

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Dear Dick,

For the first few months we spent in Hong Kong I felt like a tourist. Everything was new and fascinating. The place was beautiful with its sheer green hills and innumerable islands rising from the bluest of seas; every great moth of a sailing junk made me exclaim; I enjoyed bargaining with stall keepers on the ladder streets; and liked the Chinese faces, their industry, and readiness to smile. But I gradually became depressed by the great contrasts in living standards. At first I was inclined to blame the Hong

Kong Government, and then the Chinese themselves. Their constant preoccupation with moneymaking, even at the expense of those less fortunate than themselves, is off-putting. The prime example of this came after the devastating typhoon last summer when the extremely poor folk wanting to rebuild the meanest of squatter shacks, were charged 100% more for building materials than pre-typhoon costs. And last week, when our water supply was cut, (it is now down to four hours on alternate days) the price of water storing containers jumped from HK\$3 to \$8. But against this is the ever present struggle to survive. Bus drivers for instance, earn only about US\$60 a month, gas station attendants (selling Texaco, Shell and Mobiloil) about \$40.. Food is cheap by most standards, but rents definitely are not, and most families are large.



Tenements in Wanchai

I soon learnt that the Government is doing a great deal to alleviate bad conditions, in construction of resettlement housing, (one multi-storey block every nine days), schools, provision of medical services etc., and in addition there are innumerable welfare organizations in Hong Kong, both local and international. However, the overcrowding and the problems of Hong Kong are legion. But I found one way to alleviate my own depression in the face of all this was to visit some of the welfare organizations and learn of their work. Eventually I became connected with the job of taking visitors to see the work of some of the welfare projects connected with the Anglican Church. Thereby I learn for myself and help to give these projects some welcome publicity -- I'm an ecclesiastical tout!

One of the organizations I visit is situated in one of the most populous districts in this populous city known as Wanchai, of Suzie Wong fame. Like many similar organizations it began in a small way, when a few soldiers connected with the Church became concerned by the number of children in the streets who were left to their own devices (or vices) by working parents too poor to pay for schooling. The soldiers started a boys' club in part of an old Bhuddist Temple. In twelve years this has grown into an establishment with a staff of twenty, known as St. James' Settlement.

Children are still the main concern, starting with the toddlers who attend the day nursery while their parents are at work. Many of these attractive infants have sponsors who pay HK\$30 a month to St. James' for their upkeep and, if they are Hong Kong residents, occasionally give "their" child a day's outing. There are still clubs for children of all ages, and also for mothers, about 160 of whom attend the films, talks, and sessions on sewing, baby care, etc..

One of the most important works of the Settlement is the practical training classes, two year courses in which boys learn the rudiments of printing, photography, woodwork, electrical and auto mechanics, in well equipped workshops. The printing shop in particular, turns out extremely good work and is self-supporting. 2,000 boys have graduated from these courses and are becoming increasingly sought after by employers. Girls learn sewing and handicrafts.

Two hundred breakfasts and three hundred lunches are provided daily for children living in the area, at a cost of HK 10¢, and milk is given free to six hundred a day. At present all these meals are cooked in a triangular space smaller than most Western kitchens, but a large new building with many facilities for all the activities of the Settlement has just been completed and will soon be ready for occupation. The children most in need of these meals are chosen by St. James' caseworkers and many come from the large modern primary school next door which is connected with St. James' but now run by the Government. This, like most Hong Kong schools, runs two sessions a day and has 2,000 children. Incidentally, the cost of sending a child to the school is HK \$15 (approximately \$3 U.S.) a month for the morning session and \$5 a month for the afternoon session, and many pupils have their fees and uniforms paid by St. James'.

Right: The new building
of St. James' Settlement:
squatters' shacks and
sidewalk kitchens.

Below: The nursery.



St. James' operates a dental clinic five nights a week and will soon re-open its medical clinic in the new building. The Settlement is also used in the evenings by children seeking space, light, and quiet, in which to do their homework. Another of the services is the distribution of gifts of clothing and food, and it also takes children on excursions away from the squalor of their home environment.

