OPINION

Persecution Has Brought Out The Best in China's Churches

By H. Paul Santmire

HARTFORD, Connecticut — 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

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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 1949, there were 700,000 Protestants. Today, after years of persecution and a reign of terror during the Cultural Revolution, Protestants number an estimated 4 million, and perhaps as many as 7 million.

The Catholic community, which numbered some 4 million in 1949, has basically held its own in membership. That is remarkable, given the savage persecution that Catholics, like many others, experienced during 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 200,000 Chinese Bibles and other literature that this growing Christian population will need every year.

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

Every church was boarded up or turned into a school or factory. Clergy were sent to do hard labor with the peasants in the country or in factories. Children were encouraged to spy on their parents. Church members were forced to denounce each other. Many died in government detention centers.

But the Christian churches came through that 13-year reign of terror stronger than before. Chinese Christians say it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

Missionaries had sown the faith before 1949. During 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 terrors 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.

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 long-term commitment to rapprochement with the United States, to show a certain friendliness toward the Christian churches and Christian delegations from abroad.

The state has actually performed studies showing that 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 the People's Republic of China.

The state 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.

As a world view, the Marxism of Mao Zedong seems to be in trouble in China today. A group of "atheist" medical students with whom I spoke laughed derisively at the Maoist slogan "Serve the People," when I mentioned it.

They had been disillusioned by the excesses of the Cultural Revolution and bored by years of classes in Marxism at every educational level. They told me forthrightly that they were chiefly concerned with their own careers.

But I detected a deeper spiritual yearning beneath their protestations. No wonder some of their peers have found their way to the churches.

Who knows whether the pendulum of Chinese life might swing again toward persecution of religion? Who knows whether Christians will continue to be able to reach out to their non-Christian friends once the generation forged by the crucible of the Cultural Revolution has passed? And who knows whether the churches will continue to prosper if their members continue to become affluent?

It may be, as some have observed, that the real enemy of the Christian faith is not persecution but prosperity.

The writer, pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford, spent a month in China with a delegation of 27 North American Protestants this fall. He contributed this comment to The Hartford Courant.