

Grassroots Christians share about their churches:

1. My church is the only one in the area which was directly founded by foreign missionaries. It was established in the 1930s by British missionaries and is in an old historic town, in what is now a rather dilapidated building. We have been told that we need to get a new building but many people, especially the older believers, are happy worshipping here because we know that there has been prayer and worship going on here for many years, and that makes it a special place. From the outside of the building I have to be honest - the building does not look great. The building is made from grey brick, and is in quite a traditional in style, which some visiting Chinese Christians are surprised by because it does not really look like a church at all from the outside. There is a small chapel downstairs and several larger meeting rooms up a small wooden staircase on the first floor. The rooms are used for training classes during the week when there are trainers here who are available to give classes. Many of these training programmes are run by local preachers and ministers but sometimes we get people coming to teach us from further a-field. Last year we had a young couple from Wenzhou come and teach us. They were on their honeymoon and everyone was very touched that they wanted to use their special time to come and teach us. The upstairs meeting rooms are also used on a weekly basis when the chapel is too busy on a Sunday. The sermon is delivered through a video link. It can get a little noisy upstairs. Average attendance for services on a Sunday is between 300-400 people, so even with the additional rooms space is cramped. During the week we have several meetings for Bible studies and prayer meetings. Attendance at mid-week prayer meetings is around 50, and small group attendance is very high with Bible study groups meeting either in the church or at private homes. In the near future we hope that the church will be able to purchase some land and build a new church. Negotiations for this have been underway for a couple of years but there seems to be little advance. The congregation is mostly elderly, and some of them do not want to move – they think it is a waste of money because we already have a building but the local officials say it is not safe and we need new premises. Some of the younger members would like a new church to worship in, partly because the old one is too small but also because they want the church to grow and feel that if there was space there is not much money to do this. Most of the locals are farmers, although some people make money as tour guides but that work is very seasonal. We have very few young people attending church.

2

You can find the church is at the top of a small hill. It is a small two storey brick building, with a main church hall, a small kitchen and some accommodation to the side for the minister and her family. Inside the church there are rows of wooden pews, with a centre aisle, and at the front a small stage with a red velvet curtain with a huge metal character “ai” (love) in gold. There is a big cross on the roof of the church so everyone knows it is the church. Many of the villagers are Christians and we built the church ourselves. We carried the bricks up the hill ourselves and did all the building work ourselves, from digging the foundations to placing the cross on the roof. We built it bit by bit, paying for what we could afford to pay for and praying that we would be able to continue the next bit. It was a time of real blessing. When we started out we had absolutely no money, but we were given the land, dug the foundations and prayed hard that we would be able to build a church and just 4 years later the church was finished. We are very proud of it. The church was finished in 2001 and we have worshipped here ever since. Since we have had a church building to meet in the

church has grown significantly. We have one service every Sunday and then we all eat lunch together after the service. During the week some of us meet for prayer. The minister who leads our church is originally from Wenzhou and there are many of her old friends who come and visit us and teach us. She was sent to the village during the Cultural Revolution from Wenzhou and has remained there ever since.¹ At first she and her mother were the only Christians in the village but the church has now grown to just under 80 people. Our village is very small – we only have one small shop which is a room in the front of one believer's house but there is a market in the nearby town where most people go to both sell and buy goods. The church recently purchased an electric organ and this has meant that we can hold a number of events at church. All of our meetings are open to all of the villagers, and since we got the organ singing practice and musical performances have been very popular.

