**Believers In Flood-Affected Provinces Rush To Help Out**

(ANS) Since mid June this year, the provinces of Jiangxi, Fujian and Henan have been hit by the worst flooding seen in several decades in those areas along the Yangtze River. Millions have lost their homes and livelihoods, and the task of providing emergency aid for these people and helping them rebuild their lives is overwhelming. The crisis situation has stirred believers in afflicted areas to reach out and demonstrate God's love to their neighbours in practical ways. In August's edition of **Tian Feng**, the magazine of the Chinese church, Tian Yu reports on how believers have translated their concern into acts of love for those in need.

Pastor Li Baole, chair of the Jiangxi Provincial Three-Self Committee, reports that 12 million people have been affected by flooding in Jiangxi, spread over 79 county towns and 1,297 townships. In response to the floods, the provincial CC/TSPM committee cancelled their annual summer training program and called an emergency meeting to plan relief work, issuing a call to church workers throughout the whole province to lend a hand. Within days, believers had collected 10,000 yuan (= US$1,200 approx.) worth of cotton quilts, sandals, grain and other foodstuffs. Within three days, the two churches in the provincial capital, Nanchang, had alone managed to collect together 11,147 separate articles of clothing to send to afflicted areas. Most of the aid collected by believers was sent to Qianshan county, the worst affected area in the province.

On June 12th, the area of Nanping in northern Fujian province saw the worst flooding in centuries (see **ANS 98.7.5**). To date, over two million people have been...
affected in the city and the surrounding county towns, with over 150 people still unaccounted for. Damage is estimated at around 6.5 billion yuan (=US$ 785 million approx.), with tens of thousands of people still homeless. President of the Nanping Municipal Christian Council, Pastor Sun Renfu reports that five local believers died in the floods, one is still missing and hundreds more are without homes. Three church buildings have collapsed in the area and many of the remaining churches are damaged and unsafe. 20,000 Bibles and hymnals were also lost in the flood waters.

After an appeal issued on June 21st by the Municipal CC/TSPM committee, Nanjing believers donated close to 100,000 yuan (=US$ 12,000 approx.), along with over 20,000 articles of clothing. Many students at the Fujian Theological Seminary in the provincial capital, Fuzhou, were so moved by the plight of the afflicted that they donated their meagre living and travel allowances in order to help with flood relief efforts. On June 29th, Nanping church leaders heard that transport along local roads was becoming difficult because of the flooding. On receiving this news, Pastor Sun, the Municipal Religious Affairs Bureau director and three other church workers personally set out with 210 bags of clothes, grain, bedding and money to make sure that the aid got to those in need before the roads were entirely blocked.

After weeks of torrential rains and flooding, one believer in Song county in the northwest of Henan Province invested his life savings of 8,000 yuan (= US$ 970 approx.) in order to buy a ferry boat to move local people about in the flood waters. In order to make ends meet, this believer charges a nominal fee, but refuses to take money from the elderly or sick, primary school children going to attend class or believers on their way to Sunday worship. Through such acts of generosity and love, believers all over China are being recognized as making a special and great contribution to the nationwide effort to combat the effects of this year's devastating floods.

The Poor Reaching Out To The Poor In Shaanxi Province

(ANS) "Our 'neighbours' are right there beside us, and the church should embody the essence of Christian love through concrete actions to help its neighbours." Thus comments Wang Jun after a visit to believers in remote and impoverished Yongshou County in the northwest of Shaanxi Province. Reporting in August's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Wang describes how believers in Yongshou, though desperately poor themselves, still do their utmost to try and alleviate the misery of poverty suffered by those around them.

Poverty is the main issue facing local people in Yongshou. The local terrain is harsh, with high mountains and deep ravines, making transport difficult and farming a challenge. In such conditions, it is difficult for local people to improve their lot in any substantial way. Nevertheless, local believers have looked for ways to make life more bearable for the county's population.

The main produce of the area is wheat, but farmers are often hit by droughts and other natural disasters, meaning they can hardly grow enough wheat to make ends
meet. Wang cites an example of how local believers noted that farmers in the area are so anxious about their crops that they often neglect to look after themselves. Farmers often do not eat or drink at regular times, do not wash or mend their clothes, and even do not get a haircut when necessary. Wang notes that such behaviour could lead to health and hygiene problems for local peasants. In response, local believers have set up stalls at the central county market place where they distribute free tea to the farmers and also provide hair-cutting and laundry services for hard-pressed peasants. Last year, during one of the harshest droughts ever recorded in northern China, believers also joined local farmers during the crucial harvest season to rescue every grain of wheat. Afterwards, believers helped distribute some of the grain to the families most severely afflicted by the drought conditions.

Local believers have also worked together with the Amity Foundation to find ways to generate income and alleviate poverty in the area. A loan from Amity helped buy 43 head of cattle which was then distributed among residents of the area's poorest villages. After three years, the value of the livestock had raised to such an extent that the original loan was recovered and used to buy more cattle for other poor households in the region. Through this kind of "rolling development", it is hoped that most of the households in Yongshou can generate an extra source of income and improve their lives as a result. Also, with the help of Amity, local believers collected money to build the Yongshou County Christian Clinic, which serves the needs of both believers and non-believers in the area.

