

Rural churches – conversion stories

These testimonies of rural Chinese Christians give a flavour of the faith stories, the commitment and joy of Chinese Christianity as well as some of the issues faced by rural Chinese:

- **Mr Fu** - 19 year old college student
Although having Christian parents, it was the influence of a school teacher which helped him find his faith.
- **Mr Jiang**, 47 year old worker and evangelist
A chance encounter with an old friend, led him to attend Christian meetings.
- **Mr Meng**, 37 year old farmer and church worker
As a child he went to church with his grandmother and was healed through prayer.
- **Mr Liu**, 43 year old doctor (surgeon)
He started attending church thanks to a Christian colleague and was later converted after believing in Christ's resurrection.
- **Mrs Bai**, 24 year old tour guide
After being invited to church by a stranger, during her first visit she was overwhelmed by a feeling of peace.
- **Mrs Ding**, 55 year old retired worker and church volunteer
Her mother and grandmother were Christians, and her son was healed over time through prayer.
- **Mrs En**, 33 year old shop worker
She had Christian parents and, at 18, started studying hymns and realised she was sinful.
- **Mrs Gui**, 47 year old farmer
She initially went to church for the music and one day was so moved by a song that she invited Jesus into her life.
- **Mrs Kang**, 63 years old factory owner and Party member
Words from a Muslim tour guide while on holiday prompted her to become a Christian.
- **Mrs Lai**, 57 year old retired dancer
She went to church and was baptised after having been taught a heavenly dance by angels in a dream.
- **Mrs Liao**, 47 years old and unemployed
She was drawn to church by local Christians praying for her and was healed of cancer.

Mr Fu, 19 year old college student

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

My parents are both Christians and wanted me to become a Christian too. This is usual for parents who believe but in my case it was something special too because my father had cancer and knew that he was dying. For him it was important that he knew that I would be joining him in heaven.

I felt torn. I had been taught at school that all religious belief was just superstition, that only uneducated people believed and that with the right kind of education we would see it for the fakery it was. I loved my parents, but they had not had a good education and, although I knew that their faith was very meaningful to them, I just struggled to believe myself.

My parents, especially my father, would ask me all the time if I would go to church with them and if I would believe. I said nothing but inside my heart ached. I had no one to talk to about it all. I was at boarding school and none of my dormitory mates understood. They said I should just believe to make my father happy, but it did not feel right.

Just at this time a new teacher came to the school. It was his first job, but he was very good and spent a lot of time with the students. He became very popular very quickly and was very kind to me, encouraging me and taking time with me, where other teachers just shouted. He seemed different and everyone said so.

After a few months we realised that he was a Christian. Some people laughed about it behind his back, but for me it was amazing. I had never met a young, educated person who believed before. It made my heart race. I don't know how we found out about his faith but although he never raised the issue in class he also never denied it or tried to hide it when we asked him about it.

One day I was called home because my father was very sick and when I came back to school he asked me how I was. We talked and I was able to tell him about my concerns. Should I become a Christian to please my father? It was what a good son should do. He smiled and said that it was an important decision to make, that it was something that shouldn't be looked on lightly. He gave me a copy of an English-Chinese Bible and told me to read it for myself and to see what I thought. He did not press me to be a Christian like all the others did. In fact the opposite, he said it was my decision and that had a big impact on me.

For the first time I read the Bible because I wanted to. It was interesting reading part of it in Chinese and then seeing the English written next to it. Sometimes I would go to church, and slowly I realised that there was truth in the message.

I would occasionally talk to my teacher about what I read in the Bible because it was not always easy to understand. He told me to read the parable of the prodigal son. I felt like it had been written for me. I became a Christian after reading it, quite peacefully. Nothing special, nothing exciting, just slowly and quietly. Suddenly I simply believed.

I went to church with my parents and then said that I wanted to be baptised. Of course I am pleased that I have made my father happy but I am even more pleased to have found peace and truth. I don't know what will happen in the future. I have to take my exams this summer. Maybe I will pass, maybe not, but I feel peace that God is in control of my future. My teacher was sent as a messenger from God I know that I can trust God to protect me and my family.

How are you involved in the church?

When I am at home I go. There is no church near my school and we have class on Sunday so it is not possible to go. But I can read my Bible and pray.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth/decline?

I am not sure. God touches people differently. Some believe quickly, others like me slowly.

Mr Jiang, 47 year old worker and evangelist

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I have recently come back from the city. I was working there in a number of different short term jobs. I did painting and decorating and construction. Anything that I could get a days work for I would do. Sometimes I would find work for a few weeks at a time. That was best but some of the companies were bad. They required you to give them a deposit and then at the end of the job they not only don't pay you your money back but they also don't pay your wages. It is terrible. Someone had warned me but I thought that they were after my job and so I ignored them. I learnt the hard way.

I did not find it easy in the city. On top of everything I really missed home and knew that there were so many people dependant on me. If I did not get work I could not eat, but also I would have very little to send home at the end of the month. There was a lot of pressure.

Things had been so much easier here in the past. I had worked at the large paper mill. The pay was not good and the hours were long but there was a real community feel and we all felt safe. Those days are long gone.

