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Season’s Greetings from the China Christian Council

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!
The social service ministry of the Zhoukou church is an excellent illustration of how a relatively small Christian community can do great things to alleviate pain and poverty. Rev. Ma, head of the Zhoukou Christian Council, has chosen not to close his eyes from the needs around him, because “church and society cannot be separated”.

The popular saying, “Where there is a will, there is a way”, seems to be illustrated in Zhoukou churches who actively seek practical ways of acting as Good Samaritans in their community. AIDS orphans receive shelter and care, rural pastors learn to grow their crops better, and Zhoukou Gospel Hospital treats 15,000 outpatients annually. Mobile teams take health education and bible training classes to the areas where people cannot afford lengthy trips to county seats.

Actually, Rev. Ma, with his Zhoukou believers, is taking measures to uphold the vitality of local communities by improving the quality of life where they are. Migrant workers moving from rural areas into cities for better income may bring positive effects on the development of city churches, as is indicated in the study of urban churches by Rev. Chen Yilu. However, this kind of social mobility often entails that rural “left-behind” children are, like other orphaned children, deprived of parental care and family structure. Lin Manhong reminds Christians in her sermon on page 5 that Good Samaritans are needed to ensure children’s basic right to education.

While preparing for the greatest celebration of Christendom, it is also good to remind oneself of all God’s blessings during the past year, as Rev. Dr. Cao Shengjie does in her season’s greetings to all ANS’ readers. I myself also want to thank you all on behalf of the Amity Foundation Hong Kong office for your support for ANS and wish you a blessed Christmas season!

With kind regards from the editorial desk,

Elisa Nousiainen
In September this year, the Amity Foundation, in cooperation with the Overseas Relations Office of the CCC/TSPM, facilitated the visit of a ten-women delegation from ATESEA (Association for Theological Education in Southeast Asia) to Chinese seminaries and churches. They came from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines and Thailand. Theresa Carino from the Amity Hong Kong Office accompanied the group, led by Sientje Merentek Abram, on the ten-day tour that included Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing and Xi’an. There were rich and exciting encounters with women leaders from the CCC/TSPM, seminaries and churches. The group discovered that feminist theology has been taught at Nanjing Seminary for several years and Xian Bible School will follow next year. In Beijing, six out of eleven churches are led by senior women pastors.

Fifty percent of seminary students in present day China are women and women’s ordination has been common since the 1980s. There were 2,000 ordained ministers in the whole of China in the year 2000 and only one sixth were women. Today, there are at least 1,000 ordained women ministers, making up a third of all the ordained ministers in China. Obviously, women are a force in Chinese church life. However, according to Rev. Cao Shengjie, President of the China Christian Council (CCC), not enough women are in leadership positions. The CCC hopes to double women’s representation in the top echelons of church councils from the current 16% to 30%, but major obstacles remain. The majority of women come from rural areas and the challenge for the church is how to educate and equip them in a context where a bias towards males remains strong. In urban areas, the situation seems to be much better.

**Women in Shanghai donate their heirlooms to the church**

In Shanghai, where 80% of 210,000 church members are women, there are 31 women pastors, making up 53% of all pastors. Together with their male counterparts, they take part in training programs that involve collaboration with well known universities such as Fudan and the East China Normal University. Women have contributed much to the building of churches, donating their savings, even wedding rings and heirlooms. The head of the Shanghai Women’s Fellowship, Rev. Cai Wei said that the main task of the Fellowship is to promote women’s work in local congregations. The Fellowship has organized meetings and lectures for the women on topics ranging from psychological counselling to marriage and parenting. There are sessions to encourage participation in social services, with each congregation having a different focus. Some churches have begun to work with marginalized migrant workers coming from different provinces in China. The women take part in the “World Day of Prayer” during which collections are taken to be offered for relief work, for the poor and elderly.

When women pastors were asked why so many women are active in church, there was no single clear answer. For some, belonging to a Christian family often contributes towards having a sense of calling and commitment. Others felt that women have more “free time” than the men and are more compassionate. This triggered a discussion on whether women do “secondary things” and not make the major decisions. Those we met were adamant it was not the case in Shanghai churches. They explained that in many local churches, women are the senior pastors and take charge of things.

**Jiangsu has the highest proportion of women pastors in the country**

In Nanjing, we were informed by leaders of the Jiangsu Provincial Council that while the percentage of women in rural churches remained around 80%, in the urban churches, it was falling to 70% with the growth in participation of intellectuals and professionals.
At the Jiangsu Provincial Bible School on the outskirts of Nanjing, where the Dean of Studies is a young woman, we found that six out of the faculty of eight are women. Almost a third of pastors in Jiangsu province are women, the highest proportion in the country.

Empowering women through women’s theology

Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NJUTS) is the only seminary in China today where feminist theology is a part of the curriculum. At a meeting with women faculty at the seminary, the visiting women’s group learned from the vice-president, Rev. Gao Ying, that feminist theology is new in China. According to her, the challenge is how to practise gender equality in China especially in the light of cultural traditions. She conceded that women’s ordination in the church has proceeded at a much faster pace than that of men over the last two decades but surmised it could be related to the numerical strength of women active in the church. The fact remains that even women pastors can be submissive.

Reflecting on the situation, some faculty felt that making theoretical criticisms of patriarchy is easy but to actually challenge patriarchy in the church and in the Bible is a different story. In rural areas, where Christians hold on to a very literal interpretation of the Bible, the letters of Paul are often used to justify women’s oppression. Meng Yenling, who co-taught a course on feminist theology, said that “When women are badly treated by their husbands, they think they should endure their husbands’ oppression”. It was felt that courses on feminist theology should be used to empower women students. Many rural congregations continue to have a strong preference for male pastors and do not like to take the communion from women pastors.

