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**Not Window Dressing But Fellowships Of Love - Church Choirs In China**

(ANS) Until fairly recently, church music has not really been taken too seriously in the life and worship of the grassroots Chinese church. In the past, many local church leaders just considered music as a kind of “window dressing”, something which may add to the atmosphere of worship but achieves little else. Membership of church choirs varied from week to week, practice times were irregular and ability was not a major factor. However, times are changing. In July’s issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, musical directors from three different churches testify to how attitudes among Chinese believers toward church music are slowly coming around.

When the Qidong church in Jiangsu Province was re-opened in 1983, few members of the congregation knew how to sing hymns, writes Shi Chengzhong. Arranging the choir meant putting together a band of more or less willing volunteers shortly before the service each week. There was no chance to rehearse and performance quality was invariably poor.

Shi discovered that the key to improving things lay first of all in training. In 1988 the church held a short church music training class. Everyone worked hard and a group of people were finally able to manage a reasonable selection of hymns. However, the church as a whole still did not attach that much importance to music, and the choir lacked direction and cohesion. As Chen Wei from Zhejiang points out, this is a common problem in the Chinese church. Churches are often unwilling to spend valuable time or money on providing music, musical equipment or training for choirs. Even when new churches are constructed with the latest sound systems, keyboards and pianos, the church may still not be willing to invest in the training necessary to make good use of these items. Only when a church is prepared to invite musical experts from other churches to spend time working with its choir, notes Chen, do things start to improve.

After training comes organization. It wasn’t until 1994 that the church in Qidong finally took its music seriously and appointed Shi as choir manager. Shi wanted first of all to establish rules for the choir in order to give it some structure and underline its importance. At first he encountered resistance to this idea, with many...
choir members believing that rules were "worldly" and would be a hindrance to the spiritual nature of serving in a choir. Guo Haojian discovered a similar problem when organizing a choir in a Shanghai church: "Choir members come from all sectors of society, with different expectations, educational levels and musical abilities. They also live scattered all over the surrounding area. Bringing all the members together can be very difficult, especially if the musical director is also the pastor of the church - then the burden is particularly heavy", writes Guo. In the Qidong church, Shi proposed a set of rules concerning membership of the choir and the duties of choir members, then suggested that the group lift all these up in prayer. At this, choir members finally felt that the rules had been presented before God and were therefore "spiritual" enough to be adopted!

Chen and Guo stress how a church choir provides an excellent opportunity for young people to get involved in the life of the church. Chen notes how young people's educational level nowadays is much higher than in the past. As a result, young people taking part in training courses learn faster than before. On attending a Church Youth Fellowship Performance in Wenzhou recently, Chen discovered that most of the participants were young people and that many of the performances were written by the performers themselves. Chen has confidence that young people in the Chinese church will take on the task of developing church music in the future.

One thing which all three musical directors have discovered is that a choir is more than just a group of people who perform hymns on a regular basis. It is also a spiritual fellowship. When a choir director does not also care for the spiritual life of the choir members then the choir will never reach its full potential. As all three directors note, it is very easy for choirs to slip into a routine of practice and performance while forgetting whom and why they are serving. If choir members have been neglecting their spiritual lives then they also lack enthusiasm, understanding and feeling for the words that they are singing. In order to care for choir members' spiritual development, the writers suggest that periods of Bible study, prayer and fellowship should be incorporated into regular choir practice times. This is especially important with younger members of a choir, who may have great musical abilities but who lack the spiritual experience to understand fully what and why they are singing.

Guo describes how his choir in Shanghai has now become a "Fellowship of Love". On the basis of their times together, their sharing of testimonies and troubles, and their journeying together in prayer and Bible study, the group experiences God's love through each other. As they experience God's love within the choir, so they desire to worship and honour God better through their music.

Advice For Christian Parents

(ANS) "Today's society is like a big vat of dye - you have to try and prevent your children from getting stained by it." So writes Wang Songliang in an article in June's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church. In the article, Wang gives tips to Christian parents about how to raise their children. As Wang points out, we always need to remain conscious of the fact that children are entrusted to us as gifts from God.
Wang first of all encourages Christian parents to pray with and for their children on a regular basis. If parents pray, tell Bible stories and teach simple Bible verses to their children then they become aware of God and God's values from an early age. They learn to feel comfortable with God and with spiritual topics. Wang reminds us that there are many temptations in society for today's younger generation today. When children are steeped in the words of God from an early age, they are more likely to react in a Christian way to the situations they face. More importantly, they are less likely to be led astray by the temptations in today's society.

Children always observe and copy their parents carefully. Therefore, in Wang's view, it is vitally important that Christian parents provide a good model through their words and deeds. For example, at the dinner table, parents can discuss the blessings and grace of God in their own lives and in the lives of others. They can encourage their children to recognize God's love and blessings in their own young lives. In this way, children observe how their parents love God, and are more likely to do the same for themselves. Above all, Christian parents should avoid hypocrisy. If dinner table talk centers around gossip and criticism of others then children may lose respect for the God whom their parents supposedly serve.

