Simple gifts

When the two of us headed to China for the first time, in 2006, we understood it would likely be for one year and possibly two. As it turned out, we lived and worked in China for four years, and we can say with all our hearts that we have been deeply blessed! It is our hope that we too have been a blessing.

We spent three years as visiting professors at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, then last year, took on new assignments, this time in the magnificent city of Shanghai at Shanghai University and at the YMCA. Our work in Shanghai had one aspect that was very different from that at the Nanjing Seminary; most of our students and the people we interacted with were non-Christians and even atheists. In most cases it was not that they had chosen to be “against” religion but only that they did not have a religion! Learning this brought immediately to my mind an old hymn we used to sing as children in Canada. Its second verse went like this.

How kind was our savior to bid these children welcome.
But there are many thousands who have never heard His name. The Bible they have never read. They know not that the Savior said: “Suffer little children to come unto me.”

In Shanghai, we were living among the people, and seeing them as gentle and kind and giving – but without any religion, many never having heard the name of Jesus. We were not permitted to proselytize, as the Chinese government does not allow it. Still, there was no reason why could not talk about Christianity and, maybe even more importantly, to try to model in as simple and sincere a way as possible just how a Christian behaves. It was easy to love and serve the Chinese people, as they were always so good to us. This gave us pause to think about who we are and what we need to do as Christians in the world.

Let us pray, that in this season of giving we remember what a blessing each individual gift of service and love is to others.

Doreen and Michael McFarlane served as visiting professors at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Doreen taught Biblical Hebrew and Greek, and Biblical interpretation, while Michael served as choir director and concert coordinator of the newest branch of the Shanghai YMCA.