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Artistic rendering of a photo of Early Rain Covenant Church attendees at a 2018 prayer meeting.  
Illustration by Blaze Bratcher

# Struck down, but not destroyed

Current and former members of Early Rain church in Chengdu, China, have experienced raids and arrests for practicing their faith, but the work of the church continues, even as some still draw attention to its plight from abroad



**TWENTY-FIVE-YEAR-OLD REN RUITING** remembers how Dec. 9, 2018, started out like any other Sunday. She took the elevator up to the sixth floor of an office building to worship at Early Rain Covenant Church, a well-known unregistered Presbyterian church in Chengdu, China. Afterward, she attended a rehearsal for an upcoming Christmas event.

But while out for dinner, her phone started lighting up with messages: Police were arresting her church's leaders and members from their homes.

At first, Ren wasn't overly anxious. Earlier that year, on the May 12 anniversary of the 2009 Sichuan earthquake, police had raided an Early Rain prayer meeting and detained Pastor Wang Yi and 200 other church members but released them within 24 hours. She assumed this crackdown, too, would be temporary.

Then the volume of messages ballooned.

"It was so terrifying because people would be updating you on their situation, but then partway through they would stop responding," Ren said. "It's like they vanished." Police had a list of names of people associated with the church, and Ren knew they would come for her too.

That day launched a series of events that would lead Ren and her family to seek their escape from China. The family became the first Early Rain church members to come to the United States seeking political asylum.

China's crackdown on Early Rain proved to be long-lasting—with special retribution reserved for Wang, a former legal scholar who became an outspoken pastor. (In one sermon he called President Xi Jinping a sinner in need of repentance.) The Chinese government ultimately sentenced Wang to nine years in prison for subversion of state power and illegal business operations.

In Chengdu, Early Rain today continues to meet online and in small groups as church leaders regularly face detention and monitoring. Although the government has imprisoned its pastor and confiscated its building, the church is growing and raising leaders for smaller gatherings of its congregants. The seminary, school, and college connected to the church have also continued despite government harassment.

Meanwhile, Ren's story shows the persecution some of Early Rain's Christian congregants have endured.

The night of the 2018 raid Ren didn't go home. When the police started calling her, she removed the SIM card from her phone and stayed with friends for the next few nights. She learned that among church members police targeted young people and sent those who were not originally from Chengdu back to their hometowns. Ren, who had studied at the church's seminary, realized she couldn't keep hiding.

So she finally responded to their call and went to the police station. There, police urged her to sign a paper saying she would stop attending Early Rain worship services, stop engaging in a cult, and agree to participate in the government's correction work, which she believed referred to teaching reeducation classes. Ren felt she could agree to the first two: The church was already shut down, and she didn't believe her faith was a cult. But she refused on the third count: She feared one day the government could take her away to a reeducation camp if she agreed to this.

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“It's like they vanished.”

The people at the station finally allowed her to leave, provided she added them to her account on WeChat, a social media app popular in China, so they could track her location. After she returned home to the apartment she shared with her husband and her father (the rest of the family returned to their hometown), more than a dozen men sat outside their door to monitor them. For more than two weeks they surveilled and followed them as they went out.

Altogether, police had detained more than 100 people affiliated with Early Rain.



Police raid the Tashui Small Group of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu on Aug. 22, 2021.  
Illustration by Blaze Bratcher

**WITH EARLY RAIN'S** building closed, its services continued in a new format: Sunday worship took place online as some of the church members gathered in small groups, meeting in apartments, teashops, or private rooms in restaurants. New preachers from the seminary stepped in while most of the leaders were still in detention, and small group leaders also took on increased shepherding responsibilities. By mid-2019, all of the church leaders—except for Wang and elder Qin Defu—had been released. Over time, Bible studies, prayer meetings, and Sunday school classes restarted either online or in small in-person gatherings.

