

UNL student smuggles Bibles to Beijing

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Trembly said one of the most memorable experiences of her trip was dining with a group of elderly Chinese people, all of whom had served at least 15 years in prison. Two were ministers who had served 22 and 24 years in prison under the religious persecution of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution.

The group also met a woman named Mable, a religious leader in China.

Mable's grandfather was executed because of his religious beliefs in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion against foreign influence in China. Mable said she was whipped during the Cultural Revolution, but claimed she didn't feel the lashes. She later attributed this to the prayers of Christians around the world.

In both cases, Trembly said, she was inspired by the faith of Chinese Christians.

"They have a lot greater awareness of how every day is a gift to them, because in a blink of an eye everything could be taken away. When you talk to a Christian in China, you know you've talked to a Christian - it's really apparent and just shines through them," she said.

At a crossroads

In Beijing, Trembly and her group visited Tiananmen Square. Although a contingent of People's Liberation Army soldiers stood guard, the situation was calm along the vast square that is overlooked by a gigantic image of Mao.

But a closer look revealed the concrete tiles splattered with bullet pockmarks, a grim reminder of the brutal 1989 government crackdown on pro-democracy students who had gathered to demonstrate in the square.

The director of China Harvest, who asked that his name not be used in this article because of the sensitivity of the organization's work, said the square is symbolic of the younger generation in China. After their hopes for political reform were crushed, he said, many became disillusioned with politics and took refuge in spirituality.

"There is a great generation gap in China," the director said. "The younger generation did not know the Cultural Revolution, but they were impacted by the 'spiritual vacuum' in the wake of the Cultural Revolution."

Since Tiananmen, he said, "for the first time in China's long history, large numbers of students are coming to Christianity."

Despite the conflict between the government and religious devotees, there is a trend in China toward greater religious freedom since the mid-1970s when Deng Xiaoping became premier, said Andrew Wedeman, a UNL political science professor.

In the late '70s there were three registered churches in China; now there are more than 11,000, he said. At that time, offenses such as distributing Bibles could earn the violator a stiff sentence in

a labor camp, he said, whereas punishments today aren't as severe.

Full of faith

Trembly called her two-week trip to China, which ended in early June, "the experience of a lifetime."

In China, she noted, baptism means a formal commitment to go to the death for one's faith. In America, she said, Christians rarely have to contemplate that level of commitment.

She said she hoped to learn from this commitment and expand her faith.

She is interested in a career teaching English as a second language in China, and is exploring options in that field.

"I really fell in love with the people; they're so hospitable and kind," she said.

"In terms of my faith, it really caused me to examine a lot in my day-to-day commitment."

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