

Look Back, Move Forward, Innovate!

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The impression that mainland churches of 2016 may have left on us is that spaces are becoming smaller, while restrictions are increasing. Ever since the demolition of crosses in the Zhejiang Province in 2014, many have expressed that religion in China has entered a deep winter. Is this merely an impression, or is it the truth? In this article, let us review Christianity-related incidents that have aroused concern in the past year. Also, let us explore what needs to be paid attention to when overseas churches and organizations serve in the mainland.

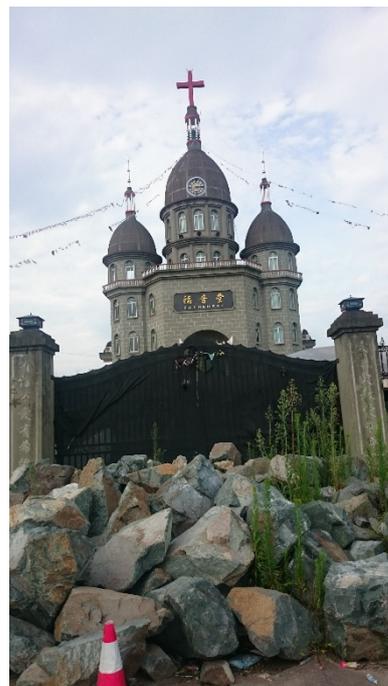


Overview of Major Religious Events in 2016

The National Religious Work Conference marked the end of the cross demolition incidents in April 2016. Issues of the people concerned in those incidents, however, continue. Right defender lawyer Zhang Kai as well as several pastors who supported churches in suing the government were incarcerated and interrogated; accusations against Rev. Joseph Gu, senior pastor of Chongyi Church and former head of the Zhejiang Christian Council, have not yet reached a conclusion; the whereabouts of Xia Baolong, the Communist Party Secretary of Zhejiang who is considered to be highly antagonistic towards the churches, are still unknown. What brings more challenges to the churches than the demolition of crosses is the “five entries and five transformations” policy¹ introduced during the period of the

demolition. The policy aims to eliminate the uniqueness of Christianity by changing the Christian doctrine and management of churches.

Aside from the National Religious Work Conference, the National People's Congress and the NPC Standing Committee were convened in March and April last year to pass the *Law on Management of Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations in the Territory of Mainland China*, which was then implemented in January 2017. In October 2016, the State Council released the *Religious Affairs Regulations Draft Revisions (Deliberation Draft)*. Many hold the view that the purpose of deliberation draft is to enhance the government's management of the church, further manipulating churches.



The churches face challenges greater than cross demolition

The Extension of the Policies

Restrictions imposed on Christianity by the Chinese government are traceable. From the history of Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, it can be seen that the freedom of religion with Chinese characteristics refers to an internal personal freedom of faith, not freedom of religious activity as understood in the West. To “force” others into a religion is naturally not allowed; to influence education is forbidden as well; to be associated with foreign influence is the greatest taboo.² Under clear regulations of the government, religious activity has a relative freedom only—the government alone has the power to define which religious activities meet the requirements of national regulations.

Apart from the Constitution, *Document No.19* in 1982³, and *Document No.6* in 1991⁴ were aimed at deepening the specifications of the Constitution while addressing corresponding background issues of the time, such as the Chinese economic reform and the June Fourth Incident. In this backdrop, the relevant departments released regulations responding to international and national situations every once in a while to regulate religious activities of outsiders in China. In 2016, President Xi Jinping emphasized the need for stricter control on religion, and proposed a path of Sinification. It included stricter and more rigorous control based on past trends.

Serving with Wisdom

When serving mainland churches under the above circumstances, we ought to be mindful, but not overly anxious.

1. Make Good Use of Local Networks

Leadership training in small groups



We must first understand that the actual execution of law is far more influential than any legislation of law. Frankly speaking, legislations of law exist for its execution. For example, in the cross demolition incidents in Zhejiang, the government had already demolished many crosses before they released the *Zhejiang Provincial Regulations on Religious Buildings* to

place restrictions on religious buildings. Afterwards, even when church buildings were built according to these regulations, their crosses were still demolished. Thus, the issue really lies with who and how the law is executed.