At the seminary, there was a consensus that developing a better understanding of the theological basis for women’s ordination was crucial. There was also a need for women to develop their self-identity and for them to read the Bible from a woman’s perspective. These were important in a context where divorce and domestic violence are on the rise.

The visiting women theological educators from Southeast Asia agreed with their Chinese hosts that culture plays a strong role in determining behaviour. There was thus a need to review their respective cultures and see where changes can be made. Discussing ways of providing more support for women in seminaries, Dr. Merentek-Abram explained that in ATSESA, scholarships for women are encouraged and in the accreditation of theological schools, seminaries are required to have substantial collections of books on feminist theology. Nevertheless, many blocks to more equality for women remain. Even in parts of Indonesia, such as Minhasa, where women are given a relatively important role to play in religion, and where 65% of pastors are female, many women still suffer from domestic violence. In Thailand, Buddhist culture was blamed for the inferior social position of women. There was also a sense of self-sacrifice that many women accept. According to Rev. Chuulepran Srisoontorn, most Thai women who are infected with HIV/AIDS by their husbands seldom blame them for their suffering. In addition, she felt that churches often do not provide adequate support to women pastors, especially those who are married and have very young children to take care of.

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Continued on page 18
Go and Do Likewise – Learning from the Good Samaritan

Who is my neighbour? Whose neighbour am I? How should we apply Jesus’ exhortation to “Go and do likewise” in today’s society? These are questions which Lin Manhong, a faculty member at Jinling Union Theological Seminary (Nanjing), reflects in her sermon on the parable of Good Samaritan. The sermon, summarised below, was published in Tian Feng 2008.8 #316 and translated by Dr. Richard Phua.

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is a response to the question of the Pharisee, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ The Pharisee’s question entails defining the boundaries of his responsibility. According to some biblical scholars, the ‘neighbour’ within the Lukan community is a member of the family or of the close geographical community. The question was relevant to the Lukan community because people of different ethnicities and locations were joining in it. Hence, the story of the Good Samaritan is helping the church to solve practical problems by teaching that believers were to accept those they previously were reluctant to accept and also those who appeared to be in no need of acceptance, or were undeserving of their help or love.

Further, the parable encourages people to expand their horizons and see that high social standing does not necessarily equal good personal qualities and high ethics. Jesus brings in a Samaritan, one outside the community, as a moral hero, thus challenging people’s stereotypes. He also widens the concept of ‘neighbour’ not to include only the object of love, but also the subject of love. A ‘neighbour’ ought to have mercy, sympathy and love, which ought to be seen in deed, not just in words.

‘Likewise’ may appear a simple term, but it has profound theological implications. Some biblical scholars have suggested that the term serves as a compass for our actions. It invites us to use the imagination to make comparison and so better understand the spirit of what Jesus is teaching. ‘Comparative imagination’ is in fact a very important path of learning, since we often seek to understand the ‘unknown’ by what we already know; without comparative imagination, the ‘unknown’ will remain ‘unknowable’.

‘Comparative imagination’, when used as a tool for exegesis and theological deliberation, enables us to link Jesus’ teaching with our spiritual needs today and turn this teaching into a lesson which is relevant for us today.

New Testament scholar William Klassen points out that the ‘neighbour’ in the Gospels includes tax-collectors, prostitutes, victims of robbery, debtors, the sick, the despised children and the weak of the society. And works of ‘love’ for these neighbours are concrete, including healing the sick, feeding the hungry, delivering the socially despised, lost and marginalized. How shall we help the socially weak? How shall we deliver them? As preachers, does the provision of spiritual food and psychological comfort entail all that Jesus commands us to do?

“In our society today, whenever we mention the socially weak, we are reminded of the farmers. According to the statistics of 2006, there were 150 million farmers throughout China working in the cities. They account for 80% of all construction workers, 80% of miners, 60% of factory workers, 70% of workers in real estate, and 50% of the positions in hospitality industry.”

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As an illustration, Lin Manhong retells a story written by a child labourer, entitled ‘A Day of My life’:

‘I get up at 3 a.m. with my mum. After washing my face, I accompany my mum to the wholesale market to get vegetables to be sold at the retail market. While mum is selling the vegetables, I return home to prepare breakfast. After having breakfast with my brother, I rush back to the market so that mum can come home for breakfast. Once mum has returned to the market, I will be able to go to school. At noon, I return home first to prepare lunch for my brother and myself, and then I go over to the market to free my mum for her meal. After her lunch, I will go back to school to continue my afternoon classes. In the evening I return home to do my homework, while taking care of my little brother and preparing dinner at the same time. Then we wait for our mum to have dinner with us. Eventually, we go to bed. This is a typical day of mine.’

At the end of the essay, the girl wrote that her mum had recently told her not to go to school, but to help her at the market instead, as her brother would be starting school soon and they could only afford sending one child to school. ‘But I wish so much to continue schooling!’ When I came to this part, my heart was aching. What can I do to help such a child who has lost her opportunity of schooling? How can I join activities which have emerged in our society to help poor students? Despite the efforts of the Government and related organizations to improve this situation, school dropouts remain a social problem. What can we, believers and the Chinese church do to help them and how should we do it? When will we be prepared to do it?

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are six characters, but only one managed to ‘love others as himself’. We ought to imitate the Good Samaritan, or to better protect people from crime. Perhaps we should go to the extent of investigating why people need to have recourse to crime and how we may rehabilitate these people – this is all about learning to be a neighbour; using different methods to obey what Jesus has said, ‘Go and do likewise’.

