Dear Reader,

The harvest season is over in many parts of the world, including China. And, just as Chinese peasants are bringing in the fruits of their labour after a year’s work, ANS is pleased to present you with a “bumper issue” at the end of the summer.

The Chinese church is not an isolated entity, it is a member of the Church Universal and the worldwide community of churches. With China opening up at a breathtaking speed, Chinese Christians now have more opportunities for contact and exchanges with overseas Christians than ever before. Just how should the Chinese Protestant church approach its overseas relations work? We present excerpts of a discussion from August’s edition of Tian Feng on p2.

Enhanced contact and cooperation between Chinese churches and the outside world do not only benefit the Chinese, but also their foreign counterparts. The situation of a rapidly growing Chinese church in a unique socio-political setting offers much food for thought. Carlos Ham from the WCC reflects on lessons learned during a recent trip to China about “Sharing the Good News Ecumenically” (p14). And, from a culturally closer perspective, professor of theology Peter Lee takes a look at theological reconstruction from a Hong Kong perspective (p10).

With kind regards from the editorial desk,

Katrin Friedler

If you read Chinese, check out the Chinese Protestant Church’s website. Surfing to

http://www.chineseprotestantchurch.org.cn

will give you access to latest news and views from the China Christian Council and the National TSPM Committee.
Getting The Message Across To Overseas Churches

(ANS) The Chinese church is not an isolated entity, it is a member of the Church Universal and the worldwide community of churches. With China having opened up at breathtaking speed over the last decade or so, Chinese Christians now have more and more opportunities for contact and exchanges with overseas Christians than ever before. This trend is likely to continue in the future, leading members of the Chinese church to ask themselves: just how should we approach our overseas relations work? In August's edition of Tian Feng, two pastors, one elder and three lay workers from different levels within the church and different parts of China share their thoughts on this issue. What follows is a summary of their main ideas.

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Since the Chinese church re-emerged in the 1980s, the frequency of exchanges between Chinese and overseas Christians has increased by leaps and bounds. How Chinese Christians have approached such exchanges has also evolved over time. In the beginning, the main aim was merely to arrange a successful visit and be good hosts. Over time, as relationships have deepened, exchanges have shifted to achieving a certain level of mutual understanding and friendship. Now, many in the Chinese church and overseas would like to see deeper exchanges take place. During a meeting last year in Shanghai to discuss the Overseas Coordination Work of the Chinese Church, Bishop K.H. Ting emphasized: "In our overseas exchanges, we need to improve our theological content, not just always give very general introductions."

Many churches in China still believe that a successful meeting with overseas visitors involves showing them a few new church buildings, then reciting some facts and figures to them about the number of Christians and meeting points in the area. Very few local church leaders engage their visitors in discussions of a theological nature, sharing with them what Chinese Christians believe and how they think on various issues of faith and religious practice. It is now time to move on to this deeper level.

Part of the problem is that the Chinese church as a whole does not yet possess a systematic and comprehensive theology which it can share with overseas visitors. However, the church is aware of this fact and passed a resolution at a meeting in Ji'nan (Shandong Province) in 1998 to pursue the "reconstruction of theological thinking" within the church. As Chen Meilin, Director of the Overseas Relations Department of the China Christian Council, points out: "For many years we had to concentrate on the 'hardware' of the church - re-opening and rebuilding church buildings, accommodating huge numbers of new believers, printing Bibles and hymnals, training pastoral workers. Now it is time for us to shift our focus to the 'software' of the church - a systematic body of theological thinking which fits our circumstances and our times."

Although such a body of theological thinking has not yet been put together, all agree that it is important to share the "building process" with overseas audiences. Many overseas do not understand what the Chinese Church is attempting to do with its "reconstruction of theological thinking" and fear that the Christian faith will somehow be compromised, betrayed or altered in the process. This is not the case at all. "In reconstructing theology, we will always respect the authority of the Bible, uphold the Nicean and Apostle's Creeds, and bear in mind historical Church tradition," Chen
emphasizes. "Reconstructing theology" is about discovering what it means to be a Chinese Christian in 21st century China, how to interact and participate as Chinese Christians in a socialist society, how to shake off irrelevant and unhelpful practices and teachings from the past while holding on to that which is still valuable, how to adapt to the times and raise the general understanding of faith among all believers. When grassroots Chinese Christians continue to ask questions such as "Do people 'outside of God's covenant' have any worth?" or "Is there any good to be found outside of the church?" or "Are floods and disasters God's judgement on humankind?" then the church needs to have a theology which provides answers to such questions. The fact that the Chinese church is embarking on this process and what is being done to advance "building theology" can and should be shared with overseas visitors.

There are some very practical ways that the Chinese church can improve its overseas relations work. One is to "know its audience". Many overseas visitors come from Europe and North America but, as Yue Qinghua from Fujian Province points out, most of the overseas guests he encounters are actually overseas Chinese whose family left Fujian in the past to settle in various parts of South East Asia. With such visitors, who often understand Chinese, he can point them to various church publications such as Tian Feng magazine and Jinling Theological Review, as well as local provincial publications, for a better understanding of current developments in the church, something which is not suitable for non-Chinese speaking visitors.

Wang Jun from Shaanxi Province believes that appointing the right people within the church to handle overseas relations and to represent the church abroad is important, selected by criteria based on a strong understanding of faith, the Bible, Three-Self principles and a correct understanding of theological reconstruction. He also believes that the church needs to be more pro-active in both inviting visitors to China and accepting invitations overseas. "Reciprocal visits are the prerequisites, exchanges are the process, friendship is the result," he maintains. Meanwhile, Fu Xianwei from Shanghai believes that overseas relations work needs to be integrated into other church work and not seen as something separate and "special" any more. In this way, visits by overseas friends will be more integrated into the life and work of the church, and exchanges will be more informed.

