"We Learn From The Children We Work For" - Two Amity Volunteers Report

Katrin Fiedler

"It was in Easter 2000 that I read a newspaper article about somebody who was sponsoring a child in Yunnan to go back to school. I was very moved by this story and decided that I wanted to do something myself."

Shortly afterwards, Wu Qiumei (53) joined the ranks of Amity’s volunteers. "At first, having studied some theology myself, I wanted to support a theology student from a poor region. But then, the opportunity to work for Amity came up," she smiles and seems to be perfectly happy about this twist of fate.

Today Wu, a former accountant, is one of the voluntary workers who come in regularly to help with the paperwork related to Amity’s Back To School project. In this project, students who had to drop out of school for financial reasons are supported by Amity to resume their studies. To ensure that the money allocated to needy families is really spent on tuition fees, regular follow-up is necessary. Thousands of school reports, project forms filed by local representatives and the occasional thank you letter all need to be read, sorted through, and checked for consistency to make sure donations reach those they are intended for.

"When I joined Amity, I did not know much about how the project actually worked. I just learned the necessary skills on the job," Wu explains. "It is work where you need to pay attention to details, be quick and responsible. Because of the expansion of the programme, we actually had to review some of the procedures over the past few years. Fortunately, we now have a large bunch of university students coming in to help during their summer vacation."

"The more I do this kind of work, the more meaningful it becomes"

"The more I do this kind of work, the more meaningful it becomes," Wu continues to talk about her motivation. "In the end, we don’t do it for ourselves or for the beneficiaries, but for God. With this attitude, every day at work is very meaningful. Of course my work sometimes is tiring, but when I see those children before my inner eye, I feel strong again. And every year, we do a
Han Tingting, who spend five days a week in the office just like their paid colleagues.

Han Tingting (53) joined Amity in March of 2001. "Wu Qiumei brought me along after I retired from my job," Han recounts. "Amity's mentality is very compatible with my faith," she describes one of her discoveries after joining Amity's volunteers. "I want to express Christ's love through my work."

Working for God, not themselves

For Han, one of the most rewarding experiences is the cooperation with her young Amity colleagues. "They are all very lovable - so nice and then so hardworking, they go to all those remote places..." And, like Wu, Han treasures the exposure to the children she works for. "I learn such a lot from these children, from the letters they write. It is very fulfilling to read their reports. The bible says 'Giving is more blessed than receiving,' and my work with Amity gives me a lot of opportunities to make this saying come true. A while ago, we had to fill in a questionnaire about our motivation. I simply wrote down that I am very happy to do this kind of work." Wu nods emphatically to her colleague's words.

As a professional church musician, Han nurtures further hopes for her children's work. "I would love to help them through music, expose them to it and give them opportunities to make music for themselves. Many children love music, and there may even be very gifted young people among the students we sponsor, but they simply get no opportunity to study music."

For both Han and Wu, one of the highlights in their involvement in the Back To School project was a visit to Mengcheng earlier this year, where they had an opportunity to meet some of the students they work for in person. In November, they will take another batch of visitors from Hong Kong to meet Amity-sponsored primary school students. "I am looking forward to it," Wu smiles.

Amity's Back To School Children

9-year-old Zhu Liyan
from Mashan County in Guangxi writes:

"After my father died of illness, my family went into dire strait. Just when I was about to drop out of school, you gave me a hand, a warm hand.

I am now the flower that will blossom in the morning dews and raindrops. The flower will grow more beautiful, and with your help and love, I will grow up and become a useful person for my motherland."
Social Service and the Church in China

Interview with Dr. Wenzao Han

The CCC/TSPM [China Christian Council/ Three Self Patriotic Movement] has recently announced the establishment of a Social Service Department and has plans to promote social service projects among churches in China. Dr. Wenzao Han, General Secretary of the Amity Foundation and Chair of the Advisory Council to the CCC/TSPM, was interviewed by ANL on this new development.

What are your thoughts on the recent establishment of a Social Service Department by the CCC/TSPM?

