

China's Urban House Churches Amid the Pandemic¹

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. The plague led to an economic depression, corporate failure, and alienation among people. 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. As the epidemic eases, the intensity and scope of the persecution is expanding.

Xiamen: Xingguang Church's Sunday

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.

Xingguang Church's place of worship is not owned by the church. This space is for Christians to educate their children at home; pooling their resources they bought one of the floors of this residential building for dwelling, worship and to use for the church school. Therefore, this is private property. 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.

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

¹ The author of the report is a researcher with in-depth knowledge of Chinese house churches; all the church or personal information mentioned in the article comes from public channels, or the consent of the interviewee has been obtained.

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. Xiamen has always been considered to be more civilized than other cities in its law enforcement because of its Christian origins. However, due to high administrative pressure, the authorities have ripped off their warm disguise and are starting a fight.

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. In 2017, the Religious Affairs Bureau promulgated the 'Regulations on Religious Affairs', in which Article 4 states: 'The state protects normal religious activities in accordance with the law, and actively guides religions to adapt to socialist society... Article 20 requires that the establishment of venues for religious activities must not violate the provisions of Articles 4 and 5. Beginning in February 1, 2018, the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Public Security Bureau cooperated to enforce the 'Regulations on Religious Affairs', interrogated house churches one by one, and required them to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau. The conditions for registration are to recognize the core values of socialism and to receive guidance from the Religious Affairs Bureau. The purpose of the new 'Regulations on Religious Affairs' is to drive all house churches that don't follow the "state-sanctioned religion" into the Three-Self Church.

Because of the thoroughly atheist position of the Chinese ruling party and the violent governing strategy it advocates, the government has always done its utmost to control Christian minds through the control of religion. The Three-Self Church appeared in this context. They built their own seminaries, trained priests to serve from the rostrum in accord with socialist ideology, by giving interpretations to Christians to inculcate statist and nationalistic indoctrination, and specious explanations of state-church relations. Moreover, they hoist the national flag and sing the national anthem in church.

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 in the name of 'illegal assembly.' In August last year, police and urban management personnel were dispatched to force their way into the meeting place of the Xingguang Church, which was then undergoing renovation, and conduct a search. The Church rejected all of the repeated attempts by the government to enter and search the church without following proper law enforcement procedures. This building is difficult to enter because of the security door at the gate. On the afternoon of November 28 last year, Xiamen Joint Municipal Management Department forcibly removed the security door, claiming 'unauthorized construction'.

According to the experience of other churches, breaking doors is only the first step. The second step is to prevent and interfere with the freedom of citizens to educate their children according to their religious beliefs, and force parents to close down their self-initiated joint education, and force parents to send their children to public schools they don't approve of. This not only violates citizens' right to religious freedom, but it also deprives parents of their right to education with respect to their children. The next [third] step of Xingguang Church is to use legal procedures in order to continue to defend their rights. By gathering in their own homes, the Christians of the Xingguang Church did not violate the Constitution or the health and epidemic prevention regulations. 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 May 3, six Christians were taken to the Xinglin Police Station, and it was 9 o'clock that evening before they were all released. The pastor's wife Xiaofei and other Christians greeted each other. Everyone took a group photo outside the police station, and their bright smiles illuminated the night sky. Xiaofei left a message in Moments [*Tr. note: a social networking app*]: "Going home. Only one king in this world deserves our allegiance and loyalty unto death!"

Fujian was one of the earliest areas where Protestantism first entered China, and Xiamen's Gulangyu Island was a gathering place for early missionaries. It is also the hometown of Christians such as Lin Qiaozhi, Lin Yutang, and Tang Chongrong. 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. Just when the epidemic was over, Fujian could not wait to take a series of actions against Christians. 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. According to Yang Xibo, a preacher from the "No. 5 Xunsiding Church" in Xiamen, during the epidemic, government security personnel kept guard at the No. 5 Xunsiding Church every day. No matter how serious the epidemic was, the Xiamen municipal government still paid close attention to them.

Previously, when one or two friends visited, they were allowed to enter after signing in. In early April, the monitoring suddenly escalated, and no one was allowed to enter. After the Xunsiding Church, a church with a rich historical tradition, was banned in May of last year [2019], the police and security personnel dispatched by the authorities were stationed downstairs at the church for more than a month. On June 30 last year, when the wife of Pastor Yang Xibo of the No. 5 Xunsiding Church brought friends back to the church, a large number of public security officers lined up to form a 'human wall' to block the entryway to the house. As a very able and talented graduate of the law department, she faced the public security officers and denounced the enforcement of the law by the authorities, saying that it was "simple and rough, and without legal basis."

When the epidemic broke out, the Xiamen Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau sent a brief questionnaire to the house churches, which included interesting questions like this: "Do you think the epidemic is because God is angry?"