This renewed consciousness of how to approach overseas relations has already born fruit in recent times. Fu Xianwei from Shanghai cites an example of a recent meeting between Shanghai pastoral workers and representatives from the Hong Kong Christian Council. Instead of merely reciting lists of facts and figures about the church, the Shanghai Christians focussed discussions on how both sides attempt to run their churches well. The talk revolved around theological sharing, and was more beneficial to participants as a result. Similarly, Chen Meilin found affirmation for the Chinese church's efforts to strengthen its theological thinking during a recent tour of Europe with other CCC/TSPM church leaders. Rev. Stroudinsky of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches commented, "Theological reflection in Europe has never stopped. When a church has its own theology, it can be said to be a mature church. A church needs to take on its social responsibilities, witnessing to the Gospel in ways that both bring glory to God and benefit people." By continuing to refine its approach to overseas relations work, the Chinese church hopes to get its message across effectively in such ways.
Can Christians File Suit In Public Courts?

(ANS) In recent years, increasing wealth and personal liberties have brought with them a strengthening of the rule of law in China. In many areas of life, the rule of law is replacing political decisions or personal negotiations. Awareness of legal rights and obligations is on the rise, and more and more Chinese resort to legal means to solve conflicts. However, this trend is not being fully embraced by China's Protestant Christians. Many of those who are theologically conservative believe that Christians should "withdraw" from the world. In August's edition of Tian Feng, Li Ke discusses the problem of filing suit from a Christian perspective.

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There are some in the church who, due to limited knowledge of the Bible, think that Christians are not allowed to file legal suits in public courts. This mistaken point of view, while currently quite common, has an extremely detrimental influence on the church. We need to understand and view the Bible comprehensively; otherwise, our misguided words will obscure the clear intentions of God's will and have dire consequences for future generations.

The Corinthian church was clearly corrupt. A full reading of 1 and 2 Corinthians reveals a church whose faith was impure, whose unity was fractured, whose religious rites were in a state of confusion, and whose morals had decayed to the point that virtually any form of iniquity was possible. In 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, Paul addresses the issue of lawsuits in order to correct the wayward church. Paul said, "When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous instead of taking it before the saints? ... Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another?" In this Biblical passage, Paul's intention was not to negate the usefulness of a secular legal system; rather, he was trying to show the Corinthians how to appropriately manage the disputes and contradictions that rightfully belong within the church.

In every age, nations, societies, and organizations have all had their own laws, rules and regulations. In the Old Testament, Israel relied on the law to solve its disputes, and Levites were priests who bore the responsibility for matters related to legal complaints. (Deuteronomy 17: 2-13) In the New Testament, Jesus also put forward principles for how to deal with conflicts and contradictions. (Refer to Matthew 18: 15-17).

Paul, himself, used the law to protect human rights. All over the world, progressive countries, and certainly law-abiding countries use law to protect the rights and interests of the state and its citizens - this is perfectly natural and reasonable. Paul said, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God .... Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.... If you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer...." (Romans 13:1-7) All law is meant to reward the good and punish the bad.

Christians are children of God, but they are also citizens of countries in which they live, and every citizen has the right to use the law to protect themselves when their
rights and interasts are being violated. Why say, "Christians cannot sue for their legal rights before unbelievers?" We must not use misguided ideas to cut ourselves off from society. In China there are around 13 million Christians - a tiny minority in contrast to the whole population. Obviously, we have a great deal of interaction with society at large in the course of our work, study, travel, daily shopping, etc. If we were to try to divide all our interaction according to who was Christian and who was not, it would be laughable! Paul said, "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons - not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world." (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). Even if we went so far as to restrict our daily interaction to believers, we would have to admit that those believers could not all be completely pure or without defect. Under what circumstances could our parents, spouse, children and friends all be perfect Christians without exception? To achieve such separation from the world, we would have to cut ourselves off completely.

Paul lived in the first century A.D., and at that time, the Jewish people were ruled by the Roman Empire - the Jews had no political rights of their own. The Jewish tribunal was a legal body that belonged to and worked for the Roman Empire (Matt. 10: 17-19). Paul's work as an evangelist was not only under pressure from the Jews; he was also under the rule of the Roman government. Facing political persecution on two different fronts, Paul used the law as a weapon to protect his faith and personal freedom.

In Acts 21 and the chapters that follow, there are 8 different passages that describe Paul's struggles with the Jewish tribunal and the Roman legal system. Within these accounts, there are 8 different references to making a defense and 5 instances where the issue of appealing to a higher court is mentioned.

Once during a hearing before the Jewish tribunal, Paul was bound and a Roman centurion prepared to flog him as a means of further interrogation. At that moment, Paul asks the centurion, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is un-condemned?" On hearing this both the centurion and the tribune who ordered the flogging become afraid, because they bound a Roman citizen who was therefore naturally protected by the Roman legal system. (Acts 22: 24-29)

Finally, Paul was examined by the highest ranking Jew in the Roman government - King Agrippa - with the result that everyone found him innocent of any crimes or offenses. In accordance with Paul's appeal, however, King Agrippa could only say, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor."

In order to protect the natural rights and benefits of the law, Paul persisted in his journey to the capital of the Roman Empire to appeal to the emperor himself. He had already seen the Lord standing beside him in a vision saying, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness for me in Rome." (Acts 23: 11) Much earlier Jesus had already warned his followers to beware of the false piety of the Jews. "They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles." (Matt. 10: 17-20)
A comprehensive look at Paul's experience reveals a pattern of examination, defense and appeal that included not only the Jewish tribunal, but the Roman courts and the emperor himself. None of Paul's engagement with the legal system was merely for the sake of his own personal safety and protection. Rather, he was primarily concerned with protecting the freedom of his faith. Securing the personal safety of citizens is important precisely because it provides an opportunity to be a witness for God, and that struggle becomes meaningful insofar as it persists in the effort to preserve truth. Paul's spirit of fearlessness in such matters is truly worthy of our praise and imitation.

