

"Answering China's Cry"

-- some excerpts from two articles in the May issue of Charisma magazine. They are from an interview with Dennis Balcombe, missionary pastor of Revival Christian Church in Hong Kong. This is the ministry we will work with when we go to Hong Kong and into China this summer. The occasion of the interview was Dennis Balcombe's arrest this past February in the interior of China, on charges of violating new laws, called "Decrees 144 and 145 that are designed to control religious activity by prohibiting contact with foreign religious organizations.

"Affiliated with Shiloh Christian Fellowship in Oakland, California, Balcombe says he sensed a call to China at an early age. In 1969 he and others who shared the same vision started Revival Christian Church in Hong Kong.

Today the church has two Sunday services -- one in Cantonese and another in Cantonese with English translation. Of the 500 people who attend, almost all are from non-Christian backgrounds.

Part of the church's ministry includes sending teams of Christians into China to deliver much needed Bibles and Christian literature. Each month, the Donkeys for Jesus program distributes 10,000 to 20,000 volumes in China. Balcombe, who has made more than 500 trips to China, encourages foreign Christians to participate in the program.

There is a desperate need for Scriptures in China, Balcombe says. According to The Bible League, the main supplier of bibles to China's underground home church movement, at least 50 million newly converted Chinese Christians do not own a Bible or have access to one."

"Christians in the West typically have bookshelves loaded with more Bibles and Christian books than they will ever read. But in China only a privileged few enjoy such abundant access to spiritual truth.

In many areas of China, up to 100 believers must share one Bible. Preachers often ride their bicycles as far as 60 miles to attend church meetings, where they ask for Bibles and books to take back to their districts.

House church leaders are frustrated as they ration out meager quantities of books to local Christians. "How can we feed our flocks with just these?" they ask.

One pastor wrote: "One of the hardest things about my job comes after I have planted a church. I have the painful task of telling the newly converted villagers that they may have to wait years before they can have a copy of God's Word.

In some areas the ratio of believers to Bibles is 1,000-to-1. Letters received from believers in China reveal that churches are starving for copies of the Scriptures. "We have a preacher here who does not have any preaching material," one Chinese believer wrote.

Another said, "I wish I would learn God's Word by heart. But I do not have a good memory. My greatest wish is to possess a Bible.

A significant number of Bibles are being printed in China

by the government-sanctioned Amity Press in Nanjing, with assistance from the United Bible Societies. But the enormous need will not be met by that source alone.

There are at least 60 million Christians in China, and mission experts estimate at least 3.5 million people are converted to Christ every year. Since Amity Press prints only about 1 million new Bibles every year, the supply is lagging behind current church growth.

To complicate matters, Amity's Bibles are available only to members of officially recognized churches -- so house churches in rural areas (most of China's Christians) still depend on foreigners to provide help from the outside."

"China's religious freedom situation has gone from bad to worse, and the two new anti-religion laws signed by Premier Li Peng in January 1994 are a serious step backward. Some Chinese Christians wonder if their country will re-embrace the government policies of the 1950's and early 1960's -- when countless Christian leaders were sent to prison for 30-year terms.

I see massive suffering ahead as the Chinese government attempts to turn back the clock. Reports of continued arrests, harassment and torture of Christians will continue to pour out of this nation.

These new laws have serious implications for Christians in the West who want to reach the most populous nation on earth. For centuries China has drawn missionaries like a magnet. How do we reach China now that its leaders have outlawed foreign missionary activity?"

"Since the early 1980's, there has been some freedom for evangelism by foreigners in China. Only periodically did officials arrest or expel foreigners working there.

Today, however, we face a different situation. The new anti-religion laws indicate an imminent resistance to all foreign missionary efforts.

Chinese believers, however face the most serious danger. After I was arrested in February for attending an illegal church service, I was detained for only four days.

But three of my Chinese colleagues -- both leaders of house churches -- were not released until early March. A dozen more believers who escaped the initial roundup -- mostly young women -- were arrested when they went back to their village to pick up their tambourines.

Christian believers in China -- not foreign missionaries -- are the real victims. Who will stand up to defend them?"

Dennis Balcombe,
Revival Christian Church, Hong Kong

I think our burden to go was increased by reading this article (I suggest you get May Charisma and read it all). Perhaps the time is short for serving as Bible couriers; our part seems small, but the Bibles our team will carry in can feed hundreds, maybe thousands, of believers. **Can you help us get there?**

John and Jackie