

China

New research on China's urban house churches amid the COVID-19 pandemic

CSW is pleased to highlight an exclusive piece of research into the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on unregistered Protestant 'house' churches in China. The research, undertaken by an experienced researcher in May and June 2020, looks at three key cases: a police raid on Xingguang Church in Xiamen; an Easter crackdown on members of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu; and a church-led effort to support hospitals and communities in Wuhan affected by the virus – an effort which was thwarted by the authorities.

This briefing contains extracts and analysis from the report, the full version of which can be found at: csw.org.uk/2020-chinacovid-report

The research looks at these three cases in the context of the increasing oppression of unregistered churches by the government:

'From January 2020 to the present, China and the entire world have been plagued by a once-in-a-century plague that started in Wuhan and spread to the rest of the world...China's urban house churches, which had been persecuted by the government in the past, thought they could breathe a sigh of relief during this period. However, the plague did not reduce the Chinese government's strict control over them. Even during the most severe period of the epidemic, demolition of crosses and the banning of the churches in various places never stopped.'

While the paper focuses specifically on unregistered Protestant 'house' churches, CSW's research finds that this fits into a broader context of a rapid and significant decline in religious freedom across the nation, impacting all major religious communities, including both registered and unregistered Protestant and Catholic churches.¹

As the researcher asserts: 'Although the PRC Constitution clearly stipulates that citizens have freedom of religious belief, this freedom has been repeatedly undermined by various regulations of the government's administrative departments.'

The researcher also finds that violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief against churches in China are increasing now that coronavirus restrictions are being lifted: 'As the epidemic eases, the intensity and scope of the persecution is expanding.'

Case study from Xiamen: Xingguang

Church's Sunday

Xingguang Church is an unregistered church in Xiamen, Fujian Province. The church meets in privately owned rooms belonging to church members. The same space is used for the church school. Police and authorities have raided the church twice this year.² The researcher here describes the first incident.

'On Sunday, May 3, the epidemic in Xiamen had been stable for several days, some commercial and consumer establishments were opening, schools had resumed classes, and people began to gather at churches. People seemed to be gradually recovering their past freedom. However, Xiamen Xingguang Church experienced darkness on this day.

'In the morning, dozens of Christians living on the same floor as the Xingguang Church came to a room one after another; this room is where they worship. These people, more than a dozen, included elderly, middle-aged, and children. They began singing hymns amid the sounds of the piano. The Sunday worship had not yet begun, when the gate was suddenly surrounded by more than 200 police, urban management officers, and staff of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. They tore down the Xiamen Bureau of Religious Affairs' notice of the ban on the 'Xingguang Church' and tried to enter the church forcibly to carry out a raid. Church pastors and able-bodied Christians stood at the door to intercept them. They argued on strong grounds, warning the officials not to charge into private homes.

1 For more information, please see www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report

2 CSW, 'Authorities raid Xingguang church for second time in just over a month', 15 June 2020 www.csw.org.uk/2020/06/15/press/4691/article.htm

‘The police finally broke in. Christians blocking the door were forcibly dragged out and beaten on the ground. Their cell phones were forcibly taken. Female Christians and school teachers were also treated violently. The police tore apart window frames and door locks and entered a Christian home, taking away a family of three. Even the neighbor who photographed this scene with his mobile phone was berated and threatened by police who climbed up the railing; the scene was very chaotic.

‘The wife of the pastor of the church, Sister Xiaofei, and some adherents took some videos before their phones were snatched. From the videos, we can see the violence of the police, hear the shrieks of Christians, the cry of children, and the angry questions of the pastor’s wife, Sister Xiaofei: “Why did you burst into our home? Why did you take our mobile phones? Why did you hit people?” The police’s violent law enforcement led to Brother Xu Wenping suffering chest and forearm contusions, and broken ribs, and other brothers and sisters were also injured to varying degrees.’

The researcher believes the reason for the crackdown on the church has nothing to do with the coronavirus: ‘At that time, the virus in Xiamen City had been substantially alleviated, and public health and safety measures restricting the gathering of citizens had been lifted. A dozen or so Christians worshipping God at home did not violate public health regulations.’

Instead: ‘The reason why the Xingguang Church was suppressed was that they persisted in their right to believe granted to Christians by the Constitution, refused to join the Three-Self Church, and refused to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau viewing this as contrary to their principles of faith. Because of this, the church has been subjected to numerous joint law enforcement actions by the police, urban management officers, and the fire department...The police raided the Church on May 3rd, purportedly for “illegal assembly”. Ironically, this day, May 3rd, is World Press Freedom Day, yet this church experienced instead the reality that freedom of belief is ruthlessly suppressed.’ On that day, six church members were taken to the Xinglin Police Station; they were released at 9pm that night.

