

*The*  
**GLOBE**  
ISSUE

**CT**


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I S S U E

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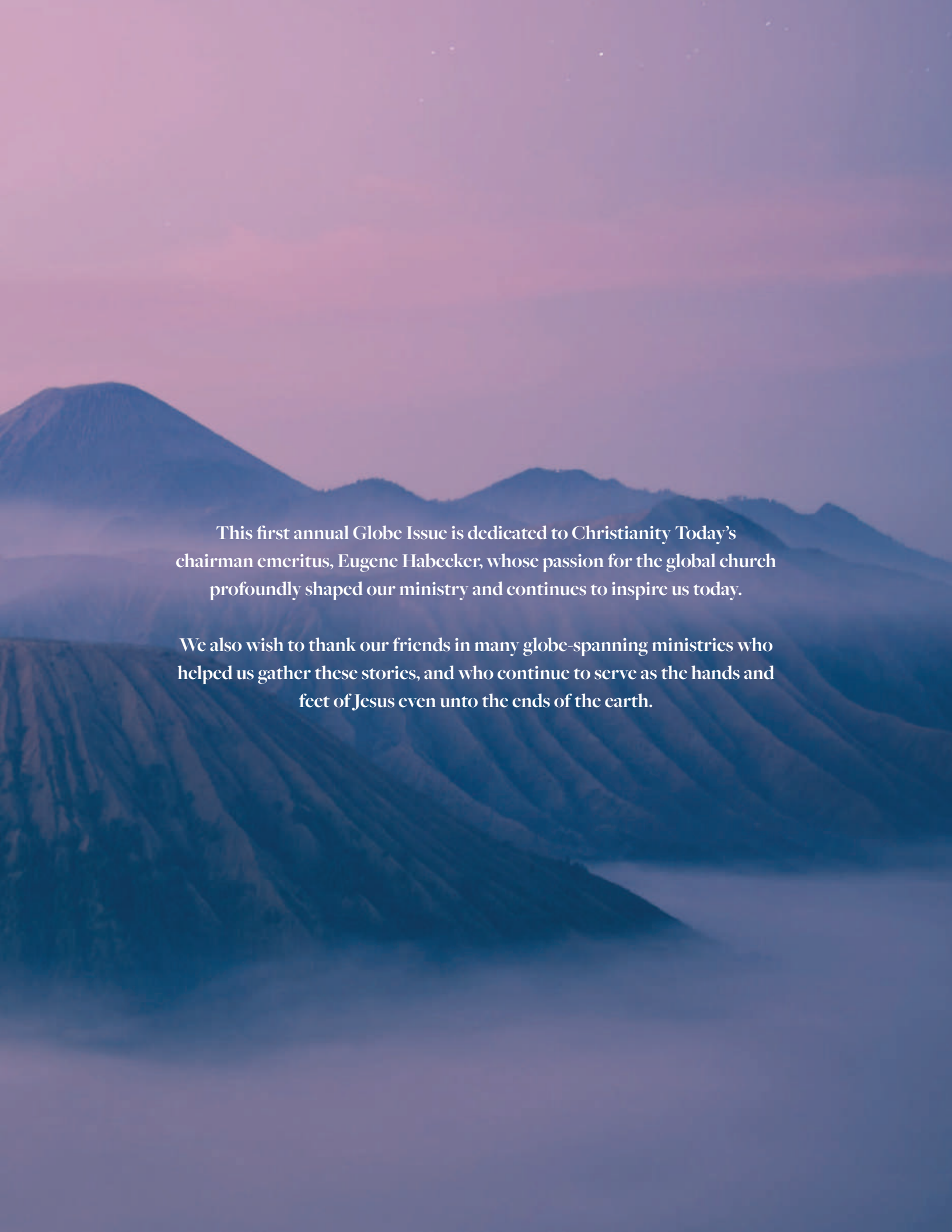
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**CT**



As its name implies, Christianity Today has always been about a simple question: What does it mean to follow Jesus Christ in our time? How should we think and feel about the world we inhabit, how can we expand the depth and breadth of our relationship with Jesus, and how can we join him in his work?

Without a global perspective, our vision of what it means to follow Jesus grows small. In this, our first annual Globe Issue, we hope you find a captivating and capacious vision of how men and women are following the call of Christ all around the planet. We hope you find your horizons broadened on what we mean when we say Christianity today. We hope, too, you catch a vision of the vast and varied, complex and compelling, sometimes broken but always beautiful global church, the bride of Christ, who continues to join with him in his redemption and restoration of the world.



This first annual Globe Issue is dedicated to Christianity Today's chairman emeritus, Eugene Habecker, whose passion for the global church profoundly shaped our ministry and continues to inspire us today.

