

# CHINA’S NEW NORMAL: HOW THE CHURCH IS RESPONDING WITH COURAGE AND LOVE

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## SUMMARY:

The following five chapters explore the situation for Christians in China in 2018.

- Section 1 summarizes noticeable changes in religious regulations in China as of 1 Feb 2018 and includes highlights of local enforcement.
- Section 2 highlights the contradictory attitudes towards Christianity by the Chinese government and the different enforcement of religious regulations in minority ethnic regions.
- Section 3 attempts to depict the different types of incidents happening in China. It also describes the fine line the Chinese government is walking to rein in church activities while trying not to attract international attention or be accused of ‘abuses.’
- Section 4 describes how the Chinese Church is working through how to respond when government leaders command them to obey laws that contradict God’s will.
- Section 5 examines how believers in China are striving to overcome fear in the face of adversity and learning to live joyful, courageous lives.

## CONTENTS

Summary: .....	1
Section 1: The battle for Chinese hearts and minds .....	2
1.1 The ‘Sinicization’ of religion .....	3
1.2 The ebb and flow of local enforcement .....	3
Section 2: China demands social cohesion from its diverse cultural mosaic .....	4
2.1 China’s Christians – friend or foe? .....	4
2.2 The different faces of persecution .....	5
2.2.1 Countrywide .....	5
2.2.2 Minority ethnic regions .....	5
2.3 Hunger or hide – The Church’s response to prohibition .....	6

Section 3: The world is watching .....	6
3.1 Sporadic pressure keeps Christians vigilant.....	7
3.2 Enforcement aims to draw a line in the sand .....	7
3.3 Strategic enforcement .....	7
3.4 High-profile urban churches targeted.....	8
3.5 Some Christian nursery schools targeted .....	8
3.6 Availability of Bibles threatened? .....	8
3.7 Not always religious persecution .....	9
3.8 Geographical and political diversity.....	9
Section 4: A healthy tension for Chinese churches.....	10
4.1 United they stand .....	11
Section 5: To Fear or not to fear .....	12
5.1 Learning that love drives out fear.....	13

## SECTION 1: THE BATTLE FOR CHINESE HEARTS AND MINDS

Since the introduction of revised religious regulations in China in February 2018, a new battle has begun for the hearts and minds of China’s estimated 97.2 million Christians. There are increasing concerns about how this new season of ‘Christianity with Chinese characteristics’ might unfold.

Strictly speaking, this new era is a reiteration of restrictions that have existed since the early 1980s. Though these restrictions might not be strictly enforced everywhere, there is now a heightened sense that a breach of regulations will be met by some form of warning, increased surveillance, or punishment. Certainly, most churches feel it is time to take extra precautions, to downsize or maybe even relocate some of their ministries.

Some examples of these long-term regulations that are being emphasised include:

1. Believers may only meet in churches that have registered with the government.
2. Pastors must hold theological qualifications issued by a government-sanctioned seminary.
3. No foreign person may teach in a church unless approved by the provincial government.
4. No materials may be published or distributed without government approval.

Enforcement of regulations varies from province to province, right down to village level, depending on the relationship a particular church has established with its local authorities.

## 1.1 THE 'SINICIZATION' OF RELIGION

At the recent 19th Party Congress (November 2017), there was a call to “Sinicize religion” - a process by which the various religions in China would be re-modeled to “become more Chinese”. Some surmise that so-called foreign religions, particularly Islam and Christianity, will be forced to cast off their attachment to external forces and morph into Chinese-style religions that fit both culturally and politically. Affiliation with overseas religious groups and receipt of overseas funding are the primary concerns voiced by authorities.

Since February, further speeches by the authorities, and a government department reshuffle suggest a more determined approach to bring the governance of religion under Communist Party control:

1. The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) has been absorbed into the United Front Work Department, directly under the CCP.
2. Party officials have been sanctioned to control and guide religion to ensure followers of religion adapt their teaching and religious activities to contribute to China’s socio-economic development, and the rejuvenation of the Chinese people.
3. Authorities have been told to use the law to squash what are considered “extreme” religious practices.
4. Warnings have been issued against infiltration by foreign powers that use religion to gain a foothold in China.

