

A Journey of Peace: Study Leave Reflections with OMF New Zealand

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Preface: A Vessel for Peace

This isn't an academic paper or a comprehensive survey of East Asian missions. It's simply what I saw, felt, and learned during two weeks with OMF International—a collection of journal entries, prayers, and observations from a pastor stepping outside his familiar world.

I serve at Hibiscus Coast Presbyterian Church in Auckland, where ministry often feels comfortably suburban amidst the typical challenge of an aging congregation working tirelessly towards revitalisation. This journey was about listening and learning in contexts utterly different from my own. I wanted to witness God's work in places I'd only read about, to see how the gospel takes root in soil nothing like the ground I tend at home.

Throughout the trip, Jesus' words from Luke 10:5–6 kept returning to me: "When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace be to this house.' If someone who promotes peace is there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you." That image of God's peace settling into ordinary spaces—homes, guesthouses, borrowed meeting rooms—became the lens through which I understood what I was seeing in Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Tacloban, and Manila.

These reflections come from my particular angle as a Reformed pastor, shaped by my theological convictions and pastoral calling. I hope they capture something of the beauty, complexity, and real cost of mission work. More than anything, I want to share what I learned about OMF's ministry in the hope that it might inspire HBCPC—and perhaps others—to engage more deeply with global missions through prayer, support, and genuine relationship.

Introduction: Why This Journey?

This trip belonged to OMF's National Director. He was visiting missionaries in regions where he hadn't personally visited up to now —Inner Mongolia and Tacloban—places where the work needed fresh eyes and encouragement. I tagged along as an observer during my study leave, invited to see OMF's mission up close.

OMF International started back in 1865 as the China Inland Mission, founded by Hudson Taylor. It was rebranded in 1964 and now serves throughout East Asia, from major cities like Beijing to remote communities like Tacloban in the Philippines. What drew me to OMF is their commitment to sustainable, contextual mission—they focus on equipping local believers and doing culturally sensitive outreach. It resonates with that Luke 10 vision of peace finding its home in receptive households.

We planned the itinerary to include Sundays in Inner Mongolia and Tacloban. I wanted authentic glimpses of worship and lay leadership, not polished presentations for visitors. As a pastor serving a multicultural congregation at HBCPC, I had specific questions driving me: What assumptions do I carry about cross-cultural ministry that need challenging? How might fresh perspectives on discipleship reshape my approach at home? What does it actually look like to cultivate peace-filled communities in Auckland's diverse suburbs?

This experience offered me a chance to see how OMF's work might inspire me to engage globally—perhaps through missions-focused initiatives or cross-cultural partnerships that move beyond the occasional newsletter.

The journey took us through Beijing, Hohhot, Tacloban, and Manila. We made stops at cultural landmarks like the Great Wall and spent time at the OMF guesthouse in Quezon City. From Beijing's surveillance-heavy streets to Tacloban's post-disaster poverty, each location revealed something about how God's peace rests in fragile places. As an observer and occasional contributor, I experienced mission unfiltered. It sparked questions about how HBCPC might embody similar resilience and hospitality.

The Itinerary: Four Regions, Four Worlds

The trip unfolded across four distinct regions, each with its own cultural texture and missional challenges. The National Director chose these locations to balance his oversight responsibilities with exposure to different ministry contexts—urban and rural, pioneering and sustaining, ancient traditions bumping up against modern pressures. The Sundays in Hohhot and Tacloban anchored the journey in real worship with actual congregations.

Travel Diary:

Beijing (Night 1 / Days 1–2)

I arrived late in Beijing and spent the first night in a hotel—a quiet haven before diving into the city's intensity. The next morning we tried to visit Tiananmen Square but gave up quickly. The crowds and security checkpoints felt overwhelming.

Walking Beijing's streets afterward, I couldn't stop noticing the surveillance cameras. They're everywhere—impossible to miss once you start looking. For someone just passing through, they create an unsettling atmosphere. But for local believers and missionaries, this is simply daily life. Every gathering carries risk. Every conversation requires discretion. Yet their witness doesn't falter. It takes on this quiet resilience—sharing hope discreetly, living out the gospel with remarkable courage.

In this monitored world, Luke 10's peace shines through small acts of faithfulness, proving the gospel's power even under scrutiny.

