

Youth Visit to Taiwan

19 July – 2 August 2015

Week 1

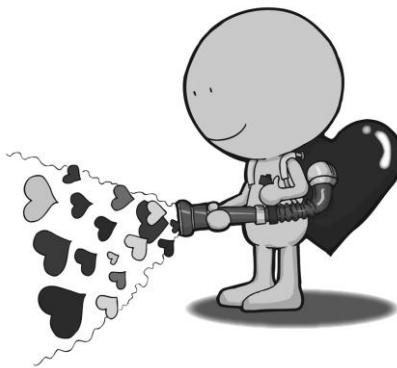
19 hours after leaving Manchester Airport 3 leaders, Leo, Barbara and Addie, and 5 young people landed in Taiwan at 4pm (9 am in the UK). We met up with Dan, the last member of our group who had only flown from Singapore after visiting his brother there. Stephen, his wife Sophia and Joy, their daughter who were our hosts for the visit, met us at the airport.

After eating at the airport we caught the high speed train to Chaiyi Province. Most Presbyterian Churches in Taiwan seem to have accommodation and we stayed in the church accommodation where we were to attend a meeting rather like our Synod meeting the next day.

At the meeting Connie gave a greeting on behalf of the group and we learnt to say “Ping An” – “Peace be with you”. After the meeting we split into 3 groups to go and help with holiday clubs, or summer camps as they are called, at 3 different churches. Connie, Katy and I went to Shulin where they were starting the second week of their holiday club which ran daily from 10am until 5pm. The topic was “Love” – love you, parents, siblings, friends, enemies, nature, God and then the action it leads to. We were given two t-shirts with the club logo on and the minister’s wife washed them each night for us.

The day was very structured starting with action songs, then games followed by a story and discussion in small age groups. We were each allocated to help with a group. We learnt new games. After lunch the kids went to 2 of four activities – Art, Craft, Cooking and English – we were helping with the last of these. On the last Saturday the kids shared what they had been doing and on the Sunday took part in the service. On Sunday evening we and all 30 young helpers, were treated to a sumptuous Chinese banquet.

The pastor was a brilliant cartoonist and the sessions were greatly enhanced by his drawings



During the week we were there we attended a moving service dedicated to mission among the indigenous people. From Eric, our translator, we heard about the work of Shulin church. When their minister came in 2008 there were only 8 people attending worship. They encouraged him to work with young people. There are now two services on a Sunday, one geared towards young people, with a total attendance of about 140. They do much work in the community. As well as the holiday clubs, they run computer classes, health lectures, clinics, guitar classes, an exercise group and homework clubs

We were also taken to some tourist sites -the golden bat sanctuary, a ukulele factory and a pottery centre where they were huge fun models and we could paint our own Christmas tree decoration.

Addie, Alison and Georgia went to Linnei Church. Their impressive work in the community was done through 2 coffee shops one beside the church and one in a nearby university town. These shops were called "What's Up" which is similar to the Taiwanese word for "church".

The camp ran every afternoon from Wednesday to Saturday. Wednesday morning was spent in preparation which included blowing up balloons ad infinitum, fortunately with a machine. Wednesday afternoon 50 children arrived and were divided into 5 groups. Each member of our group worked with a different group painting T-shirts, balloon modelling, drama, lots of singing and dancing based on a Christian version of the three little pigs. Addie as usual was involved in the drama. I am told he was an awesome donkey. Alison and Georgia told the children the story of Easter using a PowerPoint presentation to get the kids to make appropriate crowd noises. Addie gave a talk on Redemption using an aeroplane/rocket/cross origami. All the kids from the summer camp attended the Sunday service to share what they had been doing. The three from the UK were asked to give our testimonies.

Each morning the minister and his family took the group and some Taiwanese young people to visit local places of interest. There was the Formosa Times Museum where they learnt a little of the culture of Taiwan, the puppet museum, a towel factory where they made little animals out of flannels and the What's Up Cafe in the university town which the church uses as a mission to the students. The highlight visit was to the night markets (not in the morning, of course!) which are the place to be in the evenings in Taiwan – those chicken kebabs were to die for!

Leo, Dan and Liz helped out at the church in Lumen. Their summer camp was being run by a group using MeBig - a programme which had been developed in Japan and was being led by leaders and young people from another church. MeBig stands for 'Make everyone believe in God' and there were some interesting discussions with the leaders as to whether our evangelical aim should focus on MAKING everyone believe! Young people from the local area were also involved in the staffing of the camp. The activities ran every morning at the church with visits to the homes of the children taking place in the afternoons. It was very Bible-focussed and was using the theme of 'Patience'. As well as helping out with the games and activities, we had an 'English' slot each day to share our own thoughts on the theme. We came away with some great ideas of activities we could use in our own churches - and many new friends.

In 2016 6 to 8 young people from Taiwan will visit the UK North Western Synod. We will try and give them as warm and generous a welcome as we had in Taiwan. Churches that run holiday clubs will be needed to host and involve a couple of Taiwanese young people.

Week 2

After a week helping at holiday clubs we were all sad to leave the churches where we had been staying. I think in retrospect we all thought it was the best part of the trip.

On the Monday morning we all met up in Chiayi City at the Presbytery Office together with several of the pastors. We evaluated our experiences and heard something about the work of the Presbyterian Church in the area. We were impressed how a large number of church members went up the mountain following the typhoon and earthquake, carrying provisions on their backs to help those cut off by landslides – they got through before the helicopters arrived.

After a look round a large department store we went for another sumptuous feast followed by a visit to the City Hall where we met the deputy mayor. He spoke good English and told us about his city. Leo (the other leader who is the Synod Training and Development Officer (Children and Youth)) then introduced us all. We were told that it was unusual for the church and the civic society to meet but he was pleased that this was happening.

