

Protagonist Corner

Face to Face

Scott Lawson and Marybeth Asher-Lawson
Community Church Hong Kong, Hong Kong S.A.R., China

A group of carolers was singing “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” but their misprinted song sheets read: “*Gold* and sinners reconciled.” In this capital of capitalism, no one even missed a beat. There are many such humorous accounts in a place that still feels more than half a world away from the life we knew in the United States.

For our first pastorates, we lived in the second smallest town in the state of Pennsylvania—population 212. It was a pleasure to amble down the middle of the street just because you could. The neighborhood cats and dogs would sometimes wander in the open sanctuary doors during worship. Here in Hong Kong, there are vast apartment blocks the size of American cities. One dare not walk in the street—though one is tempted—because of the sardine-like crush of the sidewalks. Our worship home is on the top floor of one of the world’s tallest buildings. The view is incomparable, but alas, pets are not welcome.

It’s not just the scenery that separates us from the life we knew in the United States. Time has distanced us as well. Since we left in September 1990, the U.S. has had a Presidential election and experienced a stunning terrorist attack, and a war has changed our world. Meanwhile, we have been consumed with upheaval closer to our new home—an economic slump, political unrest, and, of course, SARS. The virus killed more people in Hong Kong than anywhere else and frightened the rest of us. SARS also softened people’s hearts and the community began reaching out in loving ways. But most times, Hong Kong still feels like a city too busy to care. We have witnessed a rising sense of hopelessness especially among young people who face diminished prospects for meaningful work.

Fifteen years ago when we began seminary’s Greek School, the rallying cry was, “We know more than we know we know.” Our class even had T-shirts printed up: *gnoskomen malen gnoskomen gnoskomen*. It was just the bravado we needed for those tentative, early days. Coming to Hong Kong, we had a reckoning. We realized, not too long after we arrived, that we didn’t know much of anything. Nowhere was that more apparent than on Sunday mornings when we stood to preach. Staples in our homiletical vocabulary, words like “justification,” were met with blank stares. Most of our so-called pulpit humor died a soundless death. Early attempts at using Cantonese, on the other hand, were met with gales of laughter. It was enough to make one wistful for Greek School.

What would cause us to leave the friendly confines of small-town America for such misadventures? For months after arriving we asked ourselves the same question—daily. In the end, we came to Hong Kong for the same reason Abraham journeyed to a far land and Moses moved toward a promised land—a call. In our case, it was God’s call to an international, inter-denominational and inclusive congregation. It’s a community that begs description. On any given Sunday there are two-dozen nations represented. This community also includes a mind-boggling amalgam of

different traditions—Assemblies of God, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and even a handful of fellow Presbyterians. The most significant demographic, however, is the number of seekers and new Christians who have no tradition at all, or more accurately, the tradition we are hoping will become theirs.

As it was for Moses, the vision and the promise are real but elusive. At times we have wondered if there was enough “glue” to hold it all together, if the gaps might ever be bridged. At times it seems Rudyard Kipling was right—“East is *east* and west is *west* and never the twain shall meet” [emphasis added]. But that’s a misinterpretation of Kipling’s poem, “The Ballad of East and West,” which robs it of its possibilities. Here is what he wrote:

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat,
But there is neither East nor West, Border nor Breed nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends
of the earth!¹

In the past four years we have experienced a hard-won grace that comes when diverse people come face to face. One of the key issues before all congregations, wherever we minister, is how we can become strong enough to stand with those who are different. Within every congregation, we are all more different from one another and alike with one another than we sometimes realize. Even in our small, quaint church in Pennsylvania, which appeared quite homogeneous, there was great diversity in age, vocation, theological and political viewpoints as well as life experience. Our likeness, of course, is that we are all adopted sons and daughters of God. In Christ, we share the same family tree.

But we live in a time when fear and mistrust are building walls between us, not only between nations and cultures but also within denominations and congregations. In the process, too much of our thought and belief has become binary: either/or, in or out. We do not want to come face to face with the other. Differences become suspect and unity seems contrived. But this is not God’s desire for us. In scripture there is a memory and a hope that our unity is in our differences. “For he [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2: 14).

For those who share this vision and want to pioneer new forms of worship in anxious times, here are some humble learnings from our experiences in Hong Kong:

Remember our roots. Asian Christians seem more comfortable with the notion that opposites can be complimentary and not contradictory. It’s worth remembering that all of the Christian faith is built upon such opposites. The early church’s declaration that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine is only one notable example. Such opposites abound when we pause to reflect. The essence of our faith is found in the presence, and the tension, of these extremes. Perhaps we should treat the diversity and the unity in our congregations in the same way. We can actually enhance our unity in the Lordship of Jesus by making room for our diversity.

Get out of the box. Soon after I (Scott) arrived in Hong Kong, I attended a conference featuring Jack Hayford, a classic Pentecostal preacher from southern California. I would have preferred to sit at Barbara Brown Taylor’s feet, but when you

live in Hong Kong you take what comes. At one point during the conference, as I stood surrounded by 200 hand-waving Chinese pastors, asking for a refund did cross my mind. But I stuck it out, and as the years have gone by I have even begun to appreciate these encounters. Such Christians had been little more than caricatures to me, but now I see that the body of Christ is richer, and more nuanced, than I ever imagined. Consider taking time to listen to a thoughtful person with whom you are pretty sure you won't agree. You do not need to debate. Nobody has to win a conversation. Somewhere in the sharing across those chasms, God's resounding love pours forth.

Share the pulpit. One of the most encouraging signs for us here in Hong Kong is the desire of lay members to share their experiences of God in worship. They are providing the personal stories we are always looking for to complete a sermon. Recently, a member of our congregation asked if he could share a testimony on the importance of financial stewardship. He is one of Hong Kong's famously pragmatic and shrewd businessmen, and so when he spoke about generosity his peers listened in a different way. Whether the theme is stewardship or healing or guidance or world peace, there is someone in every congregation who has a story of God's transforming power to share. It's been said that if you can't say it, then you either don't believe it or you don't understand it. Encouraging individuals to say what they believe and what they have experienced of God's grace edifies everyone in worship.

Diversify liturgy. Against the tide of conventional wisdom, we have not settled upon a single style of music or liturgy. A typical worship service at Community Church could include chants from the Taizé community, contemporary music from *Hillsongs*, and hymns from the reformed tradition. If we have a niche, it's for people who do not want to be niched. Because we are a relatively young congregation with many new Christians, we have not had to face the bruising battles about worship, and especially music, that others might face. But we have discerned that the real issue is not style so much as it is authenticity. Our dyed-in-the-wool Anglicans and our hand-waving evangelicals worship along one another despite their differences in theology and tradition because they recognize the authentic experience of one another's worship of God. If our worship had an organizing principle, it would be, "get real."

The big poster in a local bookstore proclaimed, *Exotic travel!* Displayed beneath it were the books it advertised—copies of M. Scott Peck's classic of spiritual awakening, *The Road Less Traveled*. Indeed, the less-traveled way, which brings us face to face with those who are different, can be exotic and challenging. No matter what your context, it is a journey well worth taking.

Note

¹ Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West," in poetryloverspage.com