

Honan Mission (1917–1951)

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Early Activities: 1903-1917

The Honan Mission was constituted in 1917 as a subsidiary of the North China Union Conference. It comprised Honan (now Henan) Province, and its headquarters was located at Yen-cheng (now Yancheng). Seventh-day Adventist mission work in the territory had commenced in 1903 and considerable advances were made during the years leading up to 1917.

In November 1903 Drs. Harry and Maude Miller (,) first entered Honan and established a clinic at Sin Tsai (now Xincai). They remained there for ten months and then moved several kilometers north to Shang Tsai where they conducted another clinic. Tragically, twin boys born to them at Sin Tsai died within a few hours of birth and Maude herself passed away with sprue in March 1905.²

John and Hulda Westrup () replaced the Millers at Shang Tsai. A second center was pioneered at Cheo-Chia-K'ou (now Zhoukou) by Arthur and Eva Allum () and Esta Miller (). Drs. Arthur and Bertha Selmon () assisted for a brief time. The Selmons were replaced by Roy and Myrtie Cottrell (). Cheo-Chia-K'ou was the largest city in Honan. Arthur Allum reported treating cases of opium-poisoning. He also made evangelistic visits into the surrounding countryside. At times these were made in a wheelbarrow pushed by a hired coolie and his night lodgings were shared with cows and donkeys in barns.³ Pauline Schilberg () arrived in Honan to minister, especially to the Chinese women. By November 1910 it was reported there were fifty-nine baptized members. At the same time a photograph of a large group of missionaries and mission attendees portrayed approximately 150 individuals that included some who were simply attracted to the mission cause but not yet baptized.⁴

Civil unrest and a breakdown in law and order became prevalent in Honan in 1912. It was virtually impossible to get mission supplies and funds from Shanghai. At one time money was desperately needed to pay the team of national evangelists. One of the laity offered to make the round trip to Shanghai and so risked his life if he were caught and accused of running money to enemy forces. He took a young boy as a travelling companion, crafted a two-layered belt for each of them and in Shanghai he sealed silver bullion inside the lining. On the return trip they sailed up the Yangtze River to avoid bandits and then struck out across Anhui Province towards Honan.

Their belongings were searched by government officials but the clothes they were wearing were never examined. They arrived safely at Cheo-Chia-K'ou with the bullion ready to be converted into cash.⁵

In 1913 Honan mission headquarters were transferred from Cheo-Chia-K'ou to Yen-cheng (now Yancheng) in order to be located near the railway. A parcel of land was purchased and two homes for expatriate missionaries were built in addition to elementary school premises.⁶ A 1915 statistical report mentioned there were seven established churches in Honan with a total baptized membership of 288.⁷ By 1917 the membership had risen to 420 among eight churches and twenty companies.⁸ At the same time there were fifty-two boys and thirty-five girls attending the central school and sixty-five students scattered among the out-stations.⁹ Colporteurs and national evangelists had used Honan as their springboard for entering Shensi (now Shaanxi) Province to the west. Their efforts found acceptance.¹⁰

Honan Mission Formerly Constituted

At the Asiatic Division Conference held in Shanghai, April 1917, a major re-organization took place in the China mission field. The Honan Mission was created as a part of the North China Union Conference. Dr. Donald Davenport was elected to be superintendent as a temporary measure until Frederick Lee returned from furlough.¹¹ The mission entity began in strength, a situation inherited from the solid foundation laid by pioneers.

The central school in Yancheng was enlarged to include academy level. There were more than eighty students enrolled in 1918, some from the neighboring provinces of Shaanxi and Hubei.¹² Dr. Davenport and his wife, Pearl Ivy, a nurse, established a clinic in Yancheng. In its early days he reported he had performed thirteen eye operations in one month and in the same period had treated 551 patients.¹³ The institution was developed into a small hospital/dispensary¹⁴ and became a training center for nurses. Evangelistic advances were hindered by famine in 1920 and 1921. Nevertheless, an August 1921 report was favorable, noting fourteen churches, thirty-seven outstations and a membership of 450.¹⁵ These statistics need to be understood in the context that the population of Honan numbered thirty-seven million people.¹⁶

In 1923 one of the teachers at the intermediate school, Ora Williams, initiated a program to teach Chinese women to read English. Her aim was to encourage them to read the English Bible and the English-language Sabbath School lessons. Teaching them to read the Chinese versions would have been just as effective. However, she chose to teach the English phonetic script and the classes proved to be popular.¹⁷ A decade later the preferred method was to teach the vernacular and the women were soon reading booklets such as *Steps to Christ* and *The Key to Health*.¹⁸

