Dear Reader,

China’s rapid economic development, with its inherent opportunities and challenges, weave like a thread through this issue of ANS. In China’s highly industrialized cities, pollution is one of the clearly noticeable side effects that come with development. A resident from one such city, Guangzhou (Canton), calls on Chinese Christians to develop a stronger ecological awareness (p4). By way of contrast, in underdeveloped Yunnan Province, some Christians are still struggling with the notion of engaging in business at all. "Money: A Thing Of The Devil?" asks writer A Puju (p6). Last but not least, we introduce to you an unusual congregation in China’s "Wild South." Follow Rev. Ewing W. Carroll Jr., Amity’s Overseas Coordinator, on a visit to a church in the boomtown of Shenzhen (p9).

Within a rapidly changing society, China’s young church is struggling to define its proper place. A recurring theme in Tian Feng over the past few months has been the debate over “building theology.” Is this a merely academic debate or does “building theology” also have meaning for grassroots believers, Hui Guofen asks (p2). Xiao Anping from Hubei calls for a church with a social agenda (p3), another reflection of how Chinese Christians are now stepping out into society.

Under “documentation” this issue of ANS also carries an open letter reflecting the China Christian Council’s stance on the Falungong movement. Over the past two years, the government’s battle against Falungong has highly politicized the whole issue. Read the China Christian Council’s official statement on page 11.

These are just a few highlights for this issue of ANS. Discover more for yourself inside...

With kind regards from the editorial desk,

Kathrin Feickert

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Building Theology: Nothing To Offer Grassroots Believers?

(ANS) "Theology has nothing to offer ordinary, grassroots believers." Or has it? In February's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, Hui Guofen from Jiangsu refutes this commonly held view, highlighting her conviction that theological thought does need to be encouraged among such believers.

Initiated in 1998, the movement for building theology (shenxue sixiang jianshe) aims at strengthening theological reflection within the church and developing a genuinely Chinese theology. As an initiative started by China's top church leaders, it is now slowly working its way down to ordinary believers through Bible schools, lay training centers and, of course, pastors and church workers.

Some say that theological reflection is only for the "big fish", those teaching in seminaries or working in the upper echelons of the church hierarchy, Hui Guofen starts her article. As for ordinary grassroots-level believers, many people are of the opinion that the church only needs to worry about what content they are being fed in weekly sermons and nothing else, Hui writes.

This way of thinking is regrettable, Hui points out. Whether we realize it or not, every single believer's interpretation of the Bible is influenced by his or her theological views, and a wrong interpretation may harm not only individual believers but, ultimately, the church as a whole. Heretical sects have caused great harm in recent years. Strengthening theological reflection must, therefore, not be seen as a movement far removed from grassroots reality but rather as something which can actually enhance healthy church growth at all levels.

To lead believers along the right path, evangelists must have a correct theological understanding themselves, which will be reflected in their Biblical interpretation and preaching. Being an evangelist herself, the author recalls one incident she experienced in the countryside. A female believer asked her whether her son should continue to promote his business dealing in snakes. The believer was concerned that this was not allowed for Christians since snakes have often been portrayed as the embodiment of Satan in the Bible. Hui Guofen had to explain to this believer how a distinction should be drawn between Satan and the isolated use of snakes by Satan for his purposes. Such theological exchanges with believers not only relieve them of spiritual burdens but also cause evangelists to engage in theological reflection in order to resolve such issues.

By teaching them how to discern erroneous doctrines, theological reflection equips grassroots believers against heretical teachings. Hui gives a few examples of distorted Biblical interpretations frequently used to lure believers into sects. She then emphasizes that interpretations of Biblical passages change over the years. Certain passages from the Old Testament in particular are now interpreted less literally than before. For example, childbirth was once considered "dirty" but is now no longer thought to be so, and women are encouraged to participate in church activities once again immediately after childbirth.
Financial dealings are another area where grassroots believers would benefit from theological reflection. Many Chinese Christians used to think that "the poorer you are, the more spiritual you are," the author remarks. Today, it is more widely recognized that poverty does not necessarily equal socialism, nor is poverty a sign of "superior" Christian belief. The Bible does not call on believers to live as beggars, it merely teaches us to trust in God in times of hardship. Now, more and more Christians in China are hardworking and do prosper. This marks a correction of theological thinking and also directly improves believers' lives.

