New Style Church Retreat Tackles Problem Of Church Administration

(ANS) With the explosive growth of congregations during the past two decades, the administrative structure of the Chinese church has been struggling to keep up. Theoretically, the parallel structure of CCC/TSPM committees provides the church with an effective management tool. However, in practice, it can take a while for these administrative bodies to set up and begin functioning effectively in areas where congregational growth has mushroomed. Furthermore, even when administrative structures are in place, local church representatives often lack adequate training, resulting in poor implementation of religious and church policy. In December's issue of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, Tian Yu reports on new approaches to this issue being attempted by church leaders.

Efforts to acknowledge and tackle the problem of church administration date back as far as the Sixth National Chinese Christian Conference held in 1996, writes Tian. At that conference, CCC President, Dr. Wenzao Han, called for a strengthening of church structures and the reshaping of CCC/TSPM units on all levels. Dr. Han proposed the establishment of a working group to address this particular problem.

A ten-day retreat of over forty church workers and church leaders was held in October last year, where a review of the situation was held. Tian reports how Dr. Han reminded participants that the suitable training of church workers at all levels was imperative, from grassroots workers to urban seminary professors. Han also stressed the need to raise awareness of the notion that "a good Christian is also a good citizen."

For his part, Luo Guanzong, Chair of the TSPM committee, focused on the notion of internal church democracy as the basis for unity and effective church management. In order to achieve this democracy, Luo explained, an attitude of openness toward a wide variety of opinions had to be adopted. Furthermore, institutional arrangements needed to be put into place to encourage such an attitude,
like arranging regular consultations between different church bodies. Luo also
mentioned the need to maintain a healthy self-discipline at the administrative level of
the church, particularly avoiding favoritism and the granting of privileges to relatives.

Perhaps more striking than what was discussed at the meeting, writes Tian,
was the form the meeting itself took. Unlike at previous formal conferences, this
meeting aimed at truly studying the issues under debate at the practical level, rather
than merely theorizing about them in the abstract. Topics discussed included the role
of the Three Self Patriotic Movement, the theology of the Chinese church, theological
education and church administration. Tian describes how Church leaders and
professors from renowned academic institutions adopted the role of teachers,
sharing their insights and experiences with delegates. This new form of interaction
with delegates delighted those present. As one participant put it, the instructive
nature of the meeting and the presence of numerous top church leaders underlined
the importance the church attaches to building a healthy church administration. More
importantly, it helped bridge the gap between mere theories and the actual reality
experienced by delegates at the grassroots level.

The lack of personnel and finances in the church may make administrative
reform a slow and difficult process. However, through this retreat, the church has
shown itself willing to be both imaginative and innovative in its approach.

2000.1/2.2

The Taiwanese Church Through Mainland Chinese Eyes

(ANS) After 1949, Taiwan and the Chinese Mainland embarked on different paths,
and this has certainly been true for the church in both places. By way of striking
example, the Protestant churches on the Mainland united under the post-
denominational Three Self Patriotic Movement, while Taiwanese Protestants are still
divided along denominational lines. In the November 1999 issue of Tian Feng, the
magazine of the China Christian Council, Lin Qiuwen reports on a recent visit to
Taiwanese churches. His article offers a rare glimpse of the church in Taiwan from a
Mainland Chinese Christian perspective.

Although Christians churches in Taiwan have been growing in recent years,
Lin reports they still only account for 6% of the 21 million people. This figure includes
Catholics, Protestants and members of groups such as the Seventh Day Adventists.
Through efforts such as the "Evangelical Movement of the Year 2000", Christian
churches on the island hope to push church growth beyond its current level.
Furthermore, cooperation between denominations already takes place in many
ways. For example, theological seminaries belonging to one denomination are
generally also open to members of other denominations, and evangelical bookshops
sell materials published by many different churches.

However, despite united efforts at evangelism, Lin observes that day-to-day
parish church life is still divided along strict denominational lines. About half of
Taiwan's Christians are Protestants, most belonging to the Presbyterian, Anglican,
Baptist, Lutheran or Methodist church traditions. Aside from these more mainline
churches, charismatic movements are now also making headway.
Lin focuses on the Methodist church in Taiwan as a typical example of church life on the island. Although Taiwanese Methodists only make up a small percentage of all Taiwanese Christians, they are nevertheless structurally and financially independent of Methodist churches overseas. Taiwanese Methodists run a total of 19 churches and 25 church-related institutions in Taiwan. Lin noticed remarkable similarities between these churches: for example, before worship at the churches Lin attended, believers were handed a carefully-prepared leaflet containing not only parish news but also the whole text of the sermon to be preached.

