

The
First 25 Years

The Church in Asia: Getting on the Charts

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THE LONG LINE curling around the block in front of downtown Seoul's Myungbo theater pointed up a new phenomenon in East Asia. The people were not crowding to see some sensational American import, but the dramatized life of a Korean martyr, Pastor Chu Ki-Chol. The film, moreover, was produced and acted by members of a unique congregation: the Entertainers' Church—composed almost entirely of new Christians from among the stars, writers, and technicians of the country's radio, television, and movie industries.

This represents a significant shift in direction in the Asian religious pattern. We can see vigorous evangelistic growth, an increasing Christian impact on Asian culture and, to a lesser degree, a deepening desire to bring Christian ethics to bear on all the dimensions of life in Asia. Of all the continents, Asia is the least Christian. Islam in western Asia, Hinduism in Southern Asia, and traditional Eastern religions, Communism, and imported Western materialism in the Far East, have combined to blunt the edge of Christian expansion.

But in northeast Asia, the picture is changing. Mainland China, which sharply suppressed Christianity for over 30 years, has surprised the world with an abrupt about-face. Last year it allowed a printing of 50,000 Chinese New Testaments, and the Bible has suddenly become the most sought-after book in the

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country. Only a few months ago a band of adventurous Christians was allowed to travel from Peking to the Great Wall for what must have been the first open Easter sunrise celebration in China for years.

And in late 1978, for the first time in its 2,500 years of history, Japan elected a Christian as prime minister, Masayoshi Ohira. The white cross prominently displayed at his widely televised funeral in 1980 was a surprise in a country where visible signs of a Christian presence are hard to find, and where the percentage of Christians has only recently managed to pass 1 percent.

These are signs of the times on Asia's Pacific rim. They take on added significance as the global importance of this area becomes more apparent. If, as some think, the history of the world in this generation may be shaped by what happens in the oil-rich Islamic Middle East, it is

even more possible that the history of the next generation will be largely made at the other end of Asia, the Far East. Its northern sector alone—China, Korea, Japan—contains more than a quarter of the world's people. Japan has a higher rate of literacy than the United States, South Korea more university students than England. Some experts predict that by the year 2000, Asia, and more particularly East Asia, could become the industrial center of the world.

Will it also be a center for Christian growth and mission? There are reasons for both hope and concern. We shall see this by concentrating on Korea, Japan, and China (arbitrarily excluding the Philippines as belonging to a different cultural area).

If there is any identifying unity in this vast and diverse area it is its heritage of traditional Chinese culture rather than that of race, or religion, or spoken language. A few generalizations hold true.

First, the Christian church of East Asia, outside the Philippines, is predominantly Protestant. Out of a total population of perhaps 1.2 billion, there are probably not more than 14 million Christians, both Catholic and Protestant—a ration of barely more than 1 percent. Roughly 10 million are Protestant, and 4 million are Catholic. But there is a great and challenging uncertainty to such figures, for no one knows how many Christians are left in China since the revolution. Estimates

vary from four million on up. One startling fact is that if we accept that lower number for China, almost half of all the Christians in this great northern circle of the Far East are in little South Korea!

A second generalization is that the growing edge of East Asia's Protestantism is evangelical and evangelistic. This partly explains the remarkable church growth in South Korea where the theological tradition is staunchly conservative. The conservative trend has been reinforced by the proliferation of new missionary societies throughout East Asia after World War II. Most of these have come from Protestantism's evangelical wing—and at a time when so-called mainline denominations were talking of a moratorium on missionaries, and “the end of the missionary era.” The new and growing Third World missionary movement, too, while strongly rooted in all the Asian churches, has been most actively promoted by evangelical groups.

Important Christian social issues, on the other hand—human rights, problems of the laboring poor and of industrialization—have been championed by more liberal, or moderate center, coalitions in the churches, often represented by ecumenically oriented National Christian Councils. If the separating trend continues, the ecumenical movement may end up unecumenically representing only a Christian minority, as it now does in Korea and perhaps China. At the same time, an evangelical majority may find itself isolated in Christian ghettos removed from the main currents of Asia's intellectual, social, and political developments.

Korea

A country-by-country survey of Christianity in East Asia should probably begin with its line of sharpest division, the DMZ (demilitarized zone) that separates in one little peninsula the area's most anti-Christian country, North Korea, from its most explosively Christian center, South Korea. Until the Russians turned it Communist by force after World War II, more than two-thirds of all Korean Christians were in the North. Today, as far as we can tell, not a single organized Christian group has survived 35 years of fierce persecution. What secret Christians there may be among North Korea's 17 million people, no one knows, and no one tells.

South Korea, by contrast, startles the visitor with the extreme visibility of its Christian faith. Church steeples line the streets and climb the hills. The largest congregation in the world is in Seoul, the 150,000-member Full Gospel Central Church. Only 13 years ago it was a handful of Pentecostal believers meeting in a small tent on the outskirts of the city.

Korea's Christians grow four times as fast as the population. One estimate says Koreans build six new churches every day. Protestants outnumber Catholics about six to one, and well over half of the

Protestants are Presbyterians.