Where is the Chinese church heading in the future? Biblical interpretation and theology are inseparable. Every single believer and the church as a whole need an appropriate theology in order to develop, not just leaders within the church, Hui Guofen concludes.

Being Salt And Light Means Getting Involved

(ANS) A church that wishes to be salt and light must be a church with a social agenda. This attitude, nothing new for most Western Christians, is still rather radical in the Chinese Protestant church. While early missionary efforts often involved charitable work, in recent decades most Chinese Christian churches have been either too poor to conduct charity work outside the church or else merely uninterested. This reluctance is also a mark of strong evangelical tendencies which draw a strict line between the "saved" and the "unsaved" and which discourage any involvement with the "unsaved" in wider society. Xiao Anping from Hubei writes in February's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, how this attitude needs to change.

Only through active involvement in society can a healthy church fulfill its call to be salt and light, Xiao begins. In recent years, churches all over China have become more and more involved in social outreach. According to Xiao, this trend has not only been warmly welcomed by society but has also helped create a better image for the church. One example occurred during the devastating floods of 1998 which hit areas around the Yangtze River. Churches from these regions donated amounting to approximately RMB 100,000 (= US$ 12,000 approx.). Christians also supported the flood victims by providing goods and shelter for the homeless. This selfless help established the church's reputation as an "organization with a loving heart." As a result, many government officials overcame their deep-seated prejudices towards the church when confronted with the numerous good deeds done by believers. Such help, Xiao reminds readers, not only does good within society but also gives glory to God. It can be seen as giving help and bearing witness all at the same time.

However, Xiao Anping points out, it is not only the need to build a favourable reputation that should compel the church to take an interest in charitable causes. As a part of society, any healthy church should naturally be concerned with social issues, the author remarks. Xiao warns pastors not to put their concerns for their pastoral work over and above social involvement. Rather, social work must complement spiritual work. Xiao quotes 2 Peter 1:5-7 in support of this: "For this reason do your best to add goodness to your faith, to your goodness add knowledge,
to your knowledge add self-control, to your self-control add endurance, to your endurance add godliness, to your godliness add brotherly affection, and to you brotherly affection add love."

Xiao then continues to highlight the role the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) plays in the process of getting the church more actively involved in society. Thanks to the Three-Self, the slogans "Love Country, Love Church" and "Glorify God and Serve The People" are now more than mere hollow phrases, Xiao remarks. The Three-Self has, among many other things, helped the church to put down roots within Chinese culture and society. Xiao reminds readers of remarks by Bishop K.H. Ting that only a church liberated from its colonial past, only a genuinely Chinese church, can make a unique contribution to the church universal and ecumenical.

Xiao closes his article by pointing out that, for unhampered church development and healthy growth, good relations with society are of tremendous importance. Correspondingly, an active involvement in society will help the church in its efforts to grow into a truly Chinese church with a heightened awareness of the issue facing the society of which it aims to be a part.

2001.3/4.3

Stop Being Bad Stewards Of God's Creation!

(ANS) China’s rapid economic and social development in recent years has come at a price: severe harm to the environment. Diseases linked to poor air quality are overtaking other illnesses as the number one killers in China today, and problems of water management and quality endanger individual lives and the development of the country as a whole. The devastating floods of 1998 caused millions of Chinese to wake up and face the dangers brought about by overuse of natural resources. Still, overall awareness for environmental issues remains weak, and appeals like the one below mark a new direction for the church in China. This article appeared in February’s edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council.

