



Prayer Letter
OMF International

September 2019



The Chinese Church's "New Normal"

Over the past four decades, the numbers of worshippers in Chinese churches grew steadily. As church membership grew, the church services matured and developed. Irregular worship times became established Sunday meetings. Meetings moved from homes to larger rented spaces. Full-time pastors were hired and land was acquired for church buildings. The church ministries also expanded beyond Sunday services to include teaching for children, care for the elderly, cross-cultural missions and community outreach. These four became standard ministries in churches across

China. Despite their differences in legal status, house churches and Three-Self churches actually followed a similar pattern of growth. They came to resemble each other both in format and range of ministries, especially in the past decade or more.

However, Christianity in China has experienced a dramatic change of direction over the past 2-3 years. Under clauses in the new "Religious Regulations" related to "banning and suppressing illegal religious gatherings", Christians have been forced to give up their public meetings, and return to

worshipping at home.

Even though churches are abandoning their church buildings and meeting once again in small groups, we cannot see this as a step back in time to the church of forty years ago. Chinese ecclesiology has developed too far for that. Neither can we call it a simple replication of the “cell churches” that are popular overseas. As they are being forced out of their buildings and into private meetings, Chinese Christians are developing fresh understandings of what it means to be a “church” or “gathering”. Their focus is on Jesus’ promises to the disciples: *“For wherever two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Mat 18:20).”* The words “wherever”, “in my name”, and “I am with them” have become the theological foundations of cell church development in China.

Even though cell church is their inevitable future, we cannot imagine that this change will be easy, or even familiar for today’s Christians. They still need to gradually work through many different issues. As they resolve these issues, they will bless the worldwide church with new theological insights.

Firstly, both ordinary believers and pastoral workers are coming to understand that this change to cell group churches is not just a practical one, but is actually God’s plan for establishing his church in China at this time. The cell church structure is helping people learn how to rely more fully on God, so that more church members can not

only glorify God and bear witness through their lives, but also be equipped for discipleship and evangelism.

Secondly, the cell group format enables Chinese churches to rethink their relationship with the local community and society as a whole. Over the past 3 decades of rapid urbanization, house churches have grown through personal evangelism. This has resulted in believers in single churches coming from many different neighborhoods. Most churches already had prayer meetings and weekly fellowships in various neighborhoods throughout the week, apart from the joint Sunday worship. A change to cell church has merely meant dividing Sunday worship between the small group meeting locations in the different neighborhoods. But of course, this doesn’t mean that church ministries are unaffected.

For example, in one church I know, the change to cell group church simply meant distributing the Sunday worship service (of over 1,000 worshippers) between the church’s 60-plus established small group locations. The organizational structure of the church has not changed. The most obvious problem with the new format is that there are insufficient pastors to preach and to administer the Lord’s Supper in all of the cell group churches. Unless sufficient lay preachers can be trained within a very short period of time and take on some pastoral responsibilities, discipleship and teaching for believers

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Prayer Points September 2019

1 In 2013, groups of Christians from China have travelled to northern Myanmar, to serve the local people by providing free basic education for poor children. Pastor Cao San Qiang, the founder of this ministry, was arrested at the China border in 2017, the schools were closed and the teachers expelled. Pastor Cao's recent second trial upheld his original sentence of seven years' imprisonment. Please pray for his family, especially his elderly mother. Her health is not very good.

2 Throughout China, the new school semester starts at the beginning of September. Let's pray for all the new university students, that they may come across ambassadors for Christ and encounter the Lord who loves them.

3 Please remember the teachers who withdrew from Myanmar. Most of them are young adults. Some will continue with studies while others will move on to new ministry fields. May the Lord guide their steps.

4 Pray for Chinese students who are entering junior and senior high school this year. Many of them will be going to boarding school (this is very common for students in countryside areas). Pray for this new transition, especially for Christian youth. They are

likely to be discriminated against for their faith, and pressured to give up on Christ.

5 Pray for those who are going abroad for the first time to further their studies. Pray for opportunities to have contact with local churches and to experience fellowship with Christians.

6 Pray for Christian teachers in universities in China. Not only do their lecture outlines need go through censoring, there is reporting system at class to prevent them from discussing topics related to religion and faith. May God grant wisdom to teachers who have a heart for evangelism so they will know how to face these challenges.

7 Pray for schools run by churches. Almost all of them have been closed down. Some now operate in the form of home schools. Remember teachers and students alike. May the Lord grant them a still and quiet heart to continue well in their work and studies.

