



The Future of the Church in Hong Kong

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THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN HONG KONG IS A MATTER OF CONCERN TO MANY people, for the church, as well as the people of Hong Kong, are facing the issue of 1997—on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong, now a British colony, will become a Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China. This is a dramatic political change. Although Hong Kong is a colony, its present government is a democratic government with Christian traditions. However, the People's Republic of China is the largest communist regime in the world and has a poor record for its persecution of the church. With this great change, many believe that the church in Hong Kong will not have a bright future. But things may not be as simple as some may think. Although no one can guarantee a bright future for the church in Hong Kong, many opportunities have been opened up to

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In Chinese, "crisis" means both "danger" and "opportunity." Both danger and opportunity will face the churches of Hong Kong in the crisis of their new political situation after July 1, 1997. The churches will have a crucial role in Hong Kong's development as a region of the People's Republic of China.

Christians here in facing the crisis of 1997. In Chinese, “crisis” means both “danger” and “opportunity.” In this essay, I will give a brief account of the situation of the church in Hong Kong and try to depict its difficulties and opportunities in facing the future.

I. THE SITUATION OF THE CHURCH IN HONG KONG

The British army landed on Hong Kong Island on February 25, 1841, during the Opium War. On August 29, 1842, the Treaty of Nanking was signed by the Chinese and the British governments, precipitating the occupation of Hong Kong by the British. Within days of the British landing, a party of missionaries came from Macau¹ to look over the island to see whether Hong Kong would be a suitable place for their work. In February 1842, a Baptist missionary, the Rev. Issachar J. Roberts, became the first missionary to move from Macau to take up permanent residence in Hong Kong. In the following forty years, missionaries from the London Missionary Society, the Anglican Church Missionary Society, the Basel, Rhenish, and Berlin Missionary Societies, the American Congregational Church, and the British Methodist Church arrived at Hong Kong.² During this period, the churches in Hong Kong had two characteristics: (1) running schools and providing medical service, and (2) using Hong Kong as a stepping stone for entering China to do missionary work. With this background, the church in Hong Kong has had a long tradition of educational and social ministry as well as maintaining a close relationship with the churches in China.

According to a Hong Kong government report,³ in 1995 there were in the territory around 255,000 Catholics and 260,000 protestants in over 1,000 congregations of more than 50 denominations, plus a large number of independent churches. The protestant organizations operate three post-secondary colleges, 121 secondary schools, 146 primary schools, and 233 kindergartens. They also run seven hospitals with 3,463 beds, 24 clinics, and 61 social service organizations, which provide a wide range of social services for people of all walks of life. The Catholic church, which has been present in Hong Kong since 1841, runs 272 schools and kindergartens, six hospitals, 17 clinics; the official social welfare arm of the Catholic church—Caritas—operates 14 multi-social service centers, three hostels, eight homes for the aged, two homes for the handicapped, and various service units in different parts of Hong Kong. The church in Hong Kong spontaneously expressed concern over social issues; these included the hygiene issue in 1894,⁴ the

¹Macau is only 64 km. from Hong Kong; it has been a Portuguese colony since the sixteenth century. Since Portugal is a Catholic country, the Roman Catholic Church has enjoyed privileges there that protestant churches do not have.

²See Carl T. Smith, *Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: OUP, 1985) 2-6.

³B. Howlett, ed., *Hong Kong 1996: A Review of 1995 and Pictorial Review of the Past Fifty Years* (Hong Kong: Government Printing Department, 1996) 334-5.

