The Time Is Right For Building Chinese Theology

(ANS) The Chinese church cannot grow, develop or maintain itself unless it pays attention to theology. This viewpoint has been repeated many times in recent years by Bishop KH Ting, and echoed by other church leaders. Last November, Rev. Su Deci, Vice President and General Secretary of the China Christian Council, addressed this issue at a plenary meeting of the national China Christian Council / Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee held in Jinan, Shandong Province. Rev. Su’s reflections on the state of theology in the Chinese church today were reported in April’s edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church.

Rev. Su offers an analysis as to why the Chinese church to date has been so sluggish in formulating its theological thought. He reminds us that before Liberation, Christianity was spread within China by largely conservative, fundamentalist Western missionaries. These missionaries tended to see theological reflection as something of the mind, worldly, and therefore not to be encouraged. This negative view of theology extended to Chinese converts and quickly took root in the Chinese church as a whole. Later, due to political upheavals within China, the church was largely cut off for a period of about 30 years from theological developments outside of China. After the Chinese church reopened in the early 1980’s, it put all its efforts into reopening and rebuilding work, leaving little time or energy for serious theological reflection. Similarly, theological seminaries in China have tended to concentrate more on practical theology and basic Bible knowledge, in an effort to churn out enough pastoral workers as quickly as possible to serve the church’s growing congregations. Pressures of demand, a lack of trained teachers and limited resources have all precluded the serious study of history, philosophy or theology in seminaries.

Rev. Su reminds readers that most seminarians in China are poorly educated believers from rural areas who are ill equipped to cope with the demands of theological reflection. He also reminds us that, until fairly recently, "leftist" thinking prevailed in China. This has led to a general intellectual atmosphere where only one thought or line is usually considered correct, where extremes of thought and narrowness of view are readily accepted and where creativity and freedom of reflection is not encouraged. A whole generation of Chinese believers has grown up...
simply lacking the necessary frame of mind and inclination toward creative, reflective thought and tolerance of a wide variety of experiences and viewpoints. Rev. Su goes on to describe how, as China has opened up to the outside world during the past couple of decades, extremist anti-China religious groups have flooded into China. These groups have spread publications, tracts and theses which have long since been rejected as theologically suspect by Western theologians. The ideas contained in these works confuse and poison the minds of Chinese believers who are ill-prepared to consider and refute the ideas themselves.

Su Deci then proceeds to give several reasons why it is vitally important for the Chinese church to pay more attention to theology now. He points out that, at this present time, the membership of the church is imbalanced, with most believers relatively uneducated and coming from rural areas and comparatively few coming from educated, intellectual circles within the cities. Intellectuals in China are genuinely interested in Christianity, Rev. Su believes. However, most intellectuals have difficulties approaching the church, since it cannot yet present any systematic analysis of or reflection on its spiritual experiences which intellectuals can understand or consider. Su comments that the church needs to be able to present clearly what it believes and what it understands if it wishes to reach out to all segments of society.

Linked to the last point, Rev. Su points out that, during its 2,000 year history, the church throughout the world has had to learn to adapt its message to different times and places. Today, the Chinese church faces the task of adapting itself to a society which is following "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics." Thus, the church needs to build for itself a body of thought which takes this context into account. Su likens the relationship between church and society to an organ transplant - it is not enough just to perform an operation and put an organ inside a body, the organ has to adapt to the body or else the body will reject it. So it is with society and the church - if the church does not adapt to the larger society in which it finds itself, that society will ultimately reject the church. Rev. Su believes it is vital for the Chinese church to reflect on its message and present it in ways that are understandable and relevant to the situations faced by ordinary Chinese people today. He sees the role of the church as that of a bridge between a society in transition and God who is eternal. The church cannot fulfill this role unless it can articulate fairly accurately what it stands for.

Rev. Su concludes his reflections by making some practical suggestions as to what the Chinese church could do to strengthen its theological foundation. He believes that the key lies with strengthening the individual's ability for theological reflection. At the rural level, more lay workers need to be trained, with longer and more in-depth training courses than are currently available. Local Christian Councils need to gradually work up to this, considering the content of such courses and seeking to gradually introduce components which go beyond mere Bible knowledge and practical pastoral skills. Rural lay training courses could introduce basic theological concepts and try to equip lay workers to reflect on their faith and the faith of the congregations they serve.
In the cities, Rev. Su would like to see preparatory courses set up for budding seminarians in order to raise their general educational level before they begin their specific theological studies. Teachers and lecturers should be encouraged to apply to study for higher academic degrees. Furthermore, the content of course syllabuses needs a general overhaul and teaching in general needs more supervision as to content, aims, objectives and achievements.

