

China's Christians need clergy, says government minister

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May 13, 2011

Nairobi, Kenya, May 13 (ENInews)--Christians in China need qualified clergy who can contribute to the development of society, China's Minister of State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) said in Nairobi, where a delegation from China is visiting the Anglican Church of Kenya.

"In the past, Christianity was treated as a foreign religion, but now we treat it as ours. There are a lot of Christians there, but they lack clergy. They cannot find qualified clergy to carry out development work among them," said Wang Zuo'an on 13 May at a meeting with Archbishop Eliud Wabukala, primate of the Anglican Church of Kenya.

Wang, who is on his first visit to Africa, was accompanied by a delegation of ten officials. During the five day visit, from 12 to 16 May, the group is visiting church missions in Nairobi and Mt. Kenya South dioceses. They are also visiting schools and children's homes, and learning about Mothers Union saving and credit societies.

The minister said the purpose of the visit was to enhance the relationship between the Anglican Church, the Global South Anglican Communion and the Chinese church. The Anglican Church officials had earlier said the delegation wanted to learn about the co-existence of state and religion. Wang will also be going to Uganda and South Africa.

China has one of the fastest growing Christian communities in the world, according to Wang, a development he attributed to the country's opening up to the rest of the world in 1980s. The Christian Protestant community has grown from 700,000 to 23 million, according to the delegation officials, with another six million belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. The population of China is about 1.3 billion.

Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism are recognized by the state, which considers the practice of any other faith illegal. Religious organizations in China are required to register with one of five state-sanctioned patriotic religious associations, each of which is supervised by SARA.

Many Christians who attend so-called "house churches" choose not to register with the state and Chinese authorities have cracked down on such churches. Leaders of an evangelical Protestant church, Shouwang, have been under house arrest for more than one month, according to media reports. On 11 May, a group of 19 pastors petitioned the Chinese parliament for an end to the crackdown and for more religious freedom.

Communication in matters of faith and development between the Kenyan or African churches and those in China has been minimal in the past, according to Wang, unlike relationships between governments. Kenya's diplomatic relationship with China is 48 years old, they noted. Church-to-church relations will play a crucial role in strengthening these state relationships, he said. "We have come to learn and share with each other. We have already learned a lot. This is useful to us," he said.

Wabukala suggested that Kenyan clergy could learn Chinese and serve there. "This gives us much hope in Kenya and Africa to see the church is still flourishing there," said Wabukala.

He was last month elected the chairman of the conservative Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON). "I invite the Chinese church to actively participate and be involved in the activities of the Global South," he added. The minister said Chinese churches were interested in working with GAFCON.

China has a visible presence in Kenya, Wabukala noted. China sends varying levels of funding, material and experts in the areas of road construction, housing and sports structures. "There is a lot of government to government cooperation in roads and other development sectors, but we were concerned the moral aspect is being left out," he said.

He told the delegation the Anglican Church and the government related well and have been working together for development. It is the oldest denomination in the country. It was established in 1844, alongside the British colonial administration. "Kenya has grown to where it is today because of the partnership between the government and the church. There also many churches and we work together in an

ecumenical partnership," he said.