

Beijing Churches Risk Open Air Worship

✖ One of the largest unregistered Protestant churches in Beijing plans to risk arrest by worshipping in the open air this Sunday (April 10) after eviction from the restaurant where they have met for the past year.

The owner of the Old Story Club restaurant issued repeated requests for the Shouwang Church to find another worship venue, and authorities have pressured other prospective landlords to close their facilities to the 1,000-member congregation, sources said. Unwilling to subject themselves to the controls and restrictions of the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the congregation has held three services each Sunday in the restaurant for more than a year.

Church members have said they are not opposed to the government and are not politically active, but they fear authorities could find their open-air worship threatening.

“Normal” (state-sanctioned) religious assembly outdoors is legal in China, and even unregistered church activity is usually tolerated if no more than 50 people gather, especially if the people are related and can cite the gathering as a family get-together, said a source in China who requested anonymity. Although the congregation technically risks arrest as an unregistered church, the primary danger is being viewed as politically active, the source said.

“For a larger group of Christians to meet in any ‘unregistered’ location led by an ‘unregistered’ leader is illegal,” he said. “The sensitivity of meeting in a park is not being illegal, but being so highly visible. Being ‘visible’ ends up giving an impression of being a political ‘protest.’”

The congregation believes China's Department of Religious Affairs has overstepped its jurisdiction in issuing regulations limiting unregistered church activity, according to a statement church leaders issued this week.

"Out of respect for both the Chinese Constitution [whose Article 36 stipulates freedom of worship] and Christian conscience, we cannot actively endorse and submit to the regulations which bid us to cease all Sunday worship activities outside of [the] 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement' – the only state-sanctioned church," according to the statement. "Of course, we still must follow the teachings of the Bible, which is for everyone to submit to and respect the governing authorities. We are willing to submit to the regulations with passivity and all the while shoulder all the consequences which . . . continuing to worship outside of what is sanctioned by these regulations will bring us."

The church decided to resort to open-air worship after a prospective landlord backed out of a contractual agreement to allow the congregation to meet at the Xihua Business Hotel, the church said in its statement.

"They had signed another rental contract with another property facility and announced during the March 22 service that they were to move in two weeks," the source said. "In spite of the fact that they had signed a formal contract, the new landlord suddenly called them on March 22 and refused to let them use the facility."

The landlord offered various excuses for reneging on the contract, according to church leaders, and that disappointment came after 15 months of trying to obtain the key to another property the church had purchased.

"The space in Daheng New Epoch Technology building, which the church had spent over 27.5 million RMB [US\$4.2 million] to

purchase, has failed to hand the key over to the church for the past year and three months because of government intervention,” the church said in its statement. “For the past year, our church has not had a settled meeting place.”

Beginning as a house church in 1993, the Shouwang Church has been evicted from several rented locations. It also met outside after its last displacement in 2009. The congregation does not believe its calling is to split up into smaller units.

“For the past several years the church has been given a vision from God to be ‘the city on a hill,’” the source said. “Especially since 2009, when they officially began the church building purchase, they have been trying to become a more officially established status. At this point, they feel that they have not completed the journey in obedience to God.”

The number of Protestant house church Christians is estimated at between 45 and 60 million, according to Yu Jianrong, a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Rural Development Institute. Yu and others have concluded that house churches are a positive influence on society, but the government is wary of such influence.

Yu estimated another 18 to 30 million people attend government-approved churches – potentially putting the number of Christians higher than that of Communist Party members, which number around 74 million.

The government-commissioned study by Yu and associates suggested that officials should seek to integrate house churches and no longer regard them as enemies of the state. The study employed a combination of interviews, field surveys and policy reviews to gather information on house churches in several provinces from October 2007 to November 2008.

Yu’s team found that most house or “family” churches fit into one of three broad categories: traditional house churches,

open house churches or urban emerging churches. Traditional house churches were generally smaller, family-based churches, meeting in relative secrecy. Though not a Christian himself, Yu attended some of these meetings and noted that the focus was not on democracy or human rights but rather on spiritual life and community.

The “open” house churches were less secretive and had more members, sometimes advertising their services and holding public gatherings, he found. Urban emerging churches functioned openly but independently of TSPM churches. In some provinces such as Wenzhou, these churches had constructed their own buildings and operated without interference from local officials.

While some house churches actively seek registration with authorities to avoid arrests and harassment, they would like the option of registering outside the government-approved TSPM structure, as they disagree with TSPM beliefs and controls. Many unregistered evangelical Protestant groups refuse to register with TSPM due to theological differences, fear of adverse consequences if they reveal names and addresses of church leaders or members or fear that it will control sermon content.