Let us return to the story of the child who lost her opportunity for studies. It seems important to encourage believers or the Christian community to be involved in helping children. However, it is equally important to raise farmers’ awareness of the need of educating their children, and to call for society’s efforts in developing rural townships and villages. We also need to advocate equality between the sexes in education and to call for an overall consistent system of education. This is our duty as a church.

Lin Manhong mentions several publications which have started to raise concerns for the peasant workers in cities and to reflect on the impoverished conditions of these workers, their families and children, including some of the unjust treatments they have received. For example:

The Lives of the Migrant Workers, published by Contemporary China Publishing House in 2006
《中国农民工生存纪实》由当代中国出版社
Focus on Chinese Workers published by China Economic Publishing House in 2005
《聚焦中国民工》由中国经济出版社
A Survey on Chinese Workers, published by Qunyan Press in 2005
《中国民工调查》由群言出版社
On Children’s Day (June 1, 2007), the Shanghai YMCA and a local government social service agency joined forces to help launch a health education campaign aimed at benefitting the children of migrant workers. Known as “Small Birds Take Flight”, the campaign will make use of community volunteers to provide a wide variety of activities that promote better physical and psychological health for these disadvantaged children. Shanghai YMCA Director, Wu Jianrong said the planned curriculum includes lectures, performances, exhibitions, and a strong push for parent education and involvement. Health check-ups for the children are also built into the program in an effort to make sure that illnesses are discovered and treated promptly. Director Wu hopes to arouse widespread interest and concern in this effort to promote a healthy environment and a safe system for the growth and general education of migrant workers’ children. (TF 2007.7 #313)

In July, the CCC Social Service Department convened a conference at the Hangzhou YMCA to provide training and promote information sharing among church workers who care for autistic children. During the four-day event, Sun Zhangdao, Director of the Hangzhou YMCA shared lessons learned at the Agape Center for Rehabilitation and Treatment of Autism and three professionals from Hong Kong were invited to share their expertise. The guest speakers were Luo Jiahui, Chief Inspector for the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council; Chen Haojia, a clinical psychologist; and Zeng Lijian, a professional therapist. First-hand modeling of treatment techniques was especially valuable and participants were also glad for the chance to share common experiences through small group discussions. Topics for lecture and discussion included techniques for diagnosis and evaluation, structured teaching methods, effective use of visual aids, techniques to promote hand-eye coordination, and methods to promote social training. Conference participants reported that the training was eye-opening and educational, and they felt confident that the newly acquired skills and information would help them provide better care and treatment for autistic children. (TF 2008.8 #315)
Love Finds a Way at Zhoukou Church

Wang Rongwei, a reporter of Tian Feng, visited the City of Zhoukou (Henan) in late June, 2007. He met Pastor Ma Xin, the Chairman of the Zhoukou Christian Council, who has, during his term of leadership, taken prompt action against the influx of heresies and also successfully mobilised churches in the Zhoukou area to act as Good Samaritans. The article below is based on Wang Rongwei’s report, translated by Lucia Wah (Tian Feng 2007.8 #315).

Zhoukou City, with a population of 10.7 million, is located in eastern Henan. There are more than 260,000 Christians, 6 pastors, 46 elders, about 80 theological students and more than one thousand churches within its area. Due to its particular geographical location, Zhoukou churches are under a serious invasion from heresies and cults. Immediately after its foundation in 2003, Zhoukou CC/TSPM committees, took to constructing premises for theological training so as to tackle the influence of heretic cults.

Subsequently, Zhoukou CC/TSPM has organized 33 training courses of different lengths, including periodical studies and full-time courses from one to two years. The number of participants up to now totals 4,162 people, 95% of whom have come from rural areas. To better serve their needs, the traditional curriculum of biblical studies, basic theology, ecclesiology and pastoral counselling courses now includes AIDS prevention, fertilisation and methods of farming. The agricultural courses are organised in collaboration with Henan Agriculture and Broadcast University since 2005.

The infrastructure at the theological training centre is very basic. A new dining hall to seat 400 people has been designed but the funding is still pending. Currently, the students have their meals in a large provisional tent which is at risk of collapsing under heavy rains and strong winds. Most students must crouch on the ground while having their simple dinner, a steamed bun and a bowl of cucumber soup. The new dining hall is estimated to cost RMB 600,000.

According to Pastor Ma, defending pure Christian doctrine is one of the greatest challenges of the Zhoukou Christian Council. To a considerable number of Christians, Jesus is only a god to provide safety and blessings, or a model for good works. To nurture these Christians to resist heresies, the church must focus in its teaching on basic Christian concepts, such as Jesus’ dual nature, crucifixion, resurrection, second coming, etc.

To more effectively reach the grass-roots, Zhoukou CC/TSPM has formed mobile teams that hold training courses and seminars in rural meeting points. The teams consist of graduates from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, Zhongnan Theological Seminary and Henan Biblical School; Zhoukou CC/TSPM can also assign 1-3 local church staff members to the programme. The training takes place in winter and spring which are the agricultural low seasons, and has been well-received by the local churches.

Since 2005, the Zhoukou City CC/TSPM has also organized ten training sessions for identifying evangelists with high potential. Until now, all of
the 1,500 evangelists in the entire city have been screened, and the selected ones may remain in the preaching post. Through this screening and selection, Zhoukou CC/TSPM wishes to regulate and systematise the church work, and to lay foundations for a stable church development in the long run.

In Zhoukou City area, two counties are listed as poverty-stricken areas according to national standards, and two fall in this category by provincial standards. There are more than 5,000 orphaned children who lack parental care and basic material conditions for a healthy life, mainly because of HIV/AIDS. These children are depressed and lack motivation for learning which leads to poor school results. This adds an extra burden on their guardians and may give rise to instability in the society.

