

Chinese house church leaders attend rights defense seminar

by [Francis Wong](#)

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Hong Kong, 24 June (ENInews)--Chinese house church leaders attended a training seminar from 14-16 June in Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province in China, to learn how to safeguard their legal rights.

Participants included pastors and leaders from Beijing; six provinces, including Hebei and Shangdong; and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, according to a news release from the Texas-based organization ChinaAid, which sponsored the seminar. Attendees studied Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which relates to freedom of religion.

Rev. Bob Fu, president of ChinaAid, said that more and more churches are "emboldened by the rights defense movement to take advantage of Chinese laws, including constitutional ones, to safeguard their basic rights through administrative review and litigation."

Fu lamented that the situation facing house churches has "worsened dramatically" since last December, with more and more house churches under pressure to join the government-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) or risk being labeled an "evil cult" for organizing "illegal gatherings." He emphasized that seeking protection within China's own legal framework is "the most constructive and least harmful way, though it is slow." China still lacks an independent judiciary system and many officials in the court would decline to review church cases.

In Hong Kong, Professor Ying Fuk-tsang of the Chinese University of Hong Kong said that house church leaders are more active now in seeking their legal rights. Ying, who specializes in church-state relations in China, said that existing legislation in China cannot catch up with the development of house churches, noting there is a huge demand to enact the national

religious law. Legitimizing house churches, he said, could be accomplished if there is enough political will in Beijing.

Hong Kong Catholic bishop John Tong Hon said that China views religion "as a possible agent which could affect national security and national harmony," which is why Protestant house churches face government repression.

They

have become more popular in the cities, said Tong, attracting more educated middle class citizens, even though they are consistently refused registration.

Tong linked the repression to the recent harassment of human rights lawyers and rights activists, many of whom are Christians, calling it the worst crackdown on human rights since 1989, when the Chinese government suppressed the pro-democracy movement in Beijing.

The challenge, he said, is to make Beijing understand that paying due respect to human rights and religious freedom would contribute to the development of a prosperous society, creating a win-win situation for both China and the Church.