

2008 Report 1 from Hong Kong
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Back on the Mountain

I have returned to Tau Fong Shan (mountain) in the new territories of Hong Kong, teaching 5 courses (the heaviest academic load of my career) in Practical Theology: Congregational Conflict Management, Church Planting, Pastoral Care & Counseling, Diaconal Ministry, and Pastoral Theology.

The course on Conflict has a very large attendance. The Diaconal Ministry and Pastoral Care are tutorials to prepare our Batak student to teach those when she returns to Sumatra's Deaconess School and to prepare a Doctor of Ministry student to return to Viet Nam to teach Pastoral Care. The course on church planting is for 10 students from other countries in Asia who will return to establish new congregations. It will be interesting to watch this take place over the next couple years after they go home and try it out. Pastoral Theology is taught over the internet for a Doctor of Ministry student who is unable to get out of Thailand right now because of the upheaval in the government there.

Other Faculty members from the ELCA this semester are: Dr. Ted Zimmerman, Dr. John LeMond and Dr. James Bergquist, the latter also being a volunteer. In addition we have the former Bishop of Sweden, Dr. Jonas Jonson. Two young ELCA people teach English: Katrina Vigen and Ryan Smart. On the faculty from Germany is Dr. Gabi Hoerschelmann whose ordained husband coordinates the English publications and the international students. The former Malaysian Lutheran Bishop Voo heads up the interns hip program. He was one of my D.Min. students some years ago. There are an additional 14 faculty who are Chinese.

A Large Regional, 95 Year Old, School

LTS is a large regional seminary with 325 full time day students. They come from the following countries: Indonesia, Philippines, Taiwan, Cambodia, Laos, Viet Nam, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Malaysia, Canada, Nepal, Macau, Canada, Germany and Mainland China (Cultural Christians).

In the dining room someone sneaked up behind me and put her hands over my eyes taunting me to guess who it was. It was a former student of a number of years ago named Sophia whom I advised in her research here at LTS. A "cultural Christian" which means she is not a believer, Sophia participates in our daily worship and Sunday liturgies. She came from a large Communist University in Mainland to do research on Luther's theology of justification, with which I helped her. She has returned again for 3 months to serve as a research assistant at Tau Fong Shan. Sophia is brilliant and we developed a nice friendship while she was here the last time. She looked me up to tell me with great joy that she is now a believer and wants to be baptized. Even though she is Chinese, she calls me her "Ompung," Batak for grandfather.

We have 8 new students from Mainland this semester who are also cultural Christians, 7 women and one man. Sending these young intellectuals back into China with a deep respect for Christianity is bound to pay off. And about a third of them return as believers!

A Really Interesting Book on China

On the flight over, I read a really interesting book on China, *Out of Mao's Shadow* by Philip P. Pan, Simon & Schuster. It is by a Chinese American reporter for the Washington Post and was published just last June. Pan was stationed in Beijing for 8 years and has written very interesting narrative accounts of the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen Square Massacre, the barbaric enforcement of the one child policy, the manipulation by party bosses of the courts. the horrible Abourong system (how Chinese handled the problem of street people) and of most interest to me because I was here, the SARS epidemic cover up.

Vietnamese Students

It is encouraging to see the number of Vietnamese students now at LTS. The communist government has eased up on the Christian Church a little and Seminaries and Bible Schools are being built. A former school teacher, a middle aged man in our Doctor of Ministry program, will be returning to teach a subject little known in Viet Nam: Pastoral Care and Counseling. When he arrived here he found that the only offering in that area was in the Chinese language. It is the same story for a student from Myanmar. So I have Trin Chien (Barnabas) and Salai, Yaw Ba for a tutorial in Pastoral Care. Many Christians in Viet Nam are aligned with the Missionary Alliance Church in the USA.

Reunion with Former Students

In a meaningful reunion of former students very soon after my arrival, I met on Hong Kong Island with 14 from the 2004 graduating class. We do that each year and it usually turns into a therapy session when they all describe their joys and pain. After graduation from this seminary each must serve in a church for at least 3 years before the congregation can ask that the Synod ordain them. It is a very complicated system for approval which involves the local congregation as well as a Synod committee. One woman there had been approved by the congregation and her ordination was announced after which the Synod said no. This was a very painful “loss of face.” The female candidates for ordination seem to me to be treated like slaves for those three years. The surprise of many theology students around the world is that the ministry is very, very hard work which also plays into this picture as well.

A Side trip to Sumatra

I took a 5 day trip to Sumatra to attend the STT-HKBP seminary graduation where I also teach. Ronald, one of my Cucu, graduated #1 in a class of 71. He has applied to do a Masters here in Hong Kong. I have asked the ELCA to grant him a scholarship if we would pay his 3 round trip airfares. We are the same plan for a graduate of the Balige Deaconess School named Eleven.

Also at graduation the faculty bestowed upon me the title of Blessed Professor. I have been Affiliated Faculty there for years. Evidently this is something more and a great Batak honor. That evening they threw quite a party celebrating the honor. We danced and danced the TorTor to Gongdong music with tuned drums and other native instruments. A visiting German woman there was one of my students in the Augustana Hochschule at Neuendettelsau, Germany. These international connections happen more and more and I delight in them.

Major Cover up in Mainland

It is the same old story again. When the SARS epidemic hit some years ago the Mainland Chinese denied that there was a problem. Even when hundreds were dying in Beijing, they announced that there was no problem. Finally a medical doctor exposed the cover-up and was jailed for doing so. Currently over 60,000 babies are very sick from baby formula which has the chemical melamine added to make it test high in protein. It is also in powdered milk here in Hong Kong. Each morning's news brings new info about the tainted milk in China. As of today about a dozen have died from the contaminated formula which causes kidney stones and damage. The government knew about it for at least a month before someone exposed the problem. Indications are that they did not want to admit the problem until after the Olympics. This is the same additive which killed many of our US pets a couple years ago.

A Satisfying Project

Last week I met Dr. Wong, Hon Fai, whose English name is Solomon, who attended our Berkeley seminary for a time as an exchange student. He has just begun his teaching here in a Hong Kong Seminary. Some years ago I was able to arrange for Solomon, after being my student at this seminary, to go to the Augustana Hochschule in Germany (where I also teach) to work on a Doctorate with my good friend, professor Dr. Wolfgang Stegemann. Solomon received his Ph.D. Magna cum Laude last summer and has returned here to teach. His wife, Cheung Chung Kwan “Ackie,” remains in Erlangen, Germany working on her Doctorate in Education. What a gift these two will be to Theological Education in Hong Kong and China!

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