

The Growth of the Protestant Church in China

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The extent to which religious beliefs and practices in China are changing in the face of the rapid economic, cultural and social changes taking place in society, is the subject of a new study based at Lampeter and Oxford Universities. Preliminary findings from the study, which covers a range of urban and rural sites, indicate that a distinct change in attitude has taken place with regard to Chinese society's perception of religion. In 1995 when the study began only 2% those questioned were willing to admit that they felt that faith was a good value for someone to assert. In 2005 this has risen to 9% of the population.

Factors which are emerging as contributing to this change include:

- Changed policy and propaganda concerning concept of religion
- A more neutral stance in education towards religious matters
- Society becoming more tolerant of religion in general
- People becoming more open minded about their own religious beliefs

Against this backdrop, both the concept and practice of religious belief and subsequent belonging are being expressed and explored increasingly in the public domain.

The term "Jidujiao Re" (基督教热) or "Christianity Fever" has been used widely to describe the phenomena of exponential growth in Christian believers in China. It has both positive and negative connotations, but according to Xiao Zhitian, the term was applied "as the rate of increase [in Protestant believers] is far faster than that of the national population, as well as faster than believers in any other religion."¹ In many ways the growth of Protestant Christianity over the recent years has indeed been like a fever, with faith passing rapidly from one person to another, from province to province, and influencing both the rural and the urban areas. The growth has been widespread but it has not been even and the reasons why people are coming to faith are hugely varied.

My work with the churches in China has given me the privilege of observing some of the growth first hand. Often at home, I am asked "How many Christians are there in China?" Such a deceptively simple question can be frustratingly hard to answer. For sure, the phenomenal growth in recent years of the Protestant church in China is an undisputed fact, but the actual counting of Christians in China has proved to be a notoriously difficult business.

Tony Lambert, senior researcher with OMF, believes that many Christians, particularly evangelical and charismatic Christians, have seemed willing to accept very high figures without any real proof. Already inflated estimates, he argues, have sometimes been extrapolated and exaggerated ("if in 1983 there were 100 million, then now in 2000 there must be 150 million or even 200 million" and so on).²

¹ Xiao Zhitian, "Reflections on the Long Term Character of Religion: Insights from Christianity Fever" *China Study Journal* December 1991, p20

² Tony Lambert, *Counting Christians in China: a cautionary report*, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, 1/1/2003, p1

On the other hand, while exaggerated numbers can constitute a very real problem, numerous factors can also result in the actual number of Christians being *underestimated*. One such contributing factor is ethnic status. According to *Amity News Service (ANS)*, members of China's ethnic minorities may be included or excluded from Christian statistics as, in line with the Chinese governments understanding, certain ethnic minorities assume affiliation with a certain religion. According to *ANS*, it was only four years ago that it became possible for ethnic Mongolians (who were by definition thought to be Lamaist Buddhists) to be legally counted as Christians.³

Other factors that contribute to difficulties in collating accurate figures include the fact that many congregations from both meeting points and churches do not keep detailed records of members.⁴ Sometimes individuals who are baptised ask to be kept off the record and in some areas whole families rather than individuals count themselves as believers.

The development and growth of the church has been documented in a number of publications. The official magazine of the Protestant churches in China *Tianfeng* carries articles on the church to a wide Christian based audience, as does its English language counterpart *Amity News Service (ANS)*. The life of the rural church, which has traditionally been where the numbers of Christians is growing fastest, was well documented up to the end of the 1990s by Deng Zhaoming in the Journal *Bridge*. Numerous local Chinese churches have their own publications, some of which have circulations way beyond their own immediate constituencies, which detail individual conversions, reports of new believers and newly opened churches. Leung Ka Lun's comprehensive survey of rural Chinese churches was published in 1999 and is the most methodical overview of rural churches to date including an analysis, amongst other things, of the growth of Christianity in rural areas.⁵

There is plenty of evidence also from official sources of the explosive growth of the Chinese Church. In 1995 the magazine *Religion (Zongjiao 宗教)* which is a publication largely written by government researchers, contained a detailed article on the growth of the church in the northern province of Shaanxi.

The article claimed that in the early 1950s there were about 30,000 Protestant Christians in the province, but by 1990 they had increased to 125,000, with numbers continuing to increase. In 1950 Baoji City claimed to have around 1,500 Christians, but their numbers have grown to 26,000, a 21-fold increase. Only about 300 Christians lived in Tongchuan City on the eve of the Cultural Revolution [1965]; by 1995 they had increased to 11,000.

