Fujian Evangelists Upgrade Theological Thinking

(ANS) Courses for evangelists and other lay church workers are nothing uncommon in China. As routine parish life largely depends on the involvement of volunteers, training courses are regularly offered in Bible schools attached to many of the larger churches. The following article, reproduced from June's edition of Tian Feng, describes a training program rather unusual in its high-level, official character. Supported by the national CC/TSMP committee and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, experienced evangelists from Fujian province attended a twelve-day course on theological thinking.

The training program focused on the importance and meaning of the "building of theology" as propagated by church leaders in recent months (See, e.g., ANS 2000.3/4.2, 2000.3/4.4, 99.9/10.8). To motivate ordinary church workers to get involved in the building of theology was the main aim of the course. More specifically, the program called on evangelists from the grassroots to make their experiences and reflections fruitful for this process.

As Tian Feng author Yue Qinghua reports, in the beginning many course participants showed reservations towards the idea of developing new theological ideas at the grassroots level. "Evangelists at the grassroots only need to learn how to preach," some said, while others were of the opinion that "Theological reflection is only for theologians." Some evangelists even conceived theological reflection to be an obstacle towards a pure faith: "People who engage in theology belong to the 'Unbelievers' Sect'."

Facing such attitudes of misunderstanding and opposition, instructors were eager to point out the practical importance of theology. Through their explanations, course participants came to understand the meaning of "building theology" and the relevance of it for their everyday lives. They came to recognize their every single action as an evangelist is influenced by their theological thinking.
As instructors pointed out, the aim of this movement is not the creation of an abstract body of theology detached from everyday life. Instead, the theological ideas to be developed will be the foundation of future practical church work. Therefore, they must evolve from everyday experiences of ordinary evangelists. In this sense, the movement for the building of theology is a necessary precondition for a good running of the church, instructors explained. A church to be rooted in modern China needs a modern theology, students learned. The movement for the building of theology wants to provide us with a deeper understanding of theology and, at the same time, enable the adaptation of Protestant Christianity to socialism.

Evangelists understood that they must not make theological reflection a thing of others, but commit themselves to this task. To attain a theological standpoint appropriate for modern-day China, they need to engage in self-reflection and eliminate out-of-date theological remnants.

Among the things underlined by the lecturers was the continuing importance of the Three-Self-Movement for the Chinese church. As they pointed out, for a long time the Three-Self movement has been predominantly understood as a historical necessity. In order to prevent the Three-Self from turning into a mere phrase, this movement must now also be filled with theological meaning.

Another suggestion touched on the problem of sectarian movements. When building theology, particular attention ought to be paid to criticism on sects, some instructors pointed out.

Finally, course participants themselves also proposed a few topics to be included in the debate about the building of theology: the importance of the Three-Self movement, questions of church unity and interior cohesion and the task of individual self-cultivation were among the problems mentioned.

2000.7/8.2

A Cause For Controversy: "Love Never Ends"

Editor's Note: ANS staff was unfortunately not able to obtain a copy of Li Xinyuan's article that caused the controversy described below. However, we find the ensuing debate important and interesting enough to reproduce excerpts from the reply to Li given in Tian Feng.

(ANS) The publication of Bishop K.H. Ting's recent book, "Love Never Ends", has stirred up some controversy among certain groups of Chinese Christians. In the Chinese quarterly magazine Shengming jikan (Life), Li Xinyuan, a believer belonging to a Christian group overseas opposing the TSPM, criticizes Bishop Ting's writings as "unfaithful". A reply to this criticism was published in June's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council. The article, an open letter to Li Xinyuan, was contributed to the magazine by an elderly evangelist, Wu Guojun, who graduated from Nanjing Seminary in the 1950s.
Wu summarizes Li Xinyuan's criticism of Bishop Ting as follows: In Li's opinion, some of Bishop Ting's writings are far too political. According to Li, Bishop Ting's texts reveal a keen political attitude and present a politicized version of the Bible. Li fears that an adaptation of Christianity to socialism as propagated by K.H. Ting would water down the religious quality of Chinese church life. For Li, Bishop Ting therefore belongs to the "Unbelievers' Sect."

