Sticking Plaster and Shoes Combat Leprosy

Margot and Dr. Sten Stenstrom
“A very happy day”

Interpretation work is an important task for Amity’s Overseas Coordination Office in Hong Kong. Staff members travel regularly to China to keep abreast of developments in Amity projects there. This report was written by Gotthard Oblau following a recent trip.

Dr. Sten Stenstrom, a retired surgeon from Sweden, arrived in China in the fall of 1989 with his wife Margot, a nurse. This is the Stenstroms’ second short-term appointment, a result of Amity’s growing involvement in rehabilitation work with leprosy patients. I met the Stenstroms in Nanjing where they work as advisors at the National Institute of Dermatology and the Leprosy Hospital.

The leprosy bacillus destroys the nerves which transmit sensation from the skin to the brain. Once destroyed, these nerves can never be regenerated. Hence, even after a successful cure, leprosy patients still have no feeling in their hands and feet. Without the protective sensation of pain, they are exceptionally prone to injury in the course of normal, everyday activities. Untreated, even the smallest blister can lead to ulcers and eventually to the horrifying disfigurement widely associated with the disease. Therefore, wounds should be dressed immediately, or, even better, completely prevented. This is the concern that brought Dr. Stenstrom to China. He guaranteed such prevention would be very simple and extremely cheap, and therefore most appropriate for China or for any third-world country.

On a sunny October morning, I set out from Nanjing for the hospital where Dr. Stenstrom was working. We had to go 20 kilometres out into the countryside by car. The remote location is explained by the way leprosy patients were treated decades ago, when they were feared and shunned. Since then, medical research and public education in China and elsewhere have spread the word that this disease, though hard to cure, is also very hard to contract. Today, the leprosy hospital serves as a kind of sheltered home for the patients who look after themselves as far as they are able.

I found Dr. Stenstrom with Prof. Xu Wenyan, director of the Institute of Dermatology, in front of the one-story consulting wing, surrounded by a number of patients. Some were on crutches, their crippled hands or feet in bandages — the toll of the once cruel and terrifying disease. Wearing shabby blue or green jackets, many had faces emaciated by malnutrition — the consequences of stigmatization and social neglect.

Patients and doctors were inspecting two different types of orthopedic shoes. Apart from the strikingly thick soles, the shoes did not look much different from ordinary footwear. “These are special protective shoes,” Dr. Stenstrom explained. “They have rigid wooden soles which are rounded from front to back. As such, they not only serve as the perfect protection for numb feet, but are also very comfortable for walking.” The upper part of one type was designed as an open sandal, while the other resembled a fashionable sports shoe. The group was caught up in a lively discussion, as the shoes were turned around, touched and looked at from all sides. Finally one of the patients pointed with determination to the sports shoe, shouting: “We want this one. That looks O.K. and will be warm enough for our cold weather. Forget the other one. We don’t want to show our toes.” The others nodded: “Yes, we want the sports shoe!”

“This is a very happy day for me”, Dr. Stenstrom told me afterwards. “First, I got a clear response from the patients. Now I know which shoe to start producing. Secondly, this morning we were notified that the Baptist Union of Sweden has granted Amity a long-term donation of US$ 10,000 as capital for a shoe workshop. We plan to produce protective shoes for all those affected by the aftermath of leprosy. But we will start carefully; for the beginning, I think we need only one shoemaker with simple tools. We may expand production gradually, as demand grows. We should manufacture only what is accepted by the patients.”

During those autumn days of my visit, the hospital hosted China’s first International Workshop on Leprosy Rehabilitation, attended by renowned specialists from China and from all over the world. I had the opportunity to meet some of them over lunch, and learned from the Chinese specialists that China used to be one of the most notoriously leprosy-stricken countries. In
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1957, the government still counted 370,000 acute cases nationwide. Thanks to improved drug therapy and to systematic campaigns in social prevention and health education, this number has been reduced to the present 50,000. China hopes to eradicate the disease by the year 2000.

One of the foreign specialists lecturing at the workshop was Dr. Paul Brand, a well-known Briton who served as a mission doctor in South India. I asked him how he would assess the situation in China as compared to India. “China is much more advanced in curing and preventing leprosy”, he replied, “but still lacks experience in the field of rehabilitation.”