According to the researcher’s analysis, the measures taken by the authorities against this particular church have occurred in the context of a wider crackdown on unregistered churches in Fujian Province:

‘Fujian was one of the earliest areas where Protestantism first entered China, and Xiamen’s Gulangyu Island was a gathering place for early missionaries...However, ever since the Chinese government launched a thorough nationwide crackdown on house churches that refused to join the Three-Self Church, the Fujian Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee said it would remove all house church gathering places within its jurisdiction within two years. In the second half of last year, many house churches in Fujian were banned...In late April [2020], the government of Xiapu county in Fujian’s Ningde prefecture, destroyed 176 Christian graves. Even during the period when the epidemic was severe, the government did not relax the monitoring of Christians.’

Another church in Xiamen, No. 5 Xunsiding Church, was closely monitored by government security personnel throughout the pandemic. The church has been under tight surveillance since it was banned in May 2019. The following month police physically blocked people from entering the church space.

Case study from Chengdu: Early Rain

Covenant Church’s Easter

Early Rain Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province was founded in 2008. By 2018 the church had several hundred members from a wide range of backgrounds. The church is known for its outreach to socially marginalised groups. On 9 December 2018, the authorities arrested over 100 church members including Pastor Wang Yi and other leaders.³ Pastor Wang was sentenced to nine years in prison in December 2019.⁴ Elder Qin Defu was sentenced to four years in prison in November 2019.⁵ The researcher here describes the authorities’ efforts to prevent the church members meeting online this year.

‘April 12 [2020] was the important Christian holiday of Easter. At 8.30 in the morning, domestic security

3 CSW, ‘Police arrest 100 members of Early Rain Church’, 10 December 2018 www.csw.org.uk/2018/12/10/press/4170/article.htm

4 CSW, ‘Pastor Wang Yi Sentenced to nine years in prison’, 30 December 2019 www.csw.org.uk/2019/12/30/press/4507/article.htm

5 CSW, ‘Early Rain Church elder sentenced to four years in prison’, 3 December 2019 www.csw.org.uk/2019/12/03/press/4499/article.htm

officers (guobao) and police entered seven or eight homes of Christian followers of the Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church, who had been under long-term monitoring. Among them were elders, deacons and co-workers. Zhang Jianqing had just become a father and his daughter had just had her one-month-old birthday. The guobao and police first pretended to shoot the breeze with them; at 9.30 am, the Christians began to worship and invited the guobao and police officers to participate. After singing hymns and praying, the Christians broadcast a recorded sermon about Easter given by Pastor Wang Yi. The guobao police heard Pastor Wang Yi's voice and immediately went up to stop the recording, saying that they were not allowed to listen to Wang Yi's preaching, and that they were not allowed to gather in the name of Early Rain Covenant Church, including on the internet. Then the police took them separately to the police station and demanded they explain in detail why they held a gathering, how many people attended and so on. A church worker said: "The police seem to have known earlier that the church was going to soon hold a group activity. They began to follow believers a week ago, and no matter where they went, they discovered they were being followed." The police did not release them until noon. The purpose of this action was not only to sabotage the Easter internet activities of the Christian followers of Early Rain Covenant Church, but also for the police to be able to report back to their superiors on their political achievement on a religious holiday.'

The incident occurred at a time when COVID restrictions were being gradually relaxed in the city. After 25 March, 'citizens [in Chengdu] no longer needed to wear masks to go out, people can enter and exit neighborhoods normally, and businesses, restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, etc. are fully open. But for the Christians of Early Rain Covenant Church, what this all means is that the surveillance they were previously subjected to has been fully restored.'

Surveillance and control measures by the authorities include: 'long-term one-on-one or even several (officers)-on-one personal tracking and monitoring by police and guobao [domestic security] officers. They are often "visited" and harassed by the police or brought to the police station. Officials also pressure Christians through their work units and landlords, asking them to sign a commitment to say they no

longer belong to Early Rain. Those who did not want to sign would lose their jobs or be forcibly removed from their leases. Police officers and landlords evicted many Christians overnight, throwing their luggage out the door and leaving them stranded on the street. When a Christian comes to another Christian's house for a meal, someone immediately comes to check their ID. They are not allowed to meet each other, especially as Christians in the name of "Early Rain Covenant Church".'

