Ecumenism at Work: 
Christian-Muslim Cooperation Brings 
Piped Water to Cave Homes 

Theresa Cariño

It is hard to imagine that people still live in cave homes only five hours by car from Xian, the provincial capital of Shaanxi province. Participants in this year’s Amity Easter Tour were shocked and moved by this unexpected scene when they visited a Muslim village in Lantian County. Members of the rural community which had been struggling to cope with dwindling water resources welcomed us with drums and gongs, hope shining in their eyes. As we trekked up the hillside, we were shown the only water reserve of the village, a small well with water trickling from a remote mountain source that was obviously drying up. This precious drinking water was kept locked and carefully rationed to community members. Washing was reduced to an absolute minimum here. Xiao Ma, a young man in his thirties, confessed that he had not taken a bath since Chinese New Year and that bathing was a luxury only few people could afford more than once or twice a year. Despite his youth, his legs, affected by heavy fluoride in the water, were beginning to ache like those of many people in the village.

Crowding into the roughly 100 square foot cave home Ahmed shared with his brother and his elderly father, we felt transported back to the biblical scene of the nativity. Poorly ventilated by a small window, dimly lit, with soot-blackened ceiling and dirt floor, Ahmed’s home was furnished with a small wooden bed, tattered beddings, cooking pots and hay for the family’s prized possessions - two cows that slept indoors at night. Family income depended on farming but drought and the lack of money for fertilisers meant low crop yields, which kept the family living below the poverty line.

Ahmed’s neighbour was only a little better off, with a slightly larger cave home and two more cows. The entire village was among the poorest in the county and village leaders were hoping that with some support from Amity, the village could tap into a more adequate water source with pipes. It was a project that would be managed by the village and monitored by the Shaanxi Christian Council that had been working
closely with Amity in church-run projects for the last 10 years. County level RAB (Religious Affairs Bureau) officials were on hand to encourage Amity to support the proposed project, which Amity Tour participants found fascinating and encouraging.

The encounter with abject poverty in cave homes jolted us into deeper reflection on what Christian faith and the gospel message meant. We were profoundly impressed to find "peace building" and a larger, encompassing ecumenism at work in the remote loess hills of Shaanxi - cooperation and mutual support between Muslims and Christians in meaningful community-based projects that gave hope and assurance to those in need. "I'm amazed that Christian leaders in mainland China are much more ecumenical and open to people of other faiths than many of those in Hong Kong!" remarked Cathy Kwok from Hong Kong. Representing the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), Cathy felt that Chinese Christians were putting into practice what others can only preach about.

It also reminded us of the remarks of Professor Zhuo Xinpeng, who had received us at the Institute for World Religions of the renowned Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, "Social participation and social service is important to Christian identity in the Chinese context. It is encouraging multi-religious dialogue for a harmonious co-existence."

Villagers and members of the Easter Tour in Lantian county

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During the academic year 2004/2005 I worked as an Amity teacher at the Northwest Nationalities University in Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu province in China’s northwest. Gansu is the second poorest province in China with its barren moonscape hills and desert areas. Its population of 26 million includes different ethnic minority groups, especially Hui and Dongxiang Muslims and Tibetans.

Lanzhou, a city of 3 million, has a distinct multicultural atmosphere partly because of its strong Muslim population. Mosques and minarets can be seen all over the city, and countless Muslim restaurants and food stalls animate the street scenes. In the mornings, I was usually awakened by the prayer calls from the nearby mosque and almost simultaneously by the bells from the Buddhist monastery in Wuquan Park on the flanks of Lanshan Mountain. Lanzhou also has a visible Christian presence with a big new Protestant Church in the city centre, where I attended Sunday services and witnessed the baptism of about 300 new believers on the last Sunday of June. My Vice-Dean is a professing Catholic, as he told me during one of the school banquets.

The densest multicultural experience can be found on the campus of my university. It is one of three national universities in China prioritising the education of ethnic minority students and the study of subjects related to their culture and languages. Students come from remote border areas of China with poor schooling conditions. Their pass rate on the National College Entrance Exam is often not high enough to gain admission to universities in their home provinces. A special policy allows them to enrol at a nationality university for a preparatory year and then continue from there. Minority students also receive a monthly subsidy to their living expenses from the government to which Han students are not entitled. Most of my students come from poor families.

The Northwest Nationalities University is a special place: Chinese characters, Mongolian, Tibetan and Uyghur scripts can be seen all over campus, from the signs on teaching buildings and the library to posters announcing various activities for the day. Muslim girls with headscarves, long trousers and dresses catch the eye, as well as Tibetan boys in heavy sheepskin winter coats tied up with bright red belts around their waists. However, most students wear the same almost uniform fashion which could as well be found in Shanghai or Beijing, and it is hard to guess that they belong to exotic-sounding ethnic minorities such as Tujia, Xibo and Gelao.

