INTRODUCTION

Missionary in the Making

It was the year 2000, a year that marked the end of a millennium and the end of a missionary career in Asia that had begun more than three decades earlier. My wife, Renske, and I were flying from Indonesia to New York City, where we would be retired at a meeting of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America. As our plane touched down at JFK Airport, my thoughts went back to the day in December 1969 when, with three small children in tow, my then wife Joyce and I had taken off from that very same airport for a long journey to the unknown. We were headed half way around the world to Asia, a rather mysterious region that we had only heard about through missionary tales and “seen” through books, photos, and maps. Our specific destination was the island of Taiwan, with its sixteen million people, whom we had been called to serve and with whom we hoped to share the good news of the Christian faith.

Roots

The story had begun in Chicago, Illinois, where I was born in 1936. From childhood, my parents, Siebert and Margaret Karen, encouraged me to think about using my life in Christ’s service and modeled that
by the way they lived. They sent us to the Christian Reformed Church-sponsored Timothy Christian Grammar School and Chicago Christian High School. They often took my sister, Nancy, and me with them when they sang at the Christian Reformed Church’s Helping Hand Mission, or when they helped lead services at the Pacific Garden Mission, on Chicago’s “skid row.” One Sunday afternoon a month, we accompanied them to a local radio studio where they participated in an evangelistic outreach broadcast to the area. For a number of years, my mother worked at the Christian Reformed Church’s Chicago Jewish mission, the Nathanael Institute. During the summer, I sometimes accompanied her there on the streetcar and spent a half day among the Jewish ladies who came for Bible study and fellowship. My parents also sang for periodic outreach programs there in the evening, and my sister and I accompanied them and mixed with the Jewish families that came. Through these experiences, I was made aware at an early age of the need to reach out to others with the good news and to mix happily with people who were unlike me.

My parents also helped found the Missions Committee of the First Christian Reformed Church of Cicero. As a result, we had many missionary guests in our home—Bena Kok from Nigeria, John and Clarence Van Ens from Ceylon, Rolf Veenstra from Nigeria, Everett and Rose Van Reeken from China, and others. My sister and I used to listen wide eyed to the stories they had to tell of faraway lands with strange and wonderful customs, animals, events, and scenery; lands that were filled with people who had never heard the Christian gospel. Our parents also encouraged us to read children’s books that were replete with missionary tales and accounts of missionary sacrifice. As a result, there were some early stirrings deep within me. Maybe I would like to become a missionary some day.
My more pious introduction to the notion of an eventual missionary career was augmented by a radio program that had kids’ ears glued to their radios during the 1940s. The program was called “Terry and the Pirates,” and the scene for the daily dramas was Hong Kong—a place that conjured up mental images of exotic smells, mysterious customs, fantastic scenes, exciting adventures, and Chinese people who sounded very strange to me. My name, Wendell, means “wanderer” or “adventurer.” True to that name, I could see myself going off to some fantastic place like Hong Kong and having an adventure or two while serving the Lord.¹ At any rate, as I began to develop into a teenager, my interest in cross-cultural mission began to develop as well.

Trauma

My life changed suddenly in September of 1954 after my first day of classes at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. I was walking the mile back to my home alone in the dark, having just attended a Big Brother/Big Sister party, when disaster struck. The city of Wheaton had been installing a new water system. Barricades blocked off the street where I was walking, but not the sidewalks, which were very dark. Suddenly, I stepped off the edge of an unseen fifteen-foot ditch, my leg snapping like a toothpick as I hit a concrete culvert at the bottom. Screaming with pain, I could not move. I cried out to God for help, and he heard me.

At that moment, my best friend, Scott Oury, drove up to that very intersection and stopped for the stop sign. He heard my cries, got out of his car, cautiously worked his way through the darkness, lay down on the street, and peered over the edge of the ditch. Looking up out of

¹ I have always believed that any call to Christian service is a mixed bag. There are the more pious elements of Christian commitment, a concern for people in need, and those who have never heard the gospel, along with a deep desire to do “my utmost for his highest,” as Oswald Chambers was wont to say. However, a sense of curiosity, a desire to explore, a yen for adventure, an ambition to do something beyond the ordinary, a willingness to rise to a challenge, and a keen sense of humor—all these are also used by God in the mix that is referred to as a “missionary call.” From Paul to Livingston to Judson to the missionaries of the twenty-first century, in my view, those who have been most successful in crossing cultures and most effective in communicating the Christian faith fall somewhere between those missionaries who used to sit around our kitchen table and “Terry and the Pirates.”
that black hole, I recognized his face and called out his name. Shocked, he lowered himself over the side and dropped down beside me. Others came as well and ran to call the fire department.

