

NANJING HOSTS INTERNATIONAL CHURCH

CONFERENCE: Delegate's Report

An ecumenical gathering of nearly 150 persons from twenty-two countries met for five days in Nanjing, China, May 14-20. The largest assembly of its kind to meet in China in many years, the conference theme was "Ecumenical Sharing: a New Agenda." The intention of the organizers (the China Committee of the National Conference of Churches of Christ in the USA) was to bring together a representative group of Catholic and Protestant churchleaders and decision-makers to examine the whole range of issues affecting relationships between the churches of the Western industrialized nations and the younger churches. By convening the meeting in China, conference organizers hoped that the unique experience of the Chinese churches, particularly their implementation of the principles of self-support, self-propagation and self-government, would provide guidelines and examples to help focus group discussion of the conference theme.

Chinese clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, and Chinese church lay leaders and seminarians participated in all aspects of the conference. Bishop K.H. Ting, President of the China Christian Council and President of the Nanjing Theological Seminary, gave an address: "Sharing Across National Boundaries - as a Chinese Christian Sees It."

The opening address, "Ecumenical Sharing: A Church of the East Perspective" was given by Bishop Poulouse Mar Poulouse, Metropolitan of the Church of the East (Nestorian), Kerala, India. Other major addresses were "Ecumenical Sharing of Resources" by Dr. Huibert van Beek of the World Council of Churches; "Ecumenical Sharing in a World of

Imbalance" by the Rev. Dr. Tissa Balasuriya, Convener of the Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo, Sri Lanka; and "Ecumenical Sharing: a Latin American Perspective" by Jose Miguez Bonino, author and theologian from Buenos Aires, Argentina. These major addresses will eventually be published by the conference planning committee.

This was a working conference, with intense involvement by all participants. Each day began with a half-hour Bible study session with selections from the Gospel of Mark by Professor Ann Wire of the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. Each session was led by an expositor from a different country. Each was followed by an hour's presentation by speakers or panelists, which included groups from Britain, Cuba and the Philippines. Questions from the floor were encouraged.

Then, each morning the conference divided into fourteen discussion groups of ten persons each to analyze and apply what they had heard. Summaries of these discussions were prepared on the last day and presented by each group.

Other programs included panel presentations on the conference theme by speakers from Hong Kong, Canada, the Caribbean region, and the United States. Two panels spoke from the perspectives of women and youth.

While the conference was not meant to focus specifically on China, there were many opportunities for delegates from abroad to talk with Chinese Christians and to visit places of special interest.

Each afternoon the conference delegates broke into groups to visit cultural, historical and religious places of interest, including the Nanjing Theological Seminary, the Catholic and Protestant churches, and various schools and universities, hospitals and social service projects. Of particular interest were the Amity Foundation projects, which included the School for Handicapped Children, the Children's Welfare Center, the Children's Mental Health Center and the Children's Nutrition Center.

In a final plenary session on the last day, a representative of the third-world participants, Dr. Jualynne

Dodson, Dean of Seminary Life at Union Theological Seminary, New York (herself a member of the American black ethnic minority), read a statement prepared the previous evening by that group which asserted that the conference was primarily North American and not truly international, and that a truly representative follow-up conference should be organized, with the agenda to be prepared by third-world organizers. However, she went on to say that the third-world group was unanimous in praising the conference as a positive experience.

There will be no consensus report from the conference; that was never intended. But, in the words of one of the fourteen discussion groups, "There is an urgent need to rescue the concept of ecumenical sharing from the captivity of monetary material concerns. We must realize that there is a kind of sharing which does not require that giving and receiving take place. For example, experience, time and love are things which one cannot give to another but can share with another. Therefore, we suggest a moratorium on the discussion of money as the major resource in ecumenical sharing, so that the other non-material resources of all God's people can be identified and brought to the fore."