Dear Reader,

As Christians all over the world celebrate Christmas, Chinese believers are part of this worldwide joyous community. It is a season of elaborate worship services, where every congregation tries to bring out its best preaching, singing and performing, and the packed Christmas services are a source of attraction for many who venture into a church building for the first time in their lives.

"Pursuing the Three Self does not mean that we are entirely separate from the church ecumenical," Rev. Cao Shengjie explained during a recent meeting with German President Johannes Rau (p2). This edition of ANS reflects many facets of the growing integration of the Chinese church with the ecumenical movement as well as the rising importance of China as a global player. When China completed its first manned space flight this past October, Christian leaders joined into the nationwide celebrations with congratulatory messages (p6).

Meanwhile, the persistent influence of Western church architecture in China causes artist He Qi to ask: How can Chinese churches find a unique architectural style that does justice to its Chinese environment while at the same time keeping those Western style elements that are worth retaining? (p7) In many ways, the Chinese church's search for an appropriate architecture reflects its overall quest for a proper balance of Western and Chinese elements.

And finally, the church leadership continues its bridge-building mission with trips abroad, because "From One Ancestor God Made All Nations." (p11)

With kind regards from the editorial desk,

Katrin Friedler

Subscription Renewal for 2004

We hope that you have enjoyed reading ANS over the past year, and that you have found it a source of news and information about the Church in China. If you would like to continue receiving ANS in 2004, please fill in the enclosed subscription form and mail it to us along with your subscription fees.
German President Johannes Rau Visits National Church Leadership

(ANS) During his recent trip to China, German president Johannes Rau had the opportunity to meet with representatives from the national church leadership. Accompanied by his wife, Rau met with Rev. Cao Shengjie, President of the China Christian Council, Rev. Hua Huizeng from the Shanghai Church Affairs Committee, and Rev. Mei Kangjun, Acting Vice General Secretary of the National TSPM, on September 14, 2003. Rau, who has a strong church background and used to be head of a Christian publishing house earlier in his career, became German president in May 1999. Tian Feng reported on the visit in its October edition.

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The meeting, which had been organized by the Shanghai Municipal Foreign Affairs Bureau, was characterized by a very friendly atmosphere. In spite of his tight schedule, the German president had managed to arrange a meeting with Chinese Christian representatives, a fact which reflected, he said, his strong interest regarding the Chinese church.

Just a few months earlier, in April of 2003, a Chinese church delegation had visited Germany, Rev. Cao informed the German president. One of the highlights of that visit had been a Chinese-German symposium for church leaders in the hometown of Martin Luther, Wittenberg. German and Chinese churches had continued their talks about theological education, social service, and the building of the church. Rau’s visit to the Chinese church leadership in Shanghai followed a suggestion from German church leaders after the meetings with their Chinese counterparts.

Rev. Cao Shengjie then introduced the situation of the Chinese Protestant church to President Rau. "Following the principle of the Three Self does not mean that we are totally separated from the church ecumenical. We are a member of the WCC, and one of our pastors [Rev. Gao Ying] is a member of the WCC’s Central Committee. We also run a big printing press in Nanjing in cooperation with the United Bible Societies." As Rev. Cao explained, there are currently around 20,000 pastoral workers in the Chinese Protestant church, including pastors, elders and graduates of theology that have not been ordained yet. With its efforts at theological reconstruction, the church tries to upgrade the quality of faith in believers and church leaders alike.

Rev. Cao also used the opportunity to point out the government's altered understanding of religion. Only during the Cultural Revolution, she said, was religion oppressed, while the third generation of the Chinese leadership had explicitly acknowledged the long-term existence of religion and had recognized religious believers as active forces in building socialism. "Of course, as a social entity the church will occasionally come across instances where the government's religious laws are not properly implemented. Then we will try to voice our opinions or make suggestions through the People’s Congress, the People's Political Consultative Conference or other channels in order to help the government improve."

"Is your work as Christians limited in any way?" was one of the last questions the German president asked before leaving, the intense conversation already having
caused him to stay beyond the scheduled time. Rev. Cao and Rev. Hua replied that the work of Chinese Christians was not limited and that, on the contrary, the church was trying to encourage Christians to go out into society and be salt and light.

After the meeting, the Chinese hosts showed themselves very happy with the encounter. Rau had managed to ask sharp questions from a western perspective while at the same time maintaining a very friendly attitude, Rev. Hua Huizeng remarked. And Rev. Mei Kangjun felt that the visit had provided the Chinese church with a good platform to inform outside observers about ongoing changes and developments in Chinese church life.

