

China Mission Unit – Report to the 2014 General Assembly

It is about 35 years since the China Mission Unit was established. It was preceded by a time of about 35 years when there was no formal Columban presence in China. That period of absence was in turn preceded by about 35 years of Columban missionary presence in China, the pioneering group of that era arriving here in 1920.

The cycles of history have now brought the CMU to a new crossroads due to the fact that our membership has declined to just four Columbans. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused part of this change, as have the natural changes that take place in all RMUs over a number of years. Similar to what is happening in many RMUs, the CMU is facing serious questions about long-term viability. Further decline in our personnel numbers would obviously exacerbate what is already a vulnerable situation.

While the current CMU personnel situation is a cause for concern, a brighter picture can be seen if we look at the Columban missionary contribution that has been taking place in China over several years, part of this being possible due to collaboration with others RMUs.

For many years we have had a steady building up of relationships with Chinese Church personnel. This has happened in a setting where the Chinese authorities say that missionaries from other countries should not be involved in the life of the Church in China. However, a built-in flexibility in Chinese culture actually provides some space for missionaries to be involved here so long as a number of important boundaries are not crossed.

Within this setting, members of the Chinese Church are keenly aware of the restrictions that exist for missionary organisations, mainly because the local Church is always negotiating its own way forward in a setting that is unpredictable. A big concern for the local Church in all of its initiatives is to find a way to minimize the possibility of upsetting the civil authorities. A consequence is that the Church in China has a deep appreciation for those who are willing to come to China and live with the uncertainty and unpredictability that is normal for themselves. Our sharing in this experience of vulnerability eventually leads to strong bonds of solidarity and friendship with people in the Chinese Church.

One of the most important contributions made by Columbans in China happens due to their willingness to live here, learn the language and be involved with people in whatever ways are possible. There are many opportunities for involvement with people but most of them are in situations that involve small numbers of people, often away from public attention. These opportunities include leading retreats, availability for spiritual direction, accompanying people who have special needs, facilitating visitors to China for mission exposure, promoting *Laudato Si'* and deepening our friendships with people in the dioceses of Hanyang and Nancheng, the two areas of Columban missionary presence from one hundred years ago.

Involvement in the China Formation Committee has also been a way for the CMU to contribute to the life of the Church in China. For over twenty years, in collaboration with other RMUs, ongoing formation in China and overseas scholarships have been provided for Chinese priests, sisters and lay people. It has been normal to approve overseas scholarships for two people each year, the duration of studies usually being three years. Maintaining contact with them following their return to China has helped the CMU to develop a growing network of friendship and goodwill. Some Columbans have come to China to lecture in philosophy and theology through the networks established by the CFC.

A CMU presence in Hong Kong has been part of our structure since the mission unit was established, this also leading to a pastoral involvement in the diocese. This pastoral presence has made a meaningful contribution to the lives of many people and has established a good link between the Columbans and Hong Kong Diocese.

As changes in China continue to emerge, it is becoming clear that Hong Kong will continue to attract the attention of the Beijing's political establishment. While this is likely to remain a challenging experience for many of the city's population, it would seem that the Church in Hong Kong will also have opportunities to accompany the Church in mainland China in various ways. It has become increasingly normal for Church personnel in mainland China to go to Hong Kong for week-long visits, an opportunity for them to learn from the Church experience in the city and build up friendship with people there. The CMU presence in Hong Kong brings an opportunity for some involvement in this area of interaction.

AITECE continues to be a part of the CMU's contribution to facilitating people with a Christian faith to come to China to teach, their presence in Chinese classrooms providing the opportunity for a unique dialogue of life with young Chinese people. The CMU's involvement in AITECE takes place in collaboration with other RMUs where the teachers make their initial enquiries.

In recent years the Society has used online meetings to facilitate conversations and collaboration in various ministries. The CMU has been involved in a number of these online initiatives, including JPIC, Society Invitation to Mission, Creation Covenant Working Group, Biodiversity Working Group and the China Mission Forum.

It is just over five years since the most recent Columban Lay Missionaries in the CMU completed their agreements with the Society. We remain open to the possibility of others being appointed to the CMU.

At present there are no Chinese seminarians in the Columban initial formation programme. We continue to be open to facilitating those who wish to join the initial formation programme.

The October 5th email from Tim Mulroy to RMU leaders requests that this report would include insights based upon the *"experience of leadership in your RMU within the context of the international Society and its mission - on the basis of your knowledge of these matters from participation in various international zoom meetings, the IRMU Meeting, etc."*

In response to this request, I offer the following observations. The March 2023 IRMU meeting in Seoul involved a number of discussions about the long-term viability of the Society, the availability of personnel being a serious challenge for most RMUs. As far back as 1994 the General Assembly highlighted this issue when it stated, *"We became painfully aware of our shortage of Society personnel, especially of younger members, to carry forward our mission into the next century."* (*Choosing Life*, No. 36)

Almost 30 years later we are still facing the same issue. Obviously we are facing the challenge with even fewer personnel than in 1994. An article by Parig Digan in the March-April 2005 edition of *Columban Intercom* contains an analysis of Society personnel statistics from 1918 to 2003. A graph shows how Society membership grew steadily from 1918 until 1969. Then membership numbers declined at a steady rate from 1970 to 2003. A continuation of the same rate of reducing numbers is given by a dotted line for the years after 2003. Twenty years on from the 2003 figure, it is interesting to note that the projection made by Parig for 2023 is quite accurate.

At the Columban Under 50s gathering in 2016, I showed Parig's graph to those whom I was with in the small group discussing vocations. An opinion was expressed by one person that this graph did not really apply to us because vocations from the newer formation programmes were now providing the possibility of a different future for the Columbans. While I also hope that the Society will have a viable future, I believe we need to pay attention to what the statistics are telling us.

At the March 2023 IRMU meeting in Seoul, a few participants from the newer formation programmes expressed the view that they wish to have the opportunity to provide the Society with a brighter future, an understandable approach by those who believe that there is a viable future for the Society.

I think a key part of General Assembly 2024 will be the challenge of reconciling the stark reality of the Society personnel numbers with the hopes of younger Columbans who are from the newer formation programmes, members who have their own cherished hopes and dreams for the Society. In preparation for GA2024, the statistics and the various reports will point to the seriousness of our personnel situation and raise serious questions about the Society's viability. Younger Columbans from the newer formation programmes are likely to say that they wish to be given the space to guide the Society towards a future where a long-term meaningful missionary involvement is still possible. I think the GA2024 facilitators will need to assist all the participants to listen attentively to each other and be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit at this time in our history.

We live in a world that is currently going through immense turmoil. The tragedy of armed conflict, religious tensions and the undeniable effects of climate change are collectively posing huge questions for the future of all life on our planet. **In a world of such immense challenges, there is a deep need for the Christian message of reconciliation, peace and hope. It is within this complex and painful world that GA2024 is faced with the challenge** of trying to discern where the Holy Spirit is leading us as a missionary Society.

Dan Troy
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