

AN INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP K. H. TING



by Elizabeth Larson

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ms. Kate Hotchkiss, the Associate Director of the Midwest China Center in St. Paul Minnesota, has been kind enough to pass on to us a recent interview with Bishop K. H. Ting, one of China's leading Christian spokesmen. Bishop Ting visited St. Olaf College in St. Paul, Minnesota on April 18th where he received an honorary degree. The bishop spoke to members of the St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church the following day on how the Chinese Protestant Church looks towards its future. We are happy to offer our readers excerpts from the bishop's address and Ms. Elizabeth Larson's interview with him which took place at the Lutheran Northwestern Theological Seminary on April 21st, 1988.

HIGHLIGHTS OF BISHOP TING'S LECTURE AT ST. ANTHONY'S PARK LUTHERAN CHURCH

The church is in China by the grace of God. In 1949 there were 700,000 Christians. Today there are about 4 million Protestants and 4 million Catholics. The church is growing at twice the rate of the general population of China, which is about 1 billion. Christians have continued to meet in homes since the years of persecution. There are now about 5000 registered churches.

The theological climate has also changed since 1949. Generally, the fundamentalists have shifted to a more evangelical focus, and there is a broader acceptance of diversity. After the Cultural Revolution, the article on religious freedom in the national constitution was revised so that no one should be discriminated against because of religion. The Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government has been helpful in implementing the policy of religious freedom and in negotiating the return of church buildings.

Bishop Ting recognized the important contributions of missionaries in the past. At the present time, he stressed the emerging emphasis in the church in China on the development of Chinese art forms in communicating the Christian faith in China, as well as knowledge of Chinese church history. Bishop Ting welcomed national exchanges and said that visiting professors have been lecturing at Nanjing Seminary as the church in China moves from independence to interdependence. In light of China's shortage of theological teachers, Bishop Ting said there is a place for visiting lecturers, especially those knowledgeable in the Biblical languages.

In the last nine years, 3 million Chinese Bibles have been printed in China on various presses. One of the major accomplishments of the Amity Foundation has been the establishment of the Amity Printing Press. The Amity Printing Press gives priority to the printing of Bibles and other publications entrusted by church organizations, as well as printing other materials in conformity with Amity's goal to serve the community in general. The Amity Press is printing a large number of Bibles now and will hopefully catch up with the demand before too long.

Q: Bishop Ting, I heard your lecture at St. Anthony Park Lutheran Church last night, I wonder if I could ask you some more specific questions about the church in China today?

A: I'd be glad to respond to your questions.

Q: When I visited your seminary in 1982, I was told that two students were selected from each province to enroll in the seminary. What is your selection process now? Do students come on their own initiative? Are they recommended by the provinces, or the churches of which they are members? Do you need to limit the number of students because of the extent of your faculty and facilities?

A: We do not have a fixed number of students accepted from each province now. Students come on their own accord, but they must be recommended by the church where they worship. We do not have a shortage of applicants. Almost every year, the number of young

people we allow to take part in our entrance exams is ten times greater than the actual number of students we can admit.

Q: It sounds very competitive. Besides the entrance exam, what else is taken into account when the final decision is made as to who is admitted?

A: We ask the students to write on a few subjects, for instance, their understanding of the Bible, their way of looking at the Chinese church and its needs, and their understanding of their call to devote their whole life to the service of Christ and of the church. We also consider the pastors' recommendations.

Now our work of admitting students is not good. Even though we have these things to rely upon, still we have admitted a certain proportion of students whom we have found to be unsuitable as future church leaders. I don't mean that they are bad people.

They may be good in other ways, but to be church ministers, they are not fit.

Q: Are you speaking of personal ethics, or lack of aptitude for theological studies?

A: It could be any of a number of concerns, but it is not bad enough for us to ask them to leave. We are beginning now to put the work of admitting students on a year-round basis. We want prospective students to be related to us for a year or two prior to their enrollment. We would like to have a pastoral relationship with them. We think that then we can select better.

Generally, our pastoral care work is not good, because of the large number of Christians and the small number of pastors. One result of this is that our pastors do not know the young people well enough to know whether to recommend them or not.

Q: How do you propose establishing this pastoral relationship with prospective students?

A: We are going to establish an admissions office with two or three persons in charge of this responsibility. We will let Christians all over China know about this office, so that if they are interested in coming to the seminary to study, they should write to us and we will see how we can have them related to us more closely.