The OMF missionaries who usually work in Beijing were on leave or reassigned, so we didn't observe any active ministry in the City. But the hotel gave me space to acclimate, to begin processing what I was walking into.

Inner Mongolia — Hohhot (Nights 2–3 / Days 2–4)

A bullet train carried us to Hohhot, where we spent two nights with missionaries Andrew and Rachel. I'll admit, the city surprised me. I'd imagined nomadic sparsity—yurts on

windswept plains. Instead, I found an urban centre blending Mongolian heritage with rapid modernisation.

Andrew and Rachel were warm hosts. Rachel's dual Mongolian-Chinese identity gives her natural credibility in this cultural crossroads, much like the multicultural dynamics we navigate at HBCPC. We timed the visit for a Sunday Bible study so I could see their work in context.

Beijing (Return) → Great Wall / Summer Palace / Forbidden City (Days 5–7)

We returned to Beijing by train and spent a few days visiting major sites. The Great Wall's vastness provoked thoughts about human ambition and isolation—all that effort to keep others out. The Summer Palace offered a contrast, with its deliberate calm amid Beijing's chaos. The Forbidden City impressed me with its scale but felt oddly lifeless. Grand courtyards but no domestic warmth, all that imperial power but something essential missing.

These weren't just tourist stops. They provided space for pastoral reflection. China's fragile prosperity kept catching my attention—empty apartments, declining birth rates. The inequalities OMF addresses in their work felt more visible against this backdrop of monumental architecture.

Silk Market → Hong Kong → Manila (Days 8–10)

In Beijing we explored the vibrant Silk Market before flying to Manila via Hong Kong. The Hong Kong airport was impressive—a bridge between China's structure and what I'd soon discover was the Philippines' much more relational culture. The flight and the layover was a good transition between China and the Philippines, and it formed a natural transition to OMF's Southeast Asian work.

Tacloban & Basay (Days 11–14)

From Manila I flew to Tacloban, where missionaries Matt and Christelle welcomed us into their family home. Through home visits, shared meals, and Sunday worship, I saw ministry unfolding in a community still marked by Typhoon Yolanda's devastation. Poverty here isn't abstract—it's everywhere you look. Catholic tradition shapes daily life in ways I hadn't fully grasped before. And there's another layer of difficulty: the New People's Army still controls large portions of Leyte and Negros, which restricts movement and adds tension to everything.

The Sunday service gave me an unfiltered look at local leadership—raw, eager, and genuinely hungry for more.

Manila Guesthouse (Final Days)

The journey concluded at OMF's guesthouse in Quezon City. Typhoons were passing through the south China sea, which meant mostly staying indoors. But the rest was welcome, and the conversations with OMF staff and other missionaries gave me a wider view of their work—the networks that link short-term projects with long-term presence.

These locations showed me OMF's diverse mission. They also got me thinking about parallels for HBCPC's multicultural ministry and what it means to cultivate peace-bearing communities both locally and globally.

Inner Mongolia: A place of Peace Amid Fragility

First Encounters with the Underground Church

I met Andrew and Rachel on a Saturday night at a Bible study—my first glimpse of the underground church behind the iron wall. We climbed stairs in a dimly lit language centre after being blessed to a typical Mongolian dinner. The group went through their routine: activating VPNs, securing the door. Precautions that left me uneasy, but they handled it matter-of-factly.

Andrew's calm leadership and Rachel's warm presence helped settle my nerves. As personal introductions and sharing began, I felt that Luke 10 peace settling over the room—a quiet sign of God's kingdom present in a hidden place.

Navigating Closed Doors

China is a "closed" country for Christianity. The state permits religion only through tightly controlled bodies like the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, which offers a regulated, state-approved version of the gospel. Real missionary work can't involve open evangelism. It relies instead on small, discreet gatherings.

Inner Mongolia adds layers of complexity. Christianity navigates not just state restrictions but also a cultural landscape shaped by Tibetan Buddhism and shamanistic practices. Andrew and Rachel's ministry honours these traditions while quietly sharing Christ. It's relational, contextual work that moves at the pace of trust.

