

One Woman vs. the Dragon

Jackie Pullinger began reaching Hong Kong's drug addicts in 1966. Now a living legend of Christian sacrifice, she still offers the gospel to the Chinese people.

Serene in their leafy surroundings, the white-walled havens of Shing Mun Springs seem to belie any connection with Hong Kong's Walled City, infamous for its history of crime, drug abuse and prostitution. Ah Yin, driving for the day despite a paralyzed right arm, knows differently; he has spent much of his life on a journey from one to the other. As he rounds a steep bend, a big barred gate opens, and he pulls up inside, where his passengers disembark and breathe in the tranquility.

Shing Mun Springs is home to 200 men recovering from the ravages of drug addiction, yet there is an air of almost monastic assurance and deep pleasure in the gatekeepers' greetings. Set on a breezy hillside in the New Territories north of Hong Kong, it is a sharp contrast to the hubbub of Shatin Station. To the left, the gurgle of a creek echoes up the side of a verdant valley that, a mile or two below, opens into a sea-vista of Tolo Harbor.

After a lifetime of commitment, many missionaries might be glad to hang their hats on a monument like Shing Mun Springs, where hundreds of men have come to Christ and found freedom from drug addiction in the last four decades. Yet its founder, Jackie Pullinger, refuses to revel in the ministry's success. To her, serving Hong Kong's poor and needy is simply a Christian's duty.

Pullinger has a presence, a charisma that draws attention, and is a firm but genial host. She is of average height, with shoulder-length light brown hair. Her age, she insists, is a

thing everyone gets wrong, and she won't reveal it, but despite a youthful demeanor she must be around 60.

Her syllables are roundly enunciated, very British. Particular about language, she protests against terms she dislikes—and “missionary work” is a major contention. “It’s just a journey, and you tell people about Jesus along the way, and some of them will be wanting to hear,” she insists. “That’s all. So, [it’s] not missionary work.”

Nor will she allow that her 41-year stay in Hong Kong is permanent. “I don’t think like that,” she says. “I just happen to have stopped off for quite a long time, but it’s only a stop-off.”

Sharing the Love of Jesus

Pullinger’s journey has been unconventional and largely unmapped, a pioneering trek of trial, error and invention. She began life in a “quite ordinary” professional family in the staid south London suburb of Croydon, where she grew up as one of twin sisters whose father managed a factory. Religious allegiance was an assumed value.

“In England at the time I was born, everybody thought they were Christians because they were ‘done’ as babies,” she says, referring to infant baptism. “And we were sent to Sunday school and we went to something called church on Sunday, all of which did not really endear Jesus to me.”

However, while a student at London’s Royal College of Music, Pullinger developed a personal relationship with Jesus after attending a Bible study with some young Christians she had met. Soon she was praying over the question, “If Jesus is true, which I now believe, and if I like Him, at the end of my

life I would like to have spent it well, so what shall I do? How do I spend my life?"

Although she had no specific location in mind, the idea of pursuing missionary service was growing. One day she contacted a missionary society she had picked out from the telephone directory.

"They said, 'You have to be 25 before you can be a missionary,'" she recalls. "And I said, 'Well, I'm afraid Jesus might come back before I'm 25. ... Do you think you could send me before I'm 25 and not call me a missionary?'"

They referred her to their rulebook; she referred it back to God. After spending time in prayer, she was sure God was telling her to go, but she could see no road to follow. Then a series of incidents sharpened the focus.

She had a dream in which she and her family were poring over a map of Africa. A new country appeared, one that did not belong there, marked Hong Kong. "I woke up from my dream thinking, I always thought missionaries went to Africa, but maybe God's showing me it's Hong Kong," she says.

She sent a letter to the Hong Kong government asking about work as a musician. "We can't afford musicians," they replied.

Then in 1966, still in her first year as a Christian, Pullinger met a man in the street who told her he went to prayer meetings where God spoke. She went along and for the first time heard people speaking in tongues and prophesying.

There was a word for her: "Go, and I will lead you; I will guide you with My eye." She was impressed; it was exactly what God had been telling her through the Bible.

Later that year she happened upon a vicar in London, who challenged her: "If [God] showed you where it was; if He gave you your plane ticket, your old-age pension, your medical insurance and your salary, you wouldn't need to trust Him," she remembers him telling her. "So why don't you get on a boat that's calling in as many different countries as possible ... and pray to know where to get off?" Before the year's end she was on her way.

