

## Engage360 Episode 154 | Cross-Cultural Ministry and Lessons from the Chinese Church

### Erik Burklin

[00:00:00] **Eva Bleeker:** Friends, it's my pleasure to welcome you to this episode of Engage 360, Denver Seminary's podcast. I'm your host for today, Dr. Eva Bleeker, and I am excited to jump into a dialogue with Erik Burklin. Erik is the president of China Partner and a graduate of Denver Seminary, and is doing innovative and exciting work, and I am just delighted to have you as our guest today, Erik. Thanks for being with us.

[00:00:30] **Erik Burklin:** Such a privilege and honor and I'm really excited that Denver Seminary even, has this opportunity. It was a really great experience for me to graduate in 2010. And, just to do this ministry that God is doing in China is an honor as well. So I can't wait to share with you what God is doing there. Thank you.

[00:00:51] **Eva Bleeker:** Well, let's not delay. Let's get started. I have been encouraged and challenged just in preparation for this conversation. So I wonder if a starting point for us, Erik, if you would be willing to tell us some of your family history that led to the work that you're doing now with China Partner.

[00:01:10] **Erik Burklin:** Yeah, thank you. It started with my grandparents. They're both German. In fact, I was born and raised in Germany. They both worked in the province of Jiangxi, which is more in the interior of China and, with China Inland Mission, that's Hudson Taylor's ministry. And, they met in China, fell in love in China, got married in China, and had three kids in China, and the middle son was my dad. So when my dad started China Partner in 1989, this was after the Cultural Revolution, for a 30 year period from 1950 to 1980. Everything was shut down, churches had to go to underground. He then thought, well, maybe there's something that I can do to continue my parents' legacy a little bit and that's exactly what he did. But it started with my grandparents and they were there for 25 years doing church plant work very traditional missionary work that a lot of missionaries would do in those years. And very difficult time it was during the wars I cannot even imagine what my grandparents must have gone through, but they loved the people. They loved Jesus. They wanted to share the gospel with them. And, that's our heritage. In fact, another Chinese friend of ours contacted me already a couple years ago and she said Erik, you know that your family has been involved in China ministry almost a hundred years. And then I looked at the date and in 1925 is when my grandparents went to China. It's one of the things that has given us open doors in China because of our long heritage, I believe. Also that we, always did everything very openly and legally in China. That was a very strong value for my father when he started China Partner. That was influenced because my dad was involved in Youth for Christ in Germany. Many years, and then in Europe, and then he worked with Bill Graham for a while. . but he remembers the wall that the Soviet Union put up between East and West Germany.

In fact, I grew up in Germany during those years. During the time when the wall was up, my father was an evangelist with Youth for Christ, so he, was invited many times to go to countries that are behind what we used to then call the Iron Curtain. It was very dicey how they would do ministry in these closed countries. And, well meaning evangelists would always get in trouble because they would sneak in and out of the country and do their evangelism, and then they would leave, and then they would show great pictures of what God did while they were there. And he thought to himself, I don't want to do that in China. And so when China opened its doors for the first time in the early 80s, I remember the first trip that my father did back to China in 1981. He actually got arrested because he went by train into a province, Junxi, which is where his parents had ministered, and

wanted to get off the train there, which was not, at that time, permitted for any foreigners. But he got off anyways and told the officials after they arrested him. They gave him like a long speech of what foreigners are allowed to do. And my father just said to the police officer, I just want to come home. And the police officer was asking him like, what do you mean come home? You're a foreigner. Yeah, but I was born and raised here, and my parents used to live in this province. And he had remembered to put into his folder an identification form that he still had as a 15 year old boy with his Chinese name on it, like a very official, document. And he showed that to the police officer to prove to him that he was not lying, that this was indeed him who had been born there. Well, this police officer was so excited, and within three hours gave him permission to visit that he wanted to visit. He realized that because he was honest with this government official, this police officer, that actually that opened up the door to do more than he could have ever done if he would have tried to just sneak in and out. So that was kind of like the beginning of our ministry and how it got started. but that's the heritage that we have in China. So, yeah, a hundred years.

[00:05:16] **Eva Bleeker:** That's amazing. So I want to appreciate the sensibility that you're describing, Erik, to, the story and the way that you and your organization conduct ministry in China. And I recognize also that our listeners probably have varying levels of familiarity with what it means experientially to be a Christian in China historically for certain, and also Presently, I wonder if you might describe a little bit about the experience, daily experience of, our brothers and sisters there.

