An Eye-Opening Experience
Blindness Prevention Work In Northern Jiangsu

Imagined darkness, the darkness of blindness. This is a darkness which makes you rely on sound, touch and smell for orientation and the million other tasks seeing people use their eyes for. Without proper training, it is a darkness which makes you dependent on others for walking and traveling. And it is a darkness which tremendously limits your choices of suitable work. For many individuals, blindness also means poverty. The emotional and economic impact of blindness transcends the individual affected. "One blind person, a whole blind family," a saying in blindness prevention work goes.

Then, for the twins Duan Xianglei and Duan Xiangbao, life changed for the better, as they were accepted into Amity’s sponsorship program. With their tuition fees subsidized by Amity, they attended Xuzhou Special Education Center, where they learned Braille and basic life skills. Still, with a life of blindness ahead, the situation was far from ideal for the Duan children.

In the case of the Duan family, simple farmers in northern Jiangsu, there were three blind persons in a family of five. All of the Duan children - a daughter and twin boys - were born with congenital cataracts which left them virtually blind. For their parents, the situation seemed hopeless. Unable to attend ordinary schools, the children spent their days idly at home. Because of their visual impairment, they had little contact with other children their age. Mother Zhang Cunxiang particularly pitied her daughter Duan Manman: "I thought we could do nothing for her, it was hopeless. I felt so sorry for her."

For seven million Chinese, blindness is reality, and this number is growing daily. Inadequate medical service, insufficient nutrition and hygiene, harsh ecological conditions like heat and dust, increasing life expectancy, accidents and genetic factors, all contribute to the rising number of blind persons. However, curable and avoidable forms of blindness exist and are among the most common causes for loss of sight. About half of China’s blind are estimated to suffer from cataracts (like the Duan children), a form of blindness where sight can be relatively easily restored through corrective surgery. Other preventable
forms of blindness are childhood blindness and loss of sight produced by trachoma.

With so many avoidable or curable forms of blindness, then why are there still so many incidences of blindness in China? As She Hongyu from Amity's Blindness Prevention and Special Education Division explains, several factors restrict access to medical care and prevention. To begin with, many patients do not know their form of blindness may actually be curable. In many cases, even grassroots health workers are not familiar with the different forms of blindness that exist. Old people suffering from cataracts often are hesitant to undergo surgery. Due to cultural reasons, they would rather stay blind than impose a heavy financial burden on their children through a costly operation. Cataract surgery is not only expensive, but may only be available in city hospitals. The need to travel for medical treatment adds to the costs of treatment, and the fact that blind persons need somebody to accompany them for traveling acts as a further disincentive to undertake this trip.

Promoting quality surgery

Cataract operations require a certain degree of specialization and practice. Many ophthalmologists do not perform them at all or only irregularly. But for successful cataract operations, training and regular practice are essential. "One bad eye operation will keep twenty future patients away, while one good operation can attract a number of people," She continues. The equipment of eye clinics often also needs upgrading. However, equipment is not the major problem in blindness prevention work. "Cataract operations do not require a lot of sophisticated equipment. In fact, it is much quicker and easier to upgrade an eye hospital than to train the personnel required to run it," She Hongyu explains. The biggest bottleneck in successful blindness prevention work in China right now is education, not equipment.

Accordingly, training health workers is an important part of Amity's blindness related work. Training for medical personnel occurs at several levels: Village health workers are trained in diagnosis and simple treatment; township doctors are educated in extraocular operations and postoperational care; while county hospital ophthalmologists receive further training to equip them for intra-ocular surgeries for cataracts and glaucoma.

Within Amity's blindness prevention work, one particular focus area is Xuzhou in northern Jiangsu. Amity has been conducting blindness prevention programs in Xuzhou and the surrounding counties for over 12 years. Recently, Amity's Xuzhou work has taken on a new dimension: It is now part of Vision 2020, a campaign launched by the World Health Organization in an effort to eliminate avoidable blindness by the year 2020. Through its cooperation with and support from CBM (Christoffel Blindenmission), Amity's longstanding partner in blindness prevention work and one of the driving forces behind Vision 2020, Amity has become part of this venture. Intensive screening for curable and preventable blindness, training of medical personnel and restorative cataract surgery are the major elements of Amity’s work in Xuzhou. Operations are offered to those patients suffering from curable cataracts.

