

# THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS

May 2020



## SPIRITUAL DISOBEDIENCE IN CHINA



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“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Heb 13:3





In defiance of government orders to stop worshipping, the Early Rain Covenant Church held services outdoors after their church building was closed.

# A CHURCH NO LONGER AFRAID

*As the Chinese government tries to force Christians to subjugate their faith to Communist ideology under the guise of Chinese culture, many Chinese Believers are determined to remain faithful to Christ alone.*

**E**very Sunday at the appointed time, a moderator sets up a private online meeting and usernames begin to appear on the screen as church members join the video feed. Then, as in any other church service, the online worshipers sing hymns, offer their prayers and listen to the preaching of God's Word. This is an illegal church meeting.

The Early Rain Covenant Church of Chengdu has refused to surrender these central practices of the Christian faith despite intense pressure from China's Communist government, which in 2018 ordered the church to close. Government authorities have forced church members to sign false confessions, detained them and tortured

them to the point that some have considered suicide. Yet even though their head pastor has been imprisoned, the congregation has courageously continued to gather for worship.

While some are too afraid to be associated with the church, most of Early Rain's 500 members — even those with policemen posted outside their apartment door and those banished to faraway hometowns — are committed to bearing the cross of Christ and keeping the faith. Shortly before church elder Li Yingqiang was arrested, he encouraged the church with these words: "How wonderful it would be if, because of this suffering, we might be able to give off the sweet fragrance of the Gospel!"

**T**he Early Rain Covenant Church began as a home Bible study in 2004 and became an independent, or illegal, church in 2008. Wang Yi, who was appointed head pastor the following year, was an attorney and law professor at Chengdu University when he became a Believer in 2004. By April 2006, he had become such a prominent member of the house-church movement that he and two other Chinese Christians were invited to speak with President George W. Bush about supporting religious freedom in China.

While small pockets of Christians have existed in China for more than a century, the church was driven underground following the 1949 Chinese Communist Revolution led by Chairman Mao Zedong. Small groups of Christians who were dissatisfied with the





**Wang Yi holding a declaration against the government's attempts to suppress the Christian faith, published three months before his arrest.**

*“How wonderful it would be if, because of this suffering, we might be able to give off the sweet fragrance of the Gospel!”*

—Li Yingqiang, elder at Early Rain Covenant Church

government-run Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church, established to ensure allegiance to the new Communist government, began meeting in homes or outdoors. These Christians suffered terribly as a result of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when Mao Zedong tried to reform the Communist Party and eradicate Christianity. The Communists sentenced Christians to long prison terms on false espionage charges, torturing and killing many.

After enduring continued harsh persecution throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the house-church movement in China entered a period of dramatic growth, particularly in the country's vast rural areas. Though the house-churches were (and remain) illegal, local officials often left them alone unless they caused problems or became too outspoken. Because of China's enormous size and the difficulty of enforcing policies consistently, federal authorities granted local officials great leeway in interpreting laws regarding religion. The treatment of Christians therefore varied widely from city to city and province to province. When churches did experience persecution, it was often because they had become too visible nationally and risked embarrassing local officials.

By the mid-'90s, many Chinese house-churches, located primarily in rural parts of the country, were allowed to function with little government interference. In the past two decades, however, non-TSPM churches have arisen in China's urban centres, with memberships swelling into the hundreds and thousands. Many of these urban churches, until recently, met openly in rented office spaces, hotel meeting rooms and, in some cases, private church properties. Early Rain was one of the congregations established during this period of fast-growing urban churches with gifted, seminary-trained leaders.

From the outset, Early Rain was intentionally open about its worship and missions position

within Chengdu and the nation as a whole. The church published its sermons on the internet, printed weekly bulletins (potential evidence that it was a church) and even posted its name on elevator buttons in the building where it met. The church's strategy was to hide nothing from the government and to hold fast to its Christian convictions. “The Bible teaches us that in all matters relating to the Gospel and human conscience, we must obey God and not men,” Wang Yi wrote. “For this reason, spiritual disobedience and bodily suffering are both ways we testify to another, eternal world and to another, glorious King.”

Early Rain was known among Chinese house-churches for its emphasis on evangelism and mercy missions, distinctives generally avoided by churches wanting to stay off the government's radar. In addition, the church was publicly critical of the poorly built government school buildings that collapsed in the 2018 Sichuan earthquake, killing thousands of schoolchildren. Church leaders also spoke out against abortion and denounced the TSPM church for cooperating with the atheistic Chinese government.

