

Catherine Lee

Link Letter no. 78 | September 2019

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The call in action

Shanghai


Ah, old Shanghai! What images it conjures up – of extravagant wealth, decadence, glamour, power and indulgence! Not for nothing was Shanghai known as the “Paris of the East” in the 1920s and 30s. At the same time, Taiwan had its own “Little Shanghai” up in the mountains high above Taipei, namely the gold-rush town of Jiufen where miners came to seek their fortunes and to spend, spend, spend.

With the mines closing in 1971, Jiufen spent two decades in decline, but after “A City of Sadness” was filmed there in 1989, the town started to revive and reinvent itself as a tourist destination. Today the area is bursting with people coming to see the mining relics and gold museum, the tiny houses and tea shops, the red lanterns and movie theatre, soaking up the old-style atmosphere of Little Shanghai.

And that’s also where I was a few days ago, accompanying a group of 18 mature students from five countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (all diplomatic allies of Taiwan), who are here as part of a three-month project sponsored by the Taiwan government to upgrade their skills in electrical and electronic engineering. St John’s University is hosting the group and organising all the classes, and I am helping with their cultural programme which includes visiting interesting places like Jiufen. Actually, the crowds in Jiufen at the weekends are so huge that we decided to go on a Monday instead, but even then the place was full of people. Jiufen is a real success story, an example of what is possible for a town that underwent economic collapse in the 70s, and then a slow revival starting in the 90s. All over Taiwan, old towns are reinventing themselves to make the most of the boom in tourism, both local and from overseas (particularly Korea, Japan and Hong Kong).

Today, the same challenge faces St John’s University (SJU). This year we have about 3,400 students in total, but when I first came to SJU only a decade ago, we had 7,000 students. The birth rate (and population) is declining dramatically, Taiwan has way too many universities (so there’s a lot of competition) and the only way for SJU to balance the budget is to “lose” a further 60 professors on permanent contracts, but it seems none of them can be forced to go.

St John’s University is trying hard to reassess, reinvent, revive and transform itself, but it’s not easy. Dedicated, hard-working professors, many of whom studied here and have spent their whole academic career here, are understandably reluctant to leave so we have to come up with new projects – which is how come we now have our 18 lovely students from Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines living and studying on our campus. They are a real blessing to us all!


Name: Catherine Lee
Location: Taiwan
My call: To serve, share, and support the ministry of the Church in Taiwan.
My role: Working with the Taiwan Episcopal Church, based at St John’s University, Taipei, I support the church, chaplaincy and kindergarten ministry of the Diocese of Taiwan.



Jiufen - St John's University students from Latin America and the Caribbean

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The chair of the board of trustees of St John's University is currently the Bishop of Taiwan, David JH Lai. When he retires next March, he will also step down as chair of the SJU board. On 3 August, we held our long-anticipated and much-prayed-about election for a new bishop, and we were very pleased that everything went smoothly and there was a clear result. Our next bishop will be Rev Dr Lennon Yuan-Rung Chang, who is currently rector of Advent Church, located here on the SJU campus. He too studied here, was baptised here and has spent all of his academic career here as professor of mathematics, and also chaplain from 1997–2016. He knows first-hand the problems facing SJU, and would value your prayers as he works with the trustees and the university to find a way forward.

The Diocese of Taiwan also has eight kindergartens, ranging in size from about 30 to 300 children, and interestingly all of them have managed to stay afloat and even thrive, despite the challenges of the changing society and falling birthrate. Of our 14 churches, some continue to grow, others are stable, some see declining numbers. We have 18 full-time clergy (including the bishop), and along with our 36 lay delegates, they elected Rev Dr Lennon who, at 64, has seven years to serve before mandatory retirement. Our bishop-elect is determined to make the most of that time, and has six months to pray and reflect in preparation. His consecration is provisionally planned for 22 February, 2020, and we are expecting Presiding Bishop Michael Curry (of Royal Wedding fame!) to be here for that occasion, plus a host of other dignitaries. Next summer, the new bishop and his wife Hannah will hope to be at the Lambeth Conference. There is much to look forward to.

Taiwan's society is changing fast, and how the church and church institutions respond is an ongoing challenge for all. However, God is the one who never changes and our Christian faith remains as relevant for this time in history as much as any other. Please join us in prayer, and more prayer!

As I was preparing to write this link letter this morning, an email came from CMS announcing that Jonathan Self, our beloved link letter editor, is leaving CMS at the end of November, after 12 or more years in the post. Change is coming to us all! Jonathan is one of CMS's larger-than-life characters in Oxford, and he will be much missed. With each link letter, he takes my words and assorted attached photos and produces something that looks really great. Thank you Jonathan!

With many thanks to you all for your ongoing support and prayers,
Catherine

Photos from top to bottom: St John's University 2019 graduation: With Calvin, a member of our student fellowship from Malaysia, and his family; Bishop David JH Lai and bishop-elect Lennon YR Chang with their wives; student fellowship members at the St John's University 2019 graduation; the streets of Jiufen.



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