

# Swedish archbishop points to changes in Chinese Protestantism

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November 12, 2010

Hong Kong, November 12 (ENInews)--Changes in the make up of Chinese Christianity may make the officially-sanctioned China Christian Council less important, says the head of the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden, who is visiting the world's most populous country.

"I understand the growing force in China is in the congregations, and the China Christian Council is an important factor in linking to the government," Archbishop Anders Wejryd told ENInews in Hong Kong in advance of his 7-14 November visit to the Chinese mainland.

"But things may change also, making the CCC less influential," said Wejryd. Some observers have noted recently that the growth in the size and the number of Protestant congregations in China may lessen the role of the Christian council as a coordinating body for the churches.

The China Christian Council was founded in 1980 as an umbrella for the local congregations that reopened after being closed during the country's 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, when the expression of religious life was effectively banned. The parent denominations disappeared at the end of the 1950s during another period of communist rule called the Great Leap Forward.

The CCC supports local churches, and works to provide for theological education and for publication of the Bible, hymn books and other religious literature. Still, the CCC describes itself as a "post-denominational" body and analysts note that unlike traditional denominations, it is not bound by a particular understanding of church order.

Were the government-approved Christian council to become less important, said Wejryd, it would be vital for Protestants in China to have a solid theology of the

Church, something Christian tradition describes as ecclesiology.

"It is important to have an idea of ecclesiology ... if you are not kept together by the rules of the State," said Wejryd.

The Lutheran archbishop said that while local congregations are vibrant, it should be realised that "one congregation cannot be the full church". He noted, "For the good development in a church, you need ... some sort of oversight, or mutual oversight, and this is the old experience of having a bishop."

The China Christian Council estimates there are at least 18 million Protestants in China, but many other Christians belong to "house" or unregistered churches, say some analysts.

Wejryd is leading an eight-member delegation of his church to China. The group has visited the East China Theological Seminary in Shanghai, the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, as well as the Zhoukou Training Centre in Henan.

Asked if he would bring up human rights issues during the visit, Archbishop Wejryd said, "We of course encourage the church to have this perspective. In our churches at home, Europe, human rights issues are very important."

He said that the Swedish Lutheran bishops are now working as part of a democratic leadership of the church, so it is important to offer such experiences, while, "Chinese pick up what they need".

The population of Sweden is 9 million, and about 75 percent of Swedes belong to the Church of Sweden, making it the largest member church of the Lutheran World Federation.