Her eventual focus was small in area but huge in need. The Walled City, at the northeastern root of Hong Kong's Kowloon Peninsula, was a lawless limbo-land.

Formerly a Chinese imperial garrison enclosed by a fortified wall, it was omitted from the lease of 1898 in which China ceded Hong Kong to Britain, and neither government took responsibility for it. It had a local mandarin, but his death left a vacuum. The notorious Triad gangs moved in, turning it into a pit of misery with an economy of drugs and prostitution.

"It became a wonderful place for people to hide," Pullinger says. "The police had no power to arrest people inside, so you could run away from the law. It just became a huge slum with no water, no electricity—seven or eight acres with about 100,000 people at one time. So it was just open sewers and more rats than people."

Although young and unfamiliar with China, Pullinger was hardly

revolted by the scene. "I always felt very happy there because I always saw something else," she says. "In darkness I always saw another city. I was seeing the kingdom of God.

"Instead of the old prostitutes with needle marks in their arms, I was seeing a lady sitting up and starting life again. I always saw it because I used to think, Now, if Jesus walked down this street, what would He do? And I knew nobody would be the same after He walked past."

Although she was teaching full time in a government school, she took another job in the Walled City in a little school run by a missionary. Many youth, even preteens, had given up on school and were getting into gangs and becoming drug addicts.

She opened a youth club. It met in a succession of shabby rooms, but the gangs, whose members were mostly teenagers, responded. She was soon deeply involved.

"When people were hurt in gang fights I took them to hospital, I visited them in prison," she recalls. "We went on picnics and barbecues and things, and they were very touched by my loving them and helping their friends—but not changed."

Despite this, she pressed on, pursuing what she calls "normal" gospel-feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and caring for other basic needs. In spite of themselves, the gangs warmed to her commitment.

"They said about me, 'Oh, she's crazy about Jesus, but apart from that she's all right,'" Pullinger says. It encouraged her, but she adds: "I wanted to see them changed because I

knew that some of them would die ... before they believed in Him."

Chasing the Dragon

One day she met a Chinese Christian couple who opened up a significant means of change. "They were just simple, uneducated people, and I thought, if they met a drug addict, instead of taking him to a clinic, they'd probably pray for him. And I hadn't met anyone who'd do that."

After a time of prayer with them, Pullinger started speaking in tongues, but says: "My life didn't change. ... I didn't feel good praying in tongues, so I didn't use it."

It was another year before she met an American couple who she says told her: "The Scripture says if you pray in tongues you will be built up spiritually. It doesn't say you will feel built up."

So she began using the gift of tongues, and it opened a new door. "I would walk down the street, bump into a gangster—some of them I knew, some of them I didn't—and they all started to believe in Jesus, and I saw people healed. ... Because I was praying in the Holy Spirit, God was able to lead me to people He'd got ready.

"The problem is, most of us have got an agenda, and we say, 'This is what I want to do, dear Lord, please bless me.' ... But when you pray in tongues it's the opposite way round. It's, 'Dear Lord, You've got an agenda, and I'd like to play the part You want me to play in it.'"

Pullinger's book *Chasing the Dragon* tells how, slowly, through

prayer and persistence, she won credibility with the gangs. "We've been watching you," one gang leader told her. "What we want to know is if you are concerned with us. Now you have been here for four years, and we have decided that maybe you mean what you say."

At one time, vandals broke into the building where Pullinger held her youth club, smashing benches and skateboards, and throwing sewage along the walls and floors. Pullinger says she wanted to give up but remembered Jesus' admonition in Matthew 5 to bless those who cursed her.

When she reopened the center, a Triad boss sent a gang member to stand guard and make sure the vandalism didn't happen again. The young guard eventually came to Christ and stopped using drugs, a practice known as "chasing the dragon." And the Triad boss agreed to release gang members who became Christians.

As a result, more people approached her for help, usually young heroin or opium addicts in desperate straits. Soon resources were an issue; she had no facilities and only a loose alliance of friends to help her.

"I took people into my home," she says, "and after 12 people we needed to rent another one, then another one, then another one. ... We've borrowed or used or rented 170-something places," she laughs, "mostly tiny little apartments where people have been stacked up on beds."