Explained Prof. Xu: “Since 1949, there have been half a million leprosy patients in China, 50% of whom are still alive and suffer from ulcers or deformities. We are now seeking assistance in rehabilitation programs from abroad.”

Asked about his lecture at the workshop, Dr. Stenstrom drew a piece of sticking plaster from his pocket: “My contribution is as simple as this, and has proven more effective than any costly or sophisticated treatment. Wherever I go, I advise the patients to always carry sticking plaster with them. Whenever they discover a little wound on their hands or feet, they should cover it with plaster immediately. The problem is that patients very often don’t care, because loss of sensation means their wounds don’t hurt. Unprotected wounds quickly develop into ulcers which can later damage the whole hand or foot. But even ulcers heal nicely and quickly, if they are dressed with plaster. It creates a closed ‘room’ with the right temperature and humidity underneath. Wounds heal even faster if the plaster is coated with zinc oxide and resin. But these are only contributing factors. The main principle is that the plaster prevents any disturbance of the natural healing process. Conventional dressing usually sticks to the ulcer, and whenever you remove the bandage, the healing epidermis is destroyed again.”

This simple healing method is original to Dr. Stenstrom. When he worked as a plastic surgeon at the University Hospital in Umeå (Sweden), he often had to remove big patches of skin from patients’ thighs, leaving a large area of raw flesh. He once had a dispute with the dermatologist of that hospital over the question of which kind of dressing would enable the smoothest and quickest healing. Since they could not settle the question theoretically, they undertook a clinical investigation, covering the exposed area with two different dressings. To separate one bandage from the other, Dr. Stenstrom fixed a strip of sticking plaster across the wound. When they removed the bandages to see whose dressing proved more effective, they were confronted with a striking result: It was the sticking plaster that did the best job!

After his retirement in 1976, Dr. and Mrs. Stenstrom worked in Libya for two years and in India for three. There they advocated their healing method and fought the medical superstition that a treatment can only be as successful as it is expensive. The Amity Foundation is proud of having won them for China and grateful for their selfless commitment.

![Prof. Xu and Dr. Stenstrom talking with a patient](image)

“Always carry sticking plaster in your pocket!”

The Daxinganling Forest Fire:

From Relief to Environmental Protection

China’s forests are shrinking; deserts are on the advance; big cities face serious water shortages. Warnings of this kind have been raised by many Chinese scientists, who urge their government to promote afforestation and to protect existing forests.

In this context, the Amity Foundation has tried to set an example: Committing itself to a certain region in China’s remote northeastern woodlands, it has set up a special award fund for people who make outstanding contributions to protecting and exploring the region’s natural resources. Awards will also be given in the fields of education, medical care and social welfare.

In this way Amity hopes to contribute both to the preservation and to the development of a region where China’s largest and relatively untouched forested areas can be found.

This region is Daxinganling. Located in Heilongjiang Province near the border with the Soviet Union, it drew world wide attention in May 1987, when the region was devastated by the largest fire in the history of socialist China. Hundreds of lives were lost, more than one million acres of forest destroyed and 50,000 people left homeless. The Amity Foundation, at that time just two years old, responded to the disaster by issuing its first relief appeal to its overseas friends. Over the summer of 1987, Amity received donations of nearly US$ 200,000 from all over the world.

Amity immediately transmitted the first donation of US$ 28,000 to the Disaster Relief Office of the Heilongjiang Provincial Government. Naturally, Amity did not intend to throw its contributions into an anonymous big pot, but asked the government agency for a detailed account of how the money would be spent. The government, however, seemed unable to comply. Amity then decided to stop all further remittances, keeping the incoming donations in a special account under its own control. It was only in September of that year that Amity was able to send its own representative to the remote Northeast for a first hand investigation. By that time, construction of new accommodation, including factories, schools, kindergartens and offices comprising more square-metres than pre-fire total, was nearly finished. This had been achieved thanks to a nation-wide wave of sympathy and support, and remarkable organizational efforts by the government.

In China and around the world people who were concerned about the victims, especially in light of an early and fierce winter to come, greeted this as good news. Yet, for Amity there was still the question of how to use the already accumulated funds in a responsible way which would be in line with donors’ intentions. To proceed with the remittances just to keep up appearances would have contravened the spirit in which the money was requested and donated. In addition, there had already been reports published in China about government corruption and the misuse of funds in Daxinganling.

