

Annual Report for 'The Friends of the Church in China' (FCC)

December 2023

Introduction:

In some ways, 2023 felt like 'getting back to normal'. That is predominantly because the year included visits from Chinese friends to the UK, and several visits by FCC members to friends in China.

But there is also a sense that this is 'a new normal'. There were member meetings both in-person (in January) and on-line (in May). The committee now regularly meets online (thereby saving time and money in travelling to London). In November the Annual meeting was FCC's first attempt at a 'hybrid' meeting - members met at St Martin's in the Field in London while a good number of others joined the meeting online. Repeating the pattern from 2022, the keynote speaker was from East Asia – this time Dr Philip Wickeri addressed the meeting from Hong Kong.

At the annual business meeting in November, there were significant changes in office holders. The Revd John Austen assumed the role of chair, and Mrs Dot Stone the role of General Secretary. The previous officers (Godfrey Stone and Ian Blaney) had both completed their six-year terms of service as per the FCC constitution. What follows in this report is arranged in sections, reflecting some of the key strands in FCC's current life and work:

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Amity Foundation (and European Network of Amity Partners)

In May and June, FCC was delighted to host a visit by Ms LuYi. She is a key member of the Amity communications team. Her aim was to understand the way in which UK-based charities in England and Scotland communicate with their supporters. She used five weeks very effectively to visit 12 locations, 18

large and small charities and 7 on-site projects. The visit also broadened LuYi's cultural understanding of life in the British Isles (Left: she encountered rhubarb, and made, and enjoyed, a rhubarb crumble)

Culture Experience



During May, Angela Evans (FCC vice-chair) attended a meeting of the European Network of Amity Partners (ENAP) in Helsinki.

While Amity no longer depends on western sources for its funding, the senior staff at Amity in Nanjing

very much appreciate the sharing of skills and information that ENAP allows. FCC is a small player, but 'punches above its weight', particularly with hosting developmental visits by staff members (see right for when staff spent time in the UK). The FCC committee acknowledges that the once-important 'Summer English Programme' is no longer able to introduce new people to life in China. However, our friend She Hongyu did remind us that the English language remains "FCC's 'natural gift'" and wonders how we can find new ways to develop this gift.

Amity staff FCC's guests

April-July 2009 Ling Chunxiang
Feb-May 2011 Tan Hua
Feb-May 2013 Zhou Liting
Feb-May 2015 Li Ling

Also:

April-June 2019 Xie Jie
May-June 2023 Lu Yi.



Membership and Communication issues (and keeping in touch with friends)

During 2023, the Membership Secretary concluded a process of revising the FCC membership records. The result is an active membership of over 130. These members are scattered across the British Isles (i.e. including Ireland), with some in Germany and Hong Kong. Sheila Norris takes over this role from the end of 2023. Over recent years, an attempt has been made to exchange greetings with our friends in China at key times in the year (for example Christmas, Chinese New Year, Easter, the Graduation season, Mid-Autumn Festival). There is scope for developing this aspect of FCC's work.

We have found in both Fujian Province (in the southeast of China) and in Shandong Province (in north-east China – see right) an emphasis on tea-drinking as a focus for meeting friends.

The Church Council chair in Shandong, Dr Gao Ming (bottom right), wrote his D.Min thesis on this topic, exploring the potential for developing this within the life of contemporary Chinese churches.

Meanwhile the FCC website continues to be an introduction to the work of the charity (www.thefcc.org). Members have also received a couple of 'Updates' during the year in addition to the Annual Report. These reports are now mainly sent electronically, though we are glad to send a paper copy to the handful of members who prefer it that way. Accompanying the news 'Update', members have also received a prayer diary (right) to express and sustain FCC's vision to be a fellowship of prayer with the Chinese churches.

