

The Role of the Church in the Life's of Women

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The Chinese church is growing quickly. And, like all churches around the world, women make-up the majority of the congregational members, often averaging around 70% of the members. What attracts women to the church? And how do they feel after joining the church? In the May 1993 issue of our church periodical *Tian Feng* there are four narratives about women in the "Personal Testimony" column which reflect some of the different roles the church plays in the lives of women. Let me use there narratives to illustrate the church's role in the lives of Chinese women.

The Healing Power of the Community of Love

The first testimony in *Tian Feng* was written by a mistreated, finally divorced, women who suffered from loneliness and isolation. Initially the writer of the testimony came to church interested only in the hymn-singing; it brought some degree of comfort. Later she found the Biblical truth so nourishing, and the church people so warm and intimate that the church gradually became her home, a home she could hardly leave. The church brought healing. Compared with many other countries the divorce rate in China is very low but there are women who suffer from unhappy marriage. They have inner wounds which need mending.

There are many different ways in which women suffer. Poor physical health is one of the main reasons many countryside women come to church. Medical conditions in some areas are very poor and some chronic diseases are very distressing. These women trust Jesus as healer. They also experience the warm concern and comfort of other Christian sisters. By the grace of God and the Support of sisters miracles happen. Some sisters receive both physical and spiritual healing.

In the city, women worshippers are often retired and come from different walks of life. Since Chinese women retire at the age of 50, or with office staff at 55, many retired women are still vigorous and active. They are distressed by and lost in the change in their lifestyle. The neighbourhood committee organizes some programs but the church provides spiritual encouragement and sincere Christian fellowship which is seldom enjoyed elsewhere. Old women can live adequately on Pension or with the Support of their children yet sometimes they feel isolated. Their families are busy with each other and with daily work and neglect the care of the elderly. Some church women organize themselves to visit the old and to pray with them. The joy and satisfaction these women bring are indescribable.

The Creation of Peace in the Family

Women's lives involve family relations. The second report in Tian Feng, from a mother whose spoilt son has been jailed for stealing and fighting, describes how her son's actions broke her heart. Having accepted Christ herself she earnestly prayed for the prodigal son believing that the young man could be changed. She patiently brought the Gospel to her son who came to visit her while she was in the hospital. At least she saw his tears of repentance.

In the church I serve, Grace Church, Shanghai, a similar event took place. A young woman left her husband as he bogged himself down in a dissipated life. Later the woman became a Christian finding that only Jesus can save sinners. She brought the Gospel to her ex-husband and invited him to church. The young man too was converted and his behavior changed entirely. It was such a celebration to see the couple reunited earlier this year.

According to ancient Chinese tradition, a women is required to be a good wife and a good mother. This is not easy. Problems always emerge. The Christian faith not only helps women to pray for change but it also helps women to change themselves. In rural areas there are examples where women are wilful and hot-tempered, hostile to men, and cause great unrest in the family. When they become Christians and try to live a Christian life they change, actually bringing peace to the whole family. Therefore, in districts where such situations exist people, even outside the church, have a saying, "Go ahead and believe in Jesus and your family will be at peace."

In China a model family is praised as "A Five Good Family"; good discipline, good daily work, good house-keeping, good hygiene and good harmony within the family and within the neighborhood. Many Christian families are respected as "A Five Good Family." When three generations live under one roof, Christian women's patience and mutual understanding, between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, is especially admirable.

The Establishment of a Lofty Aim in Life.

The third story is about a woman, a factory worker, who earned a living, but was not satisfied with what she had. She wished to change her position, yet did not have the ability to do so. In despair, she became hedonistic. She fled from her work, became drunk, and soon fell to extreme poverty. The family collapsed and she lost the courage to live. She attempted suicide. Only when she came to the church, did she repent fully before Christ, and resolutely gave up her sin. Then she worked hard, reconciling with the family. As a result, she received more bonus at work, and cleared up all the old debts of the family. Life became bright again.

Many women experience frustration, frustration in love, study or career. If they follow pessimism, they live in endless pain. But when they come to the church, they are truly Born again and become joyful, hopeful and dynamic.

Now that China is adopting the policy of reform and openness to the outside world, young women are facing more opportunities and more challenges. But what is the goal of personal development --more money, high reputation? Today young women often come to church to seek the meaning of life. When they learn from the Bible that "people do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God", they find a spiritual value to life and decide to follow the savior, and to live a life worthy of Divine Calling.

The Encouragement to Better Serve the Church and Society.

The last narrative describes a women who is a church doorkeeper in western China. Being extremely faithful, she does much more work than required. She cleans, visits, takes care of a 102- year-old sister, helps the needy and even cleans the street in front of the church.

Women serve the church. A serious problem in Chinese churches today is the shortage of ministers. Women pastors are ever increasing. Some lay women have been trained as volunteer preachers. Many more church women participate actively in various church work, such as personal evangelism, home visitation, taking care of new believers and so on.

Christian women also make a lot of contributions to society. Most women in China have jobs and there are many outstanding personnel in the field of technology, medical service, education and so on. One Chinese lay Leader, Ms. Wang Juzhen, is a well known researcher. She was given an award by the United Nations and, on a national level, she was recognized for her important invention of a substance which can greatly reduce poisonous radiation.

Women may initially come to church motivated by their own personal need. But when they become church members they are taught that Christians should not concern themselves with their own personal salvation alone but to live according to God's will. In this way the involvement of women in society as well as in church is greatly motivated and cultivated by the church. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. Christians should also fulfill their obligations through good work. "Glorify God and benefit people" has become the life motto of many church women, and their experience reinforces that God has empowered them to practice it.

I could enumerate more points on the role of our church in the lives of women. However it is easily apparent that the Chinese church manifest the never changing message of God's love - a true message that touches the depths of the hearts of women. It is this revealing love of God that attracts women to the church, to become God's beloved daughters, and it is the fellowship of love which has empowered them to overcome difficulties in their personal, family and social life. By the teaching of the greatest command, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself". The love of Christ has moulded women's characters in psychological, ethical and spiritual dimensions. Women's witness of Christ's love verifies the proclamation of the church.

Under-developed Potential of Women in the Church

When I talk of the splendid role which our church has played in women's lives, I must admit that the church has not yet paid due attention to women. Women's beneficial contributions have not been fully developed in many local churches. In recent years, Chinese churches have been busy renovating, building new churches and reorganizing programs, but in many churches, women's groups have yet to be resumed. Church women are not well organized, and so exchanges of spiritual experiences mutual empowerment are still limited. Moreover, when women are inspired to practice their life of love by serving the church more fervently, it seems that not all grassroots churches are prepared to provide more space for women to develop their capacity and potential. Women are always doing considerable church work, but under the historical influence that promote the idea of men's superiority, few women are encouraged to bear increasing responsibility, to be leaders of the church. Before our national Christian Conference (December 1991), the Standing Committee of the China Christian Council set as their goal a 30% representation of women. The result was only 21.3%, somewhat higher than the previous conference (18.4%) but still far behind the goal. Women were less recommended primarily because they do not hold higher positions in the grassroots church structures.

Only when the Chinese church recognizes women's present and potential contributions, and fosters organization of all women in one accord to serve God and the people, only then will women' gifts and talents be better developed and the Gospel message of Love be spread more widely and expressed more intensely.

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