

# Religious liberty in China improving, still room for progress

June 14, 2010

DALLAS—Religious liberty in China is expanding, and the Chinese Christian community is growing, but American observers continue to hope for more progress.

Bao Jiayuan, associate general secretary of the China Christian Council, the registered church of Protestants in China, recently visited Texas. He said religious freedom in China is a matter of perspective. During the country's "cultural revolution" of 1966-1976, many churches and religious institutions were forcibly closed and destroyed. People who practiced their faith openly were persecuted.

Bao Jiayuan Since the end of the revolution, Bao noted the church has grown by leaps and bounds, and freedom has been expanded. Two churches opened every three days during the 1990s. Congregations are expanding, but outsiders seem to harp on what they see as a lack of religious liberty, he insisted.

"We feel it's quite happy now," Bao said. "Society is transforming. But it takes time."

The [U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) has named China has a "country of particular concern" each year since 1999, citing the country's restrictions on religious expression and practice. Religious organizations must be registered by the government before worshippers

can practice their faith, leading to conflicts between the government and unregistered faith groups.

Last year, almost 400 unregistered Protestants were detained and “the Chinese government stepped up efforts to destroy churches and close ‘illegal’ meeting points,” according to the commission’s 2010 report. The Chinese government remains particularly concerned about the role outsiders play in religious institutions.

Residents can worship and proselytize inside the walls of registered churches, but they cannot conduct either activity outside them. According to multiple reports, the ability of unregistered groups to exercise religious liberty varies from region to region.

Despite the restrictions, the commission reported in May that “religious adherence continues to grow rapidly in China.” People continue coming to faith. At this point, Chinese Christians outnumber the membership of the country’s communist party. Some government leaders have applauded the role religion has played in Chinese society.

Brent Walker, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs](#) , recently wrote that change in China takes time. Chinese culture historically has been focused on community and hierarchy as opposed to individual rights. It may always be more interested in promoting a “harmonious society” over individual rights. But people are working within the government structure to improve religious liberty.

“China has been working on religious liberty for only about 30 years. In this country, we have been at it for nearly 300 years and still do not always get the church-state equation right,” he wrote.

Derek Davis, director of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor’s [Center for Religious Liberty](#) , said assessing the status of religious liberty in China is a matter of perspective. While the country has a way to go before reaching

the levels of Western countries, it has made progress in the past several decades.

“In the last 30 years, China has made great strides in opening itself up to other religious groups,” he said. “You still have to register, which to us sounds like something out of the Dark Ages. But they have moved from legal to registered, which is progress.”

Bao understands there are rules requiring churches to register with the government and some choose for a variety of reasons not to register, making those congregations illegal. But Chinese Christians can freely worship if they work within the framework the government has outlined, he insisted.

A delegation from the China Christian Council recently completed a tour of several cities through the United States, scouting locations for an extensive Chinese Bible exhibit and networking with Protestant leaders. Bao pointed out the China Christian Council wants to connect with believers around the globe and is free to do so.

Through networking, Bao hopes Chinese leaders can grow in administrative and outreach skills. Leaders want to underscore common ground with other Christians and minister together.

“Churches here are very strong,” Bao said. “That’s history. That’s tradition. That’s the Bible belt. There is much to know. The Chinese church is young.” At the same time, Bao hopes American Christians come to better understand the needs and ministries of Chinese Christians. China needs seminaries and expanded ministries.

“America can know the true face of Chinese churches,” Bao said.

Davis believes strengthened relationships with Chinese leaders could aid the cause of expanding religious liberty in the country. There is a need for

people to report religious liberty abuses, but it may be more important to continue dialogue between Western leaders and Chinese officials, he said. Through those ties, religious liberty may grow in the nation.

“There is a great potential for increased religious liberty in China, but we need to be patient while at the same time closely watching and monitoring what they do, offering a hand of friendship more than a hand of criticism,” Davis said.

Walker wrote that relationships with Chinese Christians and government officials are key to expanding religious liberty in China.

“We need to continue to build relationships with the Chinese—religious leaders and government officials alike,” he wrote.

“We should press for more religious liberty. The message that I promoted in China is that when religious people are a demonstrable threat—splitist, terrorist or otherwise harmful to the well-being of others—then government can legitimately take steps to rein it in, but carefully and not before. In the end, full-fledged religious liberty will actually promote a ‘harmonious society’ more than divisive governmental intervention into the religious demography—favoring some, disfavoring others and persecuting many.”