Finally, Rev. Su would like to see the gradual emergence of a group of advanced scholars who can keep in touch with developments in overseas theological circles and who can lead the way in setting the theological agenda for China. Rev. Su encourages the church to send more students abroad for exposure to developments in the church universal. All these ideas point toward a long term project, and Rev. Su believes the national China Christian Council is the body which needs to formulate short, medium and long term goals for this work.

**Learning To Use The Law**

(ANS) As China continues to develop, so too does her legal system. Over recent years, public consciousness of the law has been raised, and the government is seriously attempting to introduce the rule of law throughout the country. In the past, reports of violations of believers' rights were commonplace. Now, thanks to greater awareness of legal developments, believers throughout China are able to use the law to protect their rights. This is not just the case in more developed areas but even right down at the rural grassroots level, as Mei Kang Jun and Liang Zhanpei report in April's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church.

Mei and Liang tell of a lawsuit involving believers from rural Jing Zi Guan Township in Xi Chuan County, Henan Province. In 1986, former church property was returned to the Christians in Jing Zi Guan for their use in worship. On renovating the property in 1992, the believers discovered that water had been leaking in to the courtyard at the back of the church and doing damage there. The owner of the neighbouring house shared a dividing wall with the church and had built a small kitchen on his side of the wall. The two properties also share a common drain and, when building the kitchen, the neighbour had diverted the drain so that all the water from the roof flowed into the church property. During the course of trying to settle this problem, the neighbour had destroyed part of the dividing wall, causing damage to church property. Last year, when matters could not be solved through mediation, the believers in Jing Zi Guan finally appealed to the local court last year.

The court was quick to decide that the neighbour had violated the church's rights. He was ordered to restore the dividing wall and the church property he had damaged, and also pay the church's legal fees. In the end, the amount involved only came to less than RMB 400 (=US$ 48 approx.). However, this case shows that the courts were on the side of justice. Even though the case only dealt with a relatively small matter, the judges still took it seriously and ruled fairly. This incident is an example to churches and believers throughout the country, that the legal system within China is developing and can now be used with confidence to defend one's rights.

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(ANS) When talking of church leadership, the Apostle Paul wrote, "He should not be a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3:6). Because today most rural churches in China lack church workers, many congregations tend to pounce on new converts and quickly recruit them into church service. This is especially the case if the new convert is relatively young, enthusiastic, literate or has certain skills. Such new believers are often given management and preaching positions very quickly, in some cases even leadership of the whole church! However, as Nong Pu points out in May's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, congregations which do not heed Paul's warning often suffer the consequences.

Nong Pu affirms that including new believers in the life of the church is important, and how their enthusiasm and new ideas can be a blessing to a congregation. However, most new rural believers do not have deep roots in the faith and also have limited education. Consequently, when they are given responsibility to deal with complex church affairs they often cause more harm than good.

Nong Pu cites the example of one rural congregation which had succeeded in building itself up to over 1,000 members over a number of years. Some recent converts were very enthusiastic young and middle-aged believers who were then quickly appointed as pastoral workers within the congregation. Over a short period of time the church started to fall apart. Pride and arrogance set in among the workers, with each one believing that only he or she knew the "right" direction for the church to take. In the end, the different church workers started to lead away their own "followers" to set up new house meeting points. Older church members were devastated to see all they had worked so hard for crumble at the hands of the newly-appointed church workers.

Similarly, new converts with a certain level of education are often quickly given responsibility for the financial affairs of their church. The congregation bestows upon them trust and respect but this can slowly cause new converts to think highly of themselves and blur the distinctions between their own funds and the church's funds. Some new converts consolidate considerable power through their new positions and then feel they have the right to dismiss older workers and evangelists who have served the congregation for years.

An area of particular concern, according to Nong Pu, is relationships between new converts and believers of the opposite sex. In rural churches, women are in the majority and their faith is often of a very pure, innocent nature. Most church workers make pastoral visits in the evening, and there have been problems in several churches when single male church workers, who are inexperienced in matters of faith and pastoral work, have visited single women. Nong Pu believes that temptations are simply too great in such situations for church workers who are not already firmly rooted in faith.
In conclusion, Nong Pu believes that new converts are to be welcomed, but that congregations should heed the words of Saint Paul and should not be in such a hurry to press new believers into leadership roles. It is more important for a church first to nurture the new convert's faith, understanding of God and knowledge of the Bible.

"Eastern Lightning" Sect Continues To Do Damage

(ANS) Due to the relatively low educational level and low understanding of faith among many rural believers, sects and heresies are able to spread fairly quickly in some areas of China. In the past couple of years, the "Eastern Lightning" sect has spread like a scar across the whole of China (for an account of the beliefs of this sect, see ANS 97.12.3). In May's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Hong Wen describes the damage this sect brought to her small rural community in Shandong Province after it arrived there in Winter 1997.