It is not only the Fujian government that treats house churches this way during the epidemic. In other provinces of China, overall control of house churches has never relaxed. Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus at the end of January this year, tens of millions of Chinese Christians had to give up going to church to worship and switch to online gatherings or small-scale family-style gatherings. Even so, it has still been difficult to escape from the government's pursuit.

Chengdu: Early Rain Covenant Church's Easter

April 12 [2020] was the important Christian holiday of Easter. At 8:30 in the morning, domestic security 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.

After more than two months of strict control, Chengdu first lowered the prevention and control measures of the new coronavirus epidemic from the first-level response to the second-level response, and then on March 25, lowered the second-level response to the third-level response. This signified that citizens 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.

In the December 9 crackdown at the end of 2018, Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church lost its assembly hall and pastor. Pastor Wang Yi and Elder Qin Defu were sentenced to 9 and 4 years, respectively. Many long-time co-workers are still on bail pending trial. Members can only persist in gathering in their homes or online in light of the long-term one-on-one or even several (officers)-on-one personal tracking and monitoring by police and *guobao* 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'. The *guobao* officers even said, "You can meet in the name of spring rain, summer rain, and winter rain, but you can't meet in the name of autumn rain!" [*Tr. note: "autumn rain" (qiuyu) is the literal translation of the church's name.*]

Although the personal monitoring of some Christians was slightly relaxed during the worst period of the epidemic, for the most 'stubborn' Christians, even on [Lunar] New Year's Eve, 30 *guobao* officers placed a sofa [to sit on while they monitored the Christians] at the door of one of their homes. Before the Spring Festival on February 21st, at the time of the worst outbreak, a member of the church was visited by five people including *guobao* and their ilk, demanding that they not be overly concerned about Pastor Wang Yi's mother, and not to buy Spring Festival products for her; they also demanded that they not organize activities in the name of Early Rain Covenant Church (*qiuyu*), and that they not mention the epidemic and any connection with Wang Yi. On March 11, Brother Lan and his family, who live in Chengdu's Longquanyi district were threatened by the Damian Town police in Longquanyi District; officers came to their home and forced them to leave the Early Rain Covenant Church and send their children to public schools. At that time, Brother Lan's

wife was pregnant with triplets and was about to give birth. The police were picking the lock of the door, while a police car and an ambulance were parked downstairs. She was frightened, and said, "We didn't call an ambulance; we were afraid we'd be taken away, under the pretense of isolation, but actually detained."

On March 25, the day Chengdu lowered its response level to the third-level response, Sister Chen Yan was followed by two *guobao* just after leaving her home. Chen Yan is also known as Mrs. Xiao. Her family has been continuously tracked and monitored by the *guobao* for 16 months since December 9 [2018], regardless of whether it's Spring Festival or the epidemic period. Due to the unbearable harassment, on April 8, Mrs. Xiao decided to use the law to protect her rights. She called three times to make a report to the police and demand that her case be filed, but the police station refused. The police even told her: "Don't talk about the law; it's work [we're just doing our jobs]." Afterwards, she continuously posted messages on social media, "Mrs. Xiao wants to sue", indicating that she will continue to defend her rights.

In such a difficult environment, most of them still refuse to give up their faith and they use limited cyberspace to persist in fellowship and gatherings, especially during the epidemic. However, even such a limited space cannot be tolerated by the government. After the Spring Festival this year, the Chengdu police repeatedly threatened the believers of the church to stop gathering on the grounds of "the resurgence of the Early Rain Covenant Church". If they refused to comply, then the police would take measures such as cutting off their electricity and water, or sending them to administrative detention. One of the staff whose power was cut off by the police was unable to participate in online worship. As a house church, Early Rain not only uses network technology to guide Christians, but also hopes to spread the gospel to more people. During the epidemic, they organized many online evangelism meetings jointly with other house churches. Most of these sermons went smoothly, but occasionally encountered technical interference that led to an audio jam, or closure of the live streaming room, or the blocking of the live stream room number.

Of course, there was also obstruction caused by humans. On April 21, Ran Yunfei was the main speaker for a meeting of the preaching of the gospel on the internet. In order to prevent his lecture, police took Ran away in advance, leading to the last-minute change of the sermon's content. After the gathering ended, Ran Yunfei was released and went home. Ran Yunfei leads quite a few reading groups to help Christians and religious investigators mature. He said that he has been 'drinking tea' [*Tr. note: summoned by police for a chat*] for twenty years, but the amount of tea he has drunk during the past year has often doubled. Just as there were *guobao* and police listening to sermons every Sunday before the church was demolished, they believed that their Zoom group may also have cyber-police in attendance and hoped that some of them would change accordingly.

