Hartford Courant

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1987

Christianity rebounds in China

The writer is pastor of Gracia Lutheran Church in Hartford, Conn. He visited China with a delegation of 27 North American Protestants.

By H. Paul Santmire

A miracle has happened in the People's Republic of China. Churches are overflowing.

On a trip this fall, we saw people crowded around windows and in nearby alleys during services because there was not enough room for them inside.

In addition to the more than 4,000 Protestant congregations that meet in church buildings, some 10,000 Christian groups congregate in private homes, courtyards or open fields during the week as well as on Sunday.

When the communists expelled the last missionaries in 1948, there were 700,000 Protestants. Today, after years of persecution and a reign of terror during the Cultural Revolution, there are an estimated 6 million Protestants — perhaps as many as 7 million.

The Catholic community, which numbered some 4 million in 1948, has basically held its own in membership. That is remarkable, given the savage persecution that Catholics, like many others, experienced in the Cultural Revolution.

Surprisingly, many of the thousands who are flocking to the churches are young people. In the last eight years, Protestants have opened 12 seminaries and Catholics three. A new printing press in Nanjing has begun to turn out the 300,000 Chinese Bibles and other Christian literature.

Starting in 1966, the Cultural Revolution inflicted brutalities and unimaginable indignities on every sector of China's population. It was an especially trying time for Christians, identified as reactionaries because of their former connections with Western missionaries.

During the Cultural Revolution, every church was bounded up or turned into a school or factory. All clergy were sent to do hard labor with the peasants in the country or with the workers in the factories. Children were encouraged to spy on parents. Church members were forced to denounce each other. Many died in government detention centers.

But the Christian churches came through that 10-year reign of terror stronger than before. The Chinese Christians say that it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Missionaries had sown the faith before 1948. During the cataclysmic years of the Cultural Revolution, Christian lay people kept the faith alive as a matter of course, even though they were bereft of their pastors and buildings.

They met in small, secretive groups for Bible study, prayer and mutual support. Many had to recreate biblical texts from memory because their Bibles had been confiscated by the Red Guards.

These Christian lay people suffered in an exemplary fashion in the eyes of their non-Christian neighbors, who saw that the faith of ordinary Christians was both deep-rooted and powerful.

Once the horrors of the Cultural Revolution began to subside, the spiritual capital that Christians had amassed began to multiply in geometric proportion, like the loaves and fishes of old.

This sudden flourishing of spiritual vitality was signaled throughout China by the emergence of a national movement for church unity called the "Three Self Patriotic Movement." It united Protestants from virtually every denomination as a single spiritual force.

As the pagan emperor Cyrus once restored the fortunes of ancient Israel, so the atheistic communist government has found its own reasons to offer some support to the churches, including back rent for buildings occupied during the Cultural Revolution.

It has suited the government's interest, given its commitment to rapprochement with the United States, to show a certain friendliness toward the Christian churches and Christian delegations from abroad.

The government has actually performed studies that show Christians tend to be more productive economically than other groups. The Protestant ethic seems to be winning the hearts of the pragmatically minded communist authorities in China.

The government also has unintentionally created new conditions for Christianity to flourish because of its own reprehensible record during the Cultural Revolution and the shallowness of much of the Marxist education to which generations of students have been subjected.

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