By way of illustration, Wang tells the story of one older believer who regularly took her grandchildren to church. She always gave the children some money to put in the offertory box. However, the children would instead escape to the nearby video arcade and squander the money there, returning just before the end of the sermon to report that they had accomplished their mission. When this believer caught them one time, she scolded them repeatedly, but the children only became more rebellious. Her pastor advised her that scolding would not work, and that she should rather teach the children by good example. So, at the dinner table she began to share stories and testimonies with the children. After three months the children began to have their own respect for God and began to attend worship on their own accord, without having to be persuaded.

In Chinese society today, competition to "get ahead" is fierce. Parents who want to give their children a head start in life often pressure them to attend private tuition, cramming classes, art and music tuition, and so on. Wang describes how advertisements for such classes abound, such as "Children who study piano do not go astray" or "Don't let your children lose the race before they've even crossed the starting line!" Wang reminds readers that, as Christians, our responsibility lies first and foremost in welcoming our children into the family of God. Where possible, we should encourage them to attend church activities, such as Sunday school or youth fellowships. Of course, if our children have the time and energy, we can also let them attend any other courses in which they show interest. The main thing is that children need to grow up and mature at their own pace, without being overburdened.

Some Christian parents worry that attending church activities will have a negative effect on their children's grades. They see other parents sending their children to private tuition on Sunday mornings and feel a little guilty that their own children are going to church instead. In fact, as Wang points out, getting to know God and maturing in the truth is the beginning of all wisdom. By being exposed to Christian teachings in church, and by being around believers who live out the Christian message, children gradually acquire solid attitudes towards life,
relationships and work, including study. In her final year in Senior Middle School, Wang attended church while her classmates attended cramming classes for university entrance examinations. Yet, in the end, it was Wang who scored highest on the tests.

Wang sums up her advice by encouraging parents to place the care of their children in God’s hands and to trust in God for guidance and help. She encourages Christian parents to communicate often with each other and share with each other their experiences of raising children in a Christian environment. Children are God’s gifts to us, and our aim should be nothing less than helping them become everything God intended them to be.

A Presence On The Northern Frontier

(ANS) On the edge of the great Mongolian plains, on the northernmost frontier of China, lies Nantun. It is situated within one of the three autonomous minority nationality regions of Inner Mongolia, the region belonging to the E Wen Ke minority. Over the years the Christian population of the area has grown from only a handful of believers to several hundred. As the number of believers has grown, so the need for a meeting point has become apparent. In June’s edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, Ba Tu tells how believers in Nantun set about providing for themselves.

Before the church in Nantun grew to any significant size, believers used to meet on a rotating basis in each others’ homes. As numbers swelled, this soon became inconvenient. Church leaders scoured the area and last January finally found an available 120 square meter residential building. As a testimony to the church’s reputation in the area, the landlord was willing to reduce the price for the building from RMB 23,000 to RMB 20,000 (= US$ 2,415 approx.) on hearing that it was to be used as a Christian meeting point.

The church in Nantun used up most of its funds to purchase the building. There was nothing left to complete the refurbishment necessary to turn the building into a place of worship. But the believers' determination was great and they dug deep into their pockets. Some skipped meals and gave their food money toward the church’s work. Others gave from their life savings, with some older women believers donating over RMB 5,000 (=US$ 600 approx.), saved up over the years, penny by penny. In the end, the repair work, installation of a bathroom, stove, furnishings and heating facilities was entirely covered by believers themselves, without any application for assistance from local government authorities. In the space of only one short month, the building was ready to use for worship.

Believers demonstrated their commitment to the meeting point during the month of refurbishment work. Many came straight after work to assist with the repairs and others took time off from work, thereby forfeiting salary, in order to get the meeting point ready for use. At a loss to themselves, some local private businessmen in the area allowed believers the use of their vehicles free of charge for the transport of bricks, stones and equipment. Those who couldn’t join in the work
because of family commitments, contributed through collecting money for the meeting point.

Now the believers in Nantun have a modest but imposing church building, a concrete presence in the local community.

Bishop KH Ting Responds To Questions

At the time of the great floods in China last year, some members of the Chinese church claimed that the floods and other calamities were "signs" of God's judgment and the end of the world. In response, Bishop KH Ting made two speeches to students at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, one at the beginning and one after last summer's floods (see ANS 98.11.2 and ANS 98.12.2). In this year's June edition of the China Christian Council magazine, Tian Feng, Bishop Ting responds to questions posed to the magazine about some of his ideas contained within those speeches. Below are extracts from his replies:

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Q: Would you approve of ethics and morality being used as a replacement for religion?

A: I cannot speak for other religions, but as far as Christianity is concerned, I do believe Christianity ought to promote high ethical and moral principles. This is by no means to say that Christianity only speaks of ethics and morality. Even less does it imply that ethics and morality can replace Christian faith.

Christianity and its predecessor Judaism both have a tradition of laying great stress on ethical and moral principles. Of the Ten Commandments, six deal with ethics and morality, such as honoring one's father and mother, not stealing, not committing adultery etc. The Bible is a book which speaks extensively on morals and ethics. The Old Testament prophets, in particular, extended the scope of morality from the behaviour of the individual alone into the political life of the community and the behaviour of society as a whole.