2003.11/12.2

"A New Phase Of Theological Reconstruction": Bishop K.H. Ting On The Bible

(ANS) Five years ago during a meeting in Ji'nan, Chinese church leaders set theological reconstruction on top of their agenda. Under the leadership of Bishop K.H. Ting, the strengthening of theological reflection has since become a priority of church activities on various levels of theological education. In July of 2003, during a major conference on theological reconstruction held in Shanghai, Bishop K.H. Ting announced a new phase of theological reconstruction. Below is a summary of his speech reprinted in September's edition of Tian Feng.

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In the five years following the Ji'nan resolution, church leaders of all levels have engaged in lively discussions in their efforts of strengthening theological reconstruction. So far, the debate has centred around the issue of justification by faith and, linked to this, the relationship between believers and unbelievers.

The dichotomy of "heaven vs. hell" was used by foreign missionaries in their efforts to attract believers when they first preached the Gospel in China. Even today, some Chinese preachers threaten their audiences with the prospect of hell. In our efforts aimed at building theology, we want to reduce the importance of justification by faith. After all, taking the idea of justification by faith alone would mean that some very bad people would go to heaven and some very good people would go to hell simply for their beliefs. Now, after having engaged in theological reconstruction, many church workers say that they do not have the heart to support this point of view any more; this is one of the big successes of theological reconstruction.

Two years ago, Lutheran churches and the Catholic Church signed an agreement to appease their eternal debate about justification by faith. This agreement can be seen as a sign that the more theologically evolved European churches put less emphasis on the idea of justification by faith than they used to do. If we now try to do the same, we can see this as a sign of improving both Christian culture in China and our communication with non-believers. These are all good things.

As less and less people object to the aims of building theology, specifically the weakening of the idea of justification by faith, we can now enter into a new phase of theological reconstruction, and move on to another important topic: how to view the Bible.
Many wrong ideas about the Bible as being totally identical with God's word abound among Chinese Christians. Some Chinese believers will say that any quote from the Bible is God's word, and if a preacher mentions "God's word", they will immediately think of the Bible. It is a misunderstanding to think that the Bible and God's word are entirely identical, a misunderstanding that was imported by foreign missionaries. If some people claim that every single sentence in the Bible is God's word, they elevate the Bible into a position similar to the trinity, something which is not in line with orthodox Christian beliefs.

The oldest parts of the Bible are 3,000 years old, and the Bible contains both God's revelations and human reflections about God. As a result, the Bible necessarily contains human errors. For example, there are parts in the Old Testament that do not correspond with the laws of nature (see, e.g., 1 Kings 7:23 and 2 Chronicles 4:2 on the figure of pí).

Another example can be found in Deuteronomy, chapter three. The God we find in this passage talking about how the liberated Israelites flee Egypt and enter Canaan is a very violent God, a God who is not morally outstanding. Can we still say that every sentence of the Bible is God's word? We can use such violent language to describe Hitler, or Fascism, or the Japanese invaders, but we cannot make these words into God's word. This is not to criticize the Bible or to oppose God, but to say how we should look at the Bible. There is one sentence by Martin Luther that should guide us in our view of the Bible. "In the manger," he said, "there was not only the holy child, but also straw."

What message does the Bible give to people? "God is love," this message from John 4:8, is the central message of the whole Bible. The passage from Deuteronomy quoted above speaks of a God full of hate and anger; maybe Chinese Christians have not learned the message of our loving God well enough yet. If we say God is full of love, we cannot maintain that floods that hit China are his punishment. God loves all human beings.

The Bible contains descriptions of God and how he guides us, as well as it contains tales of the human quest for God. The students at Nanjing Seminary often say that the four Gospels are much easier to understand than Paul's letters, the Gospels reveal us God's loving nature in the person of Jesus. Because of God's loving nature, we shouldn't believe it easily if people say that God wants to destroy the world. God is not like a traditional Chinese folk God who throws human beings into hell, and God is not like Hitler.

God is the king of creation, and he did not stop his creative work after six days. God keeps working on the half-finished products of creation, God keeps working on us and the world.

As I see the ideal Chinese church, Chinese Christians should feel honoured to be Chinese; the ideal Chinese church would help Christians to love the church and their country. I hope we can make Chinese Christians more human, rational, and morally good, and that we can create a church that is to God's taste and loves a loving God. Wu Yaozong was opposed by some as someone putting too much emphasis on the loving side of our God. I think that this opposition was wrong.
We want to change Chinese Christianity into something that is adapted to the trends of our times. This will also be welcomed by the Party, as this aim is in harmony with socialism.

