

# Welcoming The Strangers Among Us

Rev. Vincent Lee

## Historical Settings

The demographic makeup of the Chinese churches in Canada has been changing with the trends of immigration in Canada. Before 1960's, the Chinese churches have been small in number. In the 60's and 70's, the Chinese churches experienced growth due to the movement of visa students and immigrants, mainly from Hong Kong, into Canada. It was not a large influx at that time. The Chinese churches grew when visa students became Christians, and when the Canadian government allowed many of these Canadian trained students become immigrants. Many stayed in Canada, while the rest finished their studies and returned to their native location. In the 80's, as the Britain government agreed to return Hong Kong to Mainland China, many people from Hong Kong applied and came into Canada as immigrants. Some of them were former visa students who returned to Hong Kong. This was a large influx and represented the second influx of immigrants into the Chinese churches. By mid 90's, the majority of the Chinese churches were Cantonese speaking.

Beginning in the early 90's, many Mandarin speaking visa students and immigrants came from Mainland China, and started the third influx of immigrants. This group were mainly Mandarin speaking. Chinese churches responded to this wave and started Mandarin speaking congregations. This wave continued even to the present.

## Opportunity for the Chinese Churches

In the past two years, Hong Kong experienced social unrest, and many chose to immigrate to England, United States, Canada and other countries. For the Canadian Chinese churches, this is the fourth wave of influx of immigrants. Besides the immigrants from Hong Kong, there is also a rise of immigrants and refugees from other parts of the world, such as Syria, Afghanistan.

With the rise of the influx of people into Canada, the churches in Canada have developed several approaches to welcome newcomers. One such example is the "Welcoming Church Project". The initial impetus of this movement was for welcoming newcomers, immigrants and refugees, from different parts of the world. The movement hoped to include the new immigrants from Hong Kong. The purpose was to develop a "welcoming mindset" for members of the churches so that these newcomers could be welcomed to join the churches. They help to mobilize church members to walk along these newcomers in their relocation experience. They aim to network churches, organizations and agencies to work as a team to support these newcomers. Often these projects entail picking newcomers up from the airport; helping them find accommodation and to shop for food and daily necessities; assisting them in obtaining

the necessary government documents, such as social insurance cards, photo cards or driver licenses; to search for employment or training that would lead to future employment opportunities. Newcomers that have children would also need assistance in connecting the families with the local education systems. All these require the church to mobilize people and seek people with different expertise to join as a team to reach out to these newcomers.

## **Biblical Mandate**

Jesus commanded us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20). He also said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39) In other words, our Lord Jesus has called His church to welcome, accept and bring these newcomers to Him, and ultimately into His heavenly Kingdom. This is our call. Will we respond to His call to take up the opportunities at hand and face up to the challenges?

## **Challenges to Chinese Churches**

In light of the opportunity, what are the challenges? The first challenge for the Chinese churches is whether we are prepared to take this opportunity and become welcoming churches. Before the present wave of influx of immigrants from Hong Kong, the Cantonese ministries of many Chinese churches were changing their focus to ministering to the senior communities. These Cantonese congregations no longer develop or even possess young adult ministries that once brought many new believers into the churches during the 70's and 80's. When the newcomers enter the church, should the younger family members of these families join the English ministries, or should the Cantonese congregation restart a young adult ministry? In addition, what about the effect on the children ministries?

A second challenge is the mindset of the church. Many Cantonese speaking members have lived in Canada for one or more decades. Their children are now grown up and working in their career, or even have started their own families. The newcomers are unfamiliar with Canada, and need time to readjust. Even returning Canadian citizens, who once studied in Canada, but later returned to Hong Kong to work, have different mindset. The challenges that the church members have faced many years ago when they first came into Canada are different from the current situation the newcomers are facing. Examples are the high cost of housing in large urban centres, as well as job prospects (many newcomers have chosen to stay in locations where there are not many Chinese, such as Newfoundland). This means we need to bridge the cultural gap

between the “host” and the “guests”. How do we, as “hosts”, welcome these “guests” and integrate them into our churches?

The third challenge is to take this opportunity to develop a ministry plan which would not only welcome newcomers from Hong Kong, but also newcomers from other places, now and in the future. Although the needs may be different, the formation of a welcoming or caring team would ensure that this is not a temporary measure, but to make this welcoming movement a response to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment from the Bible. A welcoming church is a growing church, a Spirit led transformed and transforming church.

The Hudson Taylor Centre of Tyndale University is planning a conference for Cantonese ministries in Canada, to discuss the opportunities, challenges and ways to face the tasks ahead of us. Please pray for the organizing of this event under COVID-19 situation. We hope this event can be held in 2022, and pray that the pandemic situation would improve.

## Taking up the Challenges

In order to take up the opportunity, Chinese church leaders must prepare the members of the church to face the challenges. Here are some suggestions:

1. **PRAY** - Like all changes and challenges, we must start with prayer. In John 3:27, John the Baptist said, “A person can receive only what is given them from heaven.” The ministries of the church come from and led by God. The church is sustained by the power of God, and so we must pray that the Lord directs and empowers us to face these challenges.
2. **PLAN** - We need to evaluate how much resources we have, where we can find resources that we do not have currently. This will help us to plan how extensive and intensive our welcoming effort can have. We need to form a welcoming team with various expertise and spiritual gift mix, to welcome these newcomers. We also need to network with other churches, organizations and agencies to draw on their expertise, experience and resources, to serve as a team.
3. **PROCEED** - Plans without action are meaningless. James 2:26 said, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” In 1John 3:18, the Bible said, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” We must put our plans into action so that the world might experience the love of God, and we are to love others as He has loved us.

The needs are enormous, the challenges are great, but the opportunities are here for us to take. In light of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, how do we respond?

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