

GENERAL PRESBYTER REPORT**Bobbi White**

"I bring good news and great joy which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11

I am reminded that Jesus was born into a war torn country with violence and revolution and that he was a refugee in Egypt. He is God with us, not just in our safe world, but in a world like today, with violence, chaos and uncertainty, and where people suffer. God calls us to be in the world and to minister to people in his name. We are to tell the good news, be good news people, and demonstrate the incredible love of God to come into our world as one of us.

There are ways that I have seen us respond to this call to bring good news. We need to continually listen for ways that God is calling us as individuals, congregations, and a presbytery.

Together, we have reached out to a hurting world with your response to the starvation in Malawi, recently declared the poorest country in the world. We were able to send more than \$50,000, a large sum for Malawi, early when it was still possible to buy food. Dr. Barbara Nagy said that people were already beginning to eat grass. "Nickel a Meal" sent \$30,000 to the hospital to respond to patients, pregnant mothers, and children. Also, "Nickel a Meal" money, GAP and Southminster, First Morganton, the Presbytery, and other churches sent more than \$20,000 to the Orphan program, which is working to provide food in local villages. In addition, Barbara said they are trying to work with farmers to learn new crops in a drought prone area in Malawi.

Closer to home, Canton Presbyterian reported that vibrant ministry is taking place in Canton. They joined with about 15 other local churches in a Missional Network for service and worship. During the school year, these churches donated food and packed weekend backpacks of food and supplies for food-insecure children. Through this ministry, they became painfully aware that there are no shelters in Haywood County for homeless children and families. The Missional Network is trying to fill that gap. During Advent/Christmas, the churches raised about \$6,000 to pay for families to stay a night in a hotel on Code Purple nights. The Canton Presbyterian Church alone raised about \$1,000. In time, they hope to be able to create and support a local shelter, and continue to address poverty and housing insecurity in their community with faith and compassion. The ecumenical community in Canton is full of the joy of the Lord. Through service opportunities, joint worship services and strong friendships, the Holy Spirit is bringing about a new thing. Canton Church loves their community and is grateful to be Church together.

Grace Covenant was recently featured on the front page of our denomination's mission publication for its very visible "children's world garden." This garden helps children and parents to understand creative ways that people grow food in Haiti. This world garden and their community garden on the front lawn of the church stand as a visible demonstration of the church's concern for people and their outreach in the world. The community garden also provided food in the summer for Manna Food Bank, Loving Foods housed at Kenilworth, and many other agencies.

Two churches celebrated Martin Luther King's work by reaching out to the broader community to remind everyone that we are to love our neighbor. Heath Rada preached at the Warren Wilson Church and the church held an afternoon dialogue with Heath and the Imam Taha from the Islamic Center in Asheville. They discussed faith traditions and how both traditions are called to live in peace and love their neighbors. Heath had a press conference and many from the congregation and community stood

with a banner saying, "We welcome all," with a logo reading "Fair Immigration." It was humbling to remember that Jesus was also a refugee and the Bible tells us to welcome the stranger. It was a reminder of our ability to choose to live in a culture of fear or choose Christian hope and love.

The Kenilworth Church also reached out to its community. For several years, they have sponsored an Asheville community Martin Luther King covered dish dinner and program. This year, they tried to build bridges across racial and religious lines, having discussion from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and African American perspectives.

During the holiday, I had the pleasure to be in many of our churches. I attended a small church with about 25 in worship. With only a fellowship hall, sanctuary, very small office and very small storage/computer room, they host and work with a Girl Scout Troup of 40 girls of all ages. They helped many of them attend camp last summer. They periodically offer GED training and reach out into the community in other ways. In addition, they have two active women's circles.

The Building H.O.P.E. Ministry Campaign is also about sharing the Good News. In Malawi, at the school and hospital; in Guatemala helping seminarians, college students, and putting libraries in the schools; at Camp Grier, helping kids grow in faith while learning new skills and growing in self-confidence; and strengthening our congregations and members so they can be strong witnesses for Jesus Christ in their words, deeds, and being, these are all places that will be impacted by our Building H.O.P.E. Ministry Campaign, doing together what we cannot do separately.

I was not with you at the last Presbytery because I was in Taiwan and China, traveling with Heath Rada, Moderator of our denomination. We celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, which is when Christianity took hold in Taiwan. It was a joyous celebration! We visited churches, seminaries, schools, villages, and more. We were overwhelmed at the welcome, the faith, the challenges, and the hope for the future of the church and the people in Taiwan.

In China, we learned about the tremendous growth of Christianity there. They estimated that there are at least 40 million Christians. They talked of 500,000 baptisms a month. It was also exciting to experience the church in China.

In both countries, we felt the presence of the Holy Spirit and could see many works of the Spirit. I look forward to sharing some of my experiences with you as I am still reflecting on the incredible richness of our trip. (See attachment for more information.)

At Christmas, a friend sent me a copy of one of my favorite prayers. As we begin this New Year, it reminds me that we often see our reflection in a mirror dimly, but that we are committed followers to our Lord Jesus Christ, trying faithfully to follow his call.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." - Thomas Merton from Thoughts in Solitude.

TRAVELS IN TAIWAN AND CHINA WITH MODERATOR HEATH RADA

I traveled with Heath and Peggy Rada, John McCall, Peter Linn (China expert, who was with the Outreach Foundation and now teaches at Fuller Seminary), and in China with Mienda Uriarte (World Mission, Asia and Pacific Coordinator) and Yesenia Ayala (Program Assistant). We were in Taiwan as guests of the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church for a week and a half, and in China for almost two weeks, from October 21 to November 13.