Wuhan: "ActionLove" Thwarted by the Epidemic

On the eve of the Spring Festival, a sudden virus attacked Wuhan, like a flood breaching a dike. Wuhan became a synonym for the city of death. When fear spread uncontrollably in the city, at the end of January, Huang Lei, the pastor of Wuhan's Xiashangtang Christian Church, recorded a video in an empty church, encouraging Christians to think about eternal life, bravery, and helping each other amid the disaster, to be a witness for Christ. Pastor Huang Lei's testimony was calm, powerful, and inspiring, and quickly spread over the Internet.

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”² 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 erupted³. 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]⁴; 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.

² Tr. note: For more information on the China Christians ActionLove groups and the 2008 Wenchuan Earthquake relief efforts see <https://reliefweb.int/report/china/china-earthquake-love-action>

³ Editor's note: The Jasmine Incident (or Jasmine Revolution) refers to the Chinese pro-democracy protests beginning in February 2011, in which citizens peacefully gathered together in cities across China. Police violently dispersed crowds and beat journalists; dozens of activists and lawyers were arrested. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_Chinese_pro-democracy_protests; <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>

⁴ 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>

In a telephone interview published in the New York Times, Huang Lei told Ian Johnson,⁵ "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."⁶

During the epidemic, Pastor Huang Lei's Xiashangtang Church 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. Recently, there have been signs in Wuhan of the epidemic's return, and the control of a few communities has returned to levels seen during the most severe period.

But most areas are relatively safe. The online worship of most churches in Wuhan was not disturbed during the epidemic, but like the fate of other cities in China, Wuhan house churches have never had legal status. It seems, however, that they have tacitly been permitted to exist, but they are always at risk of being banned. Last year, more than a dozen Wuhan house churches were banned. Despite the grim reality, those house churches in Wuhan that refuse to join the Three-Self Church and refuse to register with the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau will stick it out until the very last moment.

Beijing: Pastor Jin Tianming appeared online after nine years under 'house arrest' (*ruanjin*)

On May 4, 2020, Beijing announced the lifting of the first-level response to the new coronavirus epidemic and initiated the second-level response. Just four days later, Pastor Jin Tianming, who has been under [unlawful] 'house arrest' for nine years, appeared on Zoom. He was one of three keynote speakers participating in an online citywide pastoral forum called "History and Inheritance"; many Christians who were concerned about him could finally see him via the Internet. This forum was initiated by several house church pastors who had the idea to use network technology to share the history of the city's house churches and encourage Christians to strengthen their faith during the epidemic.

Pastor Jin Tianming is the founder of a Beijing house church called Shouwang Church. He established the church in 1993. At first, there were only twenty or thirty Christians worshipping and studying at home. As the number of people increased, they began renting residences for gatherings in residential buildings. 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. Since 1999, Pastor Jin Tianming has experienced drop-in 'talks' with the police, being invited to "drink tea" by the police, warnings, intimidation, temporary detention and long-term 'house arrest' (*ruanjin*). On May 11,

⁵ Ian Johnson, "Religious Groups in China Step into the Coronavirus Crisis," *New York Times*, February 24, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/23/world/asia/china-religion-coronavirus-donations.html>.

⁶ <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/huanjing/cc-02252020153346.html>

2008, Pastor Jin Tianming carried a suitcase to preach; at that time, he was prepared to pay the price. An assembly hall that the church had purchased was forcibly returned; the government coerced the real estate company to cancel the sale. After losing the assembly hall, they persisted in worshipping outdoors. From the day of the Sunday worship in Zhongguancun Square on April 10, 2011, Pastor Jin Tianming was placed under 24/7 'house arrest' (*ruanjin*) with three shifts. From the main gate to the elevator and then to the door of Pastor Jin's home, there were three guard posts. Two years later, due to the serious decline of Jin Tianming's physical constitution, after numerous applications, he was finally granted permission to walk downstairs for two hours a day.

At the same time, Pastor Xiaofeng and Elder Sun Yi of the church were also under 'house arrest' (*ruanjin*). The believers of the church have calmly faced being taken into custody, unemployment, and rent cancellations for many years, and have long insisted on outdoor worship. The number of members decreased from over 1,000 to 300 plus. After being banned by the Beijing Municipal Government in March 2019, all members of Shouwang returned to their small groups, and went underground.

At the May 4 and May 11 online fora, Pastor Jin Tianming shared the history of urban house churches in China and Shouwang Church. In order to encourage urban house churches, he discussed how rural churches in China endured persecution for a long time without compromising and gained the right to worship. Chinese house churches appeared in the 1950s, and because of the Christians' refusal to join the official church, they spontaneously and loosely established places to meet in homes, fields, and even caves. "House church" is the collective term for this kind of non-governmental, 'people-to-people' Christian church organization. This name and phenomenon is the result of Christians' adherence to freedom and autonomy. In this sense, house churches are the forerunners of civil society. This is what scares the Chinese government the most.