After arriving in Hong Wen's home town, the sect managed to claim 300 believers and completely take over four churches within the space of only one year. The sect is unique in that it only tries to recruit members among already established Christian congregations, converting people who are already believers. The group does not try to evangelize among unbelievers, saying that "Heaven's doors are already closed", and so only those who already believe in God can be saved by realigning their beliefs toward those of the sect and believing in the "right" way. In order to win over new converts, the sect infiltrates church groups and tries to locate those whose faith is particularly weak and not grounded in solid teaching. Group members often lie about their names and addresses while evangelizing, and even send single women to young single males' homes to seduce them into embracing the sect. Sect members only operate at night or behind closed doors during the day.

The sect does not believe in Jesus Christ or a trinitarian God. Its central belief is the "second coming in the body" of a so-called "female Christ". The sect preaches reincarnation instead of heaven or hell. Sect members reject the Bible, saying it is only written by humans and not divinely inspired. Many churches in China like to display the character "Love" and the word "Emmanuel" at the front of the sanctuary. After taking over four churches in Hong Wen's locality, the sect members forced their congregations to erase all such signs.

Once someone enters the "Eastern Lightning" sect, they are forbidden to breath a word of this to family members or anyone else. The sect distributes three "sacred" texts to members, and anyone who has received all three books cannot then back out of the group. If sect members try to leave the group after receiving the third book, they are attacked physically, often violently. Therefore, many wish to leave the group but are afraid to do so, and in this way the sect resembles certain underground mafia societies.

After being trapped by the sect, many members give up their jobs and livelihoods. In Hong Wen's locality, the sect members sold their orchards and vegetable plots, land and livestock, tractors and farm machinery, even their land and

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houses. One woman wanted to donate her family's RMB3,000 (=US$ 360 approx.) life savings to the sect. When her husband tried to stop her, she separated from him. Another woman tried to sell her husband's tractor while he was out, but fortunately the family's grandfather stopped her. Sect members give all the proceeds from such sales toward the "female Christ", saying that they are just waiting for the year 2,000 to usher in the "End Times". In Hong Wen's locality, many people have heard of mass suicides in other places due to so-called "millenial" movements, and they are afraid of what the sect members might do next year.

Hong Wen reports that it has been particularly bad for families in the local area where some become members of the sect and others do not. Hong Wen tells stories of women who used to stay at home to look after young children and old relatives but who, after joining the sect, abandon the home entirely, going out for days on end without telling anyone. After his wife suddenly left home without telling him, one husband feared for the worst and informed the police. After a long period of time, the wife suddenly returned. When she tried to leave again, the husband stopped her, whereupon the wife bit a huge chunk out of his hand before leaving again. The husband was so distraught that he had to be hospitalized for a time. Another couple Hong knows entered the sect at the same time. Since they were instructed that the "End Times" would soon come, they have since withdrawn their child from school and refuse to let him go back.

Th struggle with the "Eastern Lightning" sect continues in Hong Wen's home town. Hong Wen describes the havoc which the sect continues to wreak as an example to others of what can happen when they are not watchful.

ANS Focus: Yunnan Province

Unique Developments Within A Unique Location: Churches In Dali

Dr. Theresa Carino, an overseas staff associate with the Amity Foundation, led a 17-member international delegation to Southwest China's Yunnan Province on an Amity Easter Tour, April 15 - 25 this year. During the tour, visits were made to several churches in Dali Prefecture and Wuding County. Below is her report on the church situation in the Dali area.

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Dali Prefecture lies beside Lake Erhai in Western Yunnan. Xiaguan is the capital of the prefecture and is also commonly referred to as Dali City. About 30 minutes bus ride north of Xiaguan (Dali City) lies Dali Old City, with its cobbled streets and ancient walls, not far from the famous three Pagodas of Dali. It is estimated that there are between 5,000 to 8,000 Christians in the greater Dali area (including some outlying districts) who congregate in two churches and 17 meeting points. Some meeting points have not yet been registered.

The church in Xiaguan, which is a simple two-storey building accessible through a side street, has a congregation of 1,300 consisting mainly of Han Chinese. Pastor Wang Jia He, who is 85-years-old, provides leadership. The Gospel is spread mainly through the laity and conversion takes place often because of a healing experience or because of newfound faith in the Bible. New converts are required to attend Bible study classes for about two to three months before they are baptized. Preachers visit church members in their homes at least twice a month. In the 1980s, the congregation comprised mainly of elderly
people. Now, there are more and more youth. Women greatly outnumber the men, and it is estimated that 70% of Christians are women.

At Xiaguans Church, Sunday worship is at 2 p.m. and is preceded by Sunday school for the children. Some children bring money as an offering for the church; others bring candies to share. During worship services, sermons are given either by the pastor, one of the elders, or one of the three seminary graduates now working in Dali. There is considerable sharing and exchange between the Xiaguans and Dali Old City churches. Visiting homes, especially those who are sick, is an important part of the church's work.