Despite all this, ethics and morality are not equivalent to Christianity and also cannot replace Christianity. The core of Christianity is faith and doctrine. Christian faith and doctrine can be summed up in the several hundred year old Apostles' and Nicean creeds. On the other hand, ethical and moral concepts move with the times and are always slowly changing. Theological thought is not the same as faith and doctrine. Theological thought serves to explain faith and doctrine and needs to be adapted to different peoples, times and places. The world has only one Christianity, but within this one Christianity there are many different theological points of view. There are even many different theological interpretations of just one passage from the Bible. In the same way, there are many different ethical and moral concepts.

Any relatively advanced religion speaks of ethics and morality. The scientist Albert Einstein once said: "A giant leap in the historic evolution of human religion takes place when religions of fear turn into religions of morality." This is entirely correct.
Not long ago, a writer in Hong Kong wrote an essay stating that all who advocate paying attention to ethics and morality are denying Christianity's uniqueness. This writer goes so far as to say that we mainland Chinese Christians speak of ethics and morality primarily in order to curry favor with the Communist Party. Since the earliest stages of world history, several thousand years before the Chinese Communist Party existed, countless ancient holy men and sages like Confucius, Mencius, the Mohists, Socrates, the Apostle Paul and the writers of the Bible all held ethics and morality in high esteem - is it possible that this writer does not realize this? Claiming that doing this is currying favor with the Chinese Communist Party merely exposes the true focus of attention of such critics, namely, whether or not we oppose communism. To them, if someone does not oppose communism, then that person must be speaking in favour of it.

Q: You have greatly emphasized and publicized the spirit of courage and sacrifice displayed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in fighting last year's floods. You have praised their actions widely as an expression of love. But we Christians know that this kind of love is hardly worth mentioning in comparison to the holy love of God. Christians should glorify God alone and promote His holy love, not praise other people. What do you think?

A: I have also often thought about this question since the time of the floods. I can understand why some believers can only accept the love of God as true love, calling it holy love. The reason is possibly because these believers have seen or experienced for themselves how people can act out of selfish motives. People can have the outer appearance of love but in fact be trying to deceive or take advantage of others in order to reach their own personal goals. Many pure and simple people suffer at the hands of these kinds of deceivers. This causes many to harden their hearts, thinking that, in the end, the love of worldly people is always false and unreliable, that they can only count on God's Holy love.

I have great sympathy with simple, pure people who have been deceived. But, as a Christian, I still firmly believe that behind this created world, beyond the whole universe, there exists God the Holy Father, Lord of all creation, and that love is the driving force behind all His movements and actions, that love is the most basic of all His attributes. He is the great invisible lover within the universe. His righteousness also starts from His love, it does not lie in opposition to His love. He is still continuing in the process of creation. I firmly believe in His trinitarian nature, for this process includes the moving example and the salvation offered through the Son, includes the inspiration and sanctification offered through the Holy Spirit. From among the multitude of all living things, this trinitarian God is in the process of gradually transforming us, some faster than others, some sooner than later, into so-called "half-finished products". God is changing us from hindrances to helping hands and co-operative co-workers in His work of creation, which is the work of love and the work of the kingdom of heaven. During this rather long process we can imagine how some of us "half-finished products" are well on the way to becoming finished, while others resolutely resist God's work of creation, taking instead the road to destruction.

Many years ago at Nanjing Jinling Theological Seminary I would introduce Liberation Theology, the theology of De Chardin and Systematic Theology over a period of several weeks (half a day per week). Theologians working on these three branches
of theology, as well as many others, all maintain that God is love. They see love as the most basic attribute of God, believe that this is the high point of all Biblical revelation. Most other human religions see righteousness as God's most basic attribute. They see God as a judge or an avenger, who rewards goodness and who holds great power over life and death in his hands. People are quite willing to believe in this kind of a God. Moreover, they often accept that, in order to carry out retribution and punishment, such a God might carry out large-scale attacks which harm the innocent as well as the guilty. In some parts of the Old Testament this inclination stands out fairly prominently, even though the Old Testament also has some parts which employ very beautiful language to describe God's love (e.g. when Hosea speaks of God's loving kindness according to his own personal experience). However, as soon as we step in to the New Testament, the four Gospels hit us square in the eyes with the image of the Son made flesh. What God wants to display through this person is the love of God, or rather a God of love. The righteousness through faith which Paul speaks of also points towards the Christ who, spurred on by love, went to the cross, and thereby loosened all people from the bonds of the law. Later, in 1 John 4:8, the New Testament Bible uses even more direct language to tell us that "God is love."

Humankind has made progress since that time. In more and more countries, when dealing with criminals, the principles of counter-attack, retribution and punishment are no longer applied. Instead, the guiding principles are now education, persuasion and reform. In some countries, even the death penalty has now been abolished. However, among Christians, there are still some who to this day rage with a spirit of antagonism toward the people of the world. They exaggerate up to the point of saying God will one day come to judge and take revenge, exterminating countless numbers of people or throwing them into eternal fire. As believers, they feel happy and proud about this. The view of God which we Christians have is really worth renewed consideration.