“Precisely because none of my words and actions are directed toward seeking and hoping for societal and political transformation, I have no fear of any social or political power,” Wang Yi said. “I also understand that this happens to be the very reason why the Communist regime is filled with fear at a church that is no longer afraid of it.”

**X**i Jinping became general secretary of the Communist Party of China, and therefore president of the People's Republic of China, in 2013. As president, he has centralized power and urged the nation to guard against “infiltration” through religion and extremist ideologies. In September 2017, the Chinese State Council issued new regulations on the “Administration of Religious Affairs,” and the Communist Party of China then absorbed the government bureau responsible for regulating religious life.

In March 2018, the TSPM and the China Christian Council, another government-sanctioned entity, launched a five-year plan promoting the “Sinicization of Christianity.” Sinicization is the process of bringing everything under the influence of Chinese culture.

The plan proposes retranslating the Bible and rewriting biblical commentaries to introduce Buddhist and Confucian teachings into the Old Testament and provide additional commentary on the New Testament that draws parallels to socialism. It also advocates “incorporating Chinese features into church worship services, hymns and songs, clergy's attire and the architectural style of church buildings.” Bob Fu, of the China Aid Association, believes this plan has initiated “the worst persecution in China since the end of the Cultural Revolution.”

Throughout the country, officials have removed crosses from church buildings, even those on government-sanctioned churches. Authorities have also begun to offer house-churches a form of “legal” registration, which many see as a thinly veiled attempt to gather the names of church members and pressure house-churches into joining the TSPM. At official TSPM churches, pastors must now submit every sermon to authorities before delivering them.

Government officials have closed many primary schools operated by churches and issued notices forbidding minors from receiving religious education. Foreigners with even the hint of a connection to a religious entity have been deported, and house-churches that had been meeting quite openly in large groups have now been banned. Churches are required to sing the Communist anthem at the beginning of every worship service and hang pictures of President Xi Jinping on the walls.

Facial recognition cameras, pointed at the audience, are now required inside church auditoriums. When Beijing's largest house-church, Zion Church, refused to install the cameras, the government closed the church. Another prominent unregistered Beijing church, Shouwang, closed in March after a nine-year battle with authorities during which the church's pastor remained under house arrest. Damazhan Church, a house-church established in 1950, was closed on 15 December, 2018. The church's pastor, Samuel Lamb (1924 - 2013), was a leader in the house-church movement who had spent 20 years in prison for refusing to register the church. Many smaller churches face this same sort of persecution, but their closures often go unnoticed.

One of the major initiatives of the

Regulations on Religious Affairs was to cut Chinese churches off from foreign support and influence. As a result, well-known churches like Early Rain and Damazhan were closely monitored, making it difficult for the global body of Christ to provide outside support.

In Guangzhou and other cities, officials offered financial rewards for information on “illegal religious activity” or foreigners involved in religious activity. One church after another was closed, and authorities detained many pastors, lawyers and lay-leaders, some of whom received fines and lengthy prison sentences.

Still others, like Early Rain’s Pastor, Wang Yi, simply disappeared into police custody.

**B**en Chen, a Chinese American seminary professor, said, “I think they are afraid of the Gospel preaching in the way that Pastor Wang Yi did.” Ben was expelled from China in July 2018 after preaching at Early Rain. Police accused him of being a traitor to his country by becoming a Christian and teaching at the church.

Pressure had been increasing steadily on Early Rain. And when the church held a prayer service in May 2018 for those affected by the Sichuan earthquake, police raided the meeting and confiscated more than

10,000 Bibles, books and CDs. Their attempts to intimidate Early Rain and force them to close were ineffective, however, because the church’s leadership had already begun to prepare the congregation for suffering. They would not succumb to coercion.

A month later, when authorities raided church member An Yankui’s home and detained him for questioning, he encouraged other church members in an online forum: “We will not stop our gathering in the Lord, but we are prepared to bear all possible persecutions and costs for our Lord Jesus Christ — to go to jail or be sentenced or beaten or killed. We are willing to entrust ourselves to God.”

After enduring months of government persecution, Early Rain’s leaders prayerfully decided it was time to speak up. On 1 September, 2018, they published “A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith,” which emphasized the supremacy of God, the authority and inerrancy of the Bible, and the role of the church. It concluded with this bold statement: “For the sake of the Gospel, we are prepared to bear all losses, even the loss of our freedom and our lives.”

