

China Forum Strategy

The China Forum has for many years been able to provide a means whereby the Churches in Britain and Ireland could develop meaningful partnership with the Church in China.

By drawing in expertise and pooling knowledge of the languages and cultures of China members have been enabled to do more together than they could apart and to relate to a post-denominational church, both Protestant and Catholic, in a fully ecumenical manner.

There is new and developing familiarity, experience and understanding in some of the CTBI member churches and agencies, thus adding the need for a sharing of understanding to that of seeking external expertise. Keeping pace with and interpreting the changes in China and in the region, nevertheless remain important for all members of the Forum; working together maximises impact and effectiveness in our partnership with a church which is now the largest in the world and has partnerships in dozens of countries.

Partnership with China now

In some ways the situation in China, and especially in the Church, is as confusing as it has ever been and presents many challenges if a robust partnership is to grow and the mistakes made in other parts of the world are to be avoided.

China has a growing role on the world stage and increasing wealth, power and influence in many parts of the world. Once inaccessible, through language especially, it is now open for business in a variety of ways. Chinese people have a greater freedom to travel and communication on all levels is plentiful even if understanding lags behind. Socialism with Chinese characteristics, the influence of Confucian thought, the interweaving of the historical and the new, these are all facets study of which promises much.

The comparison with India is telling. Here, we in the West have had much easier access to culture, markets and economy and this has affected our relationship with the church there, for both good and ill. Until recently, this has not been the case with China. However, there are lessons to be learned from our relationship with other parts of the world, and perhaps especially India, where there has also, at least initially, been a concerted and ongoing ambition to work ecumenically, but the nature of partnership hasn't always been as robust as it might have been and the fruits of partnership are mixed. The challenge and gifts of the Indian Church have been largely overlooked in the wider oikumene and the experience might encourage a more careful and cooperative approach in the case of the Church in China in order to allow a real mutual enrichment theologically, spiritually and ecclesiologically.

Achievements so far

The China Forum has made some significant achievements thus far, opening up avenues of engagement and encounter with the three major partners, Catholics, China Christian Council and the Amity Foundation. The Forum members have worked with officers of the Forum on major initiatives such as theological education and the institutions to support them (notably in Guizhou and Wuhan, the teachers of English programme, visits to and from China of church leaders, training for theological teachers and scholarships for Chinese students. These have had significant impact and lasting benefits.

New Strategy

The strategy of CTBI has changed in recent years and the appointment of a Director for World Church Partnerships with a broader brief than one focussed entirely on China necessitates a change to how the China Forum plays its part in meeting the challenge outlined above.

In many ways the change reflects the development from needing an expert to deal with language and cultures of which most had no understanding to a situation where many Forum members visit regularly, several understand the language and all have friends or close colleagues in China. Where once the Forum Officer held the expertise for others, now the expert role is held in common by the Forum members. The new officer role is focussed on building relationships, seeing opportunities, brokering new work and relationships, presenting in China the vision of mutual partnership and exploring in Britain and Ireland the implications of the powerful movement of the Spirit in China.

The image of the Church world-wide as the Body of Christ is an important, iconic metaphor for us in our relationships with the Church in China. If we look at partnership as a mutual endeavour we may increasingly find aspects of the work lie in advocacy in the UK and Ireland as well as perhaps a role for the Forum in enabling Chinese Christians, as they move increasingly quickly out of dependency into inter-dependency, to support churches in other parts of the world, perhaps especially in ways and places not so easily reached by others.

It is clear that with each visit that is made to China, we gain as much as we ever give. Therefore it is critical that we reflect on what we have learnt from the Church in China. This is equally true when Chinese visitors are welcomed to Britain and Ireland.

What is the role of the Forum?

- Relating to the Church in China, the CCC and the CPA.
- Developing awareness and engagement with China on the broadest level – including other ecumenical bodies, governments, NGOs, and academic institutions.
- Sharing information between members continues to be a major and necessary contribution of the Forum, including the coordination of grant-making
- Visiting experts will increase and extend the abilities of Forum member churches and organisations
- The challenge and debate within the forum will assist the avoidance of the temptation to join the unthinking procession of giving money. Members do have money to give, of course, and sharing grant-making strategies and opportunities will form part of the Forum agenda. The Forum will also focus on new and creative ways of developing mutual and reciprocal partnerships, critically evaluating new possibilities.
- At each meeting to ask the question – following a visit to China what have I learnt from China and her people which affects my life and faith and the work of my organisation?
- Exercising skills of discernment and interpretation in relation to independent and denominational church plants.
- Cooperating in finding assistance for theological research
- Promoting and maximising the impact of people programmes, including visits by Church leaders and others.
- Promoting Amity programmes including the youth programme and the Summer English Programme (with Friends of the Church in China) as well as AITELE and other programmes as they develop.

- Relating to the Chinese Christian community, including students, in Britain and Ireland and British students studying China responding where appropriate to identified needs and maximising the resources of Forum members through cooperation.
- Arranging occasional 'Round Tables' on specific topics.
- Maintaining the website 'China Online Study Centre'.
- Publishing wherever and whenever resources and capacity allow with a view to provoking thinking about Christianity in China.

Way of working

- The Forum will meet three or four times a year.
- Forum members will continue to extend the membership, both to benefit the Forum itself as well as the new members.
- The CTBI Officer and the Forum Moderator will endeavour to make best use of members' experience and knowledge as well as inviting visiting speakers.
- Forum members will find a way to maintain the 'China Online Study Centre'.
- The Forum will report to the Trustees and members of CTBI.

Priorities for 2016

- Prepare for a formal church leaders visit in 2017
- Promotion of opportunities for volunteers, students and professionals in China
- Development of the FCC exposure programme
- Engage with the Amity programmes