

# Report on UCC Conference Ministers' Delegation to China

April 4, 2011

China Christian Council,

There is a favorite little text of mine from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. Paul was the first Christian missionary, traveling around the whole Mediterranean region forming churches and spreading the Gospel. It must be that someone challenged him. That wasn't unusual. Some people must have raised the question of his authority to represent Jesus.

As he writes to the Corinthians, Paul wonders if he is in need of a "letter of reference." Does he need a letter to solidify his credentials, his legitimacy?

*Do we need a letter of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God; not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

When our delegation came to China, we did not need a letter of recommendation. We had our "living letter" in our colleague, Xiaoling, whose origins in China provides his credentials as a person with a deep love of the country and the church in it, and whose relationships with so many church leaders and pastors offers witness to a commitment to deep partnership in the Gospel.

And we have found, along with Paul, that the churches and your church, seminary, YMCA, social ministries, and the leaders we have met give credence to the Apostle Paul's phrase, "...you show that you are a letter from Christ, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the Living God; not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

Our welcome here is evidence of the love of Christ. The warmth of welcome in every setting has made us comfortable. The honesty and willingness to engage issues with openness have given us great insight into the church in China and our relationships to it, both historic and current. The commitment of the church here to social ministries and to a post-denominational and even interfaith culture has inspired and challenged us. The work of pastors and leaders in the midst of overwhelming numbers has given us much to admire and great hope for the Gospel's work among you.

Thank you. You are, indeed, a letter from Christ, and we go home with an experience written on our hearts that the churches and ministries formed by the work of our forbears as missionaries, are now vibrant churches who provide testimony to the love of Christ and to the power of the Holy Spirit to build the church.

In the United States, North America and Europe, we today often speak of "reverse mission." By that we mean that our partner churches throughout the world are today

bringing the Gospel to us in new ways; opening our eyes to fresh ways of being the church. They are showing us new styles of worship and music and new ways of doing theology in different cultural contexts. They offer us creative ways of teaching and new models of serving.

These gifts of mission are especially important to the United Church of Christ which is only a North American church. We rely on mission partners, and they are critical to us to understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ as having a worldwide scope and different identities in different contexts. We understand that there is one message of love and hope, but so many different expressions that enrich us all. What were once mission churches are now full, mutual partners, thanks be to God!

So, what have we learned here in China? What is written on our hearts as we go back to the United States and the United Church of Christ? Each one of us will have our own perceptions and impressions, but I will share my own in the hopes that they will connect with others and that our conversation and our continuing thoughts about our experiences will shape our own faith as we return to share in the life of our church.

- First, let me again simply express my deep sense of appreciation for the welcome we received in every location we have visited. It has been overwhelming to us, and we are deeply grateful. We have been received with warmth, good humor, generosity of time and lovely gifts in every setting where we have visited. Thank you.
- No one can visit China without an immediate reaction to its size, especially the size of its cities. We live in a geographically large country and continent, so we are accustomed to distances and geographic size, but the incredible size and growth of Chinese cities and the speed of development is incredible to us. To see the city of Xi'an and to know it has gone from 4 million to 7 million in just a couple decades is amazing. Your cities are among the most dynamic places we have experienced.
- We see great energy in Chinese society and culture; a dynamism that is truly impressive,
  - The high speed trains
  - The building projects, including new airports and train stations and public works projects
  - Apartments going up everywhere

These things have been amazing to see, and we celebrate with you that economic and social development is moving at a fast pace. It is quite remarkable to see a culture and society grow in this fashion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, often skipping some of the development of the industrial age and moving straight into the technological age with such speed.

- Amid this pace of development, we can also see the problems that lie behind such unbridled moves forward:
  - How to employ your huge population and how to educate people and provide them with housing and health care. Like any society, these expectations, rights and benefits of society are unequally shared today,

and the gaps will widen as the society matures, unless you model for the world a new way of distributing benefits, something that we could all hope for.

- How to care for the environment amid rapid development? What will be the policies for land use and waste disposal and water quality?
- How will the aging be cared for and those with disabilities and those who are left out of social benefits.

All of these are issues of any developing society. What we will carry home with us is the spirit of a people who are serious and open and creative about trying to find 21<sup>st</sup> century solutions. Our hope and prayers are with you in these endeavors. May the whole world; our country, your country, seek humane, just and peaceful solutions.

- We will go back with a great joy at the growth of the church, now some 24 million persons in your country. In Zhoukou, Henan Province, we have heard with amazement of churches with 500,000 members and 5 pastors and 5 church buildings; of congregations with several thousand in worship and of pastors who may have to preach 6 or even 8 times in a week.
  - A surprise for us has been to understand how the government increasingly sees the church as having a major role in social development and in shaping social and moral values.
  - This development takes us back to a time in America when this was a significant role of the church. Our Congregational forbears called their buildings “meetinghouses”, because they were also used for community gatherings and decision-making and value-shaping events. Our German forbears clearly saw one of their roles in the early German synods in America as helping their members develop into genuinely American citizens, while maintaining some cultural traditions.
  - Given the history of your country in the late 1960’s to early 1980’s, the development of explicit religious freedom is impressive, welcome, and something to celebrate. This sense of religious freedom is quite different from our understanding in the United States, and we could have important discussions of the distinctions, but given the history of almost complete repression of religious affiliation and practice, the current climate of religious freedom and of cooperation between church and government through State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) and in other settings is a remarkable turn-around.
- We have seen the church’s work in social ministries and in the shaping of values. We met a young businessman in Shaowu. He has a successful export business and employs 1,200 people. Some of us may have his products in our homes and they are certainly in our home improvement stores. This man is also a Christian, a church member and a member of the church board. We visited his business, and he was an impressive person, clearly very sharp in his management skills. But, most impressive was to hear him talk about his obligation to and personal as well as professional interest in and care for his workers. Of course he wants to make money, but he so clearly sees his