2003.9/10.3

Revealing The Real Face Of Eastern Lightning

(ANS) The large majority of Chinese Protestants are first-generation believers. As recent converts in a culture dominated by non-Christian beliefs, many of them are vulnerable to sects and heresies. The lack of qualified church personnel further adds to the emergence of heterodox groups, which range from communities on the fringe of Christian churches to sects with only superficial connections to Christian faith and doctrine. One of the most notorious sects is Eastern Lightning, a sect known to "convert" Christian believers and threaten whole congregations by gaining influence on leading members. Tian Feng has repeatedly reported on the problem, trying to educate believers about the tactics employed by the sect. The article below, contributed to August's edition of Tian Feng by Zhu Ning, is remarkable in the way it highlights the close relationship between religion and the law in its final paragraph.

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Many believers have recently contacted Tian Feng, saying that the sect has already harmed churches in Henan, Anhui, Shandong, Jiangsu, Fujian, Guangdong, Shaanxi and northeastern China. Tian Feng takes this opportunity to once more highlight the heretical teachings of the sect.

Eastern Lightning denies the existence of an all-knowing, omnipresent, almighty God, claiming for example that God did not foresee Adam's and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit. Along similar unorthodox lines, the group disclaims Jesus' double nature as man and God, saying that Jesus' work was not complete and did only represent one part of God. Thus denying the unity of Christ and God, this kind of thinking refuses to acknowledge the holy nature of Jesus.

But the teachings of Eastern Lightning go even further in their unorthodoxy by claiming that the second coming of Christ has happened in the form of a female Christ who has appeared in China. And finally, the group rejects the centrepiece of Christian faith, the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, by saying that related accounts in the Bible are "symbolic passages" rather than descriptions of real events. All of these teachings are entirely unorthodox and not in line with genuine Christian doctrine.

Eastern Lightning also undermines the authority of the Bible by denying that it was bestowed by God; instead, the Eastern Lightning "doctrine" says that the Bible was created by humans according to their own imagination and ideas.
Apart from its heretical teachings, Eastern Lightning employs cunning strategies and tactics to confuse believers and lure them into the sect. In 1998, a number of cases were reported from Henan in which people resisting the sect had been drugged and beaten. Unilateral lines of communication make it difficult for people to understand what is going on behind the scenes. When establishing contacts with local believers, Eastern Lightning members often use false names and addresses. They then announce meetings where a "master" will give lectures. Money and sex-traps are other ways of luring people into the group.

When local Christians ask questions, Eastern Lightning members never reply directly, but instead confront believers with more questions. Often, they start off their own lectures by asking questions like "Who or what is greater, God or the Bible?" Eastern Lightning members also threaten those who refuse their teachings, and separate "converts" from other people.

Finally, the organization of Eastern Lightning as well as its evil character highlight the close connection between the sanctity of religion and the law. Christians have the duty to unwaveringly defend the holy nature of religion and the law. By raising the awareness of religious laws and regulations, the church contributes to creating a favourable legal environment in Chinese society.

2003.9/10.4

ANS Feature:

Half The Sky - And More Than Half Of Heaven? A Look At The Church's Women's Commission

"Women carry half the sky," the socialist revolution proclaimed in China, and indeed, over the course of the past decades women have come to fill many different positions in Chinese society, from bus drivers to managers, not to mention the traditional roles of wife, housewife and mother. Within the church, women comprise two thirds of its members, but they remain underrepresented in leadership functions. To address the needs of its female members, the church has set up a commission dedicated exclusively to women's work. Wang Zhimin and Jin Wei, who head the commission, spoke with Katrin Fiedler.

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"One of the suggestions of the last National Christian Conference was to reinvigorate the commissions. Many of the commissions, set up to facilitate certain areas of church work such as theological education or church music, had been largely inactive for a number of reasons. The current set up of the women's commission is also a result of last year's National Christian Conference," Jin Wei introduces the work of the commission. For the soft-spoken but determined woman in her fifties, the position as Vice President of the Women's Commission is only a part-time duty - she also heads the Chinese Association of YMCAs. "We want to continue the work started before, as well as develop new initiatives. We need to serve women before the background of a society that is rapidly developing."

"I think our commission is special in the sense that it is particularly representative of the church as a whole. Among the dozen or so commission members - all of them women - are pastoral workers of different levels, grassroots and minority representatives and, of course, pastors. Our last meeting in February was very well attended, only one member was unable to come because of duties abroad. One of the commission members - she comes from Guizhou - spent more time on the road than in the actual meeting."
"All decisions made by the commission will then be implemented by the national church leadership. Because the commissions have mostly an advisory function, this centralized structure was created to ensure the implementation of the recommendations made. Of course, with the large numbers of duties the national church leadership is facing, this can also mean that implementing a certain policy will take a while."

Nodding to her counterpart, head of the women's commission Wang Zhimin, Jin Wei adds: "As she has rightly pointed out, it is essential to raise the educational background of women in the church, because they are the majority of believers. Raising their qualities will significantly benefit the church as a whole."

Wang Zhimin takes the mission of education seriously. As one of Shanghai's acclaimed arts teachers, she deals with questions of truth, good and beauty on a daily basis, and has developed a Bible-based class to introduce Christian culture to ordinary Chinese. "I think the Christian contribution to world culture should be recognized in China. When the Chinese today talk of a spiritual civilization and the search of truth, good and beauty, I think that the ethics proclaimed are the same as those proposed by Christians. I think that many elements of Christian culture can prove useful for our nation and our people."

