

## The growth of the protestant church in rural China

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Religion in China is a complex affair but today, despite on-going strict management of the religious arena, China is now home to one of the fastest growing churches in the world. Why is that? To many people news of church growth in China is surprising not least because of the propensity for churches to be seen by some government officials as hotbeds of 'foreign infiltration', a viewpoint which has led to hardliners calling for the ongoing careful management of religious affairs – including the management of numbers - as an integral part of societal control in China.<sup>1</sup>

Given this approach the phenomena of church growth in China is all the more fascinating and raises a number of interesting questions:

- Why has the government tolerated such massive church growth in recent years?
- Is the growth similar to patterns elsewhere in the world or are there factors specific to China that are underpinning this phenomena?
- What is the particular attraction of protestant Christianity to the rural Chinese?
- And finally, who are the people turning to the church?

### Academic research on rural Christianity

Whilst many Chinese citizens are moving to the cities in search of employment and a new life, the overwhelming majority of Chinese society remains rural. The majority of church growth is known to happen in the rural areas but there is very little concrete data emerging from there. There are numerous reasons for this.

The marginalisation and relative neglect of rural areas in academic research in general has been accounted for in a number of ways. Firstly, as education researchers point out from the Chinese viewpoint

The organisation of research production in China and the close ties between academic research and centres of policymaking make the physical distance a major barrier to researchers' access to rural life; the most influential or widely published researchers tend to live in large urban areas cut off from daily rural life...Considering local conditions, taking time to let questions or analytical categories emerge, and relying on local participants to define themselves and their stories – all elements typically seen as significant for ethnographic research – do not fit well either with epistemological traditions or with the need to

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<sup>1</sup> See Daniel Bays, 'A Tradition of State Dominance', in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, Jason Kindropp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Eds) 2004, pp25-39

meet policy deadlines, the impetus that drives much of China's academic research.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, even if researchers are based in the rural areas it can be hard to gain concrete data and to gather a comprehensive picture of any given area.

Religious studies have their own reasons for neglecting the rural areas. Leung Kalun has pinpointed the focus of study as one factor. He has described the early days of religious scholarship in China as being epitomised by "fragmentary rather than comprehensive research"<sup>3</sup> with Chinese researchers focusing on philosophical and theological aspects to the detriment of both historical and practical aspects. As such researchers found that "in their work at universities or research institutes, purely conceptual research was safer than on-the-ground research; and research of the west was safer than research of local conditions, with less risk of blundering into a political no-man's land."<sup>4</sup>

"Christianity Fever" (the phenomena of exponential growth in Christian believers) became the catalyst for change in the research of Christianity in China with field study tentatively undertaken. Much of this initial study was urban-centric. Cities had seen a marked increase in religious activity and were easily accessible research fields. There was simply no reason to go further afield.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past few years I have been privileged to visit a number of churches and share in a number of Chinese Christians' testimonies. While some of these have been gathered from articles printed in both national and local Christian newspapers and journals, the vast majority of conversion testimonies have been shared face to face. Hearing their stories I find myself asking a number of questions. To what extent have their narratives been reconstructed? How much are they used, particularly in articles or in services, to create a certain type of theology? How much are the narratives something that has actually happened to them and how much are they part of their 'induction' to the church family? What has the impact been on their personal life? How has becoming a Christian influenced their behaviour?

Whilst this article will not answer all of those questions it does seek to understand the essence of rural church growth through individual experiences and case studies thereby supplementing gaps in previous research.

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<sup>2</sup> Lynn Paine and Brian DeLany "Rural Chinese Education – Observing from the Margin", in *The Ethnographic Eye: Interpretive Studies of Education in China*, Ed. Judith Liu, Heidi Ross & Donald Kelly, Falmer Press, NY, 2000, p99

<sup>3</sup> Leung Kalun, "Cultural Christians and Christianity in China" in *China Rights Forum, No4 2003, China's Spiritual Revival: The Call of the Sacred, the Call of the Muse*, p29

<sup>4</sup> Leung Kalun, "Cultural Christians and Christianity in China" in *China Rights Forum, No4 2003, China's Spiritual Revival: The Call of the Sacred, the Call of the Muse*, p29