When I lost my job I think that is when I started to think about life and what it meant. I had just existed before, going from one day to the next, not really thinking much about things. But now life is suddenly very different. It is the first time that I have had to fend for myself and have others dependant on me.

I made some friends in the city but I was lonely. I missed my old comrades and family. My wife is illiterate and we had no telephone at home and so it was hard to keep in touch. There is one retired teacher back home who makes money from writing and reading letters to people and so we would use him as an intermediary but it is hard to write what is on your heart to someone you love when you know someone else has to read it first!

Sometimes I got lonely, and after some time away from home and after a terrible week, I would sometimes visit prostitutes. I would drink and these things would comfort me and make me forget. It was like I was a different person. Some of the sites I worked on were dangerous and accidents were frequent. I did not want to think about it too much.

One day I bumped into an old hometown friend. We agreed to meet up again later in the week and the other man shared how he had become a Christian and had been supported by the local church. He invited me to go to a meeting. To be honest I wasn't interested in religion but I did want to see my old hometown friend again. When I attended I got free food and that encouraged me to go back again.

To my surprise I found that I enjoyed the evenings and that it was more than just something to fill my time with. Other distractions left me feeling empty. These meetings left me wanting to think more and to be with people, not stay on my own. I felt convinced that my life had taken a turn for the worse and knew there were things I had done that I needed to stop and so I prayed to God for forgiveness. That moment changed things and I realised that some things had to change.

After about 10 months, I was home for Spring Festival when the local church asked me to come back and to work for them. It would mean that I had to stop my dreams of making money but I realised that with God in my life money and other pleasures meant much less to me. I felt that God had set me free and that this was his will, an opportunity to be at home with my family and to serve Him. Being away from home was not good. My son was misbehaving and my wife and I were like strangers. We loved each other but being apart was so hard to communicate. I was open to her about everything that had happened and told her that I felt God was calling me back home to be with her. She was hurt but was forgiving and so we decided that I would stay.

When I said yes to working for the church, a local Christian I had not known before offered me some work in a small local business, which helped to support the family. The pay was not high, but life was more stable than in the city and I knew that this was God blessing my decision to come home and to serve the church, so I did it with all my heart. I now spend a lot of his time preaching and evangelising.

Many people are going to the city to work but I tell them to be careful it is not easy. They can be cheated out of their life savings. No-one can be trusted. And there are temptations which are not good. I tell people that, but I know that people have to go and so I pray for them and when they come back at Spring Festival and for the national day holiday we have special training programmes to help them.

It is good for them to be prepared and to share the gospel with others when they are in the city, like my friend did for me. He is still in the city now. God is blessing him there. People know that I have changed and that it is God who has changed me and that is a powerful witness. My relationship with my wife is good and I am enjoying life back in the village.

How are you involved in the church?

Evangelism and preaching. Work as volunteer lay worker, but also as evangelist which involves work in this church and in others.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth/decline?

Because God loves the Chinese. He has heard the prayers of the brothers and sisters and is answering them.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

All the changes I have talked about. The paper mill has closed down as have other businesses. The concrete factory is the only one still doing good business but it is hard to get a job there – and it is dirty work. There are new businesses in the towns but there are workers needed in the fields too. Farming and church work. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

People are looking for something but they are not sure what. They think it is love and go from person to person searching for it but it is not that kind of love they need. They need the love of God, that is what is missing in peoples lives.

Mr Meng, 37 year old farmer and church worker

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I became a Christian in my teens. My parents died when I was a young child and I was looked after by my grandmother. She was wonderful and kind but we were very poor. We grew some vegetables and would sell them in the market. But the vegetables were not very good and so we only earned a few fen for them. I had to drop out of school because we had no money but I learned to do other things at home and in the fields. I worked hard.

As a child I used to have one leg shorter than another and was told that I would have to use a crutch when I was an adult. I could walk OK but I limped and I was told that it was only going to get worse. I went to church with my grandmother and the people in the church prayed for me. They prayed many times, but one day there was a special prayer meeting and I felt something like warm water flow from my back down my leg. It was strange and at first I thought maybe it was water but it was not wet. I was not at all uncomfortable but I was very conscious of it. It got warmer and warmer but not hot. It was only down my bad leg. My leg grew.

I know that it sounds strange and many people don't believe me but those who know me from my old village know that it is true. Look. Now my legs are both the same length and I have never had to use a crutch. I was healed because of those prayers and I will never doubt God because I know what He has done.

It was not that day that I had become a Christian though. I would have said that I was a Christian before but it was on that day that I realised how much God loved me and what it really meant to be a Christian. It helps me in difficult times to know that God healed me and is with me.

At 15 my grandmother died and I was left on my own. I had to look after myself. My life was hard but so were the lives of most people in my village. I kept on going to church and then was asked to work as a volunteer in the church. I loved the work. There was a lot to do, and I would preach in the villages and in the homes of brothers and sisters. It was good work.

God blessed me with a room at the church and also with food that the believers would cook for me. I did this for a number of years and then went on a training course in the city. There I met a young nurse who was also in the same class as me. We fell in love. For me it was love at first sight. I don't know why she fell in love with me. I was so poor and had nothing to offer her, but she has a good heart and God blessed me with her love. God has blessed me so much since becoming a Christian.