Lin was particularly impressed with the wide range of social services provided by the Taiwanese Methodist church, a lot of them aimed specifically at young people. For example, in the capital Taipei, a "Spreading Love To Small Angels" program cares for young children from single-parent families, while Methodists in Jiayi have established a study hall for young people. The study hall offers children a quiet environment where they can finish their homework while their parents are still at work. Another group tries to reach out to middle school students facing growing pains, like how to deal with peer-group pressure. In Lin's view, these efforts are clearly worthwhile examples of how the church can spread the Gospel through reaching out to ordinary folk and their particular needs.

Lin concludes that, while Mainland Christians may be ahead of their Taiwanese counterparts in the area of unity, there is still much that the Mainland church can learn from Taiwanese believers.

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The Slippery Path To Sect Membership

(ANS) When a Chinese court sentenced Li Ping in March last year for being a leading member of the "Lord's Religion" sect, her young age and rather high level of education made the case somewhat unusual. In China, sectarian movements have a longstanding tradition but what exactly caused a well-educated 90's girl to end up as the "Number Three" in a pseudo-Christian sect? In its December 1999 issue, Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, traces the fall of the young woman.

Born in 1977 to a peasant family in a small Hunanese village, Li Ping's family life was poor not only by material standards but also from a spiritual point of view. Believing in ghosts, local deities and "fate", her parents even bought a new house because its location was said to offer better "spiritual harmony" (Chinese: fengshui),
an act which left the family in debt and struggling for survival. When missionaries from the "Lord's Religion" sect arrived in their village in 1995, the Li family was an easy target. The promise of relief from poverty and ill fate quickly attracted Mother Li, and soon she was found reading only sectarian teachings most of her time. In the course of Mother Li's conversion, her daughters were also drawn into the sect.

Despite her poor family background, Li Ping had always been a bright and devoted student, particularly by rural standards. After graduating from junior high school in 1993, she continued her education in a vocational training college. A student well-liked by both classmates and teachers, she was even chosen as a class monitor. Then, shortly before the October National Day holiday in 1995, she suddenly disappeared to join the "Lord's Religion" sect.

The "Lord's Religion" sect was founded in 1993 by Li Jiaqiu, a former member of the "Shouters" group and later the "Established King" (Chinese: Beiliwang) sect. In order to escape the control of the "Established King" leader, Li Jiaqiu founded his own sect and proclaimed himself the "Lord". After the banning of "Established King", the "Lord's Religion" was the natural successor for many of its believers and quickly became one of China's five biggest sects. Its tightly knit structure allowed sect leaders to control simple-minded believers, while gifted members such as Li Ping slowly climbed the hierarchical ladder to assume important positions with colorful names. The ability to exercise power and her obvious success may have constituted particular attractions of sect life for Li Ping. As former sect members recall, believers had to fall on their knees in front of this young woman, who was a gifted speaker. Seeing a girl of similar simple background yet well educated, making speeches in front of them, may have made Li Ping and the "Lord's Religion" especially credible to many believers. Working as a sect teacher, one of Li Ping's main tasks was to dispel any doubts cast on the sect's credibility whereas, in fact, the sect's aims were indeed highly questionable.

In order to appropriate his followers' money and valuables, Li Jiaqiu proclaimed the end of the world to be near. As a consequence, saving money in bank accounts was of little use. He called on his followers to invest in the "heavenly kingdom" instead. Aside from benefitting financially from sect members, Li Jiaqiu also sexually abused some of his female disciples, in two cases young girls under the age of 14. Claiming sexual intercourse with the "Lord" to be "holy" in nature, Li Ping and other former victims helped provide their master with a steady supply of "playmates".

Li Ping was first captured by police in spring 1998 but later released on bail. Unable to extract herself from the sect's clutches, she instantly resumed her activities within the group. When police finally seized the "Lord" in June 1998, his sect had already accumulated more than RMB 300,000 (=US$ 36,800 approx.) in cash, an assortment of valuables, tons of food and various means of transport. Li Jiaqiu's teachings had ruined numerous families and caused suicides or premature deaths due to neglected illnesses among some of his followers. And this time, there was no escape for Li Ping either.
Where Have All The Evangelists Gone?