We live in a time of rapid change, Feng Hao from Guangzhou starts his article. Architecture, technology and human thinking are developing at a tremendous pace. While these changes are unavoidable, there is one thing which will always remain the same: Biblical truth.

Feng then turns to the book of Genesis. After each act of creation, God felt "that it was good," Feng reminds his readers. All living creatures have their special place and value within creation. And creation was bestowed on humankind so that humankind could depend on it for its living. How do we “pay this back,” Feng asks. We often overuse nature’s resources instead of relying on sustainable development, development which does not exceed the natural regeneration of the resources we use.

The nature we live in is part of God’s creation and, as such, we ought to love and protect it, Feng continues. Instead, we destroy nature and severely harm the environment. The hectic pace of life in China’s cities has already produced tourists from these urban areas who hunger after a taste of nature and know what it is like to live without it. And yet, the destruction of natural resources continues. These sins
against the environment and God's creation produce dangerous effects like new
diseases, changes in climate, floods, droughts and many more. These developments
warn us not to act against God's will, Feng underlines.

Protection of creation is a Christian duty both with regard to God, who
entrusted creation to us, and with regard to our children and grandchildren, who
have the same right to enjoy this creation as we have, Feng closes his appeal.

**Holding Up Half The Sky: Christian Women Of Ji'an Show The Way**

(ANS) As the dominant group within the Chinese church, women have been
receiving greater attention from the church over recent months (see ANS 2000.5/6.3,
ANS 2000.3/4.3). This picture is, however, somewhat deceptive. While women
constitute the overwhelming majority, over 70%, of most Chinese congregations they
are still under-represented in the church's leadership. A woman writing under the pen
name of Shui Lian ("Lotus") reports in March's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of
the China Christian Council, on a particularly accomplished example of integrating
women into all levels of church life.

In Ji'an (Jiangxi Province), half the positions on the local CC/TSPM committee
are occupied by women, a rarity in most Chinese church bodies. In the everyday
running of their church, women engage in the following tasks: leading spiritual
meetings, participating in various services offered by the church, keeping the books,
representing their church in external matters, teaching literacy classes, leading
women's meetings and much more. Clearly, women are the backbone of church life
in Ji'an, making up around 80% of all voluntary workers.

The women believers of Ji'an are not afraid of hard work. Although busy with
their homes and families, they still manage to direct the choir and visit the elderly. It
is the women who not only clean the church on a voluntary basis, but also scrub out
the church's old-style squat toilet, Shui Lian reports.

In recognition of the tremendous role played by women in the Ji'an church, the
local CC/TSPM committee established its own Women's Committee on March 8,
1999 (International Women's Day). Through the committee, women are able to react
to the needs of their church while at the same time receiving the necessary support
for their work. Women participate in various tasks according to their different abilities.
Some offer services like measuring blood pressure or mending clothes and shoes.
Others teach about women's health issues. To promote spiritual growth, activities
have included organized prayer for world peace and a retreat intended especially for
women.

In order to adequately equip these church women for their tasks, a short
training course is given. This includes advice for the women on how to greet
newcomers to the church and also support and recognition for those involved in
easily-dismissed "menial" or routine tasks. Apart from supporting the volunteers in
their work, the discussions during the training sessions reveal an impressive sense
of devotion on the part of these women. They love their church like their own family. Shui Lian concludes her article with a quote from Scripture: "Who can find a good wife? Her worth is far beyond coral." (Proverbs 31: 10)

Money: A Thing Of The Devil?

(ANS) "My daughter was on the point of opening a restaurant. Fortunately, we were still able to talk her out of it." "Engaging in business is a thing of the devil." Such sentiments still abound today among some of China's more conservative Christian believers. Many such Christians fall in to the lower-income bracket of Chinese society, and some maintain that this fear of "mammon" may be a subconscious reaction to their economically disadvantaged status. In February's edition of Tian Feng, the magazine of the China Christian Council, A Puju from Yunnan calls on readers to tackle both anti-money attitudes as well as the causes of poverty among disadvantaged Christian believers.