⁴Chee-kong Lee, “A Historical Study on the Political Role of the Church in Hong Kong,” in *A Study of Hong Kong Churches* (Hong Kong: Taosheng, 1987) 164-5 (in Chinese).

petition for the abolition of the sale of opium in the early years of the twentieth century,⁵ and the anti-*mui-tsai* campaign in 1921-1938.⁶ Christian concern for social issues seemed to be silent during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and in the period when refugees flooded in from China in the late '40s and early '50s. However, as social problems became more serious when the refugees had to stay in Hong Kong, the church was very responsive. Not only was relief work provided, particularly pioneered by Bishop Ronald Hall of the Anglican Church,⁷ but various housing schemes were launched by different denominations a full six years before the Hong Kong government embarked on the first public housing project in 1954. After the riots in 1966 and 1967, which broke out from problems relating mainly to youth and industrial workers in Hong Kong, the Christian Industrial Committee, aiming at enhancing the rights of workers, was established under the auspices of the Hong Kong Christian Council. It has eventually become a pioneer organization for social movement of Hong Kong. Since the last few years of the 1970s, Christians have become more and more active in social issues, including those related to the livelihood of low-income people, gambling, pornography, human rights, and social justice. Various Christian groups have been organized to advocate Christian social concern, such as the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, Christians for Hong Kong Society, and the Hong Kong Christian Institute. During the Sino-British negotiations on the future of Hong Kong (1981-84), three public documents explicating Christian views on the future of Hong Kong were released.⁸ At the time of the student demonstration in Tiananmen Square in 1989, a coalition of Christians was formed (the Hong Kong Christian Patriotic Democratic Movement) to support the development of democracy in Hong Kong and China. In other words, Christian people and the churches of Hong Kong have developed their own pattern of social concern in response to different situations at different times. Not only are they providing diverse institutional social and educational services, they have also been actively participating in social actions with the goal of influencing government policy for the betterment of society.⁹

⁵M. H. Berndt, "The Diakonia Function of the Church in Hong Kong" (STD thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1970) 50.

⁶Chee-kong Lee, "The Influence and History of the Hong Kong Anti-*mui-tsai* Society," *Theology and Life* 5 (December 1982) 27-40 (in Chinese). See also Carl T. Smith, "The Chinese Church, Labor, Elites and the *Mui Tsai* Question in the 1920s," *The Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 21 (1981); also in Carl T. Smith, *A Sense of History: Studies in the Social and Urban History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: H. K. Educational Press, 1995) 240-265.

⁷See D. Paton, *The Life and Times of Bishop Hall of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Anglican Diocese, 1985).

⁸All three documents (in Chinese; English translation is available) were released in 1984, just before the conclusion of the Sino-British negotiation on the future of Hong Kong. They are: "A Manifesto of the Protestant Churches on the Religious Freedom," "The Conviction Held by Christians in Hong Kong in the Midst of Contemporary Social and Political Change," and "A Position Paper on the Future of Hong Kong by the Delegation of Christian Leaders Visiting Beijing."

⁹For detailed discussion, see Lung-kwong Lo, "A Historical Review and Reflection on the Mission of the Church in Hong Kong," in *Your Kingdom, Your City: A Symposium of Reflections on Local Christian Missions*, ed. Benny Chin (Hong Kong: Fellowship of Evangelical Students, 1986) 24-61 (in Chinese).

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, many churches in Hong Kong were organized by their respective denominations, which were based in China, as part of their south China region.¹⁰ In other words, the jurisdiction, leadership, and ministries of many churches in Hong Kong were subject to churches in China before 1949. It was after 1950, when missionaries were expelled from China, that the institutional relationship between churches in Hong Kong and China was suspended. Most of the denominations moved to Hong Kong to continue their work among Chinese.

Nevertheless, the historical background of the churches in Hong Kong helped to continue the informal relationship between Christians in Hong Kong and those in China. In 1980, when the official churches in China were allowed to have public activities after the Cultural Revolution, a delegation of church leaders organized by the Hong Kong Christian Council visited Chinese Christian leaders. This event symbolized the re-establishment of institutional relationship between churches in Hong Kong and in China. Since then, mutual visits and exchanges between Christians and churches on both sides have increased tremendously every year; preachers from Hong Kong and China preach in one another's churches frequently.

In recent years, the "three-self principles"—self-government, self-support, and self-propagation—have been interpreted in a more liberal manner. Millions of Hong Kong dollars have been donated by Christians and churches of Hong Kong to churches in different provinces of China to support their building new churches and seminaries and providing social services. Through churches in China, funds are also remitted to some local authorities to rebuild old school buildings and hospitals and to support community projects. In short, the interactions between Christians and churches in Hong Kong and China have been developed at every level.

