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Keith Parks announces February retirement date

By Sarah Zimmerman

ATLANTA (ABP) -- After five years as coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's global missions program, Keith Parks plans to retire, move to Texas and turn his attention to writing.

Parks, who will be 71 in October, announced his retirement Sept. 18 during a CBF advisory council meeting. His retirement date is set for Feb. 28, 1999.

"It just felt like the time has come," Parks said of his decision. "I have no health problems, and nobody's asking me to leave."

"But," he added, "I did have some fear about staying beyond the time I was productive."

Parks has been a widely-recognized leader in Baptist missions for several decades, including a dozen years as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board). He is perhaps best known to Southern Baptists for his personal challenges to missionaries as they are being commissioned -- messages that invariably impact others in the audience.

"As a college student, I heard Keith preach for the first time, and it was a turning point in my life," said Daniel Vestal, CBF coordinator. "It awakened in me a missions consciousness that has been a central part of my ministry through the years."

"Keith Parks has been on the cutting edge of world evangelization for more than four decades, calling Baptists to obedience and sacrifice, yet he has not lost touch with the individual missionary or the local church," Vestal added.

Parks began his missions career as a Southern Baptist missionary in Indonesia in 1954. He and his wife, Helen Jean, served there 14 years before joining the administrative staff of the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Va. He was elected president in 1980.

Parks said he chose to retire in 1992 when dramatic leadership changes in the Southern Baptist Convention led him to conclude, "I could not influence decisions for the good of missions and could not lead foreign missions according to our Baptist heritage of freedom and persuasion rather than conformity and control."

Parks said he took the CBF missions-coordinator position a few months later because "the Fellowship's ambitious plan for global missions was so similar to what we thought ought to be done in a new global era."

Those missions strategies, which Parks has championed and enlarged during the past five years, include focusing on people groups who have little or no access to the gospel, missionaries working in teams with no dichotomy between home and foreign missions, assigning missionaries to people groups rather than geographic areas, and working in partnership with other Christians committed to the New Testament's "Great Commission" mandate to take the gospel message around the world.

"Keith Parks was the right person at the right time for CBF," said John Tyler, Missouri layman and CBF moderator, the organization's highest elected official.

"He came with a vision of what it takes to be faithful and effective in the 1990s, and he knew how to implement that vision. No other person could have come to a fledgling organization and built so quickly an effective global missions program."

Begun in 1991, the Fellowship has 140 missionaries and an 11-member missions staff in CBF's Atlanta offices. Its 1998-99 ministry budget of \$14.8 million includes \$9.3 million for global missions.

"I've seen a lot of evidence that the kind of missions effort that we've shaped has the blessing of the Lord and is consistent with trends in society," Parks said. "Those elements will cause it to continue to grow."

Tyler echoed Parks' optimism. "The Fellowship has a bright future in global missions simply because Dr. Parks was here to build a solid foundation for us," he said. "Ten years from now we'll look at where we are and how far we've come, and then we'll be able to really comprehend what Dr. Parks has meant to us."

The Parkses plan to move to the Dallas/Fort Worth area to be closer to family members.

Now that he and his wife, Helen Jean, plan to begin writing together, Parks wishes he had kept a journal of his missions experiences. He said he has not tried to keep track of how many countries he has visited or how many audiences he has addressed.

During his CBF tenure, Parks said he met "some of the brightest and most committed people I have ever worked with." He has frequently joked that he was "having more fun than is probably legal."

"At the Fellowship we have the freedom to experiment, and if it doesn't work, to try something else," he said. "I've had the thrill of seeing people really produce in some tough situations. We've created a system that encourages experimentation and taking risks, and I think that's consistent with Christ's example."

Born in Memphis, Texas, Parks received his bachelor's degree from North Texas State College and doctorate of theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. The only church in the United States where he served as pastor was Red Springs Baptist Church in Red Springs, Texas. He led the congregation, which he still says is "the greatest church in the world," from 1950 to 1954 while finishing his graduate studies.

SBC president issues call to focus on reaching cities

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention president Paige Patterson, in his first address to the SBC Executive Committee, said Sept. 21 the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group must focus its attention on starting churches in major cities in America and around the world.