As a result of such acts of witness, the church has seen a steady increase in membership over the past few years. In 1992, there were only 1,200 believers worshipping at one centrally-located church in Yongshou. Now there are 4,000 church members. Believers are scattered in villages all over the local area and, because of the rugged terrain of the area, it was often difficult for believers to make the long journey along narrow mountain paths to attend worship, especially in bad weather. Therefore, over the past few years, church members have mobilized themselves to collect the money and materials needed to build 13 new church buildings in the different townships within the area. Each of the new church buildings has already set up a complete management structure, including work groups, accounting systems and leadership teams. As a result of this effort, attending worship has not only been made much easier for local believers but, as Wang points out, the church now has a more visible presence within different parts of the county.

**Starting With The Spirit**

(ANS) "In today's world, people are becoming stronger and healthier, yet they are also growing weaker and more fragile than ever. People are crowding together, yet they also feel more isolated and lonelier than ever. The reason for all this is a lack of spiritual balance. The way to achieve this balance is through regular spiritual devotion." Thus writes Chen Yifu from southern China's Guangdong (Canton) Province in August's edition of **Tian Feng**, the magazine of the Chinese church. In his article, entitled "Starting With The Spirit" (the title is a play on words in Chinese, sounding like "Starting From The Beginning" when spoken aloud), Chen talks about a new course, "Devotional
Theology", which will soon be offered at Guangdong Union Theological Seminary in order to equip future pastors and evangelists with this kind of balance.

Chen notes that many churches overseas are paying great attention to personal devotion as a necessary part of the Christian life and that, in this regard, the Chinese church still needs to catch up. This new course is a step in that direction. Theological education in China to date has focused predominantly on certain practical areas such as preaching, church management etc. Very little attention has been paid in the past to encouraging seminary students to consider how they take care of their own spiritual development. The "Devotional Theology" course aims to provide this necessary balance in the theological training students receive. Chen quotes the early church father, Anselm, who said "Theology is the search to know God." Devotion is the means by which we have contact with God and thus get to know God more. Chen believes that if seminary students are not equipped to develop their devotional life then the whole point of their theological training and their future mission as pastors has been missed. As a result, many church workers in China today are, as Chen puts it, "full of spiritual words, but without the morals and character to back up these words."

The course will start with church history, examining how different figures through the ages have understood the Holy Spirit and the variety of ways in which they have sought to get closer to the Spirit. This survey will extend from the early Church Fathers right up to Mother Teresa in the present age. It will incorporate holy figures from many Christian traditions, including Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. This historical survey will be accompanied by a critical appreciation of the methods used through the ages to get closer to God and discussion on what might be deemed useful, beneficial and relevant to believers today. As Chen points out, "Sitting for months on top of a pole or deciding not to wash, as some of the Church Fathers did toward the end of their lives, may not be the best way to approach the Spirit today." Chen notes that history shows us countless different approaches to spiritual devotion, since the meaning of "being in the Spirit" differs from one individual and age to the next. For this reason, discussion and criticism are an important aspect of the course.

It is hoped that students will emerge from the course with concrete, practical ideas as to the best way to develop their own spiritual lives and draw closer to God, says Chen. As to the future direction of "Devotional Theology", Chen hopes that it may provide a place to explore the Chinese church’s own unique experience of spirituality over the past few years, possibly leading to the discovery of devotional methods ideally suited to the current Chinese situation, with uniquely Chinese characteristics, which could ultimately be shared with all believers within the Chinese church.

Holy Words And Unholy Music Just Don’t Mix

(ANS) Martin Luther wrote that one of the most magnificent, joyful and holy things God has given to us is music. This sentiment is echoed by Xu Mu in August's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church. Xu laments the fact that, in some churches in China today, hymns are being sung which are anything but holy.
Xu points out that, since the publication of the "Hymnal" and the book of "Choruses" by the Church Music Committee of the China Christian Council, church choirs and congregations in every location in China have had a store of solemn, respectful and dignified hymns at their disposal with which to praise and worship God. However, Xu has discovered that in some places, churches have neglected the use of these books and are putting parts of Scripture to tunes of their own choice and of dubious origin. Some churches are taking popular melodies from vulgar songs sung by drunks or underworld gangs in pre-Liberation times. Other churches are setting parts of Scripture to tunes taken from revolutionary and military songs. Some churches are also setting words of praise to sentimental and emotional tunes taken from popular films.

Xu claims that in all these cases, the sentiments expressed in the words may be holy, but the tunes used to add expression to these words were definitely not composed with God in mind, and may even have been written to go with lyrics contrary to God's teachings. Xu regards this trend as an unhealthy phenomenon within the Chinese church and one that may cause confusion both within and without the church. He believes that congregations need to be more discriminating in their choice of church music, making sure that hymn tunes were composed with God in mind. According to Xu, believers should not mix up old, new, folk and popular tunes in their worship with no regard for the original meanings behind these tunes.

ANS Focus: Chongwenmen Protestant Church, Beijing

Where Presidents Go To Worship

During his state visit to China in June of this year, U.S. President Bill Clinton and his entourage attended Sunday morning worship at Chongwenmen church in the capital, Beijing. Whilst millions saw the pictures of Clinton worshipping alongside Chinese Christians that Sunday morning, few know anything about the church where this service took place. In August this year, Rev. Ewing W. Carroll Jr. of the Overseas Coordination Office of the Amity Foundation paid a visit to the "Church of the Presidents" to find out more about its life, work and history.

