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Newsbriefs

November 3, 1997

Dear Friends of the Church in China,

In recent weeks, the relationship between the China Christian Council and the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, USA, has gotten into difficulty. The issue is missiological, as well as ethical and political.

Ever since the Three-Self Movement and the China Christian Council came into being, we have followed the principle that all church work and Christian activity in China should be open, honest and above-board, and thus consistent with the teachings of the Bible. This has helped us to build up a relationship of trust between church and society, between we Chinese Christians and the Chinese people as a whole. We Christians want to do our part in "having the goodwill of all people" (Acts 2:47).
We therefore are disappointed that the IMB of the Southern Baptist Convention has, without consulting us, adopted a "two track approach" vis-a-vis China. In this view, while not giving up its "partnership" with the CCC as the "open" track, it will try to give major attention to a clandestine track, through which church workers from abroad are secretly sent to China to carry out "missionary" work as dictated by the IMB. These persons do not intend to make their identities or their relationship to the IMB known, either to the CCC or to the Chinese government. We cannot see how this can be justified on Christian terms.

Therefore, the CCC has informed a representative of the IMB that we will not co-operate in their deception, and that we cannot have partnership with any organization holding to a "two track approach" and give legitimacy to secret infiltration. This is in violation of our principles and of Christian teachings. We wish to express our respect for Southern Baptist colleagues who have given up their jobs in protest rather than be a party to IMB deception. We also express our willingness to work in partnership with Southern Baptist individuals, organizations and churches who are prepared to work openly and aboveboard.

We will appreciate the reactions and advice of our friends from overseas.

Wenzao Han
President
China Christian Council

97.11.2

China's "Jerusalem" Provides For Its Present And Its Future

(ANS) The district around Wenzhou City in Zhejiang Province has sometimes been called the "Jerusalem of China" because of the number of believers there (See ANS 96.1.3). The area boasts 1,800 churches and meeting points. Altogether there are 600,000 believers in the area, who make up half the total number of believers within the whole province. However, as Shi Chenghui reports in the October edition of the Chinese church magazine Tian Feng, the area only has 34 pastors and 100 other specially-appointed pastoral workers. This means that there is only one pastor for every 2,000 believers and every 60 meeting points in Wenzhou.

Given these ratios, Shi explains that the church in the Wenzhou area has had no choice but to let lay workers take on the majority of church work in the area. At 3,500, the size of the lay worker team is quite large. However, Shi notes that most of these workers have a low educational and Bible knowledge level, that their preaching ability is quite poor and that most of these workers are also very old now. Therefore, this lay worker team cannot really satisfy the needs of the churches in Wenzhou, let alone help the church there to move forward and develop.
Shi mentions that in the past, lay worker training had taken place on a city, county and parish level within the Wenzhou district by means of short training courses. In 1995 however, the Wenzhou City Christian Council decided to set up two training centres to help upgrade and expand the range of training that lay workers receive.

The Bible Correspondence Course Training Centre was set up with the cooperation of Jinling Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing. Each year, 150 students can enroll at this centre, receive study materials from the Seminary and take an exam accredited by the Seminary at the end of their courses. The content of the courses is modeled on those offered at the Seminary itself.

The second centre is a Lay Worker Training Centre, which aims to raise existing lay workers' Bible knowledge and preaching skills, as well as their knowledge of Three-Self principles. This is done through a one-semester training course. At the same time, the centre also aims to train new lay workers from among middle aged and young believers. This is done through a Bible course for new lay workers which lasts for four semesters over a two year period. The Bible course usually has two classes of 45 students each and the class of 95, the first intake on this course, graduated in May of this year.

Most of the students on the longer Bible course come from the counties within the Wenzhou City area though, as Shi explains, a few are enrolled from churches outside of Wenzhou as a way of supporting poorer churches elsewhere. Today 90% of the students are around 20 years of age. Many of these young people are unemployed and looking for work, and therefore are able to devote considerable time to a longer, more systematic period of study. Most of the students on this course have at least a junior or senior middle school education and have had a belief in God since kindergarten. As Shi points out, this makes instruction easier for them compared to those lay workers who applied for training in the 1980's, most of whom were older and had little or no education.

Quality instruction is the key to the Lay Training Centre's success so far, Shi claims. With around 70 theological seminary graduates, the Wenzhou City area has no lack of qualified teachers, and the centre has a regular staff of 14 instructors. Stress is placed on developing students' preaching skills and three evenings a week are devoted to this during each semester. The large number of churches and meeting points in the Wenzhou area means that there is no shortage of places where students can practice their skills. Each Sunday, a group is sent out to the churches to preach and the centre gets good feedback from congregations about the students' performance. Shi explains that some congregations are even moved to tears when they see the young students approach the pulpit and give their testimonies, as they can then see with their own eyes how God has blessed the church with future generations of workers who will continue to meet the spiritual needs of believers.

As well as preaching skills and Bible knowledge, Shi observes that the longer lay training program also places an emphasis on music skills, so that workers can lead all parts of worship where necessary. One evening a week is devoted to teaching students how to sing in four-part harmony.
The author concludes that the Wenzhou City Christian Council sees its Training Centres as providing for the future of the church on many levels. Not only does it provide training for existing lay workers, but also helps train future workers and possible future pastors. After their training at the centre, five lay workers have in the past already successfully applied to enter seminary and study full time for ordination, and another 15 students have applied for enrolment this year.[871 words]

Why Is Denominationalism Raising Its Head Again?

(ANS) In the Work Report presented at the 6th National Christian Conference in January of this year, Dr. Wenzao Han stated: "Either because denominationalism has reared its head once again or for other reasons, churches in some places have begun bickering and attacking those whose views do not accord with their own, and the majority of believers have been deeply grieved by this." In October's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Luo Liguang from Xinyu in Jiangxi province probes into the reasons for the reappearance of denominationalism in some parts of the "post-denominational" Chinese church.

Luo begins by pointing out that the core of Biblical truth can never be altered but people's understanding of this truth is constantly developing and advancing. Luo admits that we all receive the faith in different ways. The apostles in the Bible all had their different emphases and styles, but they never departed from the central truth that bound them together, and they never sought to "raise their own flags" but rather pressed for unity at every turn. One of the problems in the Chinese church today, Luo believes, is that congregations and groups are not seeking this unity but are choosing to emphasize their differences instead. This can take the form of different styles or days of worship, different forms of baptism, different meanings attached to Communion, different views toward "signs and wonders", and so on. Different groups are stressing their own particular traditions and "faith characteristics" and looking down on other groups who do not share their particular understanding and expression of faith. Luo says that many groups within the church today have returned to an attitude of "Only I hold the truth", and that this presents a confusing witness to society. "If we once again firmly entrench ourselves in our own little circles, then people will not know what to make of us and they will not know which 'Jesus' of which denomination to go and believe," Luo argues.

Luo's article points out that the Chinese church, through the grace of God, was able to throw off the "yoke" of denominationalism in past decades and to create a unity seldom seen within the church elsewhere. In today's Chinese church, the majority of believers have joined the church within the last 20 years and if they hadn't heard the word "denomination" and were had not been led to join one denomination or another then denominations would mean little to them and just be something that belonged to history. Luo concludes that responsibility for splitting the church once again in this way may lie to a large extent with the older generation. Older believers are the ones who have experienced the harm that denominations have done to the unity of the church in the past and they have personally seen the damage that occurs when the body of
Christ is "snapped" by such divides. Whilst not all older believers are responsible for encouraging denominationalism at this present time, they are certainly the ones who must guide and protect the church from this danger occurring once again, and must not encourage it in any way. Luo asks the question why the church in China works hard to resist heresies and sects which threaten to split the church, and yet do not take the threat of denominational divides equally as seriously.