In his reply to Li, Wu explains in detail why for him, unbelieving Christians do not exist. Despite never having personally met Bishop Ting, Wu Guojun shows himself deeply influenced by K.H. Ting's book "How to Read the Bible". The reading of and reflection on this book clearly revealed to him that there is no such thing as an "Unbelievers Sect," Wu explains.

Wu's text centers around the argument that salvation is not "reserved" exclusively for adherents of one Christian faction or another, but is God's promise to all those open to his message. This position, Wu acknowledges, differs in an important way from out-of-date theologies who used to claim that only their way of believing opened the road to heaven.

Bishop Ting's articles have stirred up Li's political antenna because, according to Wu, the Christian groups Li belongs to hope to sleep through China's political and economic progress. "We, however, deeply love our socialist motherland and do our own bit because this is God's command and also God's gift to us" Wu explains.

Wu then puts forward his argument for supporting the Chinese government. His personal definition of politics is "to do a good job for the people," and in his opinion, this is just what the Chinese government does. In the old days, Chinese had the saying "One more Christian, one less Chinese." Besides, Christians depended on others to support them. Can this have been a Christian life as intended by God? Wu asks. To make the Gospel credible and acceptable, the Christian example is of utmost importance, Wu states. And this includes an adaptation to political circumstances: To be appealing to modern-day Chinese, Christian teachings cannot neglect Chinese political reality.

As Wu Guojun remarks, Christian groups objecting to the Three Self principle, claim to be apolitical, but in fact, their attitude of opposing the Communist Party is itself political. By making this political stance a definitive factor of their Christian thinking, these groups discredit the idea that faith questions ought to lie at the heart of all Christian thinking, the author points out.

In his defense of the Three Self movement, the author also reminds his readers of the origins of the TSPM. Attempts to unify the Chinese Protestant church date back to as early as the 1870s. Therefore, the Three Self Movement launched later cannot be attributed to Communist attempts to erase religion, the author points out.

Wu then replies to Li's objections towards "adapting faith to socialism." In Wu's opinion, Li's objections may be caused by a misunderstanding. As Wu points out, the basics of Christian faith are unchangeable. When speaking of the adaptation of religion to socialism, we mean the hope to remain open for new viewpoints, Wu
explains. The aim of theology is to direct our theological reflections, and it is this frame for viewing things that must be adapted to societal changes.

One must not misunderstand one's own will for God's will, Wu Guojun closes his appeal for more church unity. It does not matter who a Christian is as long as his or her work for God bears good fruit, he continues. Wu then invites his opponents to taste the fruits of his work: Don't they taste good?

2000.7/8.3

Growing Up In Guangzhou

(ANS) Young people are not only a minority within most Chinese congregations, but they are also particularly prone to drop out if the church's youth work does not appeal to them. In July's edition of Tian Feng, Shi Jinyu from Guangzhou's Xi'an church shares her experiences with readers.

After the reopening of the church, the first youth group in Xi'an parish was established in 1990, but died down soon afterwards. This left local church workers wondering about alternative ways of leading youth groups. The collapsed youth group had been led by some members of the choir who had attended Sunday school before the Cultural Revolution. The failure of this group in the early 1990s now made church members realize that young people today demand more than mere instruction.

However, instruction in Christian basics is of great importance for young people. Most people in their teens and twenties converting to Christianity do not come from a Christian background. For many of the elderly Christians, these young Christians are a "generation without roots," Shi reports. Therefore, when a new youth group was started in 1995, dynamic pastor Wang Yonghao first led the group through an intensive study of the Gospel of Jc h n. Later on, the church adopted a new form for youth meetings. Different sub-groups dedicated to special tasks were set up. Now, young people can choose between visits to the sick, spiritual refreshment, participation in the bookshop, publication work, help with the Sunday reception and liturgical assistance. As Shi proudly remarks, older church members have observed how the young people involved have grown through their responsibilities, and are full of praise for the young people's work.

