



PRAY FOR PERSECUTED BROTHERS & SISTERS

Pray for the Persecuted Christians in China

Remember the prisoners as if chained with them - those who are mistreated - since you yourselves are in the Body also.

(Hebrews 13:3)



China

Total Population: 1,439,323,776

Self-Proclaimed Christian Population: 9% – **Evangelical Witness: 8%**

Largest Religion: Non-Religious: 44%

Death Rate: 8.2/1000 per year: Just today: 32,335

Struck down, But Not Destroyed

by June Cheng (article abbreviated)

(World-September 14, 2021) On September 9th, World posted an article detailing the persecution of Early Rain Church in Chengdu, China.

Twenty-five-year-old Ren Ruiting remembers how Dec. 9, 2018, started out like any other Sunday. She took the elevator up to the sixth floor of an office building to worship at Early Rain Covenant Church, a well-known unregistered Presbyterian church in Chengdu, China. Afterward, she attended a rehearsal for an upcoming Christmas event.

But while out for dinner, her phone started lighting up with messages: Police were arresting her church's leaders and members from their homes.

At first, Ren wasn't overly anxious. Earlier that year, on the May 12 anniversary of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, police had raided an Early Rain prayer meeting and detained Pastor Wang Yi and 200 other church members but released them within 24 hours. She assumed this crackdown, too, would be temporary.

Then the volume of messages ballooned.

"It was so terrifying because people would be updating you on their situation, but then partway through they would stop responding," Ren said. "It's like they vanished." Police had a list of names of people associated with the church, and Ren knew they would come for her too.

That day launched a series of events that would lead Ren and her family to seek their escape from China. The family became the first Early Rain church members to come to the United States seeking political asylum.

China's crackdown on Early Rain proved to be long-lasting-with special retribution reserved for Wang, a former legal scholar who became an outspoken pastor. (In one sermon he called President Xi Jinping a sinner in need of repentance.) The Chinese government ultimately sentenced Wang to nine years in prison for subversion of state power and illegal business operations.

In Chengdu, Early Rain today continues to meet online and in small groups as church leaders regularly face detention and monitoring. Although the government has imprisoned its pastor and confiscated its building, the church is growing and raising leaders for smaller gatherings of its congregants. The seminary, school, and college connected to the church have also continued despite government harassment.

Meanwhile, Ren's story shows the persecution some of Early Rain's Christian congregants have endured.

Yet the persecution continued. Police broke up small group gatherings on Sunday mornings, at times bringing all the attendees, including children, to the station. Some members faced evictions as the government pressured landlords to kick them out. Authorities forced some parents to send their children back to state-run schools rather than attend the church's unregistered Christian school.

Weddings and funerals of church members became one of the few times the larger church body could gather, yet police would place the church leaders under house arrest on those days, forcing congregants to find a pastor from another church to officiate.

Church leader Titus Wu (WORLD has changed his name for security reasons) noted that even with this complication-and COVID-19 restrictions keeping the number of attendees small-weddings have been joyful celebrations and reunions.

Amid the trials and difficulties, the Early Rain congregants face, many have seen God working. According to church leader Wu, the church has grown since the 2018 crackdown with new converts, baptisms, and members. He declined to publicize the number over fears the government would use it against them, but described the increase as "tremendous."

Some new converts came as a direct result of the detentions. One Early Rain member, Daniel Liu, was detained during the 2018 crackdown after publishing a post on Weibo (China's Twitter-like social media platform) that read in part, "God, protect your church." Police officials accused him of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" with his post and placed him in detention for five days.

In prison, some of his cellmates began to respect him after learning he was a Christian. During leisure time, he found in the prison library a book about NBA basketball player Jeremy Lin and his Christian faith. He showed the book to his cellmates and used it to start conversations about Christianity.

Later, one cellmate, in prison for drug possession, asked Liu: "Do you think I can be saved?" Liu spoke with him and later led him in the sinner's prayer. Using a page ripped from a book, Liu wrote out the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and his phone number to leave with the man. Two other cellmates who had listened to the conversation said they also wanted to believe.

The day before his five-day sentence was up, Liu baptized the three men at the sink in the cell. After Liu's release, the initial cellmate attended a small group gathering that met at the bar where Liu worked, although he later moved away for work-related reasons.

Early Rain is starting to look forward after initially focusing on restoring church leaders who had spent months in prison, caring for the church's scattered members, and riding out the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the church began a training course for small group leaders, preachers, and leaders on church planting in preparation to break the church into several smaller gatherings. Wu said this would make it easier to pastor church members who meet in separate groups, prevent people from falling through the cracks, and allow more flexibility for their numbers to multiply.

Leaders visit different small groups to administer communion. Some of these gatherings are broken up by police: Dai said that in June, after not taking communion for more than a year, she eagerly attended a gathering at a fellow church member's house. Yet the apartment building's guards noticed that people were gathering and called the police.

Dai and other congregants hid in a bedroom as police detained three leaders of the group. Afterward they all left, reconvening later in the afternoon at a teahouse to take the Lord's Supper.

The church's Christian school continues, with each grade meeting in a different family's home. Police have visited some, forcing them to change locations. A new Chinese law regulating private education-with Communist committees ensuring schools teach core socialist values and eschew foreign curricula-could give officials a tool to shut down unregistered schools like Early Rain's.

"There is nothing the school can do," said Dai, who is a teacher there. She recalls the administrators telling her, "We will keep having class, but if you are detained for attending the school, we can't help you. We can't protect teachers or students. If parents are worried, they can take their kids out of the school."

Dai said that since the crackdown, she's missed having fellowship with her brothers and sisters in the church. At times, she feels spiritually weak. Her small group meets too far away for her to attend consistently.

Still, she's found the difficulties of the past few years have brought her closer to God. "It's made me more mature in my faith. I've experienced the mystery of God that hardship causes you to trust God more deeply," said Dai. "When you are in pain or grief, when you feel like you can't do it, you hold more tightly on to God."

<https://www.chinaaid.org/2021/09/world-overview-of-persecution-of-early.html>