

# From Living Sacrifice to Living Water

*Natalie Chan tells the story of Eirene Yeung, a senior Hong Kong executive who has faced various challenges at work, particularly after her conversion to Christ. She has wrestled with the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, the best way to make the case for a shorter working week, and how the Christian group of which she is part can witness more effectively – singing carols proving both popular and successful.*

*I'm prepared to contend that the primary location for spiritual formation is in the workplace. Eugene Peterson.*

What should you do when you are assigned to run the project of a Buddhist temple at work?

How do we navigate through a dated work culture that takes long hours for granted?

To what extent can we share and proclaim our faith at work in a prevailing secular culture?

The above three questions are not theoretical ones raised during a Christian ethics class but real-life situations that Eirene Yeung encountered during her tenure of nearly three decades at one of the biggest conglomerates in Hong Kong, working directly under one of the best-known and most powerful business leaders in Asia.

## **Buddhist Temple - from embrace to resistance to dialogue**

Eirene's journey with the Buddhist temple started even before she came to Christ. Her powerful boss, the patriarch of the company, has long been a devout Buddhist. The planning and construction started in 2003. Knowing the project was very close to her boss's heart, Eirene jumped in with two feet, realising this was a great chance to win trust and career advancement. She tried her best to ensure its success. However, everything changed when Eirene came to Christ in 2010. She found building a temple for idols contrary to biblical teachings. She started to avoid or minimise her involvement in all sorts of ways. It was indeed quite a struggle to balance professionalism and her continual involvement.

Being one of the key members of the project team, she was invited to come to the official opening ceremony upon its completion. She certainly felt conflicted but upon arriving at the temple, she realised how beautiful the environment was, and how magnificent the construction. Everything there was spectacular, including the giant Guan Yin statue that stood more than 70 metres tall. But the Psalmist reminded her that "their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands" (Psalm 115:4). Eirene knew deep down in her heart that the real God who created the heavens and the earth, and all creatures, could not be fashioned by human hands. Her next challenge came from the lunch. Should she eat what the monks ate and could she even say grace before them? She was reminded that "What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them". This verse,



Tsz Shan Monastery with the Guan Yin statue

Photo: ILHK

Matthew 15:11, came to mind; she knew all food is created by God and good to eat so she proceeded to say grace. When she closed her eyes, a picture emerged. The giant Guan Yin statue was turned into a giant white cross, giving her the peace that surpasses all understanding. She felt relaxed and enjoyed the lunch with all smiles.

She had a similar encounter at the official opening ceremony when many VIPs were present. As she prayed in the middle of all the noises and loud Buddhist worship music, she saw a picture of a big cross in the middle of the overcast open sky. She felt God's very presence and was able to feel at ease rather than intimidated. During her theology class, Eirene got to know more about Buddhism, especially the similarity to and differences from Christianity. She does not need to reject everything Buddhist but realises its beauty and appeal to contemporary culture, especially for meditation and Zen practice. However, she is also aware of its limitations, like relying on oneself to achieve liberation and the lack of a concept of transcendence. Although Eirene and her boss have different faiths, she respects his wisdom, vision and generosity. The above realisation enables her to enter into dialogue with his faith in order to appreciate his worldview so that she could know better how to pray for her boss, his family and the company.

## Navigating a dated work culture

The company Eirene works for was founded in the 1960s in Hong Kong and took off in the '70s and '80s along with the economy. The period of extraordinary growth was underpinned by a very strong work ethic where long hours were expected. However, as society progresses, a better work-life balance becomes the priority for the younger workforce. The government also changed from a 6-day working week to 5 days in 2006, with many companies following suit. Eirene found it increasingly difficult to recruit and

retain talented people if they kept the *status quo*. She described her fight for a 5-day working week as starting 'in flesh', out of frustration and all by herself. Through her persistence, her boss eventually added two days of annual leave and two Saturdays off each month but stated that had reached the limit, and any further changes would be beyond discussion. Eirene felt exhausted by then and the struggle inevitably left some strain and tension in their relationship.