It was within this framework of Vision 2020 that the fate of the Duan children changed dramatically. In the spring of 2001, all three of them were selected for cataract operations and underwent Amity-sponsored surgery. Duan Xiangbao, Duan Xianglei and Duan Manman have gained sight and now plan to attend ordinary primary school after their recovery from the operation. Indeed, Duan Manman looks a bit worried at the thought of joining primary school classes with students half her age. The results of year-long isolation are still noticeable as she and her brothers are shy and cling to each other. But the smiles on their faces leave no doubt about their happiness.

Dotting darkness with stars

There are hundreds of cases like the Duan children in northern Jiangsu alone, and part of the problem of
treatment is to find them. Screening for curable blindness is therefore an important part of Amity’s work and is usually done in cooperation with local medical outreach points and Disabled Persons’ Federations. “This saves the patients traveling,” She Hongyu explains.

Suining is one such clinic where Amity reaches out to rural blind patients. One big program was conducted in April of this year. In cooperation with the local community, identified curable blind patients were informed that in late April treatment would be made available at Suining No. 2 People’s Hospital. Hundreds flocked into the small clinic, camping on makeshift mats while awaiting their turn. In a two-week surgery marathon, doctors operated on an average of twenty patients per day. “The youngest patient we examined was four months old. The oldest one we operated on was 93,” one doctor remembers.

In many cases, patients contributed only a small fraction of the original cost for surgery. Still, for many even this fraction may be a large sum. 52-year-old Tian Yixia recounts: “We had to cut down a grown tree in front of our house to raise money for the operation. We sold the wood and contributed 350 Yuan to the cost of the treatment.” For a comparison: In Xuzhou Eye Institute a cataract operation costs 3000 RMB [around US$ 375].

“I now can see the stars at night,” Duan Xiangli discovered overjoyed after his cataract operation. Blindness increases poverty, and long blindness usually means long poverty. Therefore, it is of particular importance to treat blindness affecting young people like the Duan children. On the other hand, the low economic status of old people in peasant families often makes a costly cataract operation seem not worthwhile for the family as an economic unit. For the individual, of course, treatment never comes too late: “Now I can see my granddaughter getting married,” 93-year-old Grandmother Lu Cuishi smiles. Watching her vigorously moving around on two crutches, it becomes clear: For cataract patients, every single day with new sight counts.

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Help Them Fight For Their Rights

NGOs Can Play An Important Role In Protecting Peasants’ Interests

Zhong Xin

For a nation of peasants, land distribution is of vital interest. Until today, China remains a rural society: seventy percent of its population live and work in the countryside.

When the Communists won power in 1949, 75% of China’s arable land was in the hands of less than ten percent of the population. Land reform was one of the earliest tasks the new government faced. Based on a law from 1950, land was then redistributed following the slogan “land for those who work it.” Redistribution of land into the hands of the peasants who cultivated it greatly enhanced their motivation. Agricultural productivity and farmers’ incomes increased as a result of the land reform. Yet, the new land distribution also had a big drawback: The new tiny work units lacked capital and equipment. It proved difficult to work the land efficiently on an autonomous base. Consequently, the system of agricultural communes was introduced. From 1958 to 1978, China’s agricultural output was produced in big units without private responsibility, a system that tended to demoralize peasants and hampered agricultural development.

In order to revive agricultural production, the current system of family-based land contracts was adopted in 1979. Land is now leased to families on a contract basis for 15 years. With this system, the principle of public ownership remains intact, while at the same time private responsibility ensures that peasants work for their own interest. In 1998, the maximum rental period was extended to 30 years. This extension provides peasants with a sense of stability and acts as a further incentive for production. Besides, this long
term policy is also one form of population control: Births and deaths within a family do not affect the land assigned to the household unit.