(ANS) When visiting churches in his area, evangelist Cao Yuan often finds that church workers only recently introduced to him have "disappeared" and been replaced by new faces. Numerically speaking, churches in Cao Yuan's county in Henan Province should be well-equipped with church workers, since more than 200 lay workers have been trained there in recent years. However, when Cao visits churches, he is often asked, "Can't you come more frequently? We don't have anybody left to preach," or "Our church has already trained six church workers, yet no one is available to preach the Sunday sermon." In January's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese church, Cao analyses this puzzling phenomenon.

Cao has discovered that the need to make ends meet financially is forcing evangelists to leave their church work. Rural evangelists face so many demands that they rarely have any time to supplement their meagre and inadequate incomes by working the land or other odd jobs. Evangelists find themselves trapped in a spiral of ever-worsening poverty, until they finally have no choice but to leave home and become migrant workers.

Cao cites other cases where evangelists have quit because of poor relations with their local CCC/TSFM committees. While these committees are supposed to support and promote church work, many evangelists find them uncooperative. Frustrated by slow responses to requests for assistance, evangelists often give up and seek work elsewhere.

Finally, many evangelists find it difficult to nourish their own spiritual life and this often leaves them feeling inadequate to provide for the spiritual needs of others. Not only do their demanding duties leave them little time for private devotion, comments Cao, they often cannot afford the reading materials and literature they might need to promote their own spiritual growth.

As the church in China faces a chronic shortage of qualified personnel to pastor its growing numbers, Cao's analysis reveals that this shortage is not always for want of training but for lack of care of those already trained.

Bond Or Bondage? Discussing Marriage And Divorce

(ANS) In recent years, divorce rates have risen dramatically in China. Once heavily frowned upon, divorce is now becoming more accepted by Chinese society at large. In response to this phenomenon, a debate on divorce and the possibility of remarriage for Christians has emerged within the Chinese church. Weng Yage addresses these issues in a two-part article in last year's November and December issues of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council.

Weng begins by reminding readers of basic Christian teachings on marriage. He states that marriage unites husband and wife in a holy bond and is therefore indissoluble. Weng goes on to say that marriage was instituted by God and that the
maintenance of the union is therefore of utmost importance. According to Weng, the
crunchy nature of marriage and family even extends to "mixed" marriages between
Christians and non-Christians. Weng states that there is no Biblical justification for a
Christian partner leaving his or her non-Christian spouse on religious grounds,
although the writer admits that the Bible does allow a non-Christian spouse to
"dismiss" his or her Christian partner (1 Cor. 7:15).

Given the holy nature of the marriage bond, Weng sees divorce as a last
resort. He accepts divorce as a way of avoiding irreparable harm where
reconciliation proves impossible. Weng cites the example of a Christian woman who
was married to a non-believer. When the husband acquired a mistress, he began to
ill-treat his wife in various ways in order to compel her to file for divorce. However,
the wife refused until she finally died, bruised and neglected. Weng concludes that if
one or both partners suffer physically or mentally from marriage then "untying" the
bond is not a sign of disregard for the holy nature of marriage. Rather, it is an act of
self-protection. Weng points out that the Bible permits divorce in the case of physical
or mental cruelty, as well as cases of repeated unfaithfulness without repentance.

On the subject of un consummated marriages, Weng questions Biblical
provisions which allow this as grounds for divorce. Weng's objection lies with the
authenticity of a marriage being judged solely on sexual or physical grounds, as he
believes this would reduce human beings to the level of instinct-driven animals.

After accepting divorce as a last resort, Weng goes on in his second article to
highlight the negative impact of divorce. Not only does it harm the couple but also
any children involved. Weng cautions that these children might later encounter
difficulties in their own adult relationships as a result of their childhood experiences
of their parents' divorce.

Weng concludes by suggesting how Christian couples might fight for their
marriages in times of trouble. He proposes that marriages facing serious problems
might benefit from a short- or medium-term separation period. During this time, both
partners can pray and reassess their bond, and also seek counselling. Above all,
Weng cautions against opting for a quick divorce when troubles hit. He remarks that,
around two years after any divorce, many couples come to regret not having fought
harder for their relationship.

ANS Feature:

2000.1/2.6

From Revolution To Religion: Nanchang, Jiangxi Province

The southeastern province of Jiangxi once played an important role in China's Communist revolution.
It was home to one of the earliest Chinese soviets, and its capital, Nanchang, claims to be the
birthplace of the People's Liberation Army. However, over the years, Nanchang has fallen into
oblivion, the centre of a province renowned these days for its economic backwardness rather than its
daring revolutionaries. In January 2000, ANS editor Katrin Fiedler visited the city and met with local
church representatives. As her visit revealed, it is now religious life that is flourishing in this former
revolutionary capital.