During the past year, I taught an oral English course to two freshmen classes and methodology of English language teaching to one of the senior classes. In one of these, I counted students from 17 ethnic minorities coming from all corners of China. One girl from the ethnic Korean minority has to travel 46 hours by train from her village close to the Korean border to get to Lanzhou. An ethnic Kazakh student brought me dried horse-milk candies and told me how she spends her summer holidays with her aunt herding horses in the Altai Mountains. I also had the opportunity to visit one of my Tibetan students in the mountains of northwestern Yunnan in her hometown called Shangri-La, at 3000 meters above sea level.

While not all students want to go back to their hometowns after graduation to work as English teachers, most of them will because of their ethnic and cultural affiliation and their desire to help develop their areas. One of my Uyghur students from the Ili Valley in the far west of Xinjiang province told me that her village has no qualified English teachers and that she will go back to be the first one so that more young people like herself can make a contribution to society.

Promoting education in the minority areas of southwest and northwest China is a key factor for the development of these regions and a priority of the Amity Teachers’ Programme. During the coming academic year 2006/07, 18 Amity teachers will serve in 9 placements in Gansu province, 3 of which are new Amity partner schools.
“Seeing Clearly From The Side”:
An Interview With Katrin Fiedler
Ian Groves

Since August 1999, Dr. Katrin Fiedler has been sponsored by the Northelbian Mission Centre (NMZ) in Germany to work in Amity’s Hong Kong office, where she has been editor of the Amity Newsletter (ANL) and Amity News Service (ANS) publications. In April 2006, Katrin left Amity to return to Germany and help coordinate China-related programs at the new Inter-Disciplinary Centre for East Asia of Frankfurt University. Prior to her departure from Hong Kong, Ian Groves talked with Katrin about her time with Amity and her thoughts on its future.

Do you feel that Amity has changed or developed in any significant ways since you first joined the organisation?

There have been changes in many areas. Examples of new initiatives in recent years have been new exchange programs in the education division, working with migrant workers and counselling projects. Our projects have also become more comprehensive in their approaches, such as our integrated rural development work or our AIDS-related work. Many of our projects are also now more environmentally friendly than before, for example, our rural development work, and I always hope that we will become more environmentally aware in the way we run our own offices too. Meanwhile, another new area for Amity in recent years has been publicity and fund-raising work, and a lot has already been achieved in this in only a short time.

Internally, I think we’ve become more professional, many of our procedures have now been streamlined. We also have a lot more staff than before, and new staff are generally coming in more qualified or else quickly acquire skills they need through training. There is more talk now about participatory development, with staff speaking up and making suggestions.

In Amity’s 20th anniversary book “Growing in Partnership”, you wrote: “Many of the challenges China is facing today go well beyond what a small agency like Amity can do under current conditions.” What meaningful role do you see Amity playing within Chinese society over the next 10 to 15 years?

As China develops, poverty alleviation becomes more complex. It used to be mostly about rural poverty but now we also face urban poverty. And we now have to tackle the side-effects of development, such as stress and depression, which can erode developmental gains. I would like Amity to arrive at a more holistic definition of development which tackles emotional and spiritual needs as well as basic physical needs. We already do some of this through our counselling projects, but I would like to see this integrated into all our projects. For example, we might build

Katrin Fiedler on assignment in a rural area
counselling components into our rural development projects so that the problem of rural suicides among women might be addressed.

An important role for Amity is highlighting problems which otherwise are neglected, not only by addressing them practically within China, but also by making them a matter of concern for our partners abroad. Maybe few partners are currently aware of the water crisis China is now facing. In general, resource conservation is a very important area for Amity to address, as it will affect virtually every other area in coming years. In the past, we were one of the first to do AIDS-related work in China, and we pioneered the concept of foster care.

Poverty is still very real in most parts of China and is still at the root of many other problems, such as the abortion of girls or environmental degradation. Alongside more "popular" issues such as education, awareness-building and advocacy work, I hope we will continue to do practical poverty alleviation work in the future.

Another important role for Amity is influencing the government. Amity has introduced local governments to initiatives which these authorities have then taken over and extended by themselves. We can also be an eye-opener in certain areas, such as the foster care work I mentioned above. Through being a part of government networks, we can voice certain issues and make a difference. For example, Amity was consulted recently concerning the new national regulations for foundations. I call this a Chinese-style of advocacy work as it is non-confrontational.

**As a Christian-initiated organization, how do you personally understand Amity's "Christian" identity after working within the organization for several years?**

We are not exclusive, we are an inclusive community of Christians and people of other faiths and of no faith which serves all Chinese regardless of their beliefs. Amity serves as a bridge between China's Christians and the wider population, including the government. This all goes back to Jesus himself, who was not afraid to cross religious or social boundaries.