Pastor Wang Yi’s name was first on the list of signatories, followed by the names of many other pastors and leaders of unregistered churches throughout the

country. To date, 439 Chinese pastors have signed the declaration, publicly opposing the government’s campaign against religious freedom.

**O**n 9 December, 2018, police in Chengdu carried out a massive raid against Early Rain, shutting down the church-operated school, the seminary and the church itself. And in the space of three days, authorities arrested more than 100 church members.

Hours before his arrest, church elder Li Yingqiang wrote a letter to the congregation: “Thank the Lord!” he wrote. “Just as the year 2018 is about to end, God has given us a reward in the form of this large-scale persecution that arrived on 9 December.” He instructed the church to face persecution according to 1 Peter 4:12–14 (*“Rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings. ...”*) and concluded with a reminder of the church’s mission statement: “Christ is the Lord. Grace is the King. Bear the cross. Proclaim the Gospel.”

Pastor Wang Yi and his wife, Jing Rong, were both detained, accused of “inciting subversion of state power.” Other church leaders, including Li Yingqiang, were accused of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.”

Days after the raid, Early Rain published Pastor Wang Yi’s “Declaration of Faithful Disobedience,” which he had written in October with instructions that it be

Church members held services throughout the city in the aftermath of the December 2018 raid. Many were subsequently detained.





published if he were detained for more than 48 hours. "I firmly believe that Christ has called me to carry out this faithful disobedience through a life of service, under this regime that opposes the Gospel and persecutes the church," he wrote. "The goal of disobedience is not to change the world, but to testify about another world."

*"The goal of disobedience is not to change the world, but to testify about another world."*

—Pastor Wang Yi

In the months that followed, seminary students were sent back to their hometowns, Early Rain's main site as well as four satellite sites were closed, and the church was declared illegal. Whenever Believers tried to gather, the police followed and shut down their meetings, sometimes beating those in attendance. One woman was beaten so severely that she lost her unborn child.

And yet, church members continued to view these attacks and interrogations as opportunities to share the Gospel. They had been taught how to react under questioning. "By the grace and help of the Lord, try to turn the interrogation process into a process of evangelism," read a post on the church's online platform. "Try ... to turn the interrogation room into a new meeting of the church." Some church members reported seeing jailers come to faith in Christ or policemen soften toward the Gospel after witnessing the testimony of Believers' lives.

The pastor's wife, Jing Rong, was released six months after her arrest, but she remains under house arrest and is denied the opportunity to communicate with anyone. Li Yingqiang was released on bail in August 2019 and returned to Hubei province with his family. He must report to the police station regularly while his case is pending. All of the more than 300 Early Rain Church members arrested since 2018 have since been released, with the exception of elder Qin Defu (sentenced to four years in prison) and Pastor Wang Yi (sentenced to nine years in prison). Wang Yi's sentence is the longest given to a house-church pastor in more than 10 years.



China has close to 200 million surveillance cameras throughout the country, enough for one camera per seven citizens. The government deploys highly sophisticated facial recognition technology to track citizens.

If God decides to use the persecution of this Communist regime against the church to help more Chinese people to despair of their futures," Wang Yi wrote in his declaration, "to lead them through a wilderness of spiritual disillusionment and through this to make them know Jesus, if through this He continues disciplining and building up His church, then I am joyfully willing to submit to God's plans, for His plans are always benevolent and good."

The government shows no sign of backing away from its five-year plan to Sinicize Christianity. More arrests, raids, church closings and even demolitions of church buildings occur each month. If, however, China is entering a second period of extreme persecution such as followed the Cultural Revolution, when pastors were jailed for decades and the government sought to completely eliminate Christianity, this time the church is prepared. "Christians in China are better prepared for persecution today because more Believers have their own copy of God's Word," said VOM's regional director for the Asia Pacific region, "and also because they have seen the fruit of their predecessors' faithfulness in enduring persecution."

Having already endured difficult persecution before this most recent crackdown, many large urban churches had made plans to divide into smaller groups if necessary. Fewer churches were raided or shut down in 2019 simply because the larger groups no longer existed and their smaller gatherings were less visible. While nearly all Chinese churches have abandoned the large-

group format, they haven't abandoned meeting for worship. They simply do so in smaller groups or by using technology to create online meeting spaces.

