

Baptist workers provide training to church leaders in China

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During a break at the Hua Mei Pastor's Retreat, the participants spontaneously began singing hymns at the base of Mount Gonga. (CBF photos courtesy of the Cayards)

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By Laurie Entrekin

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

SICHUAN PROVINCE, China (ABP) — What's the greatest spiritual need in China today?

Bill and Michelle Cayard, Houston-natives who have worked in China since 2003, believe the country desperately needs more churches and trained leadership.

Case in point: Sichuan, a Western province of China where the Cayards live, is home to 100 million residents. But Sichuan has only 120 registered churches and 95 ordained pastors.



Bill Cayard teaches at the Hua Mei International Education and Training Center, which was started by Chinese Christians.

"Though small by percentage, Christian congregations in China grow quickly," Bill Cayard said. "I wish space wasn't an issue. We can see firsthand (that) as soon as space is available, a church is filled with seekers and Christians. People come out of curiosity. Neighbors invite neighbors, saying, 'The Christian faith has a lot to offer. Come and see what you think.'"

As field personnel for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Cayards' ministry lies primarily in partnering with Chinese pastors and churches.

They often deliver greetings from congregations in the United States to churches in Sichuan province.

"We believe linking churches from the United States and China in partnership will allow us to learn from each other and to build up God's kingdom," Michelle Cayard said.

"Chinese churches are often resource-poor but faith-rich. They have withstood tests and trials that would severely test the faith of most American churches. One way we can encourage Chinese churches is to expand their vision of how they can reach their communities. Basic discipleship and leadership training are key."

The Cayards also partner with Chinese Christians to organize seminars, pastor retreats and online courses for master of divinity programs.

"A church we recently visited will offer training next spring for 100 lay leaders from 20 different churches," Michelle Cayard said.

"Those in attendance will receive basic instruction for preaching, theology, church administration and pastoral counseling. Most areas in Sichuan try to conduct such lay training one time a year, according to the farming schedules."

Better education for lay leaders and pastors is vitally important, she said, especially for city churches looking to attract more young people, who tend to be more educated than older generations.

"The majority of churchgoers in China today are in the working class," Michelle Cayard said. "As economic situations become more and more prosperous, it will become necessary to reach out to every segment of society. Those who are better educated will feel more comfortable learning from a well-educated pastor."

The Cayards use Bible stories as part of their English-language lesson plans as one way to share their values without seeming confrontational to students.

Their work with Chinese organizations like the Hua Mei International Education and Training Center, started by Chinese Christians to help the poor and reach Chinese who may know little about Christianity, is a way of legally working in China.

“Hua Mei is a bridge between Chinese Christians and Western Christians, enabling social ministry,” Bill Cayard said. “Through this organization, CBF is able to partner in ways that are completely legal within Chinese society.”

In addition to teaching two classes at Hua Mei each week, the Cayards participated in English camps through Hua Mei at a large public boarding school last summer.

With 60 foreign teachers and more than 400 students, the two camps not only used Bible stories for lessons but also fostered a sense of Christian community through sports, campfire singing, drama and performances by a Christian worship band.

And they have more partnerships planned, from assisting in church construction and renovation to helping supplement rural pastors’ salaries and offering scholarships to students pursuing theological education.

It’s a lot of work, but it’s all good, the couple agreed.

“This is a great time in China,” Bill Cayard said. “People are curious and hungry for something to fill a void in their lives. God is using this opportunity, and lives are being transformed with the good news of Christ.”

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