There is no simple answer to the question of why the church has grown so fast in Korea. One obvious reason is that history favored the beginnings of Protestant missions there. A 500-year-old dynasty was crumbling; the old faiths were losing their hold; neighboring giants China, Russia, and Japan threatened the small kingdom, and its anxious people were open to a new world view that might give them hope.

But credit must also be given to sound mission policies. The Protestant pioneers were evangelistic, disciplined, non-colonialist, and steeped in the conviction that the secret of building up a Christian leadership was the training of the whole body of believers in the study of the Bible. An even deeper reason was the character of the Korean Christians. Steadfast under persecution and enthusiastic witnesses to their new faith, they willingly accepted and made their own the church's three emphases on self-support, self-government, and self-propagation. Finally, the early growth of the church was purified and quickened by the Great Korean Revival of 1907-8.

But whatever the reasons—and Korean Christians have always made clear their belief that it was God who gave the increase—the growth was catalytic and continuing. Some confidently predict that Korea will soon be a Christian nation. Such triumphalism may be premature. It could be argued that unless there is an increase in the practice of Christianity to match the growth in professions of the Christian faith, perhaps the more “Christians” there are, the more nominal will be their Christianity and the less Christian the nation will become. Yet little growth is worse than too much.

But there is a dark side to the picture of fast growth. Like industrial progress, it can have its unpleasant side effects. Korean Christianity seems to split as fast as it grows. All the larger denominations suffered schisms in the 1950s and most of those divisions remain. Yet rightly or wrongly, the divisions seem to stimulate growth, not hinder it. It remains to be seen whether Korean Christians will stand up to the temptations of influence and affluence as well as they have so heroically faced the years of persecution.

Japan

Japan is a puzzle to both Christian and secular historians. The latter find it difficult to explain how a country with too many people and too few resources and which lost a major war could have so quickly worked its modern miracle of economic success. And Christians have difficulty explaining how a church that has had periods of such great success could remain so small and seemingly ineffective. There were more baptized Christians for the population in Japan 350 years ago than there are today.

But statistics are deceptive. True, there are only a few over a million baptized Christians in a population of 115 million. But there are twice that number of “Christian sympathizers” who would, in many Asian countries, probably be included in figures on the Christian constituency sometimes reported as “total membership.” Moreover, though Japanese Christianity may still have a low profile, it rates extremely high in significant contributions to Christian theology, in social concern (the name of Kagawa is not forgotten), and in Third World cross-cultural missions.

Protestants outnumber Catholics about three to one, and about half the Protestants belong to the Church of Christ (the Kyodan). Unfortunately for unity, in 1969 young radicals of the Kyodan's left wing physically attacked the meeting of the annual conference, and their student cohorts went so far as to hold the faculty of its leading seminary hostage. Ecclesiastical violence so polarized the church that for more than a decade it has been unable even to hold its annual assembly. There are signs, however, that the Church of Christ in Japan is recovering momentum.

Meanwhile, a postwar flood of new missionary societies entered Japan, swelling the number of mission organizations from 60 (in 1930) to 140. The church-planting enthusiasm of the smaller groups, both old and new, is having an effect. A period of renewed growth could be beginning.

Japan is not irreversibly secularized. Father J. J. Spae sees a subtle shifting from the older religious patterns toward what could turn into a Christian theism and a growing recognition of needs that neither traditional Japanese religion nor modern Japanese secularism has been able to meet.

Recent reports confirm this. The militant Buddhist sect of Soka Gakkai, once considered the major religious threat to Christian expansion, has been discredited by scandal and is sharply declining in numbers and influence. Last year's Billy Graham crusade drew unprecedented crowds, even in the rain. “The tendency has been to look at the Japanese people as impossible to win for Christ,” observed Canadian missionary Kenneth McVety. “I sense a different spirit, and I expect it to grow.”

Four Chinas

The third, and overwhelmingly largest sector of northeast Asia, is Chinese. Over-

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all, it has also been the least responsive to the Christian mission. After 1,300 years of Christian effort, China must still be classified, along with Islam in Western Asia and Hindu India in South Asia, as one of the world's three largest blocs of humanity most impermeable to Christian mission.

But China is not monolithic, despite its persistent sense of national identity, nor has it been uniformly resistant to the Christian faith. There are four Chinas: mainland Communist China (the People's Republic of China); Taiwan (the Republic of China); Hong Kong, a British crown colony; and the overseas Chinese scattered worldwide, but with significant minority communities spread across Asia, particularly in Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore (where Chinese are the majority), and Vietnam. Hong Kong and Singapore are both about 10 percent Christian.

Taiwan

The largest group of "separated" Chinese are in Taiwan. After Korea and Papua New Guinea, this beautiful island has been the fastest-growing Christian center in Asia. Christians increased from 30,000 at the end of World War II to almost 800,000 (two-thirds Protestant) in 1978.