In its emergency appeal, Amity had stressed rehabilitation as an important goal. The housing shortage caused by the Daxinganling disaster was fortunately dealt with quickly and effectively. But this was not the only side to the issue. A German agency, outlining the context in which they wanted their donation to be understood, had written: “During recent years we have become more and more aware how much the survival of humankind depends on the preservation of nature and especially
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of endangered forests." Indeed, the fire served as a reminder that development and modernization in their best sense do not simply mean increased production figures, but also the improvement of human living conditions in relationship to their social and natural environment. Concerned groups in China had already taken the fire disaster as an opportunity to raise the issue of the tendency toward neglect in the development of the remote areas of the country.

Amity then decided to deposit the remaining 600,000 Yuan (US$162,000) in the bank as permanent capital, from which the annual interest of 7.2% will be drawn for awards each year. A board of trustees, based in the Northeast, will select prizewinners each year according to guidelines set up by the Amity Foundation. On September 1, 1989, the first awards ceremony was held. Representing by the Amity Foundation was Mr. Gu Renfa, one of its Associate General Secretaries.

The award fund board chose 193 non-Party members who work in the area to receive awards. Included in their number are academics, teachers, doctors, engineers, and business people. Each recipient received 225 Yuan. In his congratulatory remarks, Director Zhou Xiangdong praised their outstanding contributions: "Among those 193 are many who fought the huge forest fire; disregarding their personal safety, they protected people's lives and saved public property; in the reconstruction of homes and the restoration of production they showed exemplary commitment. Others have been working here since the sixties. For decades they have left behind a comfortable urban life, and sometimes even their families, committing themselves to the hard conditions and harsh life of our Siberian-style frontier area."

In this last point, he touched upon a sensitive problem of China's modernization. One cannot overestimate the huge gap in living conditions between the big cities (especially in the coastal areas) and the vast, scarcely populated areas of China's West and Northeast, which, in addition to their harsh climate, are still backward and very poor. It is no exaggeration to say that China has a third-world problem within its own borders. The highly educated usually flock to the big cities, leaving remote areas without the human resources so urgently needed for their development. With its award fund for Daxinganling, Amity hopes to help reverse this trend, drawing talented persons to contribute to the progress of this area.

Speaking on behalf of the prizewinners, Feng Yugui, vice-director of a local teachers' training college, expressed his gratitude towards the board of trustees, the Amity Foundation and its overseas friends. "As all of us 193 prizewinners share this year's awards, the money each of us receives cannot make us rich. But we are fully aware of the prize's human value. Realizing how many concerned groups inside and outside China made this fund possible, we feel highly honored and will do our best to live up to the public confidence and the people's expectations expressed in this award. It deeply moves us to see how much our compatriots in Hong Kong, as well as foreign friends in Europe and North America value the development of our Daxinganling region. We work so far away in inhospitable surroundings, yet we are not forgotten. What an overwhelming proof of human love!"

Chinese Officials Visit European Churches:

"China Needs Christian-Initiated Social Projects"

The Chinese government and Communist Party should welcome and support Christian-initiated social welfare activities which serve the broader society. During the drafting process for the forthcoming law on religion, clauses will be formulated to encourage and regulate non-government social service activities undertaken by patriotic religious bodies such as the Christian churches, as well as Buddhist and Islamic organizations.

These statements were made by a delegation of Chinese state officials upon their return from a three week fact-finding tour to four West European countries in May 1989. They toured Switzerland, West Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain, investigating the social role of Protestant churches and the relationship between church and state in those countries. The ten delegates, representing China's Religious Affairs Bureau, the United Front Work Department, the Chinese Associated for Friendship with Foreign Countries and research institutions in religion and the social sciences, sought inspiration for their own country, as it formulates a law on religion, the first of its kind in the history of socialist China. The trip was sponsored by the Amity Foundation, which also helped to draw up the program and to establish the necessary contacts.

Accompanied by Mr. Han Wenzao, General Secretary of the Amity Foundation, and Miss Yang Guangjie from Amity's Education Department, who served as interpreter, they visited church organizations from parish to world federations level, they met with bishops and with state ministers, and discussed the church-state relationship with pastors, party leaders, ambassadors and ordinary members of Christian congregations. They not only visited Christian hospitals, kindergartens and homes for the elderly, but also shelters for street sleepers and centers for the unemployed, observed religious education in a public school and learned about pastoral care for prisoners. They were briefed on church taxes and on the significant financial support which church-run social institutions receive from the state.