Policies are implemented to different extents in different regions, and this has to do with social networking. In the development of the church, workers of registered churches as well as leaders of unregistered churches, have connections with local officials. If those relationships are good, things can go very smoothly. There will be more “flexibility” regarding to policy. Workers who come from outside of China must understand this current culture. How overseas organizations operate in the mainland depends on the practical advice of local workers, and not on the will and motivation of those carrying out the ministry.

2. The Opportunities in Changing Ministry

“Though the door was closed, God opened a window”. In the coming year of 2017, for some organizations, the future prospects of continuing service in China looks rather dim. Perhaps

this is a time to stop and reflect: what new paths has God opened for us? Perhaps new and creative ministries will begin this year.

What irreplaceable roles do Hong Kong churches play in the restructuring of ministries? If the development of mainland churches is already mature, why do we still spend resources and manpower on similar projects? Are we doing what we want to do, or are we doing what the field needs us to do? Are we satisfying our own needs, or are we acting according to God's will?

The goal of missions is to cultivate "local leaders" and "local ministries", and to avoid leading to reliance. Many Hong Kong churches join in service with churches in the Guangdong Province, but neglect the cultivation of "local leaders" and "local ministries". Ten or twenty years later, the Sunday schools, preaching and youth gatherings there are still reliant on outside workers. I call these ministries "saline drip ministries", which means that ministry will stop as soon as external assistance stops arriving. If that is the case now is the time for it to stop.

3. Discipleship Training through Working Deeply

Since high-profile ministries can no longer be continued, and more restrictions are being imposed on ministries that involve coming into contact with large audiences, let us return to the basics: spreading the Gospel and disciple-making. Since brothers and sisters in the mainland can spread the Gospel much more effectively than outside workers, let us focus our efforts and resources on the ministry of making disciples.



Making disciples means the establishment of a spiritual relationship. It requires deep ploughing and careful cultivation. Time and effort are to be spent on a small group of people, with mutual sincere commitment. Cultivating talents is the foundation of church development. Whether we go up to the North or they come down to the South, we need to cultivate disciples in small groups and lay down the burden of large numbers in ministry. Now is the

out in the same way as in the past. Nevertheless, we must remind each other—the development of the Church has never been dependent on the favor of the political power. From the history of mainland churches in the last century, from the 50s to the 80s, the development of churches faced more restrictions than today. During the decade of the Cultural Revolution, churches even ceased to



exist in the land of China. But even in difficult times, the name of Christ continued to be preached. If there are many restrictions today, the current situation is already better than in the 90s. Therefore, in our opinion, these restrictions are only reminding us to rely on the Holy Spirit, and to be innovative in order to respond to the needs and opportunities of the current times. We should not limit ourselves to the existing ways of working.

Footnotes:

1. The “five entries” in relation to the church refer to policies and rules, health and medical services, science and culture, poverty alleviation, and building harmony. The “five transformations” in relation to Christianity refer to the localization of religion, standardization of management models, localization of theology, making financial affairs known to the public, and the accommodation of Christian doctrines.
2. Original Text of Article 36 of the Constitution, “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.”
3. *The Basic Point of Views and the Basic Policy on Religious Problems During the Socialist Period in Our Country*
4. *Notice Concerning Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, State Council Regarding Religious Work Issues*

Remembering Their Needs During the Cold Winter
— Visit to a Mainland Pastor Receiving Our Living Subsidy
Compiled by: Yin Qing



Growing maize to make a living

In North China, the winter is particularly cold. The air quality is poor and the sky is always covered by smog. However, such weather conditions have not stopped us from remembering the needs of the pastors there. Earlier, our team visited the North China region. Apart from visiting the churches whose walls had been washed away by the flood a few

months ago, we also visited the mainland pastors who were receiving our living subsidy. We listened to their sharing about their ministry, and expressed concern about the difficulties they faced. Despite all the hardship, these pastors served the Lord faithfully, and we wanted to encourage them in our gatherings.

Pastor Lu has not reached the age of 40, yet has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for two to three years. His right hand is crippled and his fingers cannot move too well. He was in overall charge of the rural churches in one region of North China, and responsible for preaching in nine churches and fellowships (each with a congregation of 70 to 80). Even though he was already extremely busy in these churches, he grasped every opportunity to spread the Gospel, and was keen to develop ministries in the enterprises there.