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Beijing's Chongwenmen Protestant Church is situated in an area which, prior to China's 1949 Liberation, was significantly occupied by church buildings and church-related offices. Some describe Chongwenmen as the "Church of American Presidents", since two sitting American Presidents have worshipped there during state visits to China in recent years: George Bush in February 1989 and Bill Clinton in June of this year.

The largest Protestant church in Beijing, Chongwenmen is well known across China for its unique architectural features. Established in 1870 as Asbury Methodist Church, the church is patterned after a turn-of-the-century American church design called "The Akron Plan." The original church building had the same design as the current building but on a smaller scale, seating only 400-500 worshippers at that time. The building was enlarged in 1882 to accommodate a rapidly increasing church membership. Burned down during the 1900 Boxer Uprising in Beijing, the church was reconstructed in 1904 and this is the same building which stands today. In 1958, when Beijing's Protestant churches were consolidated, worship at Asbury Church discontinued and the church facilities were turned over to be used as a public middle school. The property was returned to Beijing believers in 1982 and reopened for worship during Christmas that year.

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In 1990, the Beijing Municipal Government designated the mostly wooden construction as an "Historic (Protected) Building". The current church building occupies 8,246 sq. meters of land and, in addition to the main hall which seats over 800, also includes a chapel and large basement. A moveable wall divides the main hall and the chapel, thereby enabling dual-use of the facility. Additional seating in the outside garden enables the church to accommodate nearly 3,000 people for worship today.

The church’s main worship service is held each Sunday at 9:30 a.m. Normally, over 3,000 people are packed into the main worship hall, the adjoining chapel, the church basement and an outdoor garden. Strategically-placed closed-circuit television sets enable worshippers to both see and hear the entire worship service. A forty-voice choir regularly sings and assists in leading the musical parts of the service.

A Saturday worship service, usually attended by 400-500 persons, is held for the convenience of those who must work on Sundays. There is also a much smaller Sunday evening service and a Korean language service every Sunday afternoon. This service is provided for ethnic minority Koreans living and working in Beijing. Other church activities include a Friday morning gathering of some 100 women for prayer, witness and preaching and a Thursday evening Bible study and prayer meeting, usually attended by 300-400 persons. While there is yet no formal children’s Sunday School program as in many other churches in China, there is a Sunday morning class for children which includes singing, story-telling, games and other activities.

When the church was first reopened in 1982 most worshippers were quite elderly. This has changed rather dramatically over the past ten years. Today, there are growing numbers of young adults and students attending services and joining the church. During the August 16, 1998 service, Rev. Wu Wei, the church’s senior pastor, baptized over forty new believers. Each of them had previously undergone extensive training in the meaning of Christian baptism and faith. Most of them appeared to be in their 20’s and 30’s.

During that same service, Rev Wu’s pastoral prayer included concern for flood victims all across China and for world peace. He reminded worshippers that Christ is the Lord of Peace. Later in the service Wu announced that the entire Sunday offering would be given for the relief and rehabilitation of flood victims.

For many years the Chongwenmen church choir has formed the nucleus of a larger choir which performs Handel’s “Messiah” every Christmas Eve and Christmas Night. Especially on Christmas Eve, thousands of Christians and non-Christians alike stand in long dragon-like queues for several hours hoping to obtain a first-come-first-serve seat. The church has long seen this musical event as an evangelistic outreach to the wider Beijing community.

ANS Focus: Chongwenmen Protestant Church, Beijing

"We Help Each Other, We Need Each Other"

During a visit to Beijing’s Chongwenmen Church in August this year, Rev. Ewing W. Carroll Jr. of the Overseas Coordination Office of the Amity Foundation spoke with young church co-worker Liu Cuimin about her background and her current duties within the church.

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Liu Cuimin, age 29, comes from a farming family in Hubei Province. A third generation Christian, she is now the only female member of the Beijing Chongwenmen Protestant Church clergy staff. Liu’s quiet and somewhat pensive personality belies her rural roots, the era in which she was born and the stereotypical way people often describe church leaders.

Following graduation from secondary school Liu was unable to attend university. Upon hearing the church was in great need of additional workers, she saw this as an answer to her long-held dream to become a pastor. Liu applied for admission to Beijing’s Yanjing Theological Seminary. Following successful completion of the entrance examination and high

After completing her course Liu was assigned to Chongwenmen's pastoral team. As part of that team, her responsibilities include a wide variety of activities: leading worship services, preaching, home visitation, Bible study, prayer meetings and women's meetings. She also attends two weekly family meetings where she provides leadership in prayer, singing and preaching.

When asked, "What is your most important task as a pastor?" Liu's quick and bold response does not match her usual soft-spoken nature: "Of course, to spread the Gospel to the people of China." Asked to further explain what it means to spread the Gospel in a Chinese context, Liu notes, "To preach, lead our people in Christian discipleship and to nurture my own spiritual life."

Liu seems to clearly enjoy her role as one of several shepherds to some 3,000 church members. Her relative youthfulness does not seem to be an obstacle, especially with older women believers. While many see her as a granddaughter, they express appreciation for her gentle and attentive spirit. Among church members, the fact that she is both young and a woman does not appear to engender any serious difficulties. When asked about her relationship with church members, Liu said, "You know, probably the favorite part of my job is being with church members. We help each other. We need each other."