The church is growing very fast in China. This is a good thing. However, because of the lack of adequately trained pastors, many Chinese Christians are influenced by rather conservative theological thinking. Let me explain. Li Enlin, Associate General Secretary of Amity, used to teach at Wuhan Seminary. When she was a seminary faculty, she often received invitations to preach in local churches whenever she returned to her home province of Anhui. Several years after she joined Amity, the local churches stopped inviting her to preach. In other words, "social service" is still not widely understood among Chinese Christians as part and parcel of the church's life and mission.

In recent years, this mentality has undergone some changes. The steady increase in the number of Amity's church-run social service projects is a living witness to this. Over the past ten years or so, Amity has been working with different local churches in more than 100 projects that include church-run clinics, kindergartens, homes for the elderly and poverty alleviation projects. In Hangzhou for instance, the Jianqiao Church has set up a home for the elderly, providing very good service. The Christians there are putting into practice their love for others. The time is now ripe for the CCC/TSPM to establish a social service department so that they can put Christian love into action. In doing so, the CCC/TSPM is making a strong theological statement. This is why the Amity Foundation should support such a development. It is important that the church should serve society and not be some kind of inward looking community.

In what way is Amity different from the social service department of the CCC/TSPM?

Though Amity is not a church organization, it was initiated by Chinese Christians. Many key leaders of the CCC/TSPM are board members of the Amity Foundation. It was initiated by Chinese Christians to meet the humanitarian needs of fellow Chinese, regardless of their faith, ethnicity and gender. In this sense, Amity has its roots in the church and its broad understanding of mission in the Chinese context.

At the same time, Amity is a place, a melting pot, so to speak, where both believers and non-believers can work hand-in-hand to promote humanitarian aid. In today's world, there is too much conflict and confrontation between groups of different faiths and beliefs. One of Amity's aims is to demonstrate to people in China and overseas the critical importance of having people of different faiths and no faith working together to promote harmony. Amity represents a new form of Christian involvement in social development. Social development projects help others to better understand what is Christianity and Christian love.

On its part, the Social Service Department of the CCC/TSPM will play an educational role among Christians in encouraging them to become more involved in social service. In this way,
it will help broaden and deepen the theological understanding of Chinese Christians. It will also give more support to church-initiated and church-run projects.

**What will be the relationship between Amity and the Social Service Department of the CCC/TSPM?**

The work of Amity and the Social Service Department of the CCC/TSPM will be complementary in nature. We have worked in the past with local churches, some provincial councils and the YMCA/YWCA in various types of projects, often giving training in areas where we have more expertise. We should continue to cooperate closely with the CCC/TSPM. Both organizations are committed to mutual respect, mutual support and mutual cooperation. There are many areas where we can work even more closely together than before.

There is so much to do in addressing new social challenges that we welcome any help and cooperation that will strengthen our work and outreach. We hope that the nationwide network of churches can be a source for strengthening diaconal work.

**How will overseas partners relate to Amity in the future?**

Amity will continue to be project- and needs-based. This means that we will continue to implement projects at the grassroots, based on the needs there, with a focus on poverty alleviation. As in the past, overseas partners are invited to work with us in supporting Amity's projects based on the actual needs in China and in consonance with their own funding guidelines. Within China, Amity not only plays a funding role but implements projects in ways that ensure people's participation. Initiating new approaches and new models of community development is one way in which we are doing "advocacy work" in China. These new approaches, we believe, have a cutting-edge dimension to them and hopefully can become models for sustainable development of the whole society.

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**The View of the Amity Foundation on the Establishment of the Social Service Department under CCC/TSPM**

1. Amity fully supports the establishment of the Social Service Department under the CCC/TSPM, which is a reflection of the progress made on the part of the church in China. This represents further development in theological thinking and an effort of the church to apply love into practice.

2. Though Amity is not a church organization, it was initiated by Chinese Christians to meet the humanitarian needs of fellow Chinese, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, and gender. Now a well-established NGO in China, Amity is where Christians, people of other faiths, and those without a religious faith can work together for the cause of humanitarian aid. In promoting harmony among believers and non-believers, Amity represents a new form of Christian involvement in social development.

