

# MY EXPERIENCE AS A LAY MISSIONARY



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translated by Donald MacInnis

*(Jessica Ho was one of the first group of lay missionaries sent abroad by the Hong Kong Diocese. This article describes her experiences as a missionary.)*

I set foot in Africa on January 17, 1983. As I entered the airport in the very hot weather, I was surrounded by many black faces. The immigration official took my passport and, before opening it, looked at me and asked, "Are you from Japan?" "No, I am a Chinese from Hong Kong," I replied. "A Chinese missionary? Do they have religion in China?" I could see a long line of people behind me, and thus I did not desire to give a detailed explanation. However, it seemed that this immigration inspector wasn't interested in others, but only in me. Fortunately, just then the priest who was due to meet me had obtained the permit and arrived on the scene. We left the airport together very quickly. On the street he told me that the Tanzanians had great respect for Chinese people because the Chinese had built their railroad and continued to send medical and military personnel to help them. Then I understood why they had shown such interest in me.

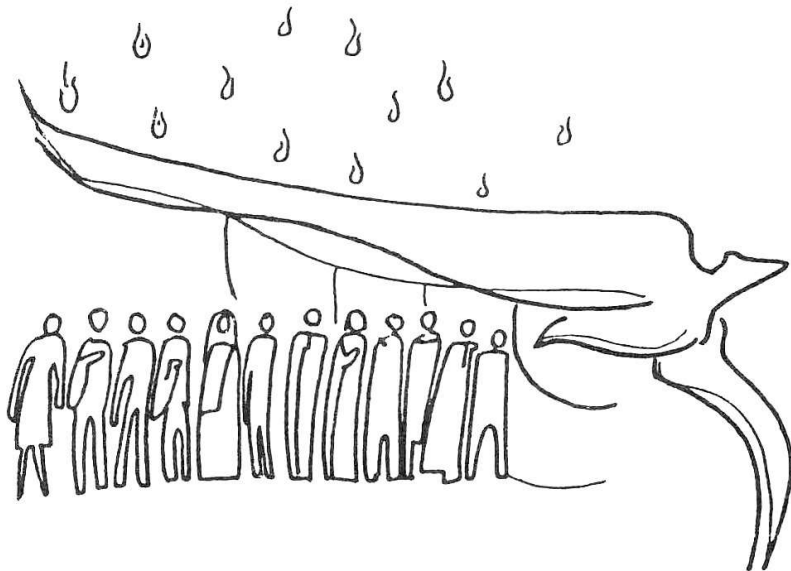
I am grateful to the Maryknoll Fathers for having given me the opportunity to serve the people in Tanzania. They were the bridge which made it possible to establish a new relationship between the Chinese and the Tanzanians. Tanzanians are emotional people, and they loved and cared for this Chinese girl, so small in stature compared to them. They know very little of the outside world, so when they have contact with foreigners they feel highly honored. They often asked me questions

about China, and I felt that I knew no more than they did, wondering where everything I had read about China had gone. I had only studied for the examinations in school, and all was now forgotten. I then regretted that I had never traveled in China, and had no real experience to share with them. At that moment I determined that after returning to Hong Kong, the first thing I would do would be to travel to China. Their interest and curiosity revealed my lack of concern for my own culture. Moreover, my presence made them aware of Hong Kong's existence and relation to China, and of the situation of the entire Asia region. Speaking of this, some persons might ask what does this have to do with preaching the gospel? There is a big relationship. If the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot enter into life or adapt to culture, this "Good News" is only empty words.

During my contacts and conversations with Tanzanians I could see Jesus in each of them. In the same way, they could see how the Holy Spirit had called me into their midst to "go into the world and preach the Gospel to all mankind" (Mark 16:15). This biblical passage was entrenched in my heart for a long time, but I never dreamed of crossing the ocean, because such a dream seemed too far from reality. Observing the missionaries who came one by one to Hong Kong from Europe and America to serve the people, I realized that because of the material aid they gave to the needy, many people had joined the church, and that included my own family. Their example planted a seed in my small heart. Is it not true that such witness in action is more persuasive than ten sermons?

