

THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

by Tony Lambert, OMF Director of China Research



When I first visited China in 1973 no churches were open in the entire country, apart from two "show" churches in Beijing—one Protestant, one Catholic—for the diplomatic community. Christianity was outlawed and had been exterminated, at least to the visible eye.

So it is good to pause, before we consider the future of Chinese Christianity, and ponder the magnitude of what God has done over the last thirty years or so:

- There are now, officially, more than 50,000 registered Protestant churches and meeting points open all over the country.
- The number of Protestants—again, officially—has soared from approx. 700,000 in 1949 (when the Communists

took power) to over 17 million today—a 20-fold increase!

- In addition, there may be 50 million unregistered house-church believers.
- 45 million Bibles and New Testaments have been legally printed and distributed.
- About 1 million new believers are added to the registered Protestant churches every year.

This staggering growth constitutes probably the largest Christian revival in 2,000 years of church history. But much work remains to be done. More than 1.2 billion Chinese (one-fifth of the world's population) still do not know Christ! How will Christianity in China develop over the next few decades? Here are some factors to take into account:

URBANIZATION: Fifty percent of China could be urbanized in the next 20 years. Evangelism of China's cities—in most of which less than one percent are Christian—must be a top priority.

RURAL TO URBAN MIGRATION: Nearly 200 million people are already on the move in either seasonal or permanent migration to the cities in search of work. They represent the greatest countryside-to-city mass migration in human history. The Chinese church as well as foreign Christian workers must take the initiative in reaching out to the new urban poor.

RURAL DECLINE: There are already signs of decline in many rural churches. In many villages, over 90 percent of the young people have left for the cities, leaving only the elderly

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WHY PRAY FOR CHINA?

- It is the most populated country in the world with 1.3 billion people.
- More than 1.2 billion of those do not know Christ.
- The growing Chinese church could become a major missions-sending base in the future.
- China's economy is growing and many people are looking for satisfaction in money, success and social status —not the living God and Savior of the world.
- China's international profile is on the rise. Some predict it will be the world's next superpower.

Tony Lambert is a former British diplomat to China and author of *China's Christian Millions* and

Resurrection of the Chinese Church. This article was adapted from a story in the *China Resource Handbook* (see back page of this issue).

and children. Poverty and lack of biblical training leave house churches vulnerable to extreme cults.

THE WEALTH-POVERTY GAP: Widespread poverty afflicts many rural churches. Many unemployed and elderly in the cities are also living on shoe-string budgets. Lack of resources means inability to train pastors and promising young people. Wealthy churches in Shanghai, Wenzhou etc. are already showing concern for poor, rural Christians in China's western regions.

MATERIALISM & CORRUPTION: Both are now rampant in Chinese society. TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement—state churches) and house churches are not immune to this temptation.

SOCIAL CONCERN: Chinese and foreign Christians have a pivotal opportunity to develop special ministries to the segments of the population left behind by the economic boom: the blind, deaf, physically and mentally disabled, migrants, HIV/AIDS sufferers, drug addicts etc. In some areas, both TSPM and house churches are already running clinics, homes for the aged and specialist facilities for severely disabled children.

THE TSPM CHURCHES: Though still overwhelmingly evangelical at the grass-roots, at higher levels, pastors and theological students are forced to study the official "theological reconstruction" campaign that waters down some of the basic foundations of the gospel. The fight for the soul of the "official" church will continue.

HOUSE CHURCHES: They, too, are thoroughly evangelical. However, they are sometimes prone to divisions over secondary issues or personalities of the leaders. Some large rural groups are increasingly reliant on overseas funding. Some are prone to indigenous cults or extreme teaching from abroad. House churches can be expected to diversify to cater to every social group in China.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH: Prohibitions on ministry to young people under the age of 18 still stand, but in practice many TSPM and house churches discreetly run Sunday schools,

youth activities and summer camps. Nevertheless, passing on the faith to the younger generation remains a weak spot in the Chinese church overall.

INTELLECTUALS: It is striking how many educated Chinese are turning to Christ—both inside the country and overseas. They can provide much needed spiritual and theologically-educated leadership for the churches.

THEOLOGY: The need to develop a fully biblical and thoroughly Chinese theology to engage a rapidly changing Chinese society is great. Under persecution, some house churches became anti-intellectual and suspicious of cultural or social engagement. This needs to change, and there are some encouraging signs among the younger, urban house-church leaders.

MINORITIES: China is home to hundreds of distinct ethnic and socio-economic people groups, such as the Tibetans, the Miao, the Hui and the Uyghurs. Though often overlooked, these groups are in desperate need of the Good News. Christians worldwide and within China should think of ways to serve these unreached peoples and reach them for Christ.

CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION: There are encouraging signs that both house-church and some TSPM Christians have already sent evangelists to Tibet, the Muslim Northwest and the many minority groups in the Southwest. Several hundred house-church Christians have begun training to take the gospel through the Muslim world as part of the "Back to Jerusalem" movement. After several decades, it is possible that China will take its place alongside South Korea as a new, major sending-base for cross-cultural mission.

The church in China is already—or will soon be—the largest evangelical Christian community in the world. This is a standing testimony to God's grace and the power of the gospel. Expect this church to integrate more fully with the worldwide Christian community. It has much to teach us. And yet, the work is not over. Foreign believers can still make a strategic impact. It is vital that Western Christians have a spirit of humility and servant-hood and a willingness to listen and to learn. If in China, they must act in partnership rather than impose their own agendas or re-impose old denominational or missions structures of dominance. ■

OMF-U.S. FINANCE REPORT 2005 (Operations)

Total Income	\$3,647,012.05
Total Expenses	\$3,604,699.54

Audited report available upon request

GOD'S WORK IN CHINA: GET INVOLVED!