Young people need to be approached constantly, Shi Jinyu continues with her experiences. As they become increasingly independent in all arenas of life, they also tend to neglect their church once they feel "grown up in faith." To prevent this from happening, church workers in Shi's church try to create a sense of belonging in the young people. In Xi'an church, young people now meet twice a week, the first meeting focusing on Bible study and the second meeting reserved for mutual exchange. Through these regular meetings, church workers hope to create a lasting bond between young people and their church. Moreover, the author writes, it is important to create a lively and relaxed atmosphere in young people's meetings to make them feel at home.
Most of the pastoral issues pressing young adults in Xi'an church are not alien to Christians in other Chinese places. Joblessness and family problems in "mixed" households of Christians and non-Christians are among the most frequent issues. But Guangzhou's position as an international "gate to China" poses particular challenges to pastoral work. Some time ago, Shi reports, many young people became influenced by charismatic movements. Church workers had to undertake great efforts to highlight the variety and richness of Christian thinking for church members to avoid their becoming narrow-minded.

On the other hand, Guangzhou's position also offers certain advantages. Recently, Xi'an church has taken up youth exchanges with young people from a congregation in Hong Kong. And, in addition to broadening the minds of young people in the Pearl River Delta, these exchanges bring new books and songs to Xi'an church.

2000.7/8.4

Honor Your Parents...

(ANS) In China, where most young couples still live with the husband's parents, the relationship with their parents (or parents-in-law) affects children well into their grown-up years. However, family relationships in China are gradually changing, and in numerous ways young people are assuming an increasingly independent stance towards their parents. In opposition to this general trend, many Chinese churches emphasize the importance of respect for one's parents. This emphasis on respect for the elderly not only matches China's Confucian heritage, but may actually form part of the churches' attraction for the older generation. In June's edition of Tian Feng, author Wang Xuan addresses young readers on the issue of respect for one's parents.

Our parents are in no way coincidental, Wang introduces the topic. Instead, God gives us a particular pair of parents because God has a plan for them in our lives. Psychology reveals the importance of childhood experiences for children's later lives, Wang continues. Accordingly, God hopes us to learn from the relationship with our parents for our future lives.

"My parents don't understand me!" Wang is aware of this complaint uttered by many youngsters, in particular young people from a non-Christian background. However, one's non-Christian parents should also be respected, Wang tells his readers. As Christians, we must remind ourselves of the power of prayer, and develop the conviction that God can change our parents. Going further, Wang is convinced that even an apparently harmful family situation may have its benefits for our development. Therefore, we cannot go wrong as long as we follow God's will.

In some cases, parents do not approve of their children's involvement in church, but encourage them to take part in other social activities. In such a case, we must explore why our parents say "no", Wang suggests. Are we eager to propagate the Gospel in society, but fail to live it out in our family life? Having become a Christian, our new life must shine through both inside and outside our family, Wang reminds his readers.
In other cases, parents disapprove of their children’s chosen partner. In such a situation, we must seek God’s support in prayer. If God approves of the love relationship in question, God will guide us through this trying experience, Wang assures his readers. Still, in spite of disagreeing with our parents, we must always respect their opinion, no matter how mature and well-established in life we might feel.

How are we to honor our parents? For Wang, honoring one’s parents carries three meanings. First of all, we must love our parents. If we love them, they will respond with similar feelings. Secondly, we need to respect their wisdom and life experience. And finally, Wang calls on his readers to become their parents’ best friends.

Wang is convinced it is God’s will that we respect our parents, and it is a command that will bring us happiness: “Children, it is your Christian duty to obey your parents, for this is the right thing to do. ‘Respect your father and mother’ is the first commandment that has a promise added: 'so that all may go well with you, and you may live a long time in the land.” (Eph 6: 1-3)

2000.7/8.5

Report On Former Nanjing Union Seminary Teacher

(ANS) For several years Ji Tai was a faculty member of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the sole national seminary of China’s Protestant Church. Ji is known to some Protestant friends abroad, particularly in Germany. Like many other Chinese organizations, the seminary is now implementing a staff contract system. ANS has recently learned that Ji who studied in Heidelberg, Germany, was not offered a new term of service. Based on information received from Nanjing, ANS can report the following:

- At a recent meeting of the leading faculty committee, in full compliance with seminary regulations, members unanimously voted not to offer Ji a new term of service.