"Our roots as Baptists are not in the city. They're in the countryside, and we are butchers and bakers and candlestick makers, at best," said Patterson, who was elected SBC president in June.

"We've got to change our attitudes about the cities," added Patterson, who is also president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Patterson has asked the presidents of the International and North American Mission boards to set a goal of reaching one million persons for Christ during the 1999-2000 church year. But Patterson said Southern Baptists are interested not just in raw numbers but in "evangelism that results in New Testament churches."

"The challenge is not just to reach a million," Patterson said. " ... The challenge for us is to see a million baptized into our churches"

Patterson said many people in urban areas feel hopeless and in despair and do not know the gospel message.

"The time has come for us to have broken hearts for the cities," he said.

Patterson repeated a statement he made earlier that conservatives' 15-year effort to gain control of the convention was a necessary theological correction. Theology is still important, he stressed, but added, "It's time to move on beyond that, and with state conventions and our national convention, with every single bit of energy we have, the day has come for us to bend our backs to the job of getting the gospel of Jesus Christ" to America's cities.

Patterson said he would also challenge metropolitan associations and megachurches to adopt goals to plant churches in cities.

Patterson's remarks to the Executive Committee came on the day when the videotape of President Bill Clinton's grand-jury testimony was made public. Patterson previously has said Clinton should resign in light of revelations that he had an inappropriate relationship with a former White House intern.

"I, with you, lament what is going on in our country right now, and I have spoken openly about what I believe the President for his own sake ought to do," Patterson told the Executive Committee. "What concerns me most is the materialism of our nation that has led our people to say moral and spiritual integrity are not important any more."

"Instead of lamenting that, let's get on with business of spreading the gospel," he said.

Patterson told committee members: "I want to challenge you to join with other Southern Baptists across this land and one last time before Jesus returns, let's have an assault on the cities of the world for the cause of Christ."

ABP honors Walker Knight with Religious Freedom Award

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- More than 100 people attended a Sept. 18 banquet and ceremony honoring longtime Baptist journalist Walker Knight as "a champion for social justice and press freedom."

Knight, 74, accepted Associated Baptist Press' 1998 Religious Freedom Award in Atlanta.

Emmanuel McCall, pastor of Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in College Park, Ga., and a former co-worker of Knight's, reflected on their long friendship.

"I want to make a bold statement. I think I can support that statement, that it was the Home Mission Board that built the fire under Southern Baptists in the area of race relations, and it was primarily under the leadership of Walker Knight," said McCall, an African-American who formerly worked as a black-church consultant for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

McCall said Knight took "bold steps" as editor of Home Missions magazine, later called MissionsUSA, which "really got the catalyst going" for racial-reconciliation efforts in the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1960s and 1970s.

McCall said he first met Knight in 1966, when Knight interviewed him and other black and white students who were meeting to discuss racial reconciliation. Knight wrote a cover story for the January 1967 issue of Home Missions magazine, which featured a cover photo of a black pastor.

"It was that issue that rocked the Southern Baptist Convention," McCall said. A number of readers cancelled their subscriptions. "To see a black minister, in terms of not being ministered to but in the quality of his ministry, there were many in our convention who were not ready to handle it, and they let Walker have it," McCall said.

"It was this [magazine] issue that led Southern Baptists to begin to take note that we were living in a different day," McCall said.

In addition to his views on race, Knight, who is white, also "talked about doing missions in a different kind of way and relating to people who were once considered the objects of missions."

He led Southern Baptists to look across "social and economic structures" and dealt with social issues, like the black family, which at the time was "something no one else was dealing with."

"Home Missions magazine became sort of the watershed publication among Southern Baptists that was not afraid to deal with the difficult," McCall said.

Though their views on race were unpopular, McCall said, he, Knight and others had the support of the Home Mission Board's president at the time, Arthur Rutledge.

"Dr. Rutledge told us we could say what the Holy Spirit led us to say, do what we needed to do, but just handle it responsibly."

Later, some suggested there should be a black person on the HMB staff to begin to help Southern Baptists deal with racial issues. McCall was invited to take the job.

"My coming represented a new era for Southern Baptists," McCall said, "a black person staffed not only with title but responsibility and authority."