Outside critics often claim pastors in China have no freedom to determine sermon themes or content. When asked how she decides what to preach about, Liu replies: "Through daily prayer and Bible reading I try to hear what God is saying to me. Based on this, and daily experiences with our parishioners, I then decide what God would have me say. Of course most important of all, I must first pray."

ANS Feature:

Opportunity And Challenge

In August this year, Rev. Cao Sheng Jie, Vice President of the China Christian Council, attended a conference in Oslo, Norway, on Freedom of Religious Belief. Below are extracts from her presentation to the conference, entitled "Opportunity and Challenge," on the subject of religious freedom in China.

As a Protestant Christian Minister, I have often heard people, my fellow Christians and friends of other religions, "The present time is the best time for religion to expand and develop in China." In order to explain the meaning of this statement, allow me to trace some recent history of the past few decades.

The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, with the leading Communist party as atheist. Prior to that time, religious believers were very worried about whether they would enjoy religious freedom any more, as so many rumours were being spread that the Communists would wipe out all religions in China. In September of that year, representatives of all religions were invited to attend the first session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and the Common Program adopted at that conference stipulated that "Chinese people have the right of religious belief." In 1954, the first Constitution also stipulated that "Chinese citizens have the freedom of religious belief." Even today, some people outside China hold that religious activities were all stopped right after the founding of New China. In fact, this is a misunderstanding. Unfortunately, this did happen during the 10 years of turmoil known as the "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976). The Constitution was trampled upon, culture was damaged, temples and mosques were closed. Clergy, just like intellectuals, capitalists and even high-ranking officials, were all persecuted.

These wrong doings were corrected 20 years ago. Since then, China has adopted a policy of reform and opening to the outside world, and is making efforts to speed up democracy and build up her legal system,
including a right attitude toward religion, by re-implementing the previously correct policy of freedom of religious belief in a process of normalizing our country's development. Since 1979, not only have religious activities been resumed but rapid developments within the different religions have also taken place within China.

At present, there are a total of more than 100 million religious believers, more than 86,000 places for worship, over 3,000 religious organizations, about 300,000 clergy and 74 religious schools or seminaries all around China. Each religion has its own umbrella organization. Public worship is carried on normally and believers can also worship at home. Besides Scriptures and books published by various religions, clergy are trained, and friendly exchanges take place widely among religious organizations and personnel with their international counterparts.

Protestant Christianity came to China mainly through the protection afforded it by unequal treaties imposed by foreign forces. The church was under the dominion of foreign mission boards in the areas of administration, finance and personnel. Thus, the Protestant Church was looked upon as a "foreign religion" by the Chinese people. Though some positive results were achieved in the previous hundred or so years, by 1949 there were still only 700,000 Christians in China. Through the continued efforts of the Chinese Christian "Three Self Movement", i.e. self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation of the Gospel, the Chinese church has become a self-governed community of Chinese Christians. At present, there are about 10 million Christians, which is 14 times as many as in 1949; 12,000 churches, 25,000 meeting places, 18,000 ministers and preachers, and 17 theological seminaries which have graduated nearly 3,000 theological students. Since the 1980's, the Protestant Church has printed 20 million copies of the Bible, including the Bible in Korean, Miao, Lisu, Jingpo and other minority languages. Eight million copies of the Chinese New Hymnal have been distributed, and our church periodical, "Heavenly Wind" has a monthly subscription of 120,000.

The above facts vigorously prove that Chinese religious believers really enjoy freedom of religious belief, otherwise how could these developments have taken place? There are some people outside of China who take some incidents which happened during the "Cultural Revolution" some 20 years ago, and use them as illustrations of "persecution" of religion in China today, which is at the very least a gross misunderstanding on their part.

We think that there are also other factors which lead Chinese religious people to say that the present time is the best time for the development of religion:

1) Freedom of religious belief is legally protected by our country's Constitution and other laws. As we work toward a system of governing the country by law, legislation concerning religion will protect normal religious activities more effectively.

2) Government officials and people of different walks of life in society are taking a more objective attitude toward religion, helping create a better social environment for the practice of the freedom of religious belief.

3) Religious people ourselves are more aware of our responsibilities, needing to adapt religion to developments within society while guaranteeing our own legal rights and interests at the same time.

At the moment, religion in China also faces certain challenges as well as good opportunities:

1. China is a country covering a vast area and with a large population. In the countryside, farmers have a low educational level and are strongly influenced by feudalistic ideas. There is still a long way for Chinese people to go to reach the goal of governing the country fully by law. We have not worked out a national Religious Law yet. In some places, the phenomenon of ignoring the law still exists. Followers of religion are scattered in rural and remote areas, where some grassroots cadres, due to their own shortcomings, do not follow the spirit of current religious policy correctly. Cases of violation of the Constitution and other laws still occur. Religious organizations are informing the government departments concerned about these cases, asking for correction. Some are solved through judicial processes. Basically, only by education, to raise all people's legal consciousness, can these problems be resolved.

2. Since the training of clerical personnel cannot keep up with the rapid growth of believers, in some places, believers do not fully understand the basic doctrine of the religion they believe in. In such places, religious activities degrade into superstitious practices and feudalistic sectarian
activities, having a harmful impact on normal religious development. If we religious organizations cannot take every opportunity to strengthen and build up ourselves then, even if freedom of religious belief is fully guaranteed by law, the future of religion is worrisome.