2003.11/12.3

From "Child Church" To Independent Grown-Up

(ANS) The following article by Presbyter Ji Jianhong, Chairman of the National TSPM, continues the ongoing discussion in Chinese church circles on how to improve church management. After increasing the volume of the church work done, raising its quality has become a major concern for the national church leadership, and "running the church well" is seen as one precondition for this.

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Though they may differ in doctrine, liturgy and traditions, all religions form part of a social community. That is to say, although their activities and goals vary, they all have an administrative structure, and their management keeps being improved and altered with the change of times. Christianity, for example, conducted its first activities in synagogues, and when early Christians started building the first churches, simple forms of administration were introduced, all with the aim of spreading the new religion among Jews and non-Jews.

Later on, as heresies emerged, the need to preserve the purity of the Christian faith produced the Apostle's Creed in the second century A.D. and the Nicean Creed two centuries later. As society continued to develop and Christianity spread farther, Christians developed administrative systems that fall into three big categories: supervisory systems like the Roman Catholic or the Lutheran churches, where the power lies with bishops; secondly Presbyterian systems as represented by Presbyterian and the Reformed churches, in which decisions are taken by elders, and finally churches that are traditionally congregation-oriented in their decision-making processes, such as Baptist and Mennonite churches.

The Chinese Protestant church has pursued the path of denominational unity since the 1950s, yet because of the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, all efforts to build a management system for the Chinese church were brought to a halt while the ban of religious activities lasted.

Although religious faith is a private matter, the number and scope of religious activities ultimately gives religion a social and political function as well. During the rise of capitalism, religion was used by the dominating groups to serve their purposes within their own countries, and during the imperialist expansion of the capitalist nations, religion was again used as an instrument by the imperialist forces, this time to extend their exterior power. Accordingly, the church management was influenced by the conditions of imperialist expansion both in its contents and in its structure. Both the theology and the church management structures of the time reflect this imperialistic attitude, for example, China was seen as a "child church" that belonged to a foreign "mother church".
These are historical facts, it is not a subjective analysis. With its efforts to strengthen theological reconstruction, the Chinese church is pursuing the big plan of deepening the Three Self. And with the strengthening of theological reflection, our church management has to be upgraded as well. Good church management constitutes the structural guarantee for implementing theological thinking that is adapted to socialist society. That is to say, church management should be guided by the needs of building the body of the church as well as by the thought of adapting to socialist society.

We can distinguish between dealing with human relations (to improve management), and dealing with matters directly, be it in a controlling, planning or supervising function. Personnel management is a key factor in successful management, because the implementation of any single matter has to be achieved through human resources.

Successful administration further requires four types of capacities: technical skills, the ability to manage human relations well, the ability for strategic thinking, and finally, a clear sense of the correct direction in which to develop. Above all, good management of human relationships is important. To achieve this goal, "management from the heart" is crucial to create an atmosphere of trust, communication and understanding.

2003.11/12.4

**Christian Leaders Greet China's First Astronaut**

(ANS) On 16 October 2003, China celebrated its first manned flight in space. Astronaut Yang Liwei completed a historic space journey aboard Shenzhou Five and was hailed as a hero upon his return to Earth. Alongside their compatriots, Chinese Christians expressed their joy and excitement at this event, which for many Chinese marked the "true" arrival of their nation in the 21st century. Below, we reprint some of these reactions taken from November's edition of Tian Feng.

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After Yang Liwei's touchdown, the phone in the Tian Feng offices kept ringing with well-wishers from all over the country. Calling from the astronaut's home province of Liaoning, Rev. Shen Guangwei from the provincial CCC/TSPM committee said: "Praised be the grace of God, who keeps blessing our country and is leading this ancient nation with its 5,000 years of history with big strides into the circle of modern nations!" As Rev. Shen continued to point out in his message, the astronaut served as a big source of inspiration for his compatriots in his home province, who would be struggling even harder to modernize Liaoning to do justice to its new reputation as a "hero's home province". Shen also composed a poem in celebration of the occasion.

Rev. Gao Ying from the Municipal CCC/TSPM committee in Beijing expressed her excitement at the event, saying that the successful completion of Shenzhou Five's journey with Yang Liwei had greatly raised China's international standing as well as China's confidence. "As our nation keeps developing, we should match this development within the church through raising the quality of faith."
In another telephonic greeting, Elder Fu Xianwei from Shanghai’s Municipal CCC/TSPM committee said that the successful launch of Shenzhou Five was proof of China’s power and had boosted national pride, including the patriotic feelings of China’s Christians. “It encourages us... to combine the practical implementation of Christianity, the strengthening of theological reflection and the raising of the quality of faith with the adaptation to a socialist society that is developing and progressing day by day.”

2003.11/12.5

What Do Our Worship Spaces Say About Us?

