

China's Powerful Church

I carry away from this visit to China an overwhelming sense of hope.

When President Bush gave a powerful speech in favor of religious freedom at Beijing's Qinghua University in February, the most remarkable thing about it was not the bold topic, but the fact there were Christians among his audience of students and professors. A mere two decades earlier, it would have been all but inconceivable that any of Beijing's elite academic institutions could have professing Christians attending.

After three months of crisscrossing this nation to investigate the Christian situation, I am convinced not only that church growth in China has not slowed down, but that it is now occurring in areas of Chinese life long assumed to be off-limits to the Christian witness: university life, the government and the nation's most sophisticated cities.

Though it is problematic to play with estimated numbers of China's Christians (40 million to 80 million is the broadly accepted range), evidence of their presence is universal. A Chinese sociologist at a top Beijing university, for example, discovered after conducting field research that there were some 20,000 Christian small groups in just one district of Beijing.

I have met Christian accountants, salesmen, graduate students and businessmen who meet regularly for small-group fellowship all over Beijing and Shanghai. I know for certain of several professors at the top four universities of Beijing and Shanghai who are Christian believers and who do not conceal their faith (though they are careful about expressing it in their classrooms—as Christian professors in the United States

must sometimes be).

Perhaps even more striking is the number of unofficial seminaries and Bible schools across the country. Ranging from one-month, crash-course programs to three-year institutions, all of them are technically “underground.” In Shanghai alone, one well-traveled instructor told me, there may be as many as 100 such institutions.

In effect, they usually are residential programs that meet in private apartments, often under cramped, if not claustrophobic, conditions. But many of them are staffed by qualified and gifted teachers, who in some cases are visiting from overseas.

There is also an unmistakable sea change among China’s intellectuals.

“The professors who teach about Christianity in universities are overwhelmingly pro-Christian,” one Shanghai professor told me, adding, with a touch of annoyance: “I wish there were some disagreement there.”

One Beijing intellectual explained that, starting in the early 1990s, when a nationwide disillusionment with Marxism was well under way, translators began to introduce Chinese audiences to books that were either about the Bible or favorable to Christianity’s influence on culture.

There are, of course, problems associated with the very rapidity of Christianity’s advance in China. The overwhelming emphasis on evangelism among rural Christians with little education has led to a shallowness in theological

understanding. A vicious cult such as Eastern Lightning, which kidnaps and tortures Christians and claims Jesus has already returned as a woman in Henan province, would have gained far fewer adherents if knowledge of the Bible had been greater among the recently evangelized.

Some of the five major networks of believers, led by respected elders who are affectionately called “uncles,” have had serious internal problems. There are the usual rivalries, jealousies and politicking associated with all large organizations. China’s Christians are no more immune to the usual temptations and pressures than Christians anywhere, but they are heartwarming human.

Yet the most striking image I carry away from this extended visit to China is of an overwhelming sense of Christian hope. China’s Christians are convinced they are the true heirs of China’s great culture and history and that China will be the next great base for global evangelism.

A wonderfully provocative T-shirt by a Chinese Christian artist depicts Tiananmen Square—an emblem of China’s revolution as well as of its suppression of democracy—filled with sheep. Translation: Chinese who are followers of Christ.

Those of you who haven’t yet prayed for China ought to start now. I doubt if any nation on earth will reveal greater visible fruits of prayer in our lifetime.

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