Wang has travelled extensively to local churches in her efforts to enhance spiritual and moral formation of women believers. "Women in their roles as wives and mothers are extremely important for society. The Bible also emphasizes the value of a good wife. Husbands work outside, but women play the more dominant role at home," middle-aged Wang says and continues: "Child pedagogy tells us that as children develop, the mother's role changes." It becomes clear that her approach is a mix of inspiration from the Bible and modern pedagogy. Based on her findings, Wang has developed teaching materials that aim to equip women for their multi-faceted roles in modern society.

"The women I meet are always very enthusiastic, but often most so in the more remote areas. On one of my recent trips, 300 persons had gathered in spite of the heat. On the last day, we had an open session aimed at encouraging everybody to speak up. We had a wonderful exchange, and everybody participated. Among the questions raised were, for example: Should wives obey their husbands? The Bible may say so, but then, women today are better educated and society is changing."

"In one of the places I visited, everybody stared at me and I felt very uncomfortable. Finally I noticed that all the local women in the church there, which goes back to Presbyterian roots, were wearing long sleeves and trousers. They felt that a skirt was improper dress for a Christian. After spending a few days with them, they got used to the thought of wearing a skirt, and before I left, I even helped them to design long skirts for their choir. The sight of the choir dressed in the new skirts is one of my fondest memories."

Trips to local congregations thus serve a double purpose: to strengthen education for female believers, but also to give the women's commission an accurate view of the situation at the grassroots. "Of course, a dozen women in a commission cannot represent all of China's women," Jin Wei observes. The impressions collected during visits to local congregations will soon be supplemented by findings from a nationwide survey about the situation of local churches to be conducted by the National CCC/TSPM committee.

Coming back to the issue of courses, Jin notes: "We have to do training of the trainers because many of them contact us saying that the things they learned during their studies are not helpful any more. Women today approach pastors with problems that cannot be solved with a traditional approach, and they ask for psychological advice."

Regarding the issue of women leaders in the church, Jin says: "Of course we hope to gradually get more women involved in the leadership, but we are not too much in favour of quotas. We prefer to achieve this aim through raising the educational level of women."

Another issue is the recently established Social Service Department of the National CCC/TSPM. "We are exploring ways in which women at the grassroots can be involved in social work to the glory of God."

Apart from working with women within the church, the women's commission also needs to voice women's concerns in society. "As part of the body of Christ, we need to speak out on women's behalf in issues such as women's participation, AIDS, or unemployment." Some of the information
spread by the commission is very practical. “Together with help from The Amity Foundation, we will distribute a booklet on women’s health.”

With an ambitious agenda for a group that comprises two thirds of the Chinese church, Wang and Jin remain realistic in their expectations for the next few years. “We hope that at the end of this five-year period, there will be a women’s commission in every city,” Jin concludes.

ANS Feature:

"Wholehearted Service And Law-Abiding Management": Aiji Printing Press

China’s ever-growing congregations hunger for Christian literature, tapes and calendars. An often-overlooked source of these materials, most notably the magazine Tian Feng, is the Aiji Printing Press. Younger and of smaller scope than the Amity Printing Press which produces mostly Bibles, the Aiji Printing Press can also be seen as a sign of increasing diversification and freedom in the realm of religious publications in China. Katrin Fiedler recently visited the Press.

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"Aiji", the love of Christ, is what ultimately motivates the movers and shakers behind the Aiji Printing Press, an church-run enterprise located at about an hour’s drive from Shanghai in the town of Jiading. Two of those movers and shakers are sitting next to me as we drive through the rapidly modernizing town, which is best known for its old temples and a location of the former imperial exams. Xu Minghan, freshly retired from Shanghai’s China Eastern Theological Seminary, represents the CCC/TSPM leadership on our trip to the printing press. And Stephen Tsui from Lutheran Hour Ministries was instrumental in securing funding for the printing press when it was conceived.

"It all started in 1995 with 200-square-meter premises and some simple printing equipment," Xu Minghan recalls. "With the continuing growth of the church, we had a need to produce printed materials, and we wanted to stop outsourcing this process." An empty floor of an old factory next to a church was located and converted into an improvised printing workshop. The initial capital was slightly more than US$100,000, and the printing company did not even have proper storage room.

The printing press has come a long way since then. After the US-based International Lutheran Layman’s League had pledged to give a substantial sum, and with additional local funding, a 5,000-square meter plot of land was bought and construction work for a new printing complex was started.

"Over the past years, we have added one piece of printing equipment per year," Zhu Defang, manager of the press, explains. Without a background in the printing business, she had to acquire her skills on the job. With 23 employees, today the Aiji Printing Press counts as one of the bigger and better companies in Jiading, and recently received a government award for "Wholehearted Service And Law-Abiding Management." For China's only completely church-run publishing house and printing company, this is a particular source of pride. "With its good reputation, Aiji Press can be seen as a witness in society," Xu Minghan explains.

"The development of the printing company mirrors a number of things about the development of the church as a whole," he continues. "First of all, God has been blessing the Chinese church in many ways, and the development of the Press is one such blessing. Besides, the continuous increase of our printing volume also reflects the growing need for these materials, and the numerical growth of the church. From the materials we produce, such as hymnals, calendars and audiocassettes, you can also learn something about how the Gospel is spread in China."

"Secondly, the existence of the printing press is a good indicator of the religious freedom we enjoy. Many government departments such as the publications department and the department in charge of religion have to approve a printing press like Aiji, and approval went very smoothly."

"For the Chinese church, financial self-control, the Third Self in the Three Selves, is an
essential principle. However, we welcome contributions from abroad as long as there is no control from outside attached. In this sense, the Aiji Printing Press is a good example of our cooperation with overseas partners. Stephen Tsui here has been so helpful and cooperative that we practically regard him as a co-worker. All profits of the press belong to the Chinese church, Xu adds, money that can "help to self-support the church, something that ultimately is also in the interest of our overseas partners."