## 1.2 THE EBB AND FLOW OF LOCAL ENFORCEMENT

Enforcement of religious regulations must be handled very carefully. In the wake of recent speeches by top leaders, local authorities do not want to appear weak when implementing new regulations. Conversely, they do not want to upset the tentative, but effective, relationship they have with local churches. There is also the possibility that a crackdown will spark demonstrations, or lead to information being leaked to overseas media, so authorities must be extremely prudent in their engagement with the Church. The level of enforcement also varies from region to region, depending on this tentative relationship, and how the Church responds each time pressure is applied.

Large and influential churches, famous or defiant pastors, and potential links with foreign religious organizations are seen as ‘hot spots’ that attract enforcement of regulations. While for most churches the force of this new dynamic is yet to be felt, believers across the country are readying themselves for a potential crackdown by local authorities.

More and more unregistered churches are being warned by local authorities not to meet in rented or self-built church venues (e.g. commercial buildings). An increasing number of landlords refuse to extend leases to local churches. It seems this approach is spreading from region to region as a measured and acceptable way for local authorities to give the appearance of pro-active governance

and subservience to the ruling party. Though most unregistered churches operating in rented venues still meet together, this negative news has caused local churches to anticipate a tightening of restrictions, and some are preparing to divide into smaller groups.

Notably, Xinjiang, China's restive north-western province, has experienced the heavy hand of repression for some time already due to potential links with Islamic separatist (or extremist) organizations in neighboring countries. Some Christians with a Muslim background have been caught up in this localized but intense crackdown.

## SECTION 2: CHINA DEMANDS SOCIAL COHESION FROM ITS DIVERSE CULTURAL MOSAIC

When looking at China, you need to think big. You must also think 'diverse.' China is a rich mosaic of cultures, landscapes, languages and religions woven together into the world's most populous nation. China's 1.4 billion people are comprised of 91% Han Chinese, and a mix of almost 9% Hui, Kazakh, Korean, Lisu, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan, Uyghur, and many more. Besides the Han, there are 55 'recognized' ethnic minority people groups.

A long-term challenge for China's leaders has been how to unify such a diverse population. Rather than encourage unity based on a celebration of diversity, they have preferred an intentional and sustained process of 'sincization' to create uniformity in order to achieve President Xi's dream of "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." Social stability must be preserved at all cost.

### 2.1 CHINA'S CHRISTIANS – FRIEND OR FOE?

China's estimated 97.2 million Christians (about 6.6% of the total population) present a perplexing challenge to the CCP. While Christians are known for their bold evangelism and resilience under pressure, many also reach out to the poor and the marginalized. Some serve university students and migrant workers who have moved from villages to the cities, while others establish orphanages and schools for the poor. Christians serve as marriage and family counselors and start kindergartens to demonstrate how to love children. Christians are also staunchly patriotic and pray for their leaders.

To the CCP, therefore, Christians are an anomaly. They think and act differently, like a unique people group. And they truly believe in God, which is anathema in Communist atheist ideology. Even more bewildering is that there are more Christians now than the 88 million Communist Party members. Could this Christian 'people group' one day challenge the legitimacy of the CCP or become a force for social change?

The Communist Party believes the Church is a de-stabilizing force, but not because it is bad; in fact, local communities and authorities tend to believe Christians are good people. Some suggest that because Christians' allegiance is first and foremost to God and not the Communist Party, there is a conflict of interests that the Party believes can potentially hinder the process of unification. Others are more concerned by what they perceive as potential 'chaos' arising from the huge number of Christians.

## 2.2 THE DIFFERENT FACES OF PERSECUTION

### 2.2.1 COUNTRYWIDE

Throughout China, Christians are experiencing varying levels of pressure to conform. In most areas, however, little has changed. It is business as usual, albeit meeting together with extra care and some downsizing to smaller groups.

In other areas, however, things are difficult. Some church buildings have been destroyed and crosses removed from atop churches. In another area, youth have been warned not to attend summer Bible camps, and signs prohibiting children from entering registered churches have been affixed to some church buildings. A recent strategy is to target the largest meeting place in a town or city and apply pressure there (such as installing CCTV or cutting electricity or water to the building) to send a strong message that no one is exempt from this latest purge. The ultimate goal is for all churches to splinter and disperse, thereby restricting large gatherings and smothering any sense of solidarity and growth.

Nanyang city in Henan, the birthplace of two of the largest church movements in China (and home to a number of cults), is especially sensitive and perceived as a 'hotspot,' so the authorities have showcased their intentions by closing 100 unregistered churches and threatening Christians with fines if they return. In March, another four churches were closed 900 km away in Lanzhou and Christians were ordered to register with the government.