We saw on our televisions how, while fighting the floods, one PLA soldier saw a five or six year old child clinging desperately to a tree, in danger of falling into the flood torrents of the Yangtze River at any time. Paying no heed to the danger or to his own personal safety, the soldier set out in a small boat. He grabbed hold of the child and, in an instant, turned her danger in to safety. This act of saving someone in the face of danger is love. I cannot accept that this love is "hardly worth speaking about". I believe this love is magnificent, it is holy, because the creator of this love is God. God certainly rejoices on seeing this love. We Christians should also feel thankful and we shouldn't deliberately play it down. As Christians, can it really be that we are called upon to scoff at and look down upon even the good behaviour of the people of this world? Can that be normal? If so, does Christianity still have any language in common with humankind? John 3:16 tells us that "God so loved the world..." May we understand this good intention on the part of God and also approach the people of this world with a loving heart.
Every year the Amity Foundation holds a summer orientation program for teachers from all over the world who come to China to teach English in Chinese colleges. The program is held in Nantong City, Jiangsu Province. Each summer, these teachers are able to share in Sunday worship at the Nantong city church and talk with the pastor and lay workers. Two years ago, Pastor Zhang Zhixiang shared something about the history and current situation in the Nantong church (see ANS 97.9.8). This year, he and another church worker, Elder Sun, shared something of their personal testimonies with the Amity group.

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The church in Nantong was re-built and re-opened for worship on Christmas Day 1988. At that time, Zhang Zhixiang was appointed the church's pastor, a position he holds to this day.

35-year-old Pastor Zhang comes from a Christian family of several generations of believers. When he was small, his parents taught him to pray. However that was the time of the Cultural Revolution, so the family only prayed at night when it was safe. Pastor Zhang remembers how his curiosity about Christianity was piqued by the Bible and hymnal which his parents kept hidden in a secret place in a wall. Occasionally, when no-one was around, Zhang would secretly take down the two "forbidden" books and have a look at them. The books were written in older, complex characters which Zhang could not recognize. At this time, Zhang also came to know a very old evangelist, who would travel around his hometown visiting and encouraging believers. This evangelist would carry a manure basket with him as a cover. All these experiences gave Christianity an air of mystery and excitement to the young Zhang.

When Zhang was in his late teens he came to a crisis of faith. He suddenly realized that the faith of his childhood no longer offered him satisfactory answers to the questions raised by his surroundings and his life. He struggled with many issues and, for a while, became a kind of "prodigal son". Fortunately, as Zhang points out, God did not leave him in confusion, and he finally came to a deeper understanding and acceptance of faith.

At about this time, God also brought to Zhang's attention the situation of the church in his hometown, Yancheng. The area had many believers but they were mostly old people and without leadership. God seemed to be calling Zhang toward entering the ministry, but he resisted. Zhang felt that he was not disciplined enough in his own spiritual life to apply for training and take on the responsibility of pastoring others. It was not until religious policy changed in China in 1983 and training courses were organized in his area that Zhang decided to follow his calling and apply for training himself. He eventually went on to study at Nanjing Jinling Theological Seminary and then took up his current post as pastor to the Nantong church.

In October 1991 the Nantong church formed its own local Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee. The joint bodies are chaired by a retired pediatrician, Elder Sun. Sun also comes from a Christian background and remembers the imposing church building which lay on the site of the current church and which she visited with her parents in the 1930s. That building was torn down during the Cultural Revolution and was replaced by the current building in 1988.

Elder Sun remembers clearly the feelings of elation which she and other older believers shared when the church was finally re-opened in Nantong. Sun enjoys music and hymn-singing, and remembers the deep sadness she experienced when she was unable to worship God in song during the Cultural Revolution. But, as she points out, she was still able to sing the hymns in her heart during those dark years. Now she is a member of the church choir and always feels a deep satisfaction when she enters the choir stalls in the Nantong church and is able to sing openly and freely to her God once again.

Through her experiences as a Christian in China during the country's turbulent history this century, Elder Sun looks back and sees that the church has all along been carried and protected by the steady hand and grace of God. Sun gives thanks for this and, now she is retired, feels it is her duty to give back to the church all that she has received from it during her lifetime.
The Gospel Helped Me Kick The Drug Habit

In recent years, as China has developed and opened up to the outside world, the problem of drug abuse has been steadily increasing, especially in larger towns and cities. In June's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, a believer going under the name of Meng En testifies how she too fell under the spell of drugs and how, when all else had failed, the power of God brought her back to life.

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I was a drug addict for five years. I want to testify how God saved me from this evil and transformed me from mere living trash back to a normal person again.

I was once a kindergarten teacher and held a position of responsibility within my work unit. My parents were both intellectuals and I received a good upbringing. But I didn't understand the point of life and I wasn't satisfied with merely having enough food to eat and clothes to wear. I wanted to stand out in some way. So, I was pleased when we moved to a certain city in the south of the country. I was able to earn good money there, but it was also there that I was tricked into trying drugs! I broke my parents' heart and made them lose face! I was no longer me.