<sup>5</sup> Such examples of urban based studies can be found in the *China Study Journal* including Luo Weilong, "Trends in Development in Religious Activity in Shanghai Over the Past 10 years" (Volume 8, No2, August 1993); Wu Yin "The Faith and Life of Christians in Beijing" (Vol 8 No3, December 1993); "Religion in Shanghai Since the Period of Reform and Opening" (Vol 12, No3, December 1997); Gao Shining, "Faith and Values: Case Studies of Chinese Intellectual Christians" (Vol 17, No2/3, August/December 2002) and Gao Shining's most recent study "A View from Beijing of the Faith of Christians in China's Cities" (Vol 18, No3, December 2003)

The case studies were drawn from a number of personal encounters and visits undertaken throughout China over the past 5 years. The churches and the members I met with can be seen as representative of the wider church, but it should be recognised that the sample is still small and therefore it would be unwise to say they are typical. There is, as Hunter and Rimmington have said, no such thing in China.

I have concentrated my case studies for this article from field study made to the two provinces of Fujian and Anhui.

Fujian was selected for its strong missionary and diverse religious heritage. Fujian Province has been described as "a paradise in China, not only in economic terms but also for the social scientist who is interested in the development of religion and other social phenomena. Historically Fujian has been a centre for religions ... Today many of those religions have made a big come back. Buddhism is thriving ... Christianity is also growing."<sup>6</sup>

In contrast Christian mission was historically less successful in Anhui province. Economically speaking the province is no showcase. However Anhui now has one of the highest percentages of Christian believers. In contrast to Fujian's strong missionary roots "it appears that the strong growth in Anhui in the 1980s was a result of unauthorised evangelism from neighbouring Henan, the centre of the so-called 'Christianity fever'."<sup>7</sup>

The two provinces are sufficiently different to illustrate some of the diversity and vitality of Christian life specifically in rural areas where such growth is at its most dynamic.

### **Factors influencing growth**

What encourages someone from a small community where the majority of the population remain un-churched, to swim against the tide and join the church?

Context is commonly seen as an important factor contributing to both personal transformation and ultimately to church growth. Given the centrality afforded to context by theorists, and the reality that the Chinese context is so special, a logical question emerges - in what ways does the rural Chinese context shape church growth and the nature of individual conversions?

Firstly, the current religious context offers us some clues. In modern China many local religious practices have been deemed 'superstitious' and have been attacked and destroyed. In rural areas Christianity has increasingly taken on a

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<sup>6</sup> Edmond Tang, Editorial, *China Study Journal*, Vol 7 No2, August 1992, p1

<sup>7</sup> Alan Hunter, "Continuities in Chinese Protestantism 1920-1990" *China Study Journal*, Vol 6 No 3 December 1991, p7

'Chinese look' with itinerant evangelists, local ministers and Chinese believers. Without cultural traditions as barriers, and with the obvious demise of a socialist society, rural Chinese are now both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems.<sup>8</sup>

One reason the protestant church has proved so popular is due to the intrinsically simple nature of protestant Christianity. The simple form and structure of Protestantism means that even if there is no minister or church building, it is still possible to engage in religious life. This structure fosters an environment which encourages the development of lay workers, with little church bureaucracy to block the vision of individual workers. The relatively low living standards, educational and cultural level of many peasants in the Chinese countryside has also made it very easy for evangelists to deliver programmes and engage in evangelistic activities.

These programmes allow engagement with a range of different people in society. Newcomers can be welcomed and cared for through the programmes. The witness of the church, and the warmth and support offered to the local community, can have a great impact. This is never truer than in the rural context where previously tight-knit communities are coming away at the seams. Individual guidance and the sense of corporate belonging are both an important and significant part of the conversion process, which can be nurtured through church-run programmes. It is here that Christianity can be tested out and experiences can be interpreted, rejected or accepted.