In the article, the writer requests that older members of the church accept that times have changed and that the church should not go back to the past. He suggests that churches which are split along denominational lines need to work hard to avoid any emphasis being placed on their denominational differences. Teaching the background and history of a particular denomination has no use for the work and life of the church today. Neither should believers glorify past church leaders of a particular denomination and lift them up on to some kind of pedestal as somehow better or more worthy than others. He believes that former teachers within the church were there in order to help all believers understand the will of God better and that they themselves would be horrified to find their adherents today glorifying and stressing them more than God.

Luo suggests that divisions occur when pastors and elders in the church work for their own glory and not for the good of their congregations. Pastors may speak well and have great knowledge and eloquence but they lose their authority when their words and behaviour do not match each other and when they do not practice what they preach. Some pastors seek their own glory instead of God's, and they like to puff themselves up and attract a following, whilst those who may need their help but cannot serve the pastor's interests get overlooked. In cases such as these, where believers needs are not being met, it is only too comprehensible when splits occur and believers are encouraged to join one group or another, or else choose to look elsewhere to have their spiritual needs met.

In conclusion, Luo urges older believers not to hold on to the past and not to lead new believers in to a denominational way of thinking. He calls on the church to take the threat to unity which denominations pose as seriously as the threat from sects and heresies. He also stresses that a church is only safe from this threat when it has good people at its head, those who provide a good example in their behaviour, in their modesty, in their care for others and in their own self-abandonment. [938 words]

Would You Sell Your Hair For The Church?

(ANS) Providing places where believers can meet and worship is one of the most pressing problems for the church in most parts of China today, especially in the poorer countryside regions. However, in their eagerness to have their own church building, believers are capable of extraordinary feats of sacrifice and ingenuity in order to provide what is necessary for the building work to go ahead. As we reported last month, the first church in a Tibetan minority area in Gansu Province was dedicated this summer in Lin Tang County (see ANS 97.10.5). In October's issue of Tian Feng magazine, Li Jianguo gives examples of some of the sacrifices made by the believers in Lin Tang in order to build for themselves this church.

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Li points out that when the work on the Lin Tang church started it was estimated that the building would cost 500,000 yuan to complete (=US$81,000 approx.). All the believers in the area gave what they could toward the construction, be it money, labour or materials, but the amount needed to complete the building was phenomenal for a community of poor rural believers to cover.

Li goes on to describe how one woman came from a poor family and could not afford to give anything except some light labour work. Dissatisfied with only this contribution to the work, she decided to sell her beautiful long hair in order to have some money, however small, to offer to the church.

Another believer heard that the church needed funds but his own salary was very low, his wife had no job and they also had two children in school to provide for. All they had in savings was a meagre 10 yuan (=US$ 1.20 approx.). The family wanted to contribute but couldn't work out how. Li mentions how the family then suddenly realized that with the children busy with school and with the parents busy at work and with church activities they had little to no time to watch television. Therefore, they sold their colour TV set and thereby raised 1,000 yuan (=US$ 120 approx.) to donate toward the building of the new church.

In a similar vein, Li tells how many craftsmen spent a period of about six months working on the new church building but, when it came to settle their accounts they only charged for half that period. Those workers who had laboured for three months only took one month's wages and some workers who did small jobs offered their services for free. The believers within the county brought food and water for these workers. Some temporary labourers working on the building only made 1.2 yuan (approx US$0.15) every day and even this they gave back to the church. Other believers sold oil and potatoes to raise cash.

By the time the building was completed it had cost less than 300,000 yuan (=US$ 36,800) to construct, a testimony to the dedication and the resourcefulness of the believers of Lin Tang county. [504 words]

Words Of Wisdom For Seminary Graduates

(ANS) "It was a chance to learn things you just can't get by sitting in the classroom." This is the comment of Pei Lianshun, a student at Jinling Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing, on a trip to Shanghai and Hangzhou in June this year for the graduating class at the Seminary. The aim of the trip was to meet with current leaders of the church in China and also to have the opportunity to meet with grass roots churches in the areas they visited. As Pei goes on to report in the October edition of Tian Feng, the Chinese church magazine, the different leaders of the church had various pieces of advice and insights to offer the new graduates as they were about to embark on their own ministry within the church.

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As Pei reports, the students' first stop was in Shanghai, with a visit to the China Christian Council headquarters there. CCC General Secretary Pastor Su Deci led devotions with the students and in his message expressed his hope in the students as the next generation, encouraging them to always behave as servants of God and servants of the people in whichever circumstance they might find themselves in the future.

TSPM Secretary General, Rev. Deng Fucun, introduced the work of the CCC to the students and also its future plans. He pointed out that the aim of theological colleges is not just to train students to become good preachers and he pointed out that the church cannot just have a single model of theological education which it always sticks to rigidly. Therefore, Rev. Deng underlined, the church also has a great need for other kinds of personnel, such as those who could develop publications, church music, theological education, and many other kinds of work within the Chinese church, not just pastoral work.

Chairperson of the TSPM, Mr Luo Guanzong, pointed out that the students were the Chinese evangelists of the next century and drew attention to the 6th National Christian Conference in January of this year. He pointed out that the young graduates were really "unusually lucky" to embark on their missions at this point in time with such a favourable situation within the church as secured at the recent conference. Mr. Luo stressed that, after leaving seminary, everything would be "as new" for the students and that it was therefore vital for them to keep strengthening their spiritual lives and never give up their studies. At the same time, he charged the young people that, wherever they were, they must manage their relations with religious cadres and church workers well, and also respect elders and older pastors. In conclusion, Mr Luo stressed that as Christians we have all to make sure that we give a good witness within society.

Pei reports that toward the end of their time at the CCC headquarters, Pastor Cao Shengjie talked with the graduates and pointed out that there were three groups in Chinese society which had any connection with religion: humanitarian circles, religious cadres and the body of believers themselves. Pastor Cao stressed that the students must always make sure that, as part of the last group, they constantly seek to understand and draw closer to the first two groups, as this was the key to running the church well.

On 19th June, the students went to visit the Shanghai City Christian Council and met with its chairperson, Rev. Shen Derong. He asked the students to do five different kinds of work within the church: "eye work" or seeing other people's strengths, especially those of old people; "ear work" or learning to listen to and tolerate many different points of view and resist flattery; "mouth work" or learning only to talk in such a way as to bring harmony and unity within the church; "hand work" or not opening out one's hands in order to receive personal benefit but to work for the good of all believers; and "foot work" - walking on the "right path" of loving one's country and one's church, and glorifying God while benefitting the people. [682 words]
ANS Feature:
Excerpts From The Letter Page Of Tian Feng

The letters to the editors of the Chinese church magazine, Tian Feng, give readers a glimpse of daily church life with all its joys and problems. To give our readers an idea of the breadth and width of the issues discussed, we are documenting here a questions and answers from the October issue of the church magazine.

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Please Help Us Find Our Younger Sister Who Left Home Because Of Her Faith

To the editors:

My younger sister Peng Yinchun, 22 years old this year, has believed in Christ through the grace of God since 1995 and since that time has developed in to a very devout Christian. However, our mother and father cannot accept their beloved daughter's beliefs and in fact resolutely oppose them. Because of these family reasons my sister had no choice but to leave home. Since she left home two years ago and to this day we have had no news of her whatsoever. I am her older sister, also her closest friend and confidant. Because of my understanding for my sister I have waited all this time but now I cannot stand it any longer because two years really is too long and I fear for her safety.

We have already tried all the different channels we can think of in order to look for her and they all say they don't know anything. Then it occurred to us that my younger sister often subscribes to Tian Feng magazine. Therefore I am writing to you to ask you for some special help and lend us some space in your publication to help find my sister. If she sees this then we ask her to give us a sign that she is OK and request that anyone who knows anything about her would get in touch with us.