How are you involved in the church?

I work as an evangelist in the church. I used to work also as a farmer but the church is wanting to employ me full time so I can leave that work behind.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth?

There are many reasons why the church is growing. Firstly it is because God loves the Chinese people so much, especially people in rural China. We may be poor but he blesses us a lot. Many people used to become Christians because they were healed but now many people come to church because of the evangelism that a church does. People are invited to church and they come and once they hear the word of God being preached they become Christians themselves.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

There have been many changes. Because of the Beijing Olympics the world is looking at China. That makes a big difference, not just in Beijing but throughout China. Locally people are much better off than they were 10 or 20 years ago. But although there are more things available and more choices about things, things are in some ways getting harder for people in the countryside. It is expensive to pay for school or for medical care but the government is helping us. We don't have to pay the same level of taxes as before. Praise God!

Has this affected people's beliefs?

Of course! People are much more willing to look at faith now, and many people are coming to church. In some villages people are still very against the church. They are superstitious and think we will anger the local folk Gods, bringing bad luck on the village. These people believe in folk religions and think that we are trying to break tradition but that is not true. We are trying to set people free. The Bible says "the truth will set you free". Many people – like me – know that this is real and that our lives are now better as a result of becoming a Christian.

Mr Liu, 43 year old doctor (surgeon)

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

My story is probably a little different from others. I had a colleague who was a Christian. Everyone knew that she was a Christian but at that time I did not know what it meant. I asked her what she did as a Christian and what she believed and she invited me to come along to the church to see for myself.

I came along with her, to the youth group on a Friday night, not really knowing what to expect or what kind of people I would be meeting there. I very much enjoyed listening to the stories that were told and discussed and to the songs that were sung. I didn't really understand much at first but I enjoyed it and continued going along, not every week but regularly.

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 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 mahjong and cards all the time and was severely in debt. I was listening 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 as the Son of God after that, that they would risk dying for him. They knew he was true, that all he had said was true and for them it was worth risking everything for.

Suddenly, I realised 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. In 1997, when I started coming along to the youth group, I would have said that I had accepted that there was a Christ but it was only 2 years later that I truly believed and received him into my life.

Things changed but I was a [Communist] Party member and things were complicated and to become baptised was something that would not be acceptable by my work unit. It would have meant big trouble in my work life and for my family, especially as my wife works at the same place as me.

In 2001, I was asked to go to Hangzhou for a 6 month period for work. I realised that it would be possible for me to be baptised at a church there and for it to have little repercussion on my work life. While I was in Hangzhou, I went to a young peoples group and signed up for a 1 month baptism class. The classes were good preparation but what was interesting was what happened after I was baptised. It was like I was a new person.

My belief was totally different after the baptism. I was totally immersed and as I came out I felt like a new person. I had had no purpose before. All of my energy had been spent on gambling but I gave up gambling and it made a big impression on everyone. Suddenly there was no interest there at all for me. I could hear the clatter of mah-jong tiles but was not interested in playing, even for fun. Also I had smoked too much but now stopped that too.

Despite these changes, I felt that I was just an average Christian and that I would just attend church and do what was necessary to help out when asked. Slowly this change has continued.

Some quite large changes happened last year. I needed a lung operation. It should have been pretty standard and should have not been a complicated thing. Many people from church were praying for me before I went into hospital and I was not overly concerned. I had a good surgeon from Shanghai come and do the operation. The trouble was it did not go as well as expected and I was bedridden for 3 months.

It was the first time in my life that I could not do anything. But God used the time well. I had time to read the Bible and to think about my life. I realised how my faith was everything to me. That meant that I had to be honest about my faith in everything. I had to tell people that I was a Christian and not keep it quiet. Once I had recovered fully, I went to see my boss to say that I was a baptised Christian. He thought I was mad to say it and said that if I insisted on having faith then that was fine, but I needed to keep quiet about it and just go on work as before. But I said that I could not do that because I was a Party member and so needed to be clear. Reluctantly he told me to speak to the Party secretary, which I did.

Lots of people at the hospital know that I am a Christian and are amazed that I have changed so much. Someone came back to the hospital after having been away for a couple of years and they said that I had changed so much that they barely recognised me. She meant it as a compliment, but there have been some hard things as a result of becoming a Christian.

My wife is not a Christian yet, and she feels I spend too much time at church and not enough time trying to earn bonuses from overtime at work. We can argue a lot about it. I have invited her to come to church with me, but she doesn't want to come.

Compared to the gambling and debt, it is not a big problem, but it makes me sad that there is still tension between us. I was going to become even more involved in church work but my minister and church elders told me that my duty had to be to my family also, and they are right. So I spend time between the church, my family and my work. Things can be very busy but I feel very blessed.

How are you involved in the church?

I am a part time volunteer. Last year I decided to do more with the church, but wife who is not a Christian is feeling left out. As such, after discussion with a visiting minister, I will now be putting family at the centre and working at church when I have time. I am involved in running a young peoples' group on a Friday night, I sing in the choir when people are needed to make up the numbers. I am a Sunday school teacher (for middle school students, although I have no prior teaching experience, or much experience with that age group). I would like to continue with all these activities.