Secondly, for rural Chinese the growing uncertainty of their personal future, including the very future of the land they till, "increases their desire for absoluteness and certainty".<sup>9</sup> Agriculture has long been the very heart of rural life in China but this is changing. Agricultural land is diminishing fast. A recently published report by China Ministry of Land Resources claims that the net loss of arable land over the past year has been 6,767km<sup>2</sup>, a third as a result of construction and over 55% through natural disasters.<sup>10</sup> If this continues then in less than two years China will no longer be able to feed itself, and the minimal security that the rural peasants depend on will be irrevocably destroyed.

Many rural workers are downing their agricultural tools in lieu of work in the cities. In 1995 70 million people migrated from rural to urban locations;<sup>11</sup> by 2006 this had grown to a massive 150 million.<sup>12</sup> The 'hukou'<sup>13</sup> system effectively divides the

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<sup>8</sup> Yang Fenggang, "Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity: the importance of social and cultural contexts", *Sociology of Religion*, Fall 1998, p11

<sup>9</sup> Yang Fenggang, "Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity: the importance of social and cultural contexts", *Sociology of Religion*, Fall 1998, p12

<sup>10</sup> ---, *China may soon not be able to feed itself, warns Wen Jiabao*, AsiaNews, 17 April 2007

<sup>11</sup> Huang Ping, *Seeking for Survival: A Sociological Study of Rural-Urban Migration in China*, Yunnan People's Press, Kunming, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Li Shi, "Rural Migration in China: Scenario, Challenge and Public Policy", found on [http://www.ideaswebsite.org/feathm/oct2006/PPT/Li\\_Shi.ppt#256,1](http://www.ideaswebsite.org/feathm/oct2006/PPT/Li_Shi.ppt#256,1), Rural Migration in China: Scenario, Challenge and Public Policy (accessed on 25 August 2007)

<sup>13</sup> The *hukou* system has a history of over two thousand years in China, and was established during the imperial era as a means of social control and to facilitate tax collection. However, under the CCP government the *hukou*

population in two – ‘the haves’ (urban households) and ‘the have not’s’ (rural households) and has been described as one of the most strictly enforced ‘apartheid’ social structures in modern world history.<sup>14</sup> Plans to end the system were hailed as a positive step towards bridging the social, political and economic gulf between China’s countryside and its cities but have yet to be realised.

Many evangelists and Christians promote the inerrancy of the Bible and actively disseminate the promises it holds of justice for the weak and the poor. These prove alluring promises for those marginalized in today’s Chinese society.

This is particularly important for the women, who are in many respects sidelined in rural life. Although tremendously improved since Liberation, the life of a Chinese woman in the countryside often remains tough. For evidence that women are considered of less value than their male counterpart one need only look at birth rates. The traditional preference for boys, combined with China’s draconian one-child policy introduced in 1979, has produced what has been described as “the largest, the highest, and the longest” gender imbalance in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Once born, particularly in rural areas, boys are often given priority in everything from education to choice of food. Later in life, a woman will leave her family and join her husband’s and a dowry is usually paid to the bride’s family. While some argue this shows the woman’s value, others argue that it highlights the sense of a woman being a mere ‘commodity’.

The old Maoist saying ‘women hold up half the sky’ does not reflect the reality of women in the workplace today.

...when the first wave of downsizing in the state sector began, women workers accounted for 64% of those sacked. Accompanying the downsizing was a fierce propaganda campaign to portray women as an inferior sex because of their ability to bear children--it is simply economically not viable to employ women.<sup>16</sup>

Even when she can find employment a woman is rarely given equal pay in line with her male counterparts. In 1990 wages for women were only 77.5% those of

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system’s functions of political and social control grew to unprecedented levels. Since the early 1950s the *hukou* has imposed strict limits on Chinese citizens. Employment, housing, and social benefits are commonly linked to *hukou* registration. Rural migrants to urban areas are often unable to obtain equal access to public services such as health care and education. Although economic reforms have undoubtedly weakened the impact of the *hukou* restrictions continue to affect the lives of Chinese migrants.