- The seminary has requested the Jiangsu Provincial Christian Council and the Provincial Three-Self Movement which originally assigned Ji to work at the seminary to reassign Ji to church work and temporarily to suspend his ministerial status.

- The seminary decision was made because Ji has repeatedly violated state laws and regulations regarding religious practices. This has included his giving leadership to clandestine activities in illegal groups in several provinces and cities.

- Bishop K.H. Ting, president of the seminary, told ANS "Ji has used his position as a theological teacher and pastor in order to carry on such activities. He was repeatedly reminded that Nanjing Seminary, as would be the case for a seminary in any country, must not engage in illegal actions. Ji has used his position with
the seminary as a protective umbrella for illegal activities both in Nanjing and other parts of China. He has resisted our attempts to reason with him but has continued his underground activities."

- While traveling, Ji refused to inform any seminary colleague of his whereabouts. This often placed the seminary in an embarrassing situation. According to Bishop Ting, "Such lack of consideration for the welfare of the seminary community has engendered great misunderstanding on the part of the wider non-Christian public. We have found it difficult to defend his actions and words to those outside."

- Ji's spouse, Ms. Peng Yaqian, will remain a teacher at the seminary. However, the seminary has suggested to the Jiangsu Christian Council that in reassigning Ji Tai it would be good to provide Ms. Peng an appropriate position so that their family can stay together.

ANS Focus: Rural Christianity

Towards An Understanding Of Rural Protestantism - Six Central Notions

(ANS) The Chinese Protestant church is currently trying to significantly improve its management. More than ten million out of thirteen million Protestant believers live in the countryside. Therefore, an assessment of China's rural church is of profound importance if any improvements in the running of the church are to be made. The following article was contributed to Tian Feng (the magazine of the China Christian Council) by church worker An Xiaohui from rural Jiangsu. He sees six points as characteristic of the Chinese Protestant church today.

An Xiaohui believes, one central characteristic of contemporary Chinese rural Protestantism is its "extremely fast growth". In many places, Christianity has grown immensely since the reopening of churches in the early 1980s.

This quick increase in believers reveals a second notion important for the understanding of the current situation, the notion of "eagerness." Many peasants are not only spiritually hungry and eager to accept the Gospel, but later on develop great commitment to their new cause. In the countryside, church life depends almost completely on volunteers. So far, local congregations have few problems in finding people willing to dedicate time and effort to church work.

This is why An characterizes rural believers as "strong". Generally speaking, they are financially and educationally less well equipped than their brothers and sisters in the cities, An Xiaohui admits. Different from city churches, who often own former missionary real estate property that now sells for high prices, rural churches can only rely on believers' donations. Yet, aware of the importance of their personal contribution to church life, they manage to keep their local congregations running.

Since many people are willing to take over responsibilities in their churches, it is not so much the lack of volunteers but their educational background that is the cause for concern. Many believers have only superficial knowledge of Christian basics.
"Some people actually are followers of others, not of Jesus Christ - they don't know who he is", An Xiaohui complains. Moreover, as 90 per cent of the preaching is done by volunteers, the "low educational background" of believers results in low-quality sermons.

Lack of properly trained pastoral workers with knowledge of how to run churches and meeting points sometimes results in "chaos", the author continues. While some Christian groups have no meeting point at all, others have twenty. In some cases, rural congregations come up with rather unusual orders for their worship services: some congregations call upon dozens of believers to give testimony, while others sing their own songs instead of hymns. What is more, instances of non-ordained church workers doing baptismal and communion services are reported.

Finally, An concludes rural pastors are extremely "busy." An array of duties leaves them little time to devote to individual believers or their own spiritual formation. Some pastors are responsible for several dozens of meetings points, while others have to care for ten thousand demanding believers. Besides, pastors in the countryside often have numerous other roles to fulfill. Most of them will be a church representative in church organs like the CC/TSPM committee or will be a representative in their local government. Unable to make ends meet with a meager salary based on donations, many rural pastors have to till their fields or do odd jobs to survive.