Wars and Floods

Civil war in the 1920s, the Sino-Japanese conflict of the 1930s and the Second World War of the 1940s all negatively impacted the mission progress. Only the persistence of the national evangelists and some risks taken by expatriate missionaries brought advances. Troubled conditions were first reported in Honan in 1923. At Shang Tsai, where the Millers had pioneered, the city was looted and burned and most of the inhabitants, including church members, lost their homes and possessions.¹⁹ In 1926 the school on the mission campus at Yancheng was destroyed by fire.²⁰ Months later the mission homes and hospital were occupied by troops, anything of value being looted or destroyed. Expatriates fled south and sought safety at Hankow (now Wuhan) from where the director tried to keep in contact with national assistants who bravely persevered at their out-stations.²¹ Not everyone who remained behind escaped without loss. Some church members lost their lives. Others fell into the hands of bandits who took advantage of the upheaval. One national minister was attacked on three different occasions. The head nurse of the hospital and his relatives were taken prisoner and forced to pay a ransom for their release. By the end of 1928 relative peace was restored and rebuilding was well underway.²²

The mission report to December 1929 was one of brighter prospects. Membership numbered 712 and tent crusades were being held under normal conditions. The Sabbath School membership stood at 1,079. Nineteen men and six women were engaged in evangelism, eight medical workers were busy at the hospital, thirteen teachers were employed at the school and there were six colporteurs scattered throughout the province.²³ By the end of 1935 the membership had risen to one thousand among six organized churches. Thirty-four Sabbath Schools were conducted regularly with a total membership of 1,639.²⁴ One experimental innovation in 1937 was the introduction of home nursing classes. These offered the public and church members instruction in preventive health measures, treatment of minor ailments, cooking and fruit preservation.²⁵ Another charitable venture involved conducting a soup kitchen for those affected by the 1939 floods. This was a united effort of the Yenchang Hospital and the American Red Cross.²⁶ Approximately five thousand people were fed every morning. Dorcas societies were formed to go door-to-door collecting wheelbarrows full of clothing to distribute to the same individuals.²⁷

Harsh times returned in 1941. The mission had grown to 1,260 members among twelve churches and twenty-five companies.²⁸ Headquarters at Yancheng came under fire in mid-1941, air raids dropping bombs that narrowly missed the church.²⁹ Expatriates continued to write optimistic reports, thinking to weather the storm, but retreat became the better part of valor after the December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour and throughout China there was a hurried escape to safer countries.³⁰ They did not return until the war was over.

The few years following the war were marked by a gradual takeover by communist forces. At the time there were reported to be two thousand church members in Honan. At the headquarters compound three hundred students were attending the rebuilt school. The hospital was caring for thirty in-patients and a nursing class was being trained. As military forces moved into the area the school students were sent home and some of the hospital staff sought safety in Wuhan.³¹ By the time Jerald Christensen, newly-appointed director of the Honan

Mission, arrived by a circuitous route at Yancheng headquarters in January 1948 he was devastated to find that the main hospital building was destroyed by fire. He left the compound in the same month.³²

One report of conditions in 1948 spoke of more than fifteen thousand individuals killed. Mission staff hid from danger. "Conditions in Honan have been very bad," it said. "The country has been swept by wave after wave of fighting and looting."³³ Despite the adversities the church members insisted that evangelistic crusades continue. However, in December 1948 a major evacuation of expatriates began.³⁴ The Honan Mission, like all other missions in mainland China, ceased to function in 1951.³⁵ The last statistics published indicated a downward trend from fourteen churches and 1,830 members in 1948 to one thousand members among eleven churches in 1951.³⁶

Directors of the Honan Mission

Donald Davenport (acting) () 1917; Frederick Lee () 1918-1919; Charles Lillie () 1919-1922; Walter Strickland () 1922-1931; E.H. James () 1931-1938; Marvin Loewen () 1939; George Wilkinson () 1940-1942; Cecil Guild () 1944-1945; Wang Ging Bo (acting) (Wāng Jìngbō) 1945-1947; Jerald Christensen () 1947-1948; Nils Dahlsten () 1949; Mao Yong Xin (acting) () 1950; Wang Ya Gang () 1951.

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