Pullinger says she learned early on that she would have to trust God to provide for the outreach. She doesn't receive a salary, but the ministry's needs have consistently been met

through gifts from other Christians and government resources. An increasing need for accountability led her to found St. Stephen's Society in 1981.

Recognizing the value of Pullinger's activities, the Hong Kong government donated the land at Shing Mun Springs. The four three-story "homes" that have been built house 200 men ranging in age from their teens to their 50s. Many are referred by social workers or friends who were previous residents.

The men go through an eight-month, five-phase program that includes a 10-day, cold-turkey detoxification; Christian discipleship; counseling; and assistance finding jobs and re-entering society. Residents also do practical work at the center such as groundskeeping, carpentry and painting, and they participate in outreach projects.

Staffed by a team of Christian workers, the ministry functions as a firm but loving family and maintains contact with the men after they leave. St. Stephen's resident Tam Ming was a gang member and addicted to heroine when he first met Pullinger.

"[Christian friends] took me to Kowloon City to meet someone called Jackie," he says. "And Jackie told me how to ... believe in Jesus. So at that time I met Jesus, and Jackie prayed for me, and I received the power of the Holy Spirit. I met lots of new brothers and sisters and changed."

He got a job, but he says pride caused him to return to his former lifestyle. "I went round and round in circles for 30 years, and I never found Jesus again until I found Jackie again," he says, "and Jackie told me to come back to Jesus."

Sai Kit was addicted to heroin and a gang member when he took

up residence at Shing Mun Springs. "When I arrived I didn't have much faith ... to believe Jesus would help me," he says. "And I didn't have much confidence to face my family.

"But then Jesus gave me the faith, and ... I confessed my sin, said sorry, and I faced my problems. Here I received love and care that I never received anywhere else, ever."

Pullinger says spiritual gifts, particularly tongues, have come to play a major role. She has seen the pain of drug withdrawal vanish after sufferers prayed in tongues, and they would receive other gifts.

"Often God will heal somebody through somebody who met Jesus just five minutes ago," she says. "That's the best time to introduce gifts because they completely know at that point they're gifts of grace."

Pullinger acknowledges that at times she has considered giving up—but only briefly. "I think one of the reasons people give things up is that they're expecting to see results," she says. "That's like, 'I put so much in, why didn't I get so much out?'

"And that's not how Christians live. You love people because God loved you. And you love them anyway—if you see no change, it doesn't matter; you still do it."

Growing recognition has inevitably brought offers to travel. She does, often quite intensively—in a three-week period last fall she visited the U.S. twice and the United Kingdom once. But she is emphatic that the poor are her day-by-day priority.

She points out the huge imbalance in the church worldwide and takes a swipe at wealthy Christians who crave blessings for themselves while ignoring the poor.

"We've got 200 men who are limping, who've lived a very difficult life," she says.

"We haven't got homes, we haven't got salaries. Then you've got the rest of the church who say, 'Isn't what Jackie's doing wonderful!' And then they say to me, 'Will you come and teach us on spiritual gifts?'"

"But I think we're typical of people who help the poor. They do tend to be admired and very happily left on the side."

Appreciation has come with an honorary doctorate from Hong Kong University; she regularly speaks at international conferences and advises governments, though she will not serve on official boards. Her most notable recognition was the award of the MBE, a grade of the Order of the British Empire, in 1988.

Before accepting it she searched the Scriptures. "I was a bit worried that if you've got honor on this earth you didn't get it up there," she laughs, "and that's the only place I'm keen on getting it."

She was allowed two guests at Buckingham Palace for the presentation by the queen. Single at the time, Pullinger took her mother and Ah Yin, the driver with the paralyzed arm. In 1992 she married former resident John To, who died of cancer in 1999.

Throughout her 41 years in Hong Kong, Pullinger has kept her focus intact. She acknowledges the pleasant surroundings of Shing Mun Springs, but declares: "If buildings ever become more important than people, then we're completely sunk."

The Walled City's slums were razed in 1993 and the land was turned into a park. But now, as when she first arrived, Pullinger is walking with those in need, even though she admits it is usually two steps forward and five steps back. She insists there is no other option: "Anybody who works with the poor should understand this."

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