We also wish to thank our friends in many globe-spanning ministries who helped us gather these stories, and who continue to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus even unto the ends of the earth.



# OUR BODY GROANS FOR UNITY

RACHEL PIEH JONES

**I**n 2018, my husband and I baptized our 17-year-old son in the Red Sea at a dusty beach off the coast of Djibouti. One hundred meters behind us was the International Airport of Djibouti and the security fences of Camp Lemonnier, the American military base.

On that humid morning, we gathered together as a church community made up of people from Madagascar, Korea, the United States, Kenya, and the Congo. As the sun rose over the ocean, we shared communion, baptized my son in warm, salty water, and then ate breakfast together.

I don't know what stories the Djiboutian airport guards told their families that evening—maybe something about a teenager getting shoved into the water, followed by a lot of singing from a strange, international gathering of people. But I do know the Malagasy couple and the Congolese family in our church have been a part of my son's life since he was four years old. And I do know the Korean family, new to Djibouti, had tears in their eyes when they thanked me for inviting them. "God is with this church," they said.

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The story of our community is one of faithfulness and hope. But it's also one of

compromise. My family has lived in Djibouti since 2004, and for most of these years, we have attended *l'Eglise Protestante Evangelique de Djibouti*, or EPED. Main services are on Sunday evening and predominantly in French.

Even though French language and culture permeate our church, the transient community includes almost no French members. At potlucks, we feast on Indian, Djiboutian, Ethiopian, and Burundian cuisine and tangle up the Malagasy names of our fellow parishioners, which often include up to 25 letters.

Our current pastor is from Senegal, the choir director from Madagascar, the administrator from Congo, the drummer from Korea, and the guitarist from Kenya. The parish council includes eight members who hail from five different nations and eight different denominational traditions. We gather in our only common language, native to few. We come out of our weekly work contexts—where our neighbors, teachers, coworkers, and friends are Muslim—and enter the church compound eager to share what unites our small, complicated community: a commitment to Jesus.

It might be tempting to call our church a little slice of heaven and quote from Revelation 7:9-10: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."







We *are* in fact Christians from many tribes, peoples, and languages gathered to worship God, so that picture is true to some extent. But it is also simplistic. Every time we come together, each of us brings with us not only linguistic and cultural differences, but also theological and stylistic preferences. Those clashing perspectives can make it challenging for our church to worship together.

They can also affect me personally. At the end of a demanding week of cross-cultural life, I might feel exhausted by services in which I strain to understand the sermon, where I may not feel moved by the music, and where fellowship requires effort. But only if I attend church expecting wholly to receive.

“It can take practice to find God in the midst of our differences and not just bemoan the more wearing parts of the adjustment,” writes Mark Labberton, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, in *Called: The Crisis and Promise of Following Jesus Today*. “We may say we want to be part of a vigorously multiethnic congregation and that we want it to be economically mixed, but this can make church more complicated. It means adjusting our expectations.”

This insight is situated in a chapter about the church in exile, where Labberton addresses Christian community as a counter-cultural group set against the secular world of American consumerism or, in my case, a surrounding Muslim culture. Christians are welcome in Djibouti, but we are an extreme minority, so the imagery of exile hits close to home. The idea of adjusted expectations also resonates deeply with me.

The compromises we make at our church have enabled us to experience vibrant Christian life. As a congregation, we consciously choose to set aside personal preferences, honor one another above ourselves, and hold fast to primary theological issues while we “agree to disagree” on

secondary ones. To a watching world, we offer a radical testimony of humility, love, and the power of God.

The world around us *is* watching. On high holidays like Easter and Christmas, French and Djiboutian soldiers armed with rifles guard the gates of the church compound. The pastor keeps a list of members so he can share openly with the government, should they inquire. My husband has been asked by former university coworkers why he goes to church—meaning they’re well aware that he does. When we enter the church building, local children approach us, beg for food or money, and ask us what we do inside and why.

We are a city on a hill, not a lamp hidden beneath a bowl. Our good deeds—by grace, may they be good!—shine before others.

“There is a *grande richesse*,” says Tshimanga Mukendi Pierre, our church’s administrator, music leader, and the longest-term member of the community. “A spirit of openness and not of judgment.”

That ecumenism starts inside our church and extends beyond our walls. On special occasions, Catholics and Protestants in the area worship together. For a season, our church didn’t have a pastor, and when a member died, a local Catholic priest performed the funeral. The few Christians here partner for social service activities, like caring for street children, or helping out with education programs for low-income families. There’s also a women’s prayer group that includes Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, and others.

“You would never see this in Congo,” Mukendi Pierre said, who arrived in 2002 and brought his family from Congo in 2008. “But here, we live with others, and we are enriched by our differences as we put aside our prejudices and judgment.”

