

Chinese and Vietnamese Church Planting

Tim Symonds, Reader at St Olaf's, Poughill, Bude, talks of his calling to Chinese and Vietnamese church planting, through service with OMF (Overseas Missions Fellowship), and of the Christian Missions Charitable Trust (CMCT) in south India which is supported by St Olaf's ...

I had the privilege of growing up in a home where my parents were missionaries with the Church Mission Society in Kenya and I wanted to be a missionary myself from an early age. I was keen on sport, travel and adventure and thought the army would be a good place to learn to witness in a potentially tough context. After two years at Sandhurst from 1961-63, training took me to Libya, Cyprus, Canada and Germany. When I reached the rank of captain I had the opportunity of applying for a long language course in Cantonese at the Ministry of Defence language school in Hong Kong and I prayed that if this was God's will for me my application would be accepted. It was, to my delight, and in 1971 I launched on to a 2.5 year intensive course. I had been studying for only a few months when some words from my Bible reading for the day stood out from the page. They were from David's injunction to Solomon regarding the building of the temple: 'Be strong and courageous and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged for.....God is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work *for the temple of the Lord* (my italics) is finished' (1 Chron 28:20) . I sensed the Holy Spirit was telling me that the long-term use of this language would be in God's service in the church in some way. So I kept this in mind as I struggled through the course qualifying as a Cantonese interpreter which led to a further two years in Hong Kong working in an intelligence unit.



My wife Zinnia and I made time to get to know missionaries serving in the colony, many of whom had served in China, where my grandparents had also served in the 19th century, before the exodus of missionaries took place caused by the Communist Revolution headed by Chairman Mao.

We returned to England in 1975 where I completed my army service and then worked for two Christian charities, the Soldiers and Airmen's Scripture Readers Association (SASRA) and Southeast Asian Outreach (SAO), the latter having been started to help refugees from Vietnam, many of whom were Cantonese-speaking, resettle in England. Zinnia and I prayed about when to return to Hong Kong and one day a magazine of the Overseas Missions Fellowship (OMF) arrived on our doormat in Swindon, where SAO was based, which had a prayer item about the need for church planters in Hong Kong. This matched our vision so we applied to OMF and found ourselves back in Hong Kong at the end of 1982. I needed a refresher course in Cantonese, not least to learn Biblical vocabulary, and Zinnia started the language from scratch while mothering our two primary-school-age children.

After attending a Chinese church for six months, the Chinese pastor asked us if we would plant a new church on a new housing estate in Shatin, a town in Hong Kong's New Territories. He would rent the premises and provide us with a group from his church to help us. I had trained as a lay reader in the Army and had experience of leading services and Bible studies but to do it all in Chinese from scratch was an enormous challenge for which I felt very inadequate! However the Lord who calls also equips and wonderfully a young and gifted Chinese graduate of a Bible School asked if he could work with me. I welcomed him with open arms and together with God's help we got a church going in a day centre which was situated on the ground floor of a multistorey block of flats, so our parish was above us and in other

multi-story blocks around us. A lovely young Chinese woman who spoke English helped Zinnia start a Sunday school and our two girls attended that.

We continued with this plant from 1982-91, with a year out in England, after which we were asked to take responsibility for heading up the team of OMF missionaries involved in other churches in the territory. This took us up to our next home assignment in 1996 at which stage we realised for family reasons we needed to establish a home in England so we stayed here and were able to start and run a church for Cantonese and Vietnamese speakers, with the aid of a Vietnamese interpreter, in Deptford, Southeast London. In 2012 a Chinese pastor who spoke Mandarin (the language of mainland China) as well as Cantonese (the language of Hong Kong and Canton province) took over the Chinese part of the church and we were asked by a Vietnamese lady to set up a separate Vietnamese church, for which she would interpret as we don't speak Vietnamese. In answer to prayer this gradually developed and led in 2015 to our setting up a Vietnamese Christian Trust and inviting a Vietnamese-speaking couple, whom we knew and were British citizens, to come from Vietnam to run the church in Deptford. To our joy they accepted and are managing very capably.

Christian Missions Charitable Trust www.christianmissionsindia.org

In 1991 we sent our older daughter to an international Christian school called Hebron situated in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu state in South India. We were met at Chennai, formerly Madras, airport by a lady called Dr Colleen Redit who heads up a mission with which OMF was linked. She is a New Zealander who founded a mission to poor people in Chennai called Christian Missions Charitable Trust (CMCT) over 55 years ago. This has grown exponentially to the point where it has some 340 staff manning 26 projects for poor people including a hostel and orphanage for women and children, soup kitchens, primary and secondary schools for 400 and 1000 children respectively, sponsorship programmes for orphans and poor children, provision of free wheel chairs, handicrafts for sale and an elderly people's home. These projects are financed in answer to prayer and faith by churches, Christian trusts and individuals mainly in the UK, New Zealand, the USA and India. Our daughter spent four happy years at Hebron and obtained the necessary grades for entrance to Durham University on her return to England in 1996. The church which Zinnia and I now have the privilege of serving, St Olaf's, Poughill, Bude, supports CMCT as one of our missions and charities.

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*"I was hungry and you gave me to eat
I was thirsty and you gave me drink
I was stranger and you welcomed me
I was naked and you clothed me
I was sick and you visited me
I was in prison and you came to me".*

Matthew : 25:35,36

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Compassion in Action
Chennai, South India

Tim Symonds. January 2022.