

**MY CALL TO THE MINISTRY:
AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY**

by Pastor Larry Tong

I was born the youngest of five children to Christian parents in China but was raised in Hong Kong. My family left China during the war when I was an infant. Like many families in the fifties, our family was poor and we struggled to survive in Hong Kong.

My father was a nominal Christian, while my mother was a devoted Christian woman. Every week, rain or shine, she brought my siblings and me to a Southern Baptist church where she served as a deaconess. Not only did I grow up in the church, I grew up as a Baptist. Many thanks to my mother, who not only relentlessly prayed for us, but left a spiritual legacy that influenced all her children.

Growing up in church does not guarantee close relationships with God. Such was my experience. At eighteen, I left home in search of a better future, which led me to wander away from God. I attended a boarding school on Vancouver Island to complete high school before applying for colleges in the US.

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My choice of college was financially driven - the best choice would be the least expensive school. I was accepted by Santa Barbara City College, with a \$200 per semester tuition (this was in the late 60's). With the I-20, I applied for a foreign student visa. Unfortunately, the immigration officer rejected my application because he felt that I had the intention to stay in the States after graduation. Feeling dejected, I wondered what I should do next. Not long after, I received another I-20 from San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California, a tuition-free city college even for foreign students. Not knowing what to expect, I took the I-20 and returned to the immigration office to try my "luck" again. The secretary couldn't find my file. (Thank God that nothing was computerized then!) Feeling embarrassed, she opened a new file for me, and a new immigration officer approved my application in less than ten minutes! Later I found out that my original application was among a stack of files on the desk of the first officer who had interviewed me. He had gone on vacation without turning over the files to the secretary. I was a "lucky" man. I thought I was "lucky" because I didn't realize that God was orchestrating the miraculous situation.

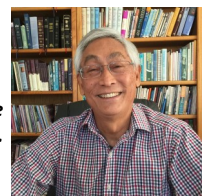
After four years of pharmacy school at Idaho State University, I graduated and moved back to California. I was able to pass the licensing board exam the same year. My life and career began to take shape the way I wanted. Throughout the six years in college, I had no time nor desire for God. I had worked hard to put myself through school, and I began to think all the achievements were self-attained. In my mind, God existed, but I had no need for Him. Six years after I left home, I had completely left God.

But God reminded me that He had never left me, and that He is sovereign. A year after settling down with my career, I married my girlfriend whom I met in college. A judge married us one fine day in May 1976. That very night, news came from Hong Kong that my father had passed away! Bewildered and disappointed at God, I asked Him why He allowed such a dreadful thing to happen to me. Shortly thereafter, my wife and I returned to church, seeking meaning and answers to life. But, throughout the process, God never answered my question why He took my father from me prematurely. I submitted that He doesn't have to, and came to realize that a life without God is a life chasing bubbles that would one day burst. Since then, I have experienced God in ways like never before, and assuredly, God has been everything to me the Bible describes Him to be for those who trust Him.

My wife and I, together with two other couples attended the "Chinese Missions '89" Conference in Washington D.C., where both of us responded to the altar call. I felt God calling me to be a missionary, but not knowing when or where. Little did I know that God had a different plan for me! Three years later, I decided to attend seminary, not to be a pastor (I didn't think of pastoring a church then as it would be too difficult), but to be a better Bible teacher, and at the same time, prepare to fulfill my calling as a missionary after I retired. I enrolled at Western Seminary as a part-time student, while working fulltime as a pharmacy manager. God surprised me once again when I graduated in 1997. He called me to pastor the church I love—the church we had started and built in 1980. I have learned to let God direct my destiny.

Transitioning from having a successful career in pharmacy to pastoring a church took some adjustments. It took me a few years to feel "comfortable" in my role. There were times I was unsure whether the decisions I made were beneficial to the church or to advance my ambition. However, I learned to often ask myself, "Am I kind and faithful?" I believe this is how Jesus would judge me one day, "Are you kind (to people) and faithful (to me)?" Giving up a successful career that I enjoyed was not easy, but it was worth it. The rewards are great, apart from the eternal rewards, rewards in the here and now as well. What great joy it is to see people accept Jesus as Savior, and believers proclaiming Jesus as Lord!

I love God's church. I love His flock entrusted to me to nourish and I love the Kingdom of God. After twenty years, it is time to pass the baton to the next generation of ministers. I have no regrets in the decision I made twenty years ago. I gave up something good in exchange for something greater and better. To God be the Glory!



Rev. Larry Tong was the Senior Pastor of the Southbay Chinese Baptist Church, San Jose, CA. He retired the end of 2017.

