

The Protestant Churches in Hong Kong

A Situation Report

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In every age, the Church of Jesus Christ struggles to be faithful to God in that it tries to respond to the situations where it believes God is acting.

This will be, then, a personal interpretation of the story of the churches in Hong Kong over the past one-and-a-half centuries; and it will confine itself to a history of those christian churches with a non-Roman Catholic background. Our subject can be divided into four eras: The First One Hundred Years, (1842 - 1942); period of Expansion (1942 - 1962); The Great Social Involvement (1962 - 1982); and, the Quest for a Future (1982 - 2002).

The First One Hundred Years (1842 - 1942)

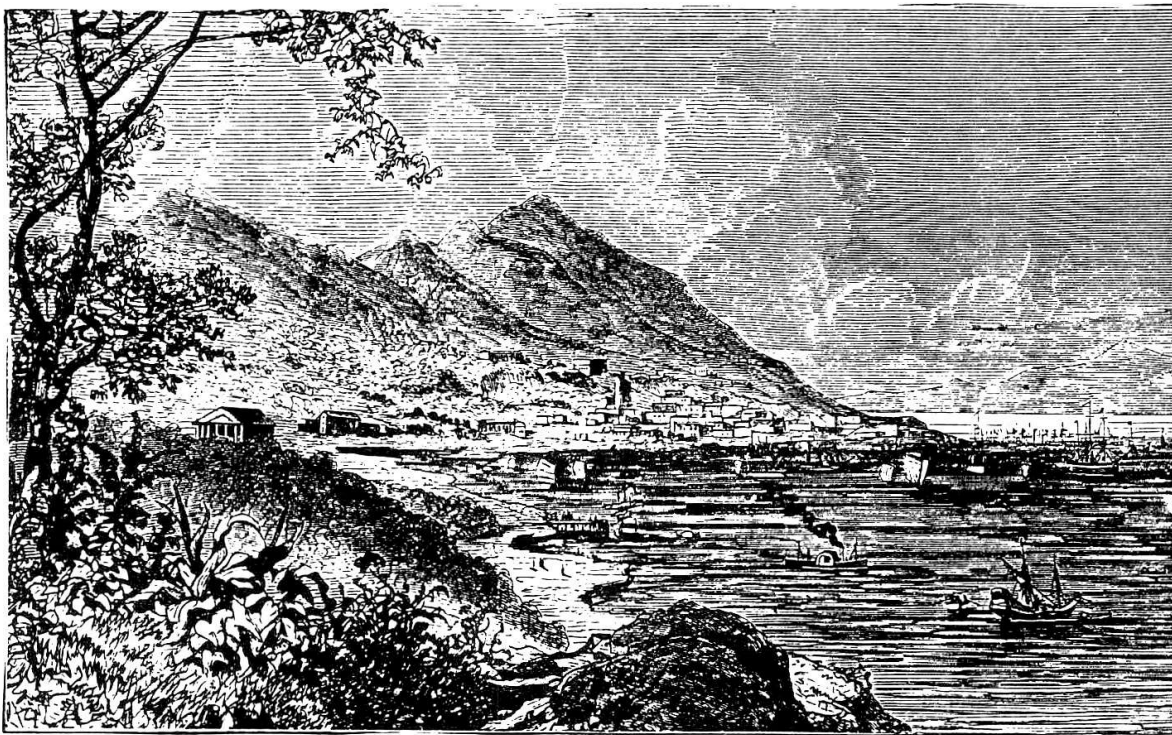
Hong Kong did not begin with the arrival of the British in 1842. It had been the home of Chinese fishermen and their families for centuries. However, it became important and known to the world only after it was turned into a British Crown Colony.

Back in the 19th Century, when Western imperialism reached its zenith, many Western imperialists took an interest in China which, even in those days, was the most populous country in the world. But owing to the closed door policy of this self-contained and self-sufficient Middle Kingdom, the rapacious, aggressive Western powers turned to military might to force open China's doors. Wars were fought, Chinese ports were forced to open, and vast areas of Chinese territory were ceded in perpetuity or leased out to foreign powers.

