in the registration process, Sha said. In Xuzhou, the six local pastors devised a written and oral examination for all lay workers in the area, and gave those who passed a certificate, which made it easier for their respective congregations to be registered. For those lay workers who failed the exam, a special training class was set up. A training class was also held in Huai'an County to coordinate the registration of churches and meeting points.

In Shuyang County, 17 unapproved meeting points were found to belong to the outlawed "Spirit Sect" (Lingling Jiao). According to Sha, five of these meeting points were registered after careful consideration, with their leadership receiving education and a warning to cease preaching the beliefs of the sect.

Sha also reported that in Jinhu County, where there are about 2,000 Christians, only two approved meeting points existed, along with about a dozen unapproved meeting points. After studying the situation there carefully, the RAB registered 14 meeting points, and gave three a temporary registration. In Xuyi County, the RAB found one meeting point that attracted believers from up to 20 kilometers away. To improve the situation, a further meeting point was set up and registered, to cut down believers' travel time.

Believers' views were taken seriously during the whole process, said Sha. In Suqian City, 200 Christians met in two meeting points only a few blocks from each other. RAB officials suggested they be united but the believers disagreed. After lengthy discussions among all involved, the two congregations agreed to register as one, but to continue meeting separately.

As of December 1995, Jiangsu Province had 2,820 registered venues of Christian worship (of which 584 were "consolidated", meaning that several venues had
been united), and 660 which hold a temporary registration. The registration of 298 venues has been deferred, and 278 were denied registration. Sha said that those which were denied registration included venues run by different sectarian groups, as well as some set up by foreigners.

When asked about problems, Sha said that some congregations had refused registration, and that one congregation had refused to register unless it was allowed to register under its denominational name. Sha insisted that these problems could be solved by better information and understanding. A denominational registration, though, was not possible, as the China Christian Council had made it clear that denominations should not be resurrected in China.

Sha pointed out that the registration process had helped government officials to better understand the situation of grassroots churches. He felt that the development and growth of Christianity in Jiangsu were normal, even though there had been some problems with sectarian groups. [602 words]

ANS 96.2.3

Head Of CCC Women's Commission Calls For Strengthening Of Women's Work

(ANS) The director of the CCC Women's Commission, Ms. Wang Juzhen, has called for the strengthening of women's work within the Chinese churches. In an article for the March issue of the church magazine, Tian Feng, she writes that since women make up about 70% of the church members in China, "strengthening women means building up the church."

Ms. Wang says that she was inspired by her participation in the NGO Forum on Women in Beijing in 1995 to reflect more deeply about the role of women believers within Chinese churches. Women, who make up such a large part of the congregations, are often little or not at all educated. Any efforts to improve their situation would therefore immediately benefit the whole church.

To improve women's work, all provincial Christian Councils should set up women's commissions, Ms. Wang writes. So far, only ten provinces have done so. Provincial Christian Councils which were not ready to set up a women's commission should at least name a liaison person to relate to the CCC women's commission.

In terms of women's education, Ms. Wang says good experiences have been had with Bible literacy classes. Such classes not only dealt with the problem of illiteracy, but also improved women's knowledge of the basics of faith. Ms. Wang suggests that the literacy Bible primer developed by the CCC should be used more widely.

Ms. Wang also stresses that more women should be given leadership roles, both in local churches and in provincial Christian councils. So far, women are far
underrepresented within the church leadership. Close attention should therefore be paid to preparing women for leadership roles.

Women’s work within the churches cannot be done without relation to society, Ms. Wang says. Women, who have been given many gifts by God, should be encouraged to get actively involved in shaping the future. Finally, Ms. Wang writes, women’s work will profit from wider exchanges with women's groups overseas. [332 words]

ANS 96.2.4

Church Magazine: How To Guard Against Preaching "Another Gospel"

(ANS) An article on how to properly preach the Gospel in the March issue of the church magazine, Tian Feng, gives an interesting glimpse of what passes for preaching the Gospel in some cases. The article, by Weng Suli from Fujian Province, names five main types of improper preaching:

1) Preaching without preaching the Gospel: Some preachers, says Weng, "start with a joke to loosen people up and pique their interest, so that they won't fall asleep. Then they go on to talk about this or that event that recently happened, or something they saw on TV or read in the newspaper, and analyze it. Then they add one or two moving stories, tack on a moral conclusion or two, and then close with something encouraging or a word of hope. Another way is to first bring up a problem, add a few Bible verses, and then just talk about what comes to mind..." Such sermons, Weng says, can be compared to "tea" made without tea leaves - the most important ingredient is missing.

