

China

Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church

January 2022

Case update

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Pastor Pan leading a church service in Jeju, South Korea

Introduction

In August 2021 CSW published a briefing on the case of Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church. In 2019 dozens of church members, led by Pastor Pan Yongguang, fled from China to Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea following increasing pressure from the authorities on their church and its associated school. The briefing documents the various forms of pressure against the church and the school, including police raids, intrusive monitoring of church activities, interrogation of church leaders, and forced eviction. The briefing also notes that several church members, including Pastor Pan, have received threatening phone calls from unknown persons while in Jeju.

The briefing concludes that the other church members must be protected from forcible repatriation to China, where they face grave threats to their personal safety and freedom, and offered asylum in a country where their right to freedom of religion or belief is protected.

This briefing, published in January 2022, focuses on the psychological implications of the church's situation, in particular the impact on the church's children.

'The police don't need a reason'

Adults and minors in the church experienced significant psychological trauma, both individually and collectively, due to police harassment in China. Adult church members describe feeling afraid every time they met for worship and prayer. Due to constant police surveillance and interference, they say, every knock at the door during a Sunday service was cause for alarm:

'On Sundays in China, when we gathered together, we were scared all the time. If someone knocked on the door, we would immediately feel afraid.'

'We were scared everywhere we went – in our church, during seminary training... We did not feel safe. We locked the door wherever we went.'

On one occasion, a church member was walking through a park when he overheard a group of plainclothes police officers saying 'Tomorrow [Sunday] we have to go to Shenzhen Church to arrest people again. I don't want to go! It's Sunday - it's my free time!' To avoid the raid, the church members decided not to meet together that week.

Other times, the church was not able to avoid a police raid:

'Once a police officer came and caught me and the other brothers [male church members]. They grabbed our arms and would not let us leave. I was very scared. All the kids were crying. The police burst in and caught all the men. There were 50 police officers, and only 60 in our church including the kids. The police took all the men from the

church to the police station. All the women were allowed to stay but the police took down all their ID numbers and phone numbers. At the police station, the police took down the men's IDs and phone numbers. The police didn't give any reason for their actions. In China, if the police want to take you away, they don't need a reason. They say, "Come with me", and you have no choice.'

Several members of the church have previously been temporarily detained and interrogated. Pastor Pan has himself been questioned by the police on numerous occasions and pressured to stop his religious activities.

Even when leaving China and entering the Republic of Korea, church members' memories of past experiences resurfaced. Church members who brought Bibles into the country reported feeling extremely worried about being 'caught' with the Bibles in Korea, despite knowing that possessing a Bible is legal in Korea:

'When we reached Korea, at immigration, they asked us to open our cases. I was scared because I had eight Bibles in my suitcase. If that had been in China, I would have been caught by the police! I asked myself why I hadn't put the Bibles into different suitcases! I was so scared.'

'All the kids were crying'

The psychological impact on the children in the church, aged from just a few months old to teenage, is of particular concern. The teenagers in the church are aware of the restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in China, contrasting Korea and the US as places where they can 'speak freely and think freely'. The teenagers also know Christian friends who were not able to leave China and are now 'being persecuted' and forced to attend government schools. One student said of Christians in China: 'They are in danger. The government is persecuting them.'

At the same time, they have encountered difficulties in Korea, such as the language barrier and moving from place to place. They are also deeply concerned that they will not be able to attend university due to their immigration status in Korea. Their parents share this concern.

Younger children in the church have also been impacted by the Chinese authorities' harassment of the congregation when they were in China. As reported in the August 2021 briefing, on one occasion a teacher saw that the police were coming to inspect the building, and told the children to hide in a cupboard: 'The kids were really scared. Because they were frightened, they stayed quiet [inside the cupboard]. Thankfully the police didn't check too carefully.'

The long-term impact of this kind of experience, coupled with the sudden escape from China, is illustrated by one comment from a parent:

'My eldest son [aged 11] remembers only a few things about China... maybe he only remembers the police bursting in and grabbing people.'

Ongoing harassment: updates

Adult church members deeply value the freedom of corporate worship in Korea, which stands in stark contrast to what their partner churches are suffering in China today. Nevertheless, the harassment by the Chinese government has followed them to Jeju Island.