employment as contributing directly to his community and he wants to share the wealth by providing good wages and benefits and exceptional working conditions. He puts his faith into action in his chosen business.

- We were amazed one day when speaking to a government official in Zhoukou to hear him say about the church: *We can see that the church is a light to the society.*” Of course, we remember Jesus also saying, “You are the light of the world...” It is encouraging that people in the wider society and not just in the church see the light of Christ in the church’s work.
  - We also heard several church people reference some of the changes in the relationship of church to society in saying with a bit of humor:
    - *We have gone from being the opiate of the people to the light of the people.*
    - (And another said) *We can now see that the opiate can be a drug, but in the proper dosage it is also a medicine.*
  - These changes in relationship of church and society confirm for us the power of the Holy Spirit and that God works out God’s purposes in strange and wonderful ways.
- We have seen the ways that the social service work of the church is carried out with great courage and compassion, especially among those with HIV-AIDS. People told us that it was church people who went among those suffering from AIDS and were willing to touch them and hold hands with them and pray and sing, and that this became a turning point in people’s attitudes toward AIDS, and, in fact, a way of communicating the fact that AIDS isn’t spread by casual touch and thus beginning to transform attitudes.
- We appreciate the self-conscious affirmation among you that the church is “post denominational”. In the United States, the church is often drawn into unhealthy and unholy cultural wars, with various denominations and expressions of the faith choosing up sides. It is good to see that you make strong efforts to be not only cooperative among various church groups, but also among interfaith groups of different religions. This encourages us.
- The admiration we have for pastors as well as our concern for the great demands on their pastoral leadership is fresh in our minds. We heard of one region of 5 pastors trying to serve 500,000 people. There are 50,000 persons in my church in Wisconsin, and we have more than 300 pastors. There is little doubt that for the church to continue to grow, it must develop many, many more leaders who can lead congregations and care for individual persons. Any growing movement needs leaders and structure and organization to support those who want to participate. As we know that Global Ministries is helping to train seminaries from China for China Christian Council.
  - Your churches are well aware of the need to train and support pastors, elders, teachers, and lay leaders. Everywhere we went theological education was lifted up as the number one issue for the church. You are working hard in this area, but the challenges are great.
    - You recognize the need to train leaders but also to educate scholars who can serve as professors of theology and Bible and the practical skills of caring for and overseeing the church.

This is a huge challenge, with only one seminary currently offering graduate courses, and the need for any who wish to pursue advanced degrees to go abroad. We hope we can be good partners in this endeavor by advocating with our seminaries to be open to receiving students and providing graduate education for those who can return to China to teach and pastor congregations.

- We found the energy and the faith and commitment and spirit of the students in the provincial and regional seminaries quite remarkable, and they encourage us in our own faith.
- Let me say one more things about theological education in your country. We met some outstanding scholars. Dr. Xun Chen at Yanjing Seminary, one particular young theologian has published in contextual theology and was articulate in speaking of the unique development of Christian theology in the Chinese context.
  - He emphasizes Christ as “reconciler” and sees the task of the church as teaching salvation as a form of harmony, because of the importance of harmony and balance in Chinese culture and the history of Chinese philosophical traditions.
  - We met some historians of Christian mission, and they helped us see that the Christian faith has been in China for centuries. North American and European missions, while important, are a recent phenomenon, compared to the long sweep of Christianity in China.
  - In the U.S. in recent times, there has been a re-evaluation of missionary activity and a confession that there have been times when mission work may have been aligned with imperial or conservative forces. We have to deal with this reality and repent of it. But the people we have met here have expressed appreciation for the missionaries and their contributions to the broad trends of the development of Chinese society into a modern society and state. They mentioned the introduction of modern medicine; modern agricultural systems and crops that have helped to feed people and also systems of education that have brought new developments to China.
    - All these developments have contributed as well to the building of a more diverse, open, and ultimately more democratic society. While we as Westerners still have confessions to make for moments when our work has fallen short of the example of Christ and the good intent of the Gospel, we will go back with a much greater appreciation for our ancestors and their commitment to China and the contributions. Our visit to the Nanjing Massacre museum provides evidence even of heroic work on the part of us who came and served in China.
- Now it is time for me to stop. Again, I say “thank you!” Thank you for everything! May God bless you. May the love of Christ compel you to continue to be light and hope in China. May the Holy Spirit empower your ministries. May we be good and faithful and productive partners in the

Gospel. May the truth of God's love be written on our hearts "to be known and read by all."

Rev. Dr. David S. Moyer  
Conference Minister, Wisconsin Conference  
UCC Conference Ministers Delegation to China