NAD Exclusive:
Interview with a Chinese Female Pastor

‘Treat the Church as a Home,’” Says Female Pastor from China

Alex Bryant, secretary of the North American Division (NAD), joins Daniel Jackson, NAD president and David Smith, senior pastor of the Collegedale, TN church, as they pray for pastor Hao Yajie, from Shenyang, China. Photo by Ray Dabrows
“We love our women pastors!” Daniel Jackson, president of the North American Division, boomed as he met Pastor Hao Yajie, the senior pastor of the Beiguan Church in Shenyang, in the People’s Republic of China, immediately following her interview on Friday, July 10, which was arranged by the NAD communication team at the Alamodome in San Antonio, Texas.

Although the hype and controversy surrounding the topic of women in ministry has been stifling, both prior to and during the General Conference Session, here is a woman in China who has been working for decades, driven by an internal call from God to be involved in ministry. Pastor Hao Yajie both radiates and generates excitement and passion for the message and she is confident that her call goes beyond worldly recognition.

**Desperate for encouragement**

From childhood, Hao Yajie had admired the foreign missionaries who had traveled to China to work for God’s ministry. The missionaries were much older than she, most of them male. She was drawn in and wanted so much to join that path. “I longed to do that,” she said through a translator. When she studied the process to see what she must do, she was distressed. Everything seemed to tell her there was no chance. Yet she prayed and prayed to have the opportunity to join ministry due to the immense impression she felt to preach the cause.

Around thirty years ago, her mother gave Hao Yajie and her two sisters each a $100 bill. They boarded a train and took a boat to the city. Hao Yajie was desperate for encouragement. “I wanted just a word from the pastors, to encourage me to dedicate my life to God and His ministry,” she said, “but there was no word.” She knew her mission; she knew what she had been called to do. All she wanted was encouragement from others on the same path but she was left unsupported.

**No room for fear**

In 1985, she began having small worship services in her house, starting with only nine members. The individuals who attended those first meetings felt a certain level of fear. “They were afraid for others to know we were worshipping in my house,” Pastor Hao Yajie explained, “but I was not afraid. I was not afraid for others to know about our worship.” Instead of acting in fear, she used her fragile and newly established leadership position to inspire others. “If I met someone, I just preached the gospel to them, even to people from the Sunday churches,” she said. Soon after, those who worshiped in her home were following her example, no longer afraid and bringing in visitor after visitor to worship in her home.

“They were eager to preach,” confirmed Hao Yajie. “God put the burden on my shoulders for ministry. I would have trouble if I didn’t preach.”

The mother church in Shenyang is located in the downtown area, with seating for 2,000 members. There are 120 local churches, all fanning out from that central location. The membership of all the churches combined is a growing group of 7,000 Adventists. Only 80 of the local churches are held in actual religious structures. “The remaining congregations are held in rented apartments to be worship places,” the pastor explained. The local
churches are divided into 12 districts and a board is made up of many of the church elders from those churches.

Known up until recently as the largest church in Shenyang, the mother church has been deemed a scenic spot by the city. After being evaluated and given a higher status, the church is now a stop on many tourist trips. Visitors come to see it in all its glory, which builds even more awareness.

Education supports evangelism

In recent years, the Beiguan Church has teamed up with the Taiwan Adventist College, working to equip young people with the tools and information to further the evangelistic message. So far 60 students have graduated from the college and 27 have received their master’s degrees. When asked about the gender ratio among students attending evangelism school, Pastor Hao Yajie smiled. “It’s half and half,” she said easily.

Despite holding the senior pastor position since her ordination in 2011, Pastor Hao Yajie is actually attending seminary school herself. “I walk an hour twice a day to get to school,” she elaborated when asked about her daily schedule. Last year, she enrolled in a master’s program for theological study. The school she attends is located miles away on an island. She laughed at the suggestion that she ride a bicycle. Apparently bicycles are not allowed on the island. “Besides,” she said, “it is good exercise.”