2) Preaching oneself: Instead of preaching Christ, some preachers put themselves at the center of their sermon. Weng quotes an unnamed Christian criticizing a preacher as follows: "This preacher was really to be feared! When he preached, he talked about how enriched he felt by participating in a religious conference, or about his experiences in starting and developing social services. He didn't talk about God's "way", but about his own insight. He did not share the Gospel of salvation, but rather information about society." In Weng's opinion, such preachers do not follow their obligation to feed their flocks with what they need.

3) Preaching abstruse or empty interpretations of the Bible: Some preachers, Weng says, put great emphasis on the "spiritual meaning" of a Biblical text, which may have nothing to do with what it originally meant to say. As an example of this, Weng quotes a sermon he once heard on the parable of the seeds (Matthew 13:3-8, 19-23). The preacher connected the parable with the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, saying that Martha was one who brought forth grain thirtyfold, Mary the one who brought forth grain sixtyfold, and Lazarus the one who brought forth a hundredfold. "When I first heard this, I thought it was really new, and had deep spiritual meaning. But when I reflected on it afterwards, I realized that this was a very confused interpretation ...
which had absolutely no foundation in the Biblical text."

4) Reading one's own understanding into the Bible or interpreting out of context: According to Weng, this is one of the most dangerous forms of wrong preaching. He recalls one sermon he heard: "When David fought Goliath, he chose five smooth stones. These five stones, as they flew, changed into five big characters: The Church At XX. Brothers and sisters, our church is recorded in the Bible, it is the only church on earth that is truly spiritual!" Weng says that some preachers in Fujian, from different denominational backgrounds, insist that their own denominational understanding of certain scripture passages is the only true and spiritual one, and that anybody who has a different understanding cannot be saved. Weng calls such preaching a sin.

5) Making a "battery" of the pulpit: Weng says that some preachers abuse the power of the pulpit to preach inflammatory and hateful messages or attack others. Anyone who does so has absolutely no right to be called a preacher.

True preaching, according to Weng, is grounded in Biblical understanding and aims at proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. [608 words]

ANS 96.2.5

Students' Practicum Reports Show Need For Pastoral Workers, Problems

(ANS) All fourth-year students at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary have to participate in a pastoral practicum, a period they usually spend in their home churches. In 1996, fifty-three students took their practicum in churches all over China.

In their report, published in the March issue of the church magazine, Tian Feng, students note the enormous shortage of church workers. When the interns conducted lay training and baptism classes, believers walked up to 20 kilometers to participate, even though the classes were held during the harvest season. To make the most of the rare chance to hear a theologically trained person speak, many were not content even with 8 hours of preaching and teaching per day, and kept asking for more. The students report that many of them had to talk until they were hoarse and felt completely dried up.

The students' report notes with joy that more and more young people are becoming Christians, and that young people now often make up more than half of a given congregation. Young people also have become much more involved in running churches, leading Sunday schools, choirs, and participating in home visits. Nevertheless, the report remarks that in some areas, old pastors, even if physically frail, are not willing to share their work and decision making power with younger people. Some of the students did not get a single chance to do pastoral work during their practicum, even though the churches they were assigned to suffer from a lack of trained workers.

Students also noted the needs of remote rural churches which are very rarely
visited by pastoral workers, and complain about the churches' neglect of rural believers in need of preaching, teaching and leadership. Finally, the report notes that sectarian activities are evident in many churches, and that tensions within churches often result in congregations splitting. [314 words]

ANS 96.2.6

International Christian Fellowships Flourishing In Nanjing

(ANS) As the number of resident foreigners in China grows, international Christian fellowships have been set up in a number of cities to serve Christians who do not understand enough Chinese to participate in local church services.