Yet the persecution continued. Police broke up small group gatherings on Sunday mornings, at times bringing all the attendees, including children, to the station. Some members faced evictions as the government pressured landlords to kick them out. Authorities forced some parents to send their children back to state-run schools rather than attend the church's unregistered Christian school.

Weddings and funerals of church members became one of the few times the larger church body could gather, yet police would place the church leaders under house arrest on those days, forcing congregants to find a pastor from another church to officiate. Church leader Titus Wu (WORLD has changed his name for security reasons) noted that even with this complication—and COVID-19 restrictions keeping the number of attendees small—weddings have been joyful celebrations and reunions.

Police stopped guarding Ren's apartment after a few weeks, yet they continued monitoring her family digitally and randomly asked them to report to the station for questioning. Ren had to inform authorities about her whereabouts: When she wanted to get a visa to the United States, she lied to the police, saying she was returning to her hometown. She then secretly visited the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu. (Her visa application was eventually rejected.)

The family's main concern was Ren's 3-year-old adopted brother, Jiawen. The boy suffered from a cancerous tumor in his right arm. Ren's father, Lao Qiang, told ChinaAid the Sichuan provincial police threatened to "save" Jiawen from being raised in a "cult family." Ren's family feared Jiawen would be sent back to a state orphanage and wouldn't receive the medical care he needed.

They began looking for ways to escape China. In May, Ren and her husband flew to Thailand, where she contacted Bob Fu of the Texas-based ChinaAid, who has helped other Chinese dissidents leave China. Fu told them they weren't safe in Beijing-Friendly Thailand, and instead told them to go to Taiwan. They returned to China, packed their bags, and arrived in Taipei in July 2019 on 15-day medical tourism visas.

Ren thought that once in Taiwan, she could apply for asylum there and her journey would be over. But because of Taiwan's precarious international status, it doesn't have a refugee law. Due to Early Rain's high profile, Taiwanese officials allowed the family members to extend their visas as Fu and the Taiwan Association for Human Rights worked to help them get humanitarian parole to the United States, where they could then apply for asylum.

In the end, the family spent nearly two years in Taiwan. They couldn't officially work, but the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan provided them dorms to live in, sent the boys to local school, and helped arrange Jiawen's medical treatments. Radio Taiwan International paid Ren as a freelancer to write on human rights topics, while some Taiwanese locals encouraged the family to sell homemade dumplings and wontons out of their home, allowing them to bring in some income.

"A pastor agreed to be our guarantor even though they had never met us before," Ren said of her time in Taiwan. "It was unbelievable, because in Chinese society you can't trust anybody."

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“When you are in pain or grief, when you feel like you can't do it, you hold more tightly on to God.”

Ren remembers feeling nervous while waiting to go through customs, but once the customs agent handed back her passport, her fear was replaced with excitement. She and her family settled in Orlando, Fla. Ren marveled at how clean the Orlando air felt compared to smoggy Chengdu.

After her experience with the crackdown, Ren said, she's had more trouble trusting people. Even in the safety of Taiwan, she feared someone would jump from the shadows to grab her and send her back to China. In the United States, she fears Chinese spies might lurk in Chinese immigrant churches and doesn't know whom she can trust. "It's tiring," Ren said. "Maybe they are genuine Christians, but I am still suspicious. ... It may take time before I will slowly be able to trust again."

In the future, Ren hopes to work for a human rights group like ChinaAid so she can help other persecuted Christians in China. Meanwhile, she speaks out about her church so that the world doesn't forget about Wang in prison. The pastor's wife, Jiang Rong, and 14-year-old son, Shuya, haven't been able to see Wang in person and are only allowed short phone calls with him that are monitored by the police: Any mention of God and the phone connection is cut.



Ren now lives in Orlando, Fla.  
Illustration by Blaze Bratcher

**AMID THE TRIALS** and difficulties the Early Rain congregants face, many have seen God working. According to church leader Wu, the church has grown since the 2018 crackdown with new converts, baptisms, and members. He declined to publicize the number over fears the government would use it against them, but described the increase as "tremendous."