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Small ice crystals dance in the air on this freezing cold morning, and a strong wind blows - just the weather, one would think, for staying at home with a rice cup of tea. However, as we enter Qingzhong church, we find a group of about twenty elderly women bracing the cold with numerous layers of warm clothing. They are in class and listening attentively to their teacher's explanations. "This is a literacy class," explains young pastor Lin Feng. "Like many Chinese congregations, our church is made up mainly of elderly women who only know some of the most basic Chinese characters. With their teacher's help, they learn to read the Bible."

For those already literate, the church offers regular Bible study groups. Other church activities include baptismal preparation courses, a prayer group, a choir and a regular youth group. "In the young people's group, we discuss problems Christians might encounter in everyday life, and we try to help believers with family problems," Lin explains. How does the church manage to offer all these services to believers? "For many of these activities, we rely on volunteer church workers. In Qingzhong church, we have three pastors and four other church workers. Three pastors may sound quite a lot but in fact, we also have to serve numerous outlying meeting points. Depending on the distances, we can visit two or three churches on average on Sundays, but we hardly ever reach some of the far-away meeting points." About 150 registered churches and meeting points are scattered around the city of Nanchang with only two in the city center itself, and there are 50,000 Christians in the Nanchang area alone.

While the provincial church leadership is located in the capital, Nanchang, the highest concentration of Protestant Christians in Jiangxi can actually be found around Shangrao, some 130kms east of Nanchang. With 400,000 baptized believers, the total number of Protestants in Jiangxi is now ten times higher than in pre-1949 missionary times, and believers today meet in over 2,000 churches and meeting points.

In his office in Qingzhong church, Pastor Lin briefly outlines the missionary origins of the two Nanchang city churches. He starts by informing me that modern Chinese churches do not usually have a bell, but Qingzhong church used to have one in missionary times, as is still reflected in its name (Chinese: zhong = "bell"). Before 1949, Methodists, Anglicans and Moravians were the most prominent denominations carrying out missionary work in the area, and Zhidao church, the second church in the city center, was established by Methodists.

As we reach Zhidao church, we find yet another group of women studying hard. "In many ways, Qingzhong and Zhidao churches are similar," Lin says, confirming my initial impression. Apart from offering numerous weekly activities, Zhidao church used to house the Jiangxi Provincial Bible School, which moved to a new location outside the city three years ago. Lin comments on the demand for lay training in the local church, "Already, the new location of the Bible School has become too small, and we have to rent out additional space." Courses at the Bible School last for two years. After graduation, students either return to their home churches as full-time church workers or go on to theological seminaries.

With its new facilities, Jiangxi Provincial Bible School now enrolls 80 students between 20 and 50 years old. Before entering the school, many prospective students come under huge pressure from their families and friends not to enroll. "Their relatives fear the financial insecurity associated with being an evangelist," Pastor He Ande, Lin's colleague, explains. "If they are lucky, evangelists are assigned a piece of land or can do odd jobs to make ends meet, but most of them have to rely completely on voluntary donations." Somewhat embarrassed, Lin and He add that many church workers make a living of only RMB 100 (= US$ 12 approx.) a month. Between 70 and 80 percent of graduates end up working in rural congregations, where believers' financial income is particularly limited.

Still, more and more believers, about half of them women, decide to become church workers. Will female church workers be accepted by conservative rural congregations? As the pastors point out, church workers sent for training have to be proposed by their home churches, where they will generally return after graduation. This trend of sending women for lay training indicates that women evangelists do not pose a problem for local congregations.

Lin Feng goes on to explain why qualified evangelists are of utmost importance to healthy church growth. During the weeks prior to our visit, debates often raged in his
congregation about how to approach the coming Lunar New Year of the Dragon. While ordinary Chinese regard the dragon as an auspicious animal within the Chinese zodiac, symbolizing many virtues, Christians are often afraid of it. They refer to Biblical passages where the dragon personifies evil or Satan. Lin perceives this as an instance of unfortunate interpretation which continually causes confusion among believers and even quarrels within families. For instance, one female believer insisted on cutting out the dragon motif from her traditional silk bed quilt, an action which was strongly opposed by her husband. Such misunderstandings could be avoided if all believers had access to qualified personnel. Otherwise, misunderstandings and false teachings will increase. As if to illustrate the point, just as we were talking about this issue, we were approached by members of the Eastern Lightening sect, a pseudo-Christian group.