The author of the article also noted that in three counties, 16 Communist Party members and 63 leading village cadres had become Christians, which he claimed 'had had a big influence on the local people'. Such admissions have become increasingly common.⁶

³ Katrin Fiedler, *How Many Sheep Are There In The Chinese Flock*, Amity News Service, 2004.11/12.4

⁴ Claudia Waerisch-Oblau, *How to Count The Number Of Christians In China. Questions And Answers*. Amity News Service, September 1997

⁵ Leung Ka Lun, *Gaige kaifang yilaide zhongguo nongcun jiaohui* [The Rural Churches of Mainland China since 1978] *4 Jidujiao yu zhongguo wenhua yanjiu congshu* [Chinese Study Series No 4] Ed Wendy C. Cheung and Andrew W. Kwok, Alliance Bible Seminary, HK, 1999

⁶ see Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, London, OMF, 1999, p 5

“Christianity Fever” has proved to be a catalyst for bringing about change in the area of research on Christianity in China. In the early days academic study in China on Christianity was predominantly “fragmentary rather than comprehensive”,⁷ and based from urban centres with little contact with those living outside of the central metropolises. Contemporary scholars have been increasingly concentrating on conducting their research through field studies with many researchers paying close attention to research on such subjects as religion and society and the connection between religion and the daily lives of religious believers.⁸

This change in methodology is enabling scholars and those who engage with their studies, to move beyond a simple counting exercise, drawing up statistics of new churches and numbers of believers, to a deeper understanding of what this growth constitutes in real terms. Field research engages with individuals and communities. It is the Christians themselves who are the lifeblood of the growing church and their stories and testimonies provide both colour and texture to the fabric of the growing church, helping both the academic world and us as fellow Christians better understand how the Holy Spirit is moving through the Protestant church in China.

The following are glimpses of fellow Christians I have met who are themselves part of the growing church. Their testimonies show snap shots of the church today.

“Wang Aiyi” was one of the first Christians I ever met in China and she was part of my own coming to faith. In many ways she is a “typical” Christian. As a retired worker in Beijing, her faith is a central part of her life and involvement in church life is a daily commitment. She is an active lay worker, helping with various activities including leading a bible study for other women of her age and participating in weekly prayer meetings. Over the years that I have known her, she has actively taken part in short term training for people in her church. She has sought to gain more bible knowledge through personal study and as part of a weekly group. At times she has struggled. Although she lives in the capital she finds there are few resources available for grassroots Christians to help in their spiritual life. Her eyesight is now failing but she has over the years learnt many passages of the bible by heart, and these now prove to be a comfort to her. Over the years her family have experienced a downturn in personal fortune. Her sons have all been made redundant, facing long periods of unemployment, and losing their homes; one granddaughter was seriously burnt as a result of an electrical fire; and her son-in-law lay for months in a coma after a near-fatal car accident. Rarely, if ever, has her faith wavered during this time, and it is most especially during these periods of crisis that her faith has sustained both her personally and those around her. She often talks of a sense of peace and joy in her life as a result of her faith and it is clear to those who know her that this is something tangible, something more than just words. It is something deeply personal but also something that she wants to share with all whom she meets. Daily prayer and bible study often lasting for hours at a time, have been her constant companion and the quiet, personal witness of her life has brought many others, from the high rise apartment block where she lives, and her family to Christ.

⁷ Leung Ka Lun, *Gaige kaifang yilaide zhongguo nongcun jiaohui* [The Rural Churches of Mainland China since 1978] 4 *Jidujiao yu zhongguo wenhua yanjiu congshu* [Chinese Study Series No 4] Ed Wendy C. Cheung and Andrew W. Kwok, Alliance Bible Seminary, HK, 1999, p29

⁸ Wu Xinming, “Christianity and Chinese Culture in the 21st century. A Study from the Viewpoint of Academic Research” *China Study Journal*, Vol 15 No2/3 August and December 2000 p10

The quiet, gentle witness of many Christians has had a profound effect on many local communities. Simple but important acts can and do often make a big difference to those outside the church. Many churches for example organise rotas of believers to visit and look after those ill in hospital. Last Easter I met two retired gentlemen preparing for their baptism. They told me how they had both been brought to faith by the love that had been shown to them by village Christians who had visited them during prolonged bouts of illness in hospital. Both were retired government officials, who reluctantly admitted that since their retirement they had received little in the way of visits from previous "friends" and colleagues. Only the Christians would visit and would bring them good food and small gifts. One of the men recounted very movingly how a woman he had persecuted and humiliated for her faith many years before had lovingly brought food for him. He recounted how, after a couple of weeks of her daily visits, he had asked her incredulously why she was helping him. She replied simply "Because Jesus loves you". Her actions and those four words changed his life.