(ANS) If you were commissioned to construct a new church building in a Chinese city, what would it look like? What factors would you take into consideration in light of that environment? He Qi, professor of art at Nanjing Theological Seminary, recently pondered this issue in October’s edition of Tian Feng. Below is an abbreviated version of his article.

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The world’s notable church architecture can be divided into two general categories of design. On one hand you have the “cathedral” (key words: grand; traditional), and on the other hand the more common “chapel”. The cathedral may take the rectangular shape of a basilica or else a Latin cross. The chapel category will tend to be smaller, more modern and having a centralized and/or radiating floor plan. Each type of building carries with it its own influence on the worship gathering. In modern centralized plans, what is emphasized is the preaching and the gathering together, but the basilica or the Latin cross building style emphasizes the order and the process of the traditional rite of worship itself.

The traditional cathedral and the modern chapel both have their own distinct advantages to take into consideration as we consider our Chinese church. The length of a cathedral’s nave serves as a space where we revisit the Way of the Cross, the process of Christ’s passion. In many traditional Catholic churches, you can find the stations of the cross represented by 14 oil paintings, 7 on each side of the nave (sanctuary). So the baptismal font in the foyer is the spiritual life’s starting point, the nave represents the course of the soul’s pilgrimage and the cross at the altar is the soul’s destination.

By contrast, among modern churches in Japan, Korea and the U.S.A., the greatest number by far make use of a centralized, radiating plan. This is in light of the fact that most congregations are, by nature, inattentive. The modern-style church wants to be not-too-big, yet embracing diversity (as defined by the local community’s make-up), with an average seating capacity of around 200 to 400 people. It emphasizes the preached Word, the concentration of fellowship and sharing together. The multifunctional facilities within its limited space are a part of meeting the manifold needs of a pluralistic society. The modern-style church is, on average, nothing like a traditional cathedral in scale, and furthermore the worship practices there do not follow traditional patterns and conventions.

Do we have to choose one style over the other? Is there a way for us in China to reconcile the old and the new? Christian liturgy’s many beneficial traditions are worth maintaining, and as one gains appreciation for the symbolism of the cathedral, today’s prevalent centralized chapel form of church does not seem very suitable for
elaborate forms of worship. From this point of view, one's experience of formal worship requires a definite quality/quantity of space in which to unfold and open. Only a space with adequate width and depth can deliver any sense of God's glory and holiness.

Applying this reasoning to China's situation, however, is difficult. Due to historical realities and limitations, most of China's cathedrals lack depth of interior space. When a couple is joined in holy matrimony, and the stately Wedding March is played, the prelude is not even finished before the bride has reached the front of the church. This situation is changing now, but many new churches reveal a very narrow view of what constitutes good church design. A "proper cathedral" rightly accentuates feelings of majesty and profundity, heightening the sense of connection between the lowly and the divine, but the Chinese Church should by all means possible avoid the classic neo-gothic motif. Associations with the 19th century's Victorian-era neo-gothicism serves to perpetuate a link with the colonial age. Moreover, it strengthens the image of Christianity as a "foreign religion". Many Chinese churches do favor two prominent towers with pointed spires, but this is the most prominent feature of those late 19th century neo-gothic churches.

Shunning this design element would effectively shun associations with the height of colonial era neo-gothicism. Do not think that the efforts to break new ground in modern church design will not compare with those classical styles - I have paid visits to the Asia-Pacific region and to more than a hundred indigenized and modernized churches throughout the world, standing and witnessing the tribute each has made to the setting of the "House of God" that moves every heart present in an unforgettable way. Some time back I went to Hong Kong Alliance Bible Seminary's new chapel with its understated modern style, as well as to the Shenzhen area's bold and magnificent "Ark" cathedral, Meilin Christian Church, and these worship spaces moved me to the utmost. I found in both places great beauty, a hundred times greater than any neo-gothic reproduction.

Architecture always expresses the spirit of the age, and church architecture expresses the church's theological reflection. The Church in every age, considering the structure of that space that is "God's House," does her very best to bring forth a respectful contribution in its conception. Witness the work of 15th-century architect Brunelleschi, whose novel dome for Florence Cathedral trumpeted the advent of the Italian Renaissance, or look at the chapel at Ronchamp, designed in the 1950's by LeCorbusier, which set off the upsurge of post-modern church architecture.

Good church architecture strives to anticipate forthcoming thought and practices. The Chinese Church has for many years put forth all sorts of great effort into the "Three Self" movement and the reconstruction of theological thinking, and is held in high repute throughout the world. But if we continue to imitate 19th-century colonial era neo-gothic churches, this will certainly bring extremely disappointing results. The millions of yuan that have been spent on gothic style churches will only bring us mockery and discredit.