8 Pray for a high school student from a rural area, surnamed Lee. He has been attending a Christian school for several years. Now that the school has been shut down, he and his classmates are managing to continue their studies by living with their teachers in their homes. We give thanks for teachers like this who are so passionate and committed. May the Lord bless all such teachers and students, and use their circumstances to mature their faith.

9 Pray for a Christian PE teacher at a high school. Even though he has not shared the Gospel with any students in class, the school is still concerned that his faith will influence his students. They are taking preventative measures, which influence both his work and family life. May the Lord give him strength to overcome in this situation by His grace.

10 Pray for a girl whose last name is Kim. According to her original plan she should have started her studies abroad by now. But because her father is a pastor, she is not allowed to leave the country. May the Lord comfort her and enable her to experience His presence.

11 Over the past year or so, many churches and Christian gatherings in Henan have been impacted by external pressures. Churches have been destroyed, Bibles and spiritual materials have been burned, pastors and church workers have been arrested or detained, and meetings have been banned. Since this summer, religious authorities nationwide are promoting the “Henan Experience” as an example of successful management of religion. It is expected that similar situations targeting faith group particularly house churches will continue to occur in different areas in China. May the Lord protect Chinese churches and Christians.

12 Suffering from political stress and unbearable responsibilities, Pastor Song Yong Sheng, chair of the Christian Protestant registered church in Shangqiu, Henan, committed suicide in July. In his suicide note, he said, “I’ve had enough”. He also said the Christian council and TSPM are “neither fish nor fowl”: they do not behave like a government authority, a church, an organization, or a company. Pray for pastors within the registered church that are emotionally disturbed. May the Lord protect and lead.

13 One Henan house church was demolished in the middle of the night. A brother who lived on the premises guarding the property was badly hurt. Pray for brothers and sisters who have been physically injured in these situations. May God’s justice prevail.

14 Some registered churches have received demands to have their pastors attend “Training for Preaching”. They are required to combine biblical truth with the “benevolence, righteousness, filial piety and loyalty” of Chinese culture in their sermons. The government expectation that politics be preached from pulpit is evidently now being implemented. Pray for churches and pastors that are affected politically.

15 It is reported that the largest house church in Hunan has been ordered to stop meeting. They have started meeting as small groups in homes. May the Lord guard all the

pastors and church workers, helping them to trust in Him and experience His victory during this difficult time.

16 The wife of a house church pastor in Guizhou recently attended a forum in the US about “religious freedom”. As a result, all Guizhou registered church pastors and evangelists have been required to openly denounce and resist this “US interference”. May the Lord guard all the pastors in China, whether in registered or unregistered churches. May they learn from Jesus how to be good shepherds to God’s sheep, and avoid too getting involved in public political statements.

17 All choirs in registered churches are required to sing “Red Songs”, praising the Communist Party. This is an expression of the Government’s campaign to “Sinicize Christianity”. Pray for pastors and brothers and sisters that are emotionally troubled because of this. Pray that they will trust in God’s sovereignty.

18 Some colleagues have pointed out that the challenges facing the churches in China do not have their roots in politics, but are a form of spiritual attack and warfare from Satan. May the Lord help pastors and coworkers to see this and stand firm in prayer to fight against it.

19 Ever since one of the house church in Xiamen was investigated, there have been policemen

guarding the building, preventing any non-church members from entering. There are now only very few people who still meet at this once vibrant church. May the Lord strengthen them in the midst of tribulations and trials.

20 Please remember Pastor Lee in a rural area. He is recuperating from a serious car accident that happened on a recent visit to church members. May the Lord remember his labor of love and watch over churches he leads.

21 7am one morning, a rural Christian family in Henan was singing hymns and reading their Bibles. The authorities broke in and took charge of the place. Over twenty people present were taken for interrogation, and the meeting place was declared “banned”. Similar incidents have happened many times. People are wondering whether small group meetings are still allowed in China. May the Lord comfort that rural family and show his presence to the brothers and sisters who were present. May God also lead the church as they think about how to move on with ministries.

22 Affected by different external factors, many church activities and trainings planned to take place in HK have been drastically downsized or cancelled. Remember those who had planned to join these events, but now cannot. May the Lord continue to bless their family and ministry.

23 Remember Han Chinese brothers and sisters serving among minority groups in southwest China. As many sending churches in China are facing challenges, the provision of funds to these workers are being affected. Meanwhile, resistance to their message on the field is also growing stronger. Pray for all who are committed to continuing in their ministry. May the Lord's strength be with them.