II. FACING THE FUTURE

The handover of Hong Kong by the British to the Chinese government is governed by the Sino-British Joint Declaration, which has also been registered with the United Nations. In the declaration, both governments have agreed to maintain the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. In order to achieve this goal, the Chinese government will establish a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) upon resuming sovereignty over Hong Kong. It is agreed that the

¹⁰This includes the mainline denominations, such as Anglican, Baptist, the Church of Christ in China, Methodist, etc. For example, the Church of Christ in China, which is a denomination established in 1927 as a Chinese indigenous denomination with the ideal of the "three-self principles" of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation (the first principle is different from the understanding of the "three-self principles" upheld by the official churches after 1949, which emphasizes their independence from foreign power), still uses the name "The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China" as the formal name of the church in Hong Kong. This denomination formed by bringing 17 denominational groups together, mainly including Congregationalist, Presbyterian, United Brethren, and London Missionary Society churches. See W. Merwin, *Adventure in Unity: The Church of Christ in China* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

HKSAR will enjoy a high degree of autonomy and be vested with executive, legislative, and independent judicial power, including that of final adjudication. The laws currently in force in Hong Kong will remain basically unchanged. Furthermore, it is also agreed that the existing social and economic systems in Hong Kong will continue, and so will the lifestyle. Rights and freedoms, including personal rights, the right to strike, and freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, travel, movement, correspondence, choice, occupation, academic research, and religious belief will be provided for by laws in the HKSAR. Private property, ownership of enterprises, a legitimate right of inheritance, and foreign investment will be protected by law. Furthermore, religious organizations and believers are guaranteed in the sense that they may maintain relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere, and schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions run by them may continue. Religious institutions may retain their autonomy and continue to recruit staff and use teaching materials from outside the HKSAR. The relationship between religious organizations in the HKSAR and those in other parts of China shall be based on the principles of non-subordination, non-interference, and mutual respect. The provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Culture Rights, as applied to Hong Kong, shall remain in force.

These promises are not only set out in the Joint Declaration but also stipulated in the Basic Law of the HKSAR, which provides that they shall remain unchanged for 50 years. The principle of “one country, two systems” will be implemented, and the socialist system and policies now in force in mainland China will not be practiced in Hong Kong.

It is also stipulated in the Basic Law, which was adopted by the National Congress of China on April 4, 1990, that schools run by religious organizations may continue to provide religious education, including courses in religion (article 137).

According to these stipulations in the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law, the future of the church in Hong Kong seems to be promising. However, the concrete implementation of paper promises is surely challenging. Several difficulties are anticipated:

1. The painful experience of the Chinese churches

Since there have been close interactions between Christians in Hong Kong and China, the painful experience of the Chinese churches after 1949, especially during the Cultural Revolution, is well known among Hong Kong Christians. As a matter of fact, some Christians and ministers in Hong Kong were victims during the persecutions in China.

The confidence of many Christians in facing the future of Hong Kong has been seriously overshadowed by these experiences. It results in a kind of pessimism that may cause Christians to adopt an attitude of withdrawal and passivity in facing the future.

Although the painful experience of the Chinese Christians should not be

overlooked, ongoing history is not merely a repetition of the past. The situation of Hong Kong as a whole and the church in particular is simply very different from the situation of China in 1949 and in the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Nevertheless, the wounds Christians experienced in China are yet to be healed, and a more objective view in understanding the experiences of the church in China needs to be learned by Hong Kong Christians.