During the pandemic, the authorities even went so far as to warn church members not to be 'overly concerned' about Pastor Wang's elderly mother, and not to send her gifts for the Lunar New Year (Spring Festival). Police also threatened a church member heavily pregnant with triplets, even picking the lock on the family's front door. The Chengdu police repeatedly threatened the church members to stop gathering together, threatening to cut off the electricity and water in their homes, or put them in administrative detention. On at least one occasion, the main speaker at an online church meeting, Ran Yunfei, was taken away by police to prevent him from speaking. He was released after the meeting. Mr Ran noted that he has been 'drinking tea' (summoned by police for a chat) for twenty years, but the amount of tea he has drunk during the past year has often doubled.

Case study from Wuhan: 'ActionLove' thwarted by the epidemic

The third case study comes from Wuhan, the epicentre of the COVID outbreak. From this city, in the early days of the pandemic, Pastor Huang Lei of Xiashangtang Church (English name: Root and Fruit Christian Church) recorded a video in an empty church, encouraging Christians to think about 'eternal life, bravery, and helping each other amid the disaster'. The message quickly spread online.

'Pastor Huang Lei was originally a surgeon when he was called by God to become a full-time minister. He arrived in Wenchuan [Sichuan province] on the fifth day after the May 12 Wenchuan earthquake in 2008, where he witnessed the despair of a woman who turned gray overnight when all three of her grandchildren were buried under mudslides. When he returned to Wuhan, he resigned from his hospital, and led three thousand Christian "ActionLove

Group”⁶ volunteer teams in Wenchuan to accompany the people there for three years, establishing a close relationship with the disaster victims. In total, there were 1.06 million civilian volunteers in Wenchuan after the earthquake, of which 610,000 were Christians. At that time, the Three-Self Church was banned from participating in Wenchuan relief efforts. Three years later [in 2011], the Jasmine Incident erupted.⁷ Because some of the Wenchuan volunteers participated in the Jasmine protests, the government forcibly disbanded all volunteer groups in Wenchuan.

‘Although the civil voluntary organizations in Wenchuan were eventually disbanded, there was more space for participation than was possible during this epidemic. This time, almost all the channels for civil assistance were blocked, especially the house churches. Spontaneous organizations with a Christian background are very sensitive to the government, and almost no social group with a (house church) Christian background can exist. Pastor Huang Lei described this as Christian churches only being able to fight the epidemic in the cracks.

‘At the end of January, seven house churches in Beijing jointly initiated activities to collect masks, goggles, protective clothing and other materials for the Wuhan churches. The church to receive the donations [from Beijing] was Huang Lei’s church because of its fulsome charity experience in Wuhan. In early February, the police summoned the organizers of this action and warned them to stop this activity. Christians at home and abroad donated a lot of money and supplies to the Wuhan church, hoping that the church could donate these materials to hospitals or individuals. However, many supplies were intercepted by the Red Cross [in China];⁸ the police even went directly to the church to search and confiscate these donations, and the pastor was

taken away by the police “to drink tea.”

‘Pastor Huang Lei’s church also raised a lot of funds and collected supplies and hoped to donate these to the government. However, because Xiashangtang Church is an unregistered house church, the government considers it an illegal organization. Local officials, afraid of inviting trouble [from higher-level officials], refused their donations. As a former doctor, Huang Lei had applied to volunteer at the Wuhan Hospital, where the epidemic was most severe, or to deliver food to patients and medical staff, but these requests were all rejected. On behalf of the Wuhan Pastors Joint Prayer Meeting, Huang Lei launched the National Christian Fasting and Prayer Proposal via video, calling on Christians across the country to fast and pray for three consecutive days from February 3 to 5 in order to stop the epidemic. He also called on Christians to follow the example of the prophet of the Book of Daniel and enter the fiery furnace, and not worship Nebuchadnezzar’s idol. Pastor Huang Lei was consequently warned by the authorities, and the online proposal and video were also deleted.