After an agonizing delay, the fire department finally arrived. It took them some time to figure out how to extract me from that deep hole, but they finally got me out and into an ambulance. Later, the doctor told me that had I stayed down in that hole for a few more hours, I would have died of shock. However, God had other plans for me.

I was in for a long ordeal. I underwent two surgeries and lost thirty pounds during my month-long stay in the hospital. A lot of prayers were said on my behalf, prayers that helped carry me through the long months of recovery until I could finally get back to college at the beginning of the second semester.

Meanwhile, I had taken a keen interest in all the medical procedures that were being performed, and in the life and routine of the hospital and its nurses and doctors. In fact, my sister, Nancy, was also training to be a nurse. Without paying too much attention to my native gifts or to what was needed to get high grades in such esoteric subjects as quantitative analysis, I decided then and there that I wanted to be a medical doctor—a missionary doctor, somewhat akin to Albert Schweitzer.

Discovery

My experience as a student at Wheaton College intensified my interest in missionary service. At Wheaton, we interacted with many cross-cultural missionaries who visited the campus, held up the high calling of missionary service, and made us more aware of the pressing needs of the world. It was also during those days that Wheaton grads Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, and Ed McCully, along with two other missionaries, were martyred by the Auca Indians in Ecuador. This event in 1956 had a tremendous impact on our campus and further stirred interest in overseas service, including my interest. A huge board on a prominent wall of the main college building listed hundreds of Wheaton graduates who had “followed the call” and served as Christian missionaries all over the world.²

It took four years of persistence for God (and the Science Department) to convince me that while I might be gifted for missionary service, I was not going to be another Albert Schweitzer. I did well

---

² My name, my first wife Joyce’s name, and my wife Renske’s name are now, of course, also listed on that board.
enough academically and ended up with a Bachelor of Science degree, but I did not excel in science and so could not think about competing for admission to medical school. Undaunted, I applied to Purdue University and was accepted into a master’s program in zoology, which could then be used as a back door into medical school.

However, just at that point, my life took another radical turn. While at Wheaton, I had participated in a number of Christian service activities, including singing with the college quartet. Having traveled to Europe on a seven-week intensive tour with a Wheaton Academy Concert Choir some years earlier, my quartet buddies and I came up with the idea of going on a European evangelistic mission during the summer following our graduation. Although we represented the college, we were responsible for our own itinerary and funds to cover the costs. A graduate student who was going into the ministry, and who played a mean trombone, joined us, as did our pianist, so we were six in all, and we named ourselves the Gospel-Aires. The idea was to offer our services to local pastors in smaller towns in an evangelistic outreach to young people.

As secretary of the group, I was responsible for arranging engagements, managing the publicity, and dealing with the finances—the nitty gritty of mission. We ended up holding ninety meetings in seventy days in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, France, Belgium, and Germany. We had a number of first-class wrestlers in the group who would put on exhibitions in a pastor’s front yard as a means of attracting young people and then invite them to the evening meetings. We also did house-to-house calling, beach evangelism, and other activities to encourage people to attend. I began to discover that I had gifts for this kind of thing—working with young people, sharing the

3 Paul Groen (bass), Russ Bishop (baritone), Jim Ferris (first tenor), myself (second tenor), Emery Cummins (pianist) and John Hertzog (evangelist).
gospel, leading singing, managing our engagements and logistics, etc. What a training ground for cross-cultural mission the summer was proving to be!

By the end of the summer, I was asking myself whether I should be considering seminary rather than medical school. The experiences of the summer had opened my eyes to new possibilities, but were these inner inklings my own, or was this the nudging of God? I decided to follow Gideon’s example. I told God that I would postpone my dream of becoming a medical missionary, try theological studies for a year, and then see where things stood.