McCall said Knight's support for integration eventually influenced other denominational publications. "Walker has served as a role model to other writers," McCall said, in his commitment to Christ, the local church, organized Baptist life, personal integrity and by his "determined consistency."

"There's another word for that," McCall said. "Bulldog tenacity. When he knows he is right, he stays with it and is not discouraged."

McCall said those are "qualities that all religious journalists ought to have in one degree or another."

"I think above all he has demonstrated what it means to be Christlike, even in the midst of ridicule and persecution," McCall said.

"Tonight we honor that man who has helped Southern Baptists in a tremendous way to cross that chasm of troubled waters called racial reconciliation," McCall said.

Knight reflected on the vast changes in technology he has seen in his 74 years, from watching his editor father take dictation from Associated Press over headphones on a manual typewriter, to teletype, faxes, computers, e-mail and digital photography.

"Technology doesn't seem to change human nature so much, does it?" he observed. "Our battles for religious liberty are often with so-called good people with their prejudices, and sometimes with our own prejudices."

After being hired to his first denominational job, Knight said he learned his editor had links with the Ku Klux Klan.

"Years later, when I went to the Home Mission Board, I found how deeply racism was ingrained in the top echelons of Baptist leadership," he continued.

He said he was once told to stop pushing for integration by a superior at the agency who told him, "We've had all the integration we can handle here; we've got one secretary who's black."

"I didn't change, but I decided to wait and see if they'd fire me," he said. "I'm grateful they did not."

After taking early retirement from the Home Mission Board, Knight started the independent newspaper now called Baptists Today in 1983.

Knight said he has seen "significant changes" over the years in how Southern Baptists have come to view religious-liberty issues. "First, our battles today more often seem to be within the Baptist family than against other faiths," he said.

"In 1950, we could hardly have found a Baptist who wanted any entanglement with the state," he said. "... But that was before the integration of our public schools, that was before the building of segregation academies, ... it was before the Supreme Court ruling on prayer in schools, it was before the tirades of W.A. Criswell against church/state separation, which he called the figment of the imagination of some infidel."

Knight issued several challenges for a "free press" in Baptist life. "As a free press, we must continue to stand for freedom," he said, including advocacy of open scholarship, local-church autonomy, interfaith alliances and the "servant model" of church leadership.

"As a free press, we must continue to stand for the freedom to proclaim the good news to all people, calling them not only to faith but to reconciliation and to social and economic justice," Knight said.

"When freedoms are lost, it seems no matter how cruel, how vicious or stupid an idea may be, it never seems to die. Freedom and truth will forever walk hand in hand."

Knight was presented with a plaque honoring him as "a champion for social justice and press freedom" and with a numbered print of Maxwell Mays' "Providence in Winter," featuring the First Baptist Church of America, founded by Roger Williams in Providence, R.I.

"There is not a [Baptist] journalist in my generation that has not been influenced by Walker Knight, whether they know it or not," said Greg Warner, ABP's executive editor.

The Religious Freedom Award, first presented in 1993, honors significant contributions to the advancement of religious liberty, particularly in journalism. Previous recipients were former Florida Baptist Witness editor Jack Brymer, the religion-section staff of the Dallas Morning News, New York Times correspondent Gustav Niebuhr, and author and Baptist minister Will Campbell.

"An award that comes from your peers has a special, unique flavor," Knight said. "I feel doubly honored, knowing that you've placed me alongside other recipients that I admire so much."

Knight also gave a "special word of thanks" to Don McGregor, a longtime Baptist journalist and founding director of ABP who rotated off the board after the September meeting.

In addition to the Religious Freedom Award, ABP also presented a special award at the banquet to Floyd Craig, a Nashville, Tenn., communications consultant who helped organize ABP in June 1990 and operated the news service during its first eight months.

"It was the behind-the-scenes work of Floyd Craig and the staff of Craig and Associates ... that gave ABP the opportunity to survive and flourish in those crucial early days," said Philip Poole, chair of ABP's awards committee.

Dan Martin, who edited the news service as an employee of Craig and Associates in ABP's early days, was invited to receive the same award but could not attend the ceremony. He will be honored in the future.