The flip side of having a number of older members is that occasional generous financial legacies come FCC's way. Such contributions have in recent years given the charity a secure financial position. Regular subscriptions cover the basic annual running costs, and this legacy income (combined with grants from partners, and specific gifts from members) has enabled significant support to be offered to a handful of key community projects in China. This in turn strengthens the relationships between FCC in the British Isles and churches and other partners in China. (NB: The FCC annual accounts show that expenditure exceeds income – this is a deliberate policy as FCC seeks to put its funds to good use).

Charitable gifts to key projects in China

FCC is grateful to our partners the Scottish Churches China Group (SCCG) for introducing us to the Barbour Trust. The Barbour Trustees have supported some of FCC's community projects over recent years, especially in 2023 the following four projects:

- **1000 days** (end of phase 1): The project concerns the first 1000 days of a baby's life. Its **aim is** to reduce maternal and child health risks and improve overall population quality. This project was undertaken in rural areas within SW China by our Chinese partner 'The Amity Foundation'. The three parts of the first phase of this work were successfully concluded by March 2023. It attracted significant funding from within China. The FCC contribution, while financially comparatively small, was deeply



Mr and Mrs Gao preside at a simple 'tea ceremony' to welcome UK guests.



Church and State

Day 6: Praying for senior leaders in China, to discern God's way through the daily challenges.

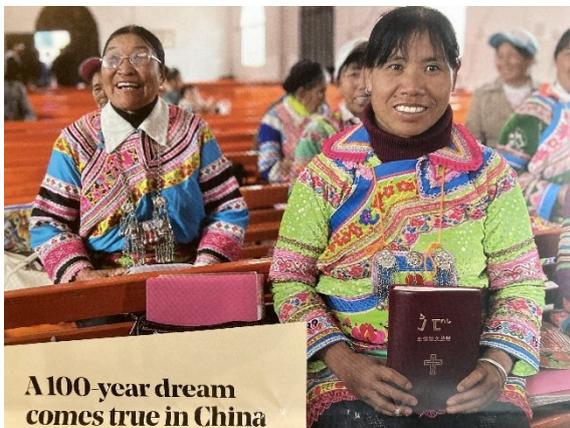


appreciated as an expression of a partnership with Amity that has lasted 39 years. FCC continues to be glad to channel money into SW China where several former members have served in the past.

- Bible translation into minority languages:** This is a large and ongoing, long-term project. It entails partnership between the Chinese churches (both nationally and locally) and theologically trained personnel both from within and beyond China. In SW China and northern China, there are minority languages (like the Lisu) in which a translation of the Bible is either absent, or in need of significant revision. There are also communities where minority language speakers appreciate audio materials to help them understand the Bible. One of the challenges of this work is currently that a new translation must wait for approval from government before it can be published.



Leading Chinese Bible scholar Dr Simon Wong (centre), Arleen (far right) and the East Lisu translation team. It took the team 12 years to translate the entire Bible.



At a time when centralisation is a dominant theme politically (and where a preference for the Mandarin language as the standard usage throughout the People's Republic is being emphasised), permission for the publication of literature in minority languages can take a long time to obtain.

(With thanks to Arleen Luo Lan of the British and Foreign Bible Society (Swindon, UK) for the photos relating to the Lisu church and language).

- HIV/AIDS project in Xi'an, Sha'anxi Province:** This project has now been going for 16 years. Elder He Qicong is the person who sustains this project, which gets very favourable reports from the Social Service department of the China Christian Council (CCC) in Shanghai. Elder He works with migrant workers and others on the streets of Xi'an, providing information about disease, and offering



Testing for HIV/AIDS and Venereal disease

Outreach on the streets



opportunities for testing. The age/social profile of those infected by HIV/AIDS is focussed on young men who are migrant workers, university students and (perhaps more surprisingly) older men (over 55 or 60 years of age). Elder He believes that their 'unofficial' status gives local people greater confidence in them than some of the 'official' government health services.