Britain defeated China in the infamous Opium Wars of the 1840's and 1850's. By the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain in perpetuity. By the Treaty of Peking in 1860, Kowloon (south of Boundary Street) and Stonecutter Island were ceded to Britain permanently. Then, finally, in 1898 in Beijing, the New Territories and about 100 islands (comprising 92% of the total land mass of present-day Hong Kong) were leased to Britain for 99 years.

Trade and the Western church arrived in Hong Kong together, following the establishment of a British colonial government which provided the territory with a rather efficient structure, especially in terms of law and order. The enormous trade between China and the West made Hong Kong an increasingly important entrepot (Hong Kong has one of the world's finest natural harbours.) The church, with the support of the government and hence with the trust of the community, helped to provide essential social services (especially medical and health, educational and welfare services.) Through the years the church also helped to train a great many young people who eventually became community and government leaders, through such schools as Ying Wa College and Ying Wa Girls School (established by the London Missionary Society), and the Diocesan Boys' School and Diocesan Girls' School (established by the Church Missionary Society together with the Anglican Church in Hong Kong).

If most of the Western traders and businessmen used Hong Kong as a stepping stone to China, this could also be said of most of the missionary boards as well. Because of this situation, Hong Kong, from its earliest days as a colony, flourished as a bridgehead to mainland China.



Hong Kong harbour in the 1850's

Church growth in Hong Kong during the initial period was extremely slow. Local Chinese churches were mostly concerned with pastoral work within their own congregations. Mass evangelistic meetings were common. Missionary societies from abroad provided social services. The Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole hospitals were founded at this time, as were the aforementioned institutions of learning.

The Chinese Christian community in the pre-war years had always been very closely knit. Preachers moved back and forth, exchanging pulpits, crossing sectarian boundaries all the time. Because of the need to co-ordinate the operations of the two Christian cemeteries and the home for the aged, the Chinese Christian Church's Union was established in the 1930's. The Union accepted only Chinese local congregations for membership.

The Great Expansion (1942 - 1962)

The pace of life in Hong Kong was very slow in the Pre-war years. But after the 2nd World War, because of a very sudden influx of people from the mainland, government and church activities mushroomed.

Reconstruction after the Japanese occupation (which lasted for 3 years and 8 months-December 1941 to August 1945) had not been easy. Immediately after the war, there were fierce internal conflicts on the mainland which eventually resulted in the seizure of political control by the Communist Party. Then came the Korean War, during which the United States declared an embargo on China and Korea. This greatly affected Hong Kong which depended heavily on international trade, especially trade between the United States and China, for survival.

Many experts at the time thought the influx of refugees from the mainland would surely destroy Hong Kong. At the end of World War II Hong Kong had about 600,000 residents; the 1961 census showed that Hong Kong now had 3,129,648.

But the Hong Kong people themselves proved the experts wrong. They showed a remarkable capacity to adjust to any kind of situation, and were ready to use their own blood and sweat to keep Hong Kong alive and prosperous.

Of course, Hong Kong was fortunate at the time in that the massive influx of refugees provided it with a very important and much needed labour force, and the inflow of capital and skills in the textile industry, especially from Shanghai, also made a very significant contribution towards economic progress. These two factors turned Hong Kong literally overnight from an entrepot to an important industrial centre. Later, the plastic and the electronic industries were introduced and were soon flourishing. Much of the work of the light industries was done in the homes or in very small factories. Shipbuilding, which included repairing and salvaging, was the only heavy industry then present in Hong Kong. But the sudden increase of population demanded massive construction of housing and other public facilities such as roads and highways, often on land reclaimed from the sea. And this led to the rapid development of the construction industry which provided much needed employment for thousands of people.

How did the churches in Hong Kong fare during this period?

First of all, we saw an overall and significant increase in the number of Christians. Motives were mixed: some joined as "rice Christians" (they came to the church for material reasons), others were Christians who had fled from the Mainland (these belonged mostly to the middle class), and still others joined the church because they sought much needed spiritual comfort.

Secondly, in the early 1950's a great many experienced missionaries arrived in Hong Kong with the financial backing of their mission boards.

