



Prayer Letter
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The Establishment and Growth of the Chinese House Church through the China Evangelistic Network

Almost forty years have passed since churches were allowed to reopen in China. Between now and July 2019, these GCM articles will look at various perspectives concerning the growth of Christianity in modern China, and analyze these so that you, our readers, can see some special characteristics in its development.

In spring 2018, the *New Religious Regulations* were implemented, wreaking havoc on many Chinese churches. But in actual fact, ever since churches reopened in 1979, Christians in China have not had an

easy time. The story of *The China Evangelistic Network (CEN)* provides a good example of the kind of struggles experienced by Christians.

The China Evangelistic Network started in rural areas of central China and has now grown into a national network, even in today's rapidly urbanizing China. It has also independently sent cross-cultural workers outside of China. It is neither a denomination nor a school of theological thought, but a good example of a dynamic church movement that has contributed significantly to the development of

churches in the late 20th and early 21st century.

In the early 1960s, villages in central China experienced a great famine. Those that survived, whether adults or children, suffered serious physical malnutrition as a result. At that time, seekers and believers also suffered from spiritual famine, because there were no Bibles or church activities - they could only hold onto their belief in Jesus privately. It was not until 1979, after the Cultural Revolution, that churches were reopened. Many of the Christians were released from jail in 1980, and Christians began to enjoy some semblance of religious freedom.

In summer 1979, a young man named SH, who lived in a rural area, became disabled because of the great famine. He was living with his terminally ill mother and had completely lost any hope in life. Someone encouraged him to believe in Jesus and His salvation, instead of simply waiting to die. He thought to himself, could things get any worse? At that time, most people knew very little about Christianity - all Bibles were burned during the Cultural Revolution, and there were no churches. In addition, most people in the villages were illiterate. However, someone heard about a radio station called "Voice of Friendship" that talked about this Jesus, so SH decided to borrow a radio and listen to broadcasts from this "enemy radio station". After a few months, he came to believe in Jesus and was able to articulate that belief. Soon, older Christians around him were bringing

their children to him so that he could explain the good news of Jesus to them.

A few months later, in the following spring, SH's home became a place where Christians gathered for fellowship. They met almost every day, starting with just ten, but that number soon grew to forty. Due to the growth, they began to meet in the larger home of another Christian. That summer (1980), the Christian farmers who were meeting unofficially began their own "house church", and in 1981 they selected seven brothers and sisters as co-workers for the church. By this time the group had grown to about two hundred people. What is more amazing is that no one in this church owned a Bible, nor had anyone ever seen one! People came in droves to hear SH talk about Jesus and His teachings. SH had no training whatsoever, so he simply tried his hardest to memorize what he had heard on the radio, then repeat it back to the congregation.

Although the church had very little in the beginning, what it did have was Christians who fasted and prayed constantly, and who shared the good news with anyone that would listen. Soon the surrounding villages all knew about this Jesus too, and many came to faith in Him. It was at this time, with the encouragement of many people, that SH finally wrote to the "Voice of Friendship" in Hong Kong to ask for a Bible. He was quite scared to do this, because he could have been thrown in jail for this simple act of communicating

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had issues with certain policies that disallowed "evangelization, miracle healings, and those under eighteen becoming Christians." A meeting was held, and everyone agreed that these policies of the Three-Self church disagreed with the teaching in the Bible. They believed that true followers of Christ should do what the Bible teaches.

It was at that point that their problems began. They were accused of "illegal gatherings", and persecutions began. In 1983, SH was hotly pursued in a campaign against illegal churches and labeled a "religious revolutionary belonging to the Shouters." It was ironic that SH didn't even know who or what the Shouters were. So from that time on he began an itinerant life in order to dodge government officials. He stayed with Christians who were brave enough to host him. Other Christians also fled, and they began to hold Christian meetings wherever they went, starting churches in the places where they stayed. In this way, the gospel spread over a very wide area, and by the end of 1984, over 200 new churches had started. In one mountainous area, over 30,000 people came to know Jesus within a two year period.

Government persecution continued throughout the 1980s, and various cults also began to attack the churches. The gospel was spreading not only from village to village, but from province to province. It was then that SH and his co-workers realized that this work of God had grown far beyond the places they knew. They felt it would

be important to encourage consistency in the work, so in 1985 they began to collaborate with others. In 1989 *The China Evangelistic Network* became official; it was the first house church network in modern China, and was reaching out all over the country.