3. In recent years, some cults have grown up in some parts of China. Leaders of these cults spread instigation in the name of religion. Some of them call themselves kings of a new dynasty, some pretend to be gods, often with the aim of defrauding people of their money or committing adultery. This has injured many followers materially and mentally and caused social disorder at the same time. We affirm that religion must abide by the law. These activities, which harm people and society, cannot be called normal activities, and thus cannot be protected. The government punishes those who engage in illegal activities and this is necessary in order to guarantee true religious freedom, preserve the good name of religion, and keep innocent believers from harm.

4. There are some overseas religious groups engaged in secret religious activities within our country. They send people to do mission work without the approval of Chinese religious organizations. They sabotage our country by saying that religious believers should not love their country, and try to cause antagonism between believers and non-believers. They also split our religion by supporting cults or spreading wrong teachings. When their activities are resisted by Chinese believers and Chinese people, they howl about "persecution" in China in order to also deceive kind-hearted religious believers outside of China. Actually, it is precisely these kind of activities which have brought disorder to the normal practice of religion in China.

We have got more understanding of the documents of the United Nations about religious freedom, and have learned much from your helpful experiences. We believe you are now glad to know more about the current situation of religion in China. We welcome you to come to China to see religious life within China with your own eyes. Let us strive together to guarantee that the basic rights of religious freedom are upheld in all our countries, according to our different national situations, in all parts of the world.

NEWSBRIEFS

"Lecturer's Group": For some time now, the Jiangsu CC/TSPM committee has been concerned about providing well-trained teachers in sufficient numbers for lay training programs within the province. To tackle this problem, it has now put together a special "Lecturer's Group", comprising 28 people from around the province. The group members are taken from CC/TSPM committees at the provincial and municipal levels as well as middle-aged and young pastors who have seminary education and several years' pastoral experience. It is hoped that training programs around the province can now draw upon members of this group when running such programs.

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Lay Training: The church in Suining County, Jiangsu Province, has over 70,000 believers worshipping at some 90 different church meeting points. The county is in desperate need of qualified pastoral workers to care for the needs of these believers. Up to the end of last year, the church in Suining had held 16 different training programs but has no fixed location where classes can be held. As a result, a church hall has to be found for use as a classroom before each program, and students have difficulty arranging a place to live, eat and study during such courses. In February this year, work began on a permanent lay training centre in Suining. Believers donated money and labour and, within only two months, the three-storey building was erected at a cost of 200,000 yuan (=US$ 24,160 approx.)
First Lay Training Class Held In Xinjiang Autonomous Region

(ANS) Urumqi, the capital city of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in northwest China, has a population of 1.5 million. The city contains 52 different minority groups and six different religions, and is the heart of politics, culture and economic life for the local dominant Uighur people. In recent years, the number of Christian believers has steadily increased and there are currently two churches and 15 meeting points in the city. As Wu Wen points out in September's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, the next logical step for the church in Urumqi was to provide some form of lay training to meet the needs of the city's growing church membership.

After much planning on the part of the Urumqi Christian Council, the region's first lay training course took place between February and June this year. 25 believers selected from the 15 local meeting points attended the course, most over 50 years of age and with a relatively low educational level. Despite their lack of formal education, most of the course participants have served at their meeting points for many years and worked hard for their congregations. Wu mentions how the participants felt that they were simply ill-equipped for the tasks they were called upon to carry out within the church. Therefore, they saw the training course as an opportunity to acquire greatly needed tools.

The training course focused on Bible knowledge, Old and New Testament studies, Life of Jesus and basic preaching skills, as well as knowledge of religious policy and law. Because of their low academic level, many course participants initially found coping with the coursework very difficult and wanted to quit. However, Wu describes how the students kept reminding themselves of the need in their home churches and realized that if they didn't complete this training then the church would suffer. In this way, the students motivated themselves to study and by the end of the course, felt time had gone by far too quickly and that they wanted to learn more.

Wu notes that one of the main lessons the course participants learned was to pay attention to their own spiritual development. Many students commented how they had been so busy in recent years with various practical affairs within the church that they had neglected their own spiritual devotions. As a result, they noticed that their church work was seen more as a burden than a joy. During the training course the students had the chance to reflect on their church service and saw the need to develop their own relationship with God so that they could always keep in mind Who exactly they were serving. The course in Urumqi gave the participants many ideas to take home for improving their own spiritual lives.

The needs of the course participants were catered for by believers at the Mingde Road church in Urumqi. For many months before the course, members of the church congregation gradually put together a dormitory for the students, bringing beds and other basic daily items for the students' use. During the course, on the students' days off, members of the church congregation gave their time and energy to clean the dormitory and change the bedding. They also took responsibility for preparing the students' food. Wu explains how the church members were more than willing to help.
out in this way when they saw how the course participants were dedicating themselves to improving the church situation in Xinjiang.

The church in Urumqi had tried to organize a lay training course years before but had failed because it had not received government permission and the course was thus seen as illegal. The present course is therefore a testimony to the improvement in relations and better understanding between the church and Urumqi's Religious Affairs Bureau. It is also a sign of how the tightening of religious laws and policy in China has meant better protection for church rights.

