During my recent trip to Hong Kong and China, I went as a part of a delegation of 8 Presbyterians who sought to build bridges and foster old and new relationships with the churches and other Christian organizations in various parts of China. This was an eye-opening experience for a few in our group who have never set-foot to mainland China. A few of them carried a misconception that China was still an underdeveloped country and boy, were they in for a cultural shock? Their perspectives about the country and the current status of the church within have totally changed….and I’ll explain more about what I mean by that.

This was the 3rd group within the last 5 years that the *Outreach Foundation* has sent a delegation to the official registered churches in the Jiangsu and Shendong provinces and to the national headquarter of the *Chinese Christian Council* in Shanghai. We’ve also visited a few registered non-government organizations such as the *Amity Foundation* and the *Amity Printing Press* and the area’s provincial seminaries that are training church leaders of tomorrow. Each of these places that we visited were thoughtfully arranged and coordinated, as our itinerary were announced in advance and received approval by the official authorities.

Each morning our group began with a short devotional followed by prayers at the hotel lobby, as each of us took turn to lead. On one morning, someone chose the passage that we just read earlier out of Psalm 145, as we meditated upon what it means to acknowledge God’s presence in our lives (Emmanuel – God with Us!). Wherever we are and no matter what the circumstances may be.

As the Psalmist proclaimed God’s steadfast love and declared God’s faithful reign throughout our life’s trials and circumstances, we prayed for God’s protection, vigilance, and blessings not only for ourselves, but upon all those whom we visited officially and unofficially. We pondered upon the lives that have been changed or soon to be changed by the powerful testimonies that are being shared by others, as God continues to open doors that have been closed for so many years in this parts of the world.

Christianity is nothing new in this country. Contrary to what many believed, Christianity has been introduced to China ever since the 6th century, thanks to the Persian missionaries (the Nestorian Christians) who shared the Christian faith across the Silk Road into Xian. During our trip, our group was privileged to come face-to-face to see the original tablet that etched the earliest recording of Christian faith at around 781 A.D. So the seeds of faith had been planted way back in the Tang Dynasty. Like the Parable of the Seeds, from time to time, the seeds had been snatched away or left stranded by the wayside waiting to be rediscovered and replanted. Nevertheless the journey of God’s faithful witnesses was not to be wavered or derailed. In the 18th century, thanks to the many missionaries who have opened door to the Christian faith and developed a ministry of compassion for China and its people, in hope to bring the good news hope and salvation to this part of the world.

Missionaries such as the British physician James Hudson Taylor, who came to China in 1853, organized the *China Inland Mission* post. He and his wife Maria literally went out of the “comfort zone” and sailed across the seas and blended themselves into the local Chinese culture. They sought to be inculturated and adapted rather than imposed their western faith and their way of life upon the indigenous. They took on the mindset of cultural humility, based on mutual respect and understanding rather than influencing and transforming those around them.

But China was now their new home. God has placed China and its people in their hearts, as Taylor and his wife settled and implanted themselves among the people to whom God had sent. China was Hudson Taylor’s ministry field and his calling. He rested his total dependency upon God for all that he was doing. As Taylor humbly wrote, “*I have often thought that God made me little in order that He might show what a great God he is.”*

In retrospect, indeed there was much to be thankful for, for those overseas missionaries who have introduced the Christian faith into the east. Just as upon my arrival to Hong Kong, I also paid my respect to my great, great, grandfather who was one of the earlier Christians in Hong Kong, thanks in part due to the overseas missionaries from England to Hong Kong. Here’s the gravesite of my great, great, grandfather and my great grandparents. As a result, all of my family from my mother’s side have been brought into faith and played a significant leadership role in the churches in Hong Kong. During this trip, I also went back to visit the church that I was baptized in and grown up having my faith nurtured there as a child. My mother served as the organist there for more than 35 years.

During our trip, we had also visited a couple of provincial seminaries who are preparing the church leaders of tomorrow. It was truly amazing and hopeful to see how God has continued to inspire people come to faith but more importantly sensed their calling to serve God and God’s people through the ministry of the church. Their theological training and pathway of becoming an ordained minister is just as rigorous and demanding as it is in the west. In fact, it might even be tougher there than here as they must go through series of interviews, examinations and internships in order to receive official approval.

Despite their lack of resources such as theological books, academic staff, or classroom and dormitory spaces, they were not deterred but instead even motivated by their conviction and their calling to serve God’s people by leading them to faith in Christ.

