

Hong Kong China Liaison Office

by Bud CARROLL

Begun in 1973, the Hongkong China Liaison Office is an integral part of the American-related United Methodist Church's China Program. Hongkong readers will clearly remember that during the early 1970's few Hongkong church groups seemed to express any interest in what was happening in China. This was true both in terms of religion and politics. In fact, other than the secular press only a handful of non-Chinese mission-board-related persons were then organized to systematically study and interpret what was happening in China.

People often ask me, "Why are United Methodists so interested in China?" The answers to this question help to explain the function and program of our Hongkong Liaison Office.

Firstly, we are interested in people. United Methodists, like other Christians, are in the "people business." This does not mean we want to return to the day of unequal and unjust structures in pre-Liberation China. It does mean that we, like the Chinese church, are a part of God's universal church. We are both separate yet inter-related. Our program takes very seriously the people of China.

Secondly, we firmly believe the past thirty years' experiences of the Chinese people (including the Chinese church) have a profound message for the non-Chinese world. Note I said message, not model.

China's own efforts in nation building, the drive for Modernization in light of centuries of feudalism, the role of religion in a Marxist society, the church as a small numerical minority in a population of one billion - these and many other questions have and will continue to have significant meaning for other parts of the world.

Thirdly, China and the Chinese church are important for us as we try to reflect on the changing purpose and nature of Christian mission. In light of the Chinese church's understandable demand to be a "three-self church" we are being called anew to discover the import and impact

of Christian mission. For instance, how can we be in mission with the Chinese church in ways which do not involve an exchange of personnel and/or money? When the Chinese church says to us "Pray for us, understand us, and please leave us alone," can we accept this plea as a desire to be one with us in the Spirit, while concurrently affirming a need to bear witness to Christ in its own way? Can we accept differences as being distinct from degrees of good or bad?

Fourthly, United Methodist interest in China is not confined to what we think, do or feel about China. It also includes how we try to be a faithful part of God's church in our own nation. It is to this point which our Hongkong Liaison Office exerts most of its time and energy.

CONSTITUENCY EDUCATION

The basic goal of our China Program, at this point in history, is to help educate our people about what God is doing in China today, and in light of this, seek to understand God's mission in our own country. Such a vast subject must not be left to the secular media. Our concern certainly includes religion in China, but only as we view religion within the overall context of the Chinese revolution.

One of the prime ways in which we try to help educate our church constituency (both lay and clergy) is through the publication of CHINA TALK. Normally published four-six times per year, CHINA TALK attempts to introduce contemporary Chinese issues to interested but not terribly specialized readers. Although our un-written motto is "China, warts and all," one constructive critic has recently described CHINA TALK as "strongly committed...to the new China." We accept this interpretation, although we feel that in interpreting China, understanding is more important than acceptance or agreement.

CHINA TALK is posted to readers in over forty countries, including China. Nearly 200 copies of each issue go to various post-secondary and technical schools throughout China. Particular articles are frequently re-printed in other publications, thus giving us an even larger readership. Our most recent issue commenced our seventh year of publication. We print 4,000 copies of each issue.

ORIENTATION FOR CHINA TRAVELERS

Hongkong remains a strategic stepping-stone for China travel. Dozens of groups pass through Hongkong and we spend considerable time

meeting with such groups. Depending on the nature and interests of each group, we try to provide general orientation regarding China's socio-political situation with more specific information regarding religion in China.

Experience has taught us that people's perceptions of China vary from day to day. It is not uncommon in such groups for two travelers to have two totally different concepts about what they saw and heard. Therefore the opportunity to meet with groups before and after their China travel, provides unusual benefits for all concerned. Our efforts are not aimed at seeking unanimity, rather to help people see how China can be seen through so many different shades of glasses.

ECUMENICAL COOPERATION

From its inception, our Hongkong Liaison Office has closely cooperated with other church China-related projects. Our current office previously comprised four different China-related programs.

We also participate in regional and international China-related programs, particularly those which include representation from China. In Hongkong we work closely with other Protestant and Catholic China programs and hope that in the future, even more of our efforts might be expended in such ecumenical gatherings.

This ecumenical cooperation also included friendship with Hongkong's so-called "patriotic community". We find it extremely helpful and important to be in constant contact with these persons. We like to believe such contact is mutually beneficial.

As a matter of principle we do not encourage contact with secular or religion groups who view contemporary China or the Chinese Church as enemies. Again, our concern is not to defend or agree with the current political/religious activities of China. Our responsibility is to help interpret and understand them.

CHINA TRAVEL

We affirm the Chinese saying "a picture is worth a thousand words." Personal observation and reflection on daily life in China, both secular and religious, are vital ingredients of our program. Through periodic visits, supportive and mutual trust with Chinese church leaders are developed. These attributes are essential for a United Methodist understanding of world mission with China.

RESEARCH AND REFLECTION

Our library contains hundreds of books and nearly 100 periodicals and newspapers, mostly in English. We welcome interested persons to use our resources and we occasionally provide financial support for local efforts aimed at understanding China.

While CHINA TALK has assisted readers with more general knowledge about China and religion in China, we have yet to attempt any significant writing regarding theological and missional reflection on China. This is a serious lacking on our part and one which hopefully will be corrected in the near future.

FINALLY

We are nearing our 10th anniversary of Liaison work in Hongkong. Although the possibility of non-Chinese living and working in China is becoming easier, we fully anticipate continuing our Liaison Office in the years to come. After-all, Hongkong is also a part of the China World! Our easy access to China, to the non-Chinese world and to other church-related China programs all suggest that we still have much unfinished work to do right here in Hongkong.



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