**Destiny**

When we returned to the States, the first thing I did was apply to the Wheaton Graduate School of Theology for a one-year preseminary program. As soon as I was accepted, I notified Purdue that I had changed my mind and wasn’t coming to study zoology after all. It was while registering for the graduate school that I met the young lady I would eventually marry—Joyce Hughes. As the year progressed, I became more and more convinced that my gifts and interests were pointing me in the direction of seminary. I became even more convinced that Joyce and I were meant for each other and that we would do well in ministry together. Fortunately for me, she eventually came to the same conclusion.

Part of what led us to that conclusion was our involvement together in weekend missions to African American families in the tenements and projects of Chicago’s south side. As we taught Sunday school and called on families in their homes, we were getting a taste of what it meant to be cross-cultural missionaries, and it felt right. We were engaged in May of 1959 and married in June of 1960. During that time, we endured three long stints apart. While I began my seminary training at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in September 1959, Joyce stayed on in Wheaton to finish up her master’s degree in New Testament Studies. I managed three holiday dashes back to Wheaton to be with her, but most of our courtship was done by mail. The phone was too expensive!

---

4 For me, falling in love with Joyce was like falling off a cliff. For her, it was a process. She was from Greenville, South Carolina, had graduated from Bryan College in Dayton, Tennessee, and had just spent the summer at an Inter-Varsity Mission Camp in Michigan. She was registering for a master of theology course at the graduate school and was thinking of devoting her life to overseas mission service as well.
Perspective

I received a solid seminary education from a Reformed perspective at Fuller. My interest in cross-cultural mission was deepened through courses in world mission and evangelism and through exposure to a number of visiting missionaries who addressed us in chapel and talked with us in class. The strong theological foundation I received there, together with an exposure to the seminary’s fervent evangelical outlook and its ecumenical make up, was to stand me in good stead throughout my years of ministry and mission. Joyce and I were married after my first year and shared life in Pasadena during my final two years at Fuller.

Fuller did nothing to dampen our enthusiasm for cross-cultural mission, but it did change our perspective about it. Dr. Clarence Roddy was my professor of practical theology. One day he startled our class by saying, “If any of you is thinking about being a foreign missionary, you had better make sure you have the goods to reach your own people in your own culture first.” Joyce and I talked and prayed about this at length and decided that he was right. I still think he is right. We decided to put overseas mission on hold while I pursued graduate studies and practiced youth work, preaching, pastoral care, teaching, evangelism, counseling, administration, and the 101 other things that pastors did in those days before the advent of the church staff concept.

Transition

At that time, we were still members of the Christian Reformed Church. While attending Fuller, I had served the First Christian Reformed Church of Los Angeles as its Sunday school superintendent and preached in Christian Reformed churches in the Los Angeles area. During my final semester at Fuller, I applied to the Master of Theology program at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in preparation for ordination into ministry in the Christian Reformed Church. However, since I had attended a nondenominational seminary, Calvin asked me to repeat two and a half years of seminary work before I could even be considered for graduate studies. Following that, I would need to be approved by six committees and judicatories and then be granted a special dispensation from the synod before I could be ordained. As a result, I was confronted with another major fork in the road of my life.

I had been raised in the Christian Reformed Church, but my mother’s family had all been members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). During my boyhood, I had spent many a Sunday
worshiping in my relatives’ church, Westside Reformed in Cicero, attending vacation Bible school, and participating in other activities there. Although my mother had joined my father’s church when they were married, she had never lost her enthusiasm for the Reformed Church and used to regale us with stories of her happy experiences in Christian Endeavor and in the Hasting Street congregation to which she belonged. Since attending seminary, I had also become more aware of the differences between the two denominations in mind-set, social outlook, ecumenical perspective, mission philosophy, and theological nuance.

After much thought, consultation, and prayer, Joyce and I decided that I should explore the possibility of being ordained into the ministry in the Reformed Church in America. The response to my initial inquiry to Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, was most encouraging. I would be welcome to begin a Master of Theology program immediately and to take a few additional courses that would introduce me to the denomination. The only other requirement would be to pass a series of examinations designed for those who had pursued their theological education in a non-RCA seminary. Upon passing those exams, I would be granted a “Professorial Certificate,” which would qualify me for licensure by the Classis of Holland, and for ordination upon receiving a call from an RCA congregation. Meanwhile, we rejoiced in the arrival of our first child, Stephen John, born June 23, 1962, while we were at Fuller.