On the whole the current system has proved to be the most successful form of land usage in China so far. However, problems hindering efficient production exist. Since the late 1980s the following shortcomings can be seen:

- Under the contract system, peasants’ rights of land usage and management are limited, thus creating an obstacle for more progressive forms of agricultural land usage.

- Land is distributed according to the number of working family members. This form of assigning land is not in the interest of maximizing efficiency. Rather, it hampers the ideal allocation of technology, capital and workers.

- Instruments to exchange land in an effective way are missing. This is another obstacle towards efficient land management and the non-agricultural development of villages.

Apart from these systemic shortcomings, violations of regulations through local governments have occurred in recent years. These include overly short contract periods, the general weakening of contractors’ rights and a reduction of the land surface under contract. In some places, the local government interferes through giving peasants detailed instructions on what to grow where, which department to sell it to etc. Such incidents severely hamper peasants’ self-initiative and agricultural production. Due to a number of factors, prices for agricultural produce have continuously dropped over the past few years. As a result, more and more peasants leave their home villages and become urban migrants. Although China suffers from a shortage of arable land, in recent years the land surface under cultivation has shrunk annually for 10.27 million mou [616, 200 ha approx.].

Farmers, associations can also support them with technology and capital they individually would be unable to obtain. Most importantly, NGOs can motivate peasants to fight for their own rights. Many well-intended government policies have been improperly implemented because peasants do not know how to protect themselves against illegal practices.

- NGOs can help peasants through introducing new crops and environmentally friendly ways of farming which assist farmers in agricultural production.

- Through installing irrigation systems, NGOs can help to improve conditions for farming.

- Another possible area of work for NGOs is data collection. Currently, there is over-usage of land in some areas and land lying fallow in other areas. Through data collection, NGOs can help to work towards a more efficient use of land.

- Finally, NGOs can speak on behalf of the peasants. Their independent position enables them to serve as intermediaries between authorities and the grassroots: NGOs can look into the implementation of government policies and speak on behalf of the peasants in meetings and at conferences.

Zhong Xin graduated from Nanjing University with an M.A. in sociology. A project secretary in the Blindness Prevention And Special Education Division, she also assists Amity in development related research.
On The Up Grade:
Supporting A School for Migrant Workers’ Children

Xu Zhudi had a pretty bad start. When she was born 14 years ago, her mother, desperate at not having given birth to a son, tried to kill her. Xu Zhudi survived and was given to a foster family. Today, only her name Zhudi ("wish for a brother") tells her story.

Her new family took good care of her, but Henan is a poor province. So her parents decided to move to Nanjing in search of paying jobs. Xu Zhudi remained with relatives, missing her family - and too poor to attend school.

A few years ago, Xu Zhudi finally followed her parents to Nanjing. Now they could even afford to give her an education. Xu Zhudi enrolled in an improvised school set up by a migrant workers’ training center, an institution run under the supervision of the local district government. However, the school hardly deserved its name - a decrepit building without any proper equipment or plumbing and frequently flooded during hard rains. The situation at the school was so bad that local newspapers and TV stations got hold of the story. At this point, the Amity Foundation learned of the school and decided to support the migrants’ initiative for education.

Fighting for every single child

With a 50,000 RMB [US$ 6,250 approx.] donation from Amity, the building was renovated and slightly elevated to prevent flooding. New benches, desks and 2,000 books upgraded the equipment significantly. The building is still rather small for its four hundred students, but the rooms are well lit and the students are obviously happy with the conditions. Some of them travel through half of Nanjing every day. "They like the teachers," explains Mrs. Yang Xiaojing, the principal. Listening to Yang, it becomes quickly obvious that the school’s greatest asset is its extremely dedicated staff. Yang, who "wanted to be a teacher ever since I was young," fights for every single child. "By birth, every child has the right to education," she states emphatically. "We see so many children who don’t have access to education. We once had two girls, aged seven and eleven. Both had never attended school. They lived in a ramshackle plastic hut together with their mother." And she continues: "Our aim is to make these children into full and competent members of society. The aims of education are the same, whether they are migrant workers’ children or not."