In Dali Old City, members of the Dali church are mainly of the Bai nationality but also include Han, Lisu and Naxi nationalities. There are about 130 parishioners in the 80-year-old church there, many of them past middle age. However, in recent years, more young people have been joining the church. We were welcomed to Dali Church by Deng Jian Wei who is a graduate of Nanjing seminary. Others who met us included Elder Wu Yong Sheng, a retired doctor in his 70s and one of the key leaders of the church. In a brief introduction to the church, we learnt that the China Inland Mission (CIM) had sent missionaries to Dali from Shanghai in 1881. The Dali Church was built in 1913 and handed over to local Christians to run in 1944. The CIM also built a hospital and a nursing school, which were taken over by the Chinese government in 1951.

The church in Dali Old City, which has an impressive stone structure, was closed for 13 years during the Cultural Revolution and only reopened in 1980. Its distinctive and unique feature is a small library and reading room, the "Dali Old City Christianity Reading Room" which is open to the public every day of the week. Located along one side of the church, its front door opens onto the main street of the Old City. Its shelves contain Bibles, hymnals, religious literature as well as a wide assortment of books and magazines. Anyone can walk in from the street, sit and read the literature in the reading room. Visitors can also buy the Bibles and hymnals on display, and Christian tracts are left around for anyone to pick up. It is probably the only church-run reading room in China that is open to the public in this way.

There are three worship services per week at the church in Dali Old City: Sunday morning, Wednesday and Friday evenings. As in Xiaguans Church, visiting the homes of believers and holding prayer meetings are important aspects of church work. Communion is administered on the first Sunday of the month and baptisms take place twice during the year—over Easter and Christmas.

Running The Church Well Is Hard Work

Like many churches in China today, those in Dali Prefecture are faced with the problem of not having enough trained church personnel to minister to a rapidly growing church membership. Xiaguans Church, which baptizes around 70 new converts each year, at least has one pastor and is now being served by Ms. Luo Yi, who graduated three years ago from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

Dali Old City Church has not had a pastor in several decades. Leadership is presently provided by two church elders who are in their 70s. All this will change soon when 30-year-old Deng Jian Wei is ordained in August this year. Deng and his wife, also a Nanjing Seminary graduate, have been serving the Dali Old City Church for the last three years. Originally from Shanxi, Deng was converted to Christianity by his wife whose mother was an evangelist.

According to Deng, a pastor's job is difficult and complex. Many small churches and meeting points at the grassroots level desire registration so they can be legitimized and be given the rights and protection that come with official recognition. The process, however, is often fraught with difficulties. On one level, therefore, a pastor has to deal with the authorities and mediate between Church and state on issues such as registration. On another level, he has to resolve conflicts within the church. An additional dimension in Dali is that Deng has to work within a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural context since church members come from many different nationalities. For instance, in a lay-training course he conducted in August 1998, there were 140 participants of eight different nationalities from Dali, Lijiang and other areas in Western Yunnan.

Apart from lay training, Deng's job requires him to visit churches in remote, mountainous areas which are more than 300 kilometers away and inaccessible by car. Quite often, he has to travel for two whole days to reach these
rural churches. Many of these churches are extremely poor. In one village of about 400 inhabitants, he assisted a church with help from the Amity Foundation, in implementing a water project and in building a school. Villagers used to spend the whole day fetching water from a distant source. With the installation of a pipe and water tank costing a total of RMB 20,000 (US$ 2,454 approx.), villagers now enjoy piped water and the church enjoys greater esteem among local authorities.

"More are believing in God, but preachers are few"

Given the lack of pastors, churches in Dali Prefecture rely heavily on the laity for leadership. Elder Wu Yong Sheng, who currently leads the Dali Old City Church, is quite typical of lay leaders. Now in his 70s, he moved to Dali from the provincial capital, Kunming, when he was 12 and converted to Christianity at the age of 15. He was a doctor until his retirement and now devotes all his time to church work.

The elders sometimes visit other churches in the vicinity and help in lay training. According to Elder Wu, "in this area, more and more are believing in God, but preachers are few." This comment underscores the urgent need for lay training. At present Bible training classes only last for a week or a fortnight. These training classes are necessary for new Christians, since there are groups that often come around to the area to preach "heresies". In the Dali area there is a heretical sect called the Men Tu Hui or "Disciples Sect". Followers of this sect are only allowed a ration of 100 gms of grain a day. They are secretive and allegedly meet at midnight at different places. They encourage people to "wait for the kingdom of God" and not to work. Sometimes, they send their members to buy large quantities of Bibles from the church. According to Deng Jian Wei, one of the followers of this sect decided to attend the lay training class conducted by the Dali Church. He "corrected his views" after that and brought with him several hundred followers.

