

## Mission in Hong Kong 1985 – 2006

Ann Gray

I was sent to Hong Kong carrying with me the inspiring stories of courage and self sacrifice I had heard from elderly Columban Sisters who had given many years of service to the people of China – opening their doors to the thousands of homeless and sick at the time of devastating floods in 1931 and responding fearlessly as fighting raged between the Nationalists, Communists, bandits and warlords.

The Congregation of the Missionary Sisters of St. Columban had been founded originally for China, so, for me, it was a great privilege to be sent to the Chinese people in Hong Kong. I arrived in the mid- 80's, at a time when Hong Kong, still a British colony, was at the height of extraordinary progress and, with the improvements in housing, education, environment and health, it was considered to be a social miracle. It had been a very different Hong Kong to which the first Sisters had come in 1948. Thousands of refugees of the revolution in China had poured into the colony where a population of 600,000 in 1945 had grown to almost 2 million at the time the Communists sealed the border between Hong Kong and China in 1950. Among these refugees, tuberculosis was in epidemic proportions. It was the health problem needing the most urgent attention and it was here that the Columban Sisters believed God was calling them. For the next forty years, this was their central ministry as the Sister doctors and nurses tended to the sick, contributed to pioneering research on tuberculosis and trained future doctors and nurses.

In the 70's the mission had been expanded to include education work with the initial venture being the setting up of the first secondary school for girls in a densely populated area which was an overcrowded resettlement estate with a population of over 140,000 who were Cantonese speaking refugees from China.

In 1985 when I arrived as a qualified teacher with a Degree in Theology, the Sisters and the local people who got to know me presumed that I would teach in the school. On being sent, this was never actually made clear. Although part of me also expected this, another part of me wasn't very enthusiastic at this prospect and I could feel the stirrings of being pulled in another direction but it wasn't clear which one. After two years of study of the language and life and customs in Hong Kong, I was assigned to join a pastoral team in a thriving parish which was one of the first in the colony to implement a Basic Christian Community structure. After four years here, I was beginning to feel restless and was being drawn more and more to becoming involved in areas where the Christian Church was not established.

As "a child of my times", I was a post-Vatican II missionary, with a strong interest in the Decrees on ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. Despite receiving no encouragement at the Diocesan level, (I was told that nothing was happening at the "grass roots level" and that I was to be careful I did not offend my Catholic brothers and sisters!), I began my own ventures into dialogue and became a regular visitor at a Zen centre. As I sat meditating with this group of Buddhists, we reached a place of intense silence and depth where words and explanations were not needed. I also listened to and was

inspired with stories of the Buddha and the great Bodhisattvas and I shared about Jesus Christ and our saints who model for us the Christian way of life.

Then, in 1990, the Superior General of the Columban Sisters sent a letter to the Congregation which included proposals to all areas throughout the world to -

- look with free and clear vision at the needs of the people
- assess their own resources (Sisters and committed laity)
- envision a collaborative project that in some way responds to the real needs of the people
- take the necessary steps to effect this response.

Research done by the Sisters in Hong Kong showed that women who worked in the sex industry were being sadly neglected and this became the focus for further concern for us. I volunteered for this project, with the basic aim of endeavoring to give women involved in Hong Kong's sex industry an experience of being treated as a person and in particular, as a woman.

Around this time, we (the Columban Sisters) had also made a commitment, "Working in partnership with the laity, we are ready to risk new pathways as we journey with the poor and disinherited and as we dialogue with peoples of differing cultures and faiths. As women missionaries, we respond in creative and healing ways to women who are exploited and ignored in society." (Decrees of the 1993 General Chapter, Missionary Sisters of St. Columban)

When I was beginning the work with the women, the Hong Kong Women Christian Council then began to express interest in working with me and the Concern for Prostitutes group was set up. This name was later changed to REACH OUT, an acronym for 'Rights of Entertainers in Asia to Combat Human Oppression and Unjust Treatment'. The Chinese name was then chosen from a Chinese legend about the bird named 'Ching Liao'. According to the legend, this bird was very close to the gods who looked down benevolently on the people of the earth below. It was her responsibility to act as a messenger and to fly down to earth from place to place and share the blessings of the gods with all whom she met. Ching Liao became not only the Chinese name for the organisation but also its inspiration. REACH OUT thus originated as an ecumenical expression of the concern of Christian women for women working in the entertainment industry and other related services in Hong Kong and in particular those coming from other countries in South East Asia. The group started off with nothing – no money, no premises, no staff and no experience of this kind of work but like the Good Samaritan who came upon a traveler in need, one far from home, REACH OUT aimed to respond to women's immediate needs, referring them to where they could receive help and, in a spirit of sisterhood, accompanying them in their time of crisis. These experiences of working as a part of an ecumenical group were extremely supportive and life-giving.

The early years of REACH OUT were also the years when Hong Kong was preparing for 1997, when the colony would no longer belong to Britain but would become a

Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (HKSAR). It was a time of mixed emotions - the local people were overjoyed to be "returning to the Motherland" and there was a strong emphasis on 'localization'. At the same time, there was fear and uncertainty as many expatriates left Hong Kong and there were many questions about religious and political freedom, given the poor reputation of China in these areas, especially after the crackdown of the demonstrations for Democracy in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It was a time too when the local government in Hong Kong, in an attempt to make a favourable impression on the Central Government in China, seemed to totally disregard the rights of the women we were working with. For those of us involved in the ministry, it was a lonely and risky place to be and called for faith in the plans of God which never seemed to be very clear. But these plans did prevail and this ministry is now continuing in Hong Kong, under the leadership of a totally local staff and perseveres in the promoting of the rights of a very vulnerable group in society.

My original inspiration and attraction to this way of doing mission was the conviction of the Founder of the Columban Sisters, Father John Blowick, that everyone, no matter who they were, had the right to know that they were a child of God. For me, this entailed being open to whatever needs became known and trying to respond to them. It meant regularly not knowing what lay ahead but it developed in me a deep compassion for the vulnerable in society and the assurance and the trust that the way would gradually or eventually become clear. These are attributes which will certainly be of influence in my future missionary work.

(Sister Ann Gray, SSC)