

Mayflower Church not deported but fined and detained

April 3, 2023

Authorities in Thailand fined but did not immediately deport members of a persecuted Chinese church, but the Christians continue to be detained three days after their deportation hearing.



In early January, Trent Martin (right) from 21Wilberforce—a human rights organization focused on international religious freedom—and a colleague worshipped with members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church in Thailand. (21Wilberforce Photo)

Members of the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church—nicknamed the “Mayflower Church” for their commitment to religious freedom—were arrested March 30 and [faced deportation hearings](#) the next day.

Fleeing persecution and harassment in their native country, the Chinese Christians first sought refuge in South Korea. When they were denied

asylum there, they relocated to Thailand on tourist visas. However, when their visas expired, the Thai government refused to renew them unless members of the church reported to the Chinese Embassy.

Mayflower Church members have been seeking refugee status from the United Nations, and each has been issued “refugee-seeker” identification. As of last month, only two of the 16 families in the church had been granted a second refugee determination interview with the U.N.

The initial report from the March 31 deportation hearing appeared encouraging.

Deana Brown, founding CEO of [Freedom Seekers International](#) in Tyler, was not permitted in the hearing room in Pattaya, but she saw members of the church as they were exiting.

“When I walked up, they were all smiling and happy,” she wrote in a March 31 email. Freedom Seekers International has been enlisting East Texas congregations to sponsor resettlement of Mayflower Church members.

After the adult members of the church were fined, they initially understood they would be transported by bus back to the hotel where they had been staying, Brown said.

Continued detention

When the drivers of the two buses did not take a direct route to the hotel, church members feared they were being driven to the airport to be sent to China. Instead, they were taken to an immigration detention center.

Two Americans who had been assisting members of the Mayflower Church briefly were detained but had not been placed under arrest, according to an [Associated Press](#) report.



Religious persecution in China today is worse than it has been in decades, former Chinese dissident and longtime international human rights advocate Bob Fu told told Randel Everett of 21Wilberforce during an event at Dallas Baptist University. (DBU Photo)

About four dozen children and women from the church—including one pregnant woman who is due to give birth in two weeks—are being held in one location. The men from the Mayflower Church—numbering 16 or 17—are being held in a single cell with more than 30 other detained individuals in Bangkok at a detention center, Bob Fu of Midland-based [ChinaAid](#) reported in an April 1 email.

In a follow-up email to Randel Everett of the [21Wilberforce](#) human rights organization on April 3, Fu said the detained Christians “are in good spirits,” aside from some sickness and insect bites.

“But they hold praise and worship services twice a day inside the prison like [biblical figures] Daniel, Paul and Silas,” Fu wrote.

“Our American team members and the U.S. Embassy had brought basic supplies, including Bibles, and were able to deliver to the Mayflower [Church members] in the detention cells. [The] U.S. government is watching very closely for Mayflower members. Our team and U.S. Embassy are assessing the situation moment by moment. Pray for wisdom and discernment.”

In an email to Brown, the church’s pastor wrote he and the other men in detention were living a “difficult and joyful life” in captivity, worshipping together each morning and evening.

“The gospel was preached to 17 Chinese people, and they were all willing to listen,” he wrote. “There are two young Chinese who have decided to believe in the Lord, joined our worship, sang hymns, read Scriptures, and prayed with us.

“We also evangelized the Burmese through translators, and they were willing to listen. We share part of the food with everyone. The Spirit of the Lord filled us and greatly blessed every soul in the cell. All achieved more than I could have imagined. The name of the Lord is victorious and glorified.”

Brown noted FSI has been able to take diapers and baby formula to the detained women from the Mayflower Church, They also have delivered diarrhea medication, ointment for insect bites, water and changes of clothing to both the men and women.

This article originally was posted about 1:30 p.m. on April 3. It was updated at 2:20 p.m. on April 4 to include additional information included in the last four paragraphs.