

Adventist president's visit to China first by a top church leader in decades

Hub congregations support nearly 40,000 Adventists

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Bill Knott/ANN Staff



Adventist world church President Jan Paulsen speaks to a congregation of 1,000 that meets at the Beishi Protestant Church. Paulsen's visit to China was his first since he became world church president 10 years ago.

Two Seventh-day Adventist congregations in the Northeast Chinese city of Shenyang illustrate the dynamics of the church in China, where local churches often serve as both ministry and administrative hubs for smaller congregations.

The Beiguan Church, with nearly 3,000 members, worships in a building situated in a modern neighborhood and is often visited by government-sponsored tour groups. Four miles away, the Beishi congregation shares an aging, overcrowded structure with another Protestant church amid a densely-packed tangle of shops and homes. Church leadership at both locations is responsible for dozens of area church plants.

On the fourth day of a [weeklong trip](#) to the People's Republic of China, world church president Jan Paulsen and a team from the church's world headquarters and Northern Asia-Pacific region worshipped with both congregations in the city of 7 million. Overflow crowds of 2,500 at the Beiguan Church and 1,200 at the Beishi congregation greeted Paulsen as he made his first visit to China since becoming world church president 10 years ago and the first by any Adventist world church president to mainland China in more than 60 years.



Hao Ya Jie, 46, pastor of the Beiguan Seventh-day Adventist Church in Shenyang, China. More than half of Adventist pastors in China are women.

During an afternoon service on May 16, 500 church members crowded the sanctuary at Beishi as Paulsen spoke on the final counsel Jesus gave his disciples on the night they celebrated Passover together in the Upper Room.

In a literal upper room two stories above, another 500 Adventists jammed an overflow chapel, watching the service below on a single 26-inch TV screen. Two hundred more worshippers lined every hallway and stairway, listening to the music and words that drifted down the corridors from bullhorn-style speakers.

"Half of us are here, half are two stories up and 10 percent are sitting in the stairs," Paulsen told the audience. "And maybe there are some out there who say, 'I wish I were there, but there's no room today.' ... I want to honor you for your faithfulness, for your trust in God and for your devotion."

Both the Beiguan and the Beishi congregations are historic churches in China, responsible for planting and nurturing dozens of smaller Adventist congregations across this industrial city about 100 miles from the North Korean border. More than 100 congregations serving a total of 7,000 Adventists are coordinated by the Beiguan church, which acts much like a local conference does in typical church administrative structure. Likewise, the Beishi church oversees the ministry for 70 smaller churches and "meeting points."

Church planter Zu Xiu Hua, who started 380 congregations in the northeastern province of Jilin, spoke with Paulsen through an interpreter during his visit. Her congregations, now attended by more than 20,000 members in the province's mostly rural region, are served by dozens of volunteer women whom she trains to conduct Bible studies, preach, and offer spiritual care.

More than half of Adventist pastors in China are women, and a majority of the members are also female.

Other local church leaders, some from as far as a three-hour train ride away, gathered at the two main churches to meet their world church president. At the Beiguan Church, Pastor Hao Ya Jie described for the church leaders the ministries and outreach services she and her fellow leaders coordinate, including literacy classes, ministerial training, lay preacher training and wedding services. Up to five Shenyang couples are married in the church per week, which is often their first exposure to Adventism.

"You have managed to make this church what we hope Seventh-day Adventist churches everywhere would be," said Paulsen after he learned of the church's community-based ministries. "It is a center for worship, a center for ministerial training, a center open to the community."

Pastor Shi Wei of the Beishi Church doesn't have the opportunity to run such a full-fledged ministry program because the congregation doesn't own the building it meets in for Sabbath services. Training events and prayer meetings are usually scattered among dozens of smaller congregations and meeting points that have sprung up around the ministry of the Beishi Church when Christian churches began to reopen in China in the 1980s. During the Cultural Revolution, a dozen turbulent years that marked the greatest difficulties for religion in modern China, all Christian churches were closed, pastors forced to take up other work, and Bibles burned.

While some Chinese pastors have earned formal degrees through seminaries sponsored by the China Christian Council, the umbrella organization that coordinates the affairs of the nation's estimated 20 million Christians, an increasing number are emerging from training centers established by local congregations.

In meetings with both the national and regional branches of the Christian Council, Paulsen expressed the Adventist Church's interest in assisting both established seminaries and training centers in preparing larger numbers of pastors equipped to serve the distinctive needs of Adventists in the country.

Nearly 400,000 Adventists are believed to worship at thousands of locations across the nation.

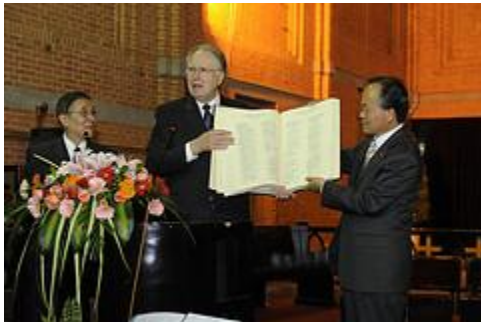
Church president calls Chinese Adventist faith 'vibrant' *Church delegation discusses ministerial education*



Jan Paulsen on his first official visit to the People's Republic of China. In Wuxi, a 4-million city West of Shanghai, Paulsen is greeted by Adventist Church members after his sermon at the Protestant Church.