[00:05:53] **Erik Burklin:** Well, everybody thinks that Christianity is not allowed in China. It's actually not true. They have a constitution, and in their papers, they actually give, what they call religious, rights. So there's five religions in China that is, are officially recognized by the Chinese government. Even though they are anti God, we know communism is, a very atheistic kind of run system. And yet in the midst of that, they allow religion. it's very mysterious and kind of interesting. And one of them is Christianity. And so it's actually legal to be a Christian in China today, which was not the case under Mao Zedong. So that's the positive. Many Christians in China actually are very, they live very normal lives. I mean, I've been doing this now 30 plus years. And every time I go there, I'm, literally surprised but also excited how normal everything operates in China. I mean, it's a communist system. And yet within the system, the Christians have learned to love their neighbors, to be a witness. And that's exactly what they do. they pray a lot. It's a praying church. of course they have a long history of the house church movement, which was really birthed under the regime of Mao Zedong. When in 1950, the Communist Party took over and Mao Zedong was the leader then, all religions were illegal. And so everybody had to go underground, including Buddhism, by the way, and a lot of what they would consider more Chinese religions like Taoism. but the Chinese church exploded in that environment. And it's still a mystery to me and to many Christians around the world, how God would use. It's such a dark time to grow the church, but it's exactly what happened. I have a good friend of mine who is a pastor in New Zealand, and when he shares about China, he's come with us many times to help train pastors, and he says this, he says, God used Mao Zedong as the greatest missionary of our time. The very thing that he wanted to squelch and stop, the opposite happened. And The church is growing During his regime, by the way, he didn't allow any Bibles , so many Christians would hide them or they would memorize them. Many, know scripture by heart. It's also, I believe, one of the reasons why the church has grown. I think they just know the word. And they practice, and they flesh out the word.

And so the environment in China today is actually quite open, quite, relaxed, Christians live their lives, they have jobs, you can go to church. you can buy a Bible anywhere you want to. Most churches in China have bookstores, and so, anybody can go in there and buy a Bible if they want to. I've had the privilege of being at the Amity Printing Company where they print the Bibles. Since 1987, they've now printed over 200 million. They're not just printing Bibles for their own people, but

for the world. So, that's what's happening today. That's reality. And so it's so exciting to see the church is growing. yes, there is pressure. Xi Jinping, the current president, has, declared a new regulations, really wants to sinonize all of China to make it more Chinese and less dependent on foreigners. That's also seen in the economy, by the way, and what's very interesting during COVID, when everything was shut down, they were really hurting, they're realizing that actually they need the rest of the world also economically. So now I'm seeing that there's more of an open door again for foreigners to come back. They're actually welcoming tourists. It's very interesting, yes, it's problematic, it's a communist country. But within that system, God is continuing to raise his church. And Christians are loving their neighbors, they're loving their families, they're, being witnesses, . Every year there's hundreds of new baptisms in local churches, and that's the reality of the Christian movement in China today. It's mysterious and it's wonderful at the same time.

[00:10:15] **Eva Bleeker:** As you describe that, Erik, I'm struck by the name China Partner. And I wonder if you would just tell us about what the name represents. How is your organization moving toward churches and Christians?

[00:10:30] **Erik Burklin:** That's very special to me, When my father, was still ministering with us years ago, he called it Warner Brooklyn Ministries. So that's how we incorporated the ministry. And our board got together and thought through that and said we need to really come up with some other names that would more better describe who we are and what we do. And, so we discussed this with also our friends in China and what's so special about it is it's actually, it was an idea of a local pastor who lives in Nanjing. And he said, you know what, we should call you China Partner. Zhongguo Huoban is the Chinese name. And it has the, characters, by the way, Zhongguo is China, and Huoban is these two characters, when you put them together, has this idea of east west, it has this idea of bridge building, it also has this idea that we're learning from one another and that we respect one another's ideas, thoughts, theology. That was very humbling for us. And when we thought of China partner, that was beautiful because that's exactly what we are. In fact, our tagline is to serve the church in China. Our whole idea of why we exist is to serve the church. We don't want to Do any church planting? Guess what? The Chinese are doing it. very well, by the way. We felt like all along, let's just serve them. Let's equip them. Let's do what we can to partner with these brothers and sisters so that they can better reach their people for Jesus Christ in their own culture, their own language. and that's, who we are. And that's how it got started.

[00:12:12] **Eva Bleeker:** Tell us a little bit about the, practical ways that China partner does what you're describing serving the Chinese church.

[00:12:22] **Erik Burklin:** So it started off, obviously, in the early 80s when my father first went back to China. I think his desire was to evangelize China. His idea was to have evangelistic meetings in churches. And then, we learned very quickly from the Chinese church, again, that this is where the China partner aspect comes in, where we listen to them because we gave them that idea, hey, what if we came with a team and evangelize and they said, oh, timeout, not such a good idea, but then they said, well, what if you just came to, to help equip us to be a better evangelists? And so then he developed this, training ministry. That's really what it turned into. It's a service slash training ministry. And wherever we are invited, in the beginning it started at, the local seminaries. By the way, the official church over there has 22 official seminaries and Bible schools now that are run, by the, local churches. and that's the first training that we conducted in 1991. And at that time, Bishop Ding was, kind of like the first official, Christian leader after Mao Zedong died. And Bishop Ding invited my father with an international team of pastors to come to his seminary to do a 10 day seminar. And the whole training was on evangelism . That was my father's heartbeat. And, after the

training, Bishop Ding said, I have not heard one negative voice about what you said or what you taught. Please come back.