Craig was presented with a plaque noting that his "vision, leadership and hard work helped bring ABP to life and made the dream of a free press for Baptists a reality."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness, your generosity and an opportunity to say thanks," Craig said.

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ABP directors vote to proceed with search for FaithWorks editor

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Associated Baptist Press directors voted Sept. 19 to hire an editor for their new FaithWorks magazine "as soon as possible." They also adopted a 1999 budget which calls for doubling the staff of the 8-year-old independent news service based in Jacksonville, Fla., from three persons to six.

Two issues of FaithWorks have been published so far, with ABP's Executive Editor Greg Warner serving as acting editor. Warner told board members it will be necessary to hire a permanent editor to meet a goal of publishing 10 issues next year.

"This has been the most exhilarating and exhausting year of my life," Warner said in a report to the board. "Don't hear this as a complaint, because I asked for it and I'm enjoying myself, but I can't keep this pace much longer. I can't effectively serve as ABP administrator, development officer, magazine editor and designated worrier. The rest of your staff has likewise been stressed and stretched as never before."

The full board approved a magazine committee recommendation to begin a search process for an editor immediately and to give the executive editor "flexibility" in working with the committee to hire or contract with marketing and business staff. The magazine committee hopes to have an editor on board before its next scheduled meeting in April, if necessary polling the full board to elect a candidate by mail or fax ballot.

Directors adopted a 1999 budget totaling \$770,000, 38 percent larger than this year's spending plan. It calls for ABP to increase by half its fund-raising efforts.

More than half of the budget, \$403,000, is for FaithWorks. The budget projects \$410,000 income for the magazine from subscriptions, advertising and fund raising.

Other projected income for ABP includes \$314,000 from conventions, churches, individuals and organizations, \$36,000 from service fees and \$10,000 from interest.

In another personnel matter, development committee member Beth Ann Boland reported that a previously approved position of development director had not been filled. The board voted unanimously to continue its contract arrangement with Atlanta fund-raising consultant Bob Banks on a month-to-month basis and continue a search process for a permanent development director.

Next year's budget includes funding for a magazine editor, development director and a new support position. The current staff consists of an executive editor, an associate executive editor and an administrative assistant.

In an editorial report, Associate Executive Editor Bob Allen reported that ABP had experienced a decline in both production and usage of news stories in the first half of 1998. He attributed both drops in part to a decline in the number of stories about the Southern Baptist Convention, which traditionally receive high use in Baptist state papers. During discussion, Allen noted that ABP should take more initiative to generate stories, particularly those related to local church life, instead of depending on breaking news from denominational agencies.

In his executive editor's report, Warner challenged ABP to "make a chance to make a difference again" by re-envisioning its news service after the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention and by reaching new audiences through ventures including FaithWorks.

In other business, the board authorized the chairman to appoint a three-person subcommittee to handle issues related to personnel. The committee's first task will be to update job descriptions.

The board also revised guidelines for nominating recipients of ABP's Religious Freedom Award. In recent years, the board has approved recipients and later learned they could not be present to accept the award, forcing the committee to come up with an alternative recipient. Under the new guidelines, the committee will ask the full board to approve a working list of more than one candidate, allowing the committee more flexibility.

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-- By ABP staff

Virginia Baptists starting partnership with China

By Robert Dilday

BEIJING, China (ABP) -- On a recent August Sunday in Beijing, as many as 3,000 Christians packed a church not far from this capital's Tiananmen Square for one of two worship services.

Every seat in the sanctuary was filled, as were those in a basement below it and in a courtyard outside, where closed-circuit televisions aired the service. Most worshipers remained after the service to watch as about 40 new Christians were baptized.

Many Americans continue to be surprised by scenes like this, which are increasingly typical across China. But after years of tension with a sometimes hostile government, the Christian church in this vast nation appears to be becoming what decades of missionary activity could not make it -- truly Chinese.

No one knows for sure how many Christians are in China. Estimates range from the official figure of 10 million to as many as 100 million -- still a fraction of the country's 1.2 billion people. Some 12,000 official Protestant churches are open, according to official accounts. That doesn't include another 25,000 legal "meeting points," where Christians worship without benefit of church buildings or pastors.

