

Alumni Spotlight: The Chengs Chris (M.Div. '19) & Emily (MAGL '21)



Current Title: Missionaries, OMF International

Family: two children, Zachary and Jeremy

Favorite professor: It's hard to pick just one when all have been influential to us.

Favorite memory: Chris—I enjoyed my Overseas Missions Practicum. Emily and the kids were able to join me for part of the trip to Japan, making it an important part of our discernment process. Emily—I enjoyed attending Chapel Services and worship in all styles and sometimes even in other languages. Especially after many years in lay ministry (and busy Sundays!), those moments really ministered to my soul.

Where are you planning to serve and what will your work be there?

We are missionaries with OMF International planning to serve in Japan. We originally intended to leave in January 2021, but pandemic travel restrictions delayed us. We've started remotely and hope to depart as soon as possible. In these first couple years, we will be full-time language and culture learners seeking to "in everything not sinful, become like the [Japanese]" (modifying a quote from Hudson Taylor, founder of OMF). Currently, we join our colleagues for culture training and meet our Japanese language teacher over Skype. After this foundational training period is completed, we will be involved in either church planting, student ministry, or church revitalization with Japanese in Japan, who are the largest unreached people group in an open access nation.



Tell us a bit about your path to this moment—from your undergraduate experience and post-graduation work to Gordon-Conwell and then to the current moment.

Chris—God placed in me a heart for missions when I was in middle school living as an expat kid in Hong Kong. I wanted to be a tentmaker, so I went to MIT for my undergraduate studies with the intention of working as an engineer in Asia. While at MIT, I struggled with depression and came out of college questioning both my gifts and my calling. I was committed to serving in lay ministry and supporting/advocating for those our church sent into cross-cultural vocational ministry but felt I had neither the personality nor entrepreneurial drive to be a missionary myself. Instead, I worked as an

engineer in the automotive industry. Looking back, I can see how God used this time to grow my heart for the Japanese people through all the business trips I took to Japan, but it wasn't until a decade and a half after college that God began to remind me of how much he had placed missions in my heart and caused me to realize that my biggest stumbling block to following Him was my own lack of faith. We decided that I should leave my job to pursue a degree full-time at Gordon-Conwell as a first step towards exploring where God was leading. While at Gordon-Conwell, God pointed us towards Japan. I went there on an Overseas Missions Practicum (OMP) the summer after my second year, which Emily and the kids were able to join as well. That trip was an essential part of our discernment process. We joined OMF International in November 2019 and are now waiting for travel restrictions to be lifted so that we can move our family to Sapporo, Japan.

Emily—My family and I came to faith together during my middle school years through the outreach of my father's coworkers. Though I was thirsty for God's word as a teenager, it was at MIT, my undergraduate institution, where I was challenged by other faithful classmates and mentors to really consider what it meant to call Jesus the Lord of my life. During these years, I attended the Chinese Bible Church of Greater Boston and through the teaching of missions-minded pastors and lay leaders God began to grow a heart for his nations within me. In fact, this like-minded burden for God's world is a part of what drew Chris and I to each other. After I graduated, I began to work at the International Students Office at MIT. At first, my role focused on software systems, but I was quickly drawn into advising work with students. What a gift it was to be able to meet students from all over the world within the small confines of my office! When Chris began to explore full-time missionary work and invited our family to join him in Japan, I was hesitant. Yes, I wanted to explore our calling into this work, but I didn't know much about Japan. However, during the OMP God opened my eyes to some of my own prejudices and challenged me to love the Japanese people. Before I left, a veteran missionary challenged me that if I was serious about church planting in Japan, then Chris was not going to be the only missionary going—I was one as well and needed Bible training. When we returned, I began my application process to GCTS as a full-time student.

How has God woven together your time at Gordon-Conwell with other life events to lead you to where you are now? What was Gordon-Conwell's biggest impact/influence?

Having spent our entire adult lives in New England, Gordon-Conwell's commitment to faithful biblical interpretation and global engagement had already been indirectly influencing us since college. Looking back at our time in seminary, we realize we're not only thankful for the tools the seminary has given us to exegete, preach, and disciple others in the Word, but also for the ways the seminary has taught us to think critically about the complexities of how biblical truth is lived out in different cultural contexts. We also didn't fully realize how rich being in an interdenominational community was until we experienced it. Developing friendships with Anglicans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and Baptists was hugely important in both helping us to understand our own faith and theology and in learning how to build bridges across "non-essential" doctrinal differences as we seek to work with others for God's glory.

What are you looking forward to about your work as a missionary? What are some of the hard things you anticipate?

We have already faced some challenges in our journey. It is hard to learn Japanese. It is difficult to live in constant transition as we've left our jobs, our ministry, and our home here only to find that we can't quite make it to the "next step" as border restrictions remain in place. We worry about schooling and stability for our children. Once we move, we anticipate culture shock and the struggle of navigating the simple mundane tasks of everyday life which suddenly are unfamiliar. During all these transitions, God has exposed how much identity and self-worth we put into what we do and how uncomfortable faith can be. Ministry also won't be easy. We hear that it is more common for people to make decisions for Christ over decades rather than months, requiring patience and a commitment to long-term relationships and friendships through all its ups and downs.

And yet, we are excited not just in spite of these challenges but also because of these challenges. Though hard, we are thankful that we've been able to start learning language and culture remotely and eagerly anticipate each session. While crossing cultures isn't easy, we look forward to building relationships with Japanese neighbors and international teammates and learning more about God's character reflected through Japanese culture. Though ministry will have its struggles, we yearn to walk alongside the local church to reach other Japanese and long to be part of God's vision in Revelation 7 when all peoples, tribes, and nations, including the Japanese church, praise God around His throne. Though God has given us opportunities to count the cost of discipleship, we have already seen that it is in the difficulties that God is glorified all the more as his power is made perfect through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). We're excited to see how God works in Japan, even if sometimes that work isn't obvious at the surface level. We pray that by God's grace He would grant us the humility and faith to persevere through challenges and to be joyful in expectation that He is faithful, He is sovereign, and He is always working.

What piece of advice would you give to alumni who are considering the mission field?

It has been important for us to find support and accountability from others on a similar path as us. There has always been pressure to remain in the U.S., both because of inertia and because needs exist everywhere, so we've really needed friends who can pray with us and who can speak words of truth and wisdom to us. We have found support and accountability from missionary mentors already on the field, friends who are missionaries, missions prayer and mobilization groups, and others who are in a similar place in their journey. We've also found it important to keep remembering all the ways God has worked in the past and how much God has moved in and through us over the years. As we've faced different obstacles (like being unable to move during the pandemic!), remembering God's faithfulness has been critical in encouraging us to take steps of faith in the midst of anxious and stressful times.

Links:

For those interested in OMF's work in Japan, please see:

<https://omf.org/east-asia/japan/about> and https://www.instagram.com/omf_japan