Q: I know that things in China have changed drastically even in recent years. Can you identify any particular developments within China

which are influencing the church today?

- A: One of the very important changes is that China now wants to open herself to the outside world. Under the Closed-Door Policy, Christians had difficulty having relationships with churches abroad. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution, we couldn't have any contacts with the church abroad. But today, it is much easier in China for us to be in touch with Christians in other countries; for example, to visit, or to receive delegations. Also organizations such as the Amity Foundation, a Chinese social service foundation with projects in the people's Republic of China, can receive project support from overseas organizations.

The restoration of the Principle of the United Front is also very important for the life of the church. The Communist Party's emphasis on the United Front means that it takes a much friendlier attitude towards intellectuals, towards democratic parties, and toward groups with minority characteristics such as churches. The Principle of the United Front emphasizes what we have in common, rather than what divides us. China's prosperity is something that all groups in China yearn for and this is our point of unity.

- Q: Is China progressing and achieving prosperity? Is this a vision that is becoming reality for the Chinese people?

- A: Changes in livelihood have been very great in China. Before 1949, many Chinese people were very poor. Before 1949, some people had to eat the bark of trees, because they didn't have enough rice or flour, but today in China, nobody needs to starve. In old China, many people were wearing patched clothing, but today everybody seems to be neat and clean and wearing proper clothes. Before 1949, many people walked around bare-footed, even in the snow, but today everyone is wearing shoes. 80% of our people used to be illiterate, but today only about 20% are illiterate. These changes may not be significant in North America, but for China they are very great changes. In a country such as ours with a very large population, changes come slowly.

- Q: How does the church in China feel about the government policy of one child per family?

- A: The church is not in objection to this policy - even the Roman Catholic Church in China. We think this is a very humanitarian measure. We must give good education and livelihood to those who are born. If there are too many citizens, we won't have enough food and many people will suffer. Under our circumstances, this one-child policy is necessary, but I hope not for long because there are many

flaws and disadvantages in putting forth this measure. Because there is only one child in a family, parents overfeed them, are indulgent to them, and primary school teachers are finding the children harder to teach.

Q: As you mentioned in your lecture presentation, could you describe the goal of the church in China to be a united church?

A: At present, we are not a united church, although we understand ourselves to be a post-denominational church. I think that it is in the nature of the church to be one. On a practical level, if we can have a united church, we can improve the quality of church life. At present, the China Christian Council can only serve the various churches. Once united, we could make important decisions concerning faith and order, ministry, the sacraments, and so on.

There are those in opposition to a united church. For instance, the Little Flock, a Christian group with a stronger fundamentalist orientation, believes the local church is the only way the church should be. The Little Flock is not a large group, but they are very well taught and therefore they are strong.



Q: Bishop Ting, in your lecture, you also expressed concern about not being too impulsive in your plans to become a united church. Are you in a deliberative stage now trying to decide what is best to do next?

A: Yes, we are, because two years ago we did do something impulsive. We had certain church leaders, 80 to 90 years old, and they wanted so much to bring about church unity in China before they died. They were in too much of a hurry and alarmed the people of the Little Flock background. The emotional reaction against this proposal was very strong, although nothing had actually been done in the name of the China

Christian Council. We are very cautious about what may happen if church unity is promoted again in this way.

Q: I know that in reaction to Western imperialism in years past, and in recognition of the connection of the church in China with the church in the West, you are cautious now and want your church to be a Chinese church. As you mentioned in your lecture, your strategy has been to establish independence on the way to interdependence. Do you see a point where your church might identify so much with Chinese culture that it may lose its Christian identity?

A: In the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, the emphasis was on separation. But today in the 1980's, our understanding of Three-Self (self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating) is much less extreme. We want to affirm our unity with Christians all over the world. We think that God doesn't mean for the church to be just national, that is, isolated from the other churches abroad.

In the book of Revelation, John wrote seven letters to seven different churches. The contents were all different, because their problems were all different. But at the end of each of these seven letters, he said, "Let those who have ears, hear what the Holy Spirit says to the churches." In other words, what the Holy Spirit speaks to one church is for all other churches to listen to as well. We cannot afford not to listen to the message the other churches are receiving from the Holy Spirit. So today we are much more open to other churches and other churches are ready to help us in anyway we think fit. For instance, the sending of a theological student to Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, if it happens, is one illustration of this more open policy.