In considering a church structure, there may be a requisite amount of decoration needed, but it should not be an overly extravagant Baroque-like style. In the early 16th-century the Pope in Rome commissioned the reconstruction of St. Peter's
Basilica. Also, throughout Europe, the sale of indulgences by parishes was used to finance construction. These were events that ignited the flames of Martin Luther's reform. And here and now, in today's Chinese Church, which cannot yet be called well-to-do, creating indulgent associations with a place and a time so far removed is meaningless and does not glorify God.

Tradition may be good - even important - but whose tradition is it? An avenue worth exploration might include a synthesis of modern minimalism, symbolism and even some quintessentially Chinese elements. It is a very significant point that while the evolution of church design spans nearly two thousand years and is a great heritage not to be ignored, we must remember that the building and its purpose are two separate things. The Christian faith lends itself to indigenization, and finds expression in many colours around the world. Why should the Chinese Church not reflect its own character in its church design? Again, there must be a reconciliation of the old and the new.

If we hope to be able to maintain Christian liturgy's many beneficial traditions, we must place stress on the heart of traditional Christianity that brings out the substance of that liturgy. Likewise, we should go into the heart of traditional church architecture to extract the symbolism that is there as a framework for us to work with.

To begin with, there are the three large entry doors, symbolizing the Trinity. Just beyond these a small entrance hall, a design concept that developed at a very early period to give the feeling that one is proceeding into a sacred place, as one does not immediately enter the nave or see the altar right away. In this small foyer there is a baptismal font. Above, a skylight is opened in the ceiling and the water in the font serves as a mirror reflecting and spreading the shaft of light being sent down, all of this symbolizing that the spiritual life of the disciple begins with baptism. Two large doorways lead from the foyer into the nave, implying the nail holes in the crucified Jesus' feet. And so on...

If you gave this symbol-filled description to an architect who had just suffered a total loss of his memory of traditional church design, what would he produce? I would prefer that the architect be from Suzhou. That city's old architecture can provide the right kind of inspiration for a project like this.

2003.11/12.6

Rise, Deborah, Rise! Reflections On Women In The Chinese Church

(ANS) "Two women were the first to find out about the resurrection of Jesus, and today again, it is the women that are the backbone of the church," a Chinese Christian woman once remarked. Ever since the reopening of churches in the 1980s, the resurrection of the Chinese church has been inextricably linked to the service and participation of women." With these words, Chen Meilin, head of the CCC/TSPM's Overseas Relations Department, starts her reflections about the situation of women in the Chinese church. Constituting two-thirds of the church membership, women and women's ministry are central to the development of the Chinese church. Below, we summarize her reflections taken from September's edition of Tian Feng.

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Two sayings reflect the position of women in China very accurately, the traditional "It is a virtue for a woman not to have any talents," and the modern "Women carry half the sky." Traditionally, women were seen as their husband's possession; many of them would give up their own surnames after marriage, and during some time, women even expressed their subservience through the custom of binding their feet. Through numerous revolutionary movements, the position of Chinese women has been greatly raised.

The growing number of Christian women is linked to the increasingly deep theological reflections of Chinese Christians. In some of his writings, Bishop K.H. Ting has expressed highest regard for feminist theology.

Likewise, more and more theologians and biblical scholars come to realize that a large number of passages in the Bible describe God's love for his people from a mother's perspective. Examples are Psalm 131:2 and Isaiah 49:15: "So the Lord answers: Can a woman forget her own baby and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you." Having endured gender-related oppression, women are particularly sensitive to these passages. China's female Christians are now actively trying to overcome people's preconceptions about the "gender" of God or God's view of women and men. During the recent conference on the view of the Bible, several female evangelists and pastors dared to challenge traditional theological notions and elicited a strong discussion on Paul's view of women.

Why have women become the majority of Chinese Christians? This experience is not unique to China. One reason for this phenomenon may be that women are more easily marginalized than men in processes of economic and political conflict; this seems to be a common pattern in many parts of the world. Women are more in need of comfort and reliability, and they also have a stronger sense of cohesion than men. As a result we can see that in China there are many more women believers, lay workers and students of theology, although the educational level of women tends to be lower. Women are active in all domains of church life; they prepare communion services, play the piano, do the accounts, preach and visit the sick, every woman according to her own possibilities.

Today, there are more than 400 women pastors in the Chinese church, and 98% of them were ordained during the past twenty years. In 1993, we initiated the establishment of women's committees to facilitate the church's women's ministries. Until today, 18 provinces have followed the model and set up women's committees. They promote women's participation on all levels of church work, from teachers of theology down to those at the grassroots who attend the church's literacy classes in order to study the Bible. In 1995, Chinese women took part in the International Women's Prayer Day, an event that marked their first participation in a major ecumenical initiative.