3

Our church is a large, single storey building in the middle of the village, just by the side of the main road going through the village. You can tell it is the church because it has a large red cross on the roof and the Chinese character “*ai*” (love) painted above the front door. The congregation was originally set up by a local group of Christians in 1987. Although there were some foreign missionaries who worked in the area a long time ago the first real Christians who lived here came to faith as a result of a healing which took place during a preacher's visit. He came from neighbouring Henan province. After the man in the village had been a healed people immediately believed and those first few Christians started to gather at the healed man's home. As numbers grew they moved to the current building which was opened in 1993. Most of the villagers are farmers. We grow lots of things but our potatoes are famous! We could not afford to pay ministers and so the evangelists who lead the church work as farmers during the day and then teach the bible at night. If people come from outside the village to teach us then we pay them in the food that we grow. We have a large church building and we try and use it for training meetings during the holidays. These discipleship training meetings are open to others from surrounding areas. We hold these meetings around harvest time and festivals to take advantage of more people being around. On most Sundays the congregation is around 100 people. There are more members than this but many of them are migrant workers, only returning home for the Chinese New Year, and sometimes other holidays such as National Day. They like to attend the training programmes when they are back. There is no Sunday school but some grandparents do bring very young children in their care with them. There is no heating in the church [*not unusual in the area*] but the back row of the church is lined with wooden barrels. These have a false floor in them, under which is placed an enamel bowl of burning coals which provides heat. This is good for the old people so they can come to the church and keep warm. The church is led by a group of evangelists but most of the Sunday services are led by a retired male volunteer. He used to be a teacher and has preached at the church since its opening. There are 4-5 other committed volunteer workers who preach and evangelise in the local area. These are all men.

¹ Wenzhou has been called the “Jerusalem” of China because of the unusually high proportion of Christians it has. It is a very prosperous town, in part due to the early adoption of a market economy plan based on Singaporean but also due to the entrepreneurial spirit of its citizens. Christian business people see it as their duty to take the gospel message with them as they travel around China, many spending equal time evangelising as doing business.

4

My church was established in the mid 1990s and is a small, white, tiled building surrounded by fields, which are the main source of income for the village. The church has a large bell tower and every hour, on the hour, the bells chime. You can hear them throughout the village. At the front of the church there are two large doors which lead into the main church hall. A side staircase can be found through the main door of the church, which leads to a mezzanine level and another one through doors at the back of the church which leads to a series of small rooms. These rooms are used as offices for the church, and are also used for evangelist and volunteer training. There is also a room and kitchen used by the church caretaker, a Christian brother who was unable to find employment elsewhere following an accident in a local factory. He was homeless and he was taken in by the church, after the church had been broken into, so that he could look after the place. He has been a Christian for many years. Sometimes we have visiting preachers come and teach us and when they come one of the meeting rooms doubles up as a bedroom for them. On a typical Sunday there are between 90 and 100 believers at the church. The church has a small team of volunteers which are active evangelists in the local area.

5

I think that my church is the most beautiful church in China. It is on a little island, and is in the middle of an orange grove. People from outside the village need to row a boat to get here, and it is very peaceful. The church is at the centre of the community and most of the villagers belong to the church. The first Christians in our village were Christians from Henan province, who came to share the gospel with us. As the church grew we needed our own place to worship and so we chose the most peaceful place here in the middle of the orange trees and built the church. The whole building was paid for by local Christians. The church is led by a team of 3 lay evangelists, 2 women and 1 man. Around 80 people attend worship on a Sunday and many families are Christian families. There are more Christians in the village than that but numbers are dropping because of the number of people who are leaving the village to go and find work in the city.

1

Our church has a long history. In 1872 foreign missionaries converted the first 2 Chinese to Christianity and a year later they opened a school for girls. In 1911 the school moved and the building became used as a church. A new, large church primary school was built adjacent to it. By 1955 there were 61 Christians, and the minister was a local Chinese. During the Cultural Revolution the church was closed down but the old school headmaster who was a good teacher and an earnest Christian led meetings for Christians in a local believer's home. When the electricity power plant relocated to the village the church and all the buildings were bought out, as everything was demolished so the plant could be built. The church moved to its current location in 1992, soon after the old church was demolished. We outgrew that building and moved into the new building last year. There are now over 600 Christians who regularly worship at our church. In addition to the regular Sunday services there are several small home group meetings which take place in people's homes. The church is used as the central meeting point for many of the smaller rural meeting points so there are often meetings in the church or in other peoples houses or even in the other meeting points related to joint ministry and training. There is so much poverty in our area, and so many needs. If we can work together we can make a real difference to our local community.