3. The work of Amity and the Social Service Department under the CCC/TSPM are complementary in nature. Both organizations are committed to mutual respect, mutual support, and mutual cooperation.

4. Amity is project- and needs-based. Donor agencies may fund Amity's projects based on the actual needs in China and in consonance with their own funding guidelines. Within China, Amity not only plays a funding role but is involved in project implementation in a way that ensures that projects employ the participatory approach, have cutting-edge significance and can become models for sustainable development of the whole society.
“Ice Tea”, Rice and Cotton Quilts

Flood Relief Work in Shaanxi Province

Ting Yenren

Following our appeals to help the victims of flood disasters in Shaanxi and Sichuan Provinces in July of 2002, Amity was able to help numerous families by supplying goods for immediate relief, like rice and plastic sheeting for tents. Below, Ting Yenren (Vice President of the Amity Foundation) shares some of his impressions with ANL readers. He visited affected areas in Shaanxi Province and assisted the distribution of more relief goods in September 2002.

Liu Sanjiang, 54, would never forget that horrible morning. Because of heavy rain during the night, he had not had much sleep and got up early. No sooner had he stepped out of his house than he heard people call his name and shout: “Run! Run! Now! You’ll be killed!” He saw that stones and sand had blocked the nearby culvert and the muddy current had changed its course: the flood was now flowing over the road behind his house, pouring towards the house and then dashing down into the valley along both sides of the house. He rushed back in, pulled his wife and daughter out and carried his three granddaughters to a high and safe place. The house collapsed behind them. The family stood in the rain, watching the roaring water devouring their pigs, furniture, clothing, grain, and everything else.

Liu and his family were not the only ones to be severely affected by this summer’s floods. In Liu’s home region of Jiangkou Township, a Hui autonomous area deep in the Qin-Ridge Mountains, hundreds of families suffered severe losses of crops, housing, food and household items. Worst of all, the floods affected or destroyed over 80% of the cropland, causing the effects of the disaster to be felt in years to come. 128 families were left with virtually nothing: no food and bedding, no house, and no farmland.

Right after the floods, Amity helped by providing flood victims with rice. This time, we had come to witness the distribution of winter supplies: more rice, and cotton quilts for surviving the harsh Shaanxi cold.

On the morning of September 19, farmers from the neighbouring villages gathered in Jiangkou. Attracted by the red banners, piles of cotton quilts of all colours, and sacks of rice sitting against a wall, and by us, the “officials from high up” standing behind a small desk by the side of the street, they gathered in a crowd around us.

“We will always remember you”

A township leader walked to the desk, asked the crowd to step closer, and announced the beginning of the meeting. There were several short speeches expressing gratitude to Amity and other agencies that had given help to the people victimized by the recent floods and mudslides: ACT (Actions by Churches Together), HKCC (Hong Kong Christian Council), the Shaanxi Provincial Christian Council, and the provincial government. The speakers had to slow down and look at their notes to make sure that all the names on the long list were pronounced correctly. Even so, "ACT" still came out like "ice tea." The crowd was quiet and moved. Someone held high a sheet of paper on
which was written: “Thank you.” Another one read: “We will always remember you.”

Next, the village leaders started to call the names one by one from a list. Whoever was called came forward, handed in his or her “relief card” to have it filled out and stamped, signed his or her name on a long list (many could only put their finger prints), and was finally given the quilts and rice. The “relief card” was actually a record that showed the size of the household, the degree of damage it had suffered, and the dates, kinds and quantities of relief supplies the household had received. This time, the rice allotment was a thirty-kilo-gram sack per person, so a family of three received three sacks. As for quilts, if a family had only one or two persons, it received one; a larger family received two.

The process was rather slow as the farmers put their signatures on the list kept by the township government and the township staff filled out the relief cards and signed as well. “With this method, no one can embezzle anything,” said my companion Pastor Wang Jun, a graduate of Nanjing Theological Seminary and the Amity project coordinator in Shaanxi Province. Since Wang also served as administrator of the office of the provincial Christian Council, when some farmers shook his hands, they would say, “We’re grateful to Christianity”—the term “Christian council” was too long for them.