-- Peng Chaohui, Hunan

Response:

After seeing this letter, I also feel concern for this sister's family. I hope that she comes home as soon as possible. Anyone who knows anything please get in touch with this magazine.

In passing I want to say a few words. There is no doubt that a father and mother who "resolutely oppose" their child's faith are incorrect in doing so (and this even contradicts our country's constitution and laws.) However, if a child decides to leave home under these circumstances in order to show their revolt then this is completely wrong also.

Parents may oppose belief in God because they have never believed themselves and so they cannot see what good Christianity can have. Perhaps there also exist some prejudices or misunderstandings and these need to be resolved through time and with prayer. As everyone knows, believers of God need to be a witness to God, yet if they leave home, how can they be a witness? The Lord Jesus once taught his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. This means that believers who want to take this road must be prepared to pay the price. If someone runs off when they face difficulties then not only can they no longer be a witness to their family of the gospel any more but their actions may deepen their family's misunderstanding of what faith in God means. Actually, the witness of one person to their own family is the most difficult witness but, from another viewpoint, it is precisely because it is so difficult that the family can become a school of the Spirit for those who love the Lord. In this "school" we study courses in reality, not just in theory, and once we have passed through and "graduated" from this "school" then we will see devoted and dedicated holy disciples of God everywhere.

The younger sister mentioned in this letter maybe attends on the Lord and even desires to make sacrifices to God. Well, she should start with her own family and with the surroundings about her!
When Our Livestock Are Ill, Can We Pray For Them?

To the editors:

I am an ordinary believer and I have a difficult question. In our village, sometimes a family’s cattle get sick and then family ask the church’s evangelist to come and pray for the cattle. Some evangelists also lay on hands in order to pray for the cattle. I am asking you now whether or not such actions are in accordance with God’s will. Please answer clearly. Thanks!

-- Shan Liang, Yunnan

Response:

First of all, people who believe in God can hand over everything to him in prayer - this is our spiritual right. The Lord Jesus said, “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (John 16.24). Our God is a God who looks after us with meticulous care, "And even the hairs of your head are all counted" (Matthew 10.30). God’s love does not just extend to people. According to Biblical teaching we can see God’s love also extends to animals, even as far as such insignificant things as sparrows and the lilies in the field (Matthew 6.28,29). Therefore, if all these things receive God’s tender loving care then why can we not pray for beasts of burden then?

Moreover, from what we hear from many believers in the countryside, their family’s cattle are their most important possession and they are closely bound together with the joys and sorrows of their lives. The cattle (such as oxen and horses etc.) are almost like a part of the family. Naturally we can bring any difficulties we are having with such an important part of our lives to the Lord. In the Old Testament, God once had Moses tell the Israelites “Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.” (Deut. 28.4). The psalms also contain this saying, "...you save humans and animals alike, O Lord" (Psalm 36.6). Of course, what the Old Testament emphasizes is that Israel can only be prosperous as a race if they obey and follow God. In the New Testament, through God’s grace, this principle of God’s blessing saw no change. Christians need to bring great matters to God in prayer for his blessing (for example, their country, their people and their church) but they can also learn faith and trust by praying for "little" things also. However, one point which needs to be stressed here is that, just as when people are sick, we should also not be against using medicines on them when animals are sick too.

We should be completely clear why we believe in God. The most important reason is to allow us to get the life of Christ and have it in ever greater abundance. Our most ardent prayer requests should be for us to be holy and pure, attentive, and possessing a loving heart. Raising our family’s cattle well is also our responsibility. We should ask God to give us more wisdom and strength to do everything that we need to do well.

A note to our readers:

We hope that you have enjoyed reading ANS over the past year, and that you have found it a source of news and information about the Church in China. If you would like to continue receiving ANS in 1998 then please fill in the subscription form enclosed with this issue and mail it to us along with your subscription fees.
Chinese Christian Church Order

Preface

Under the loving guidance of our heavenly Father, the vast majority of local churches in China have already embarked upon the path of church unity. So that the Church of Our Lord can grow up in a healthy way, and according to Biblical teachings, so that "all things be done decently and in order", Christian Councils and Three-Self organizations in more than twenty provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities (hereafter, provinces) have respectively since 1984, drafted church orders of their own for trial use. In 1987, the Standing Committees of the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee (TSPM) passed the "Resolution on the Advancement of Self-Governance through the Drafting of a Church Order", and established a "Committee on Church Order" to promote and assist local Christian church affairs organizations in the drafting of church orders or the perfecting of church orders which had been drafted. On 30 December 1991, the Joint Standing Committee of the two national Christian organizations passed a model "Church Order for Trial Use in Chinese Churches" to be used as a standard for common reference among churches in each place. Since its trial use, this order has contributed to the establishment of local church orders appropriate for churches in different places, and places where the order has needed to be supplemented and revised have also been discovered. Now, after a trial period of five years, and with revisions, we present this "Chinese Christian Church Order".

The basic content of this church order is in accordance with the teachings of the Bible, the inheritance of church tradition and the life of the church ecumenical, and integrated with the actual context of the church in China today; it has its own Chinese characteristics. According to present needs, the order is divided into separate items dealing with the Church, believers, the sacraments, ministry, churches and meeting points and administration. Because there are differences in the history, denominational background and pattern of development of churches in different parts of China, church affairs organizations in different provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities may draft or revise their own church orders according to this one, or implement their own rules and regulations, providing they do not violate this church order. Because some churches and meeting points have their own view of the church and tradition, under the premise that they observe the three-self principle and mutual respect, they can develop according to their own traditions, but they may not independently formulate a church order under a denominational name. Where there is the need, the local church affairs organization should serve and resolve differences with these churches and meeting points. With to church affairs, the China Christian Council should strengthen its connection, guidance and supervision with provincial level church affairs organizations.

1. The Church

1.1 The Christian Church is called by God to be a community of believers to serve Christ as Lord. Christ is the head of the Church, the Church is the Body of Christ, the Household of God, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The faith of the Church is founded upon the Bible and The Apostles Creed.

1.2 The Chinese church shares in the life of fellowship of the Church universal and enjoys relationships with churches in other places on the basis of equality and friendship; at the same time, the Chinese church is an independent, sovereign and self-run church, neither subordinate in its relationship to churches overseas, nor subject to the control of any foreign church body.

1.3 Local churches in China all have two characteristics: they are spiritual communities who worship Christ and who should build up the
Body of Christ according to the Bible; and they are Chinese social organizations which should observe the Chinese constitution laws, regulations and government policies, and support social progress, national construction and world peace.

1.4 According to the principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation, local churches (including meeting points, here and in what follows), guided by church affairs organizations and with the support of Three-Self patriotic organizations, should unite believers in the conscientious observance of church order, so that with one heart and mind, they can do all their work well.

1.5 All local churches should take into consideration the different spiritual experiences and needs of believers, and in matters of faith, tradition and liturgy there should be mutual respect and mutual acceptance, not attacks and forced unity. At the same time, efforts should be made to maintain a heart of unity according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

2. Believers

2.1 All those who, in their thirst for salvation, attend church to listen to the Word of God and take part in worship gatherings are termed "seekers". After a seeker has been baptized, and enrolled in a church, s/he formally becomes a "believer" and member of the church.

2.2 Believers should observe the teachings of the Bible, and do their utmost to abide by church regulations, support the work of the church and take part in the running of its affairs.

2.3 Believers should be good citizens, patriotic and law-abiding, and carry cut their social responsibility to the best of their ability.

2.4 If a believer commits a serious impropriety, transgresses church regulations or violates criminal law, s/he should be instructed and admonished by a clergy person. If there are repeated offenses and the seriousness of the circumstances so warrant, the individual may be denied communion or removed as a church member, following a report by the church or meeting point to the local church affairs organization, and ratification of the report by that organization.