The Lord paved the way for Pastor Lu's work. The boss of a factory converted to Christ and had a close relationship with Pastor Lu. His instruction to the factory manager was: "The pastor is coming! All the workers, believers and non-believers alike, stop working and come to listen to the Gospel!" As workers were forced to listen to the Gospel, such efforts went on for one year without avail. Yet, Pastor Lu did not want to give up, and decided to change his approach. He first started an 11-member cell group with the head of the production team and small group leaders. In the group gatherings, he established a rapport with the members and talked about Christian faith. Later, after these group members converted to Christ, they were invited to spread the Gospel among their colleagues. Lord, we pray that you give

Pastor Lu the wisdom and patience to work for you.

Pastor Lu has served the Lord full-time for 15 years. He works diligently every day, yet does not receive any pay from the church. Isn't that strange? It is because the church Pastor Lu serves still follows the tradition of offering crops to pastors who would not be paid a salary. In fact, many mainland churches are still of the view that pastors should lead a tough life, and they will only be given food or a meager salary. However, times have changed, and the practice of not paying pastors has fallen behind the needs of the times.

Pastor Lu's parents are close to 70 in age. They are still farming, growing peanuts and maize to support Pastor Lu's living. Despite such hardship, Pastor Lu insists on serving the Lord and responding to the calling from the Lord. The living subsidy couldn't solve all his needs, yet it somehow eases his financial burden. We hope that our offering can help faithful servants of the Christ so that they can stay dedicated in serving the Lord and grooming believers who can further spread the Gospel.



Pastor Lu whose fingers cannot move freely because of rheumatoid arthritis

On our way home after we bade farewell to Pastor Lu, we prayed for God's care and protection for Pastor Lu and other pastors with similar difficulties.

Become Our Partners to Support Mainland Pastors!

In 2017, CCL will support 23 pastors from cities and rural villages. We will provide them with living subsidy based on their actual needs and the standard of living in their respective areas. The fundraising target is US\$103,000. If you are touched to make an offering, please contact us for details, thank you.

Meanwhile, please also pray for our team visiting the pastors who are being helped by us so that we can better understand their needs and ministries and do our utmost to support them. Hopefully, then, they can stay dedicated to serving the Lord and pasturing the believers.

Prayers

1. Nurturing Local Workers for Local Ministries

As the mainland government tightened its control over religion in recent years, overseas organizations are exploring new ministry modes instead of following the traditional modes. These organizations may be worried, but need not be too much so. May the Lord lead overseas organizations to find new ways of serving in China, including collaborating with local partners, rather than being fixated on a particular approach. By nurturing local workers, e.g. in spreading the Gospel and discipleship training, they can start local ministries without violating the official rules of operating in a low-profile and non-open way.



2. The Worker Deserves His Wages



Quite a number of mainland churches only give the pastors meagre wages, thinking that it is reasonable for them to struggle to make ends meet. May the Lord help such churches understand that the social and economic environment has changed, and pastors should not be expected to lead cash-strapped lives, to an extent of not being able to even support their own families. May the Lord help churches practise the teaching of “the worker deserves

his wages”, review and adjust the pay quickly so the workers can pasture the believers without worries.

3. Support Pastoral Resources in the Front Line

In 2016, CCL distributed to each of 4,000 graduates from 36 mainland seminaries a set of



27 printed books and e-books. This year we hope to distribute 4,500 sets in support of graduates of 45 seminaries, provincial Bible schools and training centres in the mainland. May the Lord bless the work of our teams, including book-giving, publishing, distribution, marketing and development teams, and that we can raise enough money to send the books to the seminary students before they graduate.

4. Care for the Psychological Health of Children

In mid-January, a seminar on the psychological health of rural secondary and primary school students was held in Beijing. Experts said at the meeting that 15% to 20% of young people in the mainland have different degrees of psychological issues, especially left-behind children. They have a higher level of anxiety, depression, loneliness, self-blame, and also tend to have issues of staging attacks against others, violating rules, misconduct, etc. May the Lord guide churches ministering to left-behind children and with Sunday school ministry to help remove their negative emotions through Biblical teachings. May the Lord shower grace upon them and help believers create an atmosphere of trust, optimism and hope in families and the society.



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