

Christians in China Suffer for Supporting Shouwang Church

Five members of a house church in Fangshan, Hebei township woke at 4 a.m. and traveled for two hours to a public square in Beijing in order to worship with members of the embattled Beijing Shouwang house church on Aug. 28.

On their arrival at 7 a.m., waiting police sent the five back to their local police station, according to a report posted Aug. 30 on Shouwang's Facebook page. Officials then urged them to sign documents repenting of their decision to support the Shouwang church. All five refused but were eventually released.

The Fangshan five are part of a growing wave of house church Christians determined—despite the consequences—to support Shouwang church in its stand for greater religious freedom.

Shouwang members have attempted to meet in the outdoor venue every Sunday since April 11, after government officials repeatedly denied them access to a permanent worship place. Church leaders prayerfully decided on this course of action as a means of forcing the government to resolve their dilemma.

Besides the Fangshan church members, police detained at least 15 Shouwang members who turned up for worship on Aug. 28, holding them for up to 48 hours in interrogation rooms. The Domestic Security Protection Squad maintained constant surveillance outside the homes of senior church leaders, while less senior police camped outside the doors of other church members from Saturday night until noon Sunday, when service times were technically over, according to the China Aid Association.

“If we count the time from April until Christmas as the longest journey, we have gone through half of it,” Shouwang’s leaders said in a message of encouragement to church members last week. “If it is God’s will, He is [then] able to end this journey and make us shout in his victory. But if it is His will for us to continue this journey ... let us pray that He will grant us perseverance and hope.”

Finding Courage

Two weeks earlier, on Aug. 14, police detained some 16 worshippers at the square. Among them was pastor Wang Shuanyan of Beijing’s Xinshu house church.

In a letter written after her release on Aug. 16 and smuggled out of China, Wang described how police detained her at 7 a.m. and took her to the Zhongguancun Boulevard police station. The previous Sunday, a police officer had threatened to lock her up for 48 hours if she persisted in coming to the worship site; this time Wang came prepared with a sleeping bag.

Throughout her detention, Shouwang church members, including the wife of senior pastor Jin Tianming, took turns waiting outside the police station for her release.

Wang described how she wrestled with her natural inclination to obey orders and her conviction that “the things [the officers] have done are violations of the law.”

“I believe deeply that all things considered ... Shouwang’s outdoor worship, done [at] this time and this way, is right,” she wrote.

By the time fellow Xinshu church members convinced officers to allow Wang snacks and bottled water, Wang had decided to go on a hunger strike.

“Was I fasting or on a hunger strike?” she wrote. “To me it was both. To God I prayed earnestly. To the relevant authorities I was protesting against the repeatedly occurring

violence.”

She had seen police forcefully leading away a female Shouwang member who was physically abused on a previous Sunday—with one officer grinning sadistically at the woman’s fear.

“Formerly I went onto the platform, talked with government authorities and petitioned the People’s Congress,” she wrote. “Now with conflicts lasting and violence rising, to a weak, insignificant and detained person like me, a hunger strike became the only means by which I could express my protest.”

Some China watchers believe the government has shown relative toleration and restraint towards Shouwang’s outdoor worship. But “this can only be true in comparison to extreme violence,” Wang countered in her letter. “We are now used to unrighteous and illegal behavior.”

Petition Ignored

Wang was one of 17 house church pastors who signed and submitted a groundbreaking petition to the National People’s Congress (NPC) on May 10, calling for a complete overhaul of China’s religious policy.

To date the NPC has failed to respond, although CAA claims the backlash against Shouwang and associated churches has since increased.

Since Wang signed the petition, police have stationed themselves outside Xinshu church every Sunday, sometimes entering the meeting room and checking identity cards. Xinshu church members have also received threats and pressure from their work units, according to CAA.

Police on May 31 detained another signatory, Shi Enhao, pastor of Suqian house church in Jiangsu Province and deputy chairman of the Chinese House Church Alliance (CHCA), in a church raid. In late July he was sentenced – without trial – to two years in a labor camp for “illegal meetings and illegal organizing

of venues for religious meetings.”

Police have since ordered Shi’s church members to stop meeting and have confiscated musical instruments, choir robes and donations, according to CAA.

Responding to the Shouwang events and Shi’s sentencing, Zhang Mingxuan, president of the CHCA, wrote a letter addressed to Chinese President Hu Jintao; CAA translated and published it on Aug. 3. According to Zhang, when Shi’s family hired a lawyer on his behalf, officials refused to grant access to Shi on the grounds that state secrets were involved.

“Isn’t this a joke of the century that a peasant Christian knows classified state secrets?” Zhang wrote.

Shi’s lawyer appealed to higher authorities, including the NPC and the Department of Public Security, but received no response.

Zhang said he had taught church members to abide by the law and respect the government but in return had been deprived of many rights, including the right to a passport. Many others shared his fate, Zhang said, such as house church pastor Zhang Tieling of Fan County, Henan Province. Officials recently sealed Zhang Tieling’s house with bricks and knocked his wife to the floor, leaving her in the hospital with a brain injury.

“This is the so-called religious freedom and harmony of China,” Zhang Mingxuan declared.

In his letter to the president, he concluded, “In the past 26 years I have been arrested, beaten and placed under house arrest 42 times just because I speak the truth. Even if you misunderstand me or even kill me or imprison me, I still have to tell you the truth in this letter ... As long as [it means] Christians can freely worship God, I don’t mind dying for this cause.”

It seems many other Chinese Christians are fast forming the same opinion.

While the Chinese government claims freedom of religion through approved bodies such as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, many Protestant and Catholic churches prefer to worship independently, rejecting government censorship and theological interference—and paying the price. House church pastor Zhang Rongliang—who has been detained five times and served a total of 12 years in prison—was released last night (Aug. 31) from a Kaifeng prison after being detained since 2004. He was convicted on ambiguous charges in 2007 and has languished in prison while suffering chronic diseases and a stroke in 2007.

Experts estimate there are anywhere between 60 and 130 million people attending unregistered Protestant churches in China, compared with just 23 million attending TSPM churches. During the past decade of relative openness, many of these unregistered churches have come “above ground” to meet in large numbers in public spaces—highlighting the inadequacy of current religious policies and creating a government backlash often targeting church leaders.

“Now the shepherds are separated from the flocks of sheep,” wrote Yuan Xin, a Christian who recently visited Shouwang senior pastor Jin Tianming—currently under house arrest—and described his visit on CAA’s Shouwang petition website. “The sheep are being beaten, but the shepherds cannot stand out to fend off the blows.”