

Hospital Honors First RCA Medical Missionary to China

In 1898, John Otte--a doctor from Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the RCA's first medical missionary--built a hospital in Xiamen, China. One hundred ten years later, he was honored with a statue, unveiled during a hospital anniversary celebration.

To represent the Otte family at the hospital celebration, John deVelder traveled to China with his wife, Linda Walvoord deVelder. John's father, Walter deVelder, was married to Otte's daughter, Margaret. (Margaret died in childbirth and Walter later married Harriet Boot, John's mother.)

For deVelder, a hospital chaplain in New Jersey, the trip was something of a homecoming. He lived in China for several years as a young boy while his parents served as missionaries there.

"This trip to celebrate the anniversary of the hospital and to visit churches in China was a very emotional journey for me," he says. "It was amazing to walk along those streets and walk near the house of David Abeel, the first Protestant missionary in China.

"I was reconnecting with my ancestors and I was reconnecting with a very important RCA mission history. My father and mother and grandparents all had spent many years there. I have old pictures way back to the turn of the century, to the 1900s, of that area."

Golongyu, a small island where his mother had grown up, was unchanged. "My memories are basically the same. It's locked in time from the 1930s," deVelder says. "Golongyu is a tiny island off the island of Amoy. The bigger island of Amoy is all changed--not one thing is the same."

DeVelder says Otte ran hospitals on both islands. Rich people lived on Golongyu and didn't want anyone with contagious diseases at their hospital, so Otte had a hospital on Amoy as well, where the poorer people lived. "He built one hospital in the rich area and took money from the rich and gave it to the poor," deVelder says.

At the hospital anniversary celebration, deVelder was the only Westerner on the dais, seated between hospital staff members and communist party leaders. "We learned that each hospital has a CEO but the CEO has a partner who is a communist party leader who helps make decisions," he says.

"Perhaps the most moving part of the day was to learn that the second in command of Xiamen City 2nd Hospital, who had read much about Dr. Otte doing the research for the statue and the commemoration, was so touched by Dr. Otte's love for the Chinese people, his medical care, and giving his life in Christian service that he wanted to become a Christian.

"The spirit of John Otte lives on and is still attracting people to Jesus as Lord and Savior."

When Otte went to China, the medical needs of the people of Xiamen were overwhelming. For 20 years, he treated thousands of patients and trained about 20 medical students to carry on the work.

"Otte made such a contribution that he is remembered well, even today," says deVelder. "He was doing so many procedures and so many operations in 1898 that he and his assistants would rival a pretty good-sized hospital in the U.S. at that time.

"He did a remarkable amount of work in a short time before he died at a young age."

The hospital anniversary celebration included the dedication of a statue of Otte. "No statue has been put up of a foreigner that I know of in the last 50 years. No statue has ever been put up of a missionary in the last 50 years--this is a very unusual thing," deVelder says. "Otte epitomizes the kind of contribution that the communist party welcomes. The churches here do benefit from the knowledge that missionaries didn't just come to evangelize, but brought schools and hospitals and all kinds of other important institutions for the holistic care of people." DeVelder says the recognition of these legacies has led the communist party to donate money and property for rebuilding churches.

DeVelder remembers leaving China with his mother and siblings in 1949, when the communists took over, and he remembers his father coming back to the United States two years later when things got worse. "In 1951 my father would have thought that mission work was ended," he says. "We thought maybe the church would suffer, maybe wither. Instead, it has prospered under the persecution time.

"Now there are more than 800,000 Christians in the Xiamen area--a phenomenal amount of Christians." DeVelder credits the work of the Reformed Church, the London Missionary Society, and the English Presbyterians--they were the first groups with a presence in the Xiamen, or Amoy, area.

"The church is alive and growing," he reports. "The Christians are very sincere and faithful people. It still costs them something to be a Christian there, at least with communist control. But the churches are being rebuilt, and new churches are being built all the time. The congregations are very alive."

The greatest need today, deVelder says, is for trained clergy. In Anhui Province, for instance, there are 4,700 meeting places for Christians, but only 70 ordained pastors.



A statue of RCA missionary John Otte is unveiled at the 110th anniversary celebration of China's Xiamen City 2nd Hospital, which Otte founded in 1898. John deVelder, who represented Otte's family at the celebration, says: "Perhaps the most moving part of the day was to learn that the second in command of Xiamen City 2nd Hospital, who had read so much about Dr. Otte in doing the research for the statue and the commemoration, was so touched by Dr. Otte's love for the Chinese people, his medical care, and giving his life in Christian service that he himself wanted to become a Christian."