Some new converts came as a direct result of the detentions. One Early Rain member, Daniel Liu, was detained during the 2018 crackdown after publishing a post on Weibo (China's Twitter-like social media platform) that read in part, "God, protect your church." Police officials accused him of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" with his post and placed him in detention for five days.

In prison, some of his cellmates began to respect him after learning he was a Christian. During leisure time, he found in the prison library a book about NBA basketball player Jeremy Lin and his Christian faith. He showed the book to his cellmates and used it to start conversations about Christianity.

Later, one cellmate, in prison for drug possession, asked Liu: "Do you think I can be saved?" Liu spoke with him and later led him in the sinner's prayer. Using a page ripped from a book, Liu wrote out the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and his phone number to leave with the man. Two other cellmates who had listened to the conversation said they also wanted to believe.

The day before his five-day sentence was up, Liu baptized the three men at the sink in the cell. After Liu's release, the initial cellmate attended a small group gathering that met at the bar where Liu worked, although he later moved away for work-related reasons.

Early Rain is starting to look forward after initially focusing on restoring church leaders who had spent months in prison, caring for the church's scattered members, and riding out the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the church began a training course for small group leaders, preachers, and leaders on church planting in preparation to break the church into several smaller gatherings. Wu said this would make it easier to pastor church members who meet in separate groups, prevent people from falling through the cracks, and allow more flexibility for their numbers to multiply.

Leaders visit different small groups to administer communion. Some of these gatherings are broken up by police: Dai said that in June, after not taking communion for more than a year, she eagerly attended a gathering at a fellow church member's house. Yet the apartment building's guards noticed that people were gathering and called the police. Dai and other congregants hid in a bedroom as police detained three leaders of the group. Afterward they all left, reconvening later in the afternoon at a tea house to take the Lord's Supper.

The church's Christian school continues, with each grade meeting in a different family's home. Police have visited some, forcing them to change locations. A new Chinese law regulating private education—with Communist committees ensuring schools teach core socialist values and eschew foreign curricula—could give officials a tool to shut down unregistered schools like Early Rain's.

"There is nothing the school can do," said Dai, who is a teacher there. She recalls the administrators telling her, "We will keep having class, but if you are detained for attending the school, we can't help you. We can't protect teachers or students. If parents are worried, they can take their kids out of the school."

Dai said that since the crackdown, she's missed having fellowship with her brothers and sisters in the church. At times, she feels spiritually weak. Her small group meets too far away for her to attend consistently.

Still, she's found the difficulties of the past few years have brought her closer to God. "It's made me more mature in my faith. I've experienced the mystery of God that hardship causes you to trust God more deeply," said Dai. "When you are in pain or grief, when you feel like you can't do it, you hold more tightly on to God."

—This is an expanded version of the story that appears in the Sept. 25 print issue.

## Lawyers and pastors

A year before Early Rain Pastor Wang Yi's arrest, he asked human rights lawyer Zhang Peihong to represent him should the government crack down on the church in the future. To help prepare the church for such a crackdown, Zhang gave a talk in October 2017 at the seminary, where Zhang was also a student, about the church's legal rights.

After the December 2018 arrests, authorities didn't allow Zhang to meet with or represent Wang, claiming Zhang was too close to the pastor. Despite having a power of attorney authorization letter, the closest he got to Wang was being told to wait outside his detention center. He was never allowed in.

Zhang began defending persecuted churches in court after converting to Christianity in 2011. He'd grown up an atheist and studied political education—he now calls it "brainwashing"—then taught elementary-school teachers at a teaching college. Yet, feeling unfulfilled, he switched careers to become a lawyer in Shanghai. Exposure to Western ideas of democracy and rule of law caused him to question Marxism and desire something better for his country.