True generosity can be powerful and those who feel they have received much from God are often the most generous of givers. On a visit to Guizhou last year, I witnessed over 250 Christians voluntarily helping with the manual labour of a building project. Students, teachers and local Christians (from the young to those in their 80s) were joyfully levelling the ground and laying the foundations for the new bible school being built in Guiyang. The work was tough, even for those of them who were used to farming. After a hard days work, under the relentless heat of the summer sun, they slept on the floor of the current property, rising early in the morning for a time of praise and worship. The singing continued on site and was of great interest to passers by. Two men, touched by the devotion of these people, offered to help themselves for the week. In another small village in Anhui province a new meeting point has just been built. One family sold their only pig to contribute to the cost of the church, another old lady took up a job as a maid, turning over her entire 6 months wages to the project once her duties were finished. Such generosity in times of increasing materialism and self-interest may be ridiculed by some but is a moving testimony to others.

Many people come to faith through physical healing. These can range from the healing of a minor illness to a miraculous cure of a life threatening disease. Xiao Pei was healed while I was living in Beijing. Her grandmother brought her to church every week and prayed for her regularly. She was 6 years old and had been mute since birth. One Sunday there was much excitement as the minister shared that after intensive prayer she had spoken for the first time. While some may dispute that her muteness was real, her entire family came to faith as a result of what they saw as her complete healing.

Recently I heard from a worship leader whose son was healed last spring. Ever since I have known him he has not been able to walk properly. As a toddler he was diagnosed as having a growth disorder which resulted in one of his legs not growing as it should. In order to help him walk independently he has been wearing calipers on his right leg since he was seven years old. For the last 3 years he has received regular medical treatment on his legs but his parents had been advised that his leg would never grow properly and that he would be disabled for life. Measurements taken over the years by his doctor showed a significant difference in the length of his legs. Both he and his parents had resolved themselves to the fact he would never walk with ease but their prayers for healing continued. These prayers were answered when during one prayer meeting his leg literally "grew". The doctors have now incredulously verified this and his calipers are no longer needed.

Mrs K had an equally miraculous healing, which baffled the doctors who had been treating her. She was undergoing treatment for cancer of the lungs when she learnt that she was being made redundant. With the redundancy she lost her medical cover, and without work she could no longer afford treatment. A Christian friend offered to pray for her at church and invited her to a service. She was initially reluctant to go but after a few months of feeling increasingly ill she went, was prayed for and started to attend church. Over the next few months she came to terms with her imminent death and had found peace, rejoicing in her new found faith. After several months of believing and continued prayer some Christian friends offered to pay for her to go back to the hospital for continued treatment. The doctors could not explain how new x-rays showed that the cancer was no longer there. She has friends who have not been healed, in spite of strong faith and many prayers, and she struggles with why she has received healing and they did not. But she is clear that her healing was from God and has dedicated her life to sharing his love with others by serving the local church in any way that is helpful. Over two years after her healing she continues to serve the church joyfully, with her cancer still in remission.

Other kinds of healings are also evident. Luke is himself a doctor in a large city hospital. He came to faith having been initially invited to church by a colleague and was drawn into faith as the result of a slow but intense intellectual quest involving serious study of the Bible. His conversion was one of the mind and the body and resulted in a radical change of heart. Previously addicted to gambling, frequently drunk and in serious debt, he has led a quiet, addiction-free life since turning to Christ. He now works as a volunteer at church in addition to his role at the hospital, with specific responsibilities for youth work.

Stories like this are commonplace amongst Chinese Christians. A WCC publication says "China is a good example of the rediscovery of the healing ministry of the churches."⁹ Increasingly there are also cases of spiritual healing – stories of demon possession and subsequent deliverance. After successful deliverances it is not unusual for there to be group conversions, whole families, or even entire villages, turning themselves over to Christ.

The experiential and mystical can have a strong influence on many Chinese believers. Many committed Christians share of visions, dreams and experiences of mysterious phenomena that they have had, which either led them to Christ in the first place or have sustained their faith over the years. Many who have important ministries within the grassroots church were led into the work after some such experience.

Mrs X who was one of a small group of Christians who kept the church going during the Cultural Revolution for example has had an important prayer ministry, a piece of work which began after she "heard" Jesus telling her to start. As the work started she believes she was told clearly on a regular basis, how to initiate the work and what to do to sustain it.

A great many believers do not have such experiences – they come to faith "peacefully" some drawn in by friends or family, others perhaps as a result of having read the bible or other pieces of Christian literature in a quest for answers and their search for meaning in life.

