

EXCLUSIVE:



Interview with the Rev. Dr Cao Shengjie, President of the China Christian Council

The Rev. Dr Cao Shengjie was a key-note speaker at the “Seek the Welfare of the City” Conference held from 10-13 August. She spoke to the Rev. Dr Michael Poon, Director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia during her stay in Singapore. The following is an excerpt from an exclusive interview for Trumpet.

Poon: *Who among the Christians have inspired and influenced you?*

Cao: After I graduated in 1953, I served in Saint Peter’s Church, Shanghai. At that time, the Rev. Huang Peiyong of YMCA coordinated the youth ministry in Shanghai among youth workers in the city. He helped me understand that we must face up to the practical issues and situation that confronted the young people. Together we organised many summer and winter conferences for the youth, and published a magazine called “Words of Grace (En Yan)”. We sought to integrate our faith with our life, to let the young people know how to live out their faith in their daily work. He was a good mentor.

In 1959, I worked for the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and became the secretary to Mr Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu), the initiator of the Three-Self Movement.¹ He helped me understand that Christians should not simply care for their own spiritual welfare, but for the impact that the church exercises in the society. He was a serious thinker. He advocated: “Love the country, love the church, glorify God and benefit the people”. He sincerely believed in the “Three-Self” principle, and trusted that only thus could Christians discharge their duties to country and society, and alter the negative perception some held against us.

Bishop Zheng Jianye was another. His father, Bishop Zheng Hepo was the first Chinese Sheng Kung Hui (Anglican) presiding bishop. Zheng Jianye returned from Canada after the Liberation and lent his support to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He was very practical and passionate. He loved the church, and served the Henan Diocese during a very trying period. He believed that the church must govern itself well if it were able to stand firm. I worked with him when he was the first General Secretary of China Christian Council in 1980. He was very scholarly. He pioneered the Institute on the Study of Religion in the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. There he made significant contribution to the understanding of religion.

Poon: *What are your views on theological education in China?*

Cao: Theological education is crucial for the Church in China today. Our rapid growth must come hand in hand with theological reconstruction. We must decide on our theological direction. Only then can we succeed in nurturing our future pastors to govern the churches well. This is of crucial importance.

The formation of our seminary teachers is very important as well. Many students come with a conservative and narrow mindset. Teachers are instrumental in molding the outlook of the young students in our seminaries, to lead

them to a healthier understanding of their future responsibilities. Previously, many students only paid attention to preaching in the seminary. They were ignorant in other areas, and did not understand society. They became ill-equipped to exercise proper care for the church. Our seminaries need to strengthen subjects other than homiletics, for example, church music, church management, worship, counseling and the like.

Of course, theological education ultimately should offer guidance to the laity. Hence we are concerned with the training of voluntary lay workers. Many seminaries now have classes (short term or evening) for these volunteers.

Poon: *How can the Churches in China and Southeast China strengthen their relationship?*

Cao: China is part of East Asia, and hence should relate with churches in the region, especially with Southeast Asian churches. Our engagement so far has been infrequent because of the “Taiwan problem”. In the past, the Taiwan Presbyterian Church leaders always brought up the “Independence” and “Two-China” issues in international gatherings. This has deterred our participation in regional meetings. However, we are eager to have more mutual exchanges with churches in Southeast Asia. We shared similar cultural and historical heritage, and are concerned in governing our churches well in our cultural settings. I look forward to more exchanges, and to explore more concrete ways of cooperation in theological education, publication and social service.

Poon: *What words of wisdom would you like to impart to students at Trinity?*

Cao: Students here come from many different countries in Southeast Asia. This in itself is very precious. Students should develop their own independent theological reflection, and not simply regurgitate what they learn from others. Theological education should not be detached from real life. I encourage the students to reflect on how they can live out their faith in their concrete contexts – how the church should develop? How to build up a Scripturally based theology? How to make right decisions – to lead the church today along a healthier path.

Poon: *Thank you, Rev. Dr Cao, for the interview.*

Editor’s note

¹ In 1950, Wu Yaozong and other Chinese church leaders from different traditions initiated a movement of self-government, self-support and self-propagation of the Gospel, to lead the believers to change the features of the Chinese church in the old days, to become independent and decide for themselves, and make contribution in the newly established nation. In May 1950, forty prominent church leaders signed the Declaration ‘The Way of the Chinese Christian Church to exert efforts in the Construction of New China’. This founding document signified the birth of the Three-self Patriotic Movement. By September 1953, over 400,000 Chinese Christians have subscribed to it.