The Nanjing International Fellowship was founded in 1986, and meets at St. Paul's Church in the city center. The group, made up mostly of teachers and business people, has more than thirty members and meets for worship twice a month.

An African Students' Christian Fellowship has existed in Nanjing since the early 1980s. Until recently, the group met in college classrooms, on a rotating basis. But when decree No. 144 was published in 1994, stipulating that all Christian groups should meet at a registered place, the students decided that their group should find a legal place, too. The fellowship approached Rev. Bao Jiayuan, Deputy General Secretary of the China Christian Council, for help. His suggestion that the African students join the International Fellowship at St. Paul's Church was turned down, because the students wanted to meet every week, and wanted to keep to their African style of worship.

The CCC then decided to offer the African students a reception room at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary as a registered venue for their worship. The group, with about 40-50 participants, has been meeting there for more than a year. After services, students share a simple meal at the Seminary dining room.

On Easter Sunday, both Nanjing fellowships joined for a joyful communion service at Nanjing Seminary, led by three ordained pastors from the two groups. [266 words]

ANS 96.2.7

First CCA Workshop Hosted By CCC "A Historic Event"

(ANS) The first ever program of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) to be hosted by the China Christian Council was a workshop for young theologians on "Reading The Bible With Asian Eyes", held in Nanjing, March 12-20. Several such workshops have been held in recent years in different Asian countries. According to Chan Beng Seng, the CCA Youth Secretary, the meeting was a historic event, its
importance enhanced by the participation of more than 10 young people from the CCC and, among the 25 young theologians from overseas, three members of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT).

Chan told ANS that the workshop went very well despite the tensions in the overall political atmosphere due to the presidential elections in Taiwan and the Chinese military exercises in the Taiwan Strait. Said Chan: "It was a very difficult time for us but all the participants as well as organizers and hosts were committed to try to find a solution to the difficult China-Taiwan relations within the ecumenical movement."

According to Chan, it was the CCC which had suggested inviting the young theologians from Taiwan. "Before going to Nanjing, the participants from the PCT had raised concerns about their participation in the workshop especially during the period of military exercises in the Taiwan Strait. They decided that the military exercises were a government-to-government affair and that the CCA workshop was a church-to-church fellowship. I was happy to hear this from the PCT participants as the comments indicated to me a desire for the two churches to find an amicable solution to their difficult mutual participation within the ecumenical movement."

One of the main objectives of the workshop was the introduction of various ways and approaches to reading the Bible. "The pluralistic reality of Asia requires us to read the Bible from our own particular context," explained Chan. Input at the workshop included information about different aspects of the church in China, on gospel and culture in Asia, and topics like "Reading The Bible Through The Eyes Of The Poor", "Reading The Bible Through The Eyes Of A Woman", and "Asian Reality As A Context For Theology." Participants also worshipped at different churches in Nanjing.

Chan said that the workshop was "very successful". The participants decided to write a letter to the Christian Conference of Asia, encouraging the CCA to continue to play an active role in facilitating more fellowship events of this kind. The letter also encourages both "CCC and PCT to continue to meet within the ecumenical fellowship, respecting the integrity of each other and setting an example of peaceful relationships for all." [448 words]
Ordinations: Four pastors and two elders were ordained in Yancheng Prefecture, Jiangsu Province, and two pastors in Yongjia County, Zhejiang Province. Five pastors, one of them a woman, and one elder were ordained in Jiangxi Province. [36 words]

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New Churches: The first church ever built in Wuhan without outside help was recently opened in the Qingshan area of the city. The church seats more than 1,000 people. *** After forty years without a place for worship, the congregation in Danshui, Huiyang City, Guangdong Province recently finished erecting its Gospel Church. [51 words]

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The preaching team organized by the Huzhou City Christian Council has been touring the countryside to preach in areas where there are no pastoral workers. Since its inception, the team has preached in 37 locations, drawing a total of more than 100,000 listeners, many of them young people. [48 words]

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The Dengwan church building in Huaibing County, Henan Province, was taken over by the local supply and marketing cooperative shortly after 1949. As local cadres did not understand religious policy, it was not even returned after 1980, even though local believers applied for its return many times. But with the intervention of the county government and the county party committee, the church building was finally given back to the believers late last year. [73 words]