China's population of 1.3 billion people is an imposing figure. That number comprises one-fifth of the world's population. How can such a nation be reached for Christ?

In God's sovereign and infinite wisdom, he has built the Body of Christ, that, by his enabling, can accomplish the task. Not all of those involved will be on the "frontlines," in-country doing evangelism and discipling. But many will. Others, however, are needed in support roles: praying, giving, mobilizing others or welcoming (ministry to internationals). Below are some of the opportunities for your involvement in China, a nation loved and pursued by God.

GO — Though you can't officially be a "missionary" in China, opportunities still abound for onsite involvement. Whatever your background, training, gifts or passions, China probably has a place for you. Some examples:

- English teaching
- Counseling
- Leadership development
- Children's work
- Medical work
- Engineering
- Business
- Students
- Social work
- Computer science
- Agricultural consulting
- Environmental consulting
- You name it!

SEND — Many opportunities exist to use your resources for the glory of God in China. Find a foreign Christian worker going to China or contact a ministry working in China and ask how you can financially give and help send workers.

Also, special projects targeting radio or literature ministry are often in need of financial support.

PRAY — Through prayer, you can make an eternal impact on the Chinese people. Start a prayer group at your church. Sign up to pray for a foreign worker in China or a minority people group. Or get a copy of OMF's new, 30-day *Pray for China* prayer guide. Use articles about China in the media to initiate informed prayer.

MOBILIZE — Before people go to China—or pray or give—they have to be moved to the point of involvement and made aware of needs. Some ideas for mobilization:

- Organize a "China event" at your church
- Lead a Bible study on missions
- Join OMF's U.S. mobilization team. We have plenty of volunteer and support-based opportunities!

WELCOME — More than 4.5 million Chinese work or study in North America. Most will return to China, often to influential jobs. Join a local international student ministry such as ISI (International Students, Inc.). Invite some students for dinner. Seek out the Chinese community in your city and build friendships.

With more than 1.3 billion people in China, it is going to take all parts of the global Body of Christ to reach this nation. Now is the time for strategic impact. What is your role in God's work among China's millions? ■

GOD AT WORK IN EAST ASIA

A harvest in Thailand

The orphanage in a tiny Thai border town near Burma (Myanmar) houses 30 children and teaches many more. Children are exposed to a Christian atmosphere and taught night classes in Chinese, English and the Bible. Some of the children have no parents. Some have parents who are in prison for drug trafficking. And some come from poor homes with too many mouths to feed. In January a Serve Asia team from Singapore worked at the orphanage, leading devotions in the mornings and teaching the Bible in the evenings. As they shared the gospel, they saw God bring in a harvest of 37 children who received Christ as Savior! ■

Three newborns in China

A foreign worker in China — John* and his wife Judy* were part of a small group of students who, at their request, began studying the Gospel of Matthew with me in our home a little over a year ago. At our final get-together a few months later, John and Judy shared with me that the only thing holding them back from becoming Christians was their membership in the Communist Party.

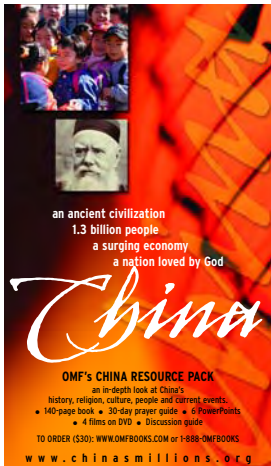
This summer, while back in China, I had a chance to visit

God pours out his grace in Japan

Steve Weemes (OMF missionary to Japan) — I had the flu and my head was mush. I made several mistakes in my Japanese grammar as I talked with Emiko's parents. My wife and I began to realize that they had very little idea what it meant to become Christians like their daughter. They had been upset because Emiko had told them how much it hurt her that they never said they loved her. Maybe Emiko's religion could help fix the mess they had made, they wondered. So we gave them advice on how to pray for God to heal their family. However, as we left, we wondered if our being there had actually accomplished anything. We arrived back home and I tried to go to sleep. The phone rang at 11 p.m. Our son answered it, then said, "That was Emiko. She wants you to know her parents just prayed to ask Jesus into their lives. She said thanks for coming over even when you were sick." I turned over in bed and thanked God for dragging me out of my sickbed to see him pour out his grace. ■

John, Judy and their five-month-old baby girl, Annie.* What a joy it was to hear them tell of how Annie's birth had brought them both to the point of calling on the Lord and confessing Jesus as Savior!

Shortly after Annie was born, John and Judy found out that she had cerebral palsy. In their helplessness and grief, they turned to the Lord as their only comfort and hope. Annie's progress and development since that day have been much better than anyone expected—for which her parents openly give thanks to God. ■ *Names changed.



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PATRICK FUNG NEW GENERAL DIRECTOR OF OMF



Dr. Patrick Fung was officially commissioned as the general director of OMF International on Feb. 11 in Singapore. Dr. Fung, 46, is the tenth director in OMF's 140-year history. He was formerly director of OMF Hong Kong and international director of mobilization. Fung is the first Asian to serve as general director. That a Chinese Christian leads the mission is significant, said Dr. James Hudson Taylor III, seventh general director of OMF and great-grandson of founder Hudson Taylor.

"In the providence of our sovereign God, it is marvelous to see his hand raising up within OMF a godly leader from the Chinese church," Dr. Taylor said. "One hundred and forty years ago, God brought the China Inland Mission into being to share the gospel with the unreached peoples of China. Now, coming full circle, a leader from a vibrant, mission-minded Chinese church and OMF take a step in global partnership in world evangelization."

Fung succeeds the Rev. Dr. David Harley. Fung and his wife Jennie have two children, Elaine, 13, and Samuel, 6. ■



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