⁹ *Contact*, WCC, July – September 2000, p1

The church buildings themselves and activities which take place there often draw people into the community of faith. The simple building or refurbishment of a new church often draws the curious in. Numerous people have come to faith through the work of the churches, many of which put on activities open to the community at large. Social work such as kindergartens, old people's homes, and clinics run by the church, are in their infancy but encourage an increasingly positive perception of the Christian church. Weekly events, and special one-off events, often based around festivals, also provide an excuse to go to church. Christmas is one particular example. The seminary at Nanjing for example, celebrates Christmas with a nativity performance watched by those living in surrounding apartments. The event is an evangelistic opportunity of celebration. Most churches host Christmas performances which are attended by believers and non-believers alike, often proving so popular that tickets need to be issued in advance. Once drawn into church many seekers are cared for and disciplined by Christian friends, ministry teams and lay workers.

While such growth gives us much to celebrate, it would be unrealistic to talk about growth without looking at the challenges it poses to those in ministry today.

The sheer numbers of new believers – and seekers – poses an enormous burden to those in ministry. Such challenges include:

- Responding to the spiritual hunger of new believers, while continuing to manage and run day to day activities and services
- Providing adequate spiritual formation to believers from a wide variety of backgrounds
- Finding time to devote to individual believers
- Finding adequate space for worship
- Managing the demands and needs of a number of churches and meeting points simultaneously
- Supporting and managing lay workers and volunteers
- Empowering young people
- Ensuring Christians are involved in their local community and do not become an inward looking clique
- Preserving time for personal spiritual formation and growth
- Dealing with the extremes of either feeling overwhelmed at the workload or succumbing to personal pride at the "success" of the growing church etc

"Mystical phenomena" in their various forms can also be a challenge. Formal theological studies include little education on the devil and subjects such as demon possession and deliverance. The lack of a solid grounding in this issue can lay churches and individuals open to be more at risk from the widespread threat from cults and the heretical teaching of charismatic individuals. While genuine cases of deliverance provide freedom, sustenance and encouragement, there is a greater need for discernment and teaching in this area.

When a church is growing considerably in size then it is often assumed that things are going well. If care is not taken growth can become an end in itself. Numbers of services and the size of buildings and congregations can unwittingly become the measure by which a church is judged to be successful, with the spiritual filling of the congregation becoming a poor second.¹⁰

¹⁰ see John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000

Infighting amongst various groups in the church and rivalry with other churches is not unknown. Many other issues can arise.

Training underpins a lot of this. Training for evangelists and lay workers is sporadic. Short term courses are put on by many churches and training centres but many of these are held at short notice. In years gone by the national seminary in Nanjing provided an excellent correspondence course for evangelists and lay workers. Since it was stopped nothing similar has been put in place on a national scale. Many grassroots Christians miss out as a result. More importantly their lack of training not only risks the unwitting spread of unbiblical or heretical teachings but also ultimately dis-empowers many evangelists and lay workers from serving the church appropriately.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is the government's perceived threat that such widespread growth poses. In 2003 Jiang Zemin stated that religion was here to stay – and would perhaps even outlive the Communist Party. Such talk does not go down well with Party hard liners. Books such as David Aikman's *Jesus in Beijing* suggest the growth of the church is not just among the rural poor but also the educated, urban elite. New studies by Chinese academics support this. The Oxford/Lampeter study mentioned earlier indicates that a changed policy and propaganda concerning concept of religion and a more neutral stance in education towards religious matters, have helped create a more positive perception of religion. However recent indications are that there are steps in place to reverse this trend. A secret document issued last year by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party advocated the study and promotion of atheism within education once again.¹¹ Numbers of students admitted to study religion at universities have been restricted. The fear of foreign infiltration into Christian groups is seen as a very real threat and stiff measures are being taken to address this.

Throughout my presentation I have tried to capture and relate some pictures of the growing Protestant church in China. The stories are just a flavour of what is happening. New challenges lie ahead but the church and the faithful have faced challenges before. While the life of a growing and evolving church continues to inspire and challenge those of us in the west it would be my hope that going forward, Protestant and Catholic believers in China may draw on that which they share together as they face these new challenges side by side, looking not simply to grow in number, but more importantly to grow in mutual understanding, in faith and in knowledge of how their common beliefs can serve China and her people in the years ahead.

¹¹ see "Notice on further strengthening Marxist atheism research, propaganda and research" Issued by Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the CPC: No (2004) 13 reproduced in the *China Study Journal* , Volume 19, No2/3, 2004, p51