Ordination

The decision was not hard to make, and the fall of 1962 found us in Holland. There, I met Western’s missiologist, the Reverend Dr. John Piet, who had been a missionary in India for many years. He sparked my interest in the Reformed Church’s mission history and in its current outreach. I was amazed to learn that such a small denomination had had such a large impact on the world mission stage for almost two hundred years. I also learned that, at that point, the RCA still had some 150 cross-cultural missionaries in eleven countries who worked with ecumenical partners to create or support indigenous churches. I began to get the feeling that I had not come into the Reformed Church by accident. Here was a denomination that had mission close to its heart and whose mission philosophy and policies I strongly agreed with.

As I was working my way through courses and exams that year, the Reverend Dr. Henry Bast, professor of preaching, paid us a visit one snowy night in December. He had been called to return to a church that
he had served before, the Bethany Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and he invited me to become his assistant there. This was a wonderful opportunity for me, since I was a comparative unknown in the denomination and was somewhat apprehensive that most of the churches looking for seminary graduates that year would have already found them. Bethany was a large city church that would provide me with ample experience in all aspects of the ministry, particularly since Dr. Bast, who was the Reformed Church’s radio minister, would go on frequent speaking trips and leave me in charge. In addition, Bethany was known to be a mission-minded church. Our predecessor, the Reverend Dr. Gordon Van Oostenberg, had inspired the church to take its share of responsibility for the world’s needs through mission projects, mission conferences, and the support of a number of RCA cross-cultural missionaries.

I gladly accepted the call to Bethany and began my ministry there in January 1963 on a part-time basis until I could finish my course work and exams at the seminary in May. I was then examined and licensed by the Holland Classis and ordained and installed as Bethany’s full-time assistant pastor on July 13 of that year. That was a rewarding and inspiring day in my life. It was rewarding in that my call to the ministry had been confirmed and my gifts for the ministry had been affirmed. It was inspiring in that I was being afforded an opportunity to minister to people’s needs and to hone the skills that I hoped to use someday among another people in another culture.

Although most of my time was spent ministering to young people, part of my responsibility was to nurture the mission vision of the church. This meant helping plan and promote mission conferences, organize mission projects for the vacation Bible school and the Sunday school, and welcome a steady stream of missionary speakers to the church. It was at Bethany that we began to forge close relationships with veteran missionaries like Sam and Lucy Noordhoff (Taiwan), Harvey and Margaret Doorenbos (Ethiopia), and Bob and Morrie Swart (Sudan). I was also in charge of neighborhood evangelism. During our time at Bethany, our second son, Philip Siebert, was born on June 9, 1965.

Ministry

In the fall of 1965, I received a call from the Lakeland Reformed Church in Vicksburg, Michigan. I accepted the call because the congregation had a strong outreach in the community, because it contained a mix of folks from different denominations, and because it
provided me with an opportunity to try my wings as a solo pastor. While there, I had to find time in a busy schedule of teaching, preaching, youth work, visitation, counseling, and administration to finish my master’s thesis on Paul’s doctrine of union with Christ. I finally completed it in May 1967 and became a bona fide graduate of an RCA seminary. This process taught me the discipline of academic research. It also helped hone my writing skills. Both of these disciplines would be employed in the years ahead in ways beyond my wildest imagination (particularly since I had never gotten very good grades in English).

While at Lakeland, I stressed a mission-focused vision for the church. We held a week-long mission festival in the fall of each year that featured missionary speakers and that challenged the congregation to increase its contribution to the Reformed Church’s mission program. Veteran missionaries like Ted and Harriet Bechtel (Taiwan), Paul and Dorothy Hostetter (Pakistan), Harvey and Lavina Hoekstra (Kenya), and Rowland and Judy Van Es (Taiwan) became our friends. We also had a very intentional “mission at home” outreach to our community, and neighborhood folks continued to commit their lives to Christ and to join our congregation. At the same time, I became increasingly interested in ministering to college-aged young people, an interest that would eventually blossom into full-time ministry abroad. Meanwhile, our third child, Rachel Lynn, was born April 21, 1968, the very Sunday we were celebrating Lakeland’s tenth anniversary.