These financial resources were very much needed to supplement government efforts to cope with the acute refugee situation. Local churches also played a key role in providing relief and welfare to thousands of refugees. Most of the social welfare agencies were founded during this period either by or with the support of overseas missionary societies.

Thirdly, the period was marked by advances in church unity. The Hong Kong Christian Welfare and Relief Council was founded for the purpose of co-ordinating the many and diverse Christian relief efforts. The Audio-Visual Evangelism Committee was established to support churches in their evangelistic efforts. But the most important of all was the founding of the Hong Kong Christian Council in 1954. The Council not only provided a forum for the churches but it was also instrumental in promoting the idea of "Joint Action for Mission" among the mainline Churches. The Council also sponsored yearly ecumenical gatherings: Weeks of Prayer for Christian Unity, World Days of Prayer, and World-wide Communion Sunday.

The Great Social Involvement (1962 - 1982)

Hong Kong developed during this period by leaps and bounds. Lacking in land and other material resources, it was rich in human resources. There were other factors contributing to Hong Kong's success: China as a major supplier of food and water, the government's rule of law and its economic laissez-faire policies. Hong Kong became, by Asian standards, an affluent society in the 1960's. Despite the fact that it had to fight against tough protectionist policies from all its major trade partners, such as the United States and the European Common Market, and that it had to face a series of world-wide economic recessions in the early 1970's, by the end of this period, Hong Kong had become the third most important financial centre in the world, and the third largest container port, and ranked 15th among the world's exporting nations (first in garment exports).

Hong Kong paid a dear price for its rapid economic development - the younger generation had been neglected. The 1967 riots forced the government, the community, as well as the church to recognize that more attention must be given to the youth. Many youth centres and recreational facilities were set up by the churches. But the most important area of progress was in education. During this period the youth of Hong Kong began to enjoy 9 years of free education (as compared with only 6 years in the previous period). The government was able to provide extra school placements only with the help of the churches.

Also during this period we witnessed the church, not satisfied with being merely a partner of government in providing social services, gradually assuming a new role as the conscience of the community.

The church was deeply shaken by the 1967 riots. Many ministers and lay leaders emigrated to other countries. Those who remained had to take a hard look at the relevance of what the church was doing. The impact of student and labour movements from the West also served as a catalyst. The church was forced to look outside itself, to pay more attention to larger community affairs.

Social involvement of the church underwent a major shift. As Hong Kong became more affluent, the primary need for immediate relief and welfare diminished. The Church was thus able to redirect its resources to provide secondary services. Education, especially primary and secondary education, was one example; another was in the area of social welfare. In order to meet the rapidly changing social and human needs, many innovative projects were introduced during these two decades. The social services became more professional, and Hong Kong can now consider many of them as meeting world standards.

During this time, the church also became more aware of the underlying realities, that in order to solve social as well as personal problems, it must tackle the structural underpinings that were causing these problems. The church thus found itself more involved in social action. Through the establishment of pressure groups like the Christian Industrial Committee, the church not only advocated more adequate legislation to protect the poor and called for more fundamental structural changes in society, but it also acted as an educational force among ordinary Christians in the pews to promote social justice.

Radical shifts within the church combined with the strong influence of secularism to bring about a drop in converts. Among the mainline churches, growth in terms of numbers was small. However, at the same time, the more evangelical churches experienced a marked increase in membership. The establishment of many para-church organizations by the evangelicals also furthered growth in evangelical churches.

The end of this period saw a blurring of the sharp lines which had traditionally distinguished mainline from evangelical churches. While the mainline churches began to realize the importance of seeking an inner renewal of their spirituality, the evangelicals began to get more and more involved outwardly in social concerns. (I feel certain that the Lausanne Conference of 1974 provided a major input in bringing about this shift in attitude and emphasis among our local evangelical churches).

Another feature of this period was the gradual withdrawal from Hong Kong of overseas missionary societies. Most of their work was handed over to local churches or to the Hong Kong Christian Council.

The ecumenical movement in Hong Kong turned a new chapter as churches with different backgrounds learned more about working together for common causes. The United Christian Hospital and the Community Health Project in Kwun Tong (an industrial satellite town) were two good examples.