### 2.2.2 MINORITY ETHNIC REGIONS

It is also a fact that converts from Muslim families in China's northeast have been hit hard; some are right now held in China's hardline re-education camps. Buddhist background pastors in Tibet are also under constant pressure not to proselytize.

A Buddhist background pastor stated: "We have been visited and searched by the police many times, and my husband has been told not to travel or preach, but we simply cannot stop meeting together. My husband is actually away on a long distance ministry trip now."

Without detracting from the reality and pain of these incidents, it should not be forgotten that hundreds of churches still meet regularly in each of China's hundreds of cities.

## 2.3 HUNGER OR HIDE – THE CHURCH’S RESPONSE TO PROHIBITION

In March 2018, an existing law that prohibits the sale of printed Bibles online was enforced and Bibles removed from e-commerce websites. Legally, Bibles can only be bought from registered church bookshops as in China the Bible has no official ISBN number, but for some years now a window of freedom has allowed the online sale of Bibles to flourish. Most Chinese Christians, however, have a Bible on their mobile phones and computers and will copy the Bible for anyone who needs one.

The two primary fears held by the Chinese government, it seems, are overseas forces using religion to infiltrate China and social unrest or separatism at home. Over the past two decades, the Chinese Government has largely tolerated church activities but the result is now that local Christians often do not know how to respond to religious restrictions. In some cases, older pastors who are used to dealing with the authorities handle all the negotiating on behalf of the church body to shield younger pastors and believers from the harsh realities of government control. They worry that threats and persecution will discourage young believers from coming to meetings. Christian parents these days often emphasize education more than spiritual development, so the next generation lacks the spiritual foundation their parents had. When persecution comes, young people often fall away or simply stay away, and without the right foundations it is difficult for the Church to help them understand the costs of being a Christian. The pressure is increasing for China’s Han Christians as well as for Muslim background and Buddhist background Christians.

## SECTION 3: THE WORLD IS WATCHING

Christians in most Western countries do not think twice before heading off to church on Sunday or a home group during the week. Mostly, worship services are a safe, predictable and enriching experience. The pastor does not fear for the safety of churchgoers, and believers do not ever think their pastor might be in danger. Christians take pride in their church facilities and welcome regulars and visitors alike into a loving, safe and joyful environment.

Since 2017, things have not been so easy for China’s Christians. As government control of religious affairs tightens, local authorities around China have been pressured by the Central Government to control the size, expansion and influence of the Christian Church, while also curbing connections with international churches and religious organizations.

This is a delicate challenge for a nation that is aspiring to be a world leader. Every new political statement and the associated enforcement of such is immediately uploaded via social media to hungry China watchers and think tanks around the world who scrutinize the stories, pictures and videos and share their commentary online.

### 3.1 SPORADIC PRESSURE KEEPS CHRISTIANS VIGILANT

Since February 2018, enforcement of China's Communist Party (CCP) directives regarding the Church have been swift but strategically varied enough not to appear like a united, country-wide purge of Christians.

The most common approach is for local police to increase surveillance of church members and church activities while ordering the pastor to report to the police station for occasional friendly 'chats' about church activities. Over the past decade, it was common for local church pastors to engage in such 'chats' over tea with local government officials. As of this year, however, some meetings have become more regular but less friendly.

### 3.2 ENFORCEMENT AIMS TO DRAW A LINE IN THE SAND

On a few occasions the police reportedly teamed up with the Fire Brigade to make repeated inspections of churches before forcing each church to close citing violations of fire safety regulations and declaring the building a fire hazard. This was the case when a large church in Lanzhou was closed recently. The accusations were exaggerated and the quote to install new fire protection equipment far beyond the means of the congregation.

One church member was quoted as saying: "Before all of this happened, officers from the Religious Affairs and National Security Bureaus visited several times ... they were just looking for an excuse to close the church."

Sometimes police arrive unannounced and demand that the meetings stop because the singing is causing a public disturbance or because Christians are holding unlicensed meetings of more than 50 people in a housing estate or office building. Large churches with congregations in the hundreds attract the most attention and endure regular harassment by local police, especially if they are not registered. Harassment acts as a warning to other churches in the area that might dare to emulate the larger church model.

### 3.3 STRATEGIC ENFORCEMENT

In Henan Province in Central China, the authorities no longer quote the number 50 as the maximum number allowed for 'free assembly,' instead declaring outright that the meetings are illegal and must stop altogether until the church registers with the government.