What reasons do you think there are for local church growth/deline?

The numbers change because of people's working patterns and because of duties and responsibilities at home etc. Not everyone is able to get to church every week, but this does not mean that they do not want to come. Equally some people come to church to see their friends or to see what the church is like and they have not yet believed.

We have lots of people coming to the church to find out what it is like and many say that they would like to join. This is a big challenge to us as we only have one minister and we do not have enough lay workers to follow up each individual. Sometimes the lay workers we have are not able to come to church because we have jobs outside of the church. We do not have the time to follow up on everything and make sure that newcomers are OK and see if they would like to come back again the following week.

Personal contact and welcome is very important in China but we need to be careful because, of course, there are also some people who do not like it if we call them up. They either have pressure from others at home to not attend or they feel pressured by us into coming back and then feel badly towards the church. We do not want that to happen.

Many young people are coming to church because they have been asked along by their friends. I help out with the youth group and can see that for many they come just because they are interested or because they think that they might see a foreigner if they come to church. Some are interested in coming to the youth group but not to coming to church on a Sunday. This often changes over time and we let them take time to come. If they are interested in coming then we encourage them to do so, if they are not then we leave them to come in their own time.

Some young people come because they have family members who are believers and they want to see what it is like for themselves. They are often surprised as it is very different in the city to their small churches at home. There are lots of things that and activities that are on and they enjoy that.

What changes have there been in the local society in recent years?

There have been many changes. Lots of people are moving to the larger cities or the coastal areas for work. Things are less stable than in the past. The last 18 months there have been several closures of factories and that has made people very worried about their own job security.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

It has made them question what they can rely on and have made things more unstable. There are more people coming to church but there are also more people going to temples. I think that people who go to temples are not always believers though – they are superstitious and go there to get good fortune.

Many people like me have had their faith in the Party shaken as it is not able to provide all the things that it used to. I joined the Party because I was committed to changing things but things have become very corrupt. I myself did wrong – wasting my time and energies on things that were not helpful. Now there is little reliable in the world and so people are turning to the church and to the Bible to get answers.

Mrs Bai, 24 year old tour guide

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I am a tour guide and was at a temple with a group one day. I have a young baby and have not found it so easy since she was born. My husband works away from home and although I have help from my mother-in-law and my mother, it is hard knowing what to do all the time.

My daughter was not very well in the first few months and although she was getting stronger I was still worried about her. So I bought some incense sticks and made an offering at the temple for her health and for our family and for me.

I went to burn the incense sticks 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, but he spoke to me perfectly clearly. 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.

Of course, now I know that that is the church but I did not know that at the time. I needed to rejoin the group and he disappeared in the crowd, but I was curious and so the first day that I was free I went to look for his house. Like he said, it was at the end of the street with a red cross on the roof. You could hardly miss it but I had never noticed it before.

There were quite a few people there and so I walked in and immediately a feeling of peace came over me. I couldn't believe it. I asked one of the ladies who's house this was and she said it was the church. I felt overwhelmed and burst into tears. I didn't know what had come over me but this peaceful feeling made something happen inside me. I did feel like I was somewhere safe and suddenly lots of my troubles, concerns and thoughts of my wrong-doings were filling my mind and I just cried and cried.

The lady was nice. She was accepting and sat and prayed with me. As she prayed, I felt better and a deep peace filled me. I did not want to leave. I came back on Sunday and went to a class that they said was for seekers – people trying to understand things about life - and very soon realised that I believed in the God and Jesus that they were talking about and wanted to be a Christian.

Later I realised that this is Jesus' home and that it was Jesus who spoke to me. I think that when I came in to the church my spirit was stirred. I was doing so many things that were not right. I was always arguing with my mother-in-law. I did not like her and got angry at the way she did things with my daughter. She always seemed to be meddling, and she made things difficult with me and my husband.

Now I love her very much and that is God's grace. His love is different from anything that I have ever experienced before. Some friends in church have trouble since they became a Christian but not me. My family are very pleased because they think that I have become a nicer person. I am more patient and hard-working and am a good mother. I am a better wife but, most importantly, a better daughter in law.

My mother-in-law comes with me to church now and she enjoys it also. She spends a lot of her time here during the day as she is retired. I think that is good because she looks after my daughter and that means that my daughter is spending time in a peaceful place. I hope that she will be a good Christian when she grows up.

I worry about how to teach her things about Jesus and pray for her all the time. It is funny how I was wanting to pray for her but went to the wrong place, and those prayers made me find the true faith. At night when she cannot sleep, I sing hymns and worship songs to her and she falls asleep very quickly. I know as she is sleeping that she feels the same peace I do.

How are you involved in the church?

If I am not working then I come to church. I often have to work at weekends because that is when groups come, but our minister has assured me that that is OK. My mother-in-law tells me what the sermon was about and we read the Bible together at home. I pray all the time. When I am free, I go to the church. I sometimes go to the young people's group. That is a nice group and the people are very energetic. It is good fun and we learn more about the Bible together, and can share about one another's lives.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth/decline of the church?