Pastor Ma posits that the society needs the church, while the church recognises the need to act, but it lacks resources. To resolve this problem, Zhoukou CC/TSPM has contacted related organizations and invited them to investigate the situation in the area. Currently, Zhoukou church is running a programme in 630 churches in 113 counties to help the orphans in their respective areas. Since July 2002, leaders of these churches have mobilised their congregations to provide shelter and care for 1,890 orphans.

Theological training and practical social ministry by Zhoukou CC/TSPM have helped to strengthen the faith of brothers and sisters of Zhoukou Church so as to become witnesses to God’s endless love. This miracle of sharing, the miracle of “Five Loaves and Two Fish” draws them closer to the Lord. It also makes them love the Lord, proclaim the Lord, glorify the Lord, love the church and love each other. •
Members of the Amity Easter Tour visited Zhoukou Gospel Hospital in Henan Province in April 2007. Below, Theresa Carino of the Amity Hong Kong Office shares her observations of the church-run hospital, one of the very few existing in China today.

Located in the Zhoukou City Development District, the Zhoukou Gospel Hospital was established in 2001 by the local church. According to Rev. Ma Xin, head of the Zhoukou Christian Council, “Amity began providing some of the equipment and helped us to upgrade the quality of the hospital.” Amity has contributed to the construction of the hospital wards. Occupying a 4-acre lot, the spotlessly clean multi-storey hospital has 33 staff who serve more than 50 patients a day. There are more than 15,000 outpatient visits per year and twenty inpatient hospital beds are maintained. Departments include emergency care, cardiovascular diseases, gastroenterology, ear-nose-throat, obstetrics and gynecology and pediatrics. The hospital currently enjoys a high rate of success in the treatment of bronchitis and colon problems which are common in the area.

Rev. Ma’s vision for the hospital is for it to specialize on women’s health. Chinese women tend to neglect their own health needs, often sacrificing these for the sake of their children and husband. When they do go to hospital it is often too late. He also hopes that health and healing can be brought to villages, stressing that, “we need more clinics that can help spread basic health knowledge. If these are located in villages, it will reduce transportation costs for the villagers.” In Zhoukou, where almost 80 percent of students are myopic, Ma hopes to have more trained personnel and facilities to provide corrective surgery. He envisions that students who benefit can then serve in the homes for the elderly and disabled children or orphans. They can become members of a volunteer team for social service. Ma believes in helping them to help others.

The quality of care at the Gospel Hospital is much better than in government-run hospitals claims Rev. Ma. To illustrate his point, he delights in recounting the story of the prison warden’s wife who had been a patient at the hospital. During her confinement there, the nurses had given her much attention, comforting her and providing counselling. This contributed to her physical recovery. She became a Christian and so did her husband.

In only six years, the Gospel Hospital has become a well-known public institution in Zhoukou City and nationally, winning the Henan Province Merit Award for Charitable Agencies in 2006. The Hospital often provides free examinations and treatment to those who

“we need more clinics that can help spread basic health knowledge. If these are located in villages, it will reduce transportation costs for the villagers.”
Social Service Ministry Department of the national CCC/TSPM organised a wheelchair donation ceremony in Hangzhou on September 21, 2007. The ceremony and donations were part of an ongoing ministry and collaboration of the Social Service Ministry Department and an American partner organisation. This time, thirty people received a wheelchair each. (TF 2007.10 #320)

“Church and society cannot be separated,” says Ma. Christians are regarded as ‘good neighbours’. Through our engagement, the church is also transformed.

“Church and society cannot be separated,” says Ma, explaining his intense involvement in social service. “The government recognizes that the church is an important part of society. Christians are regarded as ‘good neighbours’. Through our engagement, the church is also transformed. We should follow Jesus and share our love through our actions.”

NEWSBRIEFS

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Groundbreaking Ceremony.

More than 800 Christians from near and far gathered together on September 15, 2007 in Guangzhou to celebrate the groundbreaking ceremony of Tian He Church. “This church is not only a visible building, but a guiding light and a temple of prayer pleasing to God”, were the words used by Rev. Feng Hao, the chairperson of Guangzhou TSPM to express his gratitude to God for this church which is the first to be built in Guangzhou since the opening of China. It is also the first to be built in a new city district. The church will seat some 3000 people, being by far the largest church in the city of Guangzhou. (http://www.chineseprotestantchurch.org.cn/News/hot/200710-2.htm)

Across the Taiwan Strait.

A delegation of 9 members from Taiwanese Church Co-operative Council visited the Headquarters of the national CCC/TSPM on September 3, 2007. This Taiwanese Council, founded in 1963, is made up of 16 denominations and evangelizing organizations. The members of the delegation expressed that the churches in Taiwan and in mainland China are all parts of Jesus Christ’s body who should have contact and made exchanges to understand each other better. Apart from Shanghai, the delegation visited churches and theological seminaries in Fujian Province. (http://www.chineseprotestantchurch.org.cn/News/hot/200710-4.htm)

A delegation from Taiwan Baptist Theological Seminary visited the national CCC/TSPM in Shanghai on August 16, 2007. TSPM Chairman, Presbyter Ji Jianhong briefed the delegation about current developments in theological education in China mainland before its tour of churches and major theological seminaries in Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan and Beijing. This was the first official visit of Taiwan Baptist Theological Seminary to mainland China. (http://www.chineseprotestantchurch.org.cn/News/hot/200710-5.htm)
The Development of City Churches in China

Although the majority of Chinese Christian congregations are in rural areas, Dr. Chen Yilu, president of Guangdong Union Theological Seminary (GUTS), sees city churches as the essence of the Church in China for their strength of witness and the diversity and vitality of their church life. In his article published on the GUTS website, Dr. Chen outlines the main characteristics and major challenges of city churches in today’s China. The article, summarised below, was translated into English by Cinde Lee.