In summer 1992, a *Comprehensive Management of Society* movement was started. SH was arrested, but the church continued to grow. By 1993, *The China Evangelistic Network* was made up of five districts, and each district had over 300 churches. Starting in 1994, they began to train and send workers into unreached rural areas - the first group consisted of seventy brothers and sisters. In 1998, *The China Evangelistic Network* - together with other networks - published the "Chinese House Church Doctrinal Manifesto", a landmark Chinese church document. This became one of the key documents of the house church networks in 20th century China.

More recently, much has changed for these rural Christians. Many have migrated from their villages to the cities to find work. So *The China Evangelistic Network* has shifted its focus from a rural one to an urban one, establishing migrant worker churches in the cities. At the same time, they have been sending workers out to do cross-cultural work - some have already been living overseas for more than a decade.

The story of *The China Evangelistic Network* is a true legend, and a confirmation of the wonderful work of God in this land!

26 Many better off Chinese families travel abroad during the October 1st holidays. However, their plans may be impacted this year, because the value of the Renminbi has dropped. May this remind people of “the deceitfulness of wealth” and that material things can never be a source of security. May they seek after eternal riches!

27 In the past, the October 1st holiday period has been one of the best times to hold training programs for church workers. May the Lord protect these activities and make them encouraging and beneficial.

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with “the enemy”. It was only then that this church had its first copy of the Bible.

The church continued to grow rapidly, often with accompanying miracles. The communities in central China where these rural churches were established began to get a reputation for being different. They were different because families got along with their neighbors, people paid their taxes on time, and they were diligent about helping to repair public roads in the rural areas.

After churches were reopened in 1979, the government-approved “Three-Self”

28 Many churches mobilize their young people to visit hospitals, nursing homes and orphanages during the October 1st holiday period. Pray that there will be freedom to do these activities this year.

29 Some pastors and church members will visit cross-cultural workers during this holiday period. May the Lord protect their journeys and cause these visits to be encouraging to the workers.

30 It is China’s National Day tomorrow. Let us pray for China’s people, that God will bless them with peace and prosperity.

churches also began to meet; they were required to be organized and managed under the Three-Self structure. SH and his co-workers thought this would be a good idea for their church, believing that the church should indeed follow the Three-Self principles of self-governance, self-support (financial independence from foreigners) and self-propagation (indigenous missionary work).

Everyone assumed that this house church would join the Three Self Patriotic Movement. But when SH and the church co-workers read the policies of the Three-Self church carefully, they

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1 Most schools in China start a new semester today. Please remember those who will leave home and are new to college. May the Lord help them find suitable fellowship on campus and maintain a healthy spiritual life.

2 Most Chinese high school students choose to stay in the dorm in order to study hard for their important examinations. As religious activities are forbidden on campus, Christian students cannot have regular church life and fellowship, and cannot even disclose their Christian identity. Please pray for Christian high school students living in these difficult circumstances.

3 It is very competitive to get into good schools, so private, bi-lingual and elite learning centers are set up to tutor and coach students. They are very expensive, beyond the budget of most families. Private schools started by churches or Christians may be restricted or forbidden. Please pray for the development of a good education system, and for committed Christian teachers.

4 According to the PRC *Education Law*, students should have nine years of free education. However, in some rural areas there are no high schools. Please pray that Christians who are committed to serve in education will be able to serve in rural areas.

5 In 2014, there were 514,000 schools in China. The year before that, kindergartens experienced a 5% growth, but the number of primary and junior high schools decreased by 12,000. Senior high schools decreased by 548. This reflects the decline of basic education in China. May the Lord grant wisdom to government leaders, and help them devote more resources to education.

6 Many Chinese schools were started by western missionaries. However, China’s philosophy of education has its roots in the official imperial examination system, and is not based on a Christian worldview. This leads to an undue emphasis on passing exams as a measure of ability. If China’s education system is to change, there needs to be a different emphasis. We thank God for a new generation of Christian teachers. Pray that their efforts may eventually bring changes to education in China.

