

# The China Program of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

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China interest, study and research (and relationship) have always been part of the National Council of Churches' activities ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China, over three decades ago. These activities go back even further, but for the purpose of this introduction, we will limit our focus to 1949 and thereafter.

Shortly after the missionaries from the West left China in the early 1950s, the Far Eastern Joint Office of the Division of Foreign Missions of the National Council of Churches kept track of their movements and reassignments to other countries in Asia and the rest of the world. That office tried to keep abreast with developments in New China and of the church there and the many related institutions -- educational, medical and social welfare -- which were part of the Protestant missionary movement in that country for more than a century. It gathered news about Christians and the churches in China and published that information in a "China Bulletin."

In 1951 a China committee of the Council attempted an ambitious research project on the "Lessons to be Learned from the Experiences of Christian Missions in China." Looking back at that 30-page report today, we can say that the study did not focus on Western imperialism in China and the missionary movement as a possible part of it, a fundamental question which was being posed by many Christians in China then. The Cold-war climate which soon pervaded this country in a frenzy of anti-communism permitted even less readiness on the part of American church leaders to take seriously the "lessons" from China.

The next ten years of the 1960s, however, proved to be more of a ferment. The turbulent decade began with the social revolution of black people for their civil rights in the United States gaining momentum which peaked in 1966, just about the time that the Cultural Revolution began in

China. Along with growing awareness of the institutional nature of racism in America, there was by the late 1960s a relating of domestic issues at home to global issues abroad. Americans, especially the young, were engaged in sustained protests of their country's war against communism in Vietnam. In the religious realm there was excellent cooperative efforts between Roman Catholics, Protestants and Jews over social and political issues because of historical events, Vatican II and the conciliatory tone set by Pope John XXIII.

In 1966 the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. began to be on record in advocating the recognition of the People's Republic of China and its gaining a seat in the United Nations. After the Mid-1960s the "China Program" of the Council was officially established. With the lessons learned from its involvement in America's own social revolution, the National Council was beginning to be more prepared to look again at China with growing understanding, perhaps of America as much as of China. Despite what is being said by today's leaders in China about the "ten years of calamity," the Cultural Revolution did draw resounding chords in many religious and other people of goodwill outside of China. Many people working for social justice resonated with its attempt to do away with elitism and to bring about a more egalitarian social order.

The decade of the 1970s was one of euphoria in America concerning China and its social experiment, which was seen by many as an achievable goal. The China Program of the Council was beginning to look seriously at the idea of the "new man in a new society." U.S.-China ping-pong diplomacy, President Richard Nixon's visit to China, and the Shanghai Communique of 1972 were seemingly to open doors which had been shut for so long. There was growing optimism about the normalizing of relations between China and America, seen as being imminent. But seven more years ensued before normalization finally came in 1979. The Louvain international conference on "The Christian Church in New China" in 1974 tried to look positively at Mao's China, while Watergate in the U.S.A. intensified the growing exposure of the worst in the American government and its complicity with repressive regimes abroad in order to shore up and to expand a prevailing international economic order.

The China Program of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. has been in a zig-zag continuous process of evolution. It has tried to learn from historical events of which the 1960s were the watershed period of great conscious-raising. Actual contact with Christians in China came in the late 1970s which was the crowning point of that continual learning experience.

The Three-Self principle and the emphasis of Christians in China on Chinese selfhood, amidst Christian universalism, constitute perhaps the most valuable lesson gained from China. That lesson was made all the more vivid through human contacts in recent years with Christians from China and in China. The Montreal International Conference in Canada in 1981 where both Catholic and Protestant church leaders from China took an active part was, as the theme of the conference suggested, "a new beginning."

Just as Christians in China are seeking to discover what it really means to be both Christian and Chinese, American Christians need to know what it means to be both Christian and American. Members of the China Program, NCCUSA, believe that it is by knowing our respective particularities that Christians throughout the world can begin to explore with one another on a basis of equality and mutuality what the universal nature of the Christian faith is. No longer can the churches in material rich and powerful societies of the world define for the materially weaker and poorer societies what the universality of the Christian faith is, or attempt to set the agenda for the church ecumenical. How to discover our oneness in Jesus Christ amidst the fundamental contradiction between rich (North) and poor (South) societies remains a central concern of the China Program of the National Council.

The lessons learned from China are ones that shed light on God's mission in the world. In China interest, study and research (and a new beginning) we have come to understand not only China, but ourselves more. And the gospel of peace with justice demands that we continue to focus on the relationship with all its imbalance and discrepancy.

The China Program tries to share the lessons learned from China with the churches in America. In doing so it is just as much an "American" as it is a "China" program. For this ongoing task of constituency education we do many things that other China interest and concern groups do (as being reported in your journal): We publish a quarterly journal, China Notes, which is both a continuation and a departure of the old "China Bulletin." We hold monthly panels on China and our emerging relationship. We produce other educational material for the churches such as books, pamphlets, guides for study and prayer, and filmstrips.

At the moment we have been working on a photo exhibit on "China: Selfhood and Community" which will be available as a mobile exhibit for the churches related to the Council. Several trips to China are being planned for educational purposes, especially for church leaders and communications specialists. Before the year is up, the Governing Board of the National

Council of Churches in the U.S.A. will adopt a new policy statement on China. That statement essentially gives thanks for China and the Christians there. It affirms our standing with them in their emphasis on Chinese selfhood in the church universal and their participation in building the New China. It affirms also the need of North American Christians to understand themselves.

For the last decade our program has been focused on both China and and ourselves. We have tried to learn from the estranged and the new emerging relationship between our two countries and our churches. Christians in China have contributed significantly to this process. With better self-understanding of ourselves as North Americans and at the same time some understanding of New China and the Christians there, we look forward to new relationships and cooperative thinking and working to manifest our God-given unity in Jesus Christ and the gospel of peace with justice in our broken world.



## **THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POST-MAO CHINA**

by Angelo S. Lazzarotto

Published in Hong Kong by Holy Spirit Study Centre (Sept. 1982)

Pages 195; HK\$16 US\$2.70(\*\*).

The pocket-sized book gives a synthesis of events and views on the Catholic Church in China from 1977 to the end of 1981. In about two hundred pages, there is an analysis of the Church's situation in China in the context of the Country's "policy of religious freedom", together with a summary of sources and writings on the subject.

The book can be obtained through local bookstores or by sending an order, with payment, directly to:

**THE HOLY SPIRIT STUDY CENTRE**  
6, Welfare Road, Aberdeen, HONG KONG

(\*\*) Including postage outside Hong Kong, the cost is:

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