God is blessing the church in China that is why it is growing. People are coming to the church like me to seek peace, to find help to look after their families and to lead good lives. There is not much help and guidance elsewhere. You don't know who to trust. At church you can trust the other brothers and sisters.

When people share their testimonies they say they are coming to church because they have read the Bible, or because they have been healed, or because they were asked to come by someone and once they came they felt convicted of the truth.

It is amazing how many different people are in the church. I haven't met anyone else who had Jesus tell them to go to church like me, but I would never have read the Bible and no-one would have invited me because I did not have any Christian friends then.

Mrs Ding, 55 year old retired worker and volunteer in the church

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I was born here and have always lived here. My mother became a Christian in the 1950s. My grandmother led my mother to believe in God and my mother in turn asked me to become a Christian. They kept their faith going during the Cultural Revolution even when things were really bad. They prayed and hoped that the churches would be able to open again and now they are open. They were not able to go to church at that time but they would pray secretly together. It is the faith of such people that have helped the church grow.

After the churches first re-opened my son was ill with a disease affecting his feet, so my mother asked me to go to church with my grandmother so that we could pray for him. There were a lot of people in the church and a minister was there. It was quite unusual in those days to have a minister present because there were so few of them, but because he was there we prayed for healing. Slowly over time he did get better.

The church has changed a lot since those early days. There are many more believers now and, even though many Christians left their hometown to try and find work, some are coming back. Their children want to go to college, and parents need to help them. They come to church to pray for them and to try and bring their concerns to God. We all know that we can not do anything without God's will or help.

I go to church and my mother is regularly at church, on Sundays and during the week. She leads a small group which organises things in the church. Sometimes I find things are so busy and I am tempted not to go to church, but my mum is adamant that I come every week. She tells me not to do my housework at the weekend. I used to always do the laundry at the weekend but she tells me that I need to rearrange things and make it a priority to go to church with her.

She can remember clearly what it was like to not be able to go to church. So for her meeting together with other Christians is really, really important, not just as a time to praise God – we can do that at any time – but to show the government officials and other people in society that we still think that this is an important thing to do. More important than doing our washing and other responsibilities!

During the cultural revolution they used to say that we would grow out of our faith, or that money or other things would tempt us away. Many people still think that. My mother believes that we need to go to church to praise God and to show them that nothing else is as important. I know what she is saying. I go with her because I know that, if she and others had not been faithful during the Cultural Revolution, then we

would not have a church today. I know that going to church and being part of a community of faith is important. It is how I and many others came to faith.

How has being a Christian changed your life?

Before I was a Christian, I always getting angry about little things. Now it is different. My husband doesn't pray and doesn't make much money, so I pray for him. Many people pray for him because he could not control himself with drinking. When he drinks he always yells at me and our son. Before, I would quarrel with him about his drinking. My son and daughter-in-law rarely come by our home because of his constant shouting and swearing. He is 57 and when he is 60 he will be able to retire and will get his pension. He cannot change. He has come to church, he accepts Jesus but he refuses to pray. The minister comes to my house and I pass by the church almost every day.

We are poor and many people in this area have lost their jobs. There are few business opportunities. All the work units are in a similar position. I was made redundant in 1996. People don't have jobs but they still have to find a way to live. Now even the young cannot find work and many of them are gambling. They have nothing and hope that they can win something for their families. But instead they lose even what little they have and their situation is desperate.

We don't go to the temple but many others go for their fortune. Here only a tiny proportion of the population are Christian. Other people go to the temple to pray for peace. But they don't realise that true peace comes from God. God gives peace and happiness.

How are you involved in the church?

At first I would go to Sunday services and sometimes go to prayer meetings, but I was not active like my mother. I thought I had too much to do and would try and earn money, but my husband squandered it. I was wasting my time and money. Now I help out at the church on a daily basis. I don't earn anything but I am doing something worthwhile. The church is really like a family to me. It is like a second home. I am at peace here and so want to spend my time here.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth?

Because of people like my mother who prayed persistently during the Cultural Revolution. They were persecuted and carried the Cross of Christ for many years but they never gave up. God is blessing China now because of those people. Also we are poor, and so God loves us and is answering our prayers.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

There have been so many changes. The village used to be quite busy but now many people go outside for work. It is still a nice place to live though. The air is clean and we have good land which is easy to farm. Our tea and oranges are famous. But there is less community spirit than there used to be. We used to know everyone, now people come and go. You do not know if you have not seen someone because they are sick or because they have gone away for work.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

Of course, everything is hard now, even places at school and college are hard to come by. People need money for everything and so good health and luck are important. People go to fortune tellers, temples and the church to find help. But the others are a waste of money and cheat you. Peace only comes from God. The church is the place where people can be helped.

Mrs En, 33 year old shop worker

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I grew up in a rural area. I never had a faith as a young person but when I was 18 slowly I started to think about things. My parents are both Christian and go to church. At that time I studied hymns and realised that I was sinful. I donated some money to the church. I had read that I should tithe 10 per cent of my income. I thought if I did that then I would be blessed. I had little time to go to church.

Now I come to church because I want to and I have learnt a lot from the sermons. For example, when you tell people things they are often going to gossip about it with someone else, but when you tell something to God you can really get it off your chest. It will remain with him in confidence.