In Taiwan, we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan and the beginnings of Christianity in Taiwan. I have many memories:

- One of the major anniversary worship services was a time of thanksgiving to God for the way the Spirit has worked in the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. This service also celebrated the way the Holy Spirit has moved among the 13 tribes of Aboriginal peoples in Taiwan, who are 60% Christian. We worshiped with over 9,000 people outside, around an athletic field. Many were wearing traditional clothing or celebration t-shirts. There was singing and dancing as a part of the worship service. After the benediction, people began coming on the field, forming long lines in circles and dancing. It seems as the joy of the Lord was so overwhelming, the only response was doing a traditional dance. The field was full of lines of people holding hands and moving together. It was a joy-filled time.
- That afternoon, people divided into three groups and marched through the city of Tainan with banners and flags celebrating the anniversary of Christianity. Heath and Peggy were in the front of delegates from around the world that had come to be present with the Taiwanese Christians. We were followed by a long, long line of women, men, and children waving Presbyterian Church of Taiwan flags. Three separate groups convened at a big stadium for evening worship, where they were joined by many church groups from all over Southern Taiwan. Heath had the opportunity to bring greetings at this final worship service.
- Heath preached at the seminary in Taipei. He was honored with special Taiwanese Christian music by a music faculty member who attended the Worship and Music Conference at Montreat. After worship, the seminary president and faculty members joined us at lunch.
- Heath also had the opportunity to preach at a church on Sunday. The church was primarily for Aboriginal students who had come to Taipei to study. The service was in two traditional languages, plus a little English. After worship, there was an old-fashioned covered dish dinner with the most delicious food imaginable. We got to talk to young Taiwanese, who were experiencing the challenges of moving from a village and family to a large city.
- At a village high in the mountains, we learned about the different aboriginal tribes and were treated by a fantastic choir. This was just weeks before the typhoon washed away the roads and homes, and cut the village off from electricity and communication for a week. Church members in the area carried water and food in backpacks over steep rugged mountain trails to reach the village to provide aid long before the government could arrive a week later.
- We visited a school in Taipei, where the principal was openly a Christian. We saw how his Christian witness at caring for all the children and the faculty were having a positive impact on the school. The non-Christian head of the PTA took time off to speak with us, and told us what an impact this principal was having on the school.

I treasure the experience I had in China, my learnings and my remaining questions. I am left with a feeling of great thanksgiving at seeing the amazing and incredible impact of the Holy Spirit.

- In China, they estimated that there are at least 40 million Christians. One of our speakers said that they expect to have at least 500,000 new baptisms a month.
- The people, the pastors, seminary presidents, Amity Foundation people, and government officials with whom we spoke were associated with the churches that registered with the

government. Heath was representing the PCUSA as an ambassador with those churches and the government officials. He was building relationships and learning from the many people with whom we had a chance to speak. This means we have a limited perspective on the total Christian population and situation, and on the “House Church,” but were blessed to see the work of the Holy Spirit in those churches registered with the government.

- In one area we visited, we were told there were 4,600 churches or preaching points. However, they had less than 300 pastors and less than 200 lay leaders. Leadership is a major challenge as the church is growing so fast. The need for good leadership was a theme we frequently heard.
- The church is growing with new people that move to the cities from the villages. The community that a church provides is a welcomed attraction and becomes a place where the Good News of the Gospel can be preached.
- We attended the Amity Foundation’s 30th anniversary, along with many representatives from all over the world. I had heard about the Amity Foundation because of their program of having English speaking Christians teaching English in areas of China. I did not know that they had printed more than 140 million Bibles. Half of those are targeted for churches in China and distributed through the churches registered with the government. Some come to the USA. They also have social service type programs, like drug rehabilitation and anti-poverty initiatives through China, and in some other places in the world. It is interesting to hear how the church is reaching out into the community, in some cases similar to here in the US. That is one way of preaching the gospel.
- On Sunday, we worshiped with those attending the Amity Foundation celebration. We worshiped in a new sanctuary, which looked to me like it would seat several thousand. We were told that it probably had only about 500 members now, but they expect it to be full in the next nine months!
- We had the opportunity to visit two seminaries in Nanjing. One seminary is the national seminary and the other a provincial seminary. Imagine our excitement when we discovered Lamar Williamson’s commentary on Mark in English in the library of the national seminary! But an even greater thrill was to discover his book translated into Chinese. We had to stop and get a picture, since Lamar is a special member of this presbytery.
- One of John McCall’s three books written for the Taiwanese Church has been translated/printed in China. John is going to use it for one of the classes he will be teaching at the seminary in China.
- At the provincial seminary, we met many teachers. It is the seminary that John McCall, a mission co-worker from our presbytery, has been invited to teach and lead retreats on ministry and spiritual formation and growth. How blessed is the seminary and how blessed is John.
- It was a pleasure to travel with Heath and Peggy and to watch the graciousness in which Heath greeted our hosts. In many cases, he was able to open up honest dialogue as we shared the challenges of the churches in the PCUSA, allowing others to share some of their challenges also. It was humbling to share prayer together.
- We also had the opportunity to meet with the China Christian Council in Shanghai, the government officials that oversee the Christian Religion (Protestants) in Beijing, and also the Christian Council in Hong Kong. At Hong Kong, we enjoyed English tea with PCUSA mission co-workers and seminary classmates of mine.

We came back to the USA inspired by the churches of Taiwan and China and grateful for the experience and work of the Holy Spirit among us.