3. The Sacraments

3.1 There are two major kinds of sacraments in the church: baptism (by immersion or sprinkling) and Holy Communion (or the breaking of bread).

3.2 Seekers who have taken part in church services over a certain period of time, generally not less than one year, who are willing to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior, who have clearly repented or have been born again, and whose behavior is upright and law-abiding, can apply to the church for enrollment in a catechism class in order to study the Bible, the catechism and the duty of believers. Those who pass an examination on faith and morals administered by a pastor or church worker may be received for baptism.

3.3 There are two forms of baptism which local churches may use at the request of those about to be baptized: baptism by sprinkling (where water is poured on the top of the head) or baptism by immersion (where the whole body is submerged).

3.4 All baptized Christians may receive Holy Communion.

3.5 The service of Holy Communion should be conducted in reverence, with the form of liturgy decided upon by the local church. Each church may follow one or more communion liturgies.

3.6 The sacraments should be openly administered in churches or meeting points with a member of the clergy officiating. Elderly and infirm church members may receive the sacraments in their homes.

4. Ministry

4.1 Ministerial Designations:

The ministry refers to ordained church workers who can administer the sacraments. Churches in China at present use the following ministerial designations, which follow the Bible and church tradition:

Bishop (two different Chinese terms are used, reflecting different church traditions) -- has a wider area of pastoral responsibility, but does not have special administrative authority.
Pastor (including ordained Elders from some church traditions, here and in what follows) -- responsible for church work of all kinds, the management of churches and meeting points, the administration of sacraments, the nurture and teaching of believers.

Teacher (or Assistant Pastor) -- assists the pastor in the nurture and teaching of believers, the management of churches and meeting points, and may also administer the sacraments.

Elder -- assists pastors and teachers in the management of churches and meeting points, where his or her responsibility is limited to a specific church and related meeting points. If needed, and with the approval of the local church affairs organization, elders may also take part in the nurture and teaching of believers, and the administration of the sacraments.

In addition, there may be church workers who have not yet been ordained, and who do not administer sacraments, but who have been appointed or elected by the church and approved by the church affairs organization, and are designated as follows:

Preacher -- individuals who have received theological education or special training and may preach and nurture believers.

Deacon -- a believer responsible for some specific area of church affairs.

Clergy and preachers (teachers) are commonly called pastoral workers.

The foregoing designations may be adopted by churches according to their original traditions and actual conditions.

4.2 Qualifications for ministry:

4.2.1 The Bible requires that all ministers should have: (1) a pure Christian faith and a rich spiritual life; (2) an excellent character, behavior and witness; (3) a will to serve Christ and experience in church service; (4) the love and esteem of most believers.

4.2.2 Clergy should be patriotic and law abiding, with a good reputation in church and society.

4.2.3 Clergy should uphold the three-self principle in running the church well, uniting believers on the road of love-country and love-church, glorifying God and serving humanity, and should practice mutual respect regarding the special characteristics of different Christian beliefs.

4.2.4 Clergy should not be limited by gender, and in ordination, men and women are equal.

These four qualifications also apply to preachers(teachers).

4.2.5 A bishop should be above the age of forty, have solid theological achievements or published works, have rich pastoral experience, be able to unite co-workers and fellow Christians and be held in high esteem by believers.

4.2.6 Pastors should have a formal theological education, and experience in pastoral work. Those who have graduated from a standard program of theological education (four years) and above, should have a minimum of two years' experience in pastoral work; those who have graduated from a special program of theological studies (two years) or from a Bible School (two years), should have a minimum of three years' experience in pastoral work.

4.2.7 Teachers should have a formal theological education and experience in pastoral work. Those who have graduated from a standard program of theological education (four years) and above, should have a minimum of one year of experience in pastoral work; those who have graduated from a special program of theological studies (two years) or from a Bible School (two years), should have a minimum of two years' experience in pastoral work. Those who have served one or more years as a teacher, are qualified to become pastors.

4.2.8 Those who have completed an informal course of theological studies or a theological education by correspondence course and who wish to become teachers or pastors must have their academic credentials certified by the unit which conducted the course.
Such candidates should have a minimum of three years' experience in pastoral work.

4.2.9 Those who have studied the Bible and theology on their own and who wish to become teachers or pastors, must pass an examination to prove that they are up to standard. Such candidates should have a minimum of four years’ experience in pastoral work.

4.2.10 Elders are not required to have theological education, but they should uphold orthodox teaching and have many years' experience of service to the church. In order to administer the sacraments and to preach, elders should be trained by the provincial level church affairs organization.

4.3. Procedures for the Ordination of Ministry:

4.3.1 The nomination of bishops should proceed from consultation between national church bodies and the relevant provincial church affairs organization, and the candidate should be approved by the church affairs organization of his or her province and agreed upon by a majority of provincial church affairs organizations. After the candidacy has been confirmed, the date for the service of consecration will be set.

4.3.2 Candidates qualified to be pastors should first apply in writing for ordination, and, upon selection by the committee of their church or meeting point, should be recommended by the local, city, county or prefectural church affairs organization to the provincial church affairs organization. The provincial church affairs organization shall select three or more pastors to form an ordination committee and examine the candidate(s). For candidates deemed qualified, a date for the service of ordination will be set.

4.3.3 Teachers who wish to become pastors should apply, be selected, recommended and examined according to the same procedures as those applying to be ordained.

4.3.4 Candidates qualified to be elders should apply with the recommendation of their local church organization. The local or city church affairs organization shall select three or more pastors and elders to form an ordination committee and examine the candidate(s). For candidates who are qualified, the date for ordination will be set, and it will be reported to the provincial church affairs organization for the record.

4.4 The liturgy for ordination to the ministry:

4.4.1 At least three bishops must take part in the laying on of hands for the consecration of a bishop, and other respected pastors of high standing may also participate in the ceremony.

4.4.2 At least three pastors are required for the laying on of hands in the ordination of a pastor.

4.4.3 At least three pastors and elders (one of whom must be a pastor) are required for the ordination of an elder.

4.4.4 The liturgy of ordination should be solemn and conducted openly within the church. Clergy should not receive or give private favors for ordination.

4.5 The Discipline of Clergy:

If a clergy person commits a serious impropriety, transgresses church regulations, spreads heretical teachings or violates criminal law, s/he should be disciplined according to a formal decision made in a deliberative conference of the appropriate church affairs organization, bishops at the national level, pastors and teachers at the provincial level, and elders at the local or city level: discipline can include admonishment, temporary suspension of church duties, removal from office, defrocking and removal from church rolls. Removal from office must be decided upon by a formal meeting of the appropriate church affairs organization.

Preachers are subject to discipline through a formal decision made in a deliberative conference of the local church affairs organization: discipline can include admonishment, temporary suspension of church duties, removal from office, and removal from church rolls. Removal from church office can only be by decision of a formal meeting of the local church affairs organization.
5. The Organization and Management of Churches (and Meeting Points)

5.1 Requirements for the establishment of a church or meeting point:

5.1.1 A church should have:

(1) A requisite number of believers;
(2) An appointed place for worship gatherings;
(3) A full time or voluntary ordained church worker responsible for Christian nurture;
(4) A management organization or preparatory management organization;
(5) A church constitution;
(6) A source of income.

5.1.2 A meeting point should have:

(1) A fixed number of believers;
(2) A fixed meeting place;
(3) A recognized preacher (not necessarily ordained);
(4) A management organization or preparatory management organization;
(5) A meeting point constitution;
(6) A source of income.

5.1.3 City and county level church affairs organizations should conscientiously take into consideration the believers' worship needs, and, according to the above requirements, should do their utmost to assist in the setting up of churches and meeting points, in a rational system of distribution.