A woman pastor once said: "Women's liberation will never be over." This is to say that Christian women can reach a higher status and more important functions, but that their fundamental liberation is a much bigger challenge. As Christians, we believe that God does not prefer some people over others, yet within the church, we find some people who will quote Paul to support their own male chauvinism, without
taking Paul's context into account. As a result, some parishes refuse to ordain women, while in other places women may be nominally ordained but not allowed to perform all sacred rites. Until today, some local churches, including women themselves, believe that women are unclean during their menstruation and will keep them from preaching during those times.

We still have not reached the goal of a 30% representation of women in our National Christian Conference; currently, female delegates make up 26.9% of the Conference.

Another problem is the increasing divorce rate in society, a trend which also affects the church. If a women pastor wants a divorce, no matter for what reason, believers in her church will usually not accept it. For a male pastor, though, a divorce will be more easily accepted. Recently, two female church workers in Shanghai helped a woman in an abusive marriage to achieve a divorce. Many believers, in particular women, are calling for pastoral counselling services to help them deal with marital and family problems and to increase their legal awareness.

This shows us that if we want to liberate women, one key problem is to increase their sense of self-worth and self-protection. The Chinese church follows the Three Self principle; we demand a forth self for Chinese women believers: self-respect. And as Chinese women theologians go abroad for further studies, they will be better equipped to make a contribution to Chinese feminist theology and the liberation of female believers.

2003.11/12.7

ANS Feature:

From One Ancestor God Made All Nations (Acts 17:26-28)

On a recent trip to Canada, Rev. Cao Shengjie, President of the China Christian Council, was invited to preach at Trinity-St. Paul's Church in Toronto, Canada. “Even though the geographical distance between China and Canada is pretty large, and we are quite different in complexions, languages and lifestyles, I feel grateful to be able to be here and worship God with our Canadian brothers and sisters on this World Communion Sunday,” she started her sermon.

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This occasion reminds me of what Paul once said when he was preaching in Athens. He said that all people in the world are from one origin, “from one ancestor God made all nations to inhabit the whole earth.” We should have close relations with one another, worship and praise our God, and count the abundant grace he bestowed to us together.

Today, the Chinese Protestant Church is flourishing. There are about 16 million church members, twenty times as many as we had 50 years ago. All the 50,000 churches and meeting points are packed with Christians. We have printed over 33 million copies of the Bible. There are 18 seminaries and Bible schools in China now, with 1,500 students enrolled this year. What encourages us the most is that more and more intellectuals and young people are coming to the city churches. That reminds us naturally of what we can learn from Paul, when he was introducing the Gospel to scholars of the Epicurean and the Ciceronian Schools in Athens, the center of Greek philosophy at the time.

Reading Paul's sermon, I have the following three observations. 
1) God is the creator of all human beings, and all our actions, our lives and our survival depend on him. Therefore, people should treat
each other equally, understand each other, respect each other and love each other as brothers and sisters.

We all believe that God is the creator, and it is God who created all creatures and all human beings. We all acknowledge that God is taking care of the historical process of the world with its lands and boundaries. When we are facing chaos, uneasiness, confrontation and competition, however, we very often forget that the people living in different places are created and loved by God no matter how different they are. All people are struggling to live better lives. The all-loving God does not only bestow the basic requirements (sunshine and rain) for our existence, but with his holy hands also sustains and guides us to go forward. Even though there are sin, oppression and violence, we are not pessimistic, since God is responsible for our life, action and survival. We, therefore, live our daily lives in God's love. When we remember God's great concern for his creation, we will necessarily remember to treat those other people created by God as our brothers and sisters.

In the past, the Chinese Church was limited by narrow theological thinking. Some Christians used to believe that only Christians had the life of Christ and were their brothers and sisters. They believed that the sufferings of non-believers had nothing to do with Christians. Since the founding of the New China, we have felt more and more that our earthly life is an integral part of our country, our society and the destiny of the people around us. In the past, most Chinese people had difficulties in having their basic needs fulfilled. Now, only about 30 million people in China live under the poverty line, that means about three percent of the entire population. This is a progress achieved by the efforts of both Christians and non-Christians.

What we need to learn now is not to draw a clear line between Christians and non-Christians, but to identify with our fellow people. We need to treat other people as our brothers and sisters, and love other people. This is not to deny the differences, but to truly learn to respect and tolerate other people by understanding why they have a certain point of view, and how their life contexts and life experiences are different from ours. "Love is all embracing." Only when we give up our extreme conceitness and overestimation of ourselves, will we be able to achieve mutual love and to protect world peace.