This new era of persecution may be a period of refinement for the maturing Chinese church. Although some have left the faith or chosen to stay home, many more are firmly committed to following Christ despite persecution.

"Persecution itself is evil to the people of God," Ben Chen said, "but we rejoice that the Gospel can be spread. We don't simply believe persecution itself can make the Gospel spread. God uses this way to make His people realize there is a treasure in the clay. So, as the church cherishes more holding the Gospel dear, so they can continue growing."

Chinese Christians need our continued, faithful prayers and support more than ever. They must remain faithful to Christ alone as their government tries to dilute the Gospel with Chinese culture, and they must understand that their Christian faith exists above any allegiance to country or culture. Many Believers, like those at Early Rain Covenant Church of Chengdu, have prepared to confront persecution through sound teaching and the work of the Holy Spirit. In the words of Li Yingqiang, "May the whole world know that we are joyfully willing to receive this persecution for the sake of our faith."



Chinese Believer Cheng Jie spent two years in prison for her work leading a church-run kindergarten similar to the one at Early Rain.

May/June 2020

# Prayer Diary

May 2020

I Prayed

S 17	BANGLADESH	Pray for Neelam, one of only two Christians at her school, who faces persecution.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 18	YEMEN	Pray that women who are imprisoned because of their faith will see Christ in their circumstances.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 19	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	Pray that seekers who hear the Gospel will come to know Jesus Christ.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 20	TURKMENISTAN	Pray for Believers distributing Christian literature in the Turkmen language.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 21	LIBYA	Pray that Libyans who have left their country will hear the Gospel.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 22	CUBA	Pray that God will close the eyes of officials as Bibles pass through checkpoints.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 23	SRI LANKA	Pray that Sri Lankan churches will increase their evangelistic efforts.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 24	BAHRAIN	Pray for spiritual growth and unity among Believers in the country.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 25	VIETNAM	Pray that Front-Line Workers will identify and help persecuted Believers.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 26	MAURITANIA	Pray that Christian converts from Islam will stand firm amid persecution.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 27	ALGERIA	Pray for government-approved churches that are being closed.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 28	ERITREA	Pray for underground church leaders inside Eritrea.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 29	IRAQ	Pray that those who risk their lives for God's kingdom will thrive.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 30	MALDIVES	Pray that those working in the Maldives will see much fruit from their efforts.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 31	SOMALIA	Pray for a VOM-sponsored media ministry reaching Somalis around the globe.	<input type="checkbox"/>

June 2020

I Prayed

M 1	EGYPT	Pray that churches in Egypt will continue to send workers throughout the Middle East.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 2	NORTH KOREA	Pray for imprisoned Christians who are tortured.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 3	AFGHANISTAN	Pray that every tribal group and language will have access to God's Word.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 4	SAUDI ARABIA	Pray that more Christians will be sent to Saudi Arabia to be Christ's witnesses.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 5	NEPAL	Pray for the protection of those distributing Bibles.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 6	BANGLADESH	Pray for national workers taking the Gospel to Rohingya refugees.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 7	MALI	Pray that Christian converts from Islam will boldly share the Gospel.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 8	UZBEKISTAN	Pray that Christian leaders will not be forced to leave the country to support their families.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 9	TURKEY	Pray that the thousands of ostracized and persecuted Christian refugees will receive hope and comfort.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 10	YEMEN	Pray for an end to civil war and suffering.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 11	SUDAN	Pray for hospital chaplains in the Nuba Mountains as they comfort patients in Jesus' name.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 12	PAKISTAN	Pray that pastors will remain faithful despite continuous oppression and persecution.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 13	INDIA	Pray that persecutors will come to know and accept Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 14	KYRGYZSTAN	Pray that Christians who support themselves through microbusinesses will witness to their neighbours.	<input type="checkbox"/>
M 15	CUBA	Pray for the safety of leaders and pastors who are interrogated.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 16	CHINA	Pray for the pastor and members of Early Rain Covenant Church who are in prison.	<input type="checkbox"/>
W 17	UGANDA	Pray for Christian women who are abandoned by their husbands because of their faith.	<input type="checkbox"/>
T 18	INDONESIA	Pray that Front-Line Workers will be bold and wise as they share the Gospel.	<input type="checkbox"/>
F 19	KENYA	Pray that young people will follow Christ and reject worldly ideologies.	<input type="checkbox"/>
S 20	MALI	Pray for stability in the north so displaced Christians can return.	<input type="checkbox"/>



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