Xu sees a great future for the printing press in a few years' time. Already, the impact of the press onto church services is noticeable. "We used to print 30,000 copies of Tian Feng per month, and the plates had to reach the printing press six weeks before the scheduled publication date." Today, 130,000 copies of the church magazine are produced every month, and it takes only one week to print one month's worth of Tian Feng.

But it is not only because of technical aspects that Xu and Tsui deem support for the printing press worthwhile: "We spread the Gospel in a way that is suited to Gospel teachings," explains Xu, and Tsui adds: "We spread the Gospel in a way that is suitable to the needs of Chinese believers."

2003.9/10.6

ANS Feature:

What Has The Chinese Church's "Theological Reconstruction" To Do With Us?

This is a translation of an article, originally in Chinese, which appeared in the Hong Kong Christian Council's Message (Issue 225, April 2003). Substantially the same article was published in The Christian Times. The author, Methodist minister Peter K. H. Lee, is Professor of Theology and Culture at the Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong. Translation courtesy of Peter K.H. Lee.

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Last November (2002) a delegation from the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, at the invitation of the Hong Kong Christian Council and the Chinese Churches' Union, came to Hong Kong to exchange ideas and share information about the mainland churches' recent developments.

On November 25, at a gathering held in the International YMCA, Presbyter Ji Jianhong, chairperson of the Three-Self Executive Committee and Rev. Cao Shengjie, president of the China Christian Council, spoke of the work of "Theological Construction" now being promoted in China. Presbyter Ji's speech addresses principally "construction of theological thought" (or "theological construction" for short from here on), an idea originally promulgated by Bishop K. H. Ting, which was unanimously endorsed by the 1998 annual meeting of the two Chinese Christian organizations held in Jining. Rev. Cao in her speech also made the point that the promotion of theological construction receives emphasis in the current programme of the two Christian organizations.

What is "theological construction"? Presbyter Ji explained, "Theological construction is what preachers, believers and the church seek to explicate, directly and systematically, the object and content of beliefs. Theological construction is not the same as 'basic beliefs'. Basic beliefs refer to the object and content of basic Christian beliefs as summarized in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed."

Presbyter Ji further added: "Society, which is formed by people and organizations, continuously changes and develops. Theological construction is a way to explicate basic beliefs; when necessary, adjustments, short, is used here, this being more faithful to the Chinese wording.

Author's note: The Chinese wording used is shenxue sixin jianshe, word-for-word meaning "theological thought constructed" (jianshe meaning "construction"). In the context of English usage, and possibly theological thinking too, "theological thought reconstructed" would seem more natural. But given the majority of the Chinese Christians' conservative, literalistic mentality, "reconstructed" would probably be frowned upon; "constructed" would be more acceptable. So "construction of theological thought", or "theological construction", for
revisions, and replenishments are made. Otherwise, there is no way for us to fulfill the God-given responsibility to proclaim the good news to the ends of the earth.”

When the leaders of the Church in China so earnestly promote the work of theological construction, what is the reaction of Hong Kong church people?

The Necessity of Theological Construction

Why do the ranks of the Chinese church leadership pay such close attention to theological construction? Bishop K. H. Ting said in an article, “The Inevitability and Necessity of Adjustment in Theological Thought” (Tian Feng, March 2000): “Theological construction is really nothing unusual. With a history of 2000 years, Christianity has incessantly found it necessary to undertake theological construction. If not ‘construction’, we may speak of ‘development’ or ‘adjustment.’” He gave many examples from history and the Bible. As far as Christianity in China is concerned, certain historical factors make theological construction an urgent necessity.

On the one hand, when Christianity was brought into China from the West, denominational distinctions and theological disputes were foisted upon the Chinese churches. For example, competitions among denominations, the quarrels between fundamentalism and liberalism in the last century, and tension between evangelicalism and ecumenism in more recent times; these have left scar marks to this day. The problem is not just in the diversity of contents, but in the rigid attitude, so that if the disputes are left unattended to, they will become historical baggage hindering the progress of church work.

On the other hand, congregations in mainland China have mingled in their culture “false, antihuman, anti-scientific and anti-social ideas as well as tendencies incompatible with socialism, progress with the times, and scientific development.” (From Presbyter Ji’s speech.) Besides, certain heretical elements have crept into the consciousness of the followers. Such cultural impurities and oddities have led to heterodox ideas, which disturb the normal development of the church.

In recent years the Chinese church has experienced unprecedented growth, and with the rapid increase of church members, the training of pastors is an urgent priority. (Rev. Cao’s speech.) For the adequate equipment of ministers, sound theological thinking is indispensable.

Hong Kong being separated from mainland China by just a thin line, we in Hong Kong can see clearly the church situations across the border and can understand with no difficulty the urgent need for sound theological education and theological construction. To tell the truth, the culture of Christian churches in Hong Kong has inherited similar historical and cultural factors, which, if unresolved, would become a stumbling block, impeding the work of the church. At present the Hong Kong theological world has a crop of theological workers who have received advanced education from first rate theological schools abroad, and their hearts are full of Western theological thoughts of all ages. Do they, standing in the Hong Kong-China cultural context, know how to interpret these works coming from another culture and another age? This is the task of theological hermeneutics, which is the first step in theological construction.

In past generations Chinese Christianity has already produced indigenous theological works. Hong Kong theological workers of the current scene are making attempts at contextualized thinking. All these fall into the category of theological construction. As to how theologically successful these efforts are, that can be debated, but the point is that whether in mainland China or Hong Kong, theological construction is ever a challenge.

The church situations in which mainland China and Hong Kong find themselves are not identical, yet there are similarities, and precisely because there are commonalities and differences, exchange and interaction of theological thought can be conducted meaningfully, for the good of all concerned.