Both the Yunnan Christian Council and the churches in Dali recognize the urgency of having more long-term training courses for the laity. There are plans to have two-year lay training courses once the Lay Training Center across the street from the Dali Old City Church is renovated. At present, the Center has very old, dilapidated buildings that need to be torn down and rebuilt. Funds are being raised to rebuild the Center, which will eventually become an important Lay Training Center for churches in Western Yunnan.

The spirit of sharing resources is alive and well among churches in Dali. The Xiaguan and Dali Old City churches share their resources with smaller churches in outlying areas not only in terms of personnel and training but also financially. They engage in relief work, assisting churches struck by natural disasters, or make contributions for the building of churches at the grassroots level. Pastor Wang of the Xiaguan Church says, "We have been asked why we are giving money to other churches when we ourselves are poor. My reply is: Their need is greater. Apart from running our church well, we have to help other churches." This spirit of sharing stems in part from the painful experience of Christians during the Cultural Revolution. Pastor Wang himself was imprisoned for 22 years from 1958 till 1980. In 1976, only eight people in Xiaguan dared to admit they were Christians. Today, many in the more than 1,000-strong congregation believe that the suffering they underwent during the Cultural Revolution has strengthened them spiritually. Having gone through that experience, they feel they have to pay special attention to poorer congregations.

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ANS Focus: Yunnan Province

Strong Faith Found In Remote Areas: Churches in Wuding

Dr. Theresa Carino, an overseas staff associate with the Amity Foundation, led a 17-member international delegation to Southwest China’s Yunnan Province on an Amity Easter Tour, April 15 - 25 this year. During the tour, visits were made to several churches in Dai Prefecture and Wuding County. Below is her report on the church situation in the Wuding area.

Wuding County has about 25,000 Christians, 117 churches and 50 meeting points, three pastors and 252 church workers. The ethnic composition of Christians is: Miao-9,143, Lisu-6,465, Yi-6,218, Dai-515, Han-2,659.

Our three days in Wuding County were the hardest in terms of travel. We averaged 200 km. a day. To reach the churches of minority peoples we usually traveled three to four hours one way, two of which would be spent on dusty, narrow, potholed dirt roads leading up the mountains. The bus kicked up red dust that seeped in through the closed windows and caked us and everything else in a fine pink film. The spectacular scenery, however, made up for any discomfort we felt from the extremely bumpy bus rides. We passed lovely terraces and valleys that were planted with a wide variety of grains and vegetables attesting to Yunnan’s reputation of having the greatest number of floral species in the world.

We arrived at the Baishiya Church in Lufeng after a four-hour bus ride from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Here, Church members, mainly Miao, lined the route to the village church, males on one side, females on the other, singing and clapping their welcome as we walked on a thick carpet of green pine needles specially prepared for us. It seemed as if the whole village had gathered to meet us. After some beautiful songs of welcome by the choir, we were led to the dining room where the villagers had laid out a sumptuous meal for us. We were all touched by their generosity. After sharing the meal, we worshipped together in the church which was filled with over a hundred believers, many of them young people. The Baishiya Church Choir, composed primarily of young people, sang for us and gave a beautiful rendition of the Hallelujah Chorus. Music and singing seem to come naturally to the Miaoos. Their voices have a special quality and they harmonize effortlessly. Church members had spared no effort in making us welcome and their warmth touched a chord in all of us. There was hardly a dry eye among us when we left, as they once again lined up to send us off.

Fawo Township in Wuding has 31 churches. One-third of the population in Fawo are Christians. They belong mainly to the Yi minority. Zhaij village has 900 families and around 4,000 people, most of whom are Christians. We met the first Christian convert in Zhaij who is now 84 years old, blind, but still active in the church. He vowed to continue serving the church as long as he was in good health. The third convert in the village was Zhang Shi Yong who is now a church elder and chair of the Wuding Christian Council. As in Baishiya church, the village lined up to greet us with welcome songs and fire crackers. Schoolchildren, men, women, young and old all lined up in their colorful native dresses and headdresses. We shared a meal that was memorable. There was a short service in the church, a simple wooden structure built after the old one had been destroyed in an earthquake in 1995. As visitors, we were given the privilege of sitting on the few benches available in the church. Most of the congregation had to sit on the concrete floor. A minister from Fiji, a member of our delegation, delivered a short sermon on the Easter theme.

We learned that in the past, Zhaiji village had no water, no electricity and no road. In 1995, it was the epicenter of an earthquake. The church had to be rebuilt from the devastation of the earthquake. Elder Zhang explained that the Amity Foundation had helped to rebuild the village school in 1994. The church had also embarked on an electrification project that cost half a million RMB (=US$ 61,350 approx.) and took eight years to complete. Amity helped Zhaiji to complete the electrification project. 26 kilometers of electrical wires have now been installed, benefiting 26 villages and more than 4,000 people. Now the villagers have access...
to television and radio, and have started a food processing plant that will give villagers added income. According to Elder Zhang, electrification has helped maintain the ecological balance, since fewer people now chop down trees for fuel. The projects with Empy have shown the people the positive role of the church in society and strengthened solidarity between Christians and non-Christians.