The work depends on volunteers from within the churches or from the local universities. Students at the latter, of course, regularly move on, so there is a continual need for training of new workers (some of whom are people who have themselves benefitted from the project). The reports this



year have particularly emphasised aspects of mental health, and how those who have tested ‘positive’ have sometimes needed, and benefitted from, intensive support over several months.



- **Cascading Project:** This project is developing well alongside the HIV project. The essential vision is for the skills and experience gained over 16 years in Xi’an to be offered to (at present) 10 other churches. These churches in turn choose a suitable focus for their community project, and with help from Elder He and his team, gain the necessary skills and knowledge to do this work effectively. Community ‘ministry’ of this sort is seen as valuable by the State. Some of those involved in training Christian pastors in Sha’anxi Bible school refer to this project as a model of good practice for new leaders, combining as it does a practical and a pastoral approach. However, many churches are unfamiliar with what is entailed in conducting a successful community project, so a lot of input and support is necessary.
- **Financial comment:** The end of year report from Xi’an shows that the support coming jointly from FCC and the Barbour Trust in 2023 together accounted for 10% of the budget of the HIV AIDs project, and about 5% of the Cascading project. The contributions were, therefore, significant for the work they are doing in both projects. However, FCC understands that (while the projects are both producing excellent outcomes) CCC is unlikely in the future to be able to channel funds into these two projects. The committee will review the situation early in 2024.

Education for theological students and staff

This year, four FCC members were able to visit six Seminaries / Bible schools – mainly in the east, north and centre of China. In many cases, this was re-connecting with friends with whom FCC had previous connections. In Beijing (at the Yanjing seminary) we met Luo Chengzan who spent some weeks in the England in 2018 in preparation for completing his ThD research. He is now teaching Patristics – and always appreciates access to new theological books!

In the central south (Zhongnan) seminary in Wuhan, we were warmly

Rev'd Zhu Zhiguo, and Dr 'Sarah' Zhang Xuelin together lead Hubei CC and Zhongnan seminary.



received. FCC hopes to support the development of their library in partnership with SCCG. The new campus is a great resource, and student numbers are slowly increasing year by year. However, the new chapel is still not completed. Nor is there yet permission to use it – they hope one day that it will both serve the seminary’s needs, and also be a place where local people can come to worship.



In the Hua Dong (east China) seminary in Shanghai, the Principal Xie Bingguo welcomed us with staff members including Chen Qirui. Their well-stocked library includes a separate section containing significant archive material about the development of the church in China.



John and Godfrey visit the Library (with its important archived resources) at the **Hua Dong seminary in Shanghai.**



While we were in Shanghai, we also met a local graduate student Karen Quan Shaohua, who commended the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (d1610) as a model for Christian engagement with Chinese culture. With his close friend Xu Guangxi, Ricci had mastered Chinese language and literature.

In many of the seminaries, we saw evidence of an equivalent process today as Christian leaders reflect on the development of Christian faith in China and re-tell their story in ways that make connections with aspects of contemporary Chinese culture.

In Jinan, we were warmly greeted by a group of faculty members from the Shandong Seminary (right) whom we have got to know over the last decade. During that time, since 2016, pastor Du Nana has been pursuing her studies in the UK. FCC accompanied her through the master's programme in Edinburgh, and then through her doctoral studies in the Old



Meeting students in the library at the Shandong Theological Seminary in Jinan

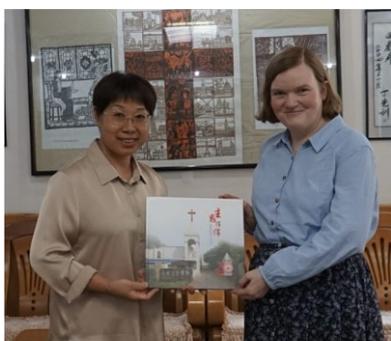


Testament. We wish her well as she has now returned to

Jinan to complete her thesis in preparation for her viva exam, and then in readiness to resume teaching. Meanwhile her colleagues have continued their development as seminary teachers – some also undertaking further education abroad.