This was the case for 100 house churches that were closed in Nanyang in March 2018. Local contacts report that Christians who used their own church building for meetings were targeted and their

buildings closed. Consequently, believers went back to meeting in homes. So far, church venues in other areas of the province (including house churches) have not been affected and meet as usual.

In some locations in Central Henan, officials banned house church meetings and then went door-to-door warning residents to stop attending 'illegal' church meetings or else face serious consequences. It is no coincidence that Henan is the birthplace of the two largest revival churches that emerged from the Cultural Revolution, so enforcing religious restrictions here is to set an example for the rest of the country. To date, such incidents have been limited to rural areas.

### 3.4 HIGH-PROFILE URBAN CHURCHES TARGETED

There is a Chinese idiom that says, 'Kill a chicken to warn the monkey,' which refers to making an example out of one, to warn or deter others. Authorities often adopt this approach with the Church, targeting high-profile churches to warn the wider church community. 'High-profile' here refers to churches that, for example, have a large congregation or effective outreach strategy. It may refer to churches that are very visible in their service to a particular community, or who call for social change on some issue, such as abortion. This kind of social activism or criticism of government policy is swiftly silenced.

### 3.5 SOME CHRISTIAN NURSERY SCHOOLS TARGETED

Soon after the new Regulations on Religious Affairs were released on 1 February 2018, 40 officials arrived at a church-run nursery school in Beijing and proceeded to confiscate books and belongings and then detain the Pastor/Principal. He was held for just half an hour, but the damage was already done. Children, teachers and parents were barred from entering the building and the nursery was closed. "We asked the officials who their superiors were but they refused to tell us," said the parents. In some areas, there have been reports of local churches or individual Christians being threatened for running private nursery schools. Despite this, by taking the necessary precautions, mini-Christian schools still operate in a number of locations around the country.

### 3.6 AVAILABILITY OF BIBLES THREATENED?

Ownership or distribution of any volume of literature (more than an acceptable amount for personal use) is not allowed. This is a grey area the authorities sometimes use to legitimize searches. Bibles are printed in Nanjing and sold in Three Self Church bookshops, but house churches are not permitted to sell Bibles because the Amity Press Bibles (intentionally) have no official book number. If a church

stockpiles Bibles for sale this is reason enough to confiscate all the materials and fine the church or pastor for illegal sale of ‘contraband.’

Despite official restrictions prohibiting the online sale of printed Bibles, e-commerce websites have been able to sell Bibles for many years. In April this year, however, soon after the revised regulations on religion were announced, Bibles suddenly disappeared from these websites.

In Xinjiang Province, police have been confiscating religious materials from homes and deleting religious content found on mobile phones or computers. This applies to both the Bible and the Koran. Locals in Xinjiang have deleted electronic Bibles off their cell phones because of random checks by police on the street. Christians still have their own printed or digital Bibles stored at home. Minority people like Muslim background Christians are of special interest to the police and attract further investigation and potentially harsh treatment if Bibles or Korans are found in their homes.

Courageous local churches in less sensitive regions of China keep a stock of Bibles to pass on to new believers and seekers; a ministry they must handle with extreme care. Electronic Bibles and Bible apps are still common at the time of writing this article, though rumors suggest Bibles apps may also be shut down.

Subsequent to the release of a “White Paper” on 28 March 2018 entitled “Principles for Promoting Chinese Christianity for the Next Five Years,” in which the government announced that ‘sincization’ of Christianity in China would, among other things, require re-interpretation and re-translation of the Bible to align with Socialist ideology, no further action has been taken. At the time, the announcement was met with shock and disdain. Only time will tell whether or not the government will carry through with this tactic.

### 3.7 NOT ALWAYS RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Land disputes have been at the center of some church closures. Even if contracts were signed in good faith, legal experts look for loopholes to discredit contractual legitimacy and bring a legal case against the Church. In many areas in China now, landlords are warned not to rent their apartments or offices to Christians who use the venue for house church meetings.

### 3.8 GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL DIVERSITY

China is an extremely diverse country. Just because an event occurs in one place does not automatically imply it will occur everywhere else as well. Many local believers do not experience the same restrictions. Some, in fact, hear the news from overseas groups or the media. While some Christians worry about how the situation is developing, others are tired of being asked so many

questions about which they can only speculate (e.g. re-translation of the Bible, showing personal ID to gain entry to a church, etc.).