Dr. Chen Yilu first looks into reasons for the growth of city churches, and links this growth with the wider socio-political and economic development in China. He also looks into current challenges and their potential resolution.

City churches had a head start

City churches, such as Chongwenmen Church in Beijing, Mu'en Church in Shanghai and Dongshan Church in Guangzhou, were the first to restore activities after 1979, because the new policy of religious freedom took effect earlier in the cities than in the countryside. Also, there were more ministers and evangelists in the cities, so the conditions were such that city churches had better resources and therefore were in the forefront of development.

Economic development had a positive impact on church development

According to Dr. Chen, urban development, particularly in coastal areas, has been the most direct cause of growth in city churches. Cities attract people because they provide job opportunities and access to quality education. He takes Shenzhen as an example: Shenzhen was once a small fishing village; the local churches each had fewer than a hundred members in their congregations. Now Shenzhen is a medium-size Chinese city with significant economic growth, where parishioners number in the thousands. With the influx of migrants, Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese) is becoming more accepted than the local dialects.

Churches are naturally affected by the economic development in their area. Although the church may not rely on power and wealth, increased funding surely boosts and secures church development. Since cities provide a better overall economic environment, city churches generally enjoy better material opportunities for growth. Dr. Chen takes an example from Shamian Christ Church where he served as a pastor before: Sunday offering in this congregation of 200 people amounted to RMB 1,200 to 1,500, which would be the total offerings for one year or even several years in some rural churches.

Generally speaking, city people are better educated than people in rural areas. Most trained church workers live in cities, and there are also more lay volunteers in city churches compared with their rural counterparts. Most city dwellers have stable 9-to-5 jobs, so they have more spare time to participate in activities and volunteer their services.

This “priesthood of all believers” takes on great significance where clergy is scarce and/or aging. Often the clergy focus on pastoral care while well-educated and sophisticated volunteers are the main force of evangelism. Since Chinese people generally look to their seniors as role models, the witness of these urban Christians is very effective: if an engineer or professor can believe in Jesus, then that faith must be reliable.

Material wealth cannot solve all problems

In a society which is becoming increasingly wealthy, the Church has not dwindled, but has actually grown. In the past, satisfying material needs seemed to be the ultimate answer, but nowadays, meeting material needs is no longer a critical matter of survival. The faith of many urban Christians does not stem from hopes for better material circumstances or better health, but rather they have decided to follow Christ because they want their lives to be more meaningful. City dwellers often come under a lot of emotional pressure which brings them to realise that they need the peace of Christ. Further, in addition to the Gospel message of Christianity, church architecture and sacred music attract urban residents by creating an atmosphere of higher spirituality.
Concern for the community

Christianity is a religion of love and service. City Christians are better off financially, and can therefore initiate social relief and welfare work. For example, Christian doctors volunteer their services to care for the sick and sometimes even offer free medication to the needy; city churches also organise relief for disaster stricken areas. The witness of charity is very helpful to the development of evangelism.

Challenges, and how to respond to them

As a result of church growth, finding adequate space for church gatherings has become a problem. Regardless of their size, churches and meeting points are packed full during their Sunday worship. Some churches need to organise 2-3 services every Sunday to accommodate all the believers. In addition to the increase in the number of worship services, carrying out pastoral duties and setting up small group ministries for the growing congregation means an increase in church workers’ workload.

"Urban believers have high expectations of their pastors, who often cannot meet the needs they are faced with for lack of time or space."

Most churches are usually located in older city districts, while the population of new districts is growing. In the city of Canton, for example, there are 8 churches which are situated in old districts. New churches are needed in new districts, but church planting still needs to overcome several problems. There is a need for better understanding of the religious regulations, so that church workers can be better able to negotiate with religious affairs officials. Another problem is the high cost of large church buildings. The construction of a new church in Shenzhen, for example, had a budget of some RMB 20 million. In addition, people may have difficulties in agreeing what a church building should look like.

Urban believers have high expectations of their pastors, who often cannot meet the needs they are faced with for lack of time or space. Parishioners may have a better educational background than their pastors. In this age of the world wide web, they can obtain a lot of information about Christianity without going to the church. Until now, only a few church workers have had access to higher education, let alone studying overseas, and therefore they cannot minister effectively to the more intellectual believers. To tackle this problem, the church must improve theological education. The Chinese Church has been hesitant to send pastors overseas for training, but this may be a necessary step to take in order to avoid even bigger problems in the future.

With the growth of churches, people from different walks of life have started coming together, using churches as grounds for doing business. Since the city churches more often facilitate a wide network of people, some come to the church for odd jobs or other temporary benefits. If rural churches have to deal with superstitious beliefs of their laity, urban churches risk becoming secularised. This underlines the importance of good guidelines for church practice and church leaders showing a good example.
Grassroots

Churches on the Pearl River Delta

Wang Rongwei, a reporter of Tian Feng magazine, paid a visit to several churches in the province of Guangdong (Canton) in June 2007. The figures in the following article are taken from his report published in Tian Feng 2007.7 #313.

Guangdong province, which lies in south-eastern China, was one of the earliest regions to open to foreign trade. It still is one of the top economic regions in China, attracting migrant populations from other parts of China. The current population of the province is 77.83 million; the estimated number of Christians is some 320,000. CCC/TSPM committee has been established in 19 out of 21 cities in the province, one committee registration being in process. In total, there are more than 650 churches and meeting points; the number of church staff (pastors, elders, evangelists, etc.) amounts to 843. Over 3,000 volunteers serve in different church ministries throughout the province.

