

A Vision for Sending Missionaries from China to Arab Gulf Countries A Triumvirate Partnership

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The church in China is ready to send hundreds if not thousands of missionaries to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ the unreached people of this world. But I thought China was a mission field for Western missionaries? A common misconception for many but the church in China has grown explosively in the past twenty years. There are at least 50 million Christians according to Tony Lambert who is a respected researcher with Overseas Missionary Fellowship.² Accompanying this growth, particularly in the house church, has been a maturation of its leadership to incorporate an outward looking focus of global missions.

According to published reports, senior leaders of house church networks that represent 30 million members met in 2001 to establish a common set of priorities. These were leadership development, basic Bible teaching for members, Sunday school teacher training, global missions, and social outreach to the new 150 million migrant workers in China. That global missions was among the top five priorities represents a maturity that many national church movements take much longer to develop.

The potential increase in the missionary workforce is staggering if the church in China can find ways to send out its missionaries. Christians around the world were amazed by the explosive growth of Korean missionaries from 1,645 in 1990 to 10,745 in 2002.³ There are potentially many more missionaries

from China with some reporting tens of thousands ready to go overseas. Yet the Korean missionary movement cannot be compared with a future missionary movement from China.

The unreached people of this world are generally found in places that prohibit missionary activities. Many of these places are in Muslim countries. Christian missionaries must find creative ways to enter these countries. One reason for the growth in Korean missionaries is their relatively easy access to most countries due to extensive business relationships, relative affluence and simplified visa procedures enabled by healthy diplomatic relations. While the Chinese government has also developed good trade and diplomatic relationships with these countries, concern over illegal immigration restricts access to visas. Hence Koreans are welcomed as businessman or skilled employees of Korean companies. Workers from China enter on restricted work visas. There are only a few thousand workers from China known to be employed in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ Most of these work in the trade or service industries. A smaller number work as nurses.

We are at a crossroads in missions as missionaries from the two-thirds world join global missions in increasing numbers. The church in China has numerous believers ready to go overseas but they need help in entering countries where they can serve as tentmaker-missionaries. The depressed economies

in most of the Arab World means Chinese workers must compete for employment against well-established expatriate labor forces generally from poor Muslim countries. The most realistic target is the Arab Gulf countries who continue to invest in infrastructure and industrial projects. In addition to help in finding employment, they will also need help in understanding the cultural and religious conditions under which proclaiming the Gospel takes place.

How can the global mission movement of the church in China be helped? A triumvirate partnership is proposed between the church in China, western mission agencies and the overseas Chinese church. Partnering with mission agencies working in the Arab world are the obvious choice because of their experience and expertise developed from many years of service. But why partner with the overseas Chinese church in the Arab world? After all, the overseas Chinese church has in the past had little interest in the Muslims of the Arab world. But in fact there is great synergy if the strengths of the three parties can be combined.

While western mission agencies possess essential knowledge of the Arab world, these agencies operate from a western context and a different socio-economic framework. Despite best intentions, there are difficulties for western mission agencies to globalize their workforce. Even though the mission agency Operation Mobilization has one of the highest international

representations, they have struggled to become an organization that could operate across cultures.⁵ And their international members generally had educational background similar to other western members and of course spoke English. So speaking hypothetically, what would happen if the traditional model of western mission agencies were employed with missionaries from China? Missionaries from China will come from a spectrum of backgrounds but most will be less educated than our Western norms and without English. They will be in jobs much lower on the socio-economic ladder. How would a predominantly Anglo-American team of English-speaking highly-educated professionals working at universities and hospitals interact with these believers from China? Barriers of language, culture and work context come immediately to mind. I don't believe in the foreseeable future that the typical missionary from China could be effectively integrated into western mission agencies.

A model that could work draws upon the current experience of house church missionaries. In their model, they find overseas Chinese believers who can find them employment and mentoring. The overseas Chinese believer provides logistical and pastoral support. This model is effective because the barrier of language is removed. Culture is also shared although unlikely to be identical. Key to this model is the logistical support that is made possible by local knowledge and the pastoral support that can be provided. While I admire the fervor and passion of believers from China, there still will be a need on the mission field for pastoral support.