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Christians from Chengguan Church in Pucheng County, Fujian Province, celebrated Christmas with a day of service for society on December 16 last year. Under a large banner reading "Celebrate Christmas By Serving The People" set up in the middle of town, Christians offered free-of-charge medical treatment, repair services for electrical appliances, bicycles and clothes, as well as hairdressing and shoe repair. [63 words]

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Missionaries brought the Gospel to Anyue County in eastern Sichuan Province in the 1890s and built a church there. After 1949, local cadres took a "leftist line" and closed the church down; subsequently, it was torn down, leaving believers with no means of restoring proper church life after 1980. But the congregation continued to grow, meeting in private homes. In 1995, normal church activities were finally allowed in Anyue. [69 words]
ANS Feature: The Healing Power Of Faith

By Claudia Währisch-Oblau

(ANS) "In April of 1992, I started having extreme pains in my leg. I could hardly walk. I was sent to a special hospital, and the doctor there told me that I had cancer. He said that they would have to remove part of a bone and replace it with a piece of metal. And afterwards, I would have to undergo radiation therapy, so that the cancer would not spread through my whole body.

I was scared to death, I thought that I would not survive the surgery. So I left the hospital, went home and prepared to become a Christian. As I came home, the pain was terrible. My younger brother, who already was a believer, prayed for me right away. Immediately, the pain stopped! I was so glad, and my faith became very strong. After that, I prayed with my brother every day, and soon I could get up and walk around. This was three years ago. Today I am healthy, I can even climb mountains! My leg moves normally, and I praise God who healed me."

I have heard countless stories of faith healing similar to this one. They were told by Christians young and old, educated and illiterate, mostly by women but also by men. Faith healing, say Chinese church workers familiar with the situation at the grassroots, accounts for at least 50%, and in many places for as much as 90%, of all new conversions. Faith healing, therefore, is at the root of the dramatic growth of Protestant Christianity in China, which has at least tripled its number of adherents in the last 15 years.

Why is faith healing so important in China? While Chinese traditions and Pentecostal influences may play a role, there is one very tangible reason: The decline of free medical care in rural areas in recent years. Most rural clinics have been privatized, and county hospitals must raise a large part of their funds from patient fees. Those who can afford to pay can get much better treatment than 20 years ago, but those who cannot pay - and few peasants are covered by health insurance - are left to their own devices. According to a World Bank report, illness has become the number one reason for the impoverishment of rural Chinese families. Often, it is those who cannot afford treatment who, in desperation, seek out a Christian church.

An itinerant lay evangelist told me this story: "On one of my trips, a peasant came to me. He had a tumor on his leg the size of a football. He had been to the county hospital, but there they had told him that he needed surgery that would cost 800 yuan (about US$ 95). This man's family has an income of maybe 800 yuan a year. There was no way they could pay for this. But he had heard from some Christians that Jesus heals the sick for free, and when he found out that I was visiting his village, he came to me. I prayed for him - what else could I do? I didn't have the money to pay his medical fees. A few weeks later I met the man again. His tumor had disappeared completely, and he and his family had become Christians."

This story sounds typical, except in one respect: The evangelist who told it is a retired physics professor, commissioned as an evangelist by his provincial Christian council. There has been no systematic research into healing experiences in the Chinese countryside, but anecdotal evidence suggests that much of the actual healing, or, to be more precise, the prayer for healing, is done by "spontaneous" evangelists or healers. These are people who may have had a faith healing experience themselves, or a vision or call to go out and evangelize. Unlike the evangelist who told me his story, such people often have little or no knowledge of the Bible, and in many cases do not have much contact with any established church. They go out on their own, heal the sick in the name of Jesus, and in some cases establish new congregations.

It is not surprising that the work of such "self-styled evangelists", as the China Christian Council calls them, is seen rather critically by the church leadership. It is understood as a threat to the church in more than one way. Firstly, such preachers and healers easily give rise to sectarian and heterodox beliefs, and may cause divisions within local churches. Secondly, the stress on healing tends to reinforce the rather pragmatic view of religion found in the Chinese countryside: Peasants will adhere to a faith that shows concrete results, but may give up on it as soon as it does not seem to "pay" anymore. And last but not least, where Christian activities mainly consist of faith healing, faith is reduced to a mere superstition - and "superstition" is outlawed in China, while "normal religious activities" are protected by law.