The Feasibility of Theological Construction

From what we hear, there are already theological colleagues in mainland China carrying on the task of theological construction. Presumably based on their endeavours, Presbyter Ji has listed ten propositions around which research and writing on theological construction have revolved:

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Human worth.

The relationship between God’s creation and God’s redemptive work.

The crucial function of knowledge, wisdom and rational thought in the pursuit of spiritual life.

The relationship between the [Christian] believer and the non-believer.

The Bible can only be approached by faith and cannot be analyzed?

What is the correct view of the Bible?

Christian believers and the church in relation to the state.

The Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit.

How to recognize that divine revelation is continuous or eternal?

The faith-basis of the Three-Self Movement. What is the theological basis of the three-self principle?

Will a democratically administered church shake up the [ecclesiastical] position of Christ as the head?

Presbyterian Ji said that in mainland China there are now sufficient personnel to proceed with the work of theological construction. The resources include a team of middle-aged and younger theological teachers and pastors, along with a group of faithful older church leaders who love China and love the church and who follow the footsteps of the Lord. Of course, that is good news to hear! The church people of Hong Kong are only too eager to receive the contributions of the colleagues on the mainland to theological construction.

At the same time, why not let the Hong Kong churches’ counterparts proceed with their theological construction work too along the lines of the ten propositions listed by Presbyterian Ji and, for that matter, other propositions as well? We need not expect heavy, academic research-type theological writings; what matters is that there are theological workers who, mindful of the situation of Hong Kong and their Chinese cultural roots, can do reflection from a theological perspective, so that thoughtful readers can profit from their writings, and that is theological construction work.

This writer has been involved in theological education and writing for many years, and it is a joy to see a crop of younger colleagues who are engaged in theological teaching and thinking after receiving advanced theological training in North America, England and continental Europe. What is encouraging is that, with solid theological foundation, they have learned methods of contemporary hermeneutics, so that in teaching and interpreting the Bible and theological subjects, they know how to treat their materials in the present context. What is more, these returned younger theologians from abroad are now relearning Chinese culture and learning social analysis. All in all, in due time, they will flex their theological muscles in good form.

Taking Further Steps in Theological Construction

In Hong Kong theological circles nowadays, theological construction is no longer something strange. Some teachers of theology are already mindful of hermeneutical principles in introducing and interpreting theological works from another culture and of another age. At the same time some theological-minded Christians (not only seminary teachers but pastors and lay workers) are ready to reflect, from a biblical or theological perspective on the current social and political situations, and the fruits of their labor are worthy of attention.

With reminders from Chinese church leaders, it seems that the time is getting ripe for Hong Kong theological workers to be engaged with more sophistication than before be it in indigenized, contextualized, or inculturated theological thinking; the theological dimension should not be undermined, or else it fails to be theological construction. As was said before, the works need not, and should not, be mere academic exercises cut off from reality. They can be short but they should have some theological substance. They should be able to create a heuristic effect on the readers. When enough writings can give a cumulative, heuristic effect, they will carve a new path for the Christian church’s ministry and mission. (Conceivably The Christian Times and other publications can provide the platform for the discussions.)

1 Indigenization – the older form, paying special attention to inherited cultural forms, often with little critical awareness.
2 Contextualization – attending to current social, economic and political situations, sometimes to the neglect of the cultural dimension.
3 Inculturation – diving into the depth structure of culture, including culture’s interweaving with socio-economic and political elements.
The following are suggestions of areas that can be the starting points for Hong Kong people to work on (along the lines of the propositions listed by Presbyter JI):

Human worth (proposition 1). This is an issue that is urgently in need of clarification, whether in mainland China or Hong Kong. Socialists speak of humanistic civilization. Confucians dwell on benevolence, righteousness and morality. Liberals advocate freedom and human rights. They all have some things of value to offer, yet they all fall short of a perfect blue-print for an ideal society. If we turn to Christian thought, we can find in the Bible invaluable teachings on the nature of humanity. The Bible teaches that humans are created in the image of God, which means that they are endowed with dignity and worth to begin with. But humans have fallen, marring the divine image in them. They can be restored to their dignity and worth through the redemptive work of Christ, and, further, they can develop their potential more fully as exemplified by Christ, as fully God and fully human. This need not be merely a dogma but can be witnessed to by the followers of Christ and the Church's ministry. Call this theology if you will, but it can be lived, it has something substantial to say and can stimulate dialogue with socialists, Confucians and liberal social thinkers in their common quest for human worth.

The Christians and the Church in relation to the state (proposition 6). We can understand why this is an issue that cannot be avoided on the mainland, and it is not a simple issue at all, certainly not easy for the Hong Kong people to grasp. Theological principles are involved, but reality must be reckoned with. The same church-state issue is a live one for the Hong Kong people too. But the situations on the mainland and in Hong Kong are not the same. In one it is a state where the Communist Party dominates, whereas in the other it is a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China based on the “one country two systems” principle. Christians in Hong Kong cannot speak for those on the mainland, and vice-versa. In Hong Kong there are alert, theological-minded people who have given some thoughts to the issue, and it would be of great value to the churches if someone can piece together the fragments into a more integral work. Frankly, how the principle works out is still evolving. In the meantime, if the brothers and sisters across the border are interested, what theological insights that may be gleaned may be of value as reference materials.