On Zoom, everyone was gratified to find that although Pastor Jin Tianming looked a bit older, his nine-year loss of freedom had failed to take away his gentleness and peace, and his faith was as firm as ever. He said he was particularly grateful that many church members got married during the epidemic, and more than a dozen people went abroad to study theology. Although they cannot meet normally and steadily, there are more and more committed members. During the lecture, an express delivery courier knocked on his door. Pastor Jin Tianming said humorously that it was only very recently that he obtained this right. During the past nine years, he could not accept express deliveries. He pointed to a small red mark on his face and said that this was the result of an intense conflict with the *guobao* police after he went out to attend a small group meeting nearby.

Greater persecution after the epidemic, or on the horizon

The following are incidents of religious persecutions that have occurred in various places since the outbreak of the epidemic:

On March 9, 2020, in Anhui province, Bengbu City, the Huaishang District, the government began to demolish crosses;

On March 10, at 4 a.m., the Shangqiu Municipal Religious Bureau of Henan Province, together with Zhecheng County government personnel and police, in total over 200 people, used two excavators to forcibly demolish the Christian Church in Xiazhuang, Dawu Township.

On March 11, Jiangsu province, Yixing Xiangbaishu Church was demolished by the government;

On March 13, the cross of the Guoyang Christian Church in Bozhou, Anhui province was forcibly demolished;

On March 14, Pastor Zhao Huaiguo of Bethel House Church in Cili County, Zhangjiajie City, Hunan Province, was given administration detention for the crime of "inciting subversion of state power" by using software to scale the Great Firewall to browse foreign media reports on the epidemic in Wuhan. On April 2, Pastor Zhao was formally arrested.

On April 1, the cross of a Christian church in Fuyang, Anhui, with a history of more than 100 years, was forcibly demolished;

On Easter, April 12, the East Lake Church on Shengli Road, Chengxi District, Xining City, Qinghai Province was forcibly demolished by the local urban construction department on the grounds of violations of regulations and a collection of hidden safety hazards;

On April 13, the Antioch Church in Zhengzhou was banned by the Civil Affairs Bureau; on April 15, the cross on the Sanhe Church in Feixi, Hefei City, Anhui Province was forcibly demolished;

On April 27, the cross on the 120-year-old Anhui Hefei Christian Church was forcibly demolished.

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. Even during the severe period of the epidemic, the government on occasion interrogated or detained house church pastors, and some pastors were taken away for compelled "tourism" on some sensitive days. For a long time, the government has also threatened, intimidated, investigated, and summoned Christians in these churches. Fines and forced evictions are also the government's tricks to shatter urban house church collective gatherings, forcing out pastors or believers who establish churches in other places, destroying their peaceful lives.

In 2018, after Pastor Huang Xiaoning of the Guangzhou Bible Reformer Church was forced to relocate and looked for a new house to rent, he asked the landlord if he dared to rent his house to the pastor of a house church. The landlord must be able to withstand pressure and not take back the house due to pressure from the relevant departments. He said: "No matter what your religious belief is, I hope the landlord will have integrity and backbone."

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.

During the epidemic, these churches were persecuted, while at the same time participating in the provision of aid to Wuhan, while also using the Internet to study the Bible, conduct academic lectures, and spread the gospel. To the contrary, the Three-Self Church issued a notice demanding that online live streaming of sermons stop, and that each church should be checked to prevent private gatherings. However, long-term inability to meet offline (i.e., in real life) will cause damage to the faith. Many pastors stated that many cities have basically returned to normal, but only the churches have not resumed operations. The government may take the opportunity of the epidemic

to deprive Christians of their right to worship. 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.

From the Chinese government's suppression of Christian house churches during the epidemic, we can see that house churches, which are caring, truthful, organized, structured, and able to bring peace to Chinese society, and insist on God instead of the Chinese Communist Party as the highest sovereign, are a major obstacle to the Chinese government's dictatorship. Therefore, the elimination of independent house churches is a long-term and lasting religious strategy of the Chinese government. The official model is still that the Ethnic Affairs and Religious Bureau jointly with the police, *guobao* and communities, detain, summon, threaten, intimidate, seal churches, tear down crosses, and use other violent methods to gradually dissolve all house churches. House churches will also continue to resist using non-violent and non-cooperative methods. The new coronavirus will affect the relationship between China and the West, especially Sino-US relations. Under pressure from the United States and some European countries, the Chinese government will transfer this pressure to the house churches [because] as the already imprisoned Pastor Wang Yi of the Chengdu Early Rain Covenant Church said, Christians are hostages in the hands of the Chinese government.

Postscript: 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.