ANS Feature:

Suzhou Bible School: Helping Supply Meet Demand

"Any church is only as good as the pastor who shepherds it", is a widely held belief in Chinese church circles. As the number of seminary graduates fails to keep pace with the growing number of congregations, many churches have to rely on lay members for leadership. This "remedy" can also bring with it negative side effects: in many places, well-meaning but untrained and uneducated evangelists can do more harm than good, lacking leadership skills and often spreading erroneous beliefs. The healthy growth of the Chinese church in China depends on the training of such lay church workers. In November last year, ANS editor Katrin Fiedler visited Suzhou Bible School in Jiangsu Province which offers such basic training.

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With its spacious complex of gray brick buildings, St. John's church in Suzhou was a natural choice for the setting up of a regional Bible school. For periods of three months at a time, some fifty lay church workers from all over the province come to St. John's to work, learn and pray. Pastor Gu Yuntao, the Suzhou CCC/TSPM committee member responsible for lay training, explains the criteria used in selecting course participants: "They should have at least a junior middle school education, be under fifty years of age and ideally, should have undergone previous lay training. And of course, they must be baptized." These requirements are somewhat stricter than for training courses in other areas, especially poorer rural areas, where candidates for lay training tend to be accepted regardless of their formal educational level.

Pastor Gu admits that a short three-month training course can only give participants a basic understanding of theology and their duties as church workers. Nevertheless, Pastor Gu stresses coherence as one of the primary aims of the course. "We want participants to undergo a systematic course of theological training which gives them a coherent understanding of the Bible and a framework for their pastoral duties," he points out. The course curriculum spans a wide range of topics: Bible study and training in preaching techniques provide church workers with their most basic tools, while studies in church history and the life of Christ adds to their background knowledge of their faith. Since many course participants will eventually lead their own congregations, practical pastoral issues such as conflict-resolution and religious policy are also dealt with. Students also receive reminders about proper behavior for evangelists. "Our instruction is in the spirit of Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians and Second Letter to Timothy," Pastor Gu explains. Since the recent publication of the selected writings of Bishop K.H. Ting, these have also been included in the curriculum.

At the moment, course participants pay RMB 1,080 (= US$ 130 approx.) in tuition fees and board for the three months course. Usually, this fee is covered by the congregation sending the student. Nevertheless, attending the course still involves great sacrifices for some students. Pastor Gu explains how some participants have even had to give up their jobs to attend the course, since they were not able to apply for three months' extended leave. On returning
home, these students not only face the challenge of leading their congregations but also have to look for a new job. Knowing the difficulties students may encounter during their first months back home, Suzhou Bible School instructors keep in contact with students and advise them on urgent problems.

NEWSBRIEFS

Theological Education: Northeastern Jilin Province contains a large ethnic Korean population, including many Christians. In autumn last year, a training program designed specifically for ethnic Korean believers was held in the province. All of the more than fifty students who attended had already undergone some form of previous lay training. The two-month course therefore aimed at enhancing previously acquired skills such as preaching, understanding of theology and church history. Participants graduated in October last year at a ceremony attended by provincial and national church leaders.

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Anniversaries: Last September, Shanghai celebrated the 20th anniversary of its churches’ reopening after the Cultural Revolution. Festivities culminated in an elaborate ceremony held at the Shanghai Stadium, where 8,000 believers gathered for worship. In his address, Shanghai TSPM Vice Chairman, Yi Xiang, recalled the time of reopening twenty years before. The very first church to reopen was the Mu’en Church in the city centre, a church dating back to missionary times. At that time, in 1979, believers even travelled overnight from places as far as Suzhou to witness the historic and long-awaited event, Yi recalled. Yi continued by recounting the growth of the Shanghai church over the past two decades, leading to the flourishing church life the city enjoys today.

Shortly before the Shanghai celebrations, a similar ceremony had been held in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang Province, where church resumed in September 1979. More such anniversaries will be celebrated all over China during the coming months.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Suzhou (Jiangsu)  5) Hangzhou (Zhejiang)
2) Nanchang (Jiangxi)  6) Jiayi (Taiwan)
3) Shangrao (Jiangxi)  7) Taipei (Taiwan)
4) Shanghai

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