On Sunday, we visited briefly with the church in Wuding City. Its members were mainly Han Chinese. We were received at the old church but did not have time to visit the new one which is still under construction. The morning service was a special one, put together especially for us. Regular Sunday worship is usually held in the afternoon. We listened to a sermon preached by a pastor, one of the very few in Wuding.

As in many rural areas in China, the churches in Wuding lack pastors and lay leaders with adequate training. Zhong Shi Yuan, our 30-year-old guide, is a native of Fawo township. Of Lisu nationality, he graduated from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary three years ago and now works with the Yunnan Christian Council in Kunming. People like him are rare. In the remote areas, poverty and low educational levels mean that very few will be able to make it to seminary. Despite this, the faith and devotion of believers was evident in every church we visited. We felt privileged and enriched to have witnessed this first hand.

ANS Feature: 99.5/6.7

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 May 1999 issue of the church magazine.

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Can I Celebrate Holy Communion?

To the editors:

The churches in our district are particularly short of pastors - we only have one elder and three seminary students in total. Therefore, most of the churches in our area cannot hold services of Holy Communion, since it is the rule of the Chinese church that an elder or a pastor officiate at these services. My meeting point is one such place. At many meeting points, a good number of believers have never received Communion in the five or six years since their baptism. Some have even gone as long as seven or eight years. I have thought about this problem and wonder whether I could possibly preside over Holy Communion in my congregation. I came to Christ in 1990 and was baptized in 1992. In 1997 I took part in a provincial lay-worker training course. Now I am the senior person responsible for my meeting point and also its preacher. I don't know if this is a possibility, so please give me your reply.

--- Zhou Zhangsheng
Response:

We have received many letters like this one, and your church situation reflects a serious problem shared by many rural church meeting points - the church may have been established for many years but, because there are no ordained church workers, baptism and Communion have become something of an "impossible dream" for believers. In order to satisfy their spiritual needs, some believers look around everywhere for someone to baptize them, causing attitudes on this issue to soften. As a result, many "sheep" end up being poached by those of dubious credentials willing to baptize them. This situation creates good conditions for sects to flourish.

I would like to point out here that, to a certain extent, this problem lies with believers themselves at the grassroots church level. After the Cultural Revolution ended and churches re-opened, people everywhere were crying, "The sheep are many, the shepherds are few!" This was certainly true at the time. But, with so many years having passed since the church was restored, and with all manner of widespread training work having taken place, each area honestly already has a large number of church workers. These are workers who have certain abilities and have already received some kind of training, but who simply cannot be ordained for the time being. Everywhere we still hear many people crying "The sheep are many, the shepherds are few!", or dwelling with great relish upon the fact that one county town may have over 10,000 believers and only one ordained minister. When reporting the nature of this problem, we can't help wanting to ask how much is truth and how much is exaggeration. In some areas, ordination has almost come to be seen as a kind of "reward" - namely, whoever obeys will be ordained. When building a church, the feeling commonly sets in among believers that ordination will take place as a result of following certain prescribed behaviour. Of course, different areas face different situations, and the reasons for not ordaining more church workers are many. Certainly the situation described in your letter does attract our attention.

Holy Orders (such as that of minister, elder etc.) do not bestow upon someone some kind of official title, much less an academic title. Rather, they serve to describe the specific role of a servant of the church. In the Bible, every time the Apostles went to a place and planted a church, their method was to quickly seek out suitable church members to act as elders (or overseers), enabling the church to develop normally after they themselves had moved on (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5). Ordination of church workers is a serious business, but we should not set up barriers to it because of its serious nature. And we should certainly not put ordination out of most people's reach just to display our own power.

The Bible lays down many conditions for the ordination of elders ("overseers"). Today's "Church Order" also contains certain concrete requirements, with the aim of building up a complete and responsible system of oversight for the church, thereby strengthening the body of Christ. All this should happen according to the church's needs, not just for one person's personal advantage. The fact that you have this desire to serve is very good. As Paul says, "Here is a saying you may trust: 'To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition'" (1 Timothy 3:1). You can make a request to the relevant local church bodies as to the required procedures and
submit your application to them. Meanwhile, as an expedient measure, you could ask your local municipal (county) church bodies to arrange someone to come and preside over the sacraments at your meeting point.

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Can We Draw Lots In Order To Discover God's Will?