Following the opening up of China's economy, more and more people are busily involved in various economic activities and, as a consequence, become quite well-off. Unfortunately, many Christians are unable to adopt a healthy attitude towards money. They still adhere to beliefs like "the poorer you are, the more spiritual you are" and "material things are evil, only things of the mind are good." In some cases, this attitude is even "officially" supported by local evangelists, A Puju reports.

A Puju goes on to explain that this dichotomy between material and spiritual things ultimately goes back to Greek philosophy. Several of the indigenous Chinese Christian groups that emerged before Liberation in 1949, like the "Jesus Family", were even closer to this line of thinking and advocated an ascetic lifestyle.

Such extreme interpretations of Christian faith are created through selective and biased Bible reading, the author continues. Passages like certain Beatitudes ("Blessed are the poor in spirit", "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see righteousness") are easily misinterpreted and may erroneously lead to the conclusion that Christians must not become rich. If earthly wealth impeded human salvation, there would indeed be no reason for Christians to strive for financial success, the author acknowledges. However, salvation does not depend on having more or less money. A Puju then underlines that it is the attitude towards wealth and poverty that counts, not the fact of being rich or poor in itself.

One reason for the continuing scepticism of many Chinese Christians towards wealth is due in part to the influence of former Western missionaries, the author remarks. These missionaries did not just bring the Gospel with them but also certain teachings totally inappropriate for modern Chinese society, among them a negative attitude towards wealth.

A Puju acknowledges there are indeed people who neglect their faith for reasons of business and wealth. However, as he points out, it is not the wealth issue itself which causes the problem but rather the shaky foundations of the person's faith to begin with.
Would a loving God wish to see God’s children in poverty, A Puju asks his readers. Many believers at the grassroots level still lead lives of incredible hardship. As children of a loving God, we should make best use of our God-given abilities to achieve wealth, A Puju concludes.

**Western Music + Chinese Words = Good Chinese hymns?**

(ANS) When first encountering Chinese congregations worshipping, a Western listener may well be surprised to find many old favourites among the hymns being sung. The impression given, however, that the Chinese church only worships to the tune of old western hymns is somewhat deceptive. *Zanmeishi* ("Songs of Praise"), the standard hymnal used in Protestant churches all over China, also contains around 100 Chinese hymns based on ethnic Chinese melodies. However, for Xu Mu from Jilin, this is not enough. In March’s edition of *Tian Feng*, the magazine of the China Christian Council, the author calls for even more indigenous Chinese hymns instead of mere "Chinese words set to Western tunes."

Xu begins his article by pointing out that every period has its own language, not only a written or spoken language but also the language of music. As Chinese, China’s Christians desire to express their faith through their own language. This is why hymns of Chinese origin are especially popular among Chinese Christians. Chinese believers find these melodies easier to pick up and remember than some of the strange-sounding pieces imported via Western missionaries.

All musical artists love their own culture and language, Xu maintains. Only if they root their hymns in their own culture they will be successful. The author offers up some suggestions for the creation of genuinely Chinese hymns.

Xu first suggests using China’s traditional "court" music as a source of inspiration for hymns. The current Chinese hymnal, *Zanmeishi*, already contains a number of songs adapted from traditional pieces for the Chinese zither (guzheng). Although not easy to sing, believers recognize and appreciate them, Xu points out.

Traditional folk music can serve as another resource when creating hymns with a Chinese flavor. In *Zanmeishi*, hymn number 365 ("Living Out Christ") is an example of a hymn based on a minority nationality song. Xu also believes that Chinese opera in its many different local varieties can also offer beautiful melodies which might inspire Christian hymn writers. However, Xu cautions that artists wishing to create meaningful hymns for contemporary Chinese believers must relate such hymns to contemporary everyday life. Though based on ancient melodies, the hymn’s content must be relevant to the present day.