ANS Focus: Rural Christianity

How To Improve The Running Of Rural Congregations

(ANS) Seventy percent of Chinese Protestants are peasants, and it is impossible to understand the present day Chinese church without knowing about its rural Christians. Starting with its July issue, Tian Feng (the magazine of the China Christian Council) is running a series of articles on rural Christianity. The following article summarizes a text by Liu Yuhui, a female believer from Sichuan province.

At first sight, Liu reports, Christianity in her area of Sichuan is living through marvelous times. Recent years have shown a marked growth in the number of believers, and church life is flourishing everywhere. Yet, a closer look reveals that many congregations are riddled with problems. In some cases, the misbehavior of church members has negatively influenced the image of Christianity, while other congregations are easily affected by sectarian teachings. The root of these and numerous other problems, Liu continues, is the low educational level of rural believers. Virtually all urban Christians are at least basically literate and can improve their knowledge of Christian basics through self-study. This is not the case for rural Christians, however, and sermons are their only source of reference for spiritual formation. What can be done to alleviate this problem? The ideas suggested by Liu are derived from reflections and suggestions local church workers shared with her.

The Bible classes [peixunban] run regularly in many Chinese churches are basically a good idea, Liu points out. However, evidence indicates that courses
should last at least 20 days instead of ten days or even less, as is the norm in some churches.

Ideally, each church should also try to send a student to seminary so as to ensure a long-term qualified leader for their congregation. However, Liu warns churches not to select at random. Rather than send somebody inappropriate, congregations should wait until a qualified candidate emerges. If a person lacks the qualifications necessary to lead a congregation, sending him or her to seminary may turn into big trouble later.

Ordinary believers can also contribute to help other congregation members raise their level of Christian knowledge. Church members with the gift for preaching should join in this task and make ample use of reference works in their preparations. But, as Liu underscores, reference works are of use for everyone. Not only those who preach can share their insights gained from reference works with others. Some Christians, Liu observes, prefer to rely solely on Bible study instead of also making use of reference works. As she points out, reading reference works does not substitute Bible study, but is just to enhance our understanding of the Bible as we do Bible study.

Liu also encourages congregation members to look in an open, cooperative mood for coworkers. She notes there are many talents to be discovered in congregations, and it is important to help these brothers and sisters develop their skills.

Church workers should also make regular, close family visits a habit. Only close contact with congregation members enables church workers to make sure "all sheep keep on the grass".

Finally, Liu suggests the establishing of small groups of believers. In these groups, church members can not only discuss spiritual matters, but also share other problems and concerns with one another. A general meeting for all groups should be held at least once a month. This pattern helps to provide a net of mutual support for all church members and, at the same time, links individual believers to the larger congregation.

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Church Administration: Hints From Henan

(ANS) Henan, the province with the largest Christian population in China, has experienced tremendous church growth over the past years. Besides, the province is a hotbed for both unregistered Christian groups and pseudo-Christian sects. All these factors not only contribute to Henan's reputation as a "wild" religious region, but also make church administration very difficult (see ANS 2000.5/6.2). In July's edition of Tian Feng, Xu Shengyi and Fan Manli from central Henan make some suggestions on how to improve church administration in rural areas.

The suggestions by Xu and Fan are based on a survey among church workers and RAB officials. The authors hope to summarize and propagate some of the more successful models of church administration. As they point out in their introduction, most churches actually are run in a faultless way, and it is only a small number of churches that are improperly managed. However, the problems such cases display are grave, ranging from chaotic finances and neglect of regulations and an "open door policy" towards sects to internal divisions within the congregations.