I once had a really comfortable home, a husband who adored me and a clever, beautiful daughter. But, after I got into drugs, I was no longer able to look after my child. As soon as I opened my eyes my only thoughts were for drugs. I had no other room in my heart for thinking about my child. Occasionally, when I did think of her, I would fetch her and take her out to play. But I was afraid of being with her, since she always said to me: "Mummy, I miss you. I don't want to stay at grandma's. I want to come home. Mummy, don't you want me any more?" At this stage it wasn't that I didn't know what was happening but that I couldn't help myself! Could I allow my child see me in the middle of one of my drug rages, when I was half person and half demon?

Sometimes on the street I would see women my age. They had a vivacious air, full of the vigours of youth. My heart would feel a faint pang and a trace of jealousy would immediately rise up within me. I also wore make up and pretty clothes but these were just a kind of outer shell. I knew that inside I was nothing more than a heap of walking flesh. Since beginning to take drugs it was the drugs which dictated how I spent my time. I could only venture out for at most three to five hours at a time, then I had to go back home. On returning home I would hide in a corner and smoke a couple of joints, quickly, like a thief. Only then did I feel alright again. If I didn't do this, my whole body would have no strength, I would be paralyzed, my nose would run and I would sob to the point of confusion. I didn't want to go out in to the daylight. If I didn't take drugs for a whole day then I would feel utterly lethargic. My days began to turn in to long dark nights. Also, I would feel scared stiff the whole day and I never dared to open door. I was afraid the police would come at any moment to seize me! On the street, whenever I saw a policeman, I would go into a blind panic.

My relatives and friends were also too scared to come see me and they all hid from me. After all, how can people associate with someone who is more like a ghost than a person? In five years, I spent more than RMB 800,000 (= US$ 96,650 approx.) on drugs! Each day I required huge amounts of money to satisfy my craving - I could do nothing without money. I turned to my husband and to my family. When I couldn't borrow money from other people then I racked my brains for more ways to get money. I started to sell things. After a while, anything of any worth in my home had been sold. It was heartbreaking! But I still couldn't control myself - not taking drugs was worse than death for me. In this way, all that was left at home was empty rooms and bare walls! In the end, I even rented out my home and stayed at other people's places.

Now why would anybody want to take drugs since they do such harm? I don't really understand this myself. In those years, if I had understood, I wouldn't have taken that first trip. Five years ago, I was idle and bored. I was introduced to something fresh and new. It was my first time to see people use a tin-foil pipe to
smoke a kind of white powder. I also saw how, after they'd smoked, they went on wild trips one by one, having the appearance of floating away. So I curiously learned how to take a few trips myself. This white powder, heroine, is a tool of the devil! When I first took it, I vomited violently. I would never have thought that pretty soon I would be "floating" away in a daze. When I came to again it was after noon the next day, I felt as if I'd had a really good sleep. I thought to myself how it would be well worth saving money every day on luxuries like taxi rides, theatre tickets, snacks etc. in order to put together the RMB 200 (=US$ 25 approx.) to buy a joint and be able to cast away my troubles through such a comfortable pleasure. I was standing at the entrance to the big black cavern - I walked inside and soon I was lost in the depths!

If at that time someone had told me that this thing would threaten my life, that continuing to smoke would mean selling myself to the devil and letting him torture me in a kind of living death, then I don't think I would have tried my first hit. Today I understand; but at that time it was already too late! It was really a torment, a living death, and you cannot have any illusions that you can rely on your own strength to quit. People only need to take their first trip, just one trip, and then they are absolutely and completely controlled by this evil demon. People who haven't taken drugs can never fully comprehend how, when the addiction takes over your body, you suffer a kind of pain like a thousand arrows being shot in to your heart. It feels like an army of ants are gnawing and drilling at all of the bones in your body, like your heart is being ripped and shredded by a cat's claws. This kind of suffering is really unendurable. At the time you are not at all afraid of looking death in the face. You first and foremost use up all your energy to get your next joint before considering anything else. You also continuously ask yourself the question: "Do you still want to live?" Every time I took the drugs they seeped a little deeper into my marrow, making all my bones brittle and crisp...

My parents, my husband, my in-laws simply could not stand the effects of the pain on me. At the time they thought that I could kick the habit if only I entered a drug rehabilitation clinic. I myself felt resolved to come off the drugs. In the five years, my family members together spent over RMB 50,000 (=US$ 6,000 approx.) to try and get me off drugs. Once they even forced me to enter the clinic but, once I got out, I started up again. Inside the clinic they used medication as a substitute for the drugs. This succeeds in removing the addiction from your body for a short time but it cannot remove the craving in your heart and your hands. The amount of drugs I took every time I got out of the clinic was always much more than before I went in. On 8th October 1998 I entered the clinic again. On that occasion, my husband's elder sister was crying and said to me: "This is the last time we can send you for drug rehabilitation, all my money has been spent on you. I know the bitterness you have to endure when the effects of the drugs take hold. We also feel cut to the heart by this pain." I said to her: "Sister, don't worry, I will definitely not take drugs any more." But how was she to know that, once I got out, I would certainly start up again?