As mentioned earlier, this strategy to contain church growth and influence uses a variety of approaches. Pressure is usually applied in waves, or sporadic, unannounced events rather than sustained force, and the situations mentioned above amount to a few isolated cases when viewed against a backdrop of many millions of Christians spread across the country. The Church continues to grow despite these challenges, and even where believers are threatened or oppressed, they mostly find a way around the challenge and move on, encouraging each other to stand strong as they go.

## SECTION 4: A HEALTHY TENSION FOR CHINESE CHURCHES

There is a healthy ‘tension’ in Scripture that instructs Christians to, “*work out your salvation with fear and trembling*” (Philippians 2:12). The Chinese Church is presently working through the tension of how to respond when earthly leaders command them to live in a way that contradicts God’s will. It would be naïve to assume that all Chinese believers are unified in their response to the new religious affairs regulations introduced on February 1st this year. While the Chinese Church is blessed in that it is basically free of denominations or divided by various theological persuasions, the question of how believers should respond to State meddling in Church affairs can trigger some emotional and mixed reactions.

House church leaders can respond quite differently when asked about the recent enforcement of restrictions on the Church. One pastor, Pastor Aaron, initiated a discussion with 20 other pastors to determine how the Church might join together to face the situation together.

“I hope all house churches in China unite against these new rules,” Pastor Aaron said. “Together, we will be stronger and the authorities will be forced to soften their stance. We came to an agreement that if one house church is forced to shut down, we would let others know and try to stand together against the authorities. If necessary, we will ask help from human rights lawyers and sue the authorities up to the highest court.” According to Pastor Aaron, the religious regulations were not only unacceptable, they were unconstitutional.

Another pastor who was invited to join this group, Pastor Patrick, was not convinced and graciously but firmly challenged the motives of the group’s actions.

“Have you prayed about this?” Patrick asked.

“Since deciding to stand together, yes, we have started praying about this daily.” Pastor Aaron replied.

“And did God reveal something?” asked Patrick.

“Actually yes,” responded Brother Aaron. “He asked us to be united, and communicated that He is Sovereign according to His good purpose.”

“So you are saying that God has a good purpose in all of this?” asked Pastor Patrick. “And what is that good purpose?”

Pastor Aaron looked thoughtful and then replied, “I think God would like to see churches unite when any of them are suffering. Due to the new regulations, we are being forced to divide into small groups, which requires more small group leaders. As they are equipped for this work, many brothers and sisters will experience spiritual revival under persecution. I guess in that sense we will benefit from the new regulations.”

“Well, if there are so many benefits,” said Pastor Patrick, “we should celebrate that instead of hiring human rights lawyers to sue the authorities, don’t you think?”

#### 4.1 UNITED THEY STAND

While Chinese brethren have a wonderful history of sharing resources and standing strong as one body, divided viewpoints on some issues can still cause disunity.

The question of whether or not to register with the government is one such issue. Every situation and location is unique, but those who choose to not register sometimes criticize those who do and vice versa. Churches that are very security minded sometimes blame churches that are openly evangelistic for attracting attention and inviting increased surveillance by local authorities. Some churches advocate building or renting larger venues that can seat many more people, sometimes in defiance of government regulations.

Disunity is, of course, harmful to believers and overall church growth. Working through these differences and learning to cooperate and humbly accept one another in spite of these differences is a vital part of church growth and maturity.

The conversation mentioned above represents the different viewpoints and speculation on the future of the Church held by pastors across the country. This is certainly a very difficult time and emotions are running high, but we must ask ourselves what it would be like if we were in their shoes and everything we had worked for was shut down and parishioners intimidated or threatened to either register with the government or suffer the consequences.

Maybe we should be asking, “Are the recent forays by the Communist Party into China’s house church affairs actually in opposition to God’s will?”

Judging by the response of the very pastor who was rallying partners against the government, the answer would have to be, “Maybe, but God is doing something in spite of the situation.” Even he had to admit that more young pastors would be trained up and experience personal spiritual revival. Scripture is clear that God can use every situation for good if we allow him, and often even if we don’t!

Some may perceive a fine line between standing up for our brethren for their constitutional ‘rights,’ and ‘rebelling against authority.’ And therein lies the tension that compels us to examine what we believe and how we will express our faith in a Sovereign God who is in control of all.

Recently, a high profile house church in southwestern China was surrounded by hundreds of local officials and his church closed. The church leaders refused to register and told us they would not hesitate to hire human rights lawyers to defend their rights. Many of the believers were scattered, some even escorted back to their hometowns. The tension was tangible.