What Is The Difference Between Christian Faith And Superstition?

(ANS) Superstition is still widespread and influential throughout many parts of China, particularly in the countryside. Since both superstition and religion deal with the supernatural, some believers within the Chinese church get confused between the two. A chronic shortage of church workers means that large numbers of new believers do not receive the thorough grounding in faith which they need to differentiate pure expressions of Christian faith from superstitious practices. Furthermore, many believers in China are attracted to the fantastic and the spectacular in matters of faith, such as miracle cures, faith healing and the casting out of demons. As Yan Bilin from Sheyang in Jiangsu province reports in the September issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, many practitioners of superstition are now taking advantage of this confusion in the church to move in and find a new "market" for their practices among Chinese Christian believers.

Yan's article presents a summary of the main differences between faith and superstition. Yan points out that Christianity is a complete set of fixed and concrete teachings, with the Bible as a point of reference. Christianity is able to explain the meaning of the whole of existence, from creation to the present day and into the future up to the last times. Furthermore, Christian teachings promote the good of society, laying emphasis on good morals and ethics, honesty, truth and loving one's neighbour. By contrast, superstition represents no systematic body of teaching and has no point of reference to back it up, tending to consist of a random collection of folk traditions and sayings. Rather than seeking the benefit of all in society, superstitious practices, such as ancestor worship, seances, fortune telling and divination, tend to seek the benefit of the individuals concerned, aiming to help them make more money or have success in their life.

Yan also points out the differences between Christian and superstitious activities. Christian activities are all consistent with Biblical teachings and follow a set pattern or form. These include hymn singing, prayers, Bible readings, preaching, baptism and communion, offerings and certain special occasions such as weddings and funerals. These activities take place at set times and are led by recognized and qualified church workers, who may not force those who attend to donate any money for these services. By contrast, superstitious activities seem to have no fixed times, patterns or forms. In order to drive out demons or call on gods, some sorcerers close their eyes and say "magic" words, some burn incense and some paint symbols on bones or special paper.

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Similarly, there are many different ways used to tell someone's fortune, such as analyzing handwriting, palm reading, astrology, divination or geomancy. According to Yan's understanding, anyone can conduct a superstitious ritual without any particular qualification to do so, and most require of those present to donate money at some point during the activity in order to make it "successful". Yan suspects that the collection of such donations is the primary aim of such practitioners.

Without proper guidance, superstition can easily creep into the practices of the church. Yan reports how many believers in country churches deal with problems by simply opening their Bibles and pointing to a piece of Scripture at random, then seeking some kind of answer to the problem from that Scripture passage. Other believers hold that every dream they have must contain a revelation from God and eagerly look for someone to interpret all their dreams. Some church members refuse to pray facing a certain direction, believing that only demons and goblins live in that direction. Still others routinely hold exorcisms in their homes if something goes wrong in the house or if there are tensions between family members. In this way out of ignorance, believers are mixing pure faith with superstition, and this can cause them into wrongdoing and give Christianity a bad name in the eyes of those outside the church.

Yan concludes that today is a joyous time for the church, with the Gospel spreading widely all over China and numerous souls being saved in every area. However, if the church wishes to keep the beliefs and activities of its members true to the Christian faith then it needs through education and information to equip them to differentiate faith and superstition.

Church Literacy Class Sets Participants "On Fire"

(ANS) Of the more than five hundred believers at the Jinshanqiao Protestant Church in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, one third have never been to school or learned to read or write. These believers all own Bibles and hymnals but become frustrated when they cannot use these books in worship services or to help them on their faith journey. As Li Jing reports in the September issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, last year the congregation at Jinshanqiao church finally found a way to help all of their members read God's word.

The Jinshanqiao church was reopened in 1983 and attempted for many years to establish a literacy class for believers who needed help in this area. Unfortunately, for a long time the church lacked space, materials and a teacher for such a course. However, circumstances changed gradually: with the publication by the China Christian Council in the early 90's of "Easy Reader", an introduction to common Chinese characters and phrases used in the church, the church had a suitable text. By the end of 1994 the church had constructed a spacious new church building with room for a class, and an experienced educator was also finally found from within the congregation. On the first morning of registration for the class over 80 illiterate believers signed up, along with many others who just wanted to sit in on the class. The class finally began in February last year.
As Li reports, weekly classes take place every Tuesday morning. The majority of the students are older people but also includes some teenagers and young people. The church provides all the textbooks, notebooks and pens for the class, as well as awards for excellent achievements. Because of this, motivation to do well on the course is high, and all the participants have made rapid progress.

One of the oldest participants is Qin Deying, close to 80 years old. Li tells how she was the first to sign up for the class, even though people believed it was of little use for her to study at such an old age. Qin replied by saying, "The Lord has allowed that my ears and eyes have not failed me in my old age, so I want to use these gifts to learn as many words as I can, read some of the Bible for myself and understand the Lord's paths better while I still have time." Qin is always the first to arrive for class and she enlists the help of her small grandson with her homework for the class. Once she was hospitalized for a while with a high fever but still insisted on bringing her character books with her to revise from her hospital bed. This greatly moved the hospital staff caring for her. Now, after one year, Mrs. Qin has learned over 800 words and can read the Bible and sing hymns by herself during worship.