Two major city-wide consultations were organized by the Hong Kong Christian Council during the period. The Consultation on the Mission of the Church in Hong Kong for the 1970's was especially symbolic. Opened by the governor, it dealt basically with internal issues, such as Christian education, formation of new congregations, social concerns, etc. The Consultation on the Mission of the church in Hong Kong for the 1980's was also very fruitful. In attendance were all the church leaders within the Hong Kong Christian Council, representatives from several evangelical churches, as well as representatives from the Roman Catholic Church. This consultation was quite outward-looking. The world set the agenda, so to speak. The consultation declared clearly that the five major mission concerns for the church in the next decade were: (1) evangelization of the lower-income people, (2) church participation in public policy making, (3) concern for the church on the China mainland, (4) ministry to students, (5) concern for social values.

The consultation brought about two immediate remarkable results: first, the establishment of a public policy commission; second, the re-establishment of a relationship with the Church in mainland China. (There had been no meaningful relationship between the churches in China and those outside since 1954 when the church in China became, in name, the Three-Self Movement Church).

Relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Hong Kong Christian Council began to develop in 1970. An Ecumenical Joint Committee on Development (mainly concerned with developmental issues in Hong Kong) was formed. Activities during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were often jointly organized. Many special Sundays (like Christian Communications Sunday, Education Sunday, Sea Sunday, Unity Sunday, etc.) were promoted jointly.

Quest for a Future (1982 - 2002)

If we say that Hong Kong underwent an economic revolution in 1942-1962, and a social revolution in 1962-1982, then we can also say that Hong Kong has entered a period of political revolution as it now confronts the 1997 issue.

In 1972, when the People's Republic of China was admitted to the United Nations, it made its position very clear regarding the future status of Hong Kong. In 1979 when the Governor of Hong Kong visited China, Deng Xiaoping told him that China planned to restore Chinese sovereignty over the whole of Hong Kong not later than 1997. (The Governor on his return did not reveal this to the Hong Kong people. He only reported that Mr. Deng had told him that the Hong Kong people should "put their hearts at ease" regarding the future of Hong Kong).

Obviously at the request of the foreign office, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister, then went to Beijing to discuss a negotiated settlement regarding Hong Kong's future. After her visit, it took 10 months for the British to realize finally that their government had no choice but to return Hong Kong's sovereignty to China. Formal negotiations began in July of 1983. It took the two teams representing the Chinese and the British governments twenty-two rounds of formal talks and 14 months to come up with an agreement. There were also during this period, many informal talks between the two heads of the negotiating teams. A drafting group was formed during the last weeks of negotiation. Geoffrey Howe, the British Foreign Secretary, also visited Beijing for talks in April and July of 1984.

The draft agreement between the two governments on the future of Hong Kong was initialled in Beijing on the 26th of September in 1984. The draft agreement consists of a Joint Declaration, 3 Annexes (the first is an elaboration of the Chinese Government's Basic Policies regarding Hong Kong; the 2nd concerns the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group; the 3rd is on land leases and an exchange of memoranda about nationality and citizenship).

According to the draft agreement, the future of Hong Kong after 1997 will be as follows: On the 1st of July 1997 China will resume sovereignty over Hong Kong. Hong Kong will then become a Special Administrative Region in China with a high degree of autonomy except for foreign affairs and defense. Hong Kong will elect its own legislature. The executive authorities (selected by elections or through consultations) shall be accountable to the legislature. Under the policy of "One country two systems", Hong Kong will be allowed to maintain its existing economic, social and judicial systems for 50 years. The people of Hong Kong will continue to enjoy their present life-styles and freedoms.