The relief card showed that its holders were put in two categories, either “three no” or “with severe loss.” A “three no” family, as it was explained to me, had no house, no land, and no food and bedding after the floods. If a family still had one of the three items, it was put in the category of “severe loss.” If it still had two of the three, it was not issued a relief card.

Altogether, in this township of close to 10,000 people, Amity had donated 212,770 kilograms of rice and 1,460 quilts to all the 128 “three no” families and to about 600 “severe loss” families that had no bedding, or 3,546 individuals, including women and children.

**Wading, not walking, to school**

The whole afternoon, as we travelled to villages to inspect the flood damage and the relief and rehabilitation work, we could see quilts and sacks of rice everywhere, on carts pulled by donkeys or by small tractors, on the back of bicycles or motorcycles, and finally in households. People were quiet but happy.

In one place, a steel-cabled bridge had been washed away, and I saw a young man wade across the river with two quilts on top of his head. Right next to where the bridge used to be was a primary school. “How do the children living on the other side of the river come to school?” I asked. “Their parents carry them across the river to the school in the morning, and then again in the afternoon,” said the village head.

Liu Sanjiang and his family were now part of the township’s programme to rebuild houses before winter set in. He believed that he could finish his new house before winter, but this was no easy job. The provincial government had supplied two tons of cement free of charge, but the family had collected the stones and laid the foundation all by themselves. He estimated that he would still need 20,000 yuan in cash in order to put up the house, and his family would have to borrow or earn most of this money themselves. This was why, when we met him one morning, he was alone. His son and daughter-in-law, together with the three girls, had gone to a nearby county to work as temporary workers. His wife went with other women of the village into the mountains to pick wild chestnuts, the only source of cash income after the family had lost all their land, together with the corn and potatoes on it. His daughter was in senior high. “The teacher said she doesn’t need to pay tuition now,” said Liu, “but I’m worried she may have to later.”

Life was once again peaceful. But were all problems solved? There seemed to be a lot of hard work ahead. ✪
Supporting Deaf Education in China's West

Chris Dowson

The Amity Foundation recently sponsored me for a visit to Lanzhou to conduct some key addresses and lectures on education of the deaf for fifty teachers from different schools for the deaf in Gansu, who were attending a two-week training course. What an uplifting experience it turned out to be, and what wonderful hosts the people of Lanzhou were.

My heart sank when I first saw the hectic schedule of six hours a day for four days, and I quickly tried to pull together information on some of the challenging topics this group presented me with, for example, how do you develop listening skills without hearing aids? Their penetrating questions gave me much food for thought as I winged my way north from Hong Kong. Soon I was stepping off the plane at Lanzhou's small but very modern airport, and found myself breathing something different — dry, clean air. The dry, brown, clay hills surrounding Lanzhou brought back memories of my homeland, the South Island of New Zealand, but there was little time to ponder and we were soon traveling down the new highway to the city of Lanzhou.

Sponsored by the Mill Neck Foundation, the Blindness Prevention & Special Education Division of the Amity Foundation had planned and arranged three training courses respectively in Gansu, Ningxia and North Jiangsu, aiming at upgrading the education of the deaf in the Western parts and other underdeveloped areas of China. Amity sent one of its staff to coordinate the training and interpret for me. I was very grateful for her interpretation, as it made the lectures and discussions run smoothly, as many technical and complicated terms were used.

The most impressive thing about my time in Lanzhou was the willingness of participants to accept ideas I brought from a Western and Hong Kong perspective, and think about how they could be adapted or tried in the participants' local area. The Amity Foundation had brought teachers, in some cases, from schools more than a thousand kilometres away from Lanzhou.

There was also a chance for me to learn about deaf education in Western China, the issues and difficulties faced, and the ingenuity participants used to overcome problems. In such a huge area as Western China, it was not surprising to find a large variety in both the methods used, and the facilities available. Participants quickly adopted an interactive approach and were more than willing to share their ideas and experiences with me and one another.

