

**The Church in China Today – God’s Miracle**  
**Sunday February 14, 2016, St. Matthew’s**  
**Betsy Anderson**

It is a great pleasure to join you for worship today and to share some of my experience as part of a recent United Church Delegation to China. Although I am a member at Trinity-St. Paul’s United Church down on Bloor St., St. Matthew’s is really my neighbourhood church. We live on Arlington and all my 5 kids went to Vaughan Co-op Nursery School, the oldest with Sheila’s daughter Margaret. I have participated in many Craft Fairs and was privileged to work part-time with St. Matthew’s for a few years when Katharine Brittain was your minister. My niece Judy and her grandchildren, go to St. Matthew’s and my parents-in-law, Isabel MacIntyre and Mike Endicott live at Bracondale.

It is good to share the service with Lynne Lamb who is a neighbor, former student at Emmanuel College where I work and friend. And it is a treat to enjoy this more intimate setting for worship. I am very familiar with the Parlour at St. Matthew’s, especially the floor, as this is where I take my weekly yoga class with Rosemary Antze.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my experiences as part of the United Church’s 22-member delegation to visit the China Christian Council/Three Self Patriotic Movement in China from November 28-December 8. It was a tremendous privilege to be part of this delegation and to visit the Chinese Protestant Church in four cities – Shanghai, Suzhou, Nanjing and Beijing. I understand our Moderator, Jordan Cantwell who led this delegation was worshipping with you here a few weeks ago.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. I saw pictures of your Pancake Supper on Tuesday and know of your Ash Wednesday Service. Lent is one of our most significant Christian seasons, corresponding to the 40 days before Easter, minus the Sundays. It is the same number of days that Jesus spent in the wilderness prior to his public ministry. The word Lent comes from old English for Spring, or the lengthening of the days and despite the cold this weekend, we can happily attest to the return of Light in these northern climes.

Lent is a time when many Christians commit to special spiritual practices such as daily prayer, Bible study, acts of charity. I understand your youth have been leading you in spiritual practices at St. Matthew's. Lent is a time of penitence and many mark this by giving something up for Lent. Mark's Gospel this morning certainly challenges us in this area. According to Jesus following the commandments since our youth is not enough to inherit eternal life, we are to sell all our possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus.

When most of the western missionaries left China in the years following the 1949 victory of the Communist-led revolution there were about 700,000 Protestant Christians. Today in China, a conservative estimate is 30 million, almost the size of our whole country. The churches we attended in Shanghai and Beijing were packed and had multiple services each Sunday. Visiting the offices and leaders of this largest member of the World Council of Churches, many of us couldn't help asking, how this had happened. How had the Protestant Church emerged from the Cultural Revolution when church buildings were closed, Bibles disappeared, and Christian leaders and ministers were assigned to other work, sometimes imprisoned and certainly repressed, to grow so profoundly?

Our preparatory reading suggested that during the cultural revolution, 1966-76, the movement of Christian gatherings from established Churches to modest home-based Bible and Prayer meetings, helped root Chinese Christianity in scripture and prayer and provided opportunity for reflection on the ways Christian truth was experienced in the Chinese context. So when the Churches were re-opened and the China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement were able to begin building the public church again in China, it was tempered by this time of study and reflection to grow into a unified, post-denominational, self-governing, self-propagating and self-reliant church. This is no doubt true, but the answer we most commonly heard was "this is God's Miracle, God's Grace, God's great work".

"For God all things are possible."

KH Ting was a key leader in, and architect of, the post-denominational protestant church that emerged following the 1949 Chinese revolution. His writings have been published widely. Ray Whitehead, who accompanied us as a Consultant on

this delegation, is the editor of *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writings of K.H.Ting*, in which Ting wrote the following in 1984:

“In China, our church is small, trying to live down the stigma of being a Western import. In the last 35 years our experience as a nation, as a church, and as individual Christians tells us that strength is found in weakness and life in death.” Sobering words to ponder.

The United Church of Canada was invited for this visit because of our United and Uniting history and experience from which the Chinese Church felt they could learn. The Protestant Church in China, at 30 million represents approximately the same portion of China’s 1.3 billion population as the United Church, at 500,000 members, does of Canada’s 36 million population, 1.5%. We are marginal churches in our contexts. But unlike the United Church, the Church in China is growing rapidly and is facing different challenges as it seeks to train and educate leaders, build churches, strengthen a post-denominational ecclesiology and articulate a theology which grows from the experience of Christianity in a Chinese culture and a socialist context.

Our 22-member delegation represented a wonderful cross-section of the United Church, including ministers from Chinese United Churches in Canada, Aboriginal members of the United Church, representatives from community ministries, congregations, students and teachers from four theological schools, the Theology and Faith and Program Committees of the National Church, key General Council staff and our Moderator and General Secretary. When we met each other for the first time at the Vancouver airport, we had flown from across the country. My participation in the delegation was partly due to my family connections to former missionaries in China.

The United Church’s partnership with the Church in China spans almost 7 generations. My husband’s great grandfather, Jim Endicott, the second Moderator of the United Church was in the second group of Methodist missionaries sent to the Methodist West China Mission in the late 1880s. Our two or three-day journey, pales in comparison to the three months they travelled. Jim’s Grandfather, also Jim Endicott, rather more well-known for his controversial support of the Communists as they led the revolution and came to power in 1949, was also a missionary born in China, as was my husband’s father. Some United

Church missionaries hoped to stay in China following the revolution, but the hostilities of the Korean War made this impossible.