A rendition of a popular Adventist hymn by a 45-member choir of the Wuxi Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Lift up the Trumpet," welcomed Pastor Jan Paulsen on his first official visit to the People's Republic of China as the world president of the Adventist world church.

"I am often asked, 'How are our brothers and sisters in China?' Now, I will be able to say - they are well and vibrant," Paulsen told the congregation of several hundred gathered in a 108-year-old city-center Protestant church, Wednesday, May 13. One of the Wuxi Adventist congregations packs this sanctuary every Sabbath.



Together with Jairyong Lee, president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Northern Asia-Pacific region, Paulsen presented a copy of a special edition of the Bible, a part of the Follow the Bible initiative of the church.

The Adventist faith community throughout China is a growing body of believers, who are part of a larger Protestant Church in the country, whose activities are coordinated by the China Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement (CCC/TSPM). The Wuxi Adventist community, which makes up 10 percent of Protestant Christians in the metropolitan area, has 35 congregations.

Preaching on the meaning of the Christian gospel, Paulsen encouraged believers to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others. "We are a witnessing community," he said.



Jan Paulsen in conversation with Rev. Gao Feng, president of the China Christian Council/Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

Seventh-day Adventist believers are among the three distinctive Christian groups in China, which includes the Little Flock and the True Jesus Church. Today, there are 20 million Protestant Christians in China, according to Council officials. There are nearly 400,000 Seventh-day Adventists in China worshipping in some 4,000 congregations, including house churches, throughout the country.

Some local congregations own their church buildings, like the newly-opened Dongting Seventh-day Adventist Church in Wuxi. But in other areas Adventist believers hold Sabbath services in Protestant churches. On Thursday morning, the



Dongting Adventist Church, opened in November, can seat 1,200 and was designed to offer facilities for a variety of training programs and services. Jan Paulsen, on a trip to Wuxi, visited the modern sanctuary and Seventh-day Adventist ministry center.

delegation visited the Dongting church, which opened last November. The new church complex can seat 1,200 and was designed to offer facilities to a variety of training programs and services.

"I cannot think of another church, even in the Western countries, built with such beauty and forethought to become a center that can respond to many needs," Paulsen said. "It underscores the importance of training lay people to play a greater role in responding to the community."

Paulsen commended church leaders and local authorities for their support in making this church project a reality. "We see growth and increase of freedom. It is a testimony of progress that has been made," he said.



The Seventh-day Adventist choir performed at a prayer meeting at Wuxi Protestant Church where world church President Jan Paulsen preached.

"When you protect religious freedom, the news spreads internationally," he added. Earlier on Wednesday in Shanghai, Paulsen and leaders from the church's world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States, and the Korea-based regional headquarters, were welcomed during a visit to Shanghai by Reverend Gao Feng, CCC/TSPM president.

In a symbolic act of the common Christian roots in the Holy Scriptures, Paulsen presented Reverend Gao with a copy of the Bible which Seventh-day Adventists are taking around the world in a "Follow the Bible" initiative. Launched in October, the initiative is taking a multi-language Bible to each of the church's world regions to emphasize Bible study. The initiative will culminate at the church's world business session in Atlanta in 2010.

"We brought this copy of the Bible with us to China as a symbolic act of our common commitment to the Scriptures," Paulsen said to the congregation in Wuxi, as together with Pastor Jairyong Lee, president of the church's Northern Asia-Pacific Division, they displayed the Bible.

Paulsen and Gao discussed challenges facing the Christian community in China and agreed to explore ways to provide more extensive training to ministers.

"We need to have more partnership and cooperation," Gao agreed. Such interest in exploring ways to further expand ministerial education, Paulsen said, would not only benefit the training of the current and future Adventist pastors, in particular, but could also meet the ministerial education needs of other Christian groups.

The Adventist delegation also met with the leaders of the Shanghai Christian Council, which coordinates the affairs of some 300,000 believers in the region. The delegation also discussed ministerial training for the region.

During a visit to the Shanghai city-center Protestant church headquarters, which is

currently being renovated, Paulsen also said that the visit expressed a "special attachment to the international faith community ... as Adventist believers in China are a part of a larger faith family."

Chinese-born Pastor Eugene Hsu, a general vice president of the world church, is coordinating the week-long visit to China of Paulsen and the Adventist delegation. Following Shanghai and Wusi, the itinerary includes stops in Shenyang and Beijing with visits to the State Administration of Religious Affairs, the Northeast Seminary and Yanjing Seminary, the provincial and city Christian Councils, as well as meeting with three Adventist congregations.

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