5.1.4 When a meeting point fulfills the requirements necessary for a church, it can become a church after a formal decision has been made by the city or county church affairs organization, and this is reported to the provincial church affairs organization for the record.

5.2 Church and Meeting Point Organizations:

Church and Meeting Point organizations refer to the management structure of individual churches and meeting points.

A church establishes a church affairs organization (of at least seven persons), and a meeting point establishes a church affairs group (of at least three persons). Members of these organizations should be elected by the believers of the church or meeting point themselves or named through consultation, with fixed terms of three to five years, and members eligible for re-election. Church workers should be members ex officio.

5.3 The Managerial Authority of Church and Meeting Point Organizations:

Church and meeting point organizations should be fully democratic, broadly seeking out the opinions of believers, and working co-operatively to administer the church with one heart and mind.

5.3.1 The management of church affairs:

(1) All gatherings, worship services and liturgies should be appropriately arranged, and proceed in an orderly fashion, so that God is worshipped in spirit and in truth, and disorder is avoided.

(2) Preaching should be done by a regular church worker, or one with a gift for preaching who has undergone church training and is an approved voluntary worker. This will prevent people who disseminate heretical teaching that can split the church, or who carry out illegal activities which harm believers.

(3) A register of church members should be established; it should be appropriately organized as part of the historical records and files of the church or meeting point.

(4) A healthy church or meeting point organization or conference system should regularly meet to discuss official business. Routine decisions require a simple majority of adult members. Decisions on major issues (for example, large purchases, the recommendation of a person for ordination, etc.) require a two-thirds vote of adult members.

(5) A retirement system for church workers should be established to guarantee their livelihood. Retired church workers can continue to assist in the work of the church providing that this is not injurious to their health, and according to the needs of the church or meeting point and the willingness of the individual involved.

(6) Church work should be guided and supervised by the local church affairs organization. When the church affairs organization discusses matters of concern to the church or meeting point, it should fully coordinate with the
meeting point or church affairs organization and listen to their opinions; after a decision is reached on this basis, the church or meeting point organization should make concerted effort in its implementation.

5.3.2 The management of church finances:

(1) Church and meeting point organizations should set up a finance committee which strictly observes financial discipline in the work of the church, and establishes a financial management system which includes the opening of the offering box, the keeping of accounts, the issuing of receipts and making cash deposits in the bank. In principle, pastoral workers should not be responsible for bookkeeping and accounting.

(2) Believers should be encouraged to give freely to the work of the church, but they should not be forced to contribute. Church and meeting point organizations should regularly report to the congregation on church finances, and when necessary, the church affairs organization has the authority to inspect the books.

(3) A strict system of financial examination and approval should be established. Major expenditures should be discussed by the church or meeting point organization.

5.3.3 The Management of Church Property and Church Affairs:

(1) Church property is collectively owned, and the church or meeting point organization is responsible for it. A person or committee should be clearly designated to be responsible for church property, and a management system should be established.

(2) The general work of the church or meeting point should be organized, including property management and repair, utilities, safety, and fire prevention.

5.3.4 The church or meeting point organization should uphold self-government, self-support and self-propagation in order to resist: individuals or groups at home and abroad who interfere with or seek to undermine the Three-Self Principle.

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This Chinese Christian Church Order is issued following discussion and approval by the Standing Committees of the China Christian Council and the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee. It may be revised by the same body. The right of interpretation of this document lies with the Chinese Christian Committee on Church Order.

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Passed 28 December 1996.

The Chinese text governs.

Translated by Philip L. Wickeri.

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Seasonal Greetings To All ANS Readers From The China Christian Council

From east to west, from shore to shore,
Let every heart awake and sing.
The holy child whom Mary bore,
The Christ, the everlasting King.

(Coelius Sedullus (d.c. 410))

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

(Isaiah 60:1)

May the blessings of joy, peace and love
Be with you at Christmas, and always

China Christian Council
Nanjing
December 1997

Chongqing: A New Identity, A New Challenge For The Church

(ANS) In March of this year, the city of Chongqing was designated as China's fourth municipality in recognition of its importance and also to promote its further development. Chongqing (formerly known as Chungking) used to be part of China's Sichuan Province. Whilst China is divided into provinces for the purposes of administration, several large and important cities, such as Tianjin, Shanghai and the capital Beijing, are known in China as municipalities and have equal status with individual provinces. As Yang Liantao describes in the November edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Christians in the new municipality have already begun planning how to meet the challenges and opportunities which their city's new identity lays before them.

As Yang explains, the city of Chongqing itself has a population of 16 million people, which includes an estimated 100,000 Christians. These believers meet at some 39 meeting points pastored by 38 ordained ministers and evangelists, all of whom are seminary graduates. However, the new Chongqing Municipality now extends to include the neighbouring city of Wanxian as well as the districts of Fuling and Qianjiang. This
adds another 14 million people to the new Municipality, including another 100,000 Christians scattered over the vast and mountainous areas of these regions. Although the number of believers in the additional areas is roughly the same as in the city of Chongqing itself, there are only 11 pastoral workers and 17 approved meeting points to meet the needs of believers in these areas. Many places lack pastoral care and meeting points altogether. Therefore, one of the major challenges facing the church in the new municipality is to provide for the long term religious and spiritual needs of all believers in the region and not just in the city itself. In order to begin meeting these needs, Yang mentions how the church in Chongqing is already looking forward to welcoming back an additional ten church workers who will soon graduate from seminary, nine from Sichuan Theological Seminary and one from Jinling Union Theological Seminary in Nanjing.

Part of the process of preparing to meet the needs of the religious believers involves the establishment of new church organizations which represent believers from all of the new Municipality's 30 areas. Yang reports that a working group headed by Rev. Cai Yuesheng was appointed in August to arrange the first official meeting of representatives from the entire municipality, held in November this year. At this meeting the process for the setting up of the new Chongqing Municipality Three-Self Patriotic Committee and the Chongqing Municipal Christian Council was set in motion. This included the presentation of a draft constitution for both of these two bodies. Yang explains that the hope of these new organizations and of all the church leaders is for the Chongqing church to become a "lamp" to light the way for the new Chongqing Municipality. [493 words]

97.12.3

The "Eastern Lightning" Sect: A Recent Threat To The Church In China

(ANS) In recent years many heretical sect have appeared all over China, such as the "Spirit Spirit" sect, the "Yellers", and the "Established King" sect, among others. Because many believers in rural areas have a low educational level and a limited understanding of the faith, these sects have at times been able to attract a limited following in certain rural areas. However, up until now, none of these sects have really managed to thrive or develop in any extensive way. November's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, reports that recently a new sect has been spreading rapidly, especially in the North of China. This sect differs from others in that it has a fully-developed theory and system of beliefs and also various tools necessary for propagation purposes, such as literature and evangelists. The sect has thus managed to spread more rapidly than other sects in recent times and continues to operate on a wide scale. As a warning to believers, November's Tian Feng gives details of the sect and also some personal accounts of encounters with sect members.

The "Eastern Lightning" sect takes its name from Matthew 24:27: "For the Son of Man will come like lightning which flashes across the whole sky from the east to the west." According to Wan Ge, writing in Tian Feng, the group claims that history can be divided in to three stages: the first stage was the era of the Law, when God took the name of Jehovah. The second was the era of Grace, when God came down to earth in
male form in Israel and spoke Hebrew, taking the name Jesus. The sect claims that now God has returned again to earth in the East, in China, speaking Mandarin Chinese and this time in female form, taking the name of Lightning. According to Wan Ge, the sect members use Genesis 1:27 to explain that it is natural for God to be female at the second coming since "God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them male and female." The sect claims that this second coming of God to earth closes the period of Grace and ushers in a new period of the Kingdom, when judgment and sentencing will begin.