The Rhythm of Their Ministry

Andrew and Rachel run a language and community centre five to six days a week, with activities starting after 5 p.m. to fit around school schedules. Weekends fill up quickly—Saturday Bible studies, Sunday services, shared lunches that build community. They're raising their son in Hohhot while their daughter stays with family in New Zealand. That separation adds a layer of personal sacrifice I hadn't fully considered before seeing their daily life.

On Sunday we joined their fellowship for Worship at a neighbouring language centre, where they also teach language using the Grape Seed program. About twenty Mongolian and Chinese believers gathered along with their children to worship God and share from the Bible. They were eager but clearly working through scripture without much theological training. A brother led a discussion on Leviticus—heartfelt but missing the connection to Christ.

When invited, I offered a brief expository reflection, trying to tie Old Testament sacrifice to Jesus' grace without overshadowing the local leader's contribution. I wanted to complement his words, to share peace in this community. This moment captured OMF's grassroots approach—building trust through education and fellowship rather than imported programs.

The Cultural and Spiritual Landscape

Inner Mongolia blends nomadic heritage with urban growth. We witnessed ministry in the bustling city of Hohhot where about 3.6mil people live. Most of the people in Hohhot are Chinese, from the Ethnic Han group, with only about 10% being Mongolian. Christianity here is young, often led by lay leaders with minimal theological training.

Sustainability is a genuine concern. Andrew and Rachel have an upcoming home assignment—a well-deserved break to rest, reconnect with supporters, refocus, and eventually return. But their absence raises questions about continuity. Who keeps the work going? How deep are the roots they've planted?

Daily Struggles, Quiet Ministry

Andrew and Rachel told us that debt crushes many of the families they work with. People take out loans just to cover basic needs, then credit card interest eats up whatever income they have. It becomes this trap—financial, yes, but spiritual too.

Alcoholism is the other shadow over this community. What starts as a way to stay warm through brutal winters ends in broken homes and courtyards littered with bottles.

Andrew and Rachel try to offer support without creating dependency. It's harder than it sounds. One night, Andrew sat with a brother who was in crisis—didn't preach, didn't offer solutions. Just sat with him, hands on knees, breathing together until the sun came up. When there's essentially no addiction support infrastructure, their work stays gritty and unglamorous.

The underground church is vibrant, but no one's counting heads. Groups deliberately stay under twenty people to avoid official scrutiny. Even so, some of the leaders we met have been questioned by authorities.

I felt that risk sitting in worship in Hohhot. It struck me as both quiet defiance and profound devotion—with very real consequences hanging over it. Just days after our visit, Open Doors UK reported that more than 70 people had been detained or fined in a crackdown on churches in Eastern China. The threat isn't theoretical.

In these hidden spaces, Luke's peace rests in whispered prayers.

Andrew's visa renewals remain an ongoing challenge. The tension from last year's visa process still lingers in their reflections on the matter, underscoring the perseverance this work requires in a regulated environment.

Through cafes, teaching centres, and discreet encounters, Andrew and Rachel create safe spaces for faith to grow. Luke's words kept proving true: peace rested in these gatherings. Their example offered insights for HBCPC's multicultural ministry that I'm still processing.

Tacloban and Basay: Poverty, Faith, and Patient Discipleship

First Impressions

Tacloban's poverty hit me just as suddenly as the heat and humidity. Cash ruled everything—credit cards and apps were essentially useless. This was such a profound contrast from the days before where absolutely everything was paid for through an App. In Tacloban, buildings sat dimly lit, with narrow shafts of light piercing through neglected structures. The missionaries' rented home reflected this neglect too, with an unresponsive landlord who ignored basic maintenance. I found the wet, unsanitary alleyways where locals walked with perpetually soiled feet, became this stark symbol of daily hardship in the humid climate.

Nothing about life here was polished, and no one pretended otherwise. Families lived hand-to-mouth, yet they'd proudly display school certificates on their walls—symbols of hope in hard circumstances. But not everyone made it that far. Dropout rates stay high, and the gap between what people aspire to and what they can actually reach felt painfully visible.

Matt and Christelle's Ministry Rhythm

Matt and Christelle welcomed us with genuine warmth despite the challenging circumstances they live in daily. Their ministry revolves around weekends. Friday evenings, full Saturdays, and most Sundays are spent on the neighbouring island of Negros in a town called Basay. There they support a new church plant and its pastor—leading Bible studies, making home visits, running youth gatherings.