To the editors:

After believing in God for several years now, I find I run across many matters concerning church affairs and life in general where I am not quite sure what to do in accordance with God's will and pleasure. I often pray to God to arrange things and bring me to understand His will so that I can act accordingly. But sometimes I haven't the time to wait for God to reply, and I also can't make out God's will. So, I have been trying the method used by the Apostles of "drawing lots", as described in the Bible (see Acts 1:26). I don't know if this is correct. I hope you can find some space in Tian Feng to reply to me on this matter.

--------- Xunke, Heilongjiang

Response:

As a Christian, we need to inquire as to God's will for everything we do. This is a must. However, your method of doing this is not correct. The Bible says, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:17). First of all, we need to rid ourselves of incorrect and harmful ideas, such as believing God's will must inevitably be difficult to understand and unfathomable and that it cannot be understood without using some special method. We should realize that getting to know God's will is not only a human desire, it is also God's cherished desire for us too. God really wants us to understand His will and act upon it. It is not for us humans, then, to think of ways to seek out God's will - God has already revealed it to us clearly. The Bible is God's revelation, it contains guidance for believers in all manner of situations. Therefore, we speak in vain about God's will if we leave out the Bible. The Psalms say that God's word is like a lamp to our feet, a light for the road. We need to develop the habit of reading the Bible at all times, instead of only thinking about seeking God's will when some concrete urgent matter crops up. Naturally this is still much better than not inquiring after God's will at all, but it is still not the right way.

The Apostle Paul points out that whoever is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The Bible as a whole reveals God's will for us. Therefore, when you read the Bible, you should read yourself into the Bible texts in order to see which mission and method you should follow in your dealings. I personally believe that the Biblical revelation of God's will can be divided into two broad categories: "general" and "specific" (even though the Bible itself is not arranged in this way). Under "general" I understand things like loving and honouring God (Matt. 22:37-40; 1 Cor. 10:23-33); the command to love one another (John 13:34); the commission to spread the Good News (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8); repentance and belief (Acts 17:30-31); dedicating oneself (Rom. 12:1-12); building the church (1 Cor. 14:26), etc. "Specific" instructions
contained in Scripture are more numerous. Many parts of the Bible contain long sections giving definite instructions, including Jesus's own teachings. These can be further divided into specific areas, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7); prayer and praise (e.g. the Psalms); Christian life (e.g. Rom.12-16, Eph. 4-6 etc.); joy and peace (e.g. Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:18); faith (e.g. Heb.11, James); marriage and family (1 Cor. 7, Eph. 5:22-23), etc. Other Scriptural passages may not directly spell out God's will but, through the example of some recorded event and the truths implied within it, something further is revealed to people about God's will. How can we continue to rely on guesswork when we have the precious Bible at our disposal? Why don't we go and research the Bible more thoroughly instead? I suggest that you refer to the above typological divisions and arrange relevant Scripture passages into these types for yourself (you could do a book-by-book study, or you could also use reference works, e.g. a concordance). Such an endeavour would be of great benefit to you in your whole life. Another thing to mention here is that understanding God's will isn't hard. The hard part is persevering in doing it. As the Lord says, hearing His word and following it is like building a house on solid rock. Otherwise, it is like building a house on sand - such a house is bound to fall down, and we deceive ourselves and others when we use other ways.

If you want to understand God's will, there is another important consideration: "the Spirit of God affirms to our spirit" (Rom.8:16). Building on the foundation of God's word (the Bible), this is the next step on the way to discerning God's will. You mention the Apostles' method of drawing lots, but this took place before the Holy Spirit had come down at Pentecost. After Pentecost we no longer see believers using this kind of method to seek God's will. What we see instead is direct and distinct guidance on the part of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not always guide us by using symbols or visions, and we cannot get God to act like this for us on demand. More often, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through our souls, causing us to know intuitively that the guidance we are receiving is God's word. All who follow in this way find peace (Rom. 8:6), so Paul urges believers not to hinder the movement of the Spirit. Ephesians mentions that if you want to understand God's will, and don't want to be a muddled-headed person, then the basic requirement is as follows, "Let the Holy Spirit fill you" (Eph.5:18). We need to do everything in the light of the Holy Spirit. While still on earth, the Lord Jesus said to wait until He had ascended to heaven, then He would send the Holy Spirit. One of the Holy Spirit's tasks is specifically to "lead people into all truth" (John 14:26, 16:13). We believe the Lord has sent the Holy Spirit to us but this is not enough in itself, we also need to lead Spirit-filled lives. For "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." (Rom.8:14).