Decision

Throughout my ministry at Lakeland, the urge Joyce and I felt to get involved in the wider mission of the church in another part of the world had grown stronger. Bob and Morrie Swart, Reformed Church missionaries to Ethiopia, were the featured speakers for our mission
conference in the fall of 1968. After their inspiring presentations, they spent the night at our place, where we talked further about mission in their part of the world, and about what it was like to serve as cross-cultural missionaries. We also shared our long interest in missionary service. They challenged us to apply to the RCA’s Board of World Mission without further delay. We prayed together, and Joyce and I made the decision to do so that very night. There was no guarantee that we would be accepted, but we decided that our tutorial in ministry had been completed and that we should offer our services.

The next question, of course, was when and where? Having spent two summers in Europe with the Wheaton Academy Choir and the college evangelistic team, it seemed to us that Europe would be the best place for us to serve. Nevertheless, we felt that we should offer to go wherever the Reformed Church believed the need to be greatest, but we hoped that “wherever” would be somewhere in Europe. The only stipulation we put on our offer was that we did not want to go anywhere we would have to send our three young children to boarding school. After months of confidential negotiations with the secretary for the Board of World Mission, we were excited to learn that we had been accepted for missionary service and that we should aim at a departure date for missionary orientation training in June of 1969.

**Assignment**

However, we were surprised when the Reformed Church informed us that the place where our gifts could best be used was in Asia—in Taiwan doing campus ministry work, to be exact. Asia! We hardly knew a thing about Asia. It seemed a mysterious, even foreboding place to us—a place that conjured up my boyhood images of “Terry and the Pirates.” As far as we knew, Asian culture was light years away from anything we had ever experienced or even read much about. The food seemed strange; the language seemed impossible; the customs seemed bizarre; the art seemed weird; the religion seemed incredible. And the list went on. However, a call was a call. How many times hadn’t I preached that God calls us to do that which is difficult, not that which is comfortable, and that he equips us to do whatever he calls us to do. Now it was time to practice what I had preached. We told the denomination we would go.

On the plus side, our friends Sam and Lucy Noordhoff, Ted and Harriet Bechtel, and Rowland and Judy Van Es were serving in Taiwan, and campus ministry still had a strong appeal for me. We immediately wrote to them, asking a hundred questions about life and service there. We also began to read everything we could lay our hands
on about Asia in general, and about China and Taiwan in particular. The world missions secretary supplied answers to our questions about the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, under whom all RCA missionaries served, and about the practical side of how we would get our family of five over there, where we would live, and what we should take.

Sacrifice

We had, of course, consulted our families along the way. Knowing our keen interest in cross-cultural mission, and considering such service among the highest of callings, they were very supportive. Having been apprised of the unfolding developments, they were not taken by surprise. However, when the decision was firm, they were not without twinges of sadness at the thought of seeing their grandchildren go half way around the world with the prospect of seeing them only once every four years. This was the one thing that weighed heavily on us as well.

Much has been made of missionary sacrifice. Actually, in the end, the only real sacrifice that we made was to be so far away from our families for such long periods of time. But then, to keep even that in perspective, the pioneer missionaries only returned “home” every seven years, and some of them not at all. When we accepted the call, the advent of the jet plane not only made it possible for people to get back more often, especially in cases of emergency, but also enabled parents to come visit, something that would have been unheard of just a few decades before. There would be times, however, when the distance from
family would be especially difficult. A beloved aunt dies, and by the time you come “home” on the next furlough, it seems that she has simply disappeared. Or sons or daughters go off to college in what has now for them become a strange culture, and the missionary parents send them off with much trepidation and many earnest prayers. But much of this was still in the distant future for us.

Questions

The remaining, and most difficult, thing left for us to do was to tell the Lakeland congregation. We had not wanted to share our mission service explorations prematurely. Had things not worked out, we would have continued to serve that church happily. We loved the people at Lakeland, and the feeling was mutual. Now it had come time to tell them that we were not only going to leave, but that we were going to Taiwan. I made the announcement at the end of our spring congregational meeting. The people had mixed feelings. They applauded our conviction that we had been called to missionary service, but they regretted the consequences of that decision for them. Following the meeting, some of the ladies who had come to love our kids followed me to my office with tears in their eyes. “How can you take those little children so far away to such a strange world! What will become of them so far apart from their culture, their families, their playmates?”