In the city of Guangzhou, CCC/TSPM has focussed in particular on training church personnel and creating uniform church services. Currently, all the city churches follow one order of worship, while last year, 12 meeting points were granted a church status. All the existing churches are located in old city areas, but this situation will change in the near future: the first church in new city districts celebrated its groundbreaking ceremony in September 2007 (see Newsbriefs on p. 11). Guangzhou municipal CCC/TSPM is one of the precursors of the present day social service ministry in Chinese churches: as early as in 1985, it initiated the foundation of a non-profit charitable body to provide social welfare services in the city area.

Cities in Guangdong province have attracted migrants for decades. Foshan city to the south of Guangzhou is famous for its overseas Chinese population (1.35 million) of which some 45% are of Hong Kong or Macao descent. Recent migrant workers, on the contrary, come mainly from rural areas of Guangdong or other provinces. Based on figures in the report, there are currently some 2.24 million people in Foshan (total population 5.79 million) living without permanent residence registration (hukou). The neighbouring city of Zhongshan boasts a population of 2.43 million, of which only 1.4 million are granted permanent city residence. The majority of the natives of Guangdong province speak Cantonese as their native language, while Mandarin Chinese is used as the language of wider communication. To meet the needs of the migrant population, Zhongshan churches provide translation in their services.

Among the five cities (Guangzhou, Foshan, Zhongshan, Shenzhen and Zhuhai) mentioned in the report, Zhuhai is the only one with only 7 meeting points and no church building nor proper office facilities. Its CCC/TSPM committees was officially registered only six years ago and therefore church ministries are being developed. All the cities, however, seem to place great emphasis on practical witness. The coastal province of Guangdong is an area frequently hit by tropical storms and typhoons; big or small, all the above churches have reached out and provided generous disaster relief in their vicinities.

In today’s churches there are issues which are not easy to work through, due to the country’s general situation, but there is also a stagnation inside the church rising from overly conservative thinking. Chinese society has undergone major changes, but the theology of the Chinese church has remained fairly unchanged and can be categorised as largely fundamentalist. In response, the reconstruction of theological thinking has as its aim the renewal and contextualisation of Chinese theology so that it may be applied in a contemporary setting.

The church also needs to review its methods of evangelisation. Telling people that if you don’t believe, you will end up in hell, is hardly an effective way of preaching the Gospel. Bishop K. H. Ting emphasises that God is love; this emphasis does not overrule God’s other attributes, but in China we need to teach the Gospel of Love. The merciful God can meet the needs of urban seekers.
Church Regulations Must not Be Trampled upon - Voice of Christians

Since April 2007, Tian Feng, the magazine of the Chinese Protestant Churches, has published a column called “Voice of Christians”. The topics of the column have ranged from Jesus’ resurrection to the church’s self-governance and women’s role in the church. The author of the following article illustrates the importance of established church practices through the example of an unauthorised ordination in Inner Mongolia. The article was published in Tian Feng 2007.7 #314 and translated by Emily Dunn, a volunteer translator.

Christian rites and doctrine may be likened to two important shields which protect Christianity. Church history tells us that in the time of the church fathers, mistaken understandings of the Trinity and Christology produced the heresies of Arianism and Nestorianism. In the Middle Ages, influential secular rulers and rich people blinded by greed used money to buy positions of ministry from the pontiff or archbishops, entering into despicable transactions. Heresies confused the Lord’s word, leading many astray; the buying and selling of positions of ministry directly caused religious degeneration and moral decay. For this reason, the church today must fully respect and prudently observe the rites and doctrines that have been passed down by the traditional church for the last two thousand years.

Recently we heard that a strange incident had occurred in a church in Inner Mongolia. Disregarding opposition from other church workers, Chinese Protestant Church regulations, and the rites and doctrines observed by the church through the ages, the person in charge of the church insisted upon so-called “ordinations” that were not held in accordance with church custom. He induced an elderly believer without any position of ministry to lay hands upon and “ordain” five people - including himself - as preachers, and three as elders. He also fired two vice chairmen - both pastors - and several elders from the local CCC/TSPM committees, who held dissenting opinions.

The CCC/TSPM Committee of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region treated this incident very seriously, and refused to recognize the newly “ordained” pastors and elders. Yet these people continued to present themselves as pastors and elders and to minister the holy sacraments, and moreover took over the pulpit and preached content that was out of step with the Bible and Christian teaching, saying “People have no sin once they have put their trust in the Lord. If they sin, it is not they who commit it, but the devil.”

Preaching this kind of message from the pulpit is very harmful. First of all, these views go against the Bible, which tells us that people will continue to sin after believing in God. The problems of the church in Corinth indicate that Christians still sin; 1 John also says “If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” Secondly, it is wrong to lay all the responsibility for our sin on the devil. People are independent agents, and so each person must take responsibility for his own actions. Third, if people do not have to bear any responsibility for their sins, then bad people will sin even more boldly, and the righteous need not repent of the occasional transgression. This is an overly lax view, and is inconsistent with the Bible and Christian doctrine.

These people also emphasised “spiritual authority,” saying things like “God is the sole authority in the universe”. God is the authority, but his authority is used for good, and is absolutely not to be used by a church leader to defend his own sin. If someone claiming to be God’s servant really believes in God’s authority, they should be exceptionally prudent about their words and deeds, and not sin.