No time for vacation

Exercise is important to her and although she told us about a few of her hobbies, which include swimming and doing kung fu, she also said there isn’t much time for things like that. “No vacation,” she said with a laugh and a shake of her head. “Pastors in China work every week, seven days a week.”

Every year, two training sessions are held in her church. These sessions are not only for encouragement and support of one another but as inspiration to evangelize. Pastor Hao Yajie said the growth of the church does not come from a secret ingredient or special formula. She believes it comes from the involvement of the church members. “We encourage our church members to be missionaries,” the pastor said, “if not to strangers, at least to the relatives and the friends and the neighbors. If you can’t bring other people, at least evangelize to your relatives. Like Noah with his sons, we at least bring our families.”

The church has changed from what it was when first held in Pastor Hao Yajie’s living room. It has developed and evolved and with that evolution, those who are drawn in by its message and join have changed as well. “From the beginning, there were many people who came for healing from God,” she said, “both physical and spiritual sicknesses. Now more young people and the educated are coming.”

In support of their health message, the church has two centers that serve two distinct purposes. The first center is a basic health center, designated to provide health information and assistance to those in need. The second center is similar to an assisted living home for elderly.

Nothing accomplished without the Spirit
Prayer is hugely important and highlighted by Hao Yajie as much as possible. “We have a prayer center for all the workers of the church,” she said. “Twice a year, we come together and have a prayer meeting.” She said it is not uncommon for church members to spend an entire week speaking only to God, not to each other, when they first join.

Everything their church has accomplished has been “through prayer and the help of the Holy Spirit,” she said. “It there is no help from the Holy Spirit, you cannot do anything.”

**Titles culturally driven**

Despite the failed vote regarding women’s ordination, Hao Yajie’s experience in San Antonio has been nothing but positive. “I really feel like everyone is one family,” she said. “No matter where you come from or what issues you have, this feels like a taste of what worship will be in heaven.”

According to Pastor Hao Yajie, the issue of women’s ordination is very much dependent on the local situation. In some cultures, it is something people barely even think about. In others, perhaps it is much more important. But Pastor Hao Yajie does not put much stock into the title ordained. “Some people pay much attention to the position,” she said adamantly. “No matter what position I have, I just want to do the work, the ministry.”

**An inherent passion**

She laughed when asked what her advice would be for pastors struggling with growth in their churches. She simply did not understand. “What kind of struggles?” she asked confusedly, chuckling. “We do not have that problem!” In her experience, church members have entered the church engaged and inspired. From the first moments of involvement in the church, members are chomping at the bit to get out in the community and share. It is the desire of each member to share what they have learned. There’s a passion inherent in the church there.

When pressed for just one piece of advice, she sat thoughtfully. “Church members have to treat the church as a home,” she answered.

Churches that are losing members in droves – both young and old – could benefit from asking: Are we treating our church as a home? When we are exhausted at the end of the day, do we imagine the church as a place of comfort? Going a step further, are we doing our part to create that environment within the church, instead of just expecting it from others?

**Remarkable role reversals**

Immediately following the interview, the leadership of the NAD swarmed Hao Yajie. She was introduced to the secretary, the treasurer, and the president, all clamoring to shake her hand and give her their business cards.

Elder Jackson asked if he could offer up a word of prayer and about six men gathered around Pastor Hao Yajie with bowed heads. As he prayed, Elder Jackson spoke on God’s blessing, evident in Hao Yajie’s ministry. “We are grateful to you for calling us to your
“work,” he prayed. “I thank you for my dear sister and I praise you for how you minister through her to your people.”

Years ago missionaries were sent to China to bring inspiration, to grow God’s church, and to witness to His people. Today Pastor Hao Yajie comes from China to America and is inspiring us with her commitment and passion.

--Katie Morrison, with Rajmund Dabrowski (for North American Division)

Watch a video featuring Pastor Hao Yajie's church in China

Watch a video of another interview with Pastor Hao Yajie from GleanerNOW