To avoid similar developments, both the external and internal administration of congregations must be up to certain standards, Fan and Xu emphasize. This includes the existence of a CC/TSPM committee to represent the church in external affairs and an administrative committee for the internal running of the congregation. An administrative committee ensures that a congregation cannot be turned into the "kingdom" of a single believer, the authors explain. In order to guarantee the participation of all believers, this administrative committee must be democratically elected. Neither RAB officials nor individual church members can appoint the church leadership single-handedly, Xu and Fan point out. Instead, church leadership must be selected according to the applicable official regulations, and must be elected in an open and democratic way. Unfortunately, some congregations do not have a structure for such democratic procedures, while in other cases these structures, though nominally existing, do not function, Fan and Xu lament.

The authors then urge RAB officials and church representatives from different levels of the CC/TSPM committees to proceed in the establishing of rules and regulations. Without a body of regulations, the rule of law cannot be implemented, Xu and Fan warn.

According to the authors, another point where church administration must be improved are church finances. Generally speaking, rural believers are very poor, and their donations are saved penny for penny from their meager incomes. Still, in some churches instances of waste, like spending money on huge banquets, do occur. In other places insufficient administration leaves church finances in a deplorable state. At this point, the authors give some practical advice on how to improve handling of the churches' financial affairs. For example, one way to make church finances more transparent would be the regular publication of church accounts. Besides, the
authors suggest that the management of church finances should not be left to outsiders or newcomers to the church, but rather to well-known and responsible believers.

The issue of financial administration highlights the importance of reliable and capable volunteers for the successful running of churches. Therefore, another suggestion by Xu and Fan is the active development of capable volunteer staff. Churches should look out for promising young people and make conscious efforts to train them.

Finally, the authors call on churches not to overestimate their financial capabilities. More and more churches in the countryside tend to build lavish church buildings without securing the financial part of their projects, Xu and Fan warn.

ANS Focus: Rural Christianity  

A Sunday In The Countryside

Huangshan Shi (Huangshan City) in Anhui Province is an administrative area with more than one million inhabitants. About 4000 of them are Protestant Christians. ANS editor Katrin Fiedler spent ten days in Tunxi, the central town of Huangshan Shi with a population of about 150,000. The small town exists mainly on Huangshan tourism (tourist groups usually stay for half a day on their way to the Huangshan scenic area) and agricultural products: Tea and dried mushrooms are local specialties. While believers in the villages around Tunxi meet in makeshift meeting points or simple church buildings, Tunxi's Protestants - about 700 - gather in a brand new and beautiful church building overlooking the nearby river. Moreover, Tunxi is the only Protestant congregation in the area with a pastor. All other meeting-points and churches nearby have to rely on elders and other trained lay-workers for the everyday-running of their churches. For baptismal and communion services, these congregations have to wait for one of the rare visits of the pastor stationed in Tunxi.

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It is 6 a.m. As I step out of the house, the pleasant Anhui countryside is already buzzing with activity: I see farmers cycling along the road, my host is already fetching water from the well, and the rooster next door has been crowing for hours. Today, I will accompany Rev. Ma on her trip to Qimen, a rural community at about ninety minutes bus ride from Tunxi. As Ma has to care for numerous meeting points in the surrounding area, she can only manage to visit Qimen about twice a year. For rest of the year, church life in and around Qimen relies completely on the work of a few elders and several other volunteer church workers.

Today is a special day for Qimen Christians, as Rev. Ma will celebrate holy communion and baptize a whole group of new believers. As we arrive in Tunxi at 7.15 a.m., the small church is already packed. On the occasion of Rev. Ma's visit, Christians from four meeting points have gathered in the church, altogether around 300 persons. Many of them have a long way behind them, on foot, by bike or by bus. The room is stuffy and crowded. Besides, the old church building is so decrepit that the first floor seems to be held together by the posters tacked to the walls.

However, the modest surroundings obviously cannot spoil believers' enthusiasm. The small church is filled
with music, led by a choir of robust-looking men and women. Clad in western-style choir robes, their peasant faces shine with joy. We sing a Chinese hymn, set to the tune of Beethoven's "Ode To Joy". After the sermon, Rev. Ma asks the new converts to stand up. To my surprise, nearly everybody - or so it seems - steps forward to receive baptism. Divided into groups of ten, 86 new believers are baptized, about three-quarters of them women. Behind them lies a year of intensive studies and preparation, and their excitement clearly shows on their faces. Looking exhausted from the stuffy air, Ma finally proceeds to the communion service. Somewhere in the heat, a woman faints.