In a triumvirate partnership, the overseas Chinese church serves as the bridge between east and west. Believers from the overseas Chinese church, especially those from English speaking

countries, join or affiliate themselves with Western mission agencies. These believers obtain the training and become part of the network of tentmaker-missionaries in the Arab Gulf so the knowledge of those in the field can be shared with the church in China. Some of these believers enter these countries as tentmaker-missionary to serve as the provider of the support necessary to bring in missionaries from China and sustain them on the field.

The tentmaker-missionary from the overseas Chinese church will in turn get their support from the western mission agencies. While there will be cultural differences with members of the western mission agency, there should be few differences in language and work context. The western mission agencies also dedicate resources to develop training materials that could be used in partnership with the overseas Chinese church and be translated for use by the church in China.

There are obstacles to this triumvirate model but these should not overshadow the vast potential for the Kingdom of God. The addition of missionaries from China brings more than just numbers. A different socio-economic class would likely be reachable since the typical western tentmaker-missionary is primarily in contact only with educated nationals. Yet most of the population in Gulf countries are non-national Muslims. The vast resources of the overseas Chinese church could be mobilized to assist not only the missionaries from China but to bolster the numbers of predominantly Anglo-American tentmakers. Americans in particular are becoming less welcome because of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Palestine.

What is the role of the overseas Chinese church in bringing missionaries from China to the Arab Peninsula? I see

them as the critical link between house church and Western mission agencies. Overseas Chinese would be invaluable in bringing the best of Western mission organizations to support missionaries from China. Without the support of the overseas Chinese church, attempts to bring missionaries from China through partnership with western mission agencies will be fraught with challenges that could easily lead to prematurely terminating these partnerships. The overseas Chinese church must be involved if they believe in being stewards of God's resources to them. It is unrealistic to expect western mission agencies to divert field workers to studying the Chinese language and culture when many struggle to just learn Arabic and Muslim culture.

Members of the overseas Chinese church can participate in many ways. They might join western mission agencies like mine to get the training that equips them to reach Muslims of the Arab world. This would include learning Arabic. They can then provide training to missionaries from China. If becoming a missionary and joining a mission agency is too much of a commitment, overseas Chinese with professional skills can serve as tentmakers especially if fluent in English. These tentmakers could then look for employment opportunities for Chinese missionaries or meet national Arabs who wish to sponsor a new business. Business people can then come to the Gulf and start businesses that hire missionaries from China.

The picture of missions that comes to mind for many Christians is a life in primitive surrounding. In the Gulf, the high standard of living means professionals and business people live in some of the newest and safest cities of the world in a society that at least externally has strict morals.

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If not able to live in the Gulf, many overseas Chinese hold passports from countries that allow easy access as tourists to provide pastoral care to missionaries from China. At the present, it would be difficult for the church in China to obtain visas so that their own people could be sent to the Gulf to provide training and pastoral care. So the overseas Chinese church could provide a critical support service by visiting missionaries from China.

The financial resources of the overseas Chinese church would also be instrumental in a triumvirate partnership. Western mission agencies would have to hire staff that could work with the overseas Chinese church in converting its training materials on reaching Muslims of the Arab world into a form useful to the church in China. Arabic language textbooks need to be translated into Chinese. There are large costs in bringing missionaries to the field and providing training and pastoral support.

A triumvirate partnership that brings together the best of western mission agencies, the church in China, and overseas Chinese church has enormous potential for seeing churches planted in the Arab Gulf during our lifetimes. Begin by praying through the pamphlet entitled "Praying Through The Arab Peninsula" available in Chinese.⁶ Then see how God might use you and your church in bring Muslims of the Arab World to His Kingdom.

1 Xiao Wu is the pen name of an engineer serving in the Arabian Peninsula with Arab World Ministries.

2 Article by Tony Lambert "The Changing Face of China's Church" (1999) <http://www.chsource.org/ChangingChina.htm>

3 see International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 2003

4 Magazine of Great Commission Center International, June 2002

5 David Lundy, We are the World, OM Publishing, 1999

6 GCCI Publications, <http://www.gcciusa.org/english/publications.html>