In the past, I was easily hurt by things people said or did, but not now. If I didn't have faith I would hate some people for what they have said, but my heart has been changed.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth?

Many reasons. We are freer now to believe. Also, there are churches which are open. Before, there simply were none. I think that people believe because they see the church doing good work. Just today someone came to the church because they had heard of a friend sick in hospital who had been cared for by some Christians. They were moved that strangers had helped out their friend at a time of need and came to see what the church was all about.

What changes have there been in the local society in recent years?

People are free to choose their jobs, their partners, their houses. There are many changes. Many people have been forced to take early retirement and are thinking what to do with their lives. They are still young but there is no work for them to do unless they move to another city.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

In many ways it has given people time to think about religion. But some people say if God is God and is powerful, then why did he die and then why do the poor suffer so much? It is a hard thing to answer, even for someone who calls herself a Christian.

But I find that once you know that some of your prayers have been answered, especially the unexpected ones, then you start to build trust that one day God will give you the answers to things you do not know, and until then you simply have to trust.

Mrs Gui, 47 years old farmer

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I was so bored with life and nothing I did had any meaning. I would sometimes see friends to chat and sometimes we would do some sewing to sell down the market. I make insoles for shoes. I am not able to read or write and so there is little else for me to do than to pick fruit at harvest time and sew. You can make good money at fruit picking time, but the seasons are short. We have a little bit of land but the crop is not always good. Twice we had been flooded.

I didn't have any hope for myself – I am too old and have no education. I can't do much. But I did have dreams for a good life for my daughters. I wanted them to have a different life, but I didn't know how I could help them, apart from encouraging them to go to school. School is tough. There is so much homework and I am not able to help at all. Sometimes I would drink some wine to forget all about my troubles.

One day, when I was in the market there was a huge crowd standing around a small group of people singing and playing instruments. It wasn't unusual to have traveling performers come to town – we all loved these visits. But this one was different because they did not ask for money. It was free. They were from the local church.

They came again the next day and one of the ladies asked me if I wanted to come along. I asked if they would be singing there and she said yes, they sing every week. I went along out of curiosity. I didn't think about becoming a Christian. I didn't think much about religion. But when I got there I enjoyed the singing very much.

The lady who had spoken to me in the market remembered me. She told me that there was singing practice on Friday night and I was invited to come along. It was free, and she was so nice, so I did go along. I had nothing to do in the evening and so I continued going for several months.

I liked the singing but did not understand much of what was said during the rest of the service. The Bible was not easy to follow, especially as I can't read very easily. But I liked some of the preachers and their stories, and they were so good and patient at explaining things.

One day there was a musical group from Wenzhou who came by. They were great. During one song, I was really moved. The words were brilliant, saying how life has no meaning – that we may feel the same way today – but that in fact there is hope because there is meaning with Jesus. I felt something had happened inside me and, in a moment, I went from being a spectator wanting to listen to the songs to really wanting to believe in Jesus.

At the end of the service, the visiting evangelist asked us to pray for Jesus to come into our hearts, to forgive our sins, and to fill us with love. I didn't know how to pray but I closed my eyes like he said and said the prayer. I felt so much love in my heart, it was full of love. I have been a Christian for just a few months and feel so much happier now. I do believe that we all have hope and that God will bless each and every one of us.

Mrs Kang, 63 years old factory owner and Party member

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I decided that I needed to become a Christian when I was away on holiday. It seems strange but I had been thinking about it for a long time. This was partly because I knew a local minister and had been impressed by his work, but I could never actually make that step to becoming a Christian myself. It still seemed to me to be a step backwards.

When I was away on holiday, the tour guide said that we all needed God in our lives. He was a Muslim but, the minute that he said those words, I was utterly convicted that I needed to go back home and go to the church that I had vaguely been interested in. It was the beginning of my holiday and it was an amazing thing to be away and abroad, but it was all I could do to stay there and not go home. The nice hotel, the magnificent sights, they all seemed so meaningless even though I knew I was in a beautiful place.

When I did finally get home, I went straight to see the minister to tell him what had happened and to say that I wanted to become a Christian. He was supportive, but said that I needed to go to a class to learn more before he would let me get baptised. I was mad. I thought he was doing it because I was a Party member and in the past we had disagreed about certain things.

I knew that I wanted to be a Christian and did not understand why I could not sit down with someone and learn what I needed to learn quickly. Now I know that this is what all new Christians have to do, and that it is good to take time to consider what we are doing. But at the time I felt as though I had already wasted too much time in my life and I just wanted to get on with it. I attended the class and a few months later I was baptised.

Things have changed since becoming a Christian. I feel a renewed and somewhat different responsibility towards my family and to my friends, but mostly to my workforce. It is easy to find workers now because so many people are looking for work. There is no need to provide many benefits because people will take what they are given – they are just so desperate for work. But I feel that as a Christian that is not enough. I need to provide for my workers and need to look after their families. There is too much divorce and too many children being brought up in broken families. We will have trouble in the future if this continues.

I have built new apartments for my workers. I want people to know that this factory is the best factory to work for. That it is successful in the way most people see success, that is that it is making good money, but that people want to work there because it is a place where people care. Quality products and quality workers, that is what I now want our factory to be known for.