A decade into his legal career, Zhang again felt depressed in his job. Lawyers could make good money taking on political cases, yet the outcomes were predetermined in the Chinese Communist Party's favor. He decided to spend a year as a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 2011. While in the United States, a friend invited him to an evangelistic crusade by well-known overseas Chinese Pastor Stephen Tong. On the car ride there, Zhang told his friend he had 200 questions he himself answered before he would become a Christian.

By the end of the night, Zhang no longer considered his questions important: He stood up to accept Christ during an altar call. A few months later, on his 39th birthday, he was baptized.

After returning to China, he began defending persecuted churches in court, including Zhejiang churches whose crosses government officials were demolishing. He avoided arrest in July 2015 during a clampdown on the work of human rights lawyers, when police detained more than 300 lawyers, legal assistants, and activists throughout China.

But pressure on him grew a year later as he represented high-profile Pastor Gu Yue-se of Hangzhou's Chongyi Church. (Authorities had charged Gu, pastor of China's largest state-sanctioned church, with embezzling funds after he spoke out against the government's cross demolition campaign.)

As authorities increased the obstacles for human rights lawyers, Zhang decided in 2017 to attend seminary in Chengdu. That led him to Wang's case.

Officials, though, blocked Zhang from representing the pastor, instead appointing two other lawyers, one of whom was Wang's high-school friend. On the day of Wang's closed-door trial on Dec. 26, 2019, only his parents were allowed to attend. Wang defended his innocence, but the court ultimately sentenced him to nine years in prison.

Despite the unjust outcome, Zhang still sees God's hand at work. Because of the crackdown and arrest, he said, Wang's mother came to profess faith in Christ.

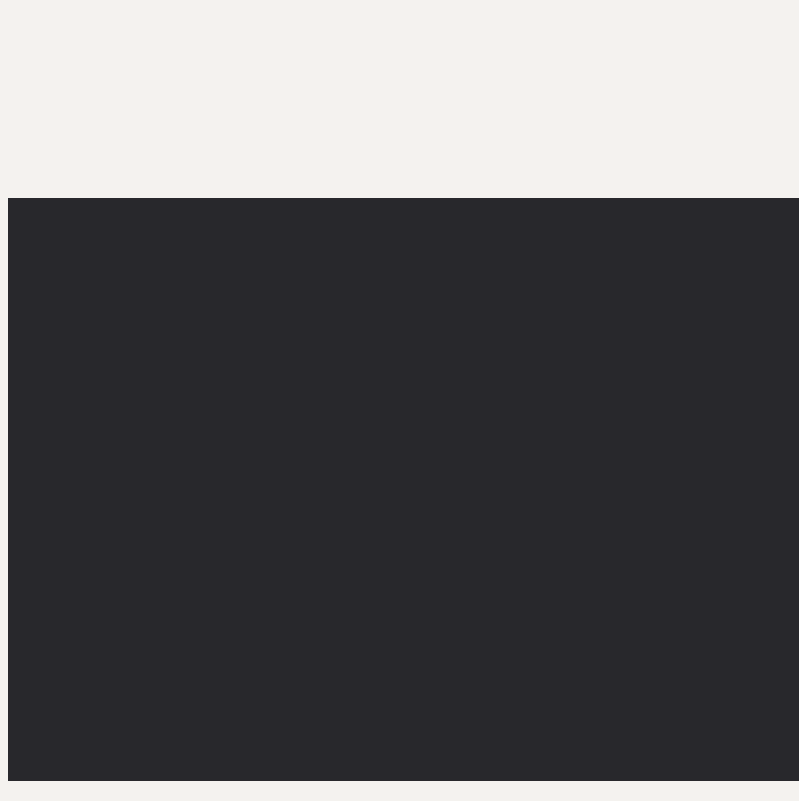
It also helped Zhang see the futility of fighting within China's legal system. He has now left the legal profession to preach at his house church in Shanghai. "There is no future for human rights lawyers," Zhang said. "The legal route churches once used is dead; the only route open to us is the road of faith, of martyrdom. There is no other road."



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