Xu then outlines a second approach to hymn writing which complements the tapping of original Chinese music sources. Just as the famous horse painter, Xu Beihong, merged Western and Chinese painting techniques into something new and very Chinese, so hymn writers should also delve into the church music of other cultures for inspiration. Again, both the church music and the folk music of other cultures should be explored.
A final important factor in the process of creating Chinese church music is the personality and the faith background of the composers themselves. If composers apply their faith and personality in an intimate and genuine manner during the composition process, the result will be hymns that are not only a source of pleasure to God but also to God's creatures on earth singing them, Xu concludes.

A Portrait Of East China Seminary

(ANS) Following a portrait of the Jiangsu Vocational Bible School in its January issue (see ANS 2001.1/2.6), Tian Feng, the magazine of the Christian Council, continues with a look at East China Seminary in February (see also the Newsbriefs in this issue).

Founded in 1985, East China Seminary (Huadong Shenxuexyuan) is one of China's regional Protestant Christian seminaries and was until recently located in the city of Shanghai. Apart from Shanghai proper, the seminary also receives students from Shandong, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Fujian provinces for its various programs.

The seminary has already produced 266 graduates, and there are currently 91 students enrolled in the program. Apart from training future pastors, the seminary also offers a variety of programs for voluntary church workers, both on a full-time and part-time basis. Some 70% of the courses are dedicated to theology, the remaining courses covering more general education topics. Students are also offered elective classes in areas ranging from traditional calligraphy to learning musical instruments to computer courses.

In May 2000, the seminary moved into new premises situated near Sheshan, a rural area on the outskirts of Shanghai. "Light of Grace" (En Guang Lou), the central seminary building, is dominated by a chapel and a meeting room. The seminary's facilities include a computer room, dorms for 150 students and a library containing 50,000 works. The library, possibly China's largest seminary library today, was created by merging the original seminary library with the book collection that used to belong to the national China Christian Council / Three-Self Patriotic Movement committee.

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No Freedom To Worship? Just Look At Us!

After the Handover of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the border between the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Mainland China was maintained for practical purposes. When visitors to Hong Kong cross this border, they first arrive in Shenzhen (Guangdong Province). In March of this year, Rev. Ewing W. Carroll, Jr., head of the Amity Foundation’s Overseas Coordination Office in the Hong Kong SAR, traveled up to Shenzhen to find out more about the church situation in this boom town just across the border from Hong Kong.

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As a new resident to Hong Kong, I first visited the Hong Kong-China Border in 1966. That was the Cold War era and the beginning of China’s Cultural Revolution, a time when China was closed to nearly all visitors. The Kowloon-New Territories tours included a stopover at the Lok Ma Chau lookout, where photo-crazy tourists snapped away at a huge and unending expanse of rice paddies and vacant fields.

What a different world today! The Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was birthed in 1980 and today those rice paddies and vacant fields comprise a bustling city of over one million inhabitants from every corner of China. The view from Lok Ma Chau is now one of hi-rise commercial and residential blocks, tree-lined streets, shopping malls and restaurants serving nearly every imaginable flavor of Chinese food.

Shenzhen is now a Hong Kong Shoppers’ Paradise. Hong Kong residents think nothing of taking the forty-minute train ride to the border, passing through two immigration lines and then spending the day having their hair done, a massage, ordering new living room draperies, seeing a dentist or even undergoing laser eye surgery. Fresh vegetables and meat are a fraction of their cost in Hong Kong and invertebrate golfers can swing to their hearts delight on a nearby Jack Niklaus-designed golf course.

Basically, there are no Shenzhen natives. The small, earlier handful of fishing families are now difficult to find. Shenzhen residents come from every province and autonomous region throughout China. In time, a “Shenzhen identity” will evolve. But, until then, the city’s inhabitants are part and parcel of a pioneering spirit destined and determined to welcome modernity across that once closed border.

