

# Report on a visit to China

## 20 August - 2 September 2017

### Partnership Coordinator Asia/Pacific – Steve Pearce

#### Aims

- To take part in a formal delegation from the British and Irish churches to the Church in China
- To visit the Amity Foundation

#### Background

The People's Republic of China is the most populous country in the world (1.3 billion) and the China Christian Council (CCC) is the largest Partner Church of the Methodist Church in Britain (MCB), having 37 million members. There are five official religions in China, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam, all of which are growing. Estimates of the total Christian population vary widely between 50 and 100 million.

CCC national offices are in Shanghai and from here it leads the Protestant religion and relates to central government and to local churches through the provincial and county or city levels. Since soon after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Protestant Church has been organised according to the 'Three-Self Principles', self-governance, self-support, self-propagation, and the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) is an integral part of the CCC.

The CCC regards itself as a 'post-denominational' Church and the British and Irish churches have, for that reason, always tried to relate to it through the China Forum of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI). The visit of CCC representatives to Methodist Conference 2016 and other contacts resulted in a formal invitation for a CTBI delegation to visit and skilful negotiation resulted in a very interesting itinerary as well as the requisite formal meetings at national, provincial and county levels.

#### The Visit

The delegation consisted of 11 people from four denominations in England, Scotland and Ireland. Methodist representation included the Revd Dr Barbara Glasson, pastoral theologian and inter faith expert, and the Revd Brian Anderson, Chair of Irish Council of Churches and former Methodist President, as well as myself, making my seventh visit having first visited China on behalf of the Methodist Church in 2000.

We had five Christian Council/TSPM meetings, visited four local churches and toured four theological education institutions, travelling over 7,000km to



do so. Inevitably, the conversations and experiences in between the formal occasion were more educative and influential than the set-piece encounters, though we recognised that the one is not possible without the other. Most important of all will be the ongoing work that will result from these encounters and deepen the partnership at local and church-to-church levels.

### Shimenkan

For me, the most important part of the visit was the pilgrimage to Shimenkan. Situated in the province of Guizhou, this village is populated by members of minority ethnic groups, largely Miao. Revd Samuel Pollard, a Methodist missionary from Cornwall, arrived in China in 1888 and died in Shimenkan in 1915, from typhoid. During that time he helped many local people to Christian faith, started schools and clinics and created the first writing script for the Miao language, which is still in use today. He is revered in Shimenkan and we were able to lay flowers at his grave, which, although destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, has been restored and carefully tended.

Many members of the local congregations gathered in the church to greet us with Methodist and local Miao hymns, including 'This is my Story, this is my Song'. Tears of gratitude were shed as representatives from



the 'sending church' were thanked and Revd Brian Anderson presented a peat cross to the church as a token of our continuing, prayerful connection. I was delighted to discover that a video camera operator covering the event was to be part of a film crew visiting Cornwall in October 2017 to make a documentary for China TV, commissioned by government. I had a meeting with the producer the next day to hear details and see what help could be offered.

Our group had much discussion about how we retell our mission stories and live up to our responsibilities as re-tellers of the Gospel story and holders of a heritage, which demands to be interpreted in every age.

## Amity Projects

The Amity Foundation is based in Nanjing. Having been created in 1985 by Chinese Christian leaders as a Chinese, philanthropic organisation, dedicated to alleviating poverty and building community, it was for many years a way for the European churches to contribute to work with the poor in China. Now over 85% of its funds are raised within China and it has opened offices in Geneva and Ethiopia. Amity now looks to its international partners mainly for access to expertise and training. MCB has enabled staff from MHA to take part in training on care homes for elderly people and currently contributes funding for young people from overseas to have experience in China and vice versa.

There are many Amity projects in many provinces and increasingly work is being undertaken to



support the activity of churches in service to local communities in conjunction with CCC as well as to advise government at various levels about community services.

We visited the Amity Bakery, where young adults with learning difficulties are given the opportunity to work and learn skills – one or two a year succeed in moving on to jobs with mainstream employers.

The Children's Development Centre is run for autistic children in cooperation with local government and draws on expertise from Amity partners especially in Scotland.

The Amity Bible Printing Press is impressive. It has so far produced over 165 million Bibles. The notice board pictured here registers as each Bible is completed; during our visit alone, over 6,600 Bibles came off the production line. An efficient distribution system in China ensures that anyone can buy a basic Bible for less than £2, either in Mandarin or in several local languages. Meanwhile, Bibles are also produced for other parts of the world, I noticed one for Malawi was in production as we walked around.



## Sunday Worship

We joined about 2,000 Christians for a service of Holy Communion on Sunday at Beishi Church in Shenyang. There are about 300 congregations meeting in this city of 7 million people in NE China. Pastor Heong (in red on the photo) leads this lively church, which moved to its present four-storey, city centre premises in 1995; she was ordained in 1991 and along with another pastor and many volunteers, organises four mid-week services, a Sunday School, hospital visiting, student work and a variety of Bible and



fellowship groups. The dance group was particularly memorable as you can see!

## Nanjing Union Theological Seminary (NUTS)

There are 22 theological education institutions within the CCC organisation; 5 are regional theological colleges (we visited the ones in Shenyang and Nanjing), 16 are provincial Bible Schools (we visited the one in Guizhou) and this one is the only national seminary. Originally in the city centre, it is now among several universities on the edge of the city. There are 350 students and numbers are rising, a PhD programme has begun and we



have offered two or three of the doctoral students the opportunity of an exposure and language improvement visit to the UK during 2018. The campus church has just been opened and is very impressive.

*Steve Pearce September 2017*