We visited some Japanese redwood houses in the rain and then went to a new beautiful church with some interesting design features. At the front of the church was an illuminated cross with, symbolically 12 pieces of wood taking Christ's light out to the world. The communion table was made from transparent glass symbolising that nothing comes between God and us. The church is a community centre not just for Christians. Finally we enjoyed a drink of hot chocolate in the church's coffee shop. Our evening meal was at June's American Diner where Addie, Leo and I had eaten last year.

Tuesday was the start of our trip up Ali Mountain. The journey took several hours up long, windy roads. We stopped for lunch and one of the things we ate was "tomorrow leaf" fried in batter which was supposed to ensure we woke up the following day. We visited a museum and a small catholic church. After eating some special jelly we strolled round the little shops trying donut type goodies and ginger tea. At this point it was raining hard and quite cold. Back to the coach and further up the mountain to our hotel. We were given ponchos to protect us from the rain as we walked from the coach park to the hotel.

Next morning we were up at 4am for our trip further up the mountain to see the sunrise. It was very cold and Addie and I had not brought fleeces as we were told we wouldn't need them. Fortunately we could hire thick coats from the hotel. One big enough for poor Leo could not be found. It was certainly worth the early start to see the spectacular sunrise. We returned to the hotel for breakfast stopping to see the second oldest tree in Taiwan.

After breakfast we went on the mountain railway and visited a 3000 year old sacred tree which is now unfortunately dead after 2 lightning strikes. We enjoyed walking along the forest walkways before returning on the train to a restaurant for lunch and then back down the mountain on the coach. We stopped at the Alishan visitors' centre where we saw some exhibits and a 3D film.

That evening we had a meal in the hotel and a birthday cake had been organised for Leo. We had to say goodbye to some of lovely Taiwanese friends who would not be joining us the following day.

At 8am on Thursday morning we were driven to Tainan city where we visited the Taiwan Church Press, the Sin Lau Christian Hospital and Tainan Theological College. We watched a film about the work of the printing press and had a go at printing on the first printing press in Taiwan. This had been provided by James Maxwell, the first missionary, who was from Scotland. We were presented with T-shirts which celebrated 150 years anniversary of PCT (Presbyterian Church of Taiwan). We were shown another film at the hospital and presented with bags before being shown round the modern clinical labs and Health Management Centre. We learnt that the theological students are equipped to go out into society and serve, so as well as studying they get involved in social issues; demonstrating about injustice, joining an anti-nuclear rally and helping clear up disaster areas . We were told that the spirit of the church is to become disciples of Christ and to walk the same path that Christ walked. At all three places we had to have a group photo taken.

We then went to the station to catch the high speed rail to Taipei accompanied by Ching-An, our guide for the next 3 days. On arriving in Taipei we caught the underground train towards the hostel where we were staying.

On Friday we were welcomed by the PCT General Secretary in the PCT Office. We learnt about the PCT Youth Ministry and their aims which are to

- Proclaim the gospel
- Nurture God's children
- Care for God's creation
- Serve with love
- Transform Society

- Make the church a sign of hope

In Taiwan youth range in age from 11 – 40 and youth empowerment is practised from the bottom up. Shou-Hui, the chaplain to mandarin students at Manchester University, who some of you have met, is supported by the PCT. The Taiwanese youth are very active and we were told about a sponsored bike ride, a teenage adventure camp, a youth leaders training camp, a gospel concert “Jesus Rocks”. We also learnt about the international youth conference “I love Taiwan” which takes place in June. Someone from our Synod went this year sponsored by the PCT. The conference is to let young people experience ecumenism through participating in mission, learning and sharing with each other and forming a life of identification, commitment and growth. Several of the UK group were interested in going to a future conference. The PCT also produce a youth magazine.

After lunch we went in a cable car up a hill and had a short walk. It was very hot and humid. After a meal we went to a concert in a church where there was a student choir singing, doing some drama and giving testimonies (which of course we couldn't understand).

On Saturday we were looked after by 2 theological students. They took us to the Peace Garden where there were some lovely sculptures and to the 228 museum where we learnt about the 1947 protests against martial law. Freedom of speech and democracy was demanded for Taiwan. Currently students are protesting about the changes the government want to make to the history curriculum so it is focussed more towards China. We went to visit the protest and were immediately pounced on by reporters with TV cameras. Our guide told them we were here to support the protest.

After lunch we went up the 101 building (so named because of its 101 floors) which was for several years the world's tallest building. We had a wonderful view of the city and it was fascinating to see the damper which stabilises the building in case of earthquakes which do occur sometimes in Taiwan.

We learnt from the students about the election which will take place in 2016. The PCT gets involved in politics and supports the DPP “Demonstration Process Party” China. The PCT and others travel to New York to observe a UN conference and lobby to become a member of the UN.

Sunday morning we went to the English Mission where the service was in English led by the pastor from Australia. We got yet another gift and of course had to introduce ourselves. After the service we chatted to several people and then said goodbye to Dan who was flying to Singapore. Before going to the airport we went to the harbour for a quiet stroll through some shady gardens where the early Canadian missionary George Mackay had been based.

Our visit was over. We said our farewells, went to the airport and were soon on the long flight home. We had had such a fantastic experience and had received such love and generosity. We made some good friends and we can keep in touch via Facebook. As well we were inspired by their faith and commitment and can bring ideas back to our own churches.

Shortly after our return, Taiwan was hit by a big typhoon. Our friends were all OK but there was lots of damage to buildings.

Barbara Redmond

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