It is well and good to desire a position of ministry, and fine to feel called to become a pastor or elder, but there is a proper way of doing things which should not be tampered with. Those preparing to be pastors and elders should examine their own moral character, their knowledge, faith and life, and whether they are committed to God and the truth. Even more important is whether or not they have a true calling from God.
Even if those to be ordained possess all the proper requirements, the ordination should still take place according to church regulations. The Chinese Protestant Church stipulates that sacramental authority lies with the provincial (or regional) CCC/TSPM, and that these organizations assess those applying to be ordained as pastors and elders to ascertain whether they really do comply with biblical standards. Second, in the ordination of a pastor, a minimum of three other pastors must lay hands on the candidate together; in the ordination of an elder at least three other pastors or elders must lay hands on the candidate together, and the ceremony must be held publicly in a church or cathedral. The leader of the church in Inner Mongolia brazenly trampled upon the regulations of the Chinese Protestant church, disregarded the rulings of the Autonomous Region’s CCC/TSPM, and attacked and retaliated against those who admonished him according to the truth. No matter how you look at it, such a person does not resemble a pastor.

The purpose of each level of the CCC/TSPM is to run the Chinese church well. Thus, they must not only support churches in their work, but also take disciplinary action against those who do not abide by the regulations so as to prevent one apple from ruining the whole barrel. The regulations of the Chinese church are a tool for maintaining the proper administration of the sacraments and facilitating the church’s preaching of the Christian truth. Moreover, these regulations have been researched and passed by the body of representatives at the National Council, and then issued by the National CCC/TSPM to the local CCC/TSPM committees throughout the nation. They have legitimate authority within the Chinese church; no church organization or individual can excuse themselves from respecting the regulations for some special reason, let alone wilfully trample on them to suit their own desires. God sees everything and knows all that people say and do. Does He not judge according to justice?

The Word Comes to the East - Bible Ministry Exhibition Commemorates Robert Morrison’s Arrival in China

On the Fourth of September 1807, Rev. Robert Morrison set foot on Chinese soil and initiated soon after that the translation of the Bible into Chinese. On the Fourth of September 2007, the opening ceremony of an exhibition entitled “The Word Comes to the East” was held in the City Hall in Hong Kong to honour the Bible and its impact on Hong Kong society. Rev. Cao Shengjie, the president of the CCC and Rev. Deng Fucun, the vice-president of the TSPM committees, attended the opening ceremony together with Hong Kong church leaders, the great-grandson of Hudson Taylor’s (the founder of China Inland Mission) James Hudson Taylor III, and the officiating guest, Hong Kong Chief Executive Donald Tsang. More than ten thousand visitors grasped the opportunity to see the history of Bible translation in China and its influence on the development of education, medical work and church life in Hong Kong. The exhibition was organised by the Hong Kong Bible Society and co-sponsored by The Hong Kong Chinese Christian Churches Union.

For more details about the contents of the exhibition, please visit the United Bible Societies’ website: http://www.biblesociety.org/latestnews/latest442.pdf.

If you are interested in the Bible Ministry Exhibition of the Chinese Protestant Churches in Hong Kong, in the US and in Germany, check the website at www.chineseprotestantchurch.org/english/ev.htm
When western missionaries left the Chinese Church in 1949, incomplete statistics indicate that they left behind over 70 church denominations. Denominational rivalries and mutual attacks had become the hallmark of old China’s protestant churches. Even today, the emphasis on specific confessions and church traditions has led to disharmony and strife in services, and some individual denominations have been able to set up religious activities and meeting places, ordain ministers and administer sacraments thanks to their own organisational structure.

According to the author, the resurgence of denominational activities is partly due to the increased international exchange. He regards the activities of foreign parties as an deliberate attempt to revive past denominational ties through direct financial aid and contacts, and through the distribution of free literature to the churches originally founded by their denomination. Such involvement erodes the unity of the Chinese church, eventually leading to church splits.

Internal reasons also aggravate the problem of denominationalism: Some individuals may make use of denominational splits for upholding their authority and pursuing their personal goals. Some denominational churches may be reluctant to join the Three-Self Church for theological reasons. In some cases, this reluctance may result from the lack of communication between the CCC/TSPM committees and the believers in denominational churches.

The protestant churches in Fujian originated in a variety of backgrounds. However, as the Protestant churches implemented a common liturgy in the whole country in 1958, Fujian churches suggested guidelines for fostering unity, mutual respect and care. In practice, these guidelines enable believers from different denominations to gather together in one church building for separate church services. The existing denominational congregations may also have a small representation in the provincial CC/TSPM committees, and joint meetings for the “reconstruction of theological thinking” are organised to emphasise the biblical basis for unity.

With reference to different church traditions, Fujian provincial CC/TSPM committees respect the liturgy of existing denominational churches in ordaining pastors and elders. As for the smaller denominational churches, the Fujian CC/TSPM gives priority to their request for ordinations. And with a view to equipping future leaders, Fujian CC/TSPM also carries on the training of young colleagues from smaller denominational churches.

Instead of insisting on uniformity, the provincial CC/TSPM committees advocate collaboration between churches from different backgrounds. To give an illustration: when the Fuqing municipal CC/TSPM was raising funds for a home for the elderly with the estimated cost of over 10 million RMB, the local Methodist, Anglican, True Jesus and Christian Assembly churches joined in.

As for solutions to the problems caused by denominationalism, the author mentions firstly the need for the churches to return to the teaching of the Bible, since denominationalism is fundamentally a theological issue. Secondly, if CCC/TSPM succeeds in acting as a bridge between different church structures, the negative impact of denominationalism is weakened. If it fails to do so, denominational churches tend to take over the CCC/TSPM functions. Thirdly, churches need to teach about the honours of unity and the disgrace of denominational splits.

In conclusion, promoting unity requires patience, because unity is not uniformity. The author believes, however, that the church will become united one day and act as a promoter for peace in society if the issue of denominationalism is dealt with firmly and positively.
Carrying the double burden of being ‘mother’ and ‘pastor’

In Beijing where the group met with a dozen female pastors, seminary faculty and church workers gathered at the Beijing Christian Council, there was ample evidence of the strong role women played in the church. Six out of the eleven churches in Beijing are led by women pastors. They were proud of the fact that they had been entrusted with leadership roles but the burden of leadership weighed heavily on their shoulders. Some, looking visibly tired, alluded to the challenges they faced as church leaders. The pastor of Gangwashi Church has to lead a congregation of 5,000 members with a disproportionately small team of five pastors and two preachers.