This year Virginia Baptists are beginning what they hope will be a long-term relationship with Chinese Christians, aimed at developing an understanding of the church in that country. Last month, nine Virginians met with Christian leaders in Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou and Beijing. The delegation, the first of several expected to travel there over the next year, got a first-hand view of church life in China.

Christianity's explosive growth in China in the past two or three decades stands in marked contrast to earlier efforts to evangelize the Chinese. In 1949 -- after centuries of missionary activity by Nestorians, Jesuits and evangelical Protestants -- there were about 750,000 Christians in the country. As Mao Zedong's Communist Party reshaped the country's political and social life in the 1950s, Christians struggled to adapt. Their efforts

were sharply curtailed by the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution. Zealous Red Guards closed churches and seminaries, and sent pastors and other Christian leaders to rural areas as laborers.

In 1979 the government took its first steps toward normalizing relations with Christianity and other religions and a few churches were reopened. To the surprise of many outside the country, the Christian community had grown to at least 6 million. Exactly how the faith grew during those years of turmoil is a story that may never be completely told. What is clear is that an indigenous Chinese Christianity emerged which today is attracting millions.

China's Communist Party remains officially atheist and continues to restrict some religious activities -- Christians may not conduct mass evangelism events outside church buildings, for example. However, within prescribed parameters, the church is clearly multiplying in a way some say replicates first century patterns of growth -- Christians are sharing their faith one-on-one with family and friends.

"Our Christians bear a very good witness to Jesus Christ," said Lin De'en, a Christian leader in Jiangsu Province, just north of Shanghai. "Non-Christians see how well Christians behave and the Holy Spirit is at work. We are satisfied with the religious freedom policy set up by the government. Compared to the past, we have much more freedom and access to Bibles."

"The Communist Party has changed its attitude toward religion," said Yang Zhouhuai, a Beijing Christian leader. "It once thought religion must be extinguished. ... But now they see that religion -- especially Christianity -- can do good and be moral and ethical. For all the courts and government officers to understand this is not easy. But all kind of religion is growing in China, especially Christianity."

Chinese Christians say they take seriously the responsibility to evangelize their country -- and in a way uniquely Chinese.

"The church is a minority here," said Han Wenzao, president of the China Christian Council, the official organization of Protestant churches in the country. "The gospel is unchanging, but the way to propagate the gospel should suit the context. ... God has called us to work on this piece of land. God will provide the means to do that."

China's history and politics have given Christianity there a unique cast. Among the distinctive features of the church in China:

-- No denominational labels.

Social and political factors have made the church in China "post-denominational." Churches which once were Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist or Anglican are today simply "Christian." Practical considerations stimulated the change, but today's Christians take pride in the absence of denominational labels -- which are in any case meaningless to a new generation of Christians raised without them. Accommodations are made for differing theological viewpoints. For instance, new Christians are offered two methods of being baptized -- by immersion or by sprinkling -- and communion is received in one of five different ways.

Post-denominationalism began in the 1950s with the development of the Three-Self Movement. The "three selves" -- self-government, self-support and self-propagation of the gospel -- aimed to create an indigenous church, freed of foreign -- primarily missionary -- control. The National Three-Self Movement Committee was joined in 1980 by the China Christian Council, established by church leaders to improve congregational administration, develop theological education and distribute Christian publications. Most provinces and large cities now have local Christian councils as well.

"Now people see that the church in China is not a foreign religion anymore," said Lin De'en, the leader in Jiangsu Province. "Because of the Three Self Movement, people think the church in China is Chinese."

That "sinicization" is increasingly reflected in church architecture, worship styles and sacred music. Yang Zhouhuai, who is vice president of the Beijing Christian Council and teaches church music at the seminary in the capital, noted a hymnal used by many of China's churches consists primarily of Western hymns translated into Chinese. But a quarter of them, he said, were written by Chinese Christians -- and that number is growing.

The China Christian Council isn't universally accepted. An unknown number of Christians refuse to work with it or to register their churches with the government, a resistance that sometimes incurs legal penalties. It was the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's insistence on working with unregistered groups -- who often worship in secret -- that precipitated the CCC's decision to break ties with the IMB earlier this year.

"We believe the church should function openly, equally, legally and honestly," said Rev. Deng, general secretary of the Three-Self Movement.