This was a legitimate lament. What were we doing to our little ones? We had thought and prayed about that for a long time. We were making a decision that would change their lives forever. Was it right for us to place their interests in possible jeopardy to follow “our” own calling? Apart from an assurance that God could and would love and keep and nurture them wherever we were in the world, their own response years later would answer these questions decisively. After our fourth child, Andrew, was born and then raised in Hong Kong until the age of seven, we were discussing the need to return to the USA to attend to the special needs of our two oldest children. “But Mom and Dad!” they protested. “How can you return to the States now? Andrew won’t have the chance to grow up in Asia like we did!”

Other people wondered aloud why we should go to minister in another country when we were meeting people’s needs effectively in our own. That was also a question we had pondered and prayed about for a long time. The more pious answer to that question was that there were far greater needs in third world countries, where only tiny minorities of the population were Christian and where there was a comparative dearth of Christian workers. The more human response to that question
was that “out there” in the cross-cultural trenches lay more challenges, more opportunities, more adventures, more discoveries than one could ever hope to have or make living and working in one’s own back yard. The first answer played well. The second raised eyebrows.

**Baptism**

June arrived and we departed. Having packed a minimum of our earthly possessions for shipment abroad, and having dispensed with most of our household items through an all-day auction, we left with $1,100 with which to finance a new household upon our arrival in Taiwan. Meanwhile, we were headed for the Missionary Orientation Center in Stony Point, New York. This center, with its beautiful grounds not far from the banks of the Hudson River, was an interdenominational missionary training center cooperatively financed, staffed, and operated by the mainline denominations, including the Reformed Church in America. We never dreamed that our five months there would mean being yanked out of the cozy conservative cocoon within which we had been raised, educated, and employed.

In the first place, 1969 was the heyday of the student revolt. Among the one hundred trainees and forty-five children at the center that summer were a large number of student activists who wanted to have an adventure abroad, teaching English or doing some kind of social work, with the church footing the bill. More than a few were in open revolt against the church and its traditions and message. Those of us who were committed to that church, those traditions, and that message were accosted, particularly if we “wore the collar.” The students confronted the staff and called for a complete reorganization of the program that had been planned. Participatory egalitarian democracy
was to be the essential guiding principle that would dominate the action. Out with lectures! Out with books! Bring on the “T-groups.” Challenge anybody in authority. Question everything, including our motives for evangelizing people of other cultures and faiths. For us, this was baptism for mission by fire.

However, what at first appeared to be a travesty turned out to be the best training course for mission among non-Christians in other cultures that we could have imagined. Here, right in front of our faces, was an opportunity to test whether we had what it took to serve people that were unlike us, to explain the faith to those who doubted it, and to demonstrate Christian love to those who derided it. In the end, once the barriers were patiently breached, these fresh-out-of-college self-styled “revolutionaries” turned out to be common human beings with common doubts, hopes, fears, and needs after all.

We older family types breathed a sigh of relief when this crowd shipped out and the remaining four months of our training could be conducted in an atmosphere that had at least some semblance of normalcy to it. However, we also missed the young people. They had taught us a lot about ourselves. They had caused us to re-examine the depth of our faith, to broaden our perspectives on society, and to practice love in a way we had never been challenged to practice it before. And many of them had changed too. They had come to respect us, to be interested in our understanding of the Christian faith, to listen to our perspective on the Christian life, and to admire our motivation for mission. We hoped the seeds that were planted that summer sprouted into shoots of faith once they found themselves abroad “doing mission.”

**Stretching**

There were also more minor adjustments, but difficult ones nevertheless, for us who had grown up in the Christian Reformed Church and been nurtured within the evangelical community. Communion services with guitars and folk hymns seemed strange. Women serving Communion seemed even stranger. Various new perspectives challenged our conservative views on mission, evangelism, the kingdom of God, the church, and other subjects, and raised many questions. How do we respect other cultures while promoting change in them? How do we approach people of other faiths? How do we as foreign missionaries relate to regimes that practice systemic political and economic injustice? How do we, who were raised in a racist society, truly learn to love and accept people whose color and culture are so
different from our own? How does the Republican Party, or any other party for that matter, differ from the kingdom of God?

Lectures on the relationship of the gospel to justice issues in the political, economic, social, and ecological realms exposed us to a plethora of thorny problems to which we had previously been underexposed. Cross-cultural exposure ventures at the Union Settlement House and its environs in the slums of East Harlem in New York City confronted us with the realities of how difficult “changing the world” would be on the ground. Linguistic courses forced us to face the difficulties of learning a foreign tongue, which, in our case, would be the formidable Chinese language.