7 Most Chinese schools stress knowledge and skills rather than moral education or social behavior. This is true in homes also – parents expect teachers to take responsibility for their children’s education. Students under eighteen years of age are forbidden to have any religious instruction, so there is a void in this area of education. May the Lord raise up Christian educators to help students mature morally, socially and spiritually.

8 While visiting different factories doing manufacturing for Apple, economist Scott Rozelle found that

they often hire high school graduates who have failed the college entrance exams. They do boring, repetitive work even though they are capable of more challenging, interesting work. Pray that these young people may find opportunities to develop their talents and reach their potential.

9In 2013, 93% of junior high school graduates in urban areas got into senior high schools, but only 37% of those in rural areas did. This reflects the unbalanced distribution of education resources. Competition is tough in urban areas; pray for rural and migrant students, that urban churches will reach out to those who consider themselves a failure.

10In terms of physical health, recent data from 130,000 rural students revealed that 27% are anemic, 33% have parasites, and 25% are in need of visual correction. More effort needs to be made to alleviate poverty and improve public health in rural areas. Pray that resources from urban areas will be made available to rural areas to improve the situation.

11Migrant workers have been moving to the cities for over twenty years now, so there are now second and third generations of migrant workers. However, due to local laws, these migrant workers are still reckoned as “rural residents”, and their social status is quite low. Praise the Lord they are the people that CEN wants to serve. Please pray for groups like CEN, that they will be able to expand

their ministries to reach more of these underserved people.

12Since religious regulations began to be tightened this spring, we have heard news of house churches being suppressed. Recently, over thirty house churches in Beijing issued a joint statement stressing the fact that freedom of religion is protected by the Constitution. They expressed their intent to maintain a position that is biblical and consistent with church tradition, that they will continue to pray for the country and actively engage in society. Please pray for churches facing these new challenges.

13In 2017 a Gallup Poll was conducted for 66,000 people in 68 countries; it revealed that over 70% of the world’s population believe in God. 67% of the Chinese population do not believe in God. A recent publication states that only 200 million people (14%) in China adhere to a religion. Let us pray for the huge atheist population in China, that God will reveal Himself to them.

14Due to increasing restrictions on Sunday worship services, many churches are meeting in small groups instead. Please pray for effective training of small group leaders.

15It is now illegal for pastors to visit believers at home, or patients in the hospital as these are not “legal religious venues”. Please pray for pastors as they seek to serve their people well in these difficult times.

16It is also illegal to give religious instruction to anyone under eighteen years of age. Please pray for creativity and wisdom for Christian teachers.

17With better theological training now available in China, there are fewer cults and heresies compared to the past. However, there is a risk of new cults and heresies developing in places where there are insufficient trained pastors. May God protect the church from false teaching, and raise up a new generation of well-trained leaders.

18Group Bible study is the most popular small group activity for Chinese Christians. May the Lord raise up workers who can write relevant and appropriate Bible study materials.

19There are many different types of small group leader training courses available, but they vary in quality. May the Lord raise up workers to write good, biblical, practical small group training materials.

20The current situation not only impacts children’s ministries; it also puts pressure on Sunday School teachers and youth workers. Please pray for these co-workers, that the Lord will grant them wisdom and strength to know how best to continue ministering to the younger generation. .

21On June 19, it was reported in the *People’s Daily* that the government has established five basic principles in handling religious issues.

These include “protect what is legal and stop what is illegal”. Please pray for all people of faith in China - - may they continue to live life with dignity and remain firm in their faith.

22The “Me Too” movement has exposed the dark side of many otherwise respectable public figures. This reminds us that God sees the hearts of all men, and that all are sinners before Him. Let us pray that more people will realize the nature of sin, and be open to confess and turn to Jesus. May the Holy Spirit do a deep work in people’s lives.

23The vaccine scandal in Jilin province has aroused public anger and much anxiety. May the Lord protect children who have been injected with poor quality vaccine.

24According to news reports, the most serious flaw in Chinese society is the “loss of integrity”. This is difficult to deal with and no one can escape it. It is the cause of deep fragmentation in society. Let us pray earnestly for the church in China, that Christians will live lives of love and integrity, creating good models that will influence society positively.

25In the presence of so many complex social problems, many people – those who can afford it - are considering immigration to other countries. However, this is not an option for those at grassroots level. Pray that the church might become a driving force for social healing.