

China: House churches must register: Government wants an accurate tally of Christians

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The Chinese government's new head of religious affairs has downplayed the role of house churches during his first official visit to Hong Kong, saying they must be registered with the government for their own protection.

Wang Zuoran, the head of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, met Hong Kong Protestant leaders at a Lutheran church on March 27.

Wang said some house churches do not register because pastors do not want to report their income to the state. Others set up house churches after they split from another church over conflict. In other cases, he said, a house church can spring up due to a theological disagreement.

"China needs to deal with so many challenges in the religious area. I appreciate the religious diversity in Hong Kong, [but] the geographical area in China is huge and the situation is more complicated," said Wang. He said there can be many challenges in the formation of pastors, especially for those serving in rural areas, where some merge local customs into their religious teachings.

Wang said there are more than 20 million Christians in China, with 16 million worshipping in registered churches. Another 4 million are outside the registered churches. He said the government wants an accurate tally of Christians, but fears that such a move could be open to misinterpretation.

Yu Jie, a Chinese Christian who attends a house church in Beijing, disputed Wang's statement that house churches "refuse registration." Yu told ENI in an e-mail message, "We are willing to register with civil authorities, but not the religious affairs administration," as it is "unconstitutional" because of its "interfering with citizens' religious freedom." -*Ecumenical News International, Religion News Service*