The Jinshangiao church literacy class has already started studying Book Three of the "Easy Reader" course. Li notes that at this level, the teacher is able to include short Bible readings for students to follow, reading one chapter of the Bible each time they complete one lesson of the "Reader". The teacher follows up the Bible readings with a short explanation of the passage. Therefore, the participants not only achieve literacy but at the same time also receive basic Bible instruction.

The literacy class has had far-reaching effects beyond the class itself. Li describes how class participants have been "set on fire" by their new found skills and have developed a new love and enthusiasm for the church which has given them the gift of reading and writing. Class participants enthusiastically throw themselves into all areas of church work as a way of thanking the church for its gift of literacy to them. This enthusiasm has spread to all members of the congregation and has given the whole church a new vitality. More importantly, many illiterates from outside the church have heard of this "good thing" the church is doing and are willing to attend the church class in order to learn to read themselves, some hearing for the first time the Good News of the Christian faith through the class. Local government leaders and United Front cadres have also praised the literacy class as making a useful contribution to the needs of society at this time.

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ANS Focus: Young People In The Church

Summer Christian Youth Conference Takes On A New Feel In Hangzhou

(ANS) For the past nine years, the church in Hangzhou, capital of southern China’s Zhejiang Province, has organized a Christian Youth Conference each summer. The conference gives young people in the church a chance to come together, share experiences and deepen their understanding of faith and church affairs. The theme of this year’s conference was “Life and Renewal”. As Gu Yue reports in September’s issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, there were several new aspects to this year’s event.

To begin with, the number of participants in the conference this year was up substantially over previous years, from 100 to 184, with the number of unofficial participants and observers pushing the total to well over 200. The conference takes place in Hangzhou’s Si Cheng church and numbers had to be limited in the past due to the church’s limited capacity to accommodate and feed participants. For these reasons, many eager and enthusiastic young people within the church had to miss out on the conference in the past or else attend only selected sessions. This year, practical support from the Hangzhou Municipal Christian Council and Hangzhou Christian Men and Women’s Youth Society enabled conference organizers to invite more participants and allow more observers to benefit from the conference sessions. 5,000 yuan (=US$ 605 approx.) was also collected from local believers to cover the expenses of participants at the conference, the highest amount ever given toward this event.

According to statistics from this year’s meeting, most of the participants had completed higher education of one form or another, with the overall educational level of participants higher than ever before. Gu says the church in Hangzhou attributes this to the growing attractiveness of the Gospel message today for young intellectuals in China seeking for spiritual direction.

Gu reports how, for the first time, 24 young members of Hong Kong’s Church of Christ in China also came to Hangzhou to participate in the conference. The General Secretary of the Hangzhou Christian Youth Society notes how this is the first time, not only since Liberation in 1949 but also in the period before then, that a youth group from Hong Kong has ever taken part in a Mainland Chinese church summer youth conference. Although it took several months for the Hong Kong group to secure the necessary permits to attend the conference, in the end their attendance did much to clear up certain prejudices and misgivings on the part of young Hong Kong believers in regard to the church and religious freedom on the Mainland. As two young Hong Kong believers noted: “We met together, personally experienced God’s presence together, shared God’s word together and saw for ourselves how God has blessed the Mainland church.”

The main speakers at this year’s conference were Pastor Wang Xiaojin from Guangdong Union Theological Seminary and Zhu Enhuo, evangelist from Ningbo in Zhejiang Province. One of their messages to the conference was how young people need to take the commitment, care and dedication of the older generation of church workers and go forward to develop, improve and build upon this using their own fresh ideas and approaches.

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Tapping The Talents Of Young Members Of The Church In Fuzhou

(ANS) "Young people are the future and the hope of the church, they bring the church vitality. A church which attends to its youth work well will be revived and blessed." In September's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Lin Chaojun describes how these words certainly apply to Pujian church in Fuzhou, capital of southern China's Fujian province. Through listening to the needs of young people and meeting them where they are, the church has kept its attraction for the young folks and managed to reach out to many of them with the Gospel message.

Whereas some churches do not see working with their young people as a vital part of the work of the church, Fuzhou's Pujian church sees this work as essential and thus devotes considerable time and resources to it. Back in 1990, the church council reserved Friday evenings as a time when church pastoral workers could devote all their time and attention to the Youth Fellowship. Lin reports that the fellowship has grown since then to over 200 members, most of whom are people curious about the Christian faith but who know little about it and have not made any commitment to the church. For this reason, church workers are careful to stress the basic teachings of Christian faith during Youth Fellowship meetings. Respected elders from other areas of the province are often invited as guest speakers to give help and advice to the young people in matters of daily life as well as spiritual guidance. Despite his busy schedule, Senior Pastor Chen Chaoxui also makes a point of attending the Youth Fellowship and gathering the young people's thoughts on the meetings.

The congregation has made several special donations to the work of the Youth Fellowship to allow them to purchase items such as a television and video cassette recorder as well as allowing them to organize some outings outside of the church. The Pujian church has been quick to realize that the usual diet of hymns, sermon and prayers cannot hold the attention of young people, who need more variety. Therefore, the church has come up with a range of activities to suit the young people's interests and encourage their different gifts and talents. Lin cites as an example how, since the educational level and understanding of faith varies among different members of the group, the church organizes a small group session for the young people after the sermon each week. At these sessions, the young people can raise questions about any part of the sermon they don't understand and also help each other explore general spiritual issues under the guidance of a pastoral worker.