The function of knowledge, wisdom, and rational understanding in the pursuit of the spiritual life (proposition 3). In a country as large as China, not surprisingly there appear supposed believers who do not care about rational understanding or harbour a high measure of superstition; some may fail to see any place for knowledge in the life of the spirit. On the other hand, there are intellectuals on the mainland who are eager to research on Christian thought and culture, but are not interested in finding out what spiritual life is. From both these angles, this proposition is worthy of note. As to Hong Kong, the culture of the churches is on the whole theologically conservative, with a notable pietistic strand, and they are not too keen to know what role knowledge, wisdom and rational activity play in spiritual life. The more liberal-minded elements, who are in the minority, are interested in expanding their knowledge all right, while they tend to have a low view of spirituality. Whether conservative or liberal, Hong Kong Christians (including pastors and theological teachers) fall into the trap of dualism in their mode of thinking (e.g. spirituality vs. rationality, emotion vs. reason, mind vs. matter, subject vs. object, theory vs. practice), which is of Western origin (a legacy of the Enlightenment) and is now pervasive all over the world. How to break through the predicament is a challenge to theological education in the West as well as other parts of the world. This writer has written a long article, "Theological Wisdom and the Remaking of Theological Education" (published in Theology and Life, Hong Kong, Issue 24, 2001), addressing the problem or reconstituting the mode of theological thinking, standing in the Hong Kong cultural context where Western theological thinking and the Chinese way of thinking meet. The article is probably too long; it can be shortened to narrow down the scope and thus heighten the challenge to fellow theological educators in Hong Kong and possibly to those in mainland China too.

What is the correct view of the Bible? (proposition 5). It is not difficult to understand why in China the question concerning the correct view of the Bible is an urgent issue. It is an issue that is left over as historical baggage since the early days of the missionary movement (witness the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the tension between evangelicalism and ecumenicalism, etc.). In Hong Kong, we can
still see the shadows of these conflicting views toward the Bible. However as far as some (though not all) of the theological schools are concerned, the churches connected with them are no longer exercised over the issue. Nowadays there are New Testament and Old Testament professors who are well-trained in modern hermeneutics, and church leaders are not worried that they will turn out students who will stray away from biblical truths. Let us suppose professors of the Bible from several (again, not all) seminaries are asked to address the question, "A correct view of the Bible as I see it" presumably they will emphasize certain aspects, but they would not likely be so contradictory to one another that there is no room for discussion. Conceivably the different emphases would creatively complement or challenge one another. This is a pluralistic (not totally relativistic) approach, but is certainly healthier and more productive than a dogmatic, exclusivist approach. The Bible is really the living fountain of our Christian beliefs. Its richness is inexhaustible; proper hermeneutical tools can help the interpreter, preachers, and readers glimpse the revealed truths as sparks of light. Let the squabbles of the past be buried; let lifeless academic exercises be swept away. Now is the time for theological teachers and students, pastors and disciples of Christ to open up their hearts and minds to the inspiration of the Spirit, so that they can use proper and lively methods of hermeneutics to bring out the living truths of the Bible. This is the basis of hope for churches in China and Hong Kong.

The above are but a few illustrative pointers to encourage theological workers and fellow-ministers to take further steps forward on the road of theological construction. From the reports of Presbyter Ji Jianhong and Rev. Cao Shengjie, the churches and Christians in China have already taken the first step. Since the team of theological workers forms quite a strong force, may they not be taking further steps along? Their Hong Kong counterparts have also begun their journey in the same direction. The new crop of people involved actually have good qualifications and they have a pastoral concern too, so that they can be expected to take more steps in the days ahead. The time will come, before long, when co-workers from mainland churches and their Hong Kong counterparts can have more occasions to exchange, interact, converge, and complement one another. Why can’t this come true? Why shouldn’t it be a pleasure?

2003/9/10.7

ANS Feature:

Sharing The Good News Ecumenically: Evangelism In China

In March of 2003, a World Council of Churches delegation visited China. Carlos Ham from the WCC’s office on Mission and Ecumenical Formation was part of the team. In his July 2003 Ecumenical Letter on Evangelism, he shares what he has learnt about evangelism in China. ANS reprints a shortened version of the original article.

Evangelism and a Post-denominational Church

The highlight of the whole visit was a two-and-a-half hour conversation with Bishop K.H. Ting. He is unquestionably the spiritual mentor of the churches in the CCC. He explained that, at the centre of his concern for theological reconstruction, is a re-assessment of the place of the doctrine of "justification by faith" in the thinking of the churches in China. The missionaries preached a message of salvation for the believers and personification for all others. This is deeply rooted in the psyche of Chinese Christians, especially in the rural areas where the majority of the churches are. It divides the people into two categories, the ‘saved’ and the ‘lost'. China needs unity, not division. “Justification by faith” is not the whole Christian doctrine. There are other dimensions of the biblical teaching that need to be lifted up in the Chinese context, e.g. God’s love which is extended to all people. Bishop Ting linked this refection to Christian anthropology. The human being is subject to God’s on-going creation. Theology should not condemn the human being as utterly bad. China has many leaders with exemplary moral behaviour. Christianity should introduce the Chinese people to a God of love and provide room for reason and thinking, in dialogue with Chinese
culture. Theological education should help pastors to acquire a more enlightened theology.

In this connection Bishop Ting spoke of the "cultural Christians", Chinese intellectuals who are interested in Christianity and come together informally in groups for discussion and Bible study. Some of them join the church but many do not. Chinese theologians and pastors should be able to be in conversation with people in these circles. This relationship with the Chinese intellectuals Bishop Ting calls "unorganized evangelism". He said: "Intellectuals in China want to learn new things, like Christianity. In former times they were hostile towards Christianity, but now they have a great willingness to hear what Christians have to say. They are curious and some enjoy the music in our churches and they raise many serious questions to us. This is a fluid experience. Even when many of them are not interested in the church, this is a significant expression and result of evangelism".

With regard to the concept of the post-denominational church, Bishop Ting gave a very helpful historical perspective. At the time of the liberation (1949) and the Korean war, the unity of the Chinese people became an imperative. That situation obliged the churches to look at the disparity of their denominations and institutions. One step they took was to form Nanjing Union Seminary. Gradually the Chinese Christians began to understand unity theologically. Today many churches no longer want to be denominational - but they are not yet fully united. "Post-denominational" union is the best description for the present stage. The CCC could be called a uniting church - not yet a united church. There are several groups which are still not comfortable with the concept and have only a partial relationship with the CCC, e.g. the Little Flock, the True Jesus Church and the Seventh-Day Adventists. All three are on good terms with TSPM, which has no ecclesiological claims. Bible distribution is one channel through which the CCC relates to these groups.