In return for the better living conditions I expect people to give something in return. I do not want people to be drinking or to be gambling for example. Too many families are wrecked by these things. So if people want to work at my factory and live in the new apartment blocks then they need to know that there are rules that they must keep to.

I try and keep families together by offering men and women work. Many places will only offer the men work, but I want women to be able to use their skills too. God created us all equal. Families can live together and the apartments share cooking areas so that it is possible to have a real family life. It is not like it used to be in the old dormitories.

Some people have become Christian since working here and so they are able to go to church on a Sunday. Since becoming a Christian my temper has improved and I am proud that my company continues to do well despite fierce competition. This is one of many of God's blessings.

How are you involved in the Church?

I lead a small group Bible study. There are now about 15 members and most, like me, are Party members who have recently found faith. Some people do not trust us, thinking that we are not proper Christians or are wary. So it is easier that we meet together so we can be open with one another and accountable to one another in front of God. It means that we can be really honest with one another. We understand the pressures we are under and we can encourage one another to share the Gospel with as many people as we can. I think that God is making so many Party members Christian so that we can influence a new generation of people.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth/decline?

People want to see people's actions and their words match. The Church shows this and so people are interested. That was what happened to me. The minister was good and upright and, although I sometimes disagreed with him, I knew that he was hardworking and honest and that he persevered when others would give up. Some people can seem like that when you meet them for the first time, but it is not possible to keep that up over a number of years. Many Christians show people what God's love can do and this makes people want to join the church.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

There is less respect for people than there used to be. Many people waste money and many people spend time thinking about how they can make more money. Finding work is hard and finding good employees who will be loyal, and will work for a long time with you, is also hard. These things used to be guaranteed by the State – not now.

Everything is unstable but there are blessings too. There are more choices and more things to buy, and people have access to education much more so than in the past.

Things are hard for young women now. The traditional values are still expected but then there are other expectations in this new world also. I am glad I have a son and not a daughter. I would worry too much if I had a daughter.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

In some ways. Actually many people are still very traditional in their beliefs. There are lots of superstitions and people like things to be done as they have always been done. People think they are modern but actually they are not. The old beliefs are still very strong. That is why so many people go to temples now. They don't go because they believe but because it is a cultural thing to do, it reinforces their 'Chinese-ness'.

It used to be that people would say "One more Christian, one less Chinese" because Christianity was seen to be a foreign religion, but that is rarely the case now. Many people see the contribution that Christians are making to society, and see that the churches are run by the Chinese themselves, and they realise that it is a religion which suits our culture and encourages a good, healthy way of life. In that way people are much more open to hearing and living the Christian message.

Mrs Lai, 57 year old retired dancer

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I was involved in a lot of bad stuff as a youngster and had quite a wild life. I was moody and was only interested in making a name for myself. I was a dancer and was famous.

Later in life, when I retired, I was asked to choreograph a dance for a women's group at Spring Festival for a competition. As I had been a famous dancer before I was keen to do well, but it just did not seem to be coming together. No matter what I did it was just not working. I knew different moves and had some good music but it just did not work. I could not sleep properly and was very worried. My temper was getting worse and worse, and I would shout at the dancers calling them stupid.

One night I had a dream. Well, I think it was a dream but I am not sure that I was actually asleep. I felt like I was awake but what happened was like a dream, so I think I must have fallen asleep because I had been so tired.

I saw a group of angels who motioned to me to learn a dance. They did not speak but just moved their arms to show me how to move. They were bright white and I could not see their faces at all. I asked them questions but they would not speak, they just taught me the dance. It looked so beautiful and I felt so good watching them and learning from them. Sometimes I was not sure how to do the actions. But they were patient with me and slowly repeated them for me until I had mastered them.

Behind them there was a cross. It was bright red and shone brightly behind them. Everything was white except for the red cross. I knew that these were angels from God.

I wrote everything down and the next day I taught the dance to the group. It was an amazing dance and we won first prize. I have a recording of it – you can see it if you want. You will see it is not a dance that a person would teach. It is a heavenly dance. I knew that this was God who had sent his angels because they were like the angels I had heard about when I was young. I had had a Christian teacher and she told me that angels looked after Christians, keeping guard of them if there was trouble. I knew that this was from God. He wanted to look after me and to teach this dance.

I went to the church and I was baptised a year later. Now I teach dance in the church and we use dancing to take the Gospel out to the villages. There are 2 dancing troupes and we are very famous – but we are not famous for ourselves but famous for God. It is so different from seeking things for yourself.

People love to come and see us dance, and we then have people sharing the Gospel at our dances. Many people have become Christians after they have seen us dance. God has blessed us a lot.

I don't have a bad temper any more and have more time for people. I used to expect everyone to do things for me, and now I am so pleased to be able to serve others. Money and fame are not important for me now. Letting Jesus be known is the most important thing. Being a Christian has changed things so much for me.

How are you involved in the church?

I go to church each week and help with the evangelism in the rural areas when there is a chance. This usually happens at festival times like Chinese New Year and then, of course, for Christmas. I go to a prayer meeting once a week.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth?