Whilst using and distorting Scripture to justify their beliefs, sect members also claim that the second coming of this "female Christ" renders all previous beliefs and writings about God invalid. The group therefore attacks the Bible and forbids its members from studying Scripture. Instead, Wan Ge mentions that the sect has produced its own "Bible", a 600-page volume entitled "Lightning From The East". The book contains no indication of publishing house, publishing number or author.

As well as attacking the Bible, the sect denies the Trinity, claiming there is no "Father" and no "Holy Spirit", only Jesus, who has now come down in female form to the East and calls herself "Lightning". The group claims that the Bible and the idea of the Trinity have now been "revealed" by this new female Christ as the imagination of human beings and not of God. On the one hand they interpret the Bible out of context and in order to justify their beliefs yet, on the other hand, they slander the Bible and proclaim it to be the product of people's imagination, saying that "Believing in the Bible is like believing in rumours" and "Those who uphold the concepts in the Bible are to be seen as God's class enemies." Since the group does not believe in the authority of the Bible or the validity of Christ's first coming, they also oppose such notions as salvation through the cross and even discourage their members from praying.

Wan Ge explains that the sect regularly sends out its "evangelists" to different areas. These groups target evangelists, preachers and church workers in each area so that they might convert these people, who often already enjoy a good reputation in their churches, and thus through their converts they can reach whole congregations more easily. According to Wan Ge, the sect has large appeal because its members are very eloquent and know how to play on believers' eagerness for the Lord's return, asking such questions as "The Lord has already returned, do you want to see him?" One "evangelist" of the sect who visited Lueyang in Shaanxi Province even bought a tape with her saying that the female Christ had recorded her words on to the tape!

Members of the sect start their exchanges reasonably, says Wan Ge, claiming that when Jesus was on earth and talked of future events he also suffered much resistance, persecution and accusation, as did the Old Testament prophets when they prophesied about the Messiah. Then, the members of the sect suddenly change their tack and try to persuade their listeners not to resist the idea that the Lord has already come down again. When people do try to argue, the "evangelists" of the sect either try to drown out other people's voices with their arguments or else resort to crude insults to silence people.
As with other sects, Tian Feng urges believers throughout China to resist this sect through regular Bible study and prayer, so that believers can refute the sect's claims through a firm knowledge of Biblical truths. [898 words]

What Attitude Should Christians Have Toward Material Possessions?

(ANS) Over the past couple of decades, and especially during the last few years, China has seen phenomenal growth within its economy and a substantial rise in the standard of living for many of her people, especially in urban areas. Many people now have more money and more things to buy with that money than at any time in recent Chinese history. This is a relatively new situation and, as society comes to terms with its new wealth and improved standard of living, certain other phenomena such as greed and corruption also need to be faced. Xie Liren comes from the prosperous Special Economic Zone of Xiamen in Fujian Province and gives guidance to Chinese Christians in November's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, on how they might approach the issue of growing prosperity within their country.

Xie begins by reminding believers that everything on earth is created by God for His glory and also for the use of humanity. He points out that God comes first, then human beings, then finally material possessions - this is the order of things as God intended it. Since people come below God, they should worship Him. Since material possessions are below people, they should serve people. However, due to selfish and sinful desires, people start to see material possessions as more important and God as less important. Xie says that by doing this, people cut themselves off from the strength and help of God and try to draw all their strength from their possessions which, in the end, can do nothing to help them.

Xie stresses that possessions in themselves are not bad: new household electrical goods which only recently became widely available and affordable on the Chinese market can certainly improve people's lives. However, Xie reminds believers that possessions cannot solve the fundamental questions of life, and of eternal life in particular. As Jesus said: "Will a person gain anything if he wins the whole world but loses his life?" (Matthew 16:26)

Quoting Scripture further, Xie says that a "worker is worth his keep", and that if believers receive material possessions in exchange for their own honest labour then this should not be criticized, as God intends that his people enjoy all the blessings His earth has to offer. However, God's people should not use up all their energy in chasing such possessions, leaving God behind. As God's children, Xie reminds believers, they are masters of all material things, not their slaves. He also points out that a person's worth is to be measured in spiritual terms, in how much honour they bring to God and in how much they complete God's mission entrusted to them on earth. Xie concludes that God's word on material possessions is clear: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and it's righteousness, and all other things will then be added unto you." (Matthew 6:33) [488 words]
American Bible Society Representatives Visit China

(ANS) Each year the American Bible Society invites donor friends worldwide to participate in an informational trip to a place where Bible activity of some kind is taking place. The purpose is not only to witness the Bible activity but also to develop a better understanding of the cultural and historical context in which such Bible activity occurs.

This year, the ABS organized a trip to China and South Korea between September 27 and October 12. There were 17 participants in total, led by Dr. and Mrs Eugene B. Habecker with the assistance of Mr Bill Cedfeldt.

The group initially travelled to Hong Kong, where Mrs Violet Wong of the Hong Kong Bible Society hosted the group and where they attended churches within the territory. Travelling on to Mainland China, the group was accompanied by Associate General Secretary of the China Christian Council, Rev. Bao Jiayuan and Deputy Asia Opportunity Coordinator of the United Bible Society, Mr. Kua Wee Seng.

In Beijing the ABS group visited several places including the former Bible House, which is now the headquarters of the Beijing Christian Council. Moving on to Nanjing, the group visited the Amity Printing Company Ltd., Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the Amity Christian Arts Centre and the Jiangsu Provincial Christian Council. The ABS group stated in their report that they were "very impressed" by the size of the printing company and the "volume of Scriptures that they are able to produce there". The group worshipped at local churches on Sunday morning and also met with Dr. Wenzao Han, President of the China Christian Council. In Shanghai the group then visited the headquarters of the China Christian Council before moving on to Korea.

The ABS group agreed that the tour was a very positive experience, giving them a better understanding of Bible activity and its context in Asia. [311 words].

ANS Focus: Zhejiang Province:

"Success Must Not Lead To Complacency": How The Church In Zhejiang Seeks To Grow Even Further

Zhejiang is one of the smallest provinces within China yet, with a total of at least 1,300,000 believers, it is a province containing one of the largest proportions of believers in the country, accounting for at least 10% of all Christians within the whole of China. Recently, ANS editor Ian Groves spoke with members of the Zhejiang Christian Council and the Theological Seminary in Hangzhou, the provincial capital, in order to discover some of the keys to the church’s success in this part of the country and also to hear the challenges which the church there still faces.

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(AN3) Rev. Wang Jisen, Vice General Secretary of the Zhejiang Christian Council, attributes the sustained growth of the church in the province to a variety of factors. On the one hand, he points out that Christianity came to Zhejiang and took root there a long time ago, and the province has now seen many generations of Christian families. Therefore, many believers are following a long-standing family tradition when coming to church. However, according to Rev. Wang, a more important reason for the growing number of believers is the good example set by Christians within society. Christians in general practice a very high standard of morality and ethics and this impresses those around them. "You won't find any believers sitting in jail, and this brings a kind of honour to God within the community", says Rev. Wang.

Rev. Wang goes on to say that some people, especially in the countryside, are drawn to the faith after having witnessed miracle healings. However, he points out that the number of such believers is comparatively small. With China's recent rapid economic growth, Rev. Wang finds that more and more young people are being drawn to the church in the search for inner peace. "Outwardly they may have met their material needs in abundance, but inside they are spiritually destitute and often disturbed, and so they come to the church to seek the peace they long for," he explains.

"Christianity is a religion of music", says Rev. Wang, and music is certainly an important aspect of the church's witness in Zhejiang. In Hangzhou, a Joint Choir, made up of the best singers from the cities' individual church choirs, regularly performs at major festivals. Rev. Wang describes how often, at major celebrations such as Christmas and Easter, music even takes precedence over the sermon during worship and never fails to draw in crowds of curious passers-by from the street. However, there is some concern over the lack of music training in seminaries in general. Last summer, the church tried to remedy this situation by holding a special music training class for church workers but it lacked suitable music, instruments and teachers. Two teachers are now being trained specifically to run such classes in the future. The church also recently received the good news that one teachers' college graduate in music has pledged to go to Nanjing Union Theological Seminary for training and then wishes to return to Zhejiang to develop music in the church there.