Mondays they recover. The rest of the week involves language coaching in Waray-Waray, the local language of both Tacloban and Basay. They coordinate with OMF and their sending church, all while raising their young family in the middle of it all.

It's an intense schedule that tests their resilience. Watching them, I kept thinking about sustainable rhythms and how easy it is to burn out in mission work.

Navigating Culture and Faith

Their work means navigating both the Waray-Waray language and a deeply embedded Catholic heritage. Catholicism here feels more cultural than spiritual. People attend mass, sit silently, leave—often without grasping what the liturgy means or why it matters. Shrines and saint statues are everywhere, blending faith with protective rituals passed down through generations.

Discipleship in this context takes enormous patience. Matt and Christelle are trying to help people move beyond inherited tradition toward personal relationships with Christ. But it's slow work—language barriers, distrust of foreigners, and the weight of centuries-old practices all push back against change.

Basay: Up Close

In Basay, during a local festival, Johan and I stayed in a modest hotel while Matt and Christelle lived in a simple home nearby. We joined them for Saturday visits and home Bible studies. What struck me was the genuine hunger for the gospel in some of these homes—real spiritual openness despite the poverty, language barriers, and lingering suspicion of outsiders that could easily have kept people at arm's length.

In one home, I shared from Colossians, emphasising Christ's sufficiency—no additions needed to know Him or live in His grace. I used commentaries on my phone and wove in parts of my own testimony, trying to guide the discussion gently. A woman's quiet "amen" signalled peace settling in that moment.

The Sunday service showed me both the promise and the challenge of local leadership. The pastor, brother Yun, brought genuine zeal but almost no thoughtful preparation. He's been blind for the past fifteen years and relies on audiobooks and teachings to learn and prepare, which limits what he can do. The building itself has seen significant improvements since Matt and Christelle arrived—they've clearly invested in the space. But like much of the island, it still has no running water, limited ventilation, and a roof that leaks when it rains.

Sitting there, I couldn't help but think about the stark contrast with the wealthy enclaves we'd passed through elsewhere in the Philippines. What struck me most was the missing middle class—not just absent, but conspicuously so, as if the country had been carved into only two worlds.

The Challenge of Dependency

Matt and Christelle's ministry largely focuses on supporting the blind lay pastor as this new church plant works toward stability and self-sufficiency. But it's complicated. He's untrained and depends on them for almost everything—transport, funding, motivation, guidance. Of concern and frustration to Matt and Christelle is his choice to preach in locations far from the church while neglecting the children and elderly women right in his own community. It's actually weakening the local presence when his role should be strengthening it.

Financial dependency complicates everything. Well meaning foreigners are seen as dollar sources and prayers turn into pleas. Tithes become personal funds for brother Yun and his wife. In this new plant Vision and savings give way to simple survival.

Matt and Christelle started small enterprises to foster independence—they bought a peanut butter grinder and a tricycle, hoping these would create sustainable income for the church. But the profits quickly vanished. The tricycle now sits unused¹, gleaming and unmoved. The grinder has no peanuts to grind. Both have become symbols of unrealised potential rather than the self-sufficiency they were meant to enable.

Matt and Christelle keep trying to build local leadership without creating dependency. Part of that means stepping back and letting people see for themselves what's possible—and what's being lost. It's a delicate balance where peace rests lightly.

These dynamics reminded me of African contexts I've encountered before—hand-to-mouth living, education remaining perpetually out of reach, lives desperately craving gospel depth, and leadership struggling to step out of dependance on external enablers. Matt and Christelle's quiet, family-integrated dedication embodies a holistic approach.

Manila: A Haven of Resilience

In Manila, OMF's guesthouse in Quezon City offered rest amid the city's chaos. A hot shower felt like luxury. Warm conversations revealed OMF's broader work—basketball ministries in urban areas, slum outreach, Muslim engagement, lay preacher training. There were more stories and testimonies than I can recount.

I met Nicole, a dedicated staff member whose passion for the work was infectious. I also spent time with a Nigerian-Swiss couple on short term mission with Serve Asia, whose energy lit up OMF's vision, even though exhaustion was catching up with me by then.