Added to all that was my special training venture in campus ministry, since that was the area in which I was to minister in Taiwan. I was required to survey three campus ministry models on Long Island: one in a more or less traditional college setting, one as a “floater”—a campus minister serving several campuses, and one in a state university setting. My assignment was to absorb and evaluate how campus ministry was being done through these three models and to adapt my findings to the university scene in Taiwan.

The University of New York at Stony Brook was by far the most challenging assignment. UNYSB was known as the Berkeley of the East and was considered to be the eastern hub of student revolt. Among its eight thousand students, my survey revealed that 65 percent identified themselves as Jewish and 30 percent as Roman Catholic. The remaining students ranged from Zen Buddhists to Christian Science adherents. There was no interfaith center, no full-time campus minister, and no department of religion. One of the most popular professors was Thomas Altizer, a leading “death of God” theologian. Over a period of three months, I commuted between the Orientation Center and Long Island several times a week, usually spending at least one night in a particular campus setting. I once spent a whole eye-opening week living in a UNYSB dormitory. I interviewed every representative type on campus—from campus ministers to faculty to staff to students—and attended a broad sampling of campus groups and activities.

One night, I went to a meeting of UNYSB’s Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The purpose of the organization was explained to the 150 students who had gathered by hard-eyed youths with an evangelical fervor. The long-term goal, they said, was to form a coalition of students and workers who would bring down the imperialist ruling class of the country by violent revolution and establish a socialist society whose final form would be a communistic state as outlined by
Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Their program was to be spread on campus via dorm cell groups, book tables, demonstrations, strikes, debates, etc. There was no Sunday school apathy in this crowd. Never mind that most of these privileged young folks had never held a job of any kind, they had the solutions for all of society’s ills and woe betide anybody who disagreed with them. I was a bit conspicuous by my age, my dress, and my note taking. Suddenly, one student stood up and demanded to know who I was. My explanation that I was a Christian pastor in training for campus ministry mission work in Taiwan sounded incredible to them. “You are an FBI informant!” they shouted. I demurred, but the meeting broke up in confusion, with people harassing me, and I left wondering if campus ministry in Taiwan was going to be anything like this.

Launch

By the beginning of December, I had submitted my research paper on campus ministry. We had finished our courses, been commissioned by the Reformed Church at its New York headquarters, and packed our bags. Our tutorial was over; now we would begin the real thing—what we had envisioned years before. We said good-bye to a place and to people that we had come to love—the staff, our teachers, and our newly made friends and colleagues. We boarded a plane at the JFK Airport to begin our long journey, first stopping in Greenville, South Carolina, and Chicago, Illinois, to bid tearful farewells to family and friends. Then it was on to Taiwan with a strong sense that we went with God.

Fast Forward

More than thirty years later, I returned to our beloved Mission Orientation Center at Stony Point. It had been renamed the Stony Point Center. Its program was still focused on cross-cultural international issues, but there were no more missionaries in training there. As I walked across the grounds and through the halls that used to ring with laughter, debates, and the sounds of the children of missionaries in the making, the faces of many people with whom we had bonded so quickly in 1969 flashed through my mind. I wondered where they were now, what they had ended up doing overseas, and how they felt about it all. So many things had changed since those days. The whole world had changed. What would it be like to be preparing for cross-cultural mission service today? Would I do it all over again? My answer was yes.

I walked into the Alpha dorm and into the open door of the three rooms that our family of five (along with a semi-legal cat) had
occupied during our five months there. I opened a center desk drawer, pulled it out, and turned it over. The “Kilroy was here” message that I had penciled where nobody would see it was still there. “The Karsen’s Five, Wendell, Joyce, Stephen, Philip, and Rachel, occupied these rooms during their preparation for mission service in Taiwan from June-December 1969.” Tears rolled down my face as I recalled the faces of the three little tykes that had geared up with us then for the great unknown, and who were now grown up, some of them with children of their own. And there was the memory of a young Joyce who would be my partner through the many challenges and adventures of fifteen years of overseas service before she would succumb to cancer and leave us too early in life in 1989.

More than three decades later, with two and a half of those decades having been spent in Asia, I knew it had been a good go. God had remained faithful. Mistakes had been made, but much had been accomplished. I left with a good feeling.