My parents were so distraught that they nearly went mad. They felt thoroughly disappointed in me. Even my husband, who loved me so much, thought that no treatment could save me. He wanted a divorce. What could I do? I really wasn't able to kick the habit. It wasn't that I didn't want to come off the drugs. When would I finally be able to shake off the fetters of this drug addiction chain? I often asked myself if I would ever become a normal human being again and lead a normal life. At such times my heart had a kind of reflex, saying: "Impossible! Don't even think about it!"

Thanks be to the Lord Jesus, at this time of utter hopelessness He brought my family in to contact with a believer. This man introduced the Gospel to me, saying: "What is impossible for man is possible for God. Jesus came into the world to save sinners. If only you would believe in Jesus, you can be saved." Half believing and half skeptical, I attended a church worship service with my husband. On that day I had taken drugs before going, I just wanted to have a look, I didn't really believe. As the pastor preached, I suddenly fell asleep. Thanks be to God! The Lord's loving care and His saving grace descended upon my body at that time.

On 25th October 1998 the Lord moved several believers to call at my home. They kneeled down and prayed earnestly for me, asking God to deliver me from my drug addiction, asking God to drive out the drug demon from my body. It was truly a miracle! At that time I was still taking drugs but, on that day, I found that simply couldn't face them anymore. I was astonished! At that time, God
moved me to kneel down and pray together with those believers. I prayed, saying: "Lord, I am a sinner. I want to repent. Please, deliver me from all of my sin. From today I believe and trust in you Lord. Please, be my savior. Give me strength. Help me. I want to throw away all my drugs. Please Lord, smash Satan's schemes." This was my first ever prayer from the heart. I trusted in God. I threw away all my drugs. This was my first step toward saying goodbye to the past. God led me to realize that only by this way could I come to hate drugs and cut myself off from them completely. During the next three days and nights, the believers took turns in staying with me 24 hours. When the drug addiction kicked in and there was no way to control me, they knelt on the cold hard floor together and prayed for me. I also prayed. It was truly miraculous, the pain in my body only reduced by any considerable degree when I prayed.

Having taken drugs for five years my addiction could not be extinguished overnight. On the second day, the effects of the addiction returned in force. I ranted and raved, sobbed, and desperately tried to run away. At such times I don't know where the strength came from but I was so strong that I frightened people. I crazily punched and kicked at the believers who were blocking my way. I even went so far as to try and jump out of the window. I only had one thought - get out and find drugs! The believers knelt down together again, crying, earnestly praying, asking the Lord to have mercy on me, calling on God to drive the demon from my body. I slowly, slowly became still. Now I have experienced that the Lord is both a true and a living God - I believe!

The third day was by far the worst as far as the effects of the drugs were concerned. My whole body was freezing. My muscles wouldn't stop cramping. I couldn't even move my tongue to speak! I thought I was going to die, but my heart couldn't stop praying and beseeching God to have mercy on me: "Lord, have mercy on me! Save me!" In my ardor I prayed this prayer seven times and a miracle occurred again. I slowly started to relax and regain full control of my senses. Trusting in the Lord Jesus, I passed through this final difficulty and won victory over the drug demon. God is righteous - I had to endure these pains because I had sinned. God is also loving - He helped me to bear the pains.

Trusting in Jesus I overcame my bodily drug addiction. After coming to the Lord my inner being was filled with joy. I did not feel empty any longer. I had the life of God within me, so I again relied on the Lord Jesus to overcome the addiction which lay in my heart. If someone is in Christ, the old has gone and the new comes. Thank the Lord and praise God.

One month later, I was eating normally and sleeping soundly. My complexion was rosy and I also put on several pounds. My daughter came home and her face now wears a constant smile. I have also once again taken up my responsibilities as a wife and a mother. My husband, who was pulled under water by me, also believes in the Lord. He too has come off drugs and has been saved. He loves me as he did before. My relatives and friends are all deeply happy at the change that has been worked within me. I have also spread the Gospel to them and hope that they can come to the saviour Lord Jesus.

Now we as a family go to church and take part in the fellowship there. May the Lord have mercy on me, protect me and not lead me in to temptation. May He deliver me from evil and lead me to follow Him all the days of my life. May I too be a good witness for the Gospel.

Good News!

Amity News Service is pleased to welcome Katrin Fiedler to its editorial team. Ms. Fiedler has a background in Sinology, with special emphasis on Chinese Christianity. With her arrival, we are hoping to offer you a more comprehensive range of articles and features about the Church in China in future issues.
The Chinese Church in a Transitional Society


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The environment. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been considerable changes in global politics, economics, culture and religion. The political hegemony of the superpowers is now past history and cooperative relations between nations have replaced political confrontation. A blending of cultures and economic cooperation are now fact. Some people predict that in the 21st century, religion in the global arena "will be marked by dynamic new forms so fascinating that they will bring to an end the secularism of the new world order."