Nevertheless, even through the 30-year period of the Cold War isolation, Canadian and Chinese Christians maintained their sense of relationship, built over many decades through deep friendship, life-long commitment and determination to live out of a place of trust and shared faith.

The centerpiece of our visit to China was a two-day Consultation between the United Church and the CCC/TSPM at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary called "The Journey of Union". We explored common themes including *The History and Current Situation of Union; Church, Society and Culture*, and *The Construction and Witness of the Church* through paired presentations by each denomination.

I was asked to speak on *The United Church and Prophetic Witness in Society*, a rather large topic for a 20-minute presentation. In that context I spoke about Katharine Hockin, a Canadian Deaconess, theologian, missiologist, born in China to missionary parents, who returned for **her** second stint as a missionary just before the Communists came to power.

Before she left, her mother, Lily Hockin, said to her:

"I went to China with a Bible under my arm and my love of the Chinese people. I didn't know about the Unequal Treaties. You do, so you have to be different."

Katharine remained teaching in Chengdu through the revolution and the creation of the People's Republic until the onset of the Korean War in 1950 put her loyalty to China under question. Suffering personal attacks and denunciation as she waited for permission to leave, Katharine had ample opportunity to consider the ways in which she represented a western imperialism that China and the Chinese Church were determined to be rid of. Rather than resentment, Katharine brought an inquisitive and critical reflection to these experiences, placed within the broader context of the western missionary presence in China for more than 150 years. Thirty years later she brought this and much other experience to the Division of World Outreach's development of a new United Church missiology, reflected in the statement adopted by the 1988 32nd General Council – "Seeking to Understand 'Partnership' for God's Mission Today".

“...the mission is God's. We and our partners are called to work together in God's mission. We believe that God has given primary responsibility for mission in any particular place to the people of that place, but not all the gifts needed for the fulfilment of mission are necessarily to be found in that place. And so we believe God calls us to be in partnership one with another, so that we can contribute to one another the gifts we have to offer for mission.”

These words were echoed by Dr. LIN Manhong, Associate General Secretary, CCC and Academic Dean at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary as she offered a reflection and challenge at the closing session of the Nanjing Consultation.

“...partnership requires three factors: trust, responsibility to serve the common enterprise and readiness to pay the price of partnership, to accept all the liabilities and limitations that arise.”

Lin Mahong went on to say “I think these three factors are essential to our cooperation in partnership and we have actually already put them into practice. For instance, such genuine involvement in trust was embodied in choosing to visit the United Church of Canada as one of the very first overseas trips of the Chinese church after the Cultural Revolution; it was embodied in the UCC recognition of the People’s Republic of China in 1952; it was embodied in the significance of the work of Katharine Hockin and Bishop Ting both in China and in Canada.”

Let us listen to **The Message** translation of the passage from Mark: *“Do you have any idea how difficult it is for people who “have it all” to enter God’s Kingdom? You can’t imagine how difficult.*

*Then who has any chance at all, the disciples asked and Jesus answered: No chance at all, if you think you can pull it off by yourself. Every chance in the world if you let God do it.”*

The post-denominational church in China is partly the result of government actions, unwelcome at the time. In the face of mostly empty churches, with small congregations, the government concluded that Christians could worship together and took excess buildings for their own use as nursery schools, art venues, offices etc and declared that denominational divisions were leftovers from western colonial history and unnecessary in China, they promoted unified worship. Eventually many of these properties were returned, but by then the Church had embraced a post-denominational/united ecclesiology. Some of the church

leaders we met, observed wryly that perhaps the government had done them a favour.

In all our meetings and discussions, there was no talk of money. The Church in China has the financial resources it needs but values partnership with churches like ours because of our shared journey, the opportunity to learn from each other in social service, sharing ways to do contextual theology in our own settings, the people exchanges which can deepen and widen our experience of God.

I know that here at St. Matthew's, as in many places across our church, folks are discerning what God's possibilities might be if we are willing to let go of our possessions and let God do it. We are being led in renewed spiritual practices of prayer, mindfulness, paying attention to the treasures of heaven and what it means in our time and place to follow Jesus.

Everywhere we went in China, we were greeted as friends because of the long history of our partnership as churches, mediated through the friendships of Chinese and Canadian people over many generations. We felt their spirit accompanying us. One phrase which stands out for me in our reading from Mark today is the one that comes between the man's assertion that he has obeyed the commandments since youth, and the instruction to sell everything and follow Jesus.

"Jesus looked at him and loved him".

Perhaps that is what we are to do for each other, in congregations like St. Matthew's across this country and in our long partnership with the Church in China and elsewhere, to look at each other with love; to be for each other, the love of Jesus, that allows us to hear the challenging words of Gospel, the good news, that when we can let go of what we think of as **our** possessions, there is room for God's treasures. In these Lenten days, in our lives and in our churches, let us let go, and look for the places where God's impossibility is breaking through. Let us tell ourselves and others, as you are in your Faith Journey stories, about God's miracle, God's grace and God's great work in this place.