

East Szechwan Mission (1919–1951)

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The East Szechwan Mission (; East Sichuan Mission) was organized in 1919. After World War II and the advance of the communist regime, it became difficult to maintain its operations, and it eventually closed in 1951.

Founding and Development

In 1914 missionaries Arthur Allum () and Merritt C. Warren () first entered East Szechwan (or Sichuan) Province by hired houseboat from Yichang, Hubei Province. They travelled up the Yangtze River to Chongqing, negotiating dangerous rapids in their journey. Warren remained to pioneer the area¹ and was still there when, in 1919, church officials divided the province into three separate missions as parts of the West China Union Mission. At the time only approximately 60 baptized members lived in the entire Sichuan Province. Church leadership established the eastern headquarters at Chongqing²

During the first two years, 1919 through 1921, civil unrest restricted most activity away from Chongqing. Cholera and influenza were prevalent. Warren occupied himself by building a residence and chapel at headquarters while his national evangelist, Liao Hsiang Hsien, ventured north to the Hochow district where several companies of believers had already formed.³ Conversion numbers were low. In a half-yearly summary for 1924, Warren wrote, "We apparently have very little to report."⁴ Several months later, he spoke of nine individuals who had been baptized, but in the context of all missions in the Far Eastern Division, the East Szechwan Mission was almost the lowest in growth. Between 1922 and 1925 the membership grew by only 20 individuals⁵

Civil unrest was still prevalent in 1927. It became so intense that the government ordered all Americans to seek safety elsewhere. Johann Effenberg (), being German, was exempt from the ruling and found good success in his mission activities. He reported a trip into the regions north of Chongqing when he organized 4 new Sabbath schools, opened 2 new chapels, and baptized 24 individuals. All his converts destroyed their household idols, and one opium addict was baptized in the same river where he tossed his pipe and smoking paraphernalia.⁶ At his headquarters station Effenberg held missionary training institutes and later travelled the countryside to nurture any pockets of interest. Wherever he visited, he treated the sick. In 1928 he reported upwards of 1,000

patients, 7 outstations, 5 organized churches, 11 Sabbath Schools with a total average attendance of 300 individuals in addition to 5 elementary schools with an enrolment total of 70.⁷

Effenberg spent months at a time circulating among the outstations to encourage and instruct church members, supply them with literature, and try to alleviate any problems. He managed this despite continuing civil unrest. In the two-year period, June 1927 through June 1929, two of the national workers lost their lives at the hands of brigands, another was imprisoned, and a married couple were badly beaten. Communist forces looted one chapel. Despite such calamities, he was able to report the continuance of 7 organized churches and 8 companies with a total baptized membership of 222. Sixteen Sabbath Schools and six elementary schools were operating in addition to a Dorcas Society and a Missionary Volunteer Society.⁸

Dallas White () succeeded Effenberg and adopted similar methods of visitation and evangelism. After 18 months in the field, he reported the baptized membership had risen to 534 by June 1933. At the same time, he had 19 literature evangelists working in his territory, and he conducted 12 elementary schools with a total enrolment of 250.⁹ The area had shifted from being relatively stagnant in the mid-1920s to being, a decade later, the most productive in the West China Union Mission.¹⁰

Nationals increasingly assumed the preaching role in public evangelistic crusades. However, warring factions in the community continued to be troublesome. It was common to see church members and interested individuals carrying to the evening meetings their crude guns as protection against robbers. A novel method of evangelism in East Szechwan was the "Ping Ming" schools, Bible study groups that used simple-language textbooks covering the essentials of the faith.¹¹ The baptized membership rose to 556 by December 1936.¹² But such momentum could not continue in the face of continual civil unrest. The last statistics published in the 1930s applied to December 1938 when the baptized membership stood at 465.¹³ For the next decade delegates were not able to meet at headquarters for their annual session, gatherings that had always engendered cohesion within the mission.¹⁴ Members in Chongqing became preoccupied with conducting a medical unit for war refugees.¹⁵

Difficulties

During the Second World War membership statistics dropped to 271, but churches remained open, their number remaining at 12.¹⁶ After the war statistics fluctuated but peaks were reached in 1948 (656 members)¹⁷ and 1951 (711 members). But we must consider such results in the context of a population of more than 30 million.¹⁸ For some of the time prior to 1951 the director of the East Szechwan Mission, Goh Gaio Oh, also filled the role of president of the entire West China Union Mission, both offices being located in Chongqing.¹⁹

The gradual advance of communist forces made it increasingly difficult for mission activities. It severely hampered the movement of personnel, pastoral visitation, and supply lines. In the northern winter of 1948/1949 expatriates retreated as an emergency measure to Hankow (Wuhan), Shanghai, Canton, Hong Kong, and

Formosa, but soon had to abandon even such places.²⁰ Nationals remained to administer the East Szechwan Mission, operating under extreme difficulties until it officially ceased to function in 1951.²¹

Directors of the East Szechwan Mission

Merritt C. Warren () 1919-1923; Ernest L. Lutz () 1923-1924; Alton E. Hughes () 1924-1926; Johann H. Effenberg () 1926-1932; Dallas R. White () 1932-1935; George L. Wilkinson () (acting) 1936; Cecil B. Guild () 1937-1939; Djang Djen-chiang (Zhāng Zhèn Qiáng) 1939-1940; Cecil B. Guild () (acting) 1941; Liu Fu-an (Liú Fú An) 1942-1948; Goh Chiao Oh (Gé Zhào è) 1948-1950; Chiu Chi Hsiu (Qiū Qí Xiū) (acting) 1951.

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