

May 13, 2013 - Hefei

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At 5 million or so not that big of a town by China standards(!) - is a provincial capital. This is where Disciples missionaries first arrived more than 100 years ago. It was then a village of 10,000. Our visits this day included the Anhui Seminary, the Christian Church of Hefei (about 9000 in worship on Sunday), government offices and the provincial hospital originally founded by Disciples (now several imposing skyscrapers worth of modern medicine).

The seminary is a three year Bible school, preparing lay ministers for church leadership. Ordained ministers are in short supply compared to the need of a rapidly growing church. There is only one seminary in all of China offering masters degrees.

The Hefei Church is in a new building in the heart of the city. The front is a replica of the face of the



original building on the site. But beyond that is a major facility that seats 5000 in worship (on the main floor plus two levels of balconies) in the main sanctuary with an overflow room for several hundred mothers and crying children and elderly.

Three services on Sunday, four weekly prayer services, a youth program of sixty different groups, keep this pastor and staff of five busy. They are well known in the community for their Christmas and Easter program - and for their contributions to Earthquake relief. Doctors from the congregation went to give medical aid in the disaster zone. They are used to volunteering their medical services - on a regular basis

50 doctors and nurses run a free clinic out of the church.



Though Christianity is growing in China, the visits with the government officials reminded us that it is still very much a minority among China's vast population. The Cultural Revolution effectively ruptured China's connection with its religious past. Now the government has a great interest in protecting the rights of religious persons in this society where religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed. We met first with a communist party official who was quite gregarious and determined that we understand how supportive he is of Christian work. "It's important for the church and the government to work together to must do God's work," he said. *(The photo above is of the pastor showing an award for earthquake relief.)*

Our next visit was with the Religious Affairs Bureau (SAR) a government office which is charged with protecting the rights of the 5 main religious communities in the province - as well as other minorities. Section 2 relates to the Protestant community. Particular issues with Protestants often have to do with the rapid growth of the church. With members outstripping the training of leaders, sometimes the church is not run as well as it should be. The SAR is therefore interested in helping the church provide training - as well as office space and training centers in churches and provincial areas. The Christian tendency to spawn cults can create problems, as these groups may disregard Chinese law - or even moral principles such as marrying only one spouse. The SAR has to help keep watch that cults do not take root among the legitimate churches. In addition SAR advocates on behalf of Christians who may come into conflict with local leaders.

Goals for the next few years: capacity building, more ordained pastors who will teach proper doctrine, catching up with property and building needs of churches.