The team was impressed by the fact that, since the evangelistic task is carried out in this "post-denominational" setting, it is pursued ecumenically. Evangelism in the CCC is therefore not conceived in terms of proselytism. To evangelize in this context does not mean to make more Presbyterians, or Methodists, or Anglicans, or Orthodox. It aims at spreading the Good News in a rapidly changing socialist society, a society that needs the freshness of the Gospel, regardless of limited confessional boundaries.

Responding to new challenges: Evangelism in a rapidly changing society

The team noted that the churches in China are facing two major challenges which call for creative and innovative answers. The first is the growth in numbers, the second is the search for unity. To this could be added a third challenge of becoming a Chinese church in a society that is socialist, has an extraordinary cultural heritage and is in a process of rapid modernization and economic growth. Any consideration coming from outside, any effort to accompany the churches in China should take into account these realities and acknowledge the ways in which the church is seeking to respond.

- The fact that the Christian faith is experiencing a tremendous revival in China, primarily as a result of the more open policy of the State towards religion in general, has had a great impact on the mission and evangelism endeavour of the church.

One of the very important vehicles which the Chinese churches have used to propagate the Gospel is through printing millions of Bibles. Even though a large number of the population is still illiterate, many pastors and lay people shared with the team that evangelism is based in the biblical stories of Jesus.

In this regard, in the visit to the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the team was told that in its teaching the Seminary seeks to:

- respect the central message of the Bible
- relate the biblical text with the local context
- focus on the Great Commission: the sharing of the Good News of salvation for everyone

A clear expression of the role of the Bible, as a valuable tool for mission and evangelism, appears as an answer to the question "Why should we read the Bible?" in the catechism of the CCC. It says, "Reading the Bible enables us:

- To receive life through believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (c.f. Jn. 6:39, 20:31)
• To gain knowledge of salvation
• To understand doctrine, and receive reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness
• To be complete and equipped for every good work (c.f. Mat. 7:7-8, 11:25)

The universal priesthood of all believers

There has been a proportional increase in pastoral vocations among young people in relation to the growth of the church, but even so, there are still not enough pastors and here is precisely where the lay movement becomes so vital for the mission and evangelism of the churches.

In one of the conversations a pastor shared with the team that the Protestant Reformation principle of the “Universal Priesthood of all Believers” is very relevant, because “every Chinese Christian is a pastor and therefore also an evangelist, “following Jesus” person-to-person style”, he said. Bishop Ting told the team “a lot of evangelism is happening because people are bringing their friends to the churches, in an unorganized way”.

Many Christians see their task of sharing the Good News by the example of their deeds - by their silent witness in society. A pastor with whom the team met, a member of the CCC leadership, defined evangelism as “Christian presence among the people”, and illustrated this referring to the passage in the Bible that speaks of the resurrection of Lazarus by Jesus. He said that when this happened, Lazarus stood there, in the middle of the crowd, without saying one word, but his silence was bearing witness of the Lord’s liberating, saving and resurrecting power (John 11:42-44).

But of course, as a result of further development of the church and its increasing influence in society, lay people also preach explicitly, by words, the Good News and for this they need preparation. So the Chinese churches devote a great amount of resources and energy to train the lay people in order to fulfill their vocation. In fact, many churches have among their staff not only pastors, but also “evangelists”.

Evangelists are full-time church workers who have received formal theological training but have not yet been ordained. In China, seminary and Bible school graduates are normally not eligible for ordination until they have worked in the church for some years, and it is not unusual for church staff members to work as evangelists for much or even all of their careers.” They work primarily in “meeting points”, but also in churches.

Referring to mission and evangelism, one of the church leaders in one of the meetings said the following, which is quoted here in summary:

• We are a growing church - evangelism is done by ordinary Christians who have the burden to pass on the Good News - this has great impact
• The Christian way of living is a witness in the family and the workplace - the changes in the life of the Christians attract other people
• The religious freedom policy - the freedom to build new churches and the freedom to worship - give confidence to non-Christians
• The church giving witness in society - serving the people - reaching out to the poor - helping the needy - doing social welfare

Above all this; the main reason for the growth of the church is that God is at work among his people in China!

NEWSBRIEFS

Giving Blood: Following a request from the provincial Red Cross, Christians from Fuzhou’s Puqian Church eagerly participated in a blood donation campaign on June 15 of this year. Within only three hours, 76 people gave blood. Donors and medical personnel received snacks and milk provided by believers from a nearby church.
meeting point. Those involved saw the campaign as a means to make a contribution to society as well as to raise the general awareness of Christianity and Christian values in society.

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Medical Services: In March of this year, the YMCA of Wuhan opened a small rural clinic in a suburban area of the city. The clinic gives local rural dwellers access to basic medical care. Equipment worth tens of thousands of yuan was donated by the YMCA, including facilities for electrocardiograms and prenatal care. Until June 2003, the clinic had already had 900 patients, and the presence of prevention and basic medical care proved to be especially beneficial for local residents during the SARS crisis.

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Running the church well: From July 9-10, 2003, the Provincial Christian Council of Fujian Province held a conference dedicated to church management. Participants from Xiamen, Quanzhou, Putian and Shaowu exchanged experiences regarding administrative matters such as church regulations and the running of churches and meetings points. Problems occurring in local churches were also discussed, and conference participants used a Bible-based approach combined with principles of pastoral work to arrive at possible solutions.
Places Mentioned In This Issue Of ANS

1) Jiading (Shanghai)
3) Wuhan (Hubei)

2) Fuzhou (Fujian)