Unfortunately, commitment does not equal competence. According to principal Yang, the teachers’ qualifications are not adequate for a primary school in one of China’s increasingly competitive urban settings. There are plans for Amity to support some of the younger teachers for further training. Again Yang: "We are not bothered by people who look down on us as ‘second-rate’ teachers because we teach in a migrants’ school. For us, bringing these children up properly is a vocation. We love these children." Currently, the school has a staff of 13 teachers, and most of the 350 RMB tuition fee per semester [US$ 43 approx.] goes for teachers’ salaries.

Apart from planning to upgrade its teachers’ qualifications, the school is currently exploring possibilities to offer more than just primary education. Xu Zhudi and her peers are growing up quickly, and parents are already demanding to set up a middle school.

Today, Xu Zhudi is a fifth grader, studying with students much younger than her. However, she obviously enjoys school. "Math is my favorite subject," she confesses after a shy smile. Every morning, while her parents are busy tending to their breakfast stall, Xu Zhudi rides her bike to school, where she also has lunch. On ordinary days, she returns home after five. What does she plan for her time after primary school? "I hope to attend middle school," she is confident.
"Amnesty" or "Amity" Foundation?
Raising Awareness For Amity's Work

Ian Groves has been involved with the Amity Foundation since 1992, working first as an Amity teacher and then seconded by British and Irish churches to Amity’s Overseas Coordination Office in Hong Kong since 1996. Last year, he spent four months in the UK raising awareness about China and the work of the Amity Foundation. Below are some of his impressions from that time.

China: The Great Unknown

When you think of China, what image comes to mind?

During the period September – December last year, I travelled the length and breadth of the British Isles, asking this question to the different groups I met. Certain images came up again and again: “the Great Wall,” “Chinese food,” “chopsticks,” “huge population,” “bicycles.” “Poverty” was occasionally mentioned. Despite the development of urban centres such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, many in the UK still think of China as a poor, developing, “Third-World” country.

In the minds of most British people, however, China is still a “great unknown”, a “mysterious” country thousands of miles away. Most people don’t know what life looks like for the poor in remote areas of China. While the desire to help is there, most people don’t know how they can help. And hardly anyone had heard of the Amity Foundation, with some even under the impression that I work for the Amnesty Foundation!

Competing for donors’ attention

We live in the age of the Internet, a connected world of multimedia and instant access to information and data. More than ever before, countless ideas and images compete for our attention. In and among all of these are many worthy causes, many groups and people in need. Whether we like it or not, those groups who succeed in grabbing our attention and “standing out” from the crowd will ultimately receive our support.

This is a truth I discovered for myself while in the UK. Amity is a small organization and, for many years, did not place great emphasis on publicity and “advertising”. When Amity started in 1985 it was something new and exciting for church groups all over the world, a way to work in partnership with Chinese Christians and do something to help a country closed to the outside world for so long. Many around the world wanted to be a part of this new endeavor and its sheer “novelty” was advertising enough.
Now, 15 years later, Amity’s work is still as necessary as ever but it is no longer "new" and is no longer the "only game in town". Amity can now ill-afford to neglect publicity. Whether we like it or not, Amity has to learn to "sell itself" now.

Highlighting needs, not "niceness"

To bring its message to more people, Amity is beginning to develop new ways of publicity. In recent years, each of Amity’s divisions has produced a video introducing aspects of its work. These proved invaluable during my time in the UK - the groups I talked to didn’t just want to hear about China, they wanted to see it for themselves. However, China and the issues Amity deals with are all so “foreign” to most people in the UK that they cannot take in and process too much at once. I found that many of Amity’s video presentations were too long and too specialized for a general audience.