At Chongwenmen Church, where membership is around 3,000, the senior pastor can count on the assistance of only three other pastors and four preachers. The pressure of responding to congregational needs was tremendous and she lamented, torn by strong feelings of guilt, that she had very little time to spend with her young son: “Every time I see him, I feel sorry. When I leave him in the morning, he is still asleep and when I arrive at night, he is already in bed.” Coping with very large congregations was indeed a challenge but for married female pastors, there was the double burden of being ‘mother’ and ‘pastor’ at the same time. Pastors were expected to counsel their flock but many of them felt inadequate and were eager to know how they could have access to courses on psychological counselling. More importantly, the question was raised: “Who will counsel pastors when they need help?”

Boosting women’s confidence and competence through education

In Xi’an, Rev. Wang Hong, who heads the Xi’an Bible School, observed that “Women in the church have a special position. We can do much for God’s work.” She informed us that among the 48 freshmen in the school’s three-year programme, The woman faculty from Yanjing Theological Seminary was keen to discover how feminist theology is taught in other parts of Asia. Eyingbeni Humtsoe from India explained that in her country, the oppression of women has religious underpinnings. It was therefore important to study the scriptures. She explained that the Bible can be a tool to oppress women but it can also be liberating. Through the study of scriptures, male students sometimes have their eyes opened and they begin to undertake changes, such as considering the ordination of women.
three fourths are women. The majority come from rural churches. Eight of the nine full-time faculty at the school are female. Rev. Chen Dingliang, representing the Shaanxi Provincial Christian Council, observed that in traditional Chinese culture, men were dominant in society and in the home. After the entry of missionaries to China, there was change in the status of women. There was more respect for women and they could have education and work outside the home. The Chinese revolution brought further improvement in the status of women.

“Women’s status is not good enough”, contended Rev. Ma Xiaoqin who had completed his M.Th. at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary two years ago. The only male faculty at the bible school, he pointed out that there are many women in the church but most of the leaders are still men. In rural areas, men enjoy more respect than women and, in his observation, “many women do not even realize things are unfair.”

To remedy the situation, Rev. Wang stressed the importance of improving the quality of women’s education. “Women should have both confidence and competence”, she emphasized. At the bible school, students learn Chinese history, how to read the Bible and how to preach in church. Raising the level of theological education was essential and she proudly announced that in 2008, Xi’an Bible School will be offering a course on women’s theology.

Hoping for further exchanges with Chinese sisters

Back in Shanghai, reflecting on their experience in China before departing for home, the delegates from Southeast Asia were full of enthusiasm for further exchanges with their Chinese sisters.

According to Chuleepran Srisoontorn from Thailand, “this trip has been the richest experience of my life. In the Xi’an Bible School you can see the spirit of the woman principal. I can see in the faces of the students their commitment to God.” For Eyingbeni Humtsoe from India, “being exposed firsthand to the churches in China, many false presumptions were clarified, and on a personal note, knowing about women’s participation in the life and growth of the churches has been encouraging”. The encounter between Southeast Asian and Chinese church women had been rich and inspiring. According to Zenaida Lumba of the Philippines, “our coming together is not simply an intellectual thing – there has been a sharing of feelings and emotions and our lives as women has become richer as a result”. 

Yu Jiade, Mary Anoints Jesus
Time has passed swiftly in 2007, as the Chinese church leadership has been quite involved in many important events.

In the wake of the successful Exhibition of the Bible Ministry of the Church in China, held in Los Angeles, Atlanta and New York in 2006, the same exhibition traveled from the U.S. to Germany and was shown at the Kirchentag in Cologne and Bavaria in May and June this year. This is the first time such a programme has taken place in Europe. Not only thousands of German church leaders and Christians have come to know more about the church situation in China, but also guests from 6 other European countries, such as the UK, Switzerland, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway also attended the event. Dr. Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the WCC, praised the exhibition as "one of the greatest events about the Bible in 21st century."

When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, visited us last year, he asked us about the relations between the Chinese church and African churches. This year, we sent representatives to attend church meetings in South Africa, while in October, Archbishops from the Anglican Church (Global South) paid their first visit to China.

In November 2007, we also received Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the US.

A large Chinese delegation attended the installation of Bishop Paul Kwong as Archbishop of Hong Kong Diocese.

Domestically, the Chinese Communist Party has taken the initiative of building up a harmonious society in China stating in their documents, including the Party’s Regulation, that religion may play a positive role in the joint effort of economic-social construction and social harmony. Chinese Christians widely echoed this proposal, as our faith is based on reconciliation between God and human beings, peace among people even with different beliefs, and harmony between humans and nature. Several theological seminars have recently been held on the theme of “Reconciliation, Harmony and Peace” in different districts and at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

The 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held on October 15-21. Presbyter Ji Jianhong and I, as well as leaders of other religions, were invited as guests to attend the opening and closing ceremony. This is a special honour from the Party to show the sincerity in keeping good relations with religions.

At the beginning of 2008, we are going to convene the 8th National Conference of the Chinese Protestant Churches, which is regulated to be held once every 5 years. At this moment, we are very busy in preparation. We look forward to the healthy development and prosperity of the Chinese church, and we will also be keen to make a positive contribution to the welfare of our society, including social services, so as to meet the expectations of the Chinese people.

We thank all the readers of ANS for your concern and prayers for the church in China. We believe we will have a brighter future in the year to come.