

Foreign Workers Flock to Worship Services in China

Shanghai Community Fellowship reaches out to the estimated 500,000 expatriates in China

In a country known for stifling its underground church movement, a nondenominational charismatic ministry in China is thriving above ground and drawing dozens to Christ.

Christians in China say the Holy Spirit is moving powerfully among the more than 500,000 foreign expatriates, also called expats, working in Shanghai. English services in the ivy-covered Gothic-style Shanghai Community Church (SCC) are bursting at the seams with 1,500 worshipers from 53 countries.

"It's a slice of heaven," said Karen Pierce, an aerospace engineer from Minnesota who lives in Shanghai with her husband.

"Every Sunday we experience the miracle of God," said John Chin, a church elder from Canada.

The nondenominational, charismatic Shanghai Community Fellowship (SCF) blossomed out of two small groups of foreign passport holders meeting at the Shanghai Hilton and Ritz-Carlton hotels. It jelled in 1996 when the Chinese government stepped in, warning believers that they were gathering illegally. Through what church leaders consider a miracle, the Christians gained permission to worship in the state-sanctioned SCC.

Built in 1925 for Americans, the church operated until the

1940s and closed for a time after communist leadership took control of China in 1949. Chinese Christians also worship there, but in separate services.

Although no provision exists yet for foreigners to register legally as a church, SCF operates under the auspices of the officially approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches of China. The Chinese government bans denominations and recognizes only five religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and Taoism.

SCF is a lay-led ministry directed by seven elders from denominational backgrounds. The group operates an annual budget of about \$500,000 and recently adopted a formal charter. It has distributed more than 1 million Bibles and pays medical expenses for orphans.

Shanghai is a rapidly expanding boomtown of 20 million people gorging on the fruits of China's new economic power and affluence. Since 2003 SCF attendance has swelled from the rising influx of foreign workers. Standing-room-only crowds led to a second worship service in 2004.

The congregation is a multiethnic mix of expat believers and seekers from North America, Taiwan, Macau, Europe, Africa and Australia. Some raise their hands and speak in tongues during worship. Others stand quietly with eyes closed.

"There is no one way of worshiping God," Pierce said. "There's dancing in the aisles, liturgy and Spirit-led charismatic worship—without condemnation. All of the petty stuff fades away."

“Although we are so different, the Holy Spirit has kneaded us together like a blanket with different colors,” said Mexico-native Jorge Solorzano, a plant manager with a auto parts firm.

“We learn to live with each other,” said Maxim Beti, a student from Cameroon. “We have the same aim in Jesus Christ.”

Although overt proselytizing is forbidden in China, people are won to Christ through one-on-one evangelism. Friends invited Constanza Leon, who is from Mexico City, to a church-sponsored Alpha course, which is an evangelism outreach. She became a born-again Christian after a few weeks, and she said her new faith helped her get through a serious personal problem. “It was Jesus in my life,” she said. “He changed my character.”

Observers say seeds of revival among Shanghai’s expat community are starting to bloom—even under China’s communist regime. Said Chin: “God is working something impossible.”

Peter K. Johnson in Shanghai, China