There are many reasons. The Church is growing because of the witness of Christians in the local community.

I know a cadre who retired and became a Christian because a woman he had persecuted during the Cultural Revolution went to the hospital to visit him and take him food when he was ill. Once he had retired no one bothered with him and he lay there forgotten. He thought he was important but when he retired no-one cared about him any more.

Only this Christian woman cared for him and she was the very person who had no reason to do anything for him. She cooked for him, brought him small gifts and cleaned him when he needed to be nursed. She did it all out of love. Her witness was so strong that he became a Christian.

Other people have friends or family who are Christian and they come to church with them. Some are just curious and come to church to see what it is all about.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

There are lots of choices now but that can actually make things harder. We used to think that not having a choice was hard but I think it is harder for young people who now have too much choice. There is a big difference between the cities and the rural areas. So many people go as migrants to the cities for work, but when they are there they are cheated or looked down on. People in the rural areas are generally simpler in the way they approach life, but they can be very superstitious. Life is better in the countryside now, but it is still much harder than life in the city.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

People are not afraid to talk about faith or belief anymore. People are looking for something more to their lives than just family or money. Faith often provides an answer. The church is good at meeting people's needs.

Mrs Liao, 47 year old and unemployed

When did you become a Christian and how did it happen?

I became a Christian 3 years ago. I wasn't looking to be a Christian. Far from it. I was quite happy going to the local temple, something I had done all my life. The church did not interest me at all.

My work unit closed down and I was sick. I had been diagnosed with cancer (of the lungs) and was having treatment through the factory clinic. It was after my factory closed down that I was told I would not be eligible for any more medical care. There was nothing I could do. I could not afford to continue treatment without a job and so went to the temple to ask for blessing and tried to rest as much as I could. I needed to look after my family and I was worried.

One of my neighbours was a Christian and she said she would pray for me. I wasn't sure what that meant but I was desperate for help and didn't mind where I got it from. I didn't believe much in what she was talking about but let her pray for me none the less. She and her friends at church prayed for me for a number of weeks and would often ask me to go to church with them, but I wouldn't. I was Ok about them praying for me, but going to the church myself was something else.

However, things did not get better and one day I decided that I would go to the church on my own. I am not sure why I decided to go, but when I got there I was touched to hear them praying for me. They had no idea that I was coming and yet I could hear strangers who I had never met praying for me to get better. They were so enthusiastic in their prayers that they were crying as they prayed for me. I sat there at the back of the church and listened. I was very moved but still did not understand much.

After that I went to church regularly, just to be with people. They made me feel welcome and they were so caring. After a while I let people pray for me and they would sometimes lay their hands on me, asking for healing for me.

One day when I was at home there was a knock at my door and my neighbour was there with some of the other women from church. They had some money for me to go and continue my treatment. I couldn't believe it. I went back to the hospital the next day and had another x-ray. The doctor looked at me strangely when I saw him and said that the old x-rays that I had brought with me and the new ones could not be the same lungs. The cancer had gone. I was healed.

I went back home and went straight to the church, and they said that Jesus healed me. I don't know why He chose me. I have no education, no job, nothing. But He did. I knew that they were right, that it was Him who healed me, and all the people at church told me it was because God loved me.

I became a Christian and have been a Christian for 3 years now, and I still cannot believe that it has happened. I still don't know why I was healed and why other people are not healed. I still don't have a job but now I spend my time at the church cooking for visitors, and that is wonderful. I know now that God provides for all my needs and so I don't need to find another job. I know that I was healed so that I could go on living. I can look after my family but I can also look after the wider, new family I have at the church, and am happy to serve God in the church in any way I can.

How are you involved in the church?

Very. I go to church every Sunday and cook for people after the service and whenever there are visitors to the church. I sometimes go to training programmes when there are speakers who come to give training programmes, and I go to Bible study. I enjoy singing and so go to singing practice also, although I am not in the choir. My new friends are in the church and I spend most of my time at the church with them when I don't have things to do at home.

What reasons do you think there are for the growth/decline?

Many people come to faith like me because they have been healed or because other people have been healed in their friends and family. This is the reason many people come to church.

What changes have there been in local society in recent years?

There have been many changes. Life is not so stable any more. Lots of people have left the village to work in the city. It is especially hard for women to find work now. There are not many jobs and if a company wants to employ someone then it is likely to take on a man. I know, I have tried, but now I am not looking, as I am happy working at the church as a volunteer. I don't have enough time to work now.

Some people are retired early, and for them it is easier because they are able to keep their old homes and their pension. People at my factory were not able to retain their homes. I am OK because we live in an apartment at my husband's work unit, but many people have had to find new places to live.

Has this affected people's beliefs?

Yes, it is hard to rely on the work unit to provide everything and so people try to work at a few jobs at a time to save money. Families have to split up so that one of them can get a good job and the other one try to keep accommodation, so there is some stability for the family.

There are a lot of new temples in the area now, and there are more and more people coming to the church also. We need to look for a new building as the church is too small for the entire congregation. It costs a lot of money to build a church though and getting permission for a new building is not easy either. But we will pray and, if it is God's will, a new place will open up for us.