As well as small study groups, the Youth Fellowship devotes one of its Friday night meetings each month to praise, worship and personal testimony. The special characteristic of these meetings is that they do not contain any sermon or specific message. The meetings start with half an hour of hymn practice and then a time of prayer, after which participants are free to get up and praise God in any way they choose, whether good or bad singers, in groups or solo. During the praise time, people can also get up and make testimonies to God's work in their lives as the Spirit moves them. From these worship meetings, mentions Lin, it was found that several young people have a real talent for hymn singing. Consequently, a youth choir was formed, which performs during the main church's Sunday afternoon services.

The church is eager to give young people as many responsibilities as possible to make them feel a vital part of the church and to develop their talents. Lin describes how youth fellowship members are often commissioned to make purchases for the church, decorate the church buildings and visit the homes of believers in difficulty. The young people are often asked to lead intercessory prayers during services, or even to present a brief message to the congregation in order to explore their preaching skills. In this way, the young people of the church gain confidence and are already taking on a lay worker role within the congregation. Some young people have actually discovered a calling to the church from these activities and have given up their jobs in order to receive theological training and work for the church full time.
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 questions and answers from the September issue of the church magazine.

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Should We Take Down The Sign Of The Cross?

To the editors:

Recently we completed construction on a church building. In the building process we took into account designs of many other churches, so the outside appearance of our church doesn't look bad and the congregation is pleased with the result. After completion of the building, the leadership of a local government department thought that the cross on top of the church attracted too much attention and wanted us to take it down. Could you please tell us whether placing a cross on top of a church violates religious policy in any way and whether or not we should take down the cross?

--- Jin Ming

Response:

As everyone knows, the cross is a symbol of Christianity. From ancient times to today, both in China and abroad, the cross has been an important feature on nearly every church building (including church meeting points). We have never heard of any Party or State religious regulation which states that churches cannot erect the symbol of the cross. In fact the opposite is the case. This request to take down the cross itself violates religious policy and the relevant legal regulations. The implementation of state religious policy actually requires the building of churches. Once a place of worship has completed registration, its legal rights and interests are protected by the law, and nobody can violate these. The placing of a cross high up on top of the church as part of the building is surely a public sign and embodiment of the freedom of belief which the citizens of our country enjoy. I hope that the church for its part can patiently clarify things with the relevant government department, and that the relevant leaders can come to a full understanding of the party's policy on freedom of religious belief.

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Should nude pictures be allowed to hang in the church?

To the editors:

Recently I went to a church and saw a large painting hanging inside. The picture portrayed Jesus emerging from the River Jordan after being baptized. Five or six other people were portrayed coming out of the river naked after receiving baptism. The believers commented as they looked at the picture. Some of them said, "Today's society is like this, it doesn't matter" while others said, "The church is no place to hang this kind of painting." Can a painting such as this one be displayed in a church?

--- Jiang Bo
Response:

Hanging works of art in the sanctuary, the corridors and the meeting rooms of a church can give people a good feeling. The themes of such paintings can be drawn from Bible stories or natural landscapes. Historical artifacts from the church (such as parts of the old church where a new one has been constructed) or photos of important events can also be used for decorative purposes. However, pictures have to be acceptable to everyone and the special nature of a church building also has to be taken into account. Therefore, the content of pictures needs to be carefully selected according to what is best for all. Works of art which reveal naked bodies are thus not suitable to hang in public.

Pictures of naked people are not necessarily pornographic. Quite a few famous works of art with Biblical themes include nudity, especially famous works from Renaissance times. However, these were products of a particular historical and cultural period, with the artists of the time having their own unique concept of art. But the church, after all, is not an art gallery, and most of those who look at these works of art are believers with relatively low education. These factors all need to be taken into account.

98.10.7

NEWSBRIEFS

National Lay Training Team: In a direct response to the many calls from countryside churches across China for trained and qualified pastoral workers, the China Christian Council has set up a team of 24 pastoral workers from all over the country to form a "pool" of teachers to help train new workers for the church in China. Some provinces within China have already put together their own provincial teams of pastoral workers to take on lay training tasks (see ANS 98.9.8), but this is the first time that such a team has been assembled at a national level. Team members will be sent to places throughout China which cannot ordinarily provide workers to take on the task of training lay workers. The team members have expressed the wish to be sent to some of the most inaccessible, remote and needy places within the church to help provide for their lay training needs as quickly as possible.

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Lay Training Centre: On 7th July this year a ceremony was held to mark the commencement of studies at the new Southern Jiangsu Provincial Christian Lay Training Centre at the former St. John's church in Suzhou. The ceremony was led by the director of the new centre, Pastor An Xinyi, with vice director Pastor He Jiemiao introducing the first courses that would be offered by the centre. National TSPM vice-chair and Jiangsu Provincial TSPM chair Elder Li Jianhong also attended the opening ceremony, along with representatives from the Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau. 49 believers from locations all over southern Jiangsu province make up the first intake of students at the new centre. The opening of the centre marks a step forward in the plans of the church in Jiangsu to set up lay training centres in the north and south of the province. These centres, together with already existing training centres in the provincial capital Nanjing, will form a network of lay training facilities throughout the province to meet the need for more pastoral workers in the Jiangsu church (see ANS 98.5.2).