Altogether, the service takes more than three hours, and yet some elderly women still stay behind to pray in front of the cross. Sitting right behind them, other people have an early lunch before going home. I follow Rev. Ma upstairs, where we sit down to a chat over tea, lychees and watermelon. While Ma is still exchanging news with the elders and church-workers, the local RAB official and later on even the county magistrate arrive. They seize the opportunity of having Ma in town to discuss the construction of the new church.

Qimen, hometown of the famous "Keemun" black tea, is a town of very rural flavour. Maofeng tea and dried mushrooms are among other important products of the area. Yearly average per capita income is 1700 Yuan RMB [US$ 207 approx]. In the congregation we visit today, not a single believer has more than high-school education.

Protestant Christianity in Qimen goes back to 1927 when the Christian and Missionary Alliance founded Qimen's first Protestant church. Church life in Qimen was restored in 1983, and for nine long years, Christians had to gather in believers' homes, until the old church building was finally given back to the Christian community. The construction of a new church building is already under way. Qimen Christians anticipate total costs of 500,000 Yuan Renminbi [US$ 61,000 approx.], but more than half the amount needed is still missing. Believers hope to raise 100,000 Yuan by selling the old church building, and they will certainly have to rely on donations. Still, they remain optimistic: "We have to pray for this. God will help us." Similar stories of churches under construction can be heard all over China. In the end, many congregations receive help from overseas compatriots who are willing to make huge donations.

For me, visiting the construction site the most impressive things are those not seen: Once again, the total lack of equipment other than a few shovels, amazes me. By sheer hard work and the most primitive tools, the new church will hopefully be finished sometime next year. The construction site, situated on a hill and surrounded by tea plantations, was carved out from the mountain only through the manual labor of believers. (Later on, Ma shows me a picture of the construction of her own church, featuring dozens of grannies eagerly shoveling down a hill.) A large sign bridges the road leading to the construction site, declaring this proudly to be the construction site for the local Christian church.

As I learn, the plot of land we are now standing on originally belonged to a Buddhist who initially refused to sell his land to Christians. "What", I dare to ask, "if a Buddhist should want to
purchase the old church building?" They laugh. Privately, Ma admits that this might equally face resistance among the Christian community.

Over lunch, Ma continues to present Christian issues with charm and persistence to the officials, both of them listening with benign interest. We leave Qimen in the early afternoon and arrive back in Tunxi in time for a wedding ceremony. As the bride and groom enter, the young man at the piano is playing Mendelssohn's wedding march. He struggles a little bit - this is the first Christian wedding in this year. Usually, Rev. Ma requires at least one of the couple has to be baptized and the other supportive of a Christian wedding. As we step out of the church, a young girl approaches Rev. Ma asking: "How much does it cost to have a Christian wedding ceremony?" There have been cases of congregations running a flourishing business of Christian [= western-style] weddings, which have become tremendously popular in China in recent years.

After the wedding ceremony, the newlyweds are driven away in a rented car. The rest of us follow on bicycles. While we are standing in the hotel lobby waiting for the wedding banquet to begin, Rev. Ma uses the time to search passages in her Bible: "I have to make two sick calls after the banquet, and I have to think of what to read to them. They called during the day." And so, when everybody heads towards the newlyweds’ flat after the banquet for a relaxing chat and some more snacks, Ma sets out once more. For her, Sunday's work is not yet over.

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**ANS Focus: Rural Christianity**

2000.7/8.10

**A Personal Story**

Chinese Christians do not only comprise a tiny fraction of the general population, but in many cases they also constitute a minority within their own families. Due to the interruption of religious life during the Cultural Revolution, the current "Christianity fever" has brought about millions of first-generation believers. In many cases, the converts' need to give up folk-religious customs, and sometimes also their zealous efforts of evangelization cause severe family conflicts. Listen to the following story a rural Christian told ANS editor Katrin Fiedler.