Good relations with the local Religious Affairs Bureau also help the church to carry out its work smoothly. Rev. Sun Xipei, President of the Zhejiang Christian Council, emphasizes that the RAB serves as a kind of bridge between the church and the rest of society but in no way interferes in the internal affairs of the church. He reports that registration has gone smoothly and well within the province. Rev. Sun admits that some cadres in some Religious Affairs Bureaus may have their own personal views and prejudices concerning religion, and this was especially the case in former years. However, as he points out, most cadres are getting younger now, are better educated and often study religion so as to understand it better and do their work well. This has been one key to the smooth relationship which the church has enjoyed with government authorities in Zhejiang and which has subsequently allowed the church to thrive within the province.

Rev. Wang Wenjun, a member of the National Women's Association, says that the situation for women within the Zhejiang church is quite complex. 70% of all believers in the church in China are women and they are also the ones who make up most of the small groups that do most of the practical work within the church. In Zhejiang, the church has women's groups at the provincial and city level, and Rev. Wang hopes that each church meeting point within the province will eventually set up its own women's group. However, according to Shu Fazhen, a church worker at a rural meeting point, the problem lies in getting women in the countryside to stand up for their rights and set up such groups. Prejudice is still deeply rooted among both sexes in country areas, and many rural meeting points will not even accept baptism or communion from female pastors, claiming these sacraments are not "valid" unless administered by a man. According to Shu, some of the old denominations active within the province also held such ideas and so they still linger in the minds of some older believers today.

Nevertheless, especially in the cities in Zhejiang, Rev. Wang reports many activities held by the church to raise the status of women. Groups have been organized to help women believers in their daily lives, such as teaching techniques of household management, keeping a budget and child care. Women in the Hangzhou church are also trying to establish a link with their poorer counterparts in Yunnan province in order to regularly send them clothing and other supplies.
Rev. Wang Jisen believes that complacency is the biggest threat facing the Zhejiang church at the moment. He stresses that the church should not become satisfied with itself because of its constant growth and thus become inward looking and stagnated. As he points out, there are still many within the province who don’t believe and ways have to be found to reach out to those people. According to Rev. Wang, more believers should go out into society and serve people there, with the church starting initiatives such as hospitals and kindergartens. Also, the level of theological training needs to be improved so that church workers can evangelize better and address issues such as faith and salvation with confidence when speaking with those they meet.

ANS Focus: Zhejiang Province:

"In The World But Not Of The World": Portrait Of An Indigenous Chinese Church Community In Zhejiang

The county of Xiaoshan outside Hangzhou city in Zhejiang Province holds the distinction of having one of the largest concentrations of "Little Flock" congregations within China. Recently, ANS editor Ian Groves visited the believers there and spoke with them about their beliefs and how they live out their faith within that community.

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(ANS) The "Little Flock" or, as it is more accurately known, the "Local Assemblies", is one of the major indigenous churches within China, having grown up with no support at all from outside missions. It was founded in 1928 by Ni Duosheng (better known in English as Watchman Nee) as a reaction to the formalism and ritual of the Anglican background in which he was raised. The church and its teachings came to Xiaoshan in Zhejiang Province in 1932 with the arrival of a silk merchant from Shanghai. At that time various denominations were active in the area - particularly the China Inland Mission, but also Pentecostals, Anglicans, Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists. However, many in the county saw these outside denominations as foreign and therefore having little relevance to their own lives and situations. The Local Assemblies message, on the other hand, had great appeal. Now, according to Zhou Zaiqing of the Xiaoshan Christian Council, the county has a total of 100,030 believers and around 200 meeting points, 95% of which belong to the Local Assemblies church. According to Zhou, around 4,500 new believers are baptized into the church each year.

Local Assemblies churches have no ordained clergy and also seek to model themselves closely on Biblical descriptions of the first century church, with men and women sitting separately at services and women covering their heads. Their churches contain no crosses or adornments of any kind, but do contain many sayings from Scripture posted on the walls.

No one person "leads" Local Assemblies services and all baptized members are equal in status and equally empowered to speak during worship. The church does appoint elders, chosen through prayer and consensus, who are not ordained and who simply serve an administrative function. Anyone who wishes to preach during worship must inform the elder of his intention so that this can be arranged. The congregations use their own hymnal, printed by the Amity Printing Company and the Zhejiang Christian Council, which contains hymns written by the church before Liberation. Congregations see no need to revise or update these hymns since they believe the meanings expressed within them are timeless.

Local Assemblies churches do not believe in any form of formal theological training, believing instead that all understanding of the faith must come directly from God. At Bible study meetings, anyone can interpret the Scripture according to the faith he has received from God and, if disputes arise, then congregations tend to go with the interpretations given by older, more experienced believers.

Although seen as a denomination by outsiders, believers emphasize strongly that they do not regard themselves as a denomination at
all. Each individual congregation sees itself as a completely self-contained unit, having no relationship with any other group, only directly with God. In the past, each individual church took the name of the town or village where it was located, based on the model of the different churches in New Testament times. However, when new laws concerning registration were introduced in 1994, the different churches were finally forced to choose a common name for themselves to fulfill registration requirements and identify themselves with the authorities. Therefore, the name "Local Assemblies" was chosen, reflecting the fact that each church exists independently within its own individual locality and forms its own separate and independent congregation, answerable only to God.

The issue of registration caused intense debate among members of the Local Assemblies churches, since many felt that their churches belonged to heaven and therefore had no need to register on earth. However, this issue was resolved when it was realized that, although belonging to heaven, believers also resided on earth as citizens and guests within a particular country and therefore had certain obligations to that country. When registering their places of worship, believers see this as merely registering a place, a building, not the church itself as a holy body of believers. Zhou reports that 173 out of the 200 or so meeting points in the area have now been successfully registered so far.

Similarly, seeing themselves as guests on earth, believers now feel able to take part in various social movements and carry out state policies in areas such as family planning. Believers maintain a strict division between that which belongs on earth and that which belongs in heaven, and this allows them to "work in the world while not being of the world".

Concerning relations with other Christians, Local Assemblies members do see other Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ as long as they see some form of evidence that these believers also have a deep faith and spiritual conviction which is lived out within their lives. Local Assemblies members may take part in services in churches following other traditions but they do not necessarily accept all that goes on in these churches. Believers do not take communion in other churches since they cannot always verify for themselves whether the pastor celebrating communion has a strong enough spiritual life or not. Similarly, pastors from other Christian traditions may visit and preach in Local Assembly churches only after the churches have come to know the pastor in question personally and satisfied themselves that his faith and spiritual life is strong enough. Local Assemblies members do not accept Catholics as fellow believers, seeing their beliefs as mere superstition.

97.12.8

ANS Feature:

"Happy Birthday To Jesus!" - Christmas In China

As the Christmas season approaches and Christians throughout the world prepare to remember and celebrate the birth of Christ, ANS has invited several teachers working in China with the Amity Foundation to contribute some of their experiences of Christmas celebrations in the churches in the cities where they work.

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Melissa Powers - Teacher at Heze Teachers College, Shandong Province, 1995-97

The city of Heze does not have its own church building and therefore local believers meet at a meeting point in an old house comprising three rooms. Pastors usually preach into a microphone connected to speakers in the other rooms and in the courtyard. On a typical Sunday, 200-300 believers gather in the house for three hours of singing and a sermon. However, last year on Christmas Day the building was packed out, not with the usual 300 people but over 600, spilling out in to the narrow lane leading to the church gate.