Eirene subsequently came to Christ and started to study theology, coming across *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* by Chris Wright. She was very touched by God's mercy and justice. He is the God who "proclaims freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1c), the same God who set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. With this burden and encouraged by her office fellowship who prayed together for this cause, she started to advocate the 5-day working week again, but this time invited more colleagues including unbelievers and different departments to join hands - with prayer - to proclaim freedom for God's transformation. She was very saddened by the low morale and the heavy heart featured on the faces of her coworkers but also knew that she should not be the one speaking to her boss. She appealed to the head of HR with both valid arguments for the business as well as the heart to care for the people. Deeply moved by the Spirit, they both ended up crying, with this colleague agreeing to speak to their boss. To her amazement, their boss agreed with no fanfare, a 5-day working week became a reality just like that, and the long march of a decade was over. She felt it was very different this time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God orchestrated and stirred different people at exactly the right time. The mission was accomplished together, in tandem with

God, with no exhaustion or tension like the previous time.

## United in the workplace to proclaim His name

Eirene and her office fellowship cannot believe this is the ninth year they have been caroling from their office, broadcasting to hundreds more in the Central Business District. It all started with a casual invitation from their property management department, wondering if their fellowship at work was interested in Christmas carolling before they approached some outside parties to do so. The fellowship jumped



Eirene Yeung

at the opportunity with 30+ people joining in high spirits and lots of enthusiasm. However, in the next year, the fellowship met with many challenges, including health issues for Eirene and another core member, to the extent that they wondered if they should even continue. The team was humbled and felt they must repent and seek God together. The vision then became clearer after their worship and prayer

in a retreat. Over the years, the carolling has also evolved from Christians in her company to believers working nearby and beyond, with unbelievers in the company anticipating this as a core event of the year with high expectations. With COVID making physical gatherings impossible, it has also gone viral to reach hundreds more. They called their fellowship "Living Water" after John 4 came up in their prayers, to reflect the name of their company as well as what Christ has promised to all his followers. They meet every Monday at lunchtime to worship, praise, share, and pray, reminding them who is the real boss at work and their identity in the Kingdom of God.

The carolling is really a spiritual journey for their fellowship as they need to be united and seek God together. It has not been easy and conflict is inevitable but



by the grace of God, their relationship and walk with God deepened as they went through different trials together. “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 John 5:20). They are from different denominations, positions at work and with different temperaments, so they are bound to have very different perspectives and practices. They learn to be patient, willing to listen, and be honest with each other, to seek God together humbly, knowing full well that they are all recovering sinners. The workplace remains challenging but the love, embrace and support of the fellowship remind them that the loving God whom they have not seen is dwelling in their midst, providing them with strength and the ability to persevere.


Proclaiming Christ and worshipping in such a high profile and public manner is inconceivable in a company culture that is predominantly secular. However,

with the fellowship and carolling, they see God’s grace and provision year after year and they can feel God’s heartbeat more and more. As a result, more space has been created to express their faith overtly and authentically, not only through words but their deeds; they all strive to be excellent workers with integrity first and foremost. They have also inspired more Christians both within and outside their company to come forward and be bolder in their faith expression, constituting a clear shift in the spiritual climate. It is their prayer that the seeds of love, joy, peace and hope in Christ are sown in the office and among coworkers – through the response of their fellowship to God’s call who is working in their midst at the workplace.

### Every Christian has a ministry

I would like to close with Michael Oh’s appeal at the Global Workplace Forum in 2019, to the effect that the Lausanne Movement has a vision for ‘Kingdom

Impact in Every Sphere of Society’. That can only happen through those whom God has placed in those spheres of society – and that’s not your pastor. For that to happen, there needs to be a change in the way we view ministry and work—a return to the way it was meant to be. Every Christian, including the 99% who are not in professional Christian ministry, has a ministry.

Eirene and her colleagues have not set out to run a ministry at the workplace but God has placed them there for Kingdom Impact. What a spiritual journey they have been through together and the impact they have created is evident both in and outside the company as well as the industry at large. After all, there are no part-time Christians; they have demonstrated to us that one can be in both full-time work and full-time ministry. By immersing themselves in God’s words, seeking Him together, and faithfully following His footsteps, they have offered themselves as a living sacrifice so that more can find the living water Jesus promised. 



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