2) Everyone has his own cultural background. Yet we can explore, conjecture and understand that our God is not far from us. The city of Athens was full of temples. Even though Paul was spreading the Gospel, he did not condemn those idol worshipers as "going to hell," but affirmed that they were "religious," and affirmed that all people could explore God. Then, starting from the unknown God, he guided them to know the true God.

China is an ancient country with a long civilization. Long before the birth of Jesus, Chinese philosophers like Confucius and Laozi had plenty of speculations on life. When the Gospel entered China in the 19th Century, some missionaries with a superiority complex linked the Gospel to western culture and even western power. They looked down on and even verbally attacked the established Chinese culture and Chinese society. As a result, Christianity was regarded as a "foreign religion," and the Gospel could not reach people widely. In over one hundred years, the number of Protestant Christians reached only 700,000. When Buddhism had come to China, in contrast with Christianity, it had integrated itself well into Chinese culture (e.g. the architecture of its temples), and therefore won the favour of the Chinese people.

Paul told the Athenians that God "is not far from each of us." His position here is very close to that of the Ciceronian School in that there is a divine spark in human beings, and goodness means to live a life according to natural law. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets." (1 Heb 1:1) We should admit that God has his general or natural revelation in every nation and every culture. The Chinese Protestant Church is struggling to be able to watch with a positive attitude the efforts other people make in seeking truth, goodness and fineness. We shall no longer confront other people on purpose, but try to have dialogue and cooperation on any possible common ground. Chinese Christians are still a small group in China. If we have an open mind, we will be able to have cordial relations with the people around us.

3) The real requirement is "repentance", that is the transformation of the mind by the renewal of the Holy Spirit. At the end of his sermon, Paul brings forth the requirement of repentance. Evangelism is not only to preach about the doctrines, but also to inspire people to reflect themselves and to change their lifestyles under the enlightenment of God. May
the resurrected life of Jesus be revealed through us, and may the world be brimming with love.

In the past 50 years, we have continuously experienced the love of God. Now our freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the constitution, and the exterior environment is very favourable for our church. The present challenge for our church is to bear lively witness. We shall tell the world that a church does not do lip service, but stands faithfully with the people in whatever situation, and we shall reveal that God is in us.

There is a church in a small town in northeast China, in a very cold place. It used to have very little influence, and the congregation was very small. After snowstorms, the people there would only sweep their own entrances. The overpasses that sweeper trucks could not reach would be very slippery and pedestrians would fall down. Some of the Christians of that church made a decision to be responsible to sweep the overpasses, and they immediately brought it into action. Their behaviour won the favour of the local people. Now the church has nearly one thousand members. The most important reason for the Chinese Protestant Church to develop rapidly in recent years is because of that kind of beautiful witness from our Christians.

May the Churches in China and in Canada pray for and support each other and witness the great love of our common God with concrete actions. May the churches in the whole world be shining gold lamp stands and lighten up our environment.

2003.11/12.8

ANS Feature:

Glowing Faith In The Freezing Cold: Churches In Inner Mongolia

Inner Mongolia is a province with a unique ethnic set up. Apart from the Han Chinese majority, there are Manchus, Koreans and a number of smaller minorities, while Mongolians only form 15% of the Inner Mongolian population. Spread over a territory of more than one million square kilometres, Inner Mongolia's Christians are even more of a minority than their brothers and sisters in other parts of the country. But just like elsewhere in China, churches in the province are growing. It is noteworthy that Mongolian congregations are something new and special in Inner Mongolia. According to Chinese understanding, one of the defining characteristics of some of the national minorities is their religion, for example Islam for the Hui minority. Following this logic, until 2000 it was not possible for Mongolian Chinese to officially become Christians - they were perceived as Lamaist Buddhists by definition. Katrin Fiedler reports.

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Between 100,000 and 170,000 Christians live in Inner Mongolia, the sparsely populated province that stretches along the west of the Chinese territory. Depending on where these Christians live, the size of their congregations and their worship conditions can vary greatly, from simple rural gatherings led by lay persons to busy city churches offering a variety of activities.

"When I graduated from Nanjing seminary in the 1980s, there were only six pastors for the whole of Inner Mongolia. Today, there are around twenty of us" estimates Rev. Yang, a woman pastor in Hohhot's New City church. With around 3,000 believers attending worship services, New City church is a hub of activity. On an ordinary November Sunday morning, ushers use microphones while they are busy helping everybody to get seated - men on one side, women on the other side, an arrangement that is rather unusual in China. And, in a fitting twist, the sermon of the day centres around marital and family relations. "Wives, submit yourselves to your husband as to the Lord [...] Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it." (Eph, 5.22 ff.)