While in the UK, it was interesting for me to observe what “turned people on” about Amity’s work and what didn’t. The video “Growing Up In Hope”, about Amity’s Back to School program, always elicited a good response. It spoke to people of all ages on subjects - education and children - which touch us all. The images of extreme poverty in remote villages in Yunnan and Ningxia prompted many to want to help in some way, and the video suggested concrete action which could be taken to support children affected by such hardship.

On the other hand, people were less enthusiastic about responding to, say, Amity’s rural development work. While people realized the importance of biogas and tree-planting and irrigation projects, these are just not as immediately understandable and relevant to the average British person as the sight of a small child in need. I often had to remind groups that “less glamorous” projects are just as important as the more “attractive” ones and are often of wider benefit to more people within a rural community in China.

Trust is not enough

Amity is small. In many ways, when a person decides to support Amity, they do so on trust, trusting that Amity will make use of donations and support in an appropriate and effective way. To demand a lot of feedback from Amity would be to take away valuable resources from where they are needed the most - the implementation of actual Amity projects.

And yet (coming back to human nature here), people do expect accountability. They want to hear where their support is going and what the result is. "What assurances can you give us that, if we support Amity, our support will really be used where it is needed the most and not squandered or wasted in some way?" This was a common concern raised by the groups I talked to in the UK. And, once a partnership is established with Amity, partners need encouragement if they are to continue to offer their support. Whether we like it or not, the bottom line is: the group that provides the most follow-up, feedback and accountability gets the support it needs. I hope Amity is able to find ways to strengthen itself in this regard in the future. This is particularly important when we consider that church membership outside China is shrinking and the amount of support available for work in China is diminishing correspondingly.

A heart for China

During my time in the UK, one thing became clear to me: China holds a special place in the hearts of many British people. This vast and great country somehow fires people’s imaginations. Many church groups in the UK have some China connection from the past, and there is genuine concern and compassion for those in need within China. People want to help but they don’t know how. They have no access to easily understandable materials about Amity’s work, and when they do, they want to know that Amity is trustworthy. How can we play our part in helping Amity reach out to such people? This is the challenge to us all.
Amity Trains YMCA/YWCA Staff

From May 20-26 of this year, a joint workshop was conducted between the Amity Foundation and the Chinese YMCA/YWCAs [Ys]. Through papers presented by Amity staff, lecturers from Nanjing University and the Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, the 21 participants from Ys throughout China learned about NGO's poverty alleviation work, project implementation and Amity's principles and policies. The training program also included an exposure visit to selected rural development projects in northern Jiangsu. Apart from strengthening the Y staff's project management skills, the workshop also aimed at enhancing cooperation and networking between Amity and other NGOs. The meeting was financially supported by the Swedish Mission Council.

TB Prevention And Control Projects Started in Gansu

A series of tuberculosis prevention and control projects have been started in April of this year. Located in Xining and ten other counties in Gansu Province, the projects are scheduled to run for three years. Two million RMB [around US$250,000] will be invested from Amity's side, with part of the money going into ten X-ray machines and other equipment. The program includes systematic training for Amity's local partners in related medical issues, but also in project supervision and coordination.

Norwegians Train Amity Staff

For the first time ever, a three-day training program for all Amity staff was conducted in Nanjing in late April. Norwegian development experts Nils Faarlund and Dr. Knud Jorgensen ran the workshop which was well received among Amity staff. The program, consisting mainly of lectures, covered areas like social development, the building of organizational structures, staff cooperation and leadership skills.

Farewell

After serving as Amity's Overseas Coordinator for nearly four years, Rev. Ewing W. [Bud] Carroll, Jr., is returning to New York City to begin a six month's pre-retirement assignment. He will be available to meet with groups interested in learning more about the church in China and the work of Amity. He can be reached by e-mail at: ewcarrolljr@compuserve.com An announcement concerning our new Overseas Coordinator should be on our web site even as you are reading this. Look out for more details in our Jan-Mar 2002 ANL!†

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The Amity Foundation was created at 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.

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