<sup>14</sup> Jiang Wenran, acting director of the China Institute at the University of Alberta. interviewed by Tim laud of BBC, *China rethinks peasant ‘apartheid’*, BBC News 10 November 2005 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4424944.stm>

<sup>15</sup> From a relatively normal ratio of 108.5 boys to 100 girls in the early 80s, the male surplus progressively rose to 111 in 1990, 116 in 2000, and is now is close to 120 boys for each 100 girls at the present time. Figures given in a report by Eric Baculinao, Beijing Bureau Chief NBC News on 14 September 2004

<sup>16</sup> Au Loong-yu, Nan Shan, Zhang Ping, *Women Migrant Workers under the Chinese Social Apartheid*, Committee for Asian Women (CAW), Bangkok, p4

men; in 2000 this has dropped to 70.1%.<sup>17</sup> Financially many rural women are wholly dependent on their husband. Many families in the countryside also draw a distinction between public roles (men) and private roles (women). Essentially women are given responsibility for domestic affairs, but often to the detriment of having a public voice.

The church offers a place where they do have a voice, a sense of community, a new family, and for many women membership offers them a social standing higher than they enjoy outside of the Christian community.

In the course of doing the research it became apparent that a very high proportion of Chinese Christians are women. This has an effect on the recruitment into many of the churches, which rely heavily on kinship and friendship networks to extend its membership. A high proportion of Christian women and a low percentage of male Christians also ensure a steady stream of secondary conversions through marriage.

The political context is another setting crucial when looking at church growth. Perhaps unsurprisingly the government has claimed its implementation of a favourable religious policy remains a key contributing factor to religious growth. One official claimed that "since the 1980s, following the implementation of the policy of freedom of religious belief, religious activities began to increase; ... and in each locality the churches began to revive."<sup>18</sup>

Certainly the majority of church growth has occurred since early 1980s but some government leaders call for a re-examination of the figures in light of what they call the re-bound effect.

The Party concedes that their initial religious policy, especially the Cultural Revolution, sought to eradicate religion. Apparently successful the number of religious believers appeared to decrease significantly. In reality many believers continued to practice their faith in secret, and religious activities were simply driven 'underground'. In the early 1980s following the implementation of the new religious policy and amendments to the Constitution which guaranteed freedom of religious belief, religious believers re-emerged, leading to the 're-bound effect'.

This created a false impression that there were suddenly many new converts to Christianity among people who had not been Christians before. In reality, many of the people who were baptised and entered the Church had in fact been Christians before, but had kept this hidden during the Cultural Revolution. These people's faith had certainly not been destroyed, and after suffering repression

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<sup>17</sup> Au Loong-yu, Nan Shan, Zhang Ping, *Women Migrant Workers under the Chinese Social Apartheid*, Committee for Asian Women (CAW), Bangkok, p4

<sup>18</sup> Luo Weihong, "The Facts About the Activities of the Heterodox Sect 'The 'Established King'" *Dangdai Zongjiao Yanjiu* 1/1998, reproduced in *China Study Journal* Part 1 December 1998

sprang back more forceful than before, which accounts for something of the phenomenon of the religious fever. This, then, is what we call the 'rebound' effect.<sup>19</sup>

Theoretically the re-bounce effect should apply equally to all religions and in all places. In reality growth is sporadic and is not evenly spread.

### **New communities of new believers**

In the course of my research it became apparent that the Christian churches that I was looking at were in many cases very young Christian communities. Whilst some of the churches did date back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the vast majority of churches I visited had emerged only in the late 1980s or early 1990s, often in places where there was no previous Christian heritage. This view of a new Christian community was reinforced when personal conversions were analysed. The majority of churches in both Fujian and Anhui showed two distinct "growth spurts", the first in the late 1980s and a second one over the last 5-10 years. These churches did not grow as many have in the West by acquiring believers who had simply changed allegiance from other churches, but grew instead through the addition of new believers to their numbers.

As I sought to understand *why* people had converted to Christianity and *how* this has impacted their lives it was important to put the individuals at the centre of the research. As Chen and Li say in their study on Fujian Christians "putting questions directly to church members can produce results which reflect ... accurately their reasons for being Christians."<sup>20</sup>

Although faith healing is often regarded by the authorities as a superstitious activity, healing has long been cited as the major reason for contemporary growth of the rural church. Back in 1984 a report in *China Daily* quoted a church elder as saying, "Unless there's illness, nobody wants to become a Christian".<sup>21</sup> Whilst conversion is no longer solely linked to health – only a minority of cases for example amongst those I spoke to in Fujian attributed healing as the reason behind their personal conversion – all of those I interviewed knew of someone who had been healed and recognised that it continues to be a major factor in the growth of the church in rural China.