Browsing recently through the China Christian Council’s 2001 “Christian Diary,” I noted a listing for “Shenzhen Christian Church.” Partly from curiosity, partly to learn about church development in Guangdong Province, I decided to spend a recent March Sunday in Shenzhen: a tasty northern Chinese breakfast, a stroll through several parks, window shopping at scores of computer shops, conversations with numerous street vendors selling everything from fresh flowers to “genuine Rolex watches,” and a memorable experience at the Shenzhen Christian Church.

The Shenzhen Christian Church is not easy to find. Housed on two floors of a large factory building, the only visible way to locate the church is by an eight-inch high hand-painted sign above the building entrance: “Shenzhen Christian Church.” There are three Sunday services (9 am, Noon and 7 pm). Like churches all across China, if one wants a seat, it is best to arrive at least forty minutes early. The usual thirty-minute pre-worship practice of hymns was led by a young church worker. The fervor and enthusiasm for the singing was more striking than its musical accuracy. But there was a spirit of warmth, rejoicing and gratitude during the hymn practice which carried over into the worship service.

Unlike most churches in China, the Shenzhen congregation is predominately young people, mostly in their twenties. As the electronic bell chimed noon and the service began, there were at least 1,000 people packed into the factory-like hall. Latecomers were seated on folding stools in every aisle and vacant space. A large number of small children sat amazingly quietly with their parents, while another 30-40 attended Sunday School in the “Children’s Room.”
The youthful fifty-voice choir's singing of an upbeat modern Chinese anthem preceded a rather short (by Chinese standards) sermon entitled, "Light in Seeing God." Based on Exodus 34:28-32, Evangelist Zheng Enhai's sermon was strongly related to life in Shenzhen. She reminded listeners that while Shenzhen is a good place to play, eat and live, life's meaning comes from a strong inward relationship with God, not from outward pleasures. Seeking to address a growing problem of intolerance towards others Zheng said, "Christian love cannot be two-faced. We cannot sing sweet hymns in church and speak unkindly of others behind their backs. Walking in the light of God, as Moses did, requires determination, commitment and practice."

Four hymns were sung: "The Spacious Firmament on High", "Long Before The Universe Was Formed" (a beautiful new Chinese hymn with a lifting Chinese melody), "Jesus Bids Us Shine" and "God Make My Life A Little Light." All quite relevant to the sermon theme.

Reflecting Shenzhen's diverse population, worshipers come from all across China. Two men sitting on my left, were from Hunan Province. Sounds of other dialects were quite audible in conversations following worship.

Following the Benediction there was time for welcome and greetings. Pastor Liu asked first-time visitors to stand. There were about fifty of us and we were warmly welcomed by the congregation. A young woman sitting in the aisle to my immediate right had never been to a Christian worship service. She was overwhelmed by both the new language of "church talk" and the friendliness of the people.

First-time visitors were invited to a hospitality room following the service. Trained leaders were on hand to introduce the basic tenants and beliefs of Christianity. "Perhaps you can learn something about Jesus and the Christian faith," one of my Hunan neighbors suggested. My initial reaction was one of impatient defense. Here I was nearing the fortieth anniversary of my ordination and someone was inviting me to learn about Jesus. But how right he was! Our faith journeys never stop. There is so much yet to learn and experience.

After a few announcements, Pastor Liu then said "I have a few words to share with you all." Over the next fifteen minutes we were all given a crash course on church etiquette:

1. Be orderly. Liu spoke first about the Chinese word lian ("disorderly"). He said, "Some of you might think my remarks are directed at you. You're right!" Liu exhorted the people to be less talkative and more meditative before worship and when others are speaking. He reminded people that the high ceilings of the factory building meant still, small voices carried like the roar of a lion. "So please, try not to talk so much. What you tell your neighbor ends up being a direct message to me."

2. Stay seated. Worshipers were encouraged to reduce their "ups and downs" during the service. "Unless you really need to go to the toilet, I encourage you not to walk around during the service. Worship should be both a pleasant but solemn experience."

