

Brief History of the Corning Chinese Christian Church (CCCC)

The origin of the Corning Chinese Christian Church dates back to the summer of 2007, when Geneva Presbytery established the Chinese Koinonia (Greek for "fellowship") Administrative Commission (CKAC—pronounced "See'-Kack"), which Rev. Glenn Kennedy—who had just completed an interim pastorate at First Presbyterian Church, Corning—was asked to chair.

The goal was to facilitate a new church development out of what were then a few small Chinese Bible study groups meeting informally in the Corning area. During the remainder of 2007, CKAC—in collaboration with the Chinese Koinonia Missionary Fellowship (CKMF) under the leadership of Rev. Todd Haines (another Geneva Presbytery pastor) and ably assisted by his wife Esther—sponsored a number of worship experiences that brought together the various Chinese Bible study groups.

In January of 2008, CKAC and CKMF began bringing in guest Chinese speakers for once-a-month worship services—which were held at First Presbyterian Church in Corning. During this early phase of development, Rev. Haines led a number of intensive Bible and leadership training sessions for the young Chinese fellowship.

In November, 2008, mainland Chinese minister Rev. Daniel Zhao was called jointly by CKAC and CKMF to come as half-time pastor of the Corning new church development for a six-month trial period. After Rev. Zhao's arrival, weekly worship was begun, still at FPC, Corning. In mid-2009, Rev. Zhao became the full-time pastor of the Chinese fellowship.

During this initial period, the new church development was closely supervised by CKAC and CKMF, and its primary financial support came from a combination of annual grants from Geneva presbytery mission funds (\$10,000 per year for at least the first three years), special gifts from several churches within the presbytery, and a three-year Swenson fund grant from First Presbyterian, Corning.

Offerings from the Chinese congregation itself steadily increased to the point where, after about five years, CCCC supported nearly all of its own budget. During this same time period, the new church development ultimately came under the sole supervision of Geneva's administrative commission.

In order to facilitate further growth, in September 2011, CCCC moved its regular worship location from First Presbyterian Church, Corning, to the United Church of Painted Post (UCPP)—where Rev. Kennedy was then pastoring. There, Sunday morning Chinese worship took place in the United Church's West (Christian Education) Building, but Sunday School and other youth activities were shared by the children of both congregations. CCCC and UCPP enjoyed joint bi-lingual Sunday morning worship services from time to time.

Under the leadership of Rev. Zhao, with on-going support from CKAC, CCCC's regular worshipers grew in number from a dozen or so initially to a core group numbering over 30 adults (as of the end of 2012), plus about a dozen children.

Outreaches, in addition to regular Sunday morning worship, included a weekly prayer service on Tuesdays and weekly Bible studies on Thursdays and Fridays. CCCC also has had occasional special joint services with other Chinese fellowships and has planned special college outreach events to the larger Chinese community that have had as many as one hundred Chinese participants.

Over the years, the Chinese fellowship baptized many new believers—with seven baptized just in the year 2012. By then, regular worship and program planning was now done primarily by Rev. Zhao and designated CCCC co-workers, rather than by CKAC.

In the ensuing years, CCCC has continued to grow and mature. In 2014, Rev. Zhao completed his service as CCCC's first full-time pastor, accepting a new call to the Chinese Christian Church of Greater Washington DC, in Rockville, Maryland. In 2015, CCCC called its second full-time pastor, Rev. Liang Ouyang, to serve the developing congregation.

When UCPP's West Building was put up for sale a few years hence, UCPP and CCCC began to share joint ministry and worship space in the East Building. As of now (2019), it has been several years since CCCC has received any outside funding, whether from the Presbytery's mission budget or from special offerings from individual Presbyterian congregations. Thus, apart from not owning its own building, CCCC is now completely self-supporting.

It is important to understand that most of the very first informal Chinese worshipers were Christians from mainland China, with just a few from Taiwan. That “mix” of worshipers is still true today within CCCC. In mainland China, very few Christians, even today, would have any western-style denominational affiliation; most would either belong to the government-sponsored “Three-Self” church or be members of small “house” (or “underground”) churches.

Thus, when Geneva Presbytery initially committed itself to nurturing the small Corning-area Chinese Bible study groups into a new church development, there was no specific requirement or necessary expectation that a successful new church congregation would ever officially affiliate with Geneva Presbytery and the PC(USA)—though that was certainly a possible option. Ultimately, CCCC made the decision to remain officially independent—while continuing ties of fellowship and affection with Geneva Presbytery, in later years particularly through the United Church of Painted Post. The decision to remain independent did not reflect any animosity towards Geneva Presbytery or lack of appreciation for Geneva's nurture and direction; the decision was simply more in accord with the nature of the majority of Chinese congregations.

There remained, however, one important role that Geneva Presbytery continued to fill for CCCC until this year: since CCCC was not yet incorporated by New York State as a church, CCCC's pastor was—from the outset—designated an employee of POG so that he could participate in the Presbyterian medical and pension plans and so that CCCC's member contributions could be legally tax-deductible. (Rev. Zhao, CCCC's first pastor, in fact, underwent the process to have his ministerial credentials recognized and transferred to POG.)

During the summer of 2019, CCCC took the significant step of forming its own 501(c)(3) organization, and thus is now registered by New York State as a fully-recognized church body. Following up on this action, CCCC members voted to move their ministry from the United Church of Painted Post, where both congregations have shared space and Christian Education ministry for the past eight years, to Hope Christian Church—also in Painted Post—where CCCC will have access to space dedicated solely to its own worship and programs. Since Hope Church is an independent congregation, CCCC's move there will also formally remove CCCC entirely from the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of Geneva. But make no mistake about it. This latest development does not represent the “death” of a long-standing relationship; it is, instead, the next stage of a *successful* new church development! Thanks be to God!

Thus, as Geneva Presbytery and the United Church of Painted Post bid farewell to a formally-shared ministry with CCCC, our prayer is that God's many blessings will continue to enrich their ministry—and ours—in the years to come. Perhaps, one of these days, we will have the opportunity to share the joy of worshiping with them in their very own church sanctuary! God willing!

– Summary by Rev. Glenn Kennedy, Chair of Geneva Presbytery's Chinese Koinonia
Administrative Commission until its recent dissolution