Within our hearts the Holy Spirit instructs and guides us, just as the pillars of cloud and fire guided the Israelites when they left Egypt (cf. Numbers 9:15-23). It is like having a traffic light in our hearts, enabling us to sense when to act and when not. This is just as John urges, "But as for you, the anointing which you received from Him (i.e. the Holy Spirit - author's comment) remains with you; you need no other teacher, but you learn all you need to know from His anointing, which is true and no lie." (1 John 2:27). If you want to reach such a stage in your understanding, you need to have a humble attitude of obedience and service, willing to open yourself up wide to the Holy Spirit. You should take care to spend time in this often,
learning to listen attentively to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit in your innermost being, especially when faced with difficult or life-changing decisions. All these things need to be brought before God, persevering in prayer and waiting attentively until God's lead is clear.

NEWSBRIEFS

Women's Affairs: Taking as their theme "God's Gentle Touch", women throughout China organized events to commemorate the 1999 International Women's Day of Prayer on March 8th this year. In Shanghai, over 1,000 believers packed into Mu'en Church to take part in a special worship service there. Likewise, around 70 staff and students from the Guangdong Union Theological Seminary and Guangdong Provincial CC/TSPM committee gathered at Christ Church on Guangzhou's Shemian Island. In the evening, over 400 women gathered in the Xita church in northeast China's Shenyang City for a prayer meeting commemorating the day. Materials used in all these meetings were distributed by the China Christian Council and were specially prepared by Venezuelan Christian women for use by women believers all over the world.

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Church Finances: Following the collapse of the Guangdong International Trust and Investment Corporation (GITIC), the investment arm of Guangdong's Provincial Government and the second largest corporation in China, the Guangdong Provincial Christian Council has also been forced to suspend the activities of three of its funds - the fund for theological education, the church worker welfare fund and the fund for church renovation and repair. The Provincial Christian Council has been receiving donations from local believers to these funds for several years for the work of building up the church in Guangdong Province. However, the funds were deposited with the financial department of GITIC. On the collapse of the corporation all dealings with GITIC were suspended and it is uncertain whether the church in Guangdong will receive compensation for its funds held with GITIC. Meanwhile, the provincial Christian Council has set aside some of its operational budget toward continuing theological education and church worker assistance programs originally financed through the funds. Projects to repair and renovate church buildings with money from the funds have had to be cancelled.

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Church Property: In 1959, church property in Shaanxi's Mei County, Qi Township, consisting of several buildings on 0.9 mu of land (= 0.06 hectares approx.), was taken over for use by the township's Grain and Oil Bureau. In 1971, the bureau moved out and the land was given over to a state-owned agricultural tools factory. After the Cultural Revolution, believers in Qi Township repeatedly called for the return of this church property. However, due to so much time having passed and people involved in the case having retired or moved away, little was done to address the believers' claims. Finally, last year official government bureaus assigned
someone to investigate this case. The original 1959 deeds to the property were located and examined, and the church was awarded a 1.1 mu plot of land (= 0.07 hectares approx.) as compensation by the township government.

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Minority Churches / Women’s Affairs: In February this year, the Lahu Minority Autonomous County of Lancang in Yunnan Province held its first ever training class for minority women in the area. The class lasted 10 days and covered issues such as religious policy, church regulations, Three-Self principles, science and technology, education, and health and hygiene. The course was organized by the County Three-Self Patriotic Committee and attended by 44 women from the Lahu, Wa and Heni minorities.

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Ordination: Last year the Provincial Church Management Committee in Jiangxi Province passed a trial resolution concerning the ordination of persons within the church who have completed self-study theological courses. The resolution specifies that those who have completed a course of self-study to a certain level can apply for examination by provincial-level church bodies with a view to ordination. During examination, the candidates must show they have reached the required level in their studies, including having accumulated relevant pastoral experience within their home churches. Candidates will be tested on their theological knowledge according to the texts studied. They will also have to submit a sample sermon. If candidates can show they have reached the required level then they can go forward for ordination. In this way, the province seeks to alleviate the chronic lack of ordained ministers within the province.

**CHINESE THEOLOGICAL REVIEW**

Since its beginning in the mid 1980s, the Chinese Theological Review has carried essays, documents, sermons and speeches by a wide variety of theologians and leading church figures in China. It is published yearly and issue 13 is now available. Articles from the Review are regularly featured in Amity News Service. The Review is required reading for anyone seriously interested in theological developments in the church in China.

For those outside of Hong Kong, copies of the Chinese Theological Review can be ordered from:

Foundation for Theological Education in Southeast Asia
c/o. Dr. Marvin Hoff
313 Glengarry
Holland, MI 49423
USA

Readers in Hong Kong can collect back issues of the Review from the Amity Foundation Overseas Coordination Office (for address, see front page). Price: HK$70 (pick-up)
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Dali (Yunnan)
2) Guangzhou (Guangdong)
3) Lancang (Yunnan)
4) Lijiang (Yunnan)
5) Mei County (Shaanxi)
6) Shanghai
7) Shenyang (Liaoning)
8) Wuding (Yunnan)
9) Xiaguan (Yunnan)
10) Xi Chuan County (Henan)