The need and value of the activities of St. James' and many similar organizations is obvious when this environment is seen. So, if our visitors are interested and have strong constitutions, we take them to see some of the homes in the area. After a year in Hong Kong I thought I knew how terrible the overcrowded conditions could be, but I was utterly appalled and horrified when I first saw some of the "homes" in Wanchai. To begin with we peer into a row of squatter shacks where families of five, six, or seven live in each eight foot by eight foot box. On my first visit I little realized how pleasant these would seem when I repassed them after returning from other nearby homes. Next we go into a tenement building which I think is typical of the places where the majority of the people of Hong Kong live. On the ground floor is a shop, and we go up into the gloom of a narrow, steep, rickety, staircase. Each floor was originally one rectangular room about thirty feet long and twelve feet wide, which has been sub-divided and sub-let to make living space for about seventy or more people. Cubicles, divided by a miscellany of curtains, wood and fibreboard, house families on one side; there is a narrow passage the length of the floor, and on the other side are tiers of "bedspaces" -- no more than shelves 4' x 6' which are the home for one family. At one end of the floor, overlooking the street, is a small balcony festooned with drying clothes, drying fish, drying vegetables, pots, pans, joss sticks and clutter.



An old lady outside the home she shares
with her grandson



A tenement kitchen

in the back room. In this dark, cluttered place, the thought of a fire outbreak gives one claustrophobia even on a ten-minute visit.

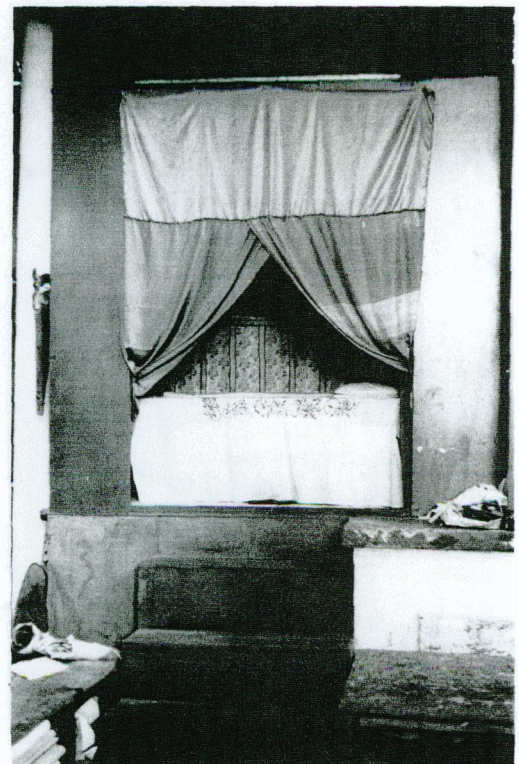
Outside again, I show visitors where a family of seven lives on the top step of the old temple beneath a tarpaulin "lean-to" against the wall. This family lives by earning about HK\$130 a month by selling snacks. Their particular delicacy requires cooking for almost an entire day, and this the wife does on the sidewalk near their home, while the husband hawks the food in the streets carrying the food in large baskets suspended from a shoulder pole.

One room of the temple is still used by the Settlement as a school room, but the rest is the home of a variety of colourful gods and goddesses who get regular worship and attention. There is one place where women can climb onto a little bed and pray to the appropriate diety for children -- it is rarely used!