The fast-growing churches in China are also faced with a tremendous shortage of ministers, evangelists, and preachers, as flocks of worshippers have come and sought their faith in Christ. There are many more sheep within the flock, with even greater potentials out there, but not enough shepherds to keep watch and to attend to their care. The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.[[1]](#footnote-1)  Many of these churches conduct multiple services throughout the week and their sanctuary’s seating capacity holds thousands. Many came to faith indigenously through God’s grace and miracles that happened upon them or others around them. Many were eager and hungered to hear the Good News of hope and salvation. They were not afraid to share with others how they were inspired to come to faith. They were more free to talk about their personal faith out in public, than among us here in a country that brags about religious freedom. To much of our surprises, many of these officially registered churches and their leaders have been given high degrees of freedom to carry out their ministerial activities without much interferences by the governments, contrary to much misconceptions and beliefs among those underground unregistered worshipping communities.

It is NOT illegal to worship in the house of God in China. It is NOT illegal to read the bible or to pray (even out loud) in public in China. Christianity is treated just like another other religions that are recognized by the State with certain degree of freedom to practice their faith accordingly. The bibles are readily available and distributed in many of the churches for those who wish to have one. So there is no need to smuggle bibles into China, when it has the largest Bible printing press in the world in Nanjing. As a matter of fact, the *Amity Printing Company* will be printing its 200millionth copy of the bible sometime today. It took 25 years to produce the first 100 million bibles. In comparison, the second 100 million takes only 7 years. Out of the 200 million Bibles, more than 85 million have been distributed within China. Amity has also become an exporter of Bibles to over 110 countries in 100 different languages, especially to Africa where the demands are high and churches there are also booming, just like their partners there in China.

Overall, I believe there are several key components that we can learn from our Chinese Christian partners overseas:

* **Indigenous Faith** – The churches in China believe in developing a contextualized faith that is indigenous to the people of whom they serve. That is to say, even though Christianity is considered a “Western” philosophy with much “Western” influence, it can be inculturated, applied, and adapted relevantly according to the local contexts. This was evident through many of its religious artworks and spiritual hymns written and developed by local artists and hymn writers or through its teaching fusioning the eastern philosophy of Confucianism and other cultural practices with that of the west.

It would do greater harm for the western church to try to dictate what the church in China ought to do. We must learn and collaborate from one another but not to impose superiority or supremacy over the others. There have been many ministry partnership among churches, seminaries, and other organizations over the years. These on-going mutual exchanges are extremely important in collaborating and demonstrating our Spirit of unity with our sister churches overseas. In light of the current geo-political climate between the US and China, the partnering churches can perhaps lead the way in bearing witness in seeking God’s kingdom first above and not here below. Let us put aside our differences and focus on the common bond and the unity that we share in Christ. That is my personal hope and my dream.

* **Unity of the Church** – the churches there belong to one single unified church and not differentiate themselves by sectarianism. As one of the provincial church leaders mentioned that *“we believe in the same God, the same Jesus, read the same bible, and we belong in the same church. Why are there so many different denominations in the West?”*

I think he does have a point that we can all learn from, as the church pondered upon what it means to be the church of the people and for the people?

* **Gospel Centric** – When asked upon how the churches in China have grown so exponentially in the past decades, a few leaders expressed that mainly by the grace of God and the powerful witness of the Holy Spirit. Many were introduced to the gospel message through the sharing of one’s faith and the telling their stories. Many of the people’s hearts were touched and their lives were changed as a result. There was this tremendous hunger and desire in yearning to seek the truth of the Gospel. The Spirit of our God is indeed actively at work through our partner and friends in China.
* **Service to the Community –** Many of the churches and para-church organizations focus on the social needs of the people. They believe that the people not only need to be fed spiritually, but also physically as well…all in the name of Christ and according to Christ’s mandate. Just as James Hudson Taylor utilized his medical skills in order to gain access to China and to provide care for the Chinese people, over the year many churches also partner with local hospitals, senior center, schools, and other community- based organizations in reaching out to the local people. This is all part of their command of fulfilling the Great Commission in reaching out and meeting the needs of the people, right where they are.

0

We are living in an exciting time and a globalized community, both in the secular sense and religious sense, with tremendous opportunities for growth and out-reach and learning from one another. Despite the growth in recent years in many of the churches in China, only about 2% of its population declare themselves as Christians. What about the other 98%? The harvest is indeed plentiful and the workers are few. The fastest growing church communities today are located in the East and in the South (in both Latin America and in Africa), as the Western Christendom is in its state of decline yet still bears much influence and carries great responsibilities in leading the way. There is much that we can learn from one another’s journey of faithful witnesses.

It is my hope and my dream that together we shall hold one another accountable and seek God’s kingdom first. May God continue to reign supreme over all earthly principalities and governance of power and authorities. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Matthew 9:37* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)