The seminary now has a research department (called 'Qilu', after a traditional name for Shandong) through which they will continue to explore ways of making connections with their local cultures.

Lydia is presented with proposals for future developments at the **Sha'anxi Bible School** by the Revd Principal Wang Hong.



A new visit in 2023 was to the Bible school in Xi'an. Students are drawn from the north-west of China as well as from their own province. The designation 'Bible College' indicates a lower academic level than seminary, but reflects a positive missional spirituality that echoes aspects of their 19th century founders.

The national Jinling seminary in Nanjing has seen a slight *decrease* in undergraduate numbers this year. But Dr Wang Jiawei (who was also a guest of FCC in 2018) is now supervising the graduate students where there has been a significant *increase* in numbers. There are over 100 graduate students, mainly studying for a master's degree. But also, some are aiming for a Doctor of Ministry degree (D Min), and there is a distinct cohort of Doctor of Theology (ThD) students. It is people in this last group whom FCC hopes to host, and for this eventuality a budget has already been allocated. We keep in touch with Dr Lin Manhong (who directs the theological education programmes in China) and await the time when this proposal; can be implemented.



This year has seen a few of short-term visits to Britain by Chinese scholars.

- Meng Xiangjiao came to the UK from Helsinki where he spent two years of his doctoral programme. At the January meeting, he spoke about his study of ecumenical liturgy (he had earlier learned a lot

through a visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva). He has now returned to Minzu University in Beijing where he is being supervised by Professor You Bin.



(You Bin has been leading several Provincial Christian Councils in developing their theological thinking. He spoke to us of the way he draws parallels between the lifelong pattern of moral development seen in traditional Confucian thought with the Christian emphasis on a maturing discipleship with a growing life of prayer in the name of the triune God).



- Zhang Xinyu (& his wife Ma Runzhi, who was studying John Wesley) was studying at Tyndale House Cambridge for six-months. He was on extension from Singapore. Having completed his doctorate in the Old Testament books of Chronicles, Xinyu is now teaching at Fuzhou seminary in Fujian Province. Runzhi is also a teacher in the same seminary while still completing her masters.

Along with Arleen Luo (from BFBS), Xiangjiao and Xinyu joined Feng Duanren (referred to FCC by Will Newman in HongKong) at an in-person meeting in January at SMITF. Each scholar took one aspect of their work and spoke about it. Arleen then gave a helpful overview of the work of the Bible Society in relation to China, and (quoting the research of Dr Huang Yinxuan) to Chinese people living in Britain.

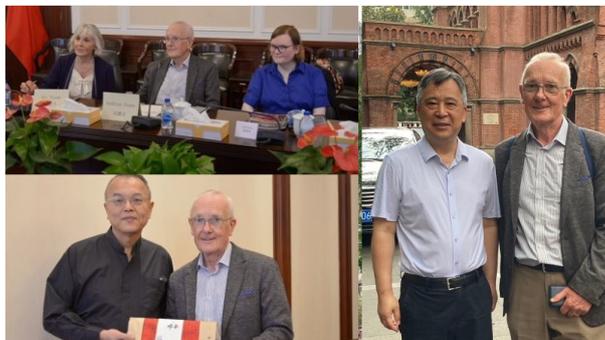
The FCC committee is glad to report that Arleen Luo has since then accepted their invitation to become a permanently co-opted member of the committee, alongside Patricia Johnson (of SCCG) and Father Pat O'beirne (of the Roman Catholic Columban brothers).