Between the buildings in this area run passageways which provide the most desperately miserable dwellings of all. With the usual conglomeration of boardings, the space has been divided into homes which I can only liken to rabbit hutches. But they are far worse than most people would condemn animals to live in because the overwhelming horror of these places is that they are pitch dark. Several of the occupants work at night and sleep here by day. On several occasions when we have picked our way gingerly along the uneven

The bed in the temple

At the other end of the floor is one small, smoke blackened room which is both the kitchen, bathroom and toilet for all the occupants of the entire floor. Cooking is done on small individual kerosene stoves by each family. The Cantonese people have a reputation among the Chinese for being quick tempered, but when I see these kitchen/bathrooms and the queues at water pumps, I wonder at their patience. The only daylight and air provided in many of these tenements comes from the balcony at the front and a small window





duckboards of a passage with the aid of a flashlight, I have seen small animals confined there -- prospective meals for their owners. I particularly remember one wild-eyed little dog in a cage which would obviously have attacked anyone who approached it, and by contrast can't help marvelling at the humans who emerge from these places reasonably clean and -- most incredible of all -- cheerful.

The type of work done at St. James' is fairly representative of many of the welfare projects, though each is adapted to suit its particular environment. For instance, about an hour and a half's drive into the New Territories, there is one project which provides a school, clinic, hostel, and small church, for the children of fisher-folk in the area. This is chiefly remarkable for the man who runs it, Richard Tsang. He is an attractive, unassuming person who was recently described as a "spare time vicar and full time dynamo" because he not only

Above: The temple family preparing their wares. Below: Their home on the top step outside the original St. James'.





Cheerful
alley-dwellers
preparing lunch

runs and inspires his St. Simon's Hostel, but holds a full time job with the Government.

Near the dockyard area in Kowloon there is a small church whose main room is put to more uses than any other church I have come across. It is called The Holy Carpenter, and caters primarily to the workers in the area. Attached to the church is a three-storey hostel where young workers live. In the church, 80¢HK meals are served to about 150 people twice a day. There is a full-time clinic in one corner, a ping pong table and newspapers for recreation elsewhere, and lessons (mainly English language) are held most evenings. On Sundays, a curtain is drawn back to reveal the altar and normal services take place. A piece of land adjoining the hostel has been obtained on which a technical training center will be built.

One of the most cheerful places to visit is St. Christopher's Home. This is an orphanage and no doubt is like many another, but

the matron of the nursery is convinced that her babies -- all 100 of them -- are the most beautiful in the world. She goes from one to another, telling you their histories, their charming Chinese names, and singing their praises. Only in one case have I known her show any doubts in the matter -- she has nicknamed one dignified, double-chinned infant, Queen Victoria! Many of these babies have been abandoned by mothers made desperate by economic struggles, but they have usually been put where they will be found quickly. There are many "before and after" photographs at St. Christopher's, of babies who have suffered from malnutrition. It is astonishing how quickly they respond to treatment. Some of the children stay at the Home for only a short time while there is illness or other difficulties in their own homes, but there is great demand for the parentless babies, and many are adopted.

Apart from the babies, there are about 100 more boys and girls of 4 to 18 years of age at St. Christopher's, who are helped to become self-sufficient youngsters in a way of life similar to that of the children of the villages in the New Territories. The forty-five acre site of the orphanage is on a hillside overlooking the sea, and it is one of the most picturesque in Hong Kong. The children live in "families" of about twelve in simple cottages built by the boys themselves. They cook and clean for themselves with the aid of house mothers and fathers. They raise chickens, pigs, and cultivate vegetable plots. The girls also grow flowers, and the clothes drying near their cottages are noticeably brighter than those of the boys. They all attend the primary school on the site, and some are able to progress to secondary schools, and all get a good deal of practical education in their daily life.

Other places I take people to see, like the School for the Deaf, are similar to organizations of their kind anywhere in the world. All those I have described are run by the Anglican Church in Hong Kong. They all have paid staff and are supported by donations from a great variety of sources, including the Government. Most of the rice they distribute is supplied by C.A.R.E., the milk by Church World Service. But there are over a hundred welfare organizations working in Hong Kong, and there is a Council for Social Service which helps to co-ordinate their work and prevent over-lapping. Hong Kong must be at once the most rewarding and most disheartening place in which to help people to help themselves. There is so much work being done, yet that much is still the merest drop in the ocean.

Yours sincerely,

Brenda Oldham

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