‘In a telephone interview published in the New York Times,⁹ Huang Lei told Ian Johnson, “In China, the government likes to control all channels for donating money...They don’t like civil society to participate, and especially not faith-based organizations.” Huang Lei told a Radio Free Asia reporter: “A large amount of supplies has piled up at the (Red Cross), and we can’t get them. We’re not able to go through our channel to get the material to the hospital quickly. All we’ve gotten is small items sent through SF Express, probably no more than 5 kilograms. Some things that others sent to us -- the (Red Cross) said that they were returned to sender, some [the Red Cross] said had been requisitioned.”¹⁰

6 Tr. note: For more information on the China Christians ActionLove groups and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake relief efforts see ReliefWeb ‘China earthquake: Love in action’, 23 May 2008 <https://reliefweb.int/report/china/china-earthquake-love-action>

7 Editor’s note: The Jasmine Incident (or Jasmine Revolution) refers to the Chinese pro-democracy protests beginning in February 2011, in which citizens China peacefully gathered together in cities across China. Police violently dispersed crowd and beat journalists; dozens of activists and lawyers were arrested. Wikipedia, 2011 Chinese pro-democracy protests https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Chinese_pro-democracy_protests Wikipedia, 中国茉莉花活 <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E8%8C%89%E8%8E%89%E8%8A%B1%E6%B4%BB%E5%8A%A8>

8 The Red Cross in China is a member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) but is government-controlled. According to political scientist Dali Yang the Red Cross in China is a “quasi-government organization”, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/06/asia/red-cross-china-donations-intl-hnk/index.html>

9 New York Times, ‘Religious Groups in China Step into the Coronavirus Crisis’ 24 February 2020 www.nytimes.com/2020/02/23/world/asia/china-religion-coronavirus-donations.html

10 Radio Free Asia, 中国基督教会在中国参与抗疫, 25 February 2020 (Mandarin) www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/huanjing/cc-02252020153346.html

‘During the epidemic, Pastor Huang Lei’s Xiashangtang Christian Church collected and distributed about 50,000 masks from within China and abroad, thousands of protective suits and 1500 sterilizers, etc. They insisted on donating money to families in need, delivering wood, rice, oil, salt and vegetables, providing protective materials to the elderly in welfare homes, community security and police officers, and ordering two meals a day for the couriers who insisted on working. There are more than 600 house churches in Wuhan. Although the government does not allow them, these churches have nevertheless participated in similar kinds of social assistance to varying degrees.’

Additional research

The researcher also noted other unexpected developments during and after the worst period of the pandemic. In May 2020, Pastor Jin Tianming of Shouwang Church appeared online after nine years under strict (unlawful) ‘house arrest’.

‘Pastor Jin Tianming is the founder of a Beijing house church called Shouwang Church. He established the church in 1993...After the year 2000, Shouwang had grown to twelve meeting locales and more than 1,000 believers, becoming the largest house church in Beijing at that time. As the church expanded and grew, so too did the persecution from the government.’

After their loss of their assembly hall due to government pressure, the church began to meet for worship outdoors. In April 2011, Pastor Jin was placed under 24/7 ‘house arrest’. Two other church leaders were also placed under house arrest, while other members were detained, fired from their jobs and had their rent agreements cancelled. The research also lists other cases of church closure and demolition of crosses and church buildings in Anhui, Henan, Jiangsu and Qinghai Provinces in March and April 2020.

Conclusion

At the end of the report, the researcher concludes that the outlook for unregistered churches in China is bleak: ‘It is not difficult to see from these events that the co-optation, suppression, and banning of Christian house churches are long-term religion strategies of the Chinese government...Churches such as Beijing Shouwang, Beijing Zion, Shanghai All Nations, Chengdu Early Rain, Guiyang Living Stone Church, Guangzhou Bible Reformer Church, Xiamen Xunsiding, etc. have all had common experiences. After the epidemic, the persecution may increase. Some pastors have already been informed in advance that they will be detained and sentenced. In this regard, the attitude of the pastors of these churches is also very clear: they can come to “enforce the law” at any time, and we will obey, but regardless, our worship will never stop.’

The researcher notes that while life has mainly returned to normal in many cities across China (at the time of writing), many churches have still not been allowed to meet together. In addition, ‘There are rumors that high-level Chinese officials are tasking universities to research how to control the spread of Christianity on the Internet. The Chinese government is using new technologies to make totalitarianism pervasive.’

The report ends with a postscript addressed to the international community, and people everywhere who value the right to freedom of religion or belief: ‘Freedom of belief is the most basic freedom of humankind. [We] recommend that European policymakers and international advocacy organizations pay attention to, and support Chinese house churches, and urge the Chinese government to abide by the provisions of the PRC Constitution on the citizens’ right to freedom of belief, and to implement the provisions on religious freedom promised to the international community when China joined the WTO. [We urge that they] condemn and sanction officials of relevant administrative departments such as religious bureaus, guobao, and public security who persecute Christians.’

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

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