For many rural Chinese the concept of healing spirits is not unusual and is linked to both Chinese traditions and charismatic influences. This dovetails with very practical reasons; where finances and lack of adequate medical provision in the rural areas rule out adequate medical care, many will turn to the church and to prayer for healing, especially when testimonies abound of lives touched by the healing power of the Holy Spirit. In her report *The healing power of faith*, Claudia Wahrisch-Oblau cited a World Bank report which claimed illness has become the

<sup>19</sup> "Examination of the rapid growth of Christianity in Henan - reflections on particular characteristics of the development of Christianity over recent years in the province", *China Study Journal*, August 1994 Pt1 p9

<sup>20</sup> Chen Zhiping and Li Shaoming, "Reasons for Joining the Local Church and Social Make-Up of Modern Christians in Fujian" *China Study Journal*, Vol 7, No2, August 1992 p16

<sup>21</sup> Robert Whyte, "Healing and Christianity", *China Study Journal*, April 1988, pt1, p24

number one reason for the impoverishment of rural Chinese families. "Often, it is those who cannot afford treatment who, in desperation, seek out a Christian church" she concluded.<sup>22</sup>

According to Reverend Xue Lianxi more than 50% of the members of the rural Anhui churches became Christians due to faith-healing experiences.<sup>23</sup> This was very much corroborated by my findings. Whilst some of the stories I heard included relatively minor healings of everyday illnesses, others were miraculous healings of cancer or other life-threatening diseases. Whatever form the healing took, the effect on those who directly felt touched by God's spirit was profound, not just in their lives but also impacting their families and friends. Numerous cases emerged where several people had come to faith as a result of one individual's testimony of healing.

Linked to, but quite distinct from the healing experience, is the realm of exorcism. On a visit to one church Mrs N shared openly about how she and her entire family became Christian after her son was delivered from a demon possession. She described how her son had become uncharacteristically aggressive and after a while was dismissed from school. At home his behaviour deteriorated further. Mrs N was encouraged by neighbours to go to the local temple to make offerings for him. Things improved for a while but it never lasted long. Financially she knew that she could not maintain daily offerings but she was desperate to help her son. He grew increasingly violent, breaking windows and furniture at home. Someone recommended the church as somewhere that could help. She took her son there but he got even worse as they approached and so she turned back home, embarrassed and despairing. One of the evangelists from church heard about the boy and came to the house to offer help. Her son was taken to the church and several men, including the minister from one of the nearby cities prayed for him over several days. One night he was delivered of several demons and changed. Physically his face was back to normal and he was once again the softly spoken boy she knew. Seeing such a miraculous change in him the entire family converted to Christianity.

Stories like this are not at all unusual. Many rural Chinese feel trapped both spiritually and financially in a spiral of dependency on the ritual imposed by certain local folk religion practices, many of which are intricately linked into village life. In areas where folk religion exercises a profound influence demon possession is considered a reality and several cases of possession and subsequent exorcism were shared with me. Christianity is increasingly seen as a means of escape and can be perceived as a progressive force in traditional rural communities.

Another example of spiritual manifestation that has turned people to faith is that of visions and dreams. Many rural Chinese Christians perceive dreams and visions as God's way of communicating with them directly. Several of those I spoke to stated quite emphatically that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ and

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<sup>22</sup> Claudia Wahrish-Oblau, "The healing power of faith", *Amity News Service* April 1996

<sup>23</sup> ---, "Church growth in Anhui", *China Study Journal*, August 1994, Pt2, p39



in sustaining them through difficult times. Some of these were considered “preparatory” – confirming prior conversations, thoughts or teachings. Dreams in which angels or others gave instructions for specific events were common. Less widespread, but still evident were dreams or visions in which Jesus himself appeared. These visions or dreams were more “empowering”, and sometimes preceded a period of intense struggle or hardship and were seen to be a means of coming to faith in their own right or of maintaining faith in difficult times.