In China, Deng Xiaoping's initiatives in thought emancipation have brought about gigantic changes in society and people's understanding of politics, economics and culture. Society is now experiencing a phase of "societal transformation" (including movement in society, economics, shifts in political control, cultural development, etc.) "societal transitions, changes in family patterns, even individual transition." Moving toward the 21st century, religion in China will also face the development of "secularism" (becoming increasingly inseparable from general society) and "pluralism." This is an inevitable trend in the future of religion. In such an international and domestic atmosphere, the church in China has an opportunity to develop in ways previously unknown.

On the other hand, in the conflict between idealism and realism, tradition and modern pluralistic values, such societal changes mean people do not know which way to turn. The direction society is taking is difficult to discern, which means it is difficult for the individual to situate him/herself, so that an apparent "aimless spirituality" and an individual bent towards "marginalization" create a societal and individual loss of heart, a proliferation of short term actions, decadence and all sorts of irrational behavior. All of this seriously impedes the healthy development of the church.

Challenges. A society in transition compels the church to re-examine itself in a timely fashion and to respond promptly to the needs of people in different sectors for the gospel, making itself able to supply ultimate concerns to the faithful, "to provide ethics and models for human life," and "entering into the world to serve those in difficulties" and moreover to be able to provide "a holy guarantee for laws of value," in ways society expects, fusing these into a new type of culture. Thus, social transition requires that the church strengthen itself and respond positively to society's needs for the Gospel as well as to the calling of the Spirit.

A transitional society can function as a positive impetus for the church, at the same time as it impacts the church in many negative ways. Secularism in society influences the church's faith and standard of values: individualism is destroying the church's unity, utilitarianism is rampant in church decision making and the market economy threatens the church's very existence. In the marginalization of the individual in society, the church, too, tends towards marginalization, and a great number of unwelcome contradictions, conflicts and rottenness have appeared during the stages of initiating and building up the church.

Results of an opinion poll among a group of seminary students revealed that 53.65% believe the greatest problem facing the church today is "relationships among co-workers;" 41.46% believe the greatest problem is "quality of leadership;" emerging "organizational bureaucracy in the China Christian Council and Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement; intellectualization of theological education (removed from believers' concrete situation); that urban churches have become showplaces and rural churches are full of superstition. These phenomena of marginalization in the church seriously threaten unity in the church, affect its witness and impede its healthy development.
The church's response. According to Professor Chen Zemin, "Since the church in China today is young and conservative and has a foreign image, since it is small and backward, faced with the dangers of division, unable to be self-supporting, is poorly equipped theologically and must witness to Christ's Gospel amidst China's modernization..." it is therefore too early to speak of the church's contributions to China's modernization. However, the church must squarely face reality and build itself up in order to meet the challenges and demands of society. It can respond on a number of fronts:

In faith. To face the challenges of society, the church in China must "Let the church become the church." The church must reflect the "heavenly vision," and meet the spiritual needs of people, just as the earth is nourished and moistened by nature, enabling crops to grow. This is to say the church must have life, God's presence and action. The late Rev. Peter Tsai (Cai Wenhao) used to criticize some churches for being "more like an office of the feudal government than like the church" and some church workers for causing their churches to deteriorate. Rev. Tsai also raised the point that: "Our Three-Self and church affairs organizations should be assisting local churches to transform church building into churches. Three-Self and Christian Council organizations should themselves become church-like, thereby preventing any tendency towards institutionalization." This is the demand of the mass of believers. A church building which transforms into the church will certainly be able to unite many more believers on the path of loving country and loving church.

In theology. The church must strengthen theological construction. The church must give serious attention to reflection and the study of ecclesiology and to raising believers' church consciousness. Professor Chen Zemin thinks the church in China has seriously neglected ecclesiology. Before 1949 the church focused exclusively on spreading the Gospel; after Liberation, Three Self was concerned simply to maintain the existence of the church, not with the union of the church itself. Following the Cultural Revolution, the Three Self Patriotic Movement and China Christian Council have become service organizations; they are not a church in theological terms. Chen hopes that "when the time is ripe (perhaps before the turn of the century), Three Self can complete its historic mission, and the China Christian Council can become "The Protestant Church of China."

Chen believes that the church should "first of all, be koinonia, a kind of mutual spiritual fellowship. Secondly, the church should be ecclesia, an organization called out from among the people." He further notes: "The ideal church should consider all the people of the world as brothers and sisters."

In polity. The church in China must pay close attention to Chinese social, political and cultural issues. Bishop K.H.Ting believes the ideal Chinese Church should satisfy believers and find favor among people outside the church. From his perspective, the church should give priority to ethical questions. Ting feels that "we clearly do not want antinomianism to grow within the church; we can only strive to help religion reform." This is the purpose of theological education. He says: "Raising the political awareness [of theological students] has yet to influence their religious faith; nor has it yet brought an ethical dimension to their faith, so it is not yet enough. Because in the depths of their hearts, their faith is still a matter of the contradiction between belief or unbelief... therefore I believe that theological transformation is very important and this is what I am putting my energies into now."