Typhoons curtailed outdoor plans, but the guesthouse remained this haven where discussions revealed the networks linking OMF's short-term projects with their long-term commitments. Amid the storms outside, Luke 10's peace rested inside—a testament to OMF's resilience and sustainable mission philosophy.

¹ At the time of the writing of this report, Matt and Christelle reported a shift in the usage of the tricycle with some interest from local drivers, and an attempt at putting aside the offering to pay for fuel and maintenance of the tricycle.

People and Challenges: The Human Side

The Missionaries

The missionaries I met embodied both promise and real challenge. Andrew and Rachel in Hohhot navigate threat of persecution while mentoring lay leaders who bring tremendous zeal but limited theological depth. Rachel's bilingual, bicultural identity bridges Mongolian and Chinese communities, enabling the kind of nuanced evangelism this context requires. But their demanding schedule and family sacrifices—particularly raising a son locally while their daughter stays in New Zealand—highlight the personal cost.

Matt and Christelle in Tacloban balance intensive ministry with family life in poverty. They're sowing gospel seeds through persistent home visits despite weekends that leave them exhausted.

The Context Shapes the Work

In China's closed context, missionaries like Andrew and Rachel must maintain a legal cover justifying their presence. They run the language centre full-time, teaching English and building relationships through work that can withstand state scrutiny. This "job" enables their visa, turning each lesson into a bridge for quiet gospel conversations.

The Philippines, on the other hand, welcomes missionaries openly. Here Matt and Christelle need no business front. Their identity as missionaries allows them to focus directly on home visits, Bible studies, and youth gatherings. It frees energy for discipleship, though poverty and cultural challenges remain formidable.

Key Challenges

Several challenges kept surfacing across the different contexts I visited, and they're worth naming.

The lay leaders I met share Scripture with genuine zeal, but often with minimal preparation. This creates a real risk of theological shallowness taking root. The hunger for God's word is absolutely there—I saw it again and again—but the biblical and theological foundations often aren't in place yet to sustain that hunger long-term.

Reflecting on some of the stories I heard in the OMF guesthouse, I'm wrestling with questions about church planting in areas where denominations are already established. Is this kingdom expansion or just denominational growth? The line between the two isn't always clear to me, and I suspect it isn't always clear to the missionaries either.

In the Philippines, there's a historical distrust of foreigners among older generations that can't be ignored. It requires the kind of patient trust-building that simply can't be rushed, no matter how urgent the ministry needs feel.

And then there are the very human constraints the missionaries themselves face. Health issues wear people down. Family demands pull in different directions. Home assignments are essential—genuinely crucial for rest, reconnecting with supporters, refocusing on calling, and preparing to return. But every time a key missionary steps away, even for good reasons, it raises hard questions about continuity. Who carries the work forward? How deep have the roots actually gone?

Reflections and Takeaways: What Changed in Me

My reflections blend cultural observations, theological insights, and practical applications for my own ministry.

Cultural and Missional Observations

Beijing's fragile prosperity—the surveillance, declining population, empty apartments—raised uncomfortable questions about sharing the gospel in controlled societies. It offered lessons for global missions I hadn't considered from the comfort of Auckland.

Inner Mongolia's young churches and untrained lay leaders mirrored something I recognise at HBCPC: the tension between theological training and grassroots evangelism. These leaders connect with people naturally and share the gospel through lived experience. But without solid biblical foundations, that zeal can drift into shallowness. It's a balance we need at home too—equipping people theologically while not dampening their authentic witness.

In Tacloban and Manila, I kept bumping up against my own assumptions about what discipleship looks like. Filipino Catholicism is everywhere—statues of saints, religious processions, rituals passed down through generations. As a Reformed pastor who instinctively reaches for Scripture alone and justification by faith, I found myself asking hard questions: Where's the line between cultural expression and syncretism? When does devotion actually point people to Christ, and when does it obscure His finished work?

I don't have neat answers. What I do know is that the OMF missionaries' patient, relational approach—building trust over years, not demanding immediate theological precision—offers something my usual pastoral instincts might miss. The gospel needs to take root in the soil it finds, not the soil I wish were there.