The distribution of this Christian 5 percent of the Taiwanese people is surprisingly uneven. There are three major ethnic groups: first, the aboriginal tribes in the mountains (now 80 percent evangelized); second, the native Taiwanese who came centuries ago from south central China and drove the tribespeople into the hills; and third, the mainlanders (10 percent Christian), the most recent arrivals, who fled to the island in the late 1940s to escape the Communists and who have dominated Taiwan's government ever since. Least evangelized, though they comprise the majority of the population, are the native Taiwanese, who are only 2.3 percent Christian.

Significantly, it is the converts from among the native Taiwanese, the most resistant of the three ethnic groups, who form the backbone of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, and it is that church that is by far the largest Protestant denomination on the island.

Next to the Presbyterians, who doubled their membership between 1955 and 1965, and who are now engaged in another evangelistic church effort, the most vigorously growing churches in Taiwan have not been "mainline" denominations, but two indigenous Chinese church movements from the mainland: the True Jesus Church, a faith-healing Pentecostal fellowship; and the Christian Assemblies (or "Little Flock") of Watchman Nee, whose practices resemble Plymouth Brethren.

Though the Chinese people are often spoken of as resistant to the Christian

faith, Chinese in Asia outside the People's Republic on the mainland usually have a higher percentage of Christians than the Asian average.

Mainland China

Everything written above about East Asia remains unbalanced until mainland China is put into the picture. But what can one say with any certainty about China? It does seem likely that despite the long years of repression, there are more Christians in China today than 32 years ago when the Communist government came to power. This is partly due to the cruelties of the cultural revolution (1966-9) when the Red Guards of the radical left ran wild. For a time, there was not one organized church open and intact in China.

They went too far. Reaction began even before Mao's death. Churches slowly reopened from 1970 on. The pace quickened after 1976. Since early 1980, as the house church movement started even the most optimistic with its emerging strength, estimates of the number of Chinese Christians have escalated wildly almost every month. A reasonable guess—and it is only a guess—might put the number of Protestants at between three and four million. This is nearly double the prewar figure. The growth must be credited to the house churches, which number in the thousands and now overwhelmingly outstrip the membership of the mainline churches. Catholics, on the other hand, who suffered much more than Protestants in the revolution, may have declined in numbers, perhaps to two million or more. So there may be five or six million Chinese Christians altogether, but it will be a long time before any reliable figures are available.

The shape of the church in China is perhaps better discernable than its size, but is still seen only through a glass darkly. The revolution changed the church almost beyond recognition. It did not outlaw religion; the constitution guaranteed individual freedom of belief. But it did not approve of religion and permitted only limited freedom of religious organization under the direction of the government's Religious Affairs Bureau. Only two approved national Christian bodies survived, one for Protestants, the Three-Self Movement ("self-government, self-support, and self-propagation"), and one for Catholics, the Catholic Patriotic Society.

When even these were swept away by the calculated violence of the Red Guards, institutional Christianity had been wiped out in China. It had taken only 20 years. But though the institutions were gone, the church was still there, a "church of the diffusion"—individual believers gathering together in houses in small groups to worship and read whatever portions of the Bible the Red Guards had left them, and to sing hymns, but not too loud.

Now the situation has changed again. Mao is dead. The Red Guards are in disgrace. The "Gang of Four" has fallen. A new internationalism is rising. The church in China is once again opening organized churches and putting out feelers toward fellowship with the rest of the body of Christ.

Last fall the number of reopened churches was reported to be 30; a few months later 80; last spring 100, and more are continuing to open. There are five large churches again open in Shanghai, and it is said that none has a Sunday attendance of less than two thousand. Services are crowded out. Seven thousand Catholics received Mass last Easter in Peking's two reopened Chinese Catholic churches. In Nanking a few months ago, when the theological seminary was allowed to reopen as a part of Nanking University, 47 entered the first class—but 300 had applied for admission.

The reopening of the churches has brought to life again the Three-Self Movement as the recognized channel of communication between the government and China's Protestants. But with it has come a new independence and a new awareness of its responsibilities to a constituency which, because its greater part is now from the house church movement, owes little to Three-Self leadership.

In an attempt to bridge the gap, a new body, the Christian Council of China, was organized in December as a sister structure to the Three-Self Movement but oriented to the Christian community rather than to the government. It will "train preachers, publish Bibles and strengthen communication with churches and believers." Linked with the formation of this new council was a call for toleration and unity of the Spirit among all China's Christians "whether worshiping in the churches or in houses." This is the nearest any government-approved body has yet come to recognizing the legal existence of the house groups.

Changes have come with stunning rapidity to China, and are continuing. In whatever way relationships may develop between "house" Christians and "church" Christians, it would be wise for Christians from outside China to refrain from judgmental comparisons and impulsive, unilaterally Western actions. Changing times call for great sensitivity.

Visitors report that they are often told, "In the old days we had to go out looking for people to tell them about Christ; now the people come looking for us to ask us to tell them about the gospel."

Here, perhaps, is the greatest single change that has taken place in China's Christianity in these 30 difficult years. Responsibility for witness has shifted from the clergy to the laity, and the laity have proved equal to the challenge. This is a good sign. Lay witness has always been the key to effective evangelism. And China is still the key to East Asia. □

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