

THE HARD PLACES: CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

An interview between Rev. Michael Bourdeaux and Chua Wee Hian

C. Wee Hian: One-third of the world's population live and march under the red flag. Its citizens occupy one-quarter of the land area of our earth. Thousands of Communist cadres and agents actively seek to propagate the "gospel" of Marx and Mao. They brook no opposition. They demand that their people render everything to the Party and to the state, even the things that belong to God. In most Communist countries the Church is still being persecuted; restrictions are engineered and enforced to prevent the active and dedicated propagation of the Christian faith.

Tonight we are delighted to have Rev. Michael Bourdeaux with us. He is the director of Keston College, a center devoted to the study of Communism and religion. He has agreed to be interviewed and to share with us some of his deep concerns for God's people and God's work in Eastern Europe.

Michael, could you please tell us something about yourself and your involvement with Christian work in Eastern Europe?

M. Bourdeaux: My involvement began as a student at the University of Moscow, devoting my life to the study of communism, speaking on behalf of Christians in communist lands, and writing books to provide accurate information.

C. Wee Hian: Have you visited all the countries in Eastern Europe?

M. Bourdeaux: All except Albania. I was able to worship with Christians in these countries.

C. Wee Hian: How much freedom is there today to worship God and to witness to Him in Eastern Europe? One hears stories of persecutions and tortures - how true are these accounts?

M. Bourdeaux: Eastern Europe is not a monolithic bloc — it must be studied country by country. There are different degrees of freedom. In countries like Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania and East Germany, there are possibilities of teaching religious knowledge to children, Bible study groups and classes.

C. Wee Hian: In what countries then are Christians harassed and persecuted?

M. Bourdeaux: Albania and the Soviet Union. In Albania, religion is completely outlawed. In the Soviet Union, laws controlling religion are very strict. Often Christians are not allowed to meet for worship and fellowship, so they have to break the law to meet in the *open air*.

C. Wee Hian: Michael, what about Bibles? Can these be obtained easily, e.g., in Poland or the Soviet Union?

M. Bourdeaux: It is easy to purchase Bibles in Poland. There's even a Christian *bookstore* operated by the Bible Society that sells Bibles openly. Since the Revolution of 1917, only a few thousand Russian Bibles were printed and distributed in the Soviet Union. Bibles are precious and literally are worth their weight in gold! Russian believers have to *hand-copy portions* of Scripture.

C. Wee Hian: Earlier on, you referred to Christians in the Soviet Union as those who had to break the law to preserve and propagate their faith. Could you cite one or two cases of Christian "lawbreakers"?

M. Bourdeaux: One of the best known cases is *Aida Skripnikova*, who was imprisoned twice for her faith. She was arrested as a young girl for distributing Christian literature in the streets of Leningrad. As a sequel to imprisonment she is gathering young people and testifying to her experience of suffering.

C. Wee Hian: I presume that Christians are tried in a public court before they are sent to prison. Could you give us an inside picture of a trial?

M. Bourdeaux: It's a hostile court-room — people booing and jeering. *Transcripts* of proceedings are recorded by Christian friends and written on cloth.

Aida used the dock as her pulpit! Publicly she witnessed to her Lord. By her example and encouragement she persuaded many to stand firm for the Master.

C. Wee Hian: When was Aida actually imprisoned? Is she still in gaol?

M. Bourdeaux: 1969. Released in 1972.

C. Wee Hian: That was a few years ago. What about recent months? Have you had any evidence of fresh persecution?

- M. Bourdeaux: Yes, a case of brutality on May 2. A policeman shot at a crowd that had gathered for a meeting in Magilyov. A 17-year-old boy was wounded. The Christians surrounded the policeman and confiscated his identity photograph. However, this incident is not a daily occurrence.
- C. Wee Hian: How many Christians would you say are now imprisoned in Soviet Union?
- M. Bourdeaux: Between 2,000 to 3,000. I know that there are at least 200 Baptists who are imprisoned for their faith.
- C. Wee Hian: I am sure that most of us in this Congress would like to know where and how you obtain information from the Soviet Union Christians. What about some of the vivid pictures that you have showed us?
- M. Bourdeaux: Members of the Baptist Council of Prisoners' relatives assembled information and sent them through every means possible.
- C. Wee Hian: So far, you have spoken about the Baptists as the objects of persecution. What about those from other Church traditions?
- M. Bourdeaux: There's also *Father Dimitri Dudko*, a bold witness, successful in youth work. Recently he was removed from the Moscow church.
- C. Wee Hian: I don't think we'll need to stretch our imagination to grasp the plight of families caused by the imprisonments of their breadwinners? What happens to these deprived families?
- M. Bourdeaux: Humanly speaking these families would starve but relief is supplied by the Council of Prisoners' relatives and Christian friends. *Mrs. Rytivoka and her children* were helped through this scheme. She is now organizing relief for others in similar situations.
- C. Wee Hian: Michael, what responsibilities do we Christians in the so-called "free world" have to our brothers and sisters in Christ in Eastern Europe?
- M. Bourdeaux: First we must re-affirm our status as members of Christ's body. *St Paul has stated*, "When one member suffers, all suffer...."
- C. Wee Hian: In practical terms how could we express our solidarity and unity?
- M. Bourdeaux: Our first responsibility is to pray with intelligent prayer based on facts and information. *Keston College* exists to research and gather accurate facts, to publish relevant in-

- formation on the state of the church in Eastern Europe. We also invite students to help us *assemble and gather information*.
- C. Wee Hian: What about more direct help and aid?
- M. Bourdeaux: Sending gift parcels and greeting cards helps, as does strengthening radio broadcasts into communist lands.
- C. Wee Hian: Wee Hian, you are wearing an England badge. I know that you live and work in London. But as a Chinese Christian, could you tell us something about the situation in China?
- C. Wee Hian: A veteran China watcher in Hong Kong used to say, "China is a big country." By this he meant that various regions, cities and villages adopt different legislative policies as to matters like local government, religious, and social behavior. In a few towns, we learn of Christians meeting publicly for worship services. In other areas, they meet in small groups, secretly and unobtrusively. Most are still afraid of the suspicious neighbor. No one knows who is the friend or the foe. With the clamor of radical youth sections to apply the pure principle of Leninism and Maoism - religion is branded as something feudal and backward, to be rid of permanently. In spite of severe restrictions, the Gospel is still transmitted through individual Christians. They firmly believe that it is still the power of God unto salvation for those who have faith in Christ.
- M. Bourdeaux: Is there any news seeping through Hong Kong?
- C. Wee Hian: Very little. The Christians in China are wary of Christians in Hong Kong and the USA who present sensational and often exaggerated accounts of the actual happenings. They certainly do not find it easy to live under the red flag especially when there are so many restrictions for them to gather to worship as Christian communities and to proclaim the living Christ to their contemporaries. It's interesting that one of the last messages of Nee To-sheng, known to many here as "Watchman Nee," to Chinese Christians in Hong Kong was to encourage Chinese Christians to continue faithful to their Master and to prepare Bible study materials and guides for suffering Christians in mainland China.