Social collaboration is one thing. Dealing

with difficult theological differences is quite another. But by God's grace, we've been able to do that too.

The pastor before our current one was a German man unfamiliar with more Pentecostal expressions of faith. One afternoon in 2005, an Ethiopian church gathered on EPED property and performed an exorcism on a young woman. While she screamed and writhed in the yard of our church compound, the pastor, who didn't know what to do, told Mukendi Pierre to call the police. But by the time that pastor left in 2017, he had hosted monthly prayer gatherings to deal with spiritual possession and attack.

"I came to Djibouti to teach the Word of God," he said in his final sermon at our church. "But I am leaving Djibouti having been taught the Word of God by Christians here."

Mukendi Pierre's wife, Eliane, emphasizes a similar message. "We must set aside fear of something different so that we can learn and change," she told me. "It takes courage to ask, 'What is good for or about this other person?'"

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God has done miraculous things in and through EPED. Members have been healed of cancer. One pastor, paralyzed in half his body from a beach accident, was able to walk again after receiving prayer. A young boy at a church picnic was pulled unconscious from the ocean and saved. Broken marriages have been reconciled, victims of serious car accidents healed without medical intervention, and explosive house fires narrowly averted.

We have also seen pain in the form of death, disease, financial devastation, divorce, and disagreements. With so many of our members living away from blood relatives and

support networks, we're learning to be the family of God for each other in times of both celebration and sorrow.

"We are a small community," Mukendi Pierre said, "but we have a big vision of God. This is what gives me hope."

It is hard to gather in a foreign language and reach across theological and cultural differences. Sometimes I step outside during a church service, just to take a few deep breaths and get some distance from others. I'm sure they do the same thing in response to me. But I don't go to this church for personal fulfillment. I attend because from Christ "the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:16).

That truth holds for all of us around the globe. As we practice dying to self, church becomes a place where we encounter God in the *imago Dei* of someone we might disagree with. We remain together, because corporately, we can cling to a bigger vision of God than one we could hold to alone. Right there in that space, we're transformed more and more into God's likeness, and church becomes a sacred gift.

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**Author Note:** Rachel Pieh Jones writes about life at the crossroads of faith and culture for the New York Times, Runners World, and more. Her work is influenced by living in the Horn of Africa, raising Third Culture Kids, and adventurous exploration of the natural world. Rachel is the author of *Pillars: How Muslim Friends Led Me Closer to Jesus* and *Stronger than Death: How Ammalena Tonelli Defied Terror and Tuberculosis in the Horn of Africa*.

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# IT WASN'T THE TEAR GAS THAT SURPRISED ME

ANONYMOUS

**A**t the end of my street, just a few yards beyond my apartment building, a wisp of tear gas curled around the corner of the road. Hundreds of protesters were fleeing in the other direction, doing their best to seek cover from the unseen clash just beyond my view.

Despite the desperation of the scene, it wasn't the tear gas that surprised me. After three months of weekly clashes between protesters and police in my neighborhood, the acrid stinging in my eyes had become a familiar experience. What surprised me was a person.

My eyes were drawn to him immediately. He was not dressed like the other protesters, adorned with the masks and umbrellas of the city's front-liners. He had nothing on him to protect himself from the chemical onslaught. He stood still, facing against the rushing tide of people. While everyone else fled in the other direction, he stood rooted in place.

At first I thought this was an act of defiance—a brave display of nonviolent resistance. But as I stood watching, I noticed his mouth was moving as his head shifted from side to side. The expression on his face was not fear or anger, but concern. He was speaking to the fleeing protesters, but he wasn't trying to get them to stand their ground and fight back. Instead, he seemed

concerned for their well-being and care. He stood against the tide, at the cost of his own safety, to offer some kind of calming presence. His posture was not provocative. It was pastoral.

As I watched this all unfold, I felt an uncomfortable move of the Holy Spirit inside me. I have been a pastor in Hong Kong for 20 years, but this man embodied the power of the church more in that moment than I ever have. Like Caleb and Joshua standing before the majority opinion of the returning spies, this man carried with him a different spirit. I realized, soberly, that I did not.

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The church in Hong Kong is at an inflection point for the gospel. Alongside a global pandemic, our city has experienced a complete social and political upheaval in the past three years as a result of the protests and China's response in its attempt to restore order. Many have welcomed the return of peace and calm to the streets, while many others have been left bruised and conflicted. And the church must now decide how to respond.

Will we become a bold and central voice of hope, faith, and identity in the years ahead, courageously rooting ourselves in



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the fertile soil of the gospel? Or will we feebly shrink into the shadows of our own self-concerns and self-preservation? Will the church reach out to a divided city, willing to plant our pastoral presence within the hardest of circumstances? Or will we settle for a comfortable gospel that keeps the lights on in our church buildings but extinguishes our prophetic light in the public square?