A final prayerful thought: We asked Chinese friends teaching in one seminary how best FCC members can pray for them. Among other things, they mentioned:

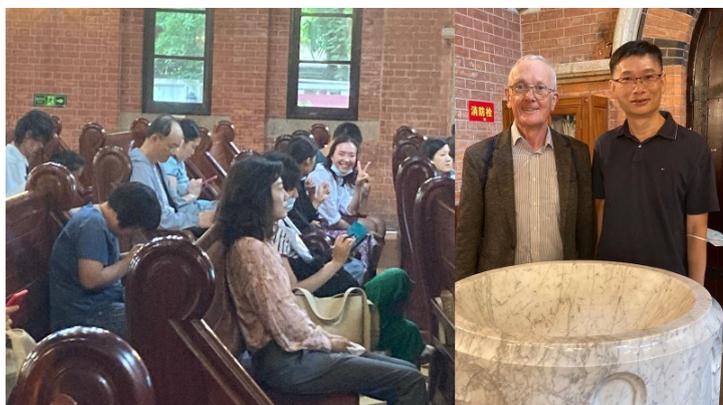
- the challenge of obtaining up to date theological books,
- the need for more people to become pastors and teachers,
- the financial difficulty some rural pastors face in retirement,
- the long time it takes to obtain permission to teach new courses,
- and for the right people to take up the opportunities of visiting friends overseas.

Anecdotal reflections on church life in China 2023

FCC has had a long-term relationship with the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC). It will be forty years in 2024 since FCC was founded. Prior to the visits in 2023, staff at CCC worked hard to prepare the way with local officials and local church leaders for many parts of our visit. We thank Revd Shen Xuebin (vice chair CCC) and his colleagues for this valuable work.



- Recovery after the Covid pandemic. As in the British Isles, some churches are having to work hard to regain the congregations in-person that they had prior to the pandemic. One large Shanghai church reported that they were operating at 70% pre-pandemic levels of attendance. One key church in Wuhan had reduced from three services each Sunday to just one service. However it has now restarted a second service (though interestingly they have chosen a midweek evening when they think a different clientele will be available).



- Baptisms: One of the encouraging aspects of church visit was that good numbers of people are being baptised across the churches that we visited. We found that 50 baptisms had taken place this year in a medium sized church in Wuhan; 140 baptisms in a large church in Qingdao, and in the newly opened Holy Trinity church in Shanghai, they had a baptism class of 70 that followed the morning service (left).

Pastor Gao Yongliang, chair of Qingdao CC, with two newly baptised young ladies ... now over 18.



Of course, these are all adults (those under 18 are not allowed to be baptised and are officially prevented from attending church). People we asked had been baptised at the age of 19, or in their early 20s, or later if they had become Christians later in life. Indeed, one church had a lot of people being baptised who were in the 'retired' age group.

(We observed some children at the entry gate of one church (right). It appeared that they were being kept waiting. We never saw whether they were allowed in or not.

We were told that in other churches, parents are provided with helpful printed resources to train their children as Christian disciples)



Telling the history of the church

In Hubei province, we found that the church is keen to re-tell the story of the missionaries from overseas who came up the river, living sacrificially, and opening schools, building hospitals and planting churches. They gladly look back to that time as the beginning of their Christian life, as do the church leaders in Xi'an.

They are also very aware of the earlier first phase of missionary work into China – in the 7th century (assuming this took place around AD 635, it is earlier than the first evangelisation of some parts of the UK). The seminary in Wuhan has recently erected a copy of the 'Nestorian stele' (right). The original of this famous stele is found in Xi'an, and commemorates the work of Aluoben, sent by the Eastern Syrian monastic movement to share the light of Christ in the former city of Chang'an.



Aluoben was AD 635
Frideswide 700s;
Theodore of Tarsus 690;
Chad 670;
Birinush 650.

By contrast with this, we found other churches who remember, but less happily, the origins of the Chinese Protestant church at a time of colonial domination on the east coast. This is all part of a unified move, displayed in churches and seminaries all over the area we visited, to tell the story of the church's origins. We were grateful that the longer term, and sacrificial, strands were being remembered alongside this more painful and difficult aspects of our shared history.

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