Amity can apply its Christian identity in the area of values. Changes in China are leading people to reassess their values, and Amity has something to offer, not by forcefully evangelizing people but rather by living out and articulating our values.

The second area where I see a role for us is in intra-religious and inter-religious dialogue. China is a multi-religious country, and we often work in areas with large Muslim populations. In places like these, we can help build bridges between people of different backgrounds.

Finally, as a Catholic myself, I am very happy that Amity is currently strengthening its cooperation with Catholics in China.

**During your time with the Amity Foundation you have been**

based in its Hong Kong office - what role do you see for this office within Amity in the coming years?

People still know little about Amity in Hong Kong and we must raise their interest. Many Hong Kong people have relatives in mainland China and overseas, so reaching out to Hong Kong Chinese could allow news of Amity to spread to these wider groups, too. Since Hong Kong is to a large extent an immigrant society, many Hong Kong people know what it means to be poor, or migrant workers, and so they are willing to help those who face these situations.

In one sense we have already reached out to a Christian audience through the work done by the Hong Kong Christian Council on our behalf. But there are non-Christian groups who might also be interested in supporting our work, such as secular groups or expatriate communities. With its expatriate and Chinese staff, the Hong Kong office is in a unique position to appeal to various groups within Hong Kong.

Another valuable role which the Hong Kong office plays is as a source of information for our overseas partners. There is a need for information about what is happening in China which goes beyond the mainstream media. Our proximity to the mainland and our location outside the mainland put us in a unique position to offer perspectives our partners might find useful. As the Chinese saying goes, "Somebody who is on the side can see things more clearly".
Moving the Mountain in Hunan: a Church-run Project

Until 2005, the Integrated Development Division of Amity has successfully implemented 11 church-related projects in the countryside of Hunan province. The female pastor Feng Xianying from one of these rural projects has been with Amity from the beginning. This is her story, told by Yao Zengyi from the Hunan Provincial Christian Council.

Her whole life, Feng Xianying has lived in Daiguancun, a remote mountain village in Hunan province. Because she was very poor and had been born to an ordinary family, nobody noticed her at first. In her village, water was scarce; no road led up the mountain, there was no doctor and hardly any medicine was available. People in the village barely eked out a living.

When Feng Xianying studied theology at the theological seminary, she had the opportunity to gradually secure 200,000 RMB in aid provided by the Amity Foundation for running a project in her village. After her return she went to work as the only woman in a group of male villagers to improve the living conditions of their hometown. Muddy water had to be purified and dammed up so ponds for water storage could be built. Dynamite was used to carve out a mountain road. Today, the village has a small church, a clinic, a primary school and a pig farm. Every family in the village enjoys running water, every household uses biogas as fuel. It is possible to reach the village with small vehicles. Minor diseases can be treated locally. In the village you can find couplets with texts like this: "Christianity helped the poor to become strong, Daiguancun people have hopes to become wealthier."

The mayor urged Feng Xianying to reach out to villages without Christian congregations to create new believers - he had realized that Christians among the peasantry paid taxes regularly, obeyed the law and were good citizens in general.

However successful she was, Feng Xianying also had her fair share of problems. Yet she continued to work for the people. Today she is responsible for more than 1,000 believers in six Christian congregations. Moreover, she has built 2 new church buildings and uses the profits from the clinic and the pig farm to cover tuition and living costs for 2 medical students.

She has not changed much since the beginning of her work. After being ordained as a pastor, she still remained a peasant and a volunteer worker of the church. But even though she remains an ordinary and humble person, God does not take her lightly. •
New Teaching Methods for Deaf Children

Chu Chaoyu

Improving the education of deaf children has been on Amity's agenda for several years. Recently, the Amity Foundation has increased the number of partner schools that are eager to try innovative teaching methods for hearing-impaired children. Chu Chaoyu from the Social Welfare Division of Amity has an update on recent developments.

Most deaf children in the world are born to hearing parents. Deaf children not only face communication difficulties with people in their local communities, but they may also encounter these problems with parents and other family members. Both deaf children themselves and professionals who try to help them go to great lengths to overcome problems; also there are various technical aids. Still, deaf children find it difficult to produce and comprehend oral language in its spoken modality. However, waiting several years for deaf children to reach a satisfying linguistic level that eventually might not even be attained at all, and in the meantime delaying the children’s access to a language that meets their immediate needs, such as sign language, is obviously not a good way: it means essentially risking children’s linguistic, cognitive, social and personal development.

In order to avoid development delays among deaf children, a bilingual approach in deaf education is important. It gives deaf children a chance to use the sign language used by the deaf community and, at the same time, learn the oral language used by the hearing majority of people.