They were deeply impressed by the wide range of the churches' social involvement, by their efficiency and high scientific standards. With regard to their evangelistic and pastoral activities, they stressed that the Chinese government would not explicitly encourage the proclamation of religious ideas, but does follow the principles of religious freedom, of separation between church and state and of the state's neutrality towards religion.
Chinese Officials Visit European Churches

The Chinese visitors understood the social activities of the churches as an expression of Christian love; yet they wondered whether such heavy involvement in society resulted from the dwindling of religious needs and from the difficulties churches face in doing traditional pastoral work in modern society. They assessed the extensive influence of Christian churches in public life as a stabilizing and harmonizing factor which would ease economic contradictions and contribute to the solving of social conflicts.

The delegates' findings and conclusions are summarized in an official report which stresses that: social welfare projects run by patriotic religious groups "are not merely necessary for society — objectively speaking, they are urgently needed. There are many fields of social welfare the government cannot cover, and many social problems that no one is working on. If people's organizations can actively assist the government in these areas, if they can help to resolve these social contradictions and to maintain unity and stability, this will definitely have a good effect." (quoted from the draft of "An Investigative Report on the Involvement of Western European Churches in Social Work").

With regard to the churches' experience in international contacts, it was emphasized that the churches in China could play a significant role in the course of the open door policy. In the fields of world peace, global justice, environmental protection and the struggle against racism, the churches have a special potential for building bridges and fostering mutual understanding between different countries and cultures. The Chinese officials repeatedly named the Amity Foundation as a positive example of how a voluntary organization in China can contribute to society through both social service and international relationships.

European Partners Meet In Holland

Amity Associate General Secretary Mr. Ting Yenren attended the annual meeting of the European Network of Amity Partners (ENAMEP), held on December 1 and 2 in Amersfoort, Holland.

Fourteen representatives of European church-related social service and development agencies from nine different countries also participated in the gathering, which was hosted by Dient Over Grenzen, a Dutch service organization.

Ting presented a report on Amity's work over the past year, and discussed plans for the future with ENAMEP partners. He explained that the work of the Amity Foundation would continue to be important in China for at least three reasons. First, there are people in need of help and Amity was committed to staying with the people. Second, since Amity represents the goodwill and commitment of Christians to serving the Chinese people, its work promoted Christian witness in society.

Third, the existence of NGOs like Amity in China helps to promote reform and social progress. "They endorse and encourage a spirit of independence and participation on the part of the people to whom these NGOs relate. Amity therefore gives priority to projects that directly benefit people at the grassroots, involving them in the design, implementation and monitoring of projects," Ting explained.

The next ENAMEP meeting will be held in the first part of November, 1990, as part of a broader Amity consultation in Nanjing.

China's Protestant Churches in Figures

The Amity Foundation has close personal links to the China Christian Council, and many of Amity's overseas friends are interested in the church in China. We have therefore decided to publish the newest statistics on Protestant Churches in China, reflecting the situation at the end of 1988. These figures were released by the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Committee.

1. Churches in use: 6,375, among which 2,683 have been newly built since 1980.
2. Meeting points or home gatherings: 20,602. 15,855 of these are affiliated with Christian Councils and Three-Self Committees at different levels.
4. Number of clergy: 12,060, which includes 6 bishops, 911 pastors (75 female pastors), 2,009 elders, 5,697 deacons, 3,437 evangelists.
6. Lay leaders: 40,108, including 18,078 leaders of meeting point gatherings.
7. Seminarians currently enrolled: 734.
8. Short term training courses in 1988 run by provincial and municipal level Christian councils: 139, with 2,651 participants. Courses run by county level Christian councils: 630, with 33,298 participants.
9. Clergy and laity who were awarded the title of advanced worker by their units in 1988: 16,556.

The Amity Newsletter has been created on the initiative of Chinese Christians for the purpose of promoting health, education and welfare in the People's Republic of China. It is an independent Chinese voluntary organization in which people from all walks of life may participate. Amity represents a new form of Chinese Christian involvement in society, through which Chinese Christians are joining hands with friends from around the world to serve the needs of China's modernization.

The Amity Newsletter is distributed free of charge four times a year. If you would like to receive the newsletter, or desire further information on any of our projects, please feel free to write.

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