3. Seat Savers. Liu said that far too many worshipers believed they have the right to save an entire row of seats for family and friends. Not so. Seats should be for people actually present, not reserved for latecomers who are still drinking tea at a local restaurant.

4. Sit in front. Early arrivals tend to sit towards the back. Liu urged them to please sit in the front. This makes the ushers and greeters' job much easier and more convenient.

5. Worshipful attitude. The congregation was gently but firmly encouraged to: "Talk to God before the service, not with each other. During the service let God speak to us. After the service we can talk to one another as long as we like."

Following his crash course in church etiquette, Liu reported that he would soon be joining a Chinese church delegation on a visit to churches in New York City and San Francisco. Liu reminded people, "There are many Chinese congregations in America but very few believers. Church buildings are quite plentiful but few Americans actually attend worship services." He continued, "Church buildings in Europe are also quite plentiful, but the numbers of worshipers are diminishing year after year. They have beautiful buildings, but it seems people there feel they do not need God." Liu then said, "Let us pray for churches and Christians in America, Europe and all across China." And he did, for about eight minutes. He also prayed that Christians
in China would be even more diligent in leading others to Christ and asked that God would strengthen individual Christians amidst the growing materialism of urban China.

As I walked towards the exit, I saw on my left several persons taking other people's blood pressure. A sign behind them said: "Free Clinic." On my right was a book stall. I counted forty-five boxes of Bibles (about 500 copies in all), stacked along a wall. A woman originally from Shanghai, who was selling church calendars, greeted me with a huge smile. I replied, "I'm amazed that so many people attended today's service." She quickly answered, "Yes, most foreigners think there are no churches in China. They even think we have no freedom of worship. But look at us! No: bad, huh?"

ANS Documentation:

2001.3/4.9

An Open Letter on the Falungong Issue

The National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China and The China Christian Council

Recently, many friends overseas have asked us about the Falungong. This letter represents our perspectives:

The Falungong cult has run rampant in China in recent years. It first used Qigong (breathing exercises) to attract people concerned about their health. The practitioners were subsequently bewitched into following its leader, Li Hongzhi, submitting to him and accepting his heresies. They have subjected themselves to his spiritual control, abandoning their families and evading social responsibility. He has instigated his followers to gather in public places in order to disturb the social order. One case that shocked the whole country was the incident in Tiananmen Square on the eve of the Chinese Lunar New Year. Seven Falungong fanatics set themselves on fire in order to commit suicide. Two of the seven were stopped before they set themselves on fire. This human tragedy ended with two deaths and three cases of severe injuries. Among the victims were a 12-year-old girl, who died later despite intensive rescue efforts, and a female university student. The incident has aroused the indignation of the nation and over a million people from all walks of life in different parts of China have signed petitions against the Falungong cult.

We, the religious circles in China, strongly oppose the Falungong cult. Li Hongzhi's fallacies are just a mixture of doctrines of various religions that have been distorted, and misrepresented. Falun, the Wheel of the Law, was originally a symbol of Buddhism but has now been usurped and used in the name of the cult. Li Hongzhi has declared himself as "God", even greater than Jesus and Sakyamuni, who can protect and save mankind, who alone has the power to delay the explosion of the globe for 30 years and so on and so forth. Though there are hardly any Christians in China who would accept the absurdities of Li Hongzhi, we feel it necessary to reveal the ferocious nature of the cult so as to help keep more people away from danger.