François Grosjean, professor for psycholinguistics at the University of Neuchâtel, has researched the bilingual concept in educating deaf children. According to him, it is important that deaf children acquire sign language first because it allows them to communicate with their parents early and comprehensively. Communicating in sign language also plays an important role in the cognitive and social development of deaf children. It allows them to learn about the world in general and, at the same time, acculturate into the world of their deaf peers. In addition, sign language facilitates the acquisition of the oral language. Oral language is acquired later not only in its written but also, if possible, in its spoken form. It depends on the child which of these languages is emphasized. Some children use sign language more often, others focus on oral language, and some use both equally often. In any event, it is essential that deaf children be given a chance to grow up with both languages.

The bilingual approach in deaf education was first introduced to China by the Amity Foundation in 1996, after the new concept had achieved considerable success in Norway and some other countries. Having gained many years of experience in working with deaf people, Amity staff became convinced that the bilingual approach in the education of deaf children can be easily adapted to the situation in China.

Amity started the SigAm Bilingual Deaf Education Project in 2004. This new project is supported by the Signo Foundation in Norway and the Amity Foundation, which join hands with the Jiangsu Provincial Special Education Professional Committee (JPSEPC). The name SigAm indicates that this is a cooperative project - the name is derived from the English names of the two organizations involved: Signo and Amity. The project is implemented under a Coordinating Committee, which is headed by JPSEPC and includes representatives of the Amity Foundation, the local deaf community and the project schools. The aim of the project is to establish a bilingual and bicultural program in selected schools for the deaf in China. The program will accompany at least one group of pupils during their whole school career within the compulsory school system.

Deaf and partially deaf children are often treated as a minority group of lesser importance, in spite of the fact that China has a comprehensive educational system. The SigAm Bilingual Deaf Education Project, which started in 5 deaf schools in Jiangsu Province in 2004, aims at facilitating the rights of deaf people to educa-
tion and to a linguistic and cultural development on their own terms. Political signals indicate a change in
the educational methods from monolingual, oral language only, to bilingual tuition, with sign language
as the main language. This is a great opportunity to provide the means for a policy and for educational meth-
ods that are in accordance with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals of basic education for all
children.

In July of this year, the Summer Seminar of Deaf Education Concept Exchange took place in Jiangsu
province. It was attended by professionals from Norway and China. Among the lecturers were Norwe-
gian and Chinese experts such as Prof. Zhang Ningsheng of Liaoning Normal University and Prof. Gong
Quanhui of Fudan University. The seminar also provided training for Chinese teachers in schools for deaf
children. Several project newsletters and books on bilingual deaf education have been published as a result
of this seminar.

Starting this year, the project has expanded from Jiangsu to Sichuan and Guizhou. Two deaf schools in
each of these two provinces are involved. Seminars to introduce the concept of bilingual deaf education
and project teacher trainings were held in April and May. They enabled teachers from the four new schools
to teach pilot classes. Lectures were given by Chinese experts and teachers from deaf schools in Jiangsu who
have had two years of experience with bilingual deaf education. The training courses provided an excel-
 lent opportunity for principals in Jiangsu to share their experiences and insights with the other participants. Their presentations showed that they were confident in their project work. Their results will
serve as important training resources and make it possible for the concept developed in the SigAm projects
to spread to other parts of China in the future. Now, SigAm project schools in Jiangsu, Sichuan and Guizhou are
working closely together and acting like one big family.

Welcome to the Hong Kong Office

In spring of 2006, the Amity Foundation welcomed Elisa Nousiainen as the new editor of the Amity News Service. Elisa brings a whole range of skills to her new position. She holds Master’s
degrees in linguistics and French philology and worked as a teacher and museum assistant. She can
read and speak Chinese fluently. For two years, she served as an Amity teacher at Wuwu Teachers’ College in Anhui province. Elisa is sent by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission
( FELM) in Finland.

In August 2006, Dr. Beate Engelen and Oliver Engelen joined the Hong Kong Office of the Amity Foundation. Beate will be in charge of the Amity Newsletter, taking over from Katrin Fiedler, while Oliver will maintain
the Amity Foundation websites.

Beate studied history, philosophy and sinology in Germany and China and worked as a historian and language teacher after that. Oliver studied German, English and philosophy before working as an editor.

Both spent two years as Amity teachers in Tai An (Shandong) before joining the team in Hong Kong. They are sent by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) in Germany.

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Funding for the work of the Amity Foundation comes from sources, both Chinese and foreign, religious and nonreligious, individual and organizational. Inquiries and suggestions concerning possibilities for new project initiatives are welcomed, as are contributions for the direct support of the Amity Foundation. Checks or bank drafts made payable to the Amity Foundation may be sent to the Nanjing Office.

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The Amity Newsletter is prepared by the staff of the Amity Foundation and printed by the Amity Printing Company, Ltd.
Editor: Beate Engelen