

Sunset Ministry? Certainly not!

By Rev. Derek Li (translated by Deacon Robert Lam)

Time flies. It is already nine months since I started my ministry at SCBC. During this time, I have attended almost every meeting of each language group so that I could better understand and become more involved. Through talking with brothers and sisters, I listened to their hearts and was able to obtain a clearer picture of the current condition of the church. After praying and much reflection, I wish to share with you my experiences and thoughts and invite you to pray for over them. May I also urge you to pray for the church not only as an observer, but also to pray for your own spirituality as a member, as well as for the whole church in response to what you see. I hope to make good use of this new column in the bulletin as an expanded platform for sharing, thoughts and communication.

In the first couple of months at SCBC, I often heard that Cantonese ministry will soon become a “sunset ministry” due to the decreasing numbers of Cantonese-speaking immigrants in recent years. If we pay too much attention to whether there are new immigrants coming, church growth will become subject to government policies and the local politics of Cantonese-speaking regions. As Paul said, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor 9:22). We should not forget that there are still many people amongst the multitude of Cantonese-speaking immigrants who came to Canada in the last 40 years that have not heard the gospel and accepted Christ yet. According to the findings of our Outreach Pastor Scott Bissell from Statistics Canada two years ago, in the GTA there were 229,010 ethnic Chinese. By mother tongue 83,955 of them were Cantonese, 85,235 Mandarin, and 59,820 other Chinese dialects. This may be a small number compared with the majority (1,317,030), whose mother tongue was English that makes up 50.09% of the total population in GTA, but our targets for evangelism should not be contained within certain languages, ethnic or language groups. We must take every opportunity to fulfil our mission, knowing that God will provide.

From the 1972 amnesty to illegal immigrants, to the 1997 influx of immigrants from Hong Kong, plus the trend of returning residents in the last two years, there appears to be a cycle of 20 odd years. According to various recent media reports (e.g. <https://dushi.singtao.ca>, <https://www.hkcnews.com>) there are half a million Canadians living in Hong Kong, far exceeding the number of foreign domestic workers (under 300,000). It is estimated that at least 10% of these Canadian citizens (i.e. 50,000) will return to Canada and re-establish residence in Vancouver and Toronto in the near future. Moreover, the Canadian Government will gradually accept more Independent Immigrants, reportedly up to 100,000 in the next three years. Government sources have also disclosed that the number of people from Hong Kong gaining permanent resident status is on the rise (500-800 in 2012-15; 1,210 in 2016; and 1,561 in 2017; and 560 in the first five months of 2018). Unlike many of the immigrants who were simply taking out a political insurance policy in the period around 1997 and who had little intention of long-term residence in Canada, these people are now expected to return for good.

The decision to return to Canada from Hong Kong permanently is prompted by several factors:

- People are frustrated with all of the politics and heated arguments that have spread to almost every aspect of daily life.
- People are frustrated by the education system that is gradually favouring the rich. Despite the fact that local schools are heavily subsidized by the government and supposedly accessible to the poor, many parents and students consider the local curriculum unfair, too harsh and therefore inferior to those foreign curricula such as the International Baccalaureate Programs and GCE A-Level programs offered by the Direct Subsidy Schools, Private Schools and International Schools. Since the latter group of schools charge very high tuition fees, many consider it is better for them and their children to return to live and study in Canada.
- People are frustrated by the lack of upward mobility. It is no surprise that since the changeover to Chinese control in 1997, it was not restricted to sovereignty alone. There have been many changes in the political, economic and social arenas as well. Many people, especially the younger generation, are feeling the lack of growth and even good opportunities for career advancement. They tend to look at Canada as a viable alternative option.
- People are frustrated by the poor living conditions, over-priced and the unaffordable real estate market. Even a tiny apartment costs close to one million Canadian dollars. For those Canadians who own property in Hong Kong, they could sell their properties and return with sufficient resources for a comfortable life here.

Given the above situation, why should we think the Cantonese ministry is a “sunset ministry” that lacks direction and a future? Even if we don’t count the returning residents, we still have the thousands of Chinese-speaking people nearby, plus the English-speaking people needing to hear the gospel. For this vision, may I encourage all you who are semi-retired or already retired to equip yourself for evangelism. Take some time away from enjoying your grandkids. Rally your friends and join the training courses offered by the Toronto Short Term Mission Training Center. They will equip you not only with text books and classes, but also by providing practical experience and spiritual nurturing. After training you can organize into small action groups for evangelism to fulfill our purpose and mission to be the salt of the earth and the light to the world. We need to care for the community, both materially and spiritually.

SCBC is comprised of three language groups, Cantonese, English and Mandarin. We are knitted together because our family members belong to different groups. Many of our younger people are multilingual. We should stop the cultural biases and personal language preferences so that we can support one another. We must learn from the early Christian church and see how they blended three different languages and six different cultures. It was such a beautiful testimony that pleased our Heavenly Father.

Please remember, without good care for our community and evangelism, any church activity or program runs the risk of becoming a “sunset ministry”!