Our range, both in content and discussion, was wide-ranging and diverse. We started with the development of listening and speech, and moved onto the role of hearing technology, language teaching, integration of the curriculum, employment for the deaf and inclusion, to name but a few of the topics.

My visit to Lanzhou had been well worthwhile and satisfying to me personally. Participants had been receptive and responsive and I left Lanzhou with a tinge of sadness but with happy memories, new friends and deep respect for the hard work of the Amity Foundation and teachers to improve the chances and education for deaf children in Western China.

Chris Dowson is a senior lecturer at the Hong Kong Institute of Education in the department of educational psychology, counselling and learning needs. He was trained as a primary school teacher and teacher of the deaf in New Zealand, and later in audiology in the university of Manchester, U.K. He has taught deaf children in New Zealand and England, and has lectured in New Zealand and Singapore in deaf and special education.
Micro-finance Workshop Held In Fangshan County

Fangshan County in Shaxi Province is one of Amity's major rural development project target areas. Between 9th - 16th June 2002, Amity's Rural Development Division held a workshop on micro-finance in Fangshan. Aside from two Amity staff, 10 representatives attended from Amity’s Fangshan Project Office, the Fangshan Women’s Federation and from two local project townships - Gedong and Yukou. The primary aim of the workshop was to enhance local project staff’s understanding of micro-finance before an upcoming participatory project appraisal which is to take place in project areas in Fangshan soon.

Micro-finance can be distinguished from traditional credit provisions and current micro-credit projects operated by credit unions. Traditional credit provisions lay emphasis on one-off large loans from outside institutions and banks. These loans are generally tied to a mortgage and supervised by the loaning body. Usually, little or no training or capacity building is provided along with the loan. Micro-finance only grants credit to poor but economically active beneficiaries. It is provided in small amounts in installments and is not tied to a mortgage. Under micro-finance, outside credit and the beneficiaries’ own resources are both used to create a self-sustaining source of future loans within the community of beneficiaries itself. Emphasis is placed on developing credit management, literacy and micro-enterprise management skills, as well as on the establishment of a self-sustaining and mutually-supporting “solidarity group” within the community. Beneficiaries of micro-finance projects are trained both to run the micro-finance project themselves and also learn skills which will ultimately allow them to generate their own loans and income in the future.

The workshop held in Fangshan comprised of two components: (1) Discussions between Amity staff and project participants on important aspects of micro-finance, participatory methodology for implementing micro-finance work, aspects of business and financial management (2) A field visit to Heshun County, where Amity is currently carrying out a micro-finance project.

Giving And Receiving: Amity’s “Project Torch”

Through its “Project Torch” the Amity Foundation has so far sponsored 53 university students from needy rural families, mostly from western China, by covering their tuition, board and living expenses until graduation. The project aims not only to provide financial assistance but also to foster a spirit of compassion and helping others.

"You have received help, now how can you help others?" The students have responded to this question with concrete action. Last year, 22 "Project Torch" Nanjing University students founded the "Amity Student Club (ASC)", a legal student organization, whose motto is “Upholding the banner of morality and sowing the seeds of compassion.” Besides being a "second family" to each other, the students have also pooled their own money to sponsor a school-less girl in Siyang to go back to school. Moreover, the students also take it in turns to teach on a voluntary basis in primary schools for migrant workers’ children in Nanjing, schools which are badly in need of teachers.

Not to be outdone, 28 "Project Torch" students at Nanjing Agricultural University organized the "Amity Torch Club", whose membership also includes 40 regular students from different departments within the university. The club’s primary activity at present is helping Amity’s "Back to School" program. Every Saturday, and also whenever there is no class, these students make the 40-minute bus journey to the Amity office and lend a hand with the checking and sorting of files for the Back to School Project.

"I cannot believe that Amity has sponsored me. I was so desperate before that I gave up all hope of ever studying. I will never forget that there are kind people backing me and encouraging me. Meanwhile, I feel very content and happy to be able to give something to poor rural children through my voluntary work, children who are just like I was in the past. There is nothing more touching in the world than the giving and receiving of compassion." So says He Shanshan, a Tujia nationality "Project Torch" student, currently studying at Nanjing University.