

God's Faithfulness in Taiwan

I just returned from Taiwan, where Curt Peterson (our executive minister of world mission) and I were among some 5,000 people gathered at the National University Gymnasium in Taipei to celebrate the fruit of sixty years of ministry. The story is one of God's full circle of faithfulness.

The ministry in Taiwan has its roots much earlier in China, one of our very earliest mission endeavors. Peter Matson and Karl and Mia Wallin were commissioned by the Covenant in 1890 to be the first three missionaries to China. Through the next fifty-eight years more than ninety missionaries would join them. The Covenant focused mainly in the Hubei Province of north central China. Churches, schools, medical work, and Bible institutes were established. Thousands of people came into a relationship with Christ, and over time became the core of the leadership serving as pastoral coworkers, evangelists, teachers, doctors, and nurses.

But convulsions of widespread civil and political turmoil were recurring. It came into vivid view for the Covenant when three missionaries, Esther Nordlund, Martha Anderson, and Alex Berg were killed by bandits in 1948, singled out as foreigners on a bus full of people.

By 1949, the communist revolution won out. Missionaries were evacuated or expelled, including our own. Two million civilians and military personnel fled offshore, ninety miles across the straits, becoming refugees on the island of Taiwan. In that turmoil, a new mission opportunity began. Ralph Hanson, the head of world mission at the time, wrote, "When God permits one door to close upon his messengers he usually opens another." The first Covenant missionary to arrive in Taiwan was Dr. Signe Berg, wife of martyred doctor Alex Berg.

Progress was modest and fragile. Taiwan was "rocky soil" for the gospel, for many decades noted as only 2.5 percent Christian. For the Covenant, by 1985 there were but thirteen churches with an aggregate attendance under 1,000. But at that point, Taiwanese leaders, notably through the vision of chair Paul Wei, embarked on a priority of church planting. Missional momentum set in, and others like Nathon Chang elevated the vision even further. Today there are forty-five churches reaching more than 12,000 people, a national church led entirely by Taiwanese leaders.

At the same time, doors began to re-open to Main-

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land China. Travel restrictions loosened. Taiwan pastors connected with house churches in China, making regular trips to hold intensive leadership training sessions. Nathon Chang connected with an elderly pastor in Hubei Province who had been trained at the former Covenant seminary. Through this connection major initiatives for impoverished children have been undertaken, and churches have been built. The Covenant has supported several of these efforts through an initiative known as the Great Open Door.

So follow this thread. The Covenant started in China, pulled back to Taiwan, and now the Taiwanese are leading the way back to China in the exact province we had been forced to leave. A new church was built in that area. Curt

joined with representatives from Taiwan for the dedication. They were overwhelmed when they happened upon two women who had known Covenant missionaries prior to the 1949 evacuation. Sister Qian, eighty-six, and Sister Yang, seventy-six, were the only two known living members of the Covenant church from before the close of mission work in China. Sister Yang cried as she shared memories—she had been an orphan who had come under the care of the church at age eight.

Curt asked how they stayed faithful during the spiritually dark days of the Cultural Revolution. Sister Yang said only her faith brought her through deep trials. Churches had been closed.

Bibles were confiscated. She did not have a Bible again until 1985. When asked what they would like to say to Christians in the West, Sister Qian said, "Be faithful to the Lord to the end of your life, serve him with a whole heart, and continue to share the gospel to the ends of the earth."

Together with our friends in Taiwan, we are taking up Sister Qian on her challenge. In addition to partnering on projects in Mainland China, we are looking at joint opportunities in Africa, where Chinese immigrant communities are forming.

Sixty years ago pioneering missionaries with names like Berg, Dwight, Hammerlind, Nelson, Larson, Pearson, Peterson, Wickman, Edlund, and Nordlund ran to the needs of Chinese refugees in Taiwan. A fledgling movement called the Taiwan Covenant Church was started. Today that sister church with names like Wu and Cheng-hua is setting the pace for us. ■

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Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

