



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Dear Friends and Companions in the church's mission,

June 2017

Greetings to you in this Pentecost season, when our Sunday worship focuses on the growth of the church and of each one of us in the church. Since Pentecost spans the whole summer it is also a time when those of us who are students and teachers break from the normal routine to explore new things: a summer job, a trip somewhere, Vacation Bible School, intensive research, or just some needed rest. Although I am based in Hong Kong this summer, I am making three trips: to Xi'an, a city in Shaanxi Province, in the middle of China; to several locations in Fujian Province, on the southeastern coast of China; and to Yangon, the former capital of Myanmar and still its biggest city. In this newsletter I invite you to share my experiences in Xi'an; the next two newsletters will be about Fujian and Myanmar.

News organizations often report on the amazing growth of Christianity in China today. But few people, inside or outside China, realize that Christianity is not new in China; it goes back 1,400 years to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), when Syriac-speaking missionary-monks of the Assyrian Church of the East (a church still surviving in Iraq) traveled with merchants along the Silk Route through Central Asia to reach Chang-an (now Xi'an), the capital of the Tang Dynasty. They arrived in 635 and were given permission to stay, worship and talk freely about the God they worshiped. Here is how one priest expressed the essence of Christianity for the Emperor Suzong, using words familiar to Chinese Buddhists and Taoists, sometime between 756 and 762 AD:

The True Lord of the Primordial Void, in absolute stillness and constant naturalness, crafted and nourished all things. He raised the earth and established the sky. He took on human form and His compassion was limitless. The sun rises; darkness is banished; and we are witnesses to the true wonder.

Maybe it's not exactly how you or I would say it, but we are all challenged to speak the gospel in ways that reach others where they are. How do you do it where you are?



Most people go to Xi'an to see the thousands of life-sized terracotta soldiers buried with the founder of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), which are truly impressive. But the highlights for me were different. I was drawn to the large stone tablet telling the story of the earliest Christianity in China and to the 8th-century Christian Da Qin monastery built like a Buddhist pagoda, from which the tablet probably came, although now the stone sits with similar monuments in the Beilin ("Forest of Stone Monuments") museum in Xi'an.



China is rightly proud of the Tang Dynasty, a golden age, and has worked hard to restore Xi'an to some of its former glory. This is part of the reconstructed city wall of Xi'an.



Inscribed in Chinese in 781 AD, the stele (stone tablet) sits on a turtle, signifying that its message is divine.



The Da Qin Monastery, built in 781, is probably the source of the stone tablet.

The stone tablet begins with a summary of the biblical story of creation and salvation and describes the Christian scriptures. It calls Christianity the “Religion of Light” and says its teachings “are like the resplendent sun: they have the power to dissolve the dark realm and destroy evil forever.” The stone spells out the benefits that the Religion of Light brings to the Chinese people (or to any people, including Americans, I might add): “to penetrate the mysteries, to bless with a good conscience, to be great and yet empty, to return to stillness and be forgiving, to be compassionate and to deliver all people, to do good deeds and help people reach the other shore, ...to calm people in stormy times, to help them understand the nature of things, to maintain purity, to nourish all things, to respect all life, and to answer the needs of those whose beliefs come from the heart.” The text ends by saying that the stone was erected on a sunny day near the forest “in the second year of [Emperor] Jianzheng” (781 AD).

On a rainy day, Mr. Xu, a teacher from the Shaanxi Bible Institute in Xi’an, drove me to that forest an hour outside of Xi’an. There, about 20 years ago, British scholar Martin Palmer discovered the only surviving Christian monastery from the Tang Dynasty, the source of the stone. Palmer tells the story in his book, *The Jesus Sutras* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), which is where my quotations from the stone come from. Palmer suspected that a pagoda called the Da Qin Pagoda had actually been built for Christian monks, not Buddhists, because “Da Qin” was the Chinese name for the “Great Empire” to the west of China during the Tang Dynasty, the Christian Byzantine Empire. Palmer’s hunch was strengthened when he saw the building and noticed that it faces east, like a church, not south, like a Buddhist or Taoist pagoda. The 115-year-old Buddhist nun living in the pagoda at that time affirmed that, indeed, everyone knew that this had been built as a Christian monastery. Since then, Chinese archaeologists have confirmed it.

In the dynasties that followed the Tang, the churches and monasteries the missionaries of the Church of the East founded were suppressed, but these precious remnants have survived in Xi’an. The living church of people has also survived, although in different church bodies.

Today the rural area around the Da Qin Monastery has a large Christian population, mostly Roman Catholic, and we saw many large Catholic churches there. In Xi'an itself, I worshiped at a 100-year-old Protestant church on Sunday. It is now one of China's officially registered churches. I don't know what the sermon was about, but I do know that the friendly man sitting next to me who had some kind of muscle disorder had learned every verse of every song by heart and sang them with gusto. Something good is going on there, as it has for hundreds of years. I pray the same for the church where you live.

Sincerely,

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P.S. In the years before I came to Hong Kong I was writing a book about a manuscript that is part of Egyptian church history. I am so grateful that it has now been published. The book is *The Text of a Coptic Monastic Discourse, On Love and Self-Control: Its Story from the Fourth Century to the Twenty-First*. Cistercian Studies Series 272. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017.

P.P.S.

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Members of the Shi Ji Du congregation in Xi'an leaving after worship on Sunday.