

## Churches Together in Britain and Ireland - ecumenical visit to China 2017

### Rev Dr Barbara Glasson

The church in China is telling a success story. There are three new churches every 2 days, 38 million Christians in total and, 400 thousand newly baptised a year. The Amity printing press has printed more than one hundred and sixty million Bibles since the opening up of religion by the State, over 25 million copies a year, distributed to a hundred different countries, more than 77 million Chinese homes own an Amity Bible. The church in China, both registered and unregistered congregations, is growing fast.

If you ask 'Why?' people give credit to the Holy Spirit, inspired leaders such as the late Bishop Ting and to the missionaries. Missionaries whose names have echoed around the churches of the UK as distant heroes of colonial days but who are as honoured within Chinese Christian communities as they were in their lifetime.

For the Miao community of Shimenkan, Rev Samuel Pollard is as revered now as when he first appeared in this remote village in 1888 aged 23. Pollard, and later his wife, travelled from the Bible Christian community of Cornwall, learned local dialects, transcribed the Miao language into script, lived, prayed and worshipped with these people, and were finally buried in Chinese soil having caught typhoid from the local people he was tending. Pollard died, aged 51 giving account of his faith and Methodist heritage with the people he both knew and loved. His grave is above the church he founded and the community that continue to sing Methodist hymns to Chinese words.

And yet, for all this, the Church in China is a young church. Since Bishop Ting's call for its restoration and the current tolerance of the five separate religious communities, Catholic, Protestant, Taoist, Muslim and Buddhist, by the Chinese regime, the question is being asked, 'What does it mean to be a Chinese Christian?' There is an un-nerving silence between the days of Pollard and the exponential growth of this new community. This silence holds the memory of the destruction of much of what it meant to be Chinese, the dislocation of a narrative, the shifting of identity. For all its history and heritage, this is a new church, asking questions both of itself and of its international partners.

One of these questions is around the identity of a post-denominational Church. Is the Chinese Church, with all its historical heritage, a uniting Church as in Australia? There are certainly many echoes of previous denominationalism in Church architecture - the beautifully lofty, white, newly completed Cathedral at Nanjing Union Seminary, has a brown, Presbyterian looking communion table and pulpit as its central feature. Indeed the 'Union' in its title refers to the eight different spiritual traditions from which it was formed in the first place. And the Jiangsu Theological Seminary, with its Protestant heritage, has included monastic style 'cells' in its new building to give its students a simple place to pray. A post-denominational church does not mean a unified outlook. How important then, to be a visiting delegation representing a variety of traditions working under the umbrella of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. Unity in China is not about polity but about practice, it may be a pragmatic solution to the relationship between Church and State but it is also a significant witness to the denominationally divided churches of the West.

The CTBI visit also called into question what our on-going relationship should be with the Church of China in the context, of not only a growing church but also a Chinese State growing in confidence and inhabiting its role as a key player in World politics. During the visit, the escalating tension between North Korea and the US was heightening. In addition, it was clear to see that the major economic centres of China are taking their place in the

economics of an increasingly prosperous and confident society. How is it possible to encourage good leadership for the Chinese church, who currently only have one pastor for 7000 believers? The problem is not so much about finances but sharing expertise. This sharing was apparent at the Amity elderly person's centre where a delegation had previously visited practitioners in the UK to learn good practice in dementia care and were able to implement what they had learned to establish a centre of excellence. Could this sort of exchange also be a way forward to developing appropriately trained clergy? Sharing expertise and learning goes both ways and certainly, our conversations around partnership in theological education has the potential for wisdom to be shared in both directions. A return visit from the China Christian Council to the UK could potentially be a fruitful exchange and move all of us beyond the protocols of official visits to a truly interactive exchange of ideas. Hopefully a visit that could include both academic learning, reflection on pastoral practice and some space for contemplation. Other members of the CTBI delegation had significant expertise in theological education and pastoral practice that could be used to facilitate such a visit. Good church leadership is important in every context, but especially as we are all increasingly aware of the need to speak truth to power in whatever context we are called to minister.

The high level of urbanisation in China has meant that 54% of the population now lives in cities. Social, medical and employment issues therefore become concentrated in the urban environment. The third session of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013 recognised that the Chinese State needed to include NGO's to participate in social development and reform. There are now 66,480 registered social organisations in China which means that longer established charities such as the Amity Foundation need help to continue their work as a Christian organisation working in a good way with government policies. Amity's work to support other NGO's in securing funding is an example of the growing movement to cooperation and it is encouraging to see that in 2016 Amity was itself 85% self-funding from Chinese sources. Amity is developing its own theory of good practice and sharing this methodology with others. In particular, it is focusing on rural development projects and targeting the left-behind communities that result from the rapid migrations due to urbanisation. As its founder, Bishop Ting wrote: 'Christianity moves and compels people not by its doctrines, but by the love made manifest, love held high and spread abroad, love waiting eagerly for the final coming of a world of love. This love draws countless men and women who give their all to enlarge love's realm'.

So, with what questions does this visit leave me? Firstly, how to continue fruitful relationships with the Chinese church during this period of rapid growth in ways that are constructive to all. This has to be a person-to-person approach in which relationships can grow and develop through time. It was apparent during our visit that the relationships of many years established with CTBI, the Methodist and Scottish churches, the China Forum and the Friends of China, are an investment in us all growing together. This sort of trust cannot be established in impersonal ways, especially in relationship with a country that may be reticent or inhibited in establishing trust.

Secondly, if a return visit is to be an exchange of ideas and good practice, how could this best be achieved? A practical and reflective dimension to such an exchange seems to be important, and this would need to reflect denominational differences without imposing our ecumenical struggles on the Chinese delegation. It would seem important to have a focus to such a visit - maybe a reflection on Christian identity within a variety of cultures? This would certainly benefit from the insights of the Scottish and Irish members of the delegation.

## Churches Together in Britain and Ireland - ecumenical visit to China 2017

Rev Dr Barbara Glasson

Thirdly, how to tell a different story? The experience of the community at Shimenkan confirmed the need to find the narrative that links the Methodist Church of Britain and Ireland, indeed all of our churches, with missionary activities of the past. Methodism has always valued and affirmed its World Church heritage and the need to make good and contemporary links was never more crucial. We must disentangle our narrative from its colonial past and learn again, what it means for us to be Christians together in the same world. We either do this ecumenically or we do it on our own - either way, we need to learn again how world church partnership can enhance our collective understanding of mission. How interesting that the impetus to tell this positive story is coming as a film commissioned by the Chinese government! I hope that we can also honour this shared heritage through the proposed film to be made about Samuel Pollard, the Cornish Methodists and the people of a remote Chinese ethnic minority, the Miao. This shared faith narrative could be an inspiration to all of us in our theological reconstruction.

I am grateful for the inspired leadership of Chris Elliott, both in preparation for and during this visit. Thanks too to Sandy Sneddon and Steve Pearce in their on-going relationships with the Church in Asia and particularly for the support of the Methodist Church in enabling my participation in this delegation. As I conclude this reflection I have in my head the voices of the singing at Shimenkan, as we arrived in their remote village in the mountains above Weining - although the words were Chinese, we recognised the hymn, 'Blessed Assurance' and were able to join in the chorus, 'This is our story, this is our song, praising our Saviour all the day long'. In addition, I am reminded too of the words of Bishop Ting and the motto of the Amity Foundation, 'Love never ends!'