"My husband and I have been married for more than ten years. Coming from a non-Christian family, my husband originally had no Christian interest at all. But through my influence, he became more and more acceptant of Christianity and, while he is not baptized, he now considers himself a Christian. His father also used to listen quite openly when I told him about my..."
faith. Only my mother-in-law has remained completely opposed to any Christian teachings and clings stubbornly to her superstitious practices and beliefs. When my father-in-law died some time ago, this produced a very serious conflict and brought our family to the verge of disruption.

After the death of my father-in-law, my mother-in-law exerted huge pressure on my husband and me to perform the traditional filial duties to the deceased. These involve the burning of incense in front of a picture of the deceased and several ritual bows. In order to be done properly, this ceremony has to be repeated regularly in the course of several weeks. I flatly refused to worship father-in-law as my ancestor, telling my mother-in-law that Christians worship God, not their ancestors. Before my father-in-law died, I had explained this to him, and he had accepted my wish not to perform these rituals after his death. However, my mother-in-law remained insistent.

When she saw that she could not persuade me, she still continued to exert pressure on my husband. He is the family's eldest son. According to Confucian teachings, the eldest son is not only responsible for the continuing of the family name, but his worshipping ancestors is of utmost importance for the family's well-being. My mother-in-law even said: If you don't perform your filial duties, I won't recognize you as my son any longer. I will have raised you in vain."

At this point, I feared that my husband would listen to his mother and give in. And would not his kowtowing and burning incense have meant that we were now taking two different roads? I told him that if he were to worship his father, I would divorce him.

Finally, he listened to me, not his mother, and chose not to do the ancestor worship. For some time, my mother-in-law was very angry with both of us. She even declared "I did not give birth to this son." Now the situation has calmed down a bit, but we still continue our religious discussions. Whenever I seize an opportunity, I try to point out to her God's power and wonderful help, and she will look for a heavenly sign contradicting me. As for today's wedding in our church, I have already told my mother-in-law that the weather will be fine. So many Christians have prayed for good weather!"

2000.7/8.11

Newsbriefs

Women's Conference: A conference designed exclusively for women church workers was held in Huangshan City, Anhui province from May 16 to 21, 2000. Organized by the national women's committee, the conference aimed at enhancing church workers' consciousness for women's issues and their own role as female church workers. The conference was also intended as an incentive to join in the building of theology; participants were specifically invited to exchange their experiences. Participants also heard lectures from women professors of Nanjing
seminary, who talked on "Women and Bible study," "Female evangelists and pastoral care" and "Women church workers in the Chinese church - their history, present and future."

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Anniversary: On May 2, more than four hundred guests from China and abroad convened in Shanghai to celebrate the centenary of the local YMCA. Apart from Shanghai officials, CCC president Dr. Han Wenzao and TSPM chairman Luo Guanzong attended the festivity. Speakers looking into the YMCA's future agreed: As Chinese society is facing rapid modernization, new material and spiritual needs emerge; needs that must be reflected in the Y's work for society. To achieve a high level of material development while maintaining the traditional spirit of the YMCA's work thus became a sub theme of the meeting.

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Conference On Spiritual Publications: On April 17 and 18 of this year, the provincial CC/TSPM committee of Shaanxi Province held its first conference dedicated to the publication of the Bible and other spiritual works. Among the topics discussed were the problem of illegal publications and matters of quality and distribution.

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Commemorative Stamps: On the occasion of the TSPM's fiftieth anniversary that is being celebrated all over China these months, the national CC/TSPM committee will issue a commemorative envelope in September. Designed by this church body, the envelope carries a stamp symbolizing the unity of China's nationalities. The commemorative item will also feature a calligraphy by Bishop K.H. Ting, a traditional Chinese seal, and the TSPM's motto: Love the motherland and the church, give glory to God and serve the people.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Guangzhou (Guangdong)
3) Nanjing (Jiangsu)
5) Shanghai

2) Hong Kong
4) Huangshan City (incl. Tunxi, Qimen)