

Letters from Overseas

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"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."
—from "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Dear friends,

Much of what we do in our lives is marked by both hope and fear. When students first come to this college where I teach they are filled with both hope and fear. For most, this is the first time they have been anywhere other than the place where they were born. It is the first time to do many things. To actually pay for food is something they have never done before. Until entering the college gate, any food that was ever available came from the family fields. This means root vegetables in winter and meat only during the Chinese New Year when the pig was slaughtered. Some have never spoken standard Chinese before and wrestle with the pronunciation, which is as foreign to them as the English language they are required to study.

Student life becomes a mixture of hopes and fears. Hope that it just may be possible to get through these four years successfully. And the ever-present fear that something could go seriously wrong. To have never handled money before and to know that the money you now have in your hands is all and there is no more is a scary thought. Students stop eating three meals a day in fear that their money will be used up before the end of a school term.

Perhaps for many of us, Christmas marks that time when all our fears and hopes come together. We hope that maybe this Christmas will somehow be that promised good time of celebration which we long to have. Yet, behind it all lies the fear that maybe something will go wrong, leaving us with that empty feeling of being so very fragile or even broken.

"You, Bethlehem, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule my people Israel," Matthew's gospel tells us. A seemingly impossible hope for a small unknown town. In fear, Mary and Joseph with the newborn Jesus fled to Egypt so soon after the birth, the Bible tells us.

We read in John's gospel that it is love that casts out fear. Perhaps that is where we go wrong. We keep hoping when what we need to do is love.

Across our campus here, the students make their way to the dining hall. They walk more in groups than alone. Back in their dormitories they have together counted their coins and pooled their resources. Perhaps this is what we all need to do more often. As Paul puts it so beautifully in his letter to the Romans, "be tenderly affectionate one to another." May this be the Christmas in which we do exactly that.

Merry Christmas to you all!
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 are made possible through your gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of The United Church of Canada.*