We regard Falungong as a cult which is anti-human, anti-society and anti-science. It is by no means a respectable religion. From a Christian perspective, what Falungong advocates is totally in contradiction to the doctrines of Christianity. We worship the one true God, but the Falungong deifies an earthly person, Li Hongzhi. Our faith to Jesus Christ strengthens us and enables us to enjoy abundance of life, but the Falungong cult tempts its followers towards a pessimistic view of life and even toward the abandonment of life. We follow the Lord's teachings to love our neighbors as
ourselves, while Falungong makes its followers neglect their family members and even lose their own humanity. We seek the kingdom of God for the fulfillment of God's will on earth, but Falungong encourages its followers to "have no regard for life or death" and to commit suicide by setting themselves on fire in order to enter heaven. In fact, what the Falungong flaunts--"truth, goodness and tolerance"--are only empty words, for "you will know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7: 20).

In China, religious freedom is a basic right for citizens, enshrined in the Constitution and by law. We note that the Protestant Church in China has grown rapidly in the last two decades, with over 15 million believers and more than 48,000 churches and meeting points, 70% of which are newly built. Moreover, 18 seminars at different levels have also been set up, and over 28 million copies of the Bible have been printed and distributed. All these are powerful proofs that people fully enjoy religious freedom in China. The ban on the Falungong cult by the government does not affect the implementation of the policy of religious freedom at all. On the contrary, there are now even more people in society who support the policy of religious freedom because they are able to distinguish the difference between religions and cults.

We believe that human beings are created by God and have equal rights to enjoy freedom. But the Bible also tells us, "Do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil." (1Pet. 2; 16) It is an international norm that no one is allowed to violate the freedom of others, to do harm to the health of others or to jeopardize public order under the pretext of individual freedom. The Falungong cult has been involved in many illegal activities in China, such as illegal publication, evasion of taxes, advocating its fallacies and thereby causing injuries, mutilation and even deaths among its practitioners. Therefore, the ban on Falungong is intended to guarantee religious freedom and protect innocent people from its harmful elements. This is by no means in violation of human rights. Rather, it helps guarantee human rights to the greatest extent. Hence, Christians in China fully support this decision on the part of the government.

We pray for those innocent people who are deceived by the cult of Falungong. We will try our best to help them pull free from the cult, to come to know the truth and to enjoy genuine freedom in their hearts.

We appeal to Christians and people worldwide to guard against the Falungong cult and to keep this social evil from becoming even more of a calamity.

NEWSBRIEFS

Church Administration: At a meeting of church representatives in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the province's first CC/TSPM committee was formally established. The ceremony, held on 29th and 30th December 29 2000, was attended by 57 church representatives from throughout the province and was presided over by Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) representatives from municipal and county levels. 21 members were elected to the new administrative body, with a standing committee of 13 persons. Rev. Qiang Fuhuo was elected head of the province's TSPM committee and Rev. Gao Zhongxiao, the Ningxia Christian Council's General Secretary.

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Social Involvement: Churches from more affluent coastal cities are taking an increasingly more active role in charitable work in China's poorer interior areas. Zhejiang's provincial CC/TSPM committee recently made a generous donation to Bije District in Guizhou province. This underdeveloped area on Guizhou's western plateau is home to some 35 ethnic groups with a population of nearly six million people, including 150,000 Protestant Christians. With this donation, 300 students
were guaranteed primary school education and 250 extremely poor households received financial assistance, on average RMB 300 (=US$ 36 approx.) per household. Money also went towards decoration work for a rural church, and 10,000 rural residents received padded jackets to help them guard against the winter cold.

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Anniversary: East China Seminary (Huadong Shenxueyuan) celebrated its 15th anniversary in Shanghai on 11th November 2000 (see also the seminary portrait in this issue). This was the first formal opportunity for school alumni to reunite once again. Topics discussed at the gathering included how to implement the principles of Three-Self and run the church well, how to develop a pastoral theology adapted to socialist society, and how theological seminaries ought to be the bases for the building of theology. In his sermon during a Thanksgiving Service on 23rd November, seminary president Su Deci highlighted a few of the challenges the institution is facing. These include keeping up with a rapidly changing society, serving churches at the grassroots level and developing theological research of a high quality.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Guangzhou [Canton]
2) Shenzhen
3) Shanghai
4) Ji'an