"The church here goes back to Swedish missionaries," says Yang. "I once had the opportunity to meet the family of the Swedish missionary who had been active in this area. They showed me a letter he had written while he was here. It started: 'I am now sitting on my kung [a hearable brick bedstead], the only heated place in my icy house...' These missionaries really were willing to endure a lot
For their calling. Not all of them were imperialists..."

Attached to New City church is a Bible School offering training for church leaders from the whole province. One of the students comes from Xianguang church, a rural congregation in the vicinity of Tongliao City.

Xianguang ["Bright Light"] church is located about 50 kilometres away from Tongliao, one of Inner Mongolia major cities in the east of the province. Formally registered in 1995, the church has now around 270 members. "Protestant Christianity came here in 1986, when somebody had a Christian relative from Shenyang visiting," Elder Piao Yongben, the leader of the church, recalls. Piao himself was introduced to Christianity through an older woman, while he was battling a stomach disease.

Weekly church activities include a morning prayer meeting, small prayer groups on Friday night, and two Sunday services. Because virtually all of the church's members are peasants, church life has to adapt to agricultural cycles, and will be livelier in the slack agricultural season. Twice a year, a pastor visits Xianguang church and the congregation can celebrate a communion and baptismal service.

Piao, who received his theological training in nearby Tongliao, has been heading his congregation for ten years now. The ethnic diversity of the area brings about its own challenges: "We have church members from four different ethnic backgrounds - Han Chinese, Manchus, Koreans and Mongolians. After we discovered that the Korean members did not understand the Chinese sermon, we now also offer a Korean service," explains the elder with the crew cut, who is ethnic Korean himself.

The rural background of the congregation means that the running of Xianguang church depends on the meagre donations church members can make. "We receive between 8,000 and 10,000 RMB [US$ 1,000-1,250 approx.] per year in offerings. This amount only covers the expenses for running the church, and after paying for electricity and other necessities, I have got nothing left. Like everybody else, I have to work as a farmer to make a living," Elder Piao says. The construction of the church building itself was only made possible through the financial help from churches in Yanji.

Another challenge in the area around Tongliao is the insufficient implementation of China's policy of religious freedom. In its annual report on religion, the Central Committee on Religion and Culture names Tongliao as one of around twenty places in China where insufficient implementation of the policy of religious freedom is a matter of concern for the central government. "It is not easy," acknowledges Piao, "the overall policy is correct but the implementation is still lacking."

Apart from Xianguang church, Piao also takes care of a second nearby congregation. "Last weekend, we had a thanksgiving service there. In spite of the cold, we had people standing outside for the duration of the whole service, because the congregation meets in a very small building." With temperatures hovering around minus ten degrees Celsius in November, local church members display a glowing faith indeed.

What would he write if he had the opportunity to write a letter to Christians abroad? Elder Piao does not hesitate long: "I am a Chinese citizen - although of Korean ethnicity -, and I respect the law. I strive to be a good citizen, do honour to God and the people, and to participate actively in China's modernization and reforms."

"God is the centre of my life, and I want to create a church that preaches, evangelizes, communicates, and fulfils God's will. As an evangelist, I hope to teach Christians to love God well, to love their country and the people, and to help the poor according to their own possibilities."

"We plan to build a lay training centre for our church, but right now we cannot afford it. It would be wonderful if churches from outside could support this project."
NEWSBRIEFS

Management Studies. In August 2003, Christians from Jining City in Shandong Province attended a one-day seminar on economic development and management skills. 52 church workers and students of theology attended the meeting, which had been organized by the local CCC/TSPM committee in an effort to upgrade and coordinate local church management. Topics included the use of modern technology and financial management skills.

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Water for Life. Under the initiative of Pastor Zhu Shaotang from Chuzhou City, more than 40 wells were dug in the poor mountainous areas of Anhui Province. For his efforts to provide villagers with clean and healthy drinking water, Pastor Zhu was awarded a Bronze Welfare and Universal Love Placard by the Chuzhou Political Consultative Conference.

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Fighting Sects and Heresies. Members of the Working Group to Combat Sects and Heresies of Fujian Province congregated in August of this year for another exchange meeting. Participants, including the leader of the Provincial Christian Council Lin Zhihua, coordinated their approach in combating heresies and sects and made a series of recommendations for future work.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Shanghai
2) Nanjing (Jiangsu)
3) Hohhot/Huhehaote (Inner Mongolia)
4) Tongliao (Inner Mongolia)
5) Jining (Shandong)
6) Chuzhou (Anhui)