Whether preparatory or empowering, those who recounted their dreams noted that they were unlike the dreams we normally have. They were often characterised by a special sense of clarity; people recounted an awareness of being momentarily moved into a new and different reality and that those people or spirit beings that appeared to them were as tangible as you and I.

Although she had had no previous understanding or knowledge of Christianity Mrs B had an encounter she later believed to be with Christ himself. She was a newcomer to the town and was a young mother. Her daughter was sick and so she bought some incense sticks at a temple as a peace offering in the hope of getting her sick daughter well.

“I went to burn the incense sticks at the temple and then someone started speaking to me. I turned around and although there were lots of people near me none of them was talking to me, but I could still hear the voice. It was strange. He told me that I would not find the peace I was looking for here, and that I needed to go to his home. I kept looking for the person speaking to me and then I saw him. He looked different from the others, with a beard and light coloured hair. I asked him where his home was, and he said that I would find it easily – it was at the end of the street and had a big red cross on the roof. That was his home.”

In many of the accounts I heard it was not unusual for people to speak of having surrendered themselves to Christ in the dream or vision itself. Another constant theme was that the dreams and visions were accompanied by a revelation of truth and of a new sense of being. Many of those who experienced such life-changing dreams or visions were already in some way searching for faith, and in some way practicing it acknowledging the spiritual realm and trying to live lives pleasing to god.

For those actively searching, the availability of the Bible in Chinese often played a key part in their journey to faith. Literacy is a problem in many rural areas, but the availability of the Bible in Chinese is a crucial resource for those seeking faith and is much used as a tool for verification and justification. Seen as the inerrant word of God the Bible is held with reverence by believers and non-believers alike. Mr A a doctor in Anhui explains how studying the Bible at a young people’s fellowship helped him come to faith:

"...It took time for me to really understand what was going on and to really understand the stories that were being told. During the first year or so I would rarely if ever come to church on a Sunday. I did like to hear the bible stories though and slowly started to think about them more and try to understand them better. During this time my life was a mess. I didn't think that I could live up to the good standards of other people's lives. I was gambling a lot. I was playing mah-jong and cards all the time and was severely in debt. I listened to the gospel stories and someone gave me a bible which I started to read. I liked the stories but kept coming back to one thing. Did Jesus really come back from the dead? I felt that I needed an answer to this question and read and read all I could and asked lots of questions. Often I did not get very satisfactory answers but I knew that this was a significant thing – for me the most important thing. I looked at the bible and saw that many of the disciples had followed him during his lifetime but on the cross they had left him. They came back though and they went out to preach and many of them preached even in the face of death. I thought about it more and more and thought that even those who had been with Jesus had doubted him especially as he faced death but then they saw him again and they were changed ... they believed in him so much they saw him as the Son of God and after that they would risk dying for him. They knew he was truth; that all He had said was true and for them it was worth risking everything for. Suddenly I realized that it was not just a story but that it was true, and that if it was true then there could be no half measures."

The telling of Bible stories and the sharing of testimonies build on the great oral story-telling tradition which flourishes in rural Chinese society. Evangelists and ministers play a central role in telling these stories and in preaching and leading the church. A strong leader is seen to contribute to church growth – conversely those churches without permanent leaders or evangelists risk losing their members to cults based around charismatic leadership.

Although the church is growing hugely in China it should be remembered that there are more people who decide to *not* join the church, than decide to convert. Unlike the cities where the majority of Christians are educated and have professional jobs, rural Christians are often poor, lacking in resources and coming from families forced to live apart in the search for work. Social networks that once provided safety and stability are now fragile; education is basic and medical care is minimal.

In light of this those who make a commitment have sometimes been criticised as being "Rice Bowl Christians", Christians who join the church for what they can get. The reality that I saw is quite different. While there are many advantages to joining the church, often that which is lost through membership is ignored. Few people convert without serious thought, indeed the church will not baptise anyone who

has not been through one of its preparation programmes. This results in a two stage commitment process, the first personal and the second public.

