

Macau: Church without fear of the electronic age

Flexible Church media discover remarkable alternatives

by Hans Peter Gohla

Communication centre "Shalom" - programmes are even received in Mainland China



The shadows of the transition from a Portuguese colony to the integration into Mainland China are presently falling on Macau, even though this will take place only in 1999, i.e. two years later than in Hong Kong. Above all, the media - in a kind of pre-rush obedience - seem to want to adjust themselves to the new situation. In this respect the most powerful private radio station in Macau, "Vila Verde", suddenly ceased broadcasting. The official explanation is that improvements in the technology and reconstruction of their premises had become necessary. The reality however is that the owners - in fear of the uncertain future - are anxious to abandon their 10-kW medium-wave station, the sooner the better. Apparently "Radio Vila Verde" will be taken over by "Radio Macau", the state-owned station of the Portuguese colony, where an increasing number of representatives of the future regime call the shots.

Broadcasts from the communication centre "Shalom" in the diocese of Macau are also affected by the termination of "Radio Vila Verde". Since 1984 "Shalom" has broadcast a daily half-hour religious programme in Cantonese through "Vila Verde", especially targeted at the Chinese Mainland. It is estimated that - theoretically - "Vila Verde" could be received by 30 million Chinese, and that approximately 1.2 million people could be counted as regular listeners. In addition, "Shalom" received 200 listener-letters weekly, which in the opinion of experts represents a very good sign indeed for quality and listener-acceptance. "Shalom is proud of the fact that its programmes are heard also by people who don't want to have anything to do with the Church". Some people were forbidden by relatives to tune into the programmes; from which one concludes - and rightly so - the programme's effect on the people on-the-spot. Most successful however is something else in Macau, namely a pay-telephone-cassette service. When dialling certain telephone numbers, children or adults can listen to short stories produced on cassettes by the "Shalom" team. Each week five new tales are prepared, one of the five always having a certain connection with the Bible, and the others taken from ordinary daily life or Chinese literature. On average, the three telephone numbers available for this service are called 2,500 times daily!

During the course of time intensive personal relationships have been borne through the listener-letter contacts, particularly with people from the Guangdong and Hebei Provinces. It can be understood that details of these contacts cannot be revealed, but it is no secret that several times a year employees of "Shalom" travel to the Chinese Mainland, and include in their luggage audio and video cassettes, religious literature and medicines. The end of "Radio Vila Verde" has given rise that "Shalom" is seeking new ways to continue their presence on the Chinese Mainland in the form of specific radio programmes. And - apparently - with success. A few small, local radio stations on the Mainland have been found, willing to broadcast the "Shalom" programmes. Access to these stations was probably made easier for the "Shalom" team as they are well-known not only as radio-people, but also as social workers in the fight against leprosy. They describe one particularly impressive experience: their meeting with an underground diocese in the Northern Province of Hebei, where approximately 70,000 Catholics live in 120 villages. Problems with Chinese officials are practically non-existent: "we have established that they have nothing against our work, on condition that our help is given with no ulterior motives".

Although cooperation with "Radio Vila Verde" came to an unexpectedly swift end, "Shalom's" religious programmes are continuing on the considerably weaker station "Radio Macau" (1-2.5 kW). 15-minute programmes are aired

once a day for the rapidly decreasing Portuguese-speaking minority, and of course also in Cantonese. From information issued by "Radio Macau", the station is received by about 650,000 listeners in Macau, Hong Kong and the Mainland. Similarly as with "Radio Vila Verde", broadcasting time on "Radio Macau" has to be bought, costing approximately US\$ 50,000.00 per year. Over and above this amount, production and running costs for the radio and professionally equipped television studio must be added, making a total of almost US\$ 200,000.00 annually. Certainly a considerable amount when one recalls that from the 450,000 people presently in Macau, only 5% are Catholics.

Observers are curious to see how the situation in the (still) Portuguese colony will develop. Will these people, in particular the 100,000 holders of Portuguese passports, wait and see what Peking will do with Hong Kong in 1997? Will the People's Republic of China hold with the law passed in 1992, which states in article 34: "The people of Macau enjoy the freedom of conscience. The people of Macau enjoy the freedom of faith and the freedom to preach, practice and take part in religious activities in public". Or will the new masters react as sensitively as the old? Four years ago the Portuguese governor forbade a "Call-in-Station" from "Radio Macau" on grounds of an article published in the Portuguese language daily newspaper "Gazeta Macanese" with the reason that callers had insulted Portugal, Portuguese history and culture, and claiming that the Macau officials were thieves, the police force corrupt and the law courts incompetent. At that time, ten journalists, three of whom were Christians, handed in their notice in protest against the curtailment of freedom of speech.