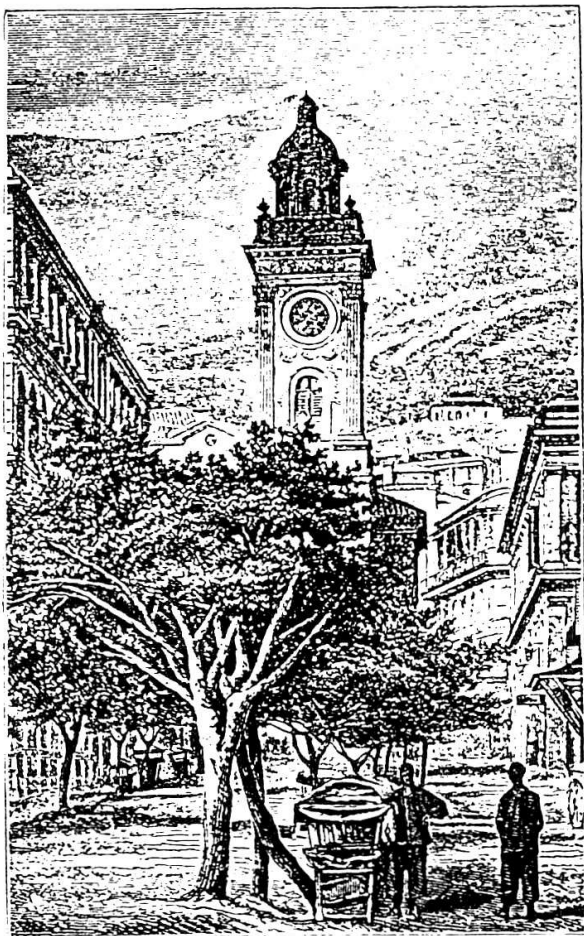
In view of this imminent political change, what has been the response of the church in Hong Kong?

First, in the Spring of 1984, some evangelical Christian leaders issued an "evangelical declaration" which was a 10-point affirmation regarding the Christian Faith in times of radical social change. It was very widely circulated and many Christian groups made a careful study of it.

Following the declaration, in the summer, came the "Manifesto on Religious Freedom". In my opinion, this is one of the most important documents in the history of the church in Hong Kong.

Earlier this year, the Hong Kong Christian Council felt that there was a need to communicate to the Chinese authorities what the churches in Hong Kong are doing. The Manifesto, therefore, was not a demand, but rather a comprehensive description of the state of the church in Hong

Kong. It is called a manifesto because in its introductory section, the document declares that "religious freedom must be based on human rights which God bestows on all people, and that, therefore, it is the responsibility of all governments to protect religious freedom"; and, in the concluding section, the document expresses the desire of the church in Hong Kong to rededicate itself to stand with the people of Hong Kong in working for a better future.



The clock tower in Hong Kong

This Manifesto endorsed by most of the protestant denominations (almost 200 local congregations and many church agencies) and sent to Beijing via the Hong Kong Branch of the New China News Agency, was published on the 31st of August, 1984.

On September 6th, 21 church leaders, including heads of denominations, Christian agencies as well as local church pastors, went to Beijing to meet with the Chinese authorities. Again, the group did not go with the intention of making any demands on the Chinese authorities.

We went to exchange ideas and to express our views about the future of Hong Kong -- what needed to be maintained and what needed to be changed. We had already submitted a position paper to the Hong Kong and Macau Office of the State Council. At the same time, we wanted to hear what the Chinese leadership was thinking regarding "Religious Freedom". Our meeting with the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council was a long one. We tried to explain to them what the churches in Hong Kong are doing. We were on the listening side when we met with the Director of the Hong Kong and Macau Office. According to Mr. Ji Pengfei, the Hong Kong church can continue to provide services for the community; China will not set up a Religious Affairs Bureau Office in Hong Kong and the church in Hong Kong will not be subordinate to the Three Self-Church in China.

The next twenty years are indeed going to be most crucial for Hong Kong. Whether Hong Kong will remain stable and prosperous will depend on the people of Hong Kong. I believe both the Chinese and British governments intend to make the arrangement for the future of Hong Kong work. After the initialling of the Joint Declaration, many countries, including the United States and Japan (the two most important trade partners of Hong Kong) have stated their support of such an agreement.

In view of this, what is the church in Hong Kong going to do?

First of all, we should re-examine our own faith. If we say many people in Hong Kong have no confidence in the future of Hong Kong, how about the Christians? At this moment, the church should re-affirm that the God we believe in is the God who acts in history. God is in charge; the future is in His merciful hands. At the same time, we must remain faithful to His calling in our daily lives. He calls us to be His co-workers in His never ceasing creating-saving-sustaining activity in this world.