While most are willing to make a public declaration of faith, it still remains difficult for some people to do so. In these cases, the churches are often pragmatic, encouraging secret baptism through contacts at another church for example.

### **Challenges emerging from growth**

As mentioned earlier, in most cases the churches that I was looking at were very young Christian communities. This has significance on pastoral matters and for the church going forward. Rapid development of such a young church has led to a variety of demands and challenges. Increasing numbers of believers are not matched by any substantial rise in the number of religious personnel and there is a very heavy reliance on un-paid volunteer lay-workers. As cost of living increases and more people migrate to the cities this model will put increasing pressure on those who chose to devote their time to church work. This model does not encourage robust theological development or systematic training. Although my research showed that the churches organised themselves in small groups to counteract the problem of work over-load for those maintaining oversight, encouraging friendship and spiritual nurturing of individuals there is an urgent need for theological training for those leading the groups.

There is a growing need for on-going theological training for existing clergy and personnel. Changing society has resulted in increasing psychological and emotional needs within the congregation and wider society. Personnel are not only stretched but they are currently ill-equipped to deal with pastoral counselling and many of the issues that are emerging from a society in transition.

In the past a highly effective correspondence training course was provided for lay workers and church personnel alike. This was stopped a number of years ago but is sorely missed in the rural areas. Some kind of systematic programme like this should be re-introduced to provide at least fundamental training in the basics of faith. Without this rural Christians remain increasingly susceptible to ever pervasive threat of cults.

The church is being presented with a number of opportunities. Increasingly families, young people and even Party cadres are turning to the church to seek help in the face of an increasing moral vacuum. Many in the church feel uncomfortable in speaking out about such issues in public. This may be a repercussion of the high proportion of women in the church, many of whom do not enjoy a public voice in their home situations.

This is a challenge for the church. Much like the government which has transitioned from a power struggling for legitimacy, to one in control, the church is growing in numbers and needs to better understand not just how it is shaped by the world it is in, but what role it can play in shaping society going forward.

The prophetic role of the church needs to be explored more. There is a need for a conciliatory go-between, one which ensures justice is given to the weaker members of society, and encourages diversity and tolerance. There is also a growing need for churches to speak out where there are issues that affect humankind, such as environment degradation.

The church is exploding numerically but as this article has shown there are no clear-cut answers why so many people are turning to the church at this moment. Many of the rural churches are tight knit communities. Although there is encouragement to engage more with the local community and to help build a "harmonious society" the reality is that many in the church are young Christians, immature in their faith. In many instances Christians are primarily focussed on their own personal salvation and security in the afterlife. They need increased theological teaching that does not limit their world view but rather challenges and expands it.

The growth of the church in China is part of a much broader search for meaning in a society undergoing rapid social change. Increasing religious freedom has undoubtedly helped in the growth of the church. The question now remains what Christians will do with that increased freedom. Whilst reform will undoubtedly propel rural China forward there is an increasing call for and arguably space for civil society. The extent to which rural churches can contribute to and shape civil society remains to be seen.

The rural church is dynamic and growing and individual conversion narratives are compelling and inspiring. The church is rife with division and challenges are mounting but the potential is exciting. More needs to be done to understand the phenomena but also to support the church in this time of transition. Important questions need to be asked about the wider social impact of such a dynamic, growing church on Chinese society, indeed on the world at large.

We need to move away from urban interpretations of rural situations and ask our questions directly to those concerned. There may be confusion, there may be disagreement but there will be passion and commitment, and genuine attempts at dialogue will break down barriers and increase our understanding.

In approaching China, it is always necessary to keep open minds and hearts, freeing ourselves to listen, so as to understand in new ways. It is necessary to go beyond the headlines and sound bites of the media. The lived reality for many Chinese Christians today is a far cry from what is extrapolated from given events or incidents by the media or those with their own agendas... Standing in solidarity with China's Christians means embarking on a spiritual voyage into their lives and their faith experiences; risking to share all that they have suffered and continue to suffer with enduring patience, vibrant hope, and courage.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Janet Carroll, "Christianity in China: its promise and potential", *The Cresset*, Michaelmas 2005, p27