In administration. The church must strengthen administration. Amid the competitive atmosphere of the market economy, greater stress must be given to this, fully utilizing limited human and material resources and steadfastly running the church well. The Sixth National Chinese Christian Conference called on the church to "seize the moment, do our work well, and speed up our efforts to run the church well." We must "resolve to put all our efforts into this, beginning with real needs and making solid progress..." Rev. Su Deci, while speaking about the task of building up the church, also pointed out that "the post-denominational era Christian Council is as yet only a transitional organ, the organizational and administrative functions of the church are still in a vacuum state, therefore we must 'fill' this 'vacuum' as soon as possible - this is the urgent task our church faces today.

Further points for consideration. In short, faced with the challenges of society, "The church should not simply sigh over changes," but rather affirm and proclaim even greater change: proclaim a "new heaven and a new earth" and the vision of a "New Jerusalem, the Holy City." Just as the early church kept to its "heavenly vision," not assimilating into the secular world in good times or losing hope in
bad, this heavenly vision will enable the church to welcome all the challenges of society.

On the other hand, the church must squarely face the realities of today's society and communicate the church's faith, values and standards amidst the concrete realities of life today. It must realize its own potential in society by achieving wholeness and unity and by a concern for church polity, planning and program implementation.

This is also to say that the church must be concerned about people's quest for faith, ethical orientation and moral standards from a faith perspective. It must view unity and peace in society from the perspective of what benefits the whole, identify its own place on the basis of the mission of the church and be concerned about what people need for existence from the perspective of the material life. At the same time, the church must resist the influence of secularization on the church's faith and values, resist the harmful effects of individualism on the unity of the church, resist the influence of utilitarianism on decision making in the church and resist the threat to the church's administration and existence posed by market forces.

Therefore, in order to face the challenges of society, the church in China must "see the present according to God's future." On the one hand the church must maintain its own faith and vision, secure in itself. On the other hand the church must integrate into and bond with the realities of society as it spreads the Good News of the time. The church must go up and down the "ladder to heaven" carrying God's will and blessings to the people and people's needs and praise of God to the Lord. This is the fundamental task of the church in China today.

NEWSBRIEFS

Church Property: In recent years, the CC/TSPM committee in Baoding City, Hebei Province have used a combination of methods to successfully solve outstanding church property disputes. The church in Baoding has now managed to either recover former church property or receive financial compensation instead. The key to the church's success in this area has been a thorough knowledge of the cases involved and the relevant government policy documents, as well as an attitude of engagement and flexibility. As a result, the church has recently managed to collect together RMB 36,000 (=US$ 4,350 approx.) in compensation. This money has been distributed to two local county churches to enable them to establish their own fixed meeting points. Part of the money has also gone toward disaster relief.

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Church Property: Before Liberation, Wang Jinding was the Kuomintang government's first foreign minister and also held a senior post in the government's embassy in the U.S. His family home was in Fenghua City, Zhejiang Province. Since Wang's mother was a Christian, the Wang family often opened up their home for Christian meetings. After Liberation, the Wang estate was redistributed to peasant families. Christians were no longer allowed to meet there.

In 1997, on his state visit to the United States, President Jiang Zemin met with Wang Gonglue, a relative of Wang Jinding and also president of the Sino-US Friendship Association. Wang Gonglue petitioned President Jiang for the return of the property for use by local Christians. After hard work by the relevant government departments in Ningbo and Fenghua cities in Zhejiang, the property was finally handed over in October last year. Local Christians worked hard to convert the different buildings on the Wang estate into a meeting hall, dormitory and kitchens. One room has also been set aside as a memorial hall for the Wang family. The new church was dedicated and opened in March of this year.
Building Theology: In March this year, the Jiangsu Provincial CC/TSPM committee organized its first ever provincial meeting to exchange ideas on building up theological thought in the Chinese church. Provincial church leaders, such as Li Jianhong and Lin De'en attended the three-day meeting, as well as 55 other pastors and church workers from all over the province. The meeting was also attended by Shen Cheng'en, vice general secretary of the China Christian Council and senior editor of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council. Meeting participants felt that the exchange of ideas resulted in some new insights on the topics of loving one's country and one's church, self-government of the church, fighting heresy and other areas. Above all, the meeting underlined for participants the urgent need to undertake the building of a Chinese theology, as well as their responsibility to carry this work out. Several papers are being compiled based on the discussions which took place at this meeting.

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Church Leadership: In June this year, 53 church representatives from all over the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region met for three days in the capital, Hohhot. Among other business, the representatives elected the region's first ever joint CC/TSPM committee. Previously, the region's Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee had existed as separate entities. Their coming together marks an important step in the strengthening of the church situation in Inner Mongolia.

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Christian Art: Last autumn the Shandong Provincial CC/TSPM committee set up a Christian Arts Service Association. The committee called on artistically gifted believers within the province to lend their talents to producing art work for the use of churches throughout the province. Calligraphers, artists and decorators have now joined the Association and offer their skills free of charge. The Association has already produced a variety of pieces for use in church offices, meeting rooms or believers' homes. The artists also takes orders for specially commissioned pieces.

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