[00:13:58] **Eva Bleeker:** Wow.

[00:13:58] **Erik Burklin:** And that was the open door and the open invitation by the top Christian leader in China, who obviously is, legally recognized by the Religious Affairs Bureau, which is the government, arm that oversees all religious activity in China. And that was the beginning of China Partners mission. And ever since then, we, have been invited in local seminaries, local Bible schools, even church training centers. Sometimes churches will bring lay leaders together for a week of training and they invite us as their special guests to equip these lay pastors. and that's what we've done. So we focus very heavily on personal evangelism, also how they can preach more evangelistically. So like in, in their sermon preparations, they don't just preach a sermon, but they bring it back to the gospel. That was a very high value of ours. then it developed into discipleship. Then we did a whole curriculum on Church leadership or more like what we call biblical leadership, how did Jesus lead when he led The son of God . how did Paul lead? How did Peter lead? How did the early church lead? Those qualities we bring, then we've expanded to, pastoral care, counseling. Youth ministry is another aspect that we have helped churches to think about. How can they be strategic, even though they're not allowed, by the way, this is one of their laws. They're not allowed to bring anybody under the age of 18, can you believe this, to church. So parents have a huge dilemma. And they're developing actually curriculum right now. We want to help them with this is how parents can be more evangelistic with their own children at home. That's what we do practically. So it's really like short term training seminars And then we follow up with them on a yearly basis. A lot of times we're invited back to continue another subject that they might need but we've done this now, like I said over 35 years and it's just a joy to see The fruit of that, many of the ones who were, by the way, in seminary when my dad first did his training in 1991, I'll never forget this. one of the students at that seminary is now the senior pastor of one of the largest churches in Nanjing. I was there last year, and this senior pastor invited me to give a greeting. it was the first time back for us. China partner after covid lockdown was stopped and it was such a beautiful moment for me personally to be invited by this pastor. Later on. I found out that he was one of the students in the classroom when my dad and this international team taught him. So that was a really sweet moment. He was then thanking me for coming back. you're the son of the person that taught us then. And so it just kind of continues now. And we have seen this throughout China, many of these, students who then or over the last three years have been equipped, through China Partner now are in leadership positions and are inviting us back to continue our partnership with them. And that's such a joy to do. I think there's a lot that we can learn from the Chinese church.

[00:17:13] **Eva Bleeker:** Tell us about that.

[00:17:13] **Erik Burklin:** I went to Denver Seminary myself. I graduated in 2010 and one of the greatest joys for me was our professors were so encouraging to me when I would get ready for a ministry trip to China, they would just pray for me, and they would pray for our team that would go over. So we'd be gone for two weeks, I would miss class, they, sometimes I would, dial in from over there and do something online. When I would come back, they would always give me a chance to report what, what did you see? What did you learn? And that was such a joy to all already then, just to help educate our students about what God is doing in China. And that's exactly what I've learned over time. I think we have to remember that Jesus, the head of the church, and he is building his church. I mean, the verse that he even said, on this rock, I will build my church. the personal pronouns in that verse are so poignant. I will, my church, and so many times when we make it about us, like my ministry, my church, my pulpit, and what you see in China is very little of that. There's a

lot of commonality, there's much more of a very humbleness, a quiet, strength that I see in these leaders. And their, their love for the word, is huge. it's so humbling, when we teach some of these seminary students or Bible school Students, or even like the lay pastors, we will mention a verse and they will just, declare it out loud. You don't even have to look it up. they just know it. that's so humbling. and, a challenge for me, personally. I, want to be more in the word. I want to trust his word. I want to believe what it says. This is his word. It's not just a book. So that's one thing I've learned from the Chinese church. The second thing is prayer. There are prayer warriors over there. They pray, all the time. And I think we can improve on that in all of our churches. So that's, another one. And then just the way they evangelize, I think, we still have this idea. We have to go out in the streets We have to knock on doors and all those things are good. They're not bad But when I observe Chinese Christians, they just they share their joy With their friends with the people that they come in contact with their neighbors people that they have a relationship with so it's like relational evangelism. The other thing they, do very well is they invite their neighbors or their non Christian friends to church. And, Many times I ask individuals, are you a Christian? And then they smile at me through interpreter and say, not yet. And then I say, what do you mean not yet? Well, I've been to church, and I've been invited by my friend for about a year now. I've been coming, and I'm investigating. I thought, wow, how powerful is that? Again, the relationship that they have, that's the reason why that person's in church. I think that's a, really sweet way of, evangelizing people. And that's, what I've learned from the Chinese church.