24 Chinese workers serving cross-culturally in Asia and Africa are being impacted by the same struggles in their sending churches. They are facing significant inconveniences and shortages in support. May the Lord move and enable them to experience His provision.

25 We thank the Lord that despite the many challenges this year, some Chinese believers have still received clear callings to serve cross-culturally. May God watch over them and help them to grow in their cultural adaptation and language acquisition. For families with children, may they be able to find suitable schools.

26 Pray for several overseas Chinese churches providing facilities for mainland church camps where these camps cannot be held in China. The overseas churches need to be careful with the legal and financial issues involved. We give thanks for the support and service of these overseas churches. May they seek God's will in the process

and make this a true blessing to the Christians in China.

27 Pray for an overseas Christian who travelled to China recently. He went with great anticipation for his visit to a brother who he had brought to the Lord overseas. But he was disappointed when he discovered that the brother's spiritual health had significantly declined since he started working in China. Pray for returnee Christians. Their social environment presents a huge challenge to spiritual life. May the Lord raise up more Chinese pastors to journey along with these returnees and understand their needs.

28 China's National Day, October 1st, is just around the corner. In the past, many churches made the most of the holiday by holding many different kinds of meetings. With the change of situation, these meetings will not be able to continue this year. May the Lord protect his people.

29 With October 1st approaching, let us pray for China, and for China's churches. May God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

30 It's Monday today. Many pastoral staff in China will take a day off to rest. Let us pray in particular for the many faithful pastors all over China. As God says, may they, "Be still and know, that I am God."

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will quickly become weak. This kind of training cannot be done within weeks or even months.

Currently, each church has cell groups spread all across their city. There can be up to twenty cell groups from different churches within one local community. Churches must think seriously about uniting their groups with cell groups from other churches. Together, they can become vessels of Gospel witness to transform their community.

How can cell groups members become people who study God's word and live Biblically in the local community? They must help those who seeking the truth to find it, and allow those who are living in a dark and broken world see the light. This is the ministry vision for cell group churches. No house church format has yet been recognized as "legitimate", but there are also no regulations that can prevent Christians from living a life of witness, nor uniting together to serve their community with acts of love. Actually, these are the ministries that Christians are most confident in, and have the greatest willingness for. Through these ministries, in time, Christianity in China will see a new era of growth.

Influenced by their traditional culture, Chinese people need to be sure that they can benefit from an interaction before they initiate one, and they do not easily talk about personal things with people outside their family. This is especially true in urban areas. But in

a cell group, the primary purpose for participation is not to gain any benefit from other participants, but to pursue the Lord, to study His word together and to build one another up through prayer. Participation in a cell group is not about worldly gain, but is focussed on growing in the Lord and serving others. This fresh perspective is helping Chinese Christians to grow in maturity.

Cell groups must put the Gospel at the center of every ministry. Shaped by traditional culture and urban life, distrust is prevalent in Chinese society. Yet a sense of missional responsibility has led groups of Gospel-guided believers to be more open and engaged than any others in society. This is a beautiful thing to see. But how can we help these believers to stay the course? How can Christian cell groups avoid becoming just another social gathering? The key question actually is this: how can the gospel remain in the center of all cell groups' activities? Only when the name of the Lord is exalted will the cell groups be vibrant, churches grow, and Chinese Christians able to influence and even spearhead the development of society.

We are grateful to the Lord that the current cell group membership has not been based on characteristics such as marital status or age, but rather on areas of residence. Because cell group members live in close proximity, they are more motivated to pray for one another. Christians of course all agree that it is essential to witness for the

Lord and share the Gospel. However, the big question is how believers from different churches, different denominations and with a range of different theological views can overcome their differences to be truly united as one in Christ. Right now is the ideal time for Chinese churches to become truly indigenous in their ecclesiology. We have great reason to look forward to a fresh and mature ecclesiology from China in the 21st century.

The political situation in China has affected its development as a civil society. Severe restrictions on theological education have meant that Chinese churches are unable to produce as many adequately trained

preachers as in the West. The main workforce for China's cell group churches is a large number of untrained but enthusiastic pastors and lay people. Training these leaders and lay people to "understand and teach the truth" is the most important challenge facing China's theological educators. But a challenge such as this is a fresh opportunity for China's churches to search out a new model of "the priesthood of all believers". This they will surely do. And in the process they will become an important example for the church worldwide.

May God's will be done in churches across China, as it is in each country on earth.