Christian leaders at the grassroots, therefore, have to deal with faith healing in a way that integrates the practice into the church and
into the broader context of the Christian faith. This is done successfully in many congregations which have established a ministry of visiting the sick and praying for them. Healing, in this context, is not seen as the spiritual gift of some special person, but rather as God’s answer to the prayer of the whole congregation or its representatives. Consequently, such ministries tend to be open to anyone who wants to participate. As one woman evangelist describes it: “When someone in our church falls ill, we wil go and build this person up spiritually. We visit the sick, we pray with them and for them, and we sing with them, not just the church workers but anyone from the church who knows them. And many of those who are sick experience healing. This is the grace of God.”

Much education is necessary for such a healing ministry. One of the biggest problems is a widespread belief held by grassroots Christians that everybody will be healed as long as one’s faith is strong enough. A woman lay worker told me: “When someone falls ill, we try to strengthen them in their faith, because then they will recover physically, too. A person who is rich in his or her spiritual life will not stay ill for long.” The dark side of this conviction is, of course, the suspicion that there must be something wrong with a person’s faith if he or she is not healed.

To counter this supposition, Christian education, while acknowledging that Jesus does heal people today, centers on teaching believers that the soul is more important than the body, and salvation rather than healing is the reason for Jesus’ coming into the world - a direct recourse to 19th century missionary theology. Healing is seen as simply a vehicle to draw people to Christ, with salvation and eternal life the real aim. In the words of a woman evangelist: “Many people start seeking God when they are ill... God sent us this illness so that we might experience his power. But Jesus’ main aim was to save our souls... Even though we became Christians because we were healed physically, the fact remains that our souls have been saved. Therefore we tell the sick that we may die, but our soul will live forever.”

In addition to praying for the sick, in recent years churches in China have begun to respond in yet a different way to the rural health care crisis. A growing number of congregations has started small clinics, usually staffed by retired Christian doctors or nurses, that offer free-of-charge or very cheap basic health care to anyone in need. There is a wide range of church-based medical activities:

- A medically-trained pastor in Yunnan takes a wooden case with her when she preaches in the countryside. After the service, she uses the limited medical supplies from it to treat people too poor to afford any other medical care. For her, the prayer for healing and medical treatment go hand in hand.
- With the help of the Amity Foundation, a number of church-run village clinics have been set up in recent years, and village Christians have undergone some months of medical training to staff such clinics. Housed in simple mud or bamboo huts, with a bed or two, and basic medical supplies, such clinics serve the urgent need for affordable grassroots medical care.
- Some churches have even been able to set up full-scale hospitals. The Amity Hospital in Zhaotong City, Yunnan Province, is one of them. Run by a retired woman doctor and ordained pastor from the Miao minority, the hospital currently has forty beds in a rather run-down old building. With the help of Amity, lab equipment, a gynecological chair, and an X-ray machine were purchased. The hospital is widely known for the excellent quality of its care, and in some cases patients travel for hundreds of kilometers to seek treatment there.

Some rural Christians go to great lengths to establish new clinics, according to Gu Xiuhtai, in charge of church-run projects for the Amity Foundation. “In Yiyang County in Henan Province, Christians started a new clinic in an area where no medical care was available. They were led by a retired doctor who used to work for the county health authority. But Christians in the area are extremely poor; they gave what they could, but it was simply not enough. Therefore, this retired doctor sold his water buffalo and some of his furniture to provide the equipment for the clinic. He and three others with medical knowledge then went into the mountains to look for medicinal herbs, because they could not afford to buy medicines.”

“Heal the sick and rescue the dying” - it is in the area of health care that Chinese Christians make their presence most felt in society, be it through clinics or through the prayer for healing. Or, as Li Enlin, a trained theologian now in charge of Amity’s medical work, puts it: “I believe that through faith healings, God is at work in China in a very special way.”

[1698 words]