2. The cultural change from a British colony to a HKSAR under Communist China

Although the intention of the Chinese government to maintain the stability of Hong Kong is clear, this does not mean that things will not change in Hong Kong after July 1997. The cultural traditions behind the two governments are clearly different. Thus the "culture" of Hong Kong after 157 years of British colonial administration is obviously different from that of mainland China, which embodies a traditional Chinese culture over 5000 years old and has been governed by a regime with communist ideology for nearly 50 years. The Hong Kong Chinese identify themselves ethnically and culturally as Chinese, but they have difficulty in identifying themselves as Chinese nationals of the People's Republic of China. Hence, they may have difficulty in accepting the responsibilities of being Chinese nationals. Although most of the rights of religious organizations are stipulated in the Basic Law, some subtle privileges enjoyed by the churches under the British rule may not continue, such as running nearly half of the schools while less than 10% of the population is Christian (protestants and Catholics). Now, some church schools insist on employing only Christians as teachers, even though most of the Christian schools are 95% subsidized by tax-payers' money. In the new HKSAR, Christian organizations may not be encouraged to run more new schools. The governing power of the schools may gradually be resumed by the government as in most countries.¹¹ In facing these changes, some Christians and churches may not feel easy. They may even see these changes as "persecution" by the HKSAR.

3. Church and state relations

Although the Anglican Church is the official church of England, it does not enjoy the same status in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government basically observes the policy of separation of church and state, but the Christian background of the British government has naturally encouraged a close cooperative relationship between the church and the government in Hong Kong. Churches are influential in education and social service. Some Christian groups have actively participated and been outspoken on social issues. In general, the church enjoys a highly honored position in Hong Kong society. However, although the basic rights of religious organizations and religious freedom have been comprehensively stipulated in the Basic Law, the basic understandings of religion, its status in the society, and its relationship with the government are understood differently by the Chinese gov-

¹¹Even in the United States, religious schools have to face the choice of giving up subsidy from the government or the exclusion of all religious activities from government-funded schools. See J. W. Whitehead, *The Rights of Religious Persons in Public Education* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

ernment. As a matter of fact, in ancient Chinese history, religion was always under the control of the government. Religious freedom was defined by the government. Government intervention in religious matters seemed to be natural, and religious activities were usually understood in a very strait and restricted sense. With this background, the future relationship between the church and the state could easily be in tension, especially when Christians and churches express concern about human rights or social and political issues. The recent disturbance over the decision to allow the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to hold its Ninth General Assembly in Hong Kong a week after the handover in July 1997 illustrates squarely the different understandings of the roles of the old and new governments in dealing with religious affairs.¹² Alas, the principle of "one country, two systems" will not be easy to maintain.

4. Different political orientations among Christians

Since the issue of 1997 is basically a political one, different political orientations among Christians in Hong Kong could easily divide the church. Pro-Taiwan or pro-Beijing constituted the basic political division among Hong Kong people in the '50s and '60s. However, this division has diminished with the emergence of a new generation born in Hong Kong after 1949. Nevertheless, after the massacre of Tiananmen Square in 1989, a strong anti-Beijing feeling has been generated, especially among the younger generation. The recent Sino-British row over political developments in Hong Kong also divides people in Hong Kong into so-called pro-democracy and anti-democracy (which usually means pro-Beijing) camps. This kind of different political orientation also exists among Christians. Discussing people's attitudes towards the Hong Kong policies of Beijing is a very sensitive issue. It would be easy to be identified as pro-Beijing (which usually means anti-democracy) if one shows any support of Beijing's policies. Since the date of the handover to China is drawing near, building up a close working relationship with the Beijing government is unavoidable. Many Christian leaders in Hong Kong are caught in the dilemma of accepting the political reality or of trying to avoid criticism from those Christians who have strong feelings against Beijing's policies.

¹²The LWF informed the Chinese government in 1993 and 1995 that they would hold their Ninth General Assembly in Hong Kong in July 1997. They did not receive any objection. However, in February 1996 the Hong Kong Lutheran church leaders were informed verbally by officials of the New China News Agency in Hong Kong, the official representative of the Chinese government in Hong Kong, that there might be difficulties in holding the assembly in July and they were advised to postpone the meeting. A press release was also issued to condemn the Hong Kong government for giving permission to the LWF for holding the assembly after July 1, 1997, without seeking the prior approval of the Chinese government. Nevertheless, holding a religious meeting in Hong Kong, whether local or international, does not need any government approval. The attitude of the Chinese officials in this case brought a great shock to Hong Kong society. After strong responses from many leaders of opinion, the majority being non-Christians, and the immediate visit of the General Secretary of the LWF to Beijing, the Chinese government gave public assurance that the decision to hold the assembly at the proposed date was totally at the discretion of the LWF. See discussion of this issue in L. K. Lo, "Insight Learned from the Trouble of the LWF Assembly," in *Message* 181 (March 1996) 5 (Official Bulletin of the Hong Kong Christian Council; in Chinese).

III. OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHURCH IN HONG KONG

Although the Hong Kong church will have difficulties after July 1997, faith in Christ always gives people courage and hope in facing the future. The Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law have already provided the people of Hong Kong with a good base for working out their future. There are also good opportunities for the church in Hong Kong to respond to the Lord's call in fulfilling his plan:

1. A new church depends on spiritual power

Past painful experiences of the church in China hurt many Hong Kong Christians. However, the spirituality of Chinese Christians that developed from these experiences has surprised many Christians in Hong Kong. Although churches in Hong Kong enjoyed privileges under British rule, the rate of church growth has been slowing down for many years.¹³ The issue of 1997 has become a spiritual one to many Christians. When the general public in Hong Kong has a crisis in confidence over facing the future, Christians will need to search their souls for the foundation of their own confidence. When people are afraid of lowering their standard of living after 1997, Christians will have to ask themselves the purpose of life. While people are looking for something on which to rely as they encounter uncertainty, Christians will have to reflect on their faith and on what they have to offer. In other words, the church in Hong Kong will be forced to think about the depth of its faith, the vision and the mission of its existence. Churches will have to draw resources from their spiritual roots, which may have been long overlooked.

2. A new church will be part of the church of China

Hong Kong will become part of China after July 1, 1997; the church of Hong Kong will become part of the church of China. The policy of "one country, two systems" and the Basic Law will ensure that the churches in Hong Kong and those in China will not be merged institutionally, but will build a relationship based on the principles of non-subordination, non-interference, and mutual respect. This "already, but not yet" relationship between churches in Hong Kong and in China is surely good for both sides. They can share experiences and resources according to their different situations and thus enrich one another. Through churches in Hong Kong, Chinese churches can understand different models of church activities and see the breadth of the Christian faith in different dimensions. The resources of theological education in Hong Kong can surely support the development of theological education in China, if desired by the Chinese churches. Through the churches in mainland China, churches in Hong Kong can see the faithfulness of God and can learn models of interaction between Christian faith and Chinese cultures. The varieties of churches in different districts and provinces of China can definitely widen the horizon of Christians in Hong Kong.

¹³See Kin-wah Li and Catherine S. H. Lee, eds., *Future Trends of the Hong Kong Churches* (Hong Kong: World Vision, 1996) 207-219 (in Chinese).

3. A new church will be closer to people

The privileges enjoyed by the church in Hong Kong under British rule have had the side effect of making the church closer to the power center than to the people. Although Christian concern for social issues increased in the '80s, church leaders in general tend to distance themselves from activities that will result in tension with the government. In the era of HKSAR, Christian leaders may have less direct access to the centers of power. Church leaders will need to appeal to popular support if they want to influence society. Furthermore, the democratic movement in society has also affected the churches in that they become more accountable to church members. In the future, churches in Hong Kong may become even closer to the people and also closer to an incarnational model of the church.

4. A new church will be part of the international Christian community

The difficulties facing the churches in Hong Kong cannot be resolved only by the resources in Hong Kong. Churches in Hong Kong have been promised that they can continue their relationship with churches in other areas of the world. After 1997, the churches of Hong Kong will have to establish new relations with churches in China and those overseas. The unique situation of churches in Hong Kong and their new experiences can contribute much to other churches in the world. It will be crucial for the Hong Kong church to have the support of the international Christian community.

In church history, the development of the church has never been determined only by external factors. In many cases, the church has flourished and given strong witness in times of difficulty, but has declined during the times with few or no challenges. There are difficulties and opportunities in the future of the church in Hong Kong. By the grace of God and with the support of fellow Christians outside Hong Kong, the efforts of the churches in Hong Kong in responding to the changes of 1997 will not be in vain. ⊕