Buddhism shaped my experience in Beijing and Hohhot differently. Temples, statues, prayers for harmony—it's a system built entirely on self-effort and accumulated merit. Standing in those spaces, I wondered how you share grace with someone whose entire worldview assumes you earn your way to peace. Again, the missionaries seem to have learned something about humility in these encounters that Auckland's religious diversity demands from me too.

But what struck me most about China wasn't the religion—it was the fragility hiding beneath all that projected control: Property bubbles. Ghost cities. Birth rates collapsing, Rising Unemployment. On a train in Hohhot, a woman made a desperate offer I wasn't expecting. In Beijing, the "lady-bar" solicitations revealed something darker beneath the surface prosperity. Luke 10's peace doesn't rest in gleaming towers or monitored streets. It rests in humble homes where missionaries quietly offer real hope. That's what I need to remember too—we meet brokenness with Christ's sufficiency, not solutions that paper over desperation.

How God is at Work

In Hohhot, Tacloban, and Manila, God's work unfolds through patient discipleship in hidden spaces. It's not dramatic revivals or Gen Z surges like we hear about in some European contexts. In Hohhot's underground studies, God knits believers together through whispered prayers and English classes, forming resilient faith amid debt and alcoholism. In Basay's home visits, He shapes lives through Matt and Christelle's gentle

nudges, breaking dependency and pointing to Christ's sufficiency. In Manila's guesthouse, amid passing typhoons, God connects networks that inspires collaboration.

This is mustard-seed kingdom work—eager disciples with minimal training but genuine hunger for God. It's perpetual, unglamorous labor that requires endurance and deep reserves of faith. Watching it unfold challenged me: Am I willing to pray faithfully for work this slow, this steady, this resistant to measurable outcomes?

Lessons for home

Meeting Andrew, Rachel, Matt, Christelle, and Nicole was transformative. It resonated with HBCPC's journey and desire for faithful witness and community transformation. Their costly commitment—navigating surveillance, poverty, dependency—challenged me to lead HBCPC more boldly in the Hibiscus Coast's diverse context.

Supporting Global Missions Locally. Andrew and Rachel's work in Hohhot, Matt and Christelle's in Tacloban, and Nicole's in Manila depend on churches like HBCPC. Their ministry in restricted or resource-scarce regions needs our prayers and consistent giving. This aligns with our call to engage globally, ensuring missions work like that of OMF's missionaries bears lasting fruit.

Staying Connected to the Mission Field. Beyond occasional newsletters, HBCPC must engage with mission realities—Hohhot's discreet Bible studies, Tacloban's persistent home visits, Manila's creative outreach. Direct connections, like hosting missionary visits or organising short-term trips, align with our missional emphasis on relational networks. It would inspire our congregation in ways secondhand reports simply can't.

Learning Cultural Contexts for Multicultural Ministry. HBCPC's journey as part of PCANZ, calls us to minister multiculturally with intentionality. Our Chinese, Filipino, and other parishioners reflect the very regions I visited. They're shaped by Buddhism or Catholicism in ways I now understand better. Rachel's bilingual bridge-building and Matt and Christelle's Waray-Waray fluency show what's possible. It inspires me to disciple immigrants more sensitively, embracing Auckland's diversity.

These lessons challenge me and HBCPC to equip lay leaders better, prioritise gospel-driven outreach, and foster peace-filled communities that reflect our community's diversity.

Conclusion: A Call to Peace

This journey left vivid images I can't shake: Hohhot's whispered prayers in a locked room, Tacloban's gleaming unused tricycle, Manila's rain-soaked resilience, and Christ's peace somehow present in all these fragile households. OMF's mission—equipping locals, bridging cultures—demonstrates the gospel's quiet power.

I'm deeply grateful to OMF, to Johan, Andrew, Rachel, Matt, Christelle, and to God for this glimpse of His kingdom at work. Thanks to HBCPC's donors, elders, congregation, and my family for making this study leave possible. I pray HBCPC and our Presbytery will respond with prayer, generous giving, and perhaps even sending people—maybe partnering directly with OMF missionaries.

In a world of sharp contrasts—prosperity and poverty, surveillance and freedom—Jesus' peace still calls us to be vessels of God's kingdom in ordinary spaces.

May peace rest on our houses, as it did on theirs.

Postscript

Some names in this report may have been altered to protect the identities of the people involved.