[00:20:24] **Eva Bleeker:** Thank you for saying those things, Erik. I need to hear them too.

[00:20:27] **Erik Burklin:** We all don't we? It's, so sweet. Yeah. it's quite an honor. it's just, it's a beautiful story. Yeah. I'm excited for the future, by the way. We are actually starting to revisit all these cities that we have not been able to be in for five years because of COVID. So, we're reconnecting with many of our leaders, with our friends over there with COVID. seminaries and Bible schools and the main purpose of us right now is to ascertain their current situation. where are they? How have they survived COVID? I mean, I mean, the stories that we're hearing from these people over there, it's unbelievable. But they have such a great joy to now be able to go to church again and to invite people to come back to church. These pastors, love Jesus. They love his word. They love to preach it And people come into faith because of what they're doing. It's just a great privilege to be a part of that.

[00:21:27] **Eva Bleeker:** Erik, I want to give you the opportunity to speak directly to our unique listening audience, current students, recent grads, people who have been in ministry a long time. what might you say to, to, our friends who right now don't really have an imagination for cross cultural work in their ministry? And then what might you say to encourage those who are

[00:21:56] **Erik Burklin:** I would say for those who might not have a cross cultural desire, don't feel guilty, number one. Follow, God's leading in your heart. Keep learning. stay teachable, that's what I would say. and then just allow the Holy Spirit to guide you see where God wants you. But don't overthink it. Don't feel like, oh, I'm not going to China, I'm not going to Africa. I must be not, That's not what Jesus wants us to, to feel. I think what he wants us to do is to be a witness, wherever we are. I used to, tell my girls when they were in high school, go mad today. I learned this from another friend of mine. go make a difference today in your school, in your setting, with your friends. Be loving, be kind. I remember my oldest said, Well, I don't have any friends. And I asked her, Well, who are you being a friend to? And she had never considered the switch. Like rather than, I want to be accepted to, Who are you accepting? Who are you inviting to be your friend. and that's what we as Christians need to start doing as well. I feel like, I think, if we can just be a little bit more intentional and, see that wherever God places us, that's, where ministry happens can be in your home. If you're

a young father, young mother, that your children are the first, so to speak, your evangelism, your evangelistic field, or your mission field in a way.

And I think to those who have that passion, just follow it. I think, go on your next trip, find out what God is doing, but always remember that Jesus is already there working. Don't ever feel like you're the one who's going to make the difference, or you're the end game, right? we're not, there's many people who have gone before us and there's many more that will come after us. just be humble, serve Jesus wherever he places you. But, but also know that Jesus is already there and he is working through their local people, whatever country, God is already there. He's working. His Holy Spirit is doing something. And Let's see where he's already working and join him in that ministry. That's what I've learned at least. God will use you.

[00:24:03] **Eva Bleeker:** Erik, was there anything you were hoping to say today that you didn't get to say?

[00:24:09] **Erik Burklin:** God be praised. God be praised is all I can say. My, my, grandmother used to say, Alles Gottes Gnade. Which translated in English means, all God's grace. It's all God's grace. And if it wouldn't have been for His grace, number one, she wouldn't have lasted 25 years over there. She had a very tough time. But then also it was very tough to, in those days, for people to believe or to become Jesus followers. My grandfather's diary that he wrote, we added it up and I think he had ten converts that he remembers personally leading to the Lord or discipling into a local church. Ten converts. So this is 25 years, so that's less than one convert per year. And yet they were faithful. they did what God called them to do and I think we need to also learn from that. If we don't see fruit right away, don't get discouraged. It's okay in God's timing. He will bring about the fruit. Now today There's thousands and thousands of believers in China. My grandparents never saw that. Now obviously in heaven They see it And they rejoice with Jesus, but we need to stay faithful stick with it.

[00:25:13] **Eva Bleeker:** Well, thank you for bringing us to that point. And thank you for being our guest today. And friends, our listeners, we're grateful to you as well that you have chosen to spend your time with us during this episode. And if you get the chance, please leave us a rating or review wherever you listen to your podcasts. And please send any questions or comments to us at [podcast@Denverseminary.Edu](mailto:podcast@Denverseminary.Edu). Visit [denverseminary.edu](http://denverseminary.edu), our website, for more information and resources about our school, such as events, degree programs, and other episodes of Engage360, including full transcripts of this episode as well. We are grateful for your interest, support, and prayers. Until next time, may the Lord bless us all.