Speaking of actions and practice, people have asked me how I did missionary work in Africa. Isn't it difficult for a lay person to preach the Gospel? Were the local people receptive? After returning to Hong Kong, what future do you have? Some people envied my opportunity and praised my courage. If you asked me where I got my courage, my only reply was, it came from the Holy Spirit. I believe it was not I doing the work, but the Holy Spirit working in me, and He is also at work in you. Jesus did not say that missionary work would be easy; He only promised that His love would always be with us. I did not use one particular method in doing missionary work. I only knew the importance of existing and sharing with the people, living the same life they lived, speaking their language, listening to their sorrows and sharing their joys. Regarding my identity, of course many people would raise questions, but after they had accepted me there were no more doubts about it. Most persons have one of two attitudes toward lay missionaries: one is that, not understanding, they do not accept lay missionaries; the other is that, although they do understand, they are

not willing to accept lay missionaries. In fact, the second attitude is wrong, because Jesus himself did not exclude lay missionaries. After his resurrection, the first person he sent to preach the Good News was a female lay person, Mary Magdalene (John 22:11-18). Although Mary was not a perfect person and did not have outstanding abilities, wealth or knowledge, yet Jesus chose her to "go" and "tell" the disciples about the Resurrection. We need not feel inferior or self-pitying. Jesus will accept us and help us to make full use for our abilities.



I remember one time in Tanzania I had no sugar for many days, and it was not available in the market. A local friend obtained a kilogram of sugar from somewhere, and immediately ran over to my house and gave half of it to me. Although he had not tasted sugar for a long time, and such an amount of sugar would be not enough for his own family of five persons, could this person still be so generous as to share with me? Was this not like the poor widow in the Bible? I thought, if the poor are so generous, what should we who have more do?

After returning to Hong Kong in 1985 I traveled for one month in China in order to compare it with my two years' experience in Tanzania. Of course these are two different experiences, but during this brief time in China some unforgettable things happened. I recall while staying in Xian in a small second class hotel, a person came early to bring hot water. Seeing a Bible which had been laid on the table by my roommate, she smiled and asked, "Are you Christians? I am." We were delighted to meet this Christian. She told us of the recent policies which resulted in the reopening of churches. She did not know about the new liturgy, but completely welcomed the new policy, because at least there were now open churches; her enthusiasm was clearly expressed in her tone of voice. I regretted that I had not brought a single thing that I could give her as a token of support for her faith. By contrast,

when she gave us a picture of the Blessed Mother, I was deeply moved. I did not know what to say, but simply thanked her. As she was leaving, she said, "Faith is a precious gift, we should treasure it." Was she not a disciple sent by Christ to preach the gospel to us?

In China the land is so vast and the people so many; and thus the situation of the big cities and small villages is not the same. Those who pass through Beijing will surely believe that China is developing rapidly and modernization is just around the corner. But if they went to Zhengzhou City in Henan Province, they would have a different impression. After eating jiaozi (dumplings) and bean milk in a restaurant, before we could leave, a group of children gazing greedily at us suddenly rushed across the street and took the remnants of the bean milk and jiaozi from our dishes. At first I held my purse tightly, thinking they were coming to grab my money. After a moment of fright, a bitter feeling remained in my heart. Yes, progress can be seen, but more effort is still needed in many places. We have the responsibility to do something too.

After my experience of traveling both in Tanzania and China, that yearning to share the Gospel with others was intensified. I know that the Holy Spirit is leading not only myself, but also many different people. There are many persons who are willing to respond to his call. Therefore, together with some friends, we are planning to organize a "Mission Association for Laity", which will be formally organized soon and will receive recognition and support from the Hong Kong diocese. We hope that through this "Mission Association" even more Christian lay people will have the opportunity to carry out their mission.

Jesus came to earth as a Jew. He loved the Jewish people, but He also loved all the people of the world. Therefore Jesus' "incarnation" was still not enough. He had to "rise from the dead", and through His resurrection set all people free. Salvation has no national boundaries; His resurrection belongs to all the people God has created and loved.