Pastor Pan and several church members have received threatening phone calls from unknown persons while in Jeju, since their case was reported in the international media. Other church members have been contacted by persons claiming to be from the Consulate telling them to return to China immediately. 'We don't feel safe here,' said one church member in relation to the phone calls. One church member in Jeju has also been contacted by the Korean Consulate in Guangzhou, claiming they were concerned that he had overstayed his visa. Police in China have also questioned church members' families, regardless of their own religious beliefs.

'If we are sent back...'

Foremost in the minds of the church members is the certainty that they cannot safely return to China:

'Things are getting much worse for churches now. If we were still in China, Pastor Pan would be in jail.'

'I think if we had stayed in China, it would be much worse now. They may have arrested us and harassed us. They would do all they could to disrupt our lives. Things would have become worse for us like they did for Early Rain Church. After Early Rain, we would be the next church to be targeted...'

Without a doubt, the situation for unregistered churches in China, and for Christian schools, continues to worsen under the Chinese Communist Party. Each week brings news of further exorbitant fines, severe and sometimes violent harassment, confiscation of property, arrests and – increasingly – lengthy prison sentences for church leaders.

The case of Early Rain Church is illustrative of the kind of violations by the authorities which have become commonplace in China since the revised Regulations on Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect in 2018. Pastor Wang was detained in December 2018

along with over 100 members of Early Rain Church. In December 2019 he was sentenced¹ to nine years in prison on charges of 'inciting to subvert state power' and 'illegal business operations'.

The authorities have continued to exert huge pressure on the remaining members of Early Rain Church at every opportunity. According to a Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church² Facebook post³ dated 2 November 2021, three unidentified men prevented pastoral intern Dai Zhichao's family from leaving their home to go on holiday while accusing his family of attending an 'illegal' church. They were later joined by police who also prevented the family from leaving. The Facebook group had also previously reported⁴ that Dai and another church member called He Shan were placed in administrative detention for 14 days and fined RMB 1,000 (approximately GBP 116) in August after police raided a small group meeting.

Other examples of arbitrary detention of church leaders include that of Pastor Yang Hua of Living Stone Church who was arrested on suspicion of 'divulging state secrets' and later sentenced to two and a half years in prison. He was subjected⁵ to torture and ill-treatment in detention, including death threats from his interrogators and denial⁶ of access to medical care.

Zhang Chunlei, an elder of Love (Ren'ai) Reformed Church in Guiyang in China's southwestern Guizhou province, was officially arrested and accused of fraud after nearly seven weeks in detention beginning on 16 March 2021.

Homeschooling parent Zhao Weikai of Xuncheng Reformed Church in Taiyuan, Shanxi province was officially arrested in July 2021 on charges of 'unlawfully possessing items that advocate terrorism or extremism,' in possibly the first such case involving a church leader in the country.

These cases are illustrative of the human rights violations Pastor Pan and other church members could face if forcibly returned to China.

The need for stability

So far, the church members' asylum claims have been rejected by the Korean authorities. At the time of writing, it is unclear whether their appeals will be successful. The lack of certainty over their future and their safety can only add to the trauma they have experienced: 'We are afraid that they will send us back to China... We feel uncertain here.'

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

2 Facebook, Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church www.facebook.com/prayforearlyrain/

3 Facebook, Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church, 2 November 2021 www.facebook.com/prayforearlyrain/videos/487259358988208/

4 Facebook, Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church, 12 August 2021 www.facebook.com/prayforearlyrain/posts/887284615225719

5 CSW, 'Repressed, Removed, Re-Educated: The stranglehold on religious life in China' www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report

6 CSW, 'Living Stone Church pastor needs medical care', 27 March 2017 www.csw.org.uk/2017/03/27/press/3496/article.htm

As previously mentioned, there is also uncertainty about whether the children will be able to access further education; additionally, without a stable status it is difficult for the church members of working age to find permanent and stable employment, and to cover more significant costs such as medical bills in the case of an emergency.

It is clear that church members, including children, urgently need the stability of a permanent place of safety, without fear of deportation, and without harassment by the Chinese authorities.

CSW reiterates our urgent recommendation that:

- the church members in Jeju be protected from forcible repatriation to China, where they face grave threats to their personal safety and freedom, and
- they are offered asylum in a country where their right to freedom of religion or belief is protected in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18).

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CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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