2

Christians here first started meeting in 1983 as a small group in old Christian sister's house. The group grew so large that in 1990 there were over 30 regular members and so they sought a more permanent place to worship. We raised over 20,000 yuan and managed to build a meeting point on a piece of land. The building was quite large but became unsafe because of the number of people regularly coming to meet there and so we were forced to look for another location. In 2003 we found a basement room for rent. It had been flooded and no-one else wanted it. Even though no-one else wanted it, and we offered good money it was still hard to get it. We received a great deal of opposition from local retired cadres who thought that the room, which was in the basement of an entertainment centre, was public space and should not be used for religious purposes. Despite this the local officials in the religious affairs office were receptive and they talked to the landlord. Finally they agreed and we signed a 5 year contract allowing us access and use of the room. During this time the number of regular worshippers grew to over 200. The lease is soon coming to an end and so we have been looking for a new church. Ideally we would like to purchase some land and build our own permanent place but it is not easy. We have managed to lose several pieces of land, for a number of reasons. Some people on our committee are scared about committing so much money to the project and so we have been slow at making decisions. We don't have much money and so of course that limits our options also. Recently we have also lost land because someone has come in after us and offered more money so we have lost out. Right now we are looking at a piece of land not far from here. It was an old cow shed, which has recently been used as a community dump. Of course no one else really wants it but if we get it then we plan to flatten the land and knock down the existing wooden structure. Land is so hard to get these days and there are issues about the land being sold to the church and so a Christian businessman has said he is willing to purchase the land as an individual and then hand over the deeds to the church. This will take time to go through the various procedures and there is no guarantee that the church will be able to be built there. The church is in a run down piece of town, with many closed down factories, but it is precisely this location that we want to be in because we feel that being here we can best serve the local population.

3

The church started here in 1910 initially under the influence of foreign missionaries and then later through the leadership of Chinese Christians. Historically the church here was active in a number of things particularly in healthcare and education. At first the church opened a small village school, and later it opened a small clinic which grew into a well respected hospital servicing a number of villages. The church grew in influence until 1957 when the church minister died and no-one was able to lead things forward. The church property was confiscated during the Cultural Revolution and it was turned into a factory. During the Cultural Revolution some Christians still gathered in secret to worship privately together. In the 1980s when the Reform era began we tried to get the original church property returned to us but we were not successful. In 1989 some overseas Chinese Christians who used to be from our village heard that we had nowhere to worship and provided funding for a new church building to be established. The new building opened in 1990. The church is now run by a young female evangelist. For a number of years she worked in Shenzhen as a migrant worker but she returned home a few years ago and has been working for the church ever since. She has been to a bible school and is hoping to go to seminary soon. The church is currently at around 140 people and has a thriving youth and children's work. Because of her

experience as a migrant worker many young people who are planning to go to the cities for work come and ask her advice and so there is a big youth group which attracts many Christian and non-Christian people.

4

Our church is about 25 years old and started when a number of Christians who had been working in other cities returned home and started worshipping together. After a few years the church had grown to just under 20 members and met regularly in the home of a returned worker. She led the church at that time. As the group was growing so fast one of the regular members applied and then got a place at Fuzhou seminary. Others went to a nearby city church for short term evangelistic outreach training. These courses were helpful in giving them good teaching but also in sharing things with other Christians there who they studied alongside. It was through these friendships with Christians in the city church that we were able to secure a piece of land and build a church. We could not afford our own place and in the end the building was financed both by local believers and by the city church who helped enormously. The church is a 2 storey building, with accommodation for the evangelist who leads the church. It was completed in 1997. There are currently 128 people worshipping regularly at the church. The church is located close to a railway hub, and this location is seen as good to evangelise – there are always lots of people coming and going! There are also a number of retired railway workers living nearby and so the church puts on activities specifically geared towards them. This is one of the important ways that the church is growing.