

## Letters from Overseas

### Gary MacDonald Writes from China

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Dear friends,

Warm greetings from China!

On a warm autumn day early in this new college semester I find myself buying vegetables from a local shop on campus. To picture this shop you must imagine a small room with a row of shelves along one wall holding the assorted vegetables of the day, still showing some of the very soil from which they have been taken. A tidy bed and plastic wash basin in one corner are indications of the shop owner's simple possessions. An old and well-used scale for weighing vegetables alongside a small cardboard box where the cash is kept are the only other objects I see.

The shop itself is owned by a couple whose worn faces tell of lives that have not been easy. They speak softly to me in a village dialect as they search among the vegetables for the ripest and firmest they have to offer.

In paying for my purchases I know that I am under-charged. To remark on this would not be appropriate. To offer to pay more would be simply too vulgar. It is the way of these good people to show their respect to me as the stranger who has returned to be among them for another academic term. As I leave the shop we bid each other a pleasant day. The simple everyday act of buying vegetables.

Outside the shop I meet one of my students. As we walk along together it is then that I hear the story. My student tells me that he knows the son of the two shopkeepers. The son had come to this same college to study. He arrived that first year without enough money to pay his tuition. Realizing this, his classmates put together what they could from their own meagre finances and the tuition was somehow paid.

To finance further expenses in his four years of study the son worked every noon hour and every evening in a restaurant near the college campus. He

did this every day without fail for four years. Knowing that his days also included long hours of study, I have no idea when he would have slept. The son continually made the highest marks in his class and started a full-time job the day after graduation. It was then that he began to save until he had enough money so that his parents, having grown too old and weak to work in the fields, could buy this small shop where I had just bought vegetables. In this, as is the way of people here, the son's parents can now enjoy their days as simple shop-keepers, giving them a place and occupation in the life of their community.

The story itself is typical of what I have seen so many times here. In humble and quiet ways, people who have little somehow find a way to help people who have less.

There is no fundraising campaign. No one thinks of forming a committee in benefit of the poor. Perhaps it is that when you have so little yourself you already understand the needs of others around you. By the very nature of life's circumstances all of you walk the same path together.

The Western world is now concerned with its own woes as financial insecurity strikes many for the first time in their entire lives. I wonder what path we might choose should we suddenly find ourselves as the ones in need.

Blessings,

Gary MacDonald

***Gary MacDonald** is a United Church of Canada global mission personnel associate serving with the Amity Foundation in China. The work of this global partner and the work of overseas personnel is made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.*