In my local community in Hong Kong, the kind of halfhearted cultural Christianity that seeks God's favor—minus the sacrificial obedience needed to follow Jesus—is no longer an option. Perhaps it never was. If the church in our city has any future, it must shift from the pursuit of relevance to the pursuit of a fresh kind of gospel resilience that is forged in the fires of dramatic societal change. And we need pastors, like that man standing before the tear gas at the end of my street, who are able to offer brave pastoral hope in fearful political times.

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John Chan is one such pastor who has bent his knee to this call. Born and raised in Hong Kong in the '80s, he studied Karl Barth in Germany before returning to Hong Kong to pursue a pastoral and academic career. Now in his early 40s, Chan is smart, engaging, deeply theological, and courageously able to connect Scripture and social change together in a way that invites people to process their traumatic experiences. He is willing to stand at the end of the proverbial street as the political tear gas creeps around the corner. He there offers a stable presence of hope.

"I grew up in a time of Hong Kong that was fabulous," John says as we sit together over coffee. "A time when the culture was strong, when we all dreamed of a good future, when

the youth of this city had hope and expectation. So much has now changed."

Chan's pastoral concerns for Hong Kong are centered around the young adults of the city, a generation caught between the affluent success of the over-40s and the relative innocence of the under-20s. "My generation grew up focused on making money and were mostly politically neutral. But the current generation is much more politically engaged and concerned. Which presents an important but challenging environment for the church."

This was especially apparent in 2014, the year Occupy Central began. Signaling the first political student protest movement, the key leaders confessed publicly to their Christian faith. As an academic at the time, Chan noticed how his students were looking toward the Christian institutions in the city to offer guidance. "Our seminaries needed to quickly shift from teaching political theology to teaching political ethics. We suddenly needed a praxis more than a theory."

This need for praxis in a time of rapid social change had to flow eventually from the halls of academia to the pulpits of the local churches, but such a shift was slow to come. Many pastors were not equipped to deal with the issues that the political upheaval was creating. As Chan observes, "Very few pastors felt able to address the major issues impacting their congregants, often from fear of being labeled too political. So at the time something significant happened, the pulpit slowly became disconnected from the people."

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This sense of disconnection raised its head again in the summer of 2019, about the time that tear gas crept around the corner of my street. "With the second wave of student







protests in 2019,” Chan says, “the church seemed to have learned little from last time, and many of the same mistakes were made. And this led to a lot of young people leaving the church. Not leaving Jesus, just leaving the church.”

This exodus led Chan to plant a new church that would be flexible enough to embrace a new generation of Christians who wanted Jesus and social justice to sit side by side, while continuing to deepen the gospel through sacrificial discipleship. He called it Flow Church, and within just a few years it has grown to more than 400 people, most of them young adults.

“Flow Church exists because Hong Kong Christians have a unique challenge different to the west,” he says. “Our issue is not one of the relationship between church and state. Our issue is how to live in a society with a disproportional imbalance of power.”

This imbalance of power is more than just a postcolonial hangover. As Chan puts it, “We have a unique situation because our empire is our motherland.” It is this unchangeable situation that has caused some to give up hope for their future, with a growing number choosing to emigrate from Hong Kong. But for Chan, he stands rooted to a particular passage that has become the foundation of his renewed pastoral ministry. “John 10:10 promises us that Jesus came so we can have abundant life. This is not conditional on a particular place or time, or a particular station in life. Despite how hard things appear for Hong Kong right now, I believe our people can know the fullness of life and joy.”

It is this vision of a full life that drives Chan’s ministry. He and his church are digging deeper roots in the soil of the city. His church desires to be a stable and sure presence of pastoral care in the wild rush of change around them. And this will require no small amount of courage, sacrifice, and strength.

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As a pastor alongside Chan in the ministry of this city, I find myself reinvigorated by his bravery. I don’t want to remain down the street, a distant observer to the spiritual courage of others. Like Chan, I want to be able to stand amongst those who are hurting with a resolve in my heart despite the stinging in my eyes.

This different spirit—as seen in Caleb and Joshua and my friend John—is defined by a wholeheartedness toward God. This sobers me, for I sense my own heart is divided, torn apart by fear, self-preservation, and institutional concerns. I need a new heart for this new calling. A new wineskin, if you will. And that is always a move of God’s spirit.

As a friend recently put it, “The hardest calling is our first one: death to self.” Like that man at the end of that street, staring down the tear gas and offering comfort to others, may we take the dying side so others can take the living side.

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**Author Note:** The author wishes to remain anonymous due to the political situation in Hong Kong.

**Photo Credit:**  
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