



9.19.2011

CHINA CSW welcomes early release of Pastor Zhang Ronglian, leader of China for Christ Church

Prominent house church Pastor Zhang Ronglian has been released from prison nine months early. He was sentenced to seven and a half years in jail for “attaining a passport through deceit” and “illegal border crossing” in 2006. Pastor Zhang has been jailed on six separate occasions, and has spent over 18 years in prison.

Pastor Zhang is leader of the China for Christ Church network, which has over ten million members, and is one of the most prominent leaders in the Chinese unofficial church. He has travelled abroad extensively, and has been featured in *TIME*, *Newsweek* and other international media. The pastor was arrested in December 2004 at his home in Zhengzhou, Henan province. At the time his family was forced into hiding. The case drew widespread international attention and, along with other organizations, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) campaigned for his release.

Pastor Zhang, who is now 61, suffers from diabetes. He was tortured and ill-treated during previous detentions, leaving him in a poor state of health. He is said to be in good spirits and, according to China Aid, Pastor Zhang and his family have sent their thanks to everyone in the international community who has worked for his release since 2006.

Pastor Zhang’s release comes at a time when other house church leaders are under pressure. Pastor Shi Enhao, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese House Church Alliance, was sentenced to two years’ re-education through labor in August 2011 for “organizing illegal meetings”. Leaders from the independent Shouwang Church in Beijing remain under house arrest and Dr. Fan Yafeng, house church leader and expert in constitutional law, has been under house arrest at his home in Beijing since December last year.

In the past year there has been an increase in the use of *ruanjin* or house arrest, which is illegal under Chinese and international law, to silence dissidents. A report released last week in the Chinese press suggests police will be given power to detain individuals in locations other than designated detention centers. Essentially legalizing house arrest under Chinese law, the new powers would undoubtedly lead to an increase in detention without trial.

CSW’s Special Ambassador Stuart Windsor said, “CSW welcomes the early release of Pastor Zhang, while calling for the rights of all Chinese citizens to practice a religion of their choice to be respected. CSW calls upon the international community to continue to urge China to release immediately those detained for their religious beliefs, including those held under house arrest.”