After several members of the church had given a welcome and the whole church had sung a round of "Hark The Herald Angels Sing", dramas began. The first sketch, written by Chinese seminary students, was about several people trying to get into heaven. They had all
been church-goers for various reasons - one had
gone to church to accompany her mother, the
other had gone simply to find himself a nice wife
etc. Each had their own reasons but in the end
these reasons alone couldn't get them in to
heaven.

A pageant followed on from the drama:
"Mary" was dressed in a traditional Chinese red
robe and veil, wearing red and white face paint as
in Chinese opera. She sang of her sorrows and
joys in local operatic style, accompanied on an
erhu (traditional Chinese stringed instrument) and
wooden clappers. The "shepherds" were played
by men who very possibly herded goats in real
life themselves, since most believers in the Heze
church are peasants from the surrounding
country areas - their sheepskin coats were
certainly authentic! "Joseph" knew how to
bargain in grand Chinese style, dangling a little
extra money in the innkeeper's face at just the
right moment but, true to the story, to no avail.
Only the "wise men" did not look Chinese but
appeared as they do in any Christmas pageant in
churches in the West, with colourful scarves tied
around their heads in an imitation of turbans. The
pageant was not displayed on a grand stage but
in a small corner of the courtyard in front of a
makeshift white curtain.

Following the final chorus given by some
"angels", a special visitor arrived on the scene -
Santa Claus, complete with long red robe and
white beard, to wish everyone well and throw
candy to the eager crowd. Following Santa's visit
we sang some Christmas carols, including "Silent
Night" and "Joy To The World".

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Mary Kelly - Teacher at Anhui University, Hefei,
Anhui Province, 1995-

The main celebration at the church in
Hefei takes place on Christmas Eve and
preparations for this begin way in advance of the
service. Choirs, groups, and individuals put in
long hours of practice. The church is decorated
with fairy lights everywhere, with long strings of
white fairy lights extending from the front of the
church to the balconies at the back. Angels,
doves, neon light angel figures, a "Merry Christmas"
sign, poinsettias and an artificial tree all grace the
interior of the church.

Come the night of the 24th December
and everyone in the whole of Hefei seems to
know that the church is where the action is on
Christmas Eve. The church building is filled to
capacity and packed with Christian and non-
Christian alike, the believers and also the simply
curious. The windows and doors are jammed
solid with on-lookers, often noisy ones. Although
they can be distracting, the pastors and
congregation don't seem to mind as they feel this
is a great way to witness to the local community
in some way. Many local students who are not
themselves Christians especially like to attend
the Christmas Eve service.

The regular church choir performs
several carols but it also seems that anyone who
wants to work up some form of sketch, act or
presentation can also get their name on to the
program. There is always at least one dramatic
presentation of the Christmas story, sometimes
several, and other dramatic monologues and
short plays. At least one group of children
perform each time, a song or a short play. Most
of the performers wear heavy white makeup and
red lipstick so as not to appear pale in front of the
lights and the audience.

The Christmas Eve service usually lasts
at least two hours, often longer. The Christmas
Day worship is usually a regular service, since
Christmas is not a public holiday in China and
most people have to work on that day anyway.
One Christmas Day afternoon we witnessed four
couples getting married in the church all at the
same time!

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Anne Freslev - Teacher at Changshu College,
Jiangsu Province, 1995-

I have now celebrated three Christmases
in Changshu - one in the old church built by
American Methodist missionaries. When this
building was torn down to allow a nearby road to
be widened the congregation moved to a new
church building where an average of 400 attend
every Sunday.

On Christmas Eve the service is held at
around 6pm and the church is completely full.
Despite extra chairs and benches, many people
still have to stand for the 2.5 to 3 hour service.
In the older building the congregation had to limit
the number of people who could enter by using
a ticket system. This was to protect the building
itself and make sure it didn't collapse under the
strain, but in the new building everyone is
welcome.
The service is similar to any you might find in a Western church except that it is a great deal longer and there is lots of singing, with four or five selected carols sung over and over again by different performers during the course of the evening. The program is not put together with that much attention, so in the first year in Changshu the congregation had to sit through several different renditions of “Silent Night” one after the other!

The service invariably includes a couple of plays - usually a nativity play in two parts. The first part sees the angels telling the shepherds about the birth of Jesus, after which they leave their flocks and go to worship the baby. The second part shows the three wise men following the star. The pastor will also read from Chapter Two of the Gospel of St. Luke and give a very short sermon.

As one of the last events of the evening, Santa Claus comes on the stage. During my first year in Changshu Santa gave a very long talk, praising the city of Changshu and its development, but over the past few years he has talked for less time. The last item of the evening is when the pastor leads the congregation in singing a round of “Happy Birthday To You!”

NEWSBRIEFS

Church Buildings: Jiangcheng county in Yunnan Province has 38 churches divided among Yi, Hani, Dai and Miao minority nationality Christian congregations. However, due to the poverty of the region, the churches all have straw roofs which do not provide adequate protection for believers from the elements. Since 1984, the believers in the county have been slowly replacing the straw roofs on their churches with tiles, at the rate of one or two churches a year, depending on funds. Through the persistence and dedication of the believers, 27 church building roofs have already been tiled. *** Nanzheng county in Shaanxi Province bought a building last winter to use for worship. After converting it in to a church able to hold 1,000 believers, the building was dedicated in March this year. *** The meeting point in Xingtian township, Wuyishan city in Fujian province used to have to make use of private homes to gather for worship. After saving up for a long time, the believers in the township finally managed to purchase a 300 m² brick building for worship purposes. After only 10 days of renovation work carried out largely by the believers themselves, the church was dedicated in March of this year. *** Believers in Bailin village, Wudu county in Gansu province used their own labour and materials to build a church seating over 500 people last year. The building was dedicated just before last Christmas.

On 27th July this year, former US President Jimmy Carter visited Zouping church in Shandong province. During the visit, he asked about the church’s history and current situation and took part in a short worship service with believers there. Said the former President, “It is the love of Christ which unites us together.”

Nanhua county in Yunnan province has over 1,500 believers belonging to various national minority groups and yet not one pastoral worker to look after their spiritual needs. Faced with this situation, the CC/TSPM joint committee at nearby Longchuan organized the area’s first lay worker training class in August this year. At the end of the training program six elders were ordained and five meeting points were also officially registered. Rev. Li Chongming, General Secretary of the Yunnan CC/TSPM committee stresses the urgency of training pastoral workers within the province, as different heresies have taken root in churches in some remote minority nationality areas, such as Wande village in Wuding county.

On 27th June, a sudden torrential rain brought devastation to Zigong city in Sichuan province. Streets, lanes, shops and houses were destroyed or severely damaged within the four districts and two counties in and around the city. Crops and livestock were also devastated. As the people of the city rallied together to salvage property and goods, believers from the Zigong church gave an excellent witness by helping others affected in the storm before attending to their own needs. By mid July, believers had collected 480 yuan (= US$58.00), as well as over 500 articles of clothing to donate to the city’s Red Cross organization.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

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2. Changshu (Jiangsu)
3. Chongqing
4. Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
5. Hefei (Anhui)
6. Heze (Shandong)
7. Hong Kong
8. Jiangcheng (Yunnan)
9. Lintang (Gansu)
10. Luyang (Shaanxi)
11. Nanhua (Yunnan)
12. Nanjing (Jiangsu)
13. Nanzheng (Shaanxi)
14. Shanghai
15. Wenzhou (Zhejiang)
16. Wudu (Gansu)
17. Wuyishan (Fujian)
18. Xiamen (Fujian)
19. Xiaoshan (Zhejiang)
20. Xinyu (Jiangxi)
21. Zigong (Sichuan)
22. Zouping (Shandong)