Q: This would be a gift for our student body at LNTS and for our church as well. To pursue my earlier question further, in what ways is the church in China counter-cultural? For example, as an American, there are some ways in which the culture and my faith conflict. Could you give some specific examples within your country?

A: The fact that we adhere to tenets of the Christian faith, and the majority of the Chinese people don't, is very conspicuous. There is also a very extreme sort of nationalism with which we are not in agreement. We think that nationalism should be understood in two different senses. There is the nationalism of the oppressed nation seeking independence and affirmation of their own nationhood. As Christians, we can support this. It is the sort of nationalism we read about in some parts of the Old Testament. But the nationalism that is aggressive, we do not support. I think that as a whole, our temptation today in China is still our lack of identification with out immediate context and culture.

Q: You mentioned this morning that 30% of seminary students are women. Are women accepted as pastors, or are there some obstacles to full acceptance?

A: As far as I know, women pastors are accepted in China without difficulty. I don't know of any case in which a woman pastor was rejected because she was a woman. This is only natural because of the general atmosphere in China today which emphasizes equality between the sexes, equal opportunities, and equal benefits. There are many newspaper articles condemning husbands who make their wives do all the housework and so on. Within this atmosphere, it is natural that women pastors receive more or less the same treatment.

But because of the long history of patriarchy, a woman's position in China is still not actually equal to that of a man's. The National People's Congress is composed of only 20% women. Although the governor of my province, Jiangsu, is a woman, she is the only woman governor of a province in China. All this has to take time. I think it is noteworthy however, that the Chinese Anglican Church ordained the first woman priest in China in 1944, an action for which it was reprimanded by the worldwide church body in 1948.

Q: In your lecture last night, you said that in Shanghai and Beijing about 25% of the worshipers in the congregations are under 30 years of age. In what ways is the church trying to reach out to the youth, or how is your evangelism geared to attract the youth who do not seem to be drawn to the churches except in the larger cities?

A: Because our pastoral care is not specialized, very little attempt is made to reach out to youth in particular. We do not have a chaplaincy program, or workers for women, youth, or children. We are maintaining a general sort of pastoral care. We are not satisfied with this, but this is the actual situation.

The YMCA-YWCA reaches out rather extensively in twelve of China's cities, but I don't know how effective they are in ultimately bringing people to the church. The program of the YMCA-YWCA in China does offer religious activities such as Bible study.

We don't have specialized ministry for university students. Generally students come to the church and join whatever activities the church provides. In the larger cities, there are youth groups organized by the church which university students often join.

Last night at the lecture, there was a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota, who is not a Christian. I suspect he was

the one who sent me the question written in Chinese: "Why can't the church in China organize Christian university students on the campuses?" We are not doing this because we know if we tried, it is most likely the university authorities would not welcome us. They would say there should be a division between the church and education. The church should not have anything to do with education, so carry on your religious organization in the church, but not in the university. Again, it is a matter of time perhaps, until people's minds are more open and they will see the benefit of having Christian student organizations on the campuses...but not today.

Q: Bishop Ting, in closing, as Christians united in Christ, how can we continue to support you in prayer? Do you have specific prayer concerns? Also, what are some things you think the Chinese church has to teach our church in the United states as a result of your experience?

A: As I mentioned last night at the lecture presentation, we have six problem areas for which we would ask your prayer support: 1)aging church leadership; 2)limited pastoral care; 3)few seminary teachers; 4)inadequate guidance for house churches; 5)continued and expanded religious freedom; and 6)movement toward a united church.

As to the things Christians abroad can learn from China, I really hesitate to say what they are because in China we have just been trying to sort out our problems. Maybe Christians abroad could help us if they visit the church in China and summarize our experience for themselves and for us. I can say that Christians in China have gained a better understanding of the resurrection of Jesus Christ through our own experience. We have also experienced God's strength revealed in our weakness and we have learned more about the necessity of reconciliation.

Thank you very much, Bishop Ting, for responding to my questions.

You are most welcome.

Bishop Ting, I am sure the constituents of the Midwest China Center and others who receive a copy of this interview will be glad for the opportunity you have provided by this interview to learn more about the church in China. I can assure you we are very interested in continuing this learning process and in continuing to pray for the church in China today. Thank you again.

It has been my pleasure.

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