

VISIT TO SHANTOU

Anthony Lam

Although October, it was still summertime in Shantou, this small trading port on the east coast of Guangdong. The morning traffic lifted the street dust which gusts of wind transformed into a light, brown fog as I made my way across town to the Kuoshi Protestant Church on the other side of the port.

You can't miss the Church, an elegant, almost exotic, structure with its Chinese style roof and delicate woodwork under the eaves. Built in the 1930's, it was used as a theatre during the Cultural Revolution, which accounts for its present state of good repair. The sanctuary area was extended at the time to serve as a stage for the presentation of local dramas. The Church reopened for worship at Christmas in 1980. Pastor Huang Honglei is the person-in-charge, although, he himself, is quick to tell you that he is not its rector.

In actuality, there are eleven pastors in the territory, who work together with ten lay assistants. They cover the thirty-odd churches, which have recently been reopened throughout the area, in well-arranged shifts that help to make up for, but do not solve, the serious shortage of pastoral personnel. Three of these churches are in Shantou City itself: one in the western district on Zhongshan Road, another in the east on Baiyi Road, and, of course, Kuoshi Church, which is more remote from the city centre than the other two.

The Christian community in Kuoshi is, like Shantou City, small but energetic. Professor Chen Zemin, the Vice-rector of Nanjing Union Theological College is one of its members. Vocations to the ministry are flourishing, with nine young men and women already studying in Nanjing and another eight in the theological college at Wuchang. It is expected that an even greater number will be attending Guangzhou's theology college when it opens next year. Pastor Huang is a member of the board preparing for the school's opening, and so he takes a more than active interest in the formation of youth.

Despite its out of the way location, over three hundred Christians attend morning and evening Sunday worship services at Kuoshi. There would be over a thousand Christians in attendance at two other churches on an average Sunday. Women outnumber men two-to-one, and there is an equal number of young and old among the congregations.



The Protestant West-City Church

In the same afternoon, I paid a call on the Christians of West-City Church. While there was a large crowd around the church, I arrived too late to meet pastor Cai Kaijing and Pastor Hong Tiande, who serve this community. However, I did get to meet and talk with Miss Wang Baojing, who showed me around the premises and introduced me to the work of the parish. Miss Wang had studied under Bishop K.H. Ting in the old days in Nanjing Theological College. Miss Wang explained that the parish is very involved in both church affairs and social work. It serves as the local headquarters for the Christian Three-self Association, and also the Christian Church Affairs Committee of Shantou. Its Christian Medical Service Centre, which is open daily, shoulders a major portion of the city's medical burdens.

The residence of the Catholic Bishop of Shantou is only a three minute walk from the West-City Church, and I was fortunate enough to find him at home when I visited. Bishop Cai Tiyan is very active at the age of 65, and he made me feel right at home when he received me in his sitting room on the second floor. The residence houses a handicraft workshop on the ground floor, and there is a small chapel with matted floor and grass curtains adjoining the bishop's sitting room. Bishop Cai was consecrated in 1981. He has expended much energy in a major effort to re-establish the diocese. Of top priority has been the rebuilding of the cathedral which was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The new cathedral, which is already finished is now only awaiting final government inspection before occupancy. Of special concern to the Bishop is the formation of the youth, and the education and training of a new generation



The Newly-built Catholic Cathedral

of priests. The diocese sent two young men to the National Catholic Seminary in Beijing and another three to Wuchang in 1983. The previous quota system for students has now been abolished in 1985 and six more candidates from

Shantou have already been accepted for Wuchang Seminary, which has been renamed the South-Central College of Theology and Philosophy. School fees for seminarians add a further financial burden to the diocese. The government pays about a third of the 1100 renminbi yearly student fee, with the rest coming from the diocese or the seminary authority. While seminarians in the National Seminary pay no fees the remaining nine students attending Wuchang present a financial problem for a rather poor diocese such as Shantou. Bishop Cai also mentioned that the diocese was as yet unable to support a convent. There are twenty aged Sisters, two of whom live in Shantou City. His visit to Suzhou at the invitation of Bishop Ma Longlin in 1985 to attend the opening of the new Suzhou Convent there gave him much cause for hope. The eighteen young women aspirants, all of whom are secondary school graduates, are proof that there are strong indications of an increasing number of young women willing to dedicate their whole lives to the Church. The Bishop also felt that a sound educational background was a necessity for anyone entering religious life today.

Chatting with Bishop Cai made time fly. It was only after I had bade farewell and started towards the pier that I remembered that our paths had crossed once before. As I looked back at the Bishop's residence, I recalled a day earlier this year when I noticed a distinguished figure in a grey jacket, black trousers and wearing a white pair of gloves moving back and forth among the prelates on the steps of Our Lady's Basilica in Sheshan. It was our ever-active Bishop of Shantou, Cai Tiyan.