Also separate from the CCC are Catholic Christians, who are organized as the National Patriotic Catholic Movement. "In China, Catholic Christianity is regarded as a different religion," said Deng, adding: "On a personal level, we have many friends who are in Catholic churches. ... We are tolerant; we should respect each other."

-- National ministries.

In 1985 Chinese churches established the Amity Foundation as a medium for carrying out social services such as education, health and rural development.

From its Nanjing headquarters, the foundation's 26 staff members try -- according to its publicity brochure -- to contribute to China's social development and openness to the outside world; to make Christian involvement and participation in society more widely known to the Chinese people; and to serve as a channel for people-to-people contact and the ecumenical sharing of resources.

Amity is well known in the United States through its education division, which invites Americans and other Westerners to teach English in Chinese universities. English teachers are in great demand since proficiency in the language is required on college entrance examinations in China.

In the past 10 years, teaching offers have been accepted by many Southern Baptists, including Lynn Yarbrough, who is helping Virginia Baptists to develop their Chinese relationships. Yarbrough teaches in a university in Nanjing.

"Southern Baptist teachers have made an impact on this program," an Amity staff member told the Virginia delegation in August.

But Amity also has been successful in assistance to senior citizen centers and orphanages; in developing programs to prevent blindness; in providing medical services to rural communities; and -- perhaps most spectacularly -- in printing Bibles.

Since 1987, the Amity Printing Co. has printed more than 20 million Bibles on its presses outside Nanjing. A joint venture with the United Bible Societies, the press turns out two and a half million Bibles each year for sale to Christians all over China -- this in a country which three decades ago regarded Bible ownership as illegal.

"At first the need in China was just for Bibles," said Peter Dean, a production specialist at the printing company. "But now we're able to produce more variety. And the growth in China is such that now we're starting to print other resources."

In 1997 the company's presses produced 800,000 hymnals and recent ventures include Bibles in Braille and in the languages of six minority groups in China who don't speak the dominant Mandarin.

Restrictions keep the Bibles from being sold in public bookstores. Instead Amity has about 25 distribution centers around the country. Churches also may sell the Bibles -- usually for 12 yuan, or about \$1.50, each.

-- The need for pastors.

Ask a Chinese Christian to name the number one challenge to Christianity in China, and invariably the answer is: "We need to train more pastors."

"The closest thing to my heart is the training of pastors," said Han Wenzao.

"The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few," noted the Three-Self's Rev. Deng.

"The churches in China are full," agreed Beijing's Yang Zhouhuai. "We need more pastors."

According to the CCC, only about 1,800 pastors are available to serve its 12,000 churches and 25,000 meeting points. And, said Han, a new congregation is started in China every three days.

Theological education was eliminated during the Cultural Revolution, and that 10-year gap in training potential pastors is still felt two decades later.

Adding to the situation is the seriousness with which the Chinese regard theological training. Zhou Shanyu, director of logistics at Beijing's Yanjing Theological Seminary, described a five-year course of study leading to the equivalent of a bachelor-of-theology degree. Potential students must work in a church for one year before attending seminary, he said. After two years of study, students serve in a church for one more year, then return to complete two additional years of study. Most courses are biblical topics, but students also learn Chinese history and English.

In 1981, China Christian Council leaders began an emphasis on theological education. Since then they have opened a national seminary in Nanjing, the Jingling Union Theological Seminary; six regional seminaries scattered across the country; and 10 Bible schools.

Typical of the Bible schools is one under construction outside Nanjing, near a cluster of modern suburban "villas." The two-story Jiangsu Provincial Bible School -- modeled, say workers, on photographs of seminaries in the American Northeast -- will contain classrooms, dormitory space and a cafeteria. A separate building nearby will house a library.

The Bible school will train leaders for this prosperous and populous province north of Shanghai. Jiangsu has at least 1 million Christians in about 3,000 churches, said Lin De'en, head of the provincial Christian council, but only about 150 pastors.

Even with the new school, a serious shortage of leaders will remain. Of the 200 who will take exams to enter the school, only about 80 can be chosen. And in the meantime the churches continue to grow.

"About 50,000 people are baptized annually in Jiangsu," said Lin De'en. "In 1950, the total number of Christians in the province was 50,000."