Secondly, the church in Hong Kong should engage in some serious re-thinking of its current mindset and mission strategies. Most pastors and a great majority of our laity are still very inward looking. Christian faith and Christian living remain two different things. Local parishes are but buildings where people are drawn in for quasi-cultic and social activities. The notion of parish becomes utterly foreign where local parishes are completely cut-off from the community in which they are located.

I believe in the renewal of local parishes in Hong Kong. They must be rejuvenated in such a way that once again each congregation becomes a confessing, learning, participating, sharing, healing, reconciling,

expecting and uniting fellowship, and its members nurtured in assuming a genuine Christ-like life-style.

For the last 3 decades the church has made very significant social service contributions, including higher education, to the people of Hong Kong. Today Christian churches or agencies (including the Roman Catholic church) provide more than 40% of the kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, 50% of the social welfare agencies, and almost 20% of the hospital beds. As we face the 1997 issue, churches need to concentrate on the following tasks:

a) *Drafting the Basic Law.* Now that we have a sound basic agreement, the next step is to translate it into the Basic Law that will govern the Hong Kong Special Administration Region after 1997. In order to forestall this process being dominated by powerful special interest groups or parties, the church must speak out for the voiceless in our society. This will insure that a balanced input will be given to the drafting committee.

b) *Democratization.* Soon, Hong Kong people will be given an opportunity for governing themselves. According to the Hong Kong government's plan in the Green Paper in Representative Government, there will not be any direct elections to the Legislative Council, at least not before 1988. The church must pressure the government on this. The earlier the people are given opportunities to participate in the central government, the better chance Hong Kong will have to achieve a well-run local government by 1997.

Political Education must be given to our young people. It does not have to take the form of additional subjects in schools (Hong Kong students already have to swallow an excessive dosage of academic courses). Rather it can become part of the school extra-curricular activities. Participation in student, school or community affairs, etc. must also be encouraged. The church-run schools and youth fellowships should take up this task immediately. Students also must be taught to distinguish between special interests and common good.

As part of its task to further democratic reforms, the church also needs to play an active role in voter registration, as well as to encourage potential leaders to run for local public offices, such as the District Boards and the Urban Council.

c) *Sinicization.* In slightly more than a decade, Hong Kong will become part of China. We have to realize that our stability and prosperity

will depend on the development of China. So it is high time that we begin thinking not only in terms of how to work for the betterment of Hong Kong, but also how we can contribute to China's modernization programs. 98% of the citizens in Hong Kong are Chinese. But it seems to me, most of them have already lost contact with their Chinese roots, so to speak. Hong Kong people look to the West more than to China in all areas of life. To help the Hong Kong Chinese rediscover and take pride in their cultural heritage is another urgent task. Young people in Hong Kong ought to have a better grasp of Chinese History, including its contemporary history and the Chinese language. As the churches are already reaching out to so many young people in Hong Kong through their schools as well as their youth groups, a great deal can be accomplished in these areas.

In order to carry out the above tasks, churches in Hong Kong must put aside their theological and ecclesiastical differences and join hands to face these common challenges together.

Today, there are more than 640 local Protestant congregations. Of these 124 are independent and the rest belong to 44 denominations. A great many of the Protestant churches in Hong Kong, whose total membership exceeds 220,000, are rich in human as well as material resources. However, most of them are more concerned with their internal affairs than with working for the well-being of the community at large. That the church exists for the world is far from being a reality among them.

Fortunately, more and more young Christians, despite the fact that they are disillusioned with their own local churches, are determined to respond to the paramount social needs and future demands in Hong Kong. This has become a formidable renewal force both within and without the church.

Increasingly, the Hong Kong Christian Council becomes a focus for social action. Concerned Christians are setting aside their denominational and theological differences and turning more and more to the Hong Kong Christian Council for leadership and support. And the Hong Kong Christian Council is determined to take on this important challenge, this unavoidable responsibility. At this critical moment of history, the Hong Kong Christian Council re-affirms its commitment to the people of Hong Kong and pledges to work for a more humane and just future for both Hong Kong and China.