In the report, apart from the frustration and disappointment, one sentence stands out ... “Despite this mild persecution, the Church held evangelical meetings during Christmas and shared the Gospel as much as possible. They did this, however, in a relatively low profile manner.” Despite the tension, it seems the believers still had their eyes on Jesus, and as promised, he was with them wherever they went. When considered in context and with the benefit of hindsight, this dispersion of believers was later described as ‘mild persecution.’

## SECTION 5: TO FEAR OR NOT TO FEAR

About 15 years ago, business magazines around the world began to use the Chinese word *wēi jī* (危机), or ‘crisis’, in articles describing how to turn your business around in hard times. The word *wēi jī* is comprised of two Chinese characters, 危 (*wēi*), which means ‘danger’ and 机 (*jī*), which means ‘opportunity.’ The idea is that in times of crisis, despite apparent or real danger, there is also (sometimes hidden) opportunity for the crisis to be turned around for good.

As the Chinese Church enters a new phase of potential crisis, the dangers seem to loom larger than life. But are there also new opportunities here for the Church waiting to be uncovered?

Jane\*, a pastor in a southern Chinese city, was warned that the Church could not meet anymore because neighbors had complained about the loud singing and the large number of cars parked outside their homes each Sunday. Authorities took the details of all church members.

“The church kept growing so we had to downsize and split into smaller groups,” Jane said. “We had planted churches elsewhere in our province and they too were growing so I couldn’t keep up with the demands on my time.”

This is a common situation in China. Where a church flourishes, pressure is brought by authorities to close or register the church under the Three Self system (now under direct control of the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party).

Sometimes, officials can be aggressive or use violence to humiliate or intimidate church leaders. Understandably, a very common response to such coercion is fear. Fear of man, fear of further reprisal, fear of imprisonment or beatings, fear even of other believers who may disagree with how the pastor handles the situation. Is there a 'correct' response to persecution? Should we fear or not?

## 5.1 LEARNING THAT LOVE DRIVES OUT FEAR

Pastor Jane is a wonderful teacher and pastor, but she is also a passionate evangelist. As the church grew, so did government pressure, so Jane made a decision. Against the wishes of some, she handed over the running of the churches to her younger leaders, and taking a few faithful believers, she moved to an unreached area to plant new churches. Her passion for souls compelled her to reach the lost. It was like all the government's threats fell on deaf ears! That's courage.

Once in her new home, Jane started a business which gave her a platform to visit all the homes in the Buddhist villages nearby, and now many of the village families call Jesus Lord. Jane continues to visit all the churches in the network to encourage them, and they continue to flourish under their new leaders. Jane even led a respected Buddhist monk to the Lord, and now this redeemed Buddhist background 'monk' is sharing the gospel with Buddhists in his network!

However, while courage and fear are both contagious, it is often fear that takes root first. Widespread use of social media means reports of a crackdown or persecution spread quickly and influence believers elsewhere in the country. While one local church may endure under enforced restrictions, another church not directly involved in the conflict may be overwhelmed just imagining such oppression. The reality is many churches overreact and become unnecessarily cautious. A local pastor was recently so disturbed when another pastor told him it was illegal to conduct Christian activities in an unauthorized venue, he became emotional and disoriented, unable to make logical decisions, even suggesting it was time to run, with little or no thought for his congregation.

As pressure on Chinese Christians ramps up once again, they are in a unique position to 'pre-empt' and prepare for persecution. Rather than fearing the worst and retreating, they can see this as an opportunity to train many new leaders into a deeper understanding of Christian faith and ministry.

When confronted by domineering, rude or angry opponents, the temptation for pastors is to resist, even lash out defensively to protect everything and everyone they have worked for, not meekly forgiving them. But when fear is dethroned by holy courage, then there is room for joy. One Buddhist background (BBB) pastor revealed how the police call him and his wife in for regular questioning, sometimes in the middle of the night, to unnerve them and disrupt their lives and ministry. Theirs is

one of two main house churches in the town and both are under constant surveillance. Their letters are difficult to read because of the constant harassment, but surprisingly lighthearted and joyful as well! In the last letter they were joking that if they are taken away and one of them dies, they could invite 14 Buddhist monks to chant words from the bible at the funeral. “By the time the seven-day funeral proceedings are over, all the monks will have become Christians!” the wife joked. Then again, maybe she *wasn't* joking. They are always looking for creative ways to reach the lost!

*\*Names changed for security reasons*