-- Generation gap.

Like the rest of Chinese society, the church there was changed by the Cultural Revolution. In many congregations, there is a marked difference between Christians converted prior to 1949 and those who have joined in the relative openness since 1980.

"There is a big gap between older generation pastors and younger generation ones," said Lin De'en. "The gap was created by the Cultural Revolution. ... We have begun very recently to put emphasis on training a younger generation of ministers."

"We must have younger pastors or there is no hope for our church," said Yang Zhouhuai in Beijing, who noted that the senior pastors of most churches in the capital are young men and women.

The urgency for younger pastors is in part a reflection of changing demographics in Chinese congregations.

"The age structure in China's churches has changed," said Lin De'en. "Ten years ago only old people were in churches. Now you see people in both suits and jeans, which means age has changed and the level of education has changed."

Similar changes are occurring in Beijing's churches, said Yang Zhouhuai. "The age of attendance decreases year by year. There are more young people and more intellectuals. It's a general trend of all churches in China."

-- Gender openness.

In a society which traditionally held women in low regard, the Chinese church's elevation of numerous women to leadership positions is noteworthy. Communism enhanced the role of women in China, but even today in some rural parts of the country, daughters are received with less enthusiasm than sons. Among Christians, the attitude appears different.

In a rural church outside Nanjing, Pastor Paul Hsu is training his successor -- a middle-aged woman named Persis Zhu. Despite his age -- he graduated from a seminary in Shanghai in the 1940s -- Hsui regards the situation pragmatically. "There are more women than men in church so there needs to be women pastors," he said.

If theological education statistics are any indication, the future of women pastors in China is secure. Two-thirds of the students at Yanjing Theological Seminary in Beijing are women; at a lay training school at St. John's Church in Nanjing, 27 of the 50 students are women.

-- Lay leadership.

During the Cultural Revolution, as ministers found themselves assigned to secular jobs, lay people often stepped in to lead small gatherings of Christians in private homes. That experience left its mark and today lay leadership is a key characteristic of Chinese Christians, especially in rural areas.

As many as 6,000 lay people lead services at meeting points in Jiangsu Province, said Lin De'en of the provincial Christian council.

"In order to improve the quality of leadership we have established training schools," he said.

Training schools play an important role in Beijing as well, where there are eight churches but more than 300 meeting points, said Yang Zhouhuai. The Beijing Christian Council sponsors extensive lay training seminars and so do the city's churches, whose members enthusiastically support the undertakings.

"Nearly all members of churches know that we have fewer pastors and more members," said Yang Zhouhuai. "So members help carry out the work of the church."

-- Urban vs. rural.

For American visitors, China's rapid economic growth is astonishing. New skyscrapers pierce the skyline of Shanghai and Beijing, and shops are filled with local produce and Western goods.

But as in many countries, China's rural areas, especially those far from the prosperous east coast, are missing out on economic growth. Rural development is one of the Amity Foundation's key goals. "We have a gap between the east and west," an Amity official told the Virginia delegation in August. "The focus of economic development has been on the coastal area, but in the west people are still suffering from poverty."

Deng of the Three-Self Movement agreed: "Churches along the east coast are doing better because the economy is doing well," he said. "We encourage churches to share with each other."

Most congregations in the rural areas are meeting points, without buildings or pastors. Here, lay leadership is especially critical, although in provinces like Jiangsu, the staff of the provincial Christian council and students at the seminaries and Bible schools regularly preach and lead training seminars, said Lin De'en.

But not all rural churches struggle. At Pastor Paul Hsu's congregation outside Nanjing, attendance has grown from a few people in his home to 1,200 every Sunday. A building completed in 1994 has become inadequate and an addition is being built.

Most members at Hsu's church have become believers since 1980. The majority of members are workers in a nearby factory, but some are peasants from surrounding farms.

About one third are young people; another third, middle aged; and a final third, old. "Many young people are coming to church," Hsu said. "Also, many unemployed are coming -- we provide comfort for them."

It's a desire to provide that level of spiritual comfort that seems to motivate all Chinese Christians. Han Wenzao put it this way: "My vision is to build his [Christ's] body on Chinese soil."