

Report on a visit to China

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Aims

- To make field visits to Amity Foundation projects in Hunan Province
- To represent the Methodist Church at the 30th anniversary of Amity Foundation
- To discern some of the changes in China and engage with the developing strategy of Amity

Background

China is the most populous country in the world (1.3 billion) and recently became the second largest economy. According to the World Bank the rapid GDP growth in recent years - averaging about 10 percent - has lifted more than 500 million people out of poverty. All the Millennium Development Goals have been reached or are within reach.

In many ways, however, China remains a developing country; its per capita income is still a fraction of that in Europe and official data (end of 2012) shows that about 100 million people still live below the national poverty line of RMB 2,300. With the second largest number of poor in the world after India, poverty reduction remains a major challenge.

The breakneck speed of economic development has brought with it many challenges, including high inequality, rapid urbanization and challenges to environmental sustainability. China also faces demographic pressures related to an ageing population and the internal migration of workers. All these are immediately apparent on even the shortest visit to China.

Amity

The Amity Foundation is an independent Chinese voluntary organisation and was initiated by Chinese Christians to promote education, social services, health and rural development. MCB working through the China Forum of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) has been a partner of Amity since its earliest days; it is the only effective way to support such work in China, although MCB is increasing its work with the China Christian Council especially its newly re-formed Social Services Department. There are no denominations in China, so ecumenical working is essential.

Amity sees its goals as:

- contributing to China's social development and openness to the outside world,
- making Christian involvement in meeting the needs of society known to the Chinese people,
- serving as a channel for people to people contact and the ecumenical sharing of resources.

The Visit

Although I have visited China seven times before, I had never set foot in Hunan Province. The capital, Changsha, is another of those Chinese cities, about the size of London, of which most of us have never heard. The province has a population slightly larger than that of the UK, 10% belong to minority ethnic groups. A day in the capital gave time to attend one of the morning services at the



church in the centre of the city, a traditional building dating back to 1905 and now opening right onto a busy city street. Built originally as an Anglican Church it was taken by the state in 1949 and put to a variety of uses until it was finally handed back to the Christian community and reopened as a church in 2004. Now it is full to capacity three times each Sunday.

The next day we set off at 9 o'clock heading for Yongshun County, which is officially designated as 'poor' and here the minorities make up 92%. At 5.30 we finally arrived, grateful to finally leave the bus! Dinner followed, an important occasion as we met up with the officials who would be accompanying us on our village visits, a local Communist Party leader, members of the Overseas Friendship Association (a government department) and other officials. At our briefing session later in the evening we learnt about



Amity's 17 years work in the area, the current 8 projects, which involve about 120,000 people, and the importance of the relationships with all those different strands of officialdom and leadership, because Amity now looks to local government for matched funding. Interestingly just over half of Amity's own funding now comes from Chinese (including Hong Kong) sources, not least due to some very creative internet fundraising and a strong approach to Christian businesses.

Our first village visit was Bagu, where the introduction of a biogas system had been accompanied by the development of a female



development cooperative. We would see in several places how important a role the women played and how their involvement led to a variety of benefits for the community such as more cooperation between families, a renewed interest in traditional art forms, effective learning of new skills and added benefit from existing cultivation and husbandry.

Biogas is simple. Dig a hole and install a digester next to the kitchen. Build a pig pen and the family toilet on top. Run a pipe to the cooker. And remember to train someone who knows



how to fix it when something goes wrong. In this village 250 families now have biogas and use about 85% less firewood than before - and everyone says how clean it is.

Amity, like China itself, is developing rapidly and now sees itself as both receiving and giving on the international level. The biogas scheme is being run in Madagascar as well as China, a joint project between Amity and Norwegian Mission; there are other links with Nepal, Philippines and N Korea.



The next day saw us in greenhouses. Here as in most of the village projects there is an integrated approach with activities developed by the villagers themselves usually through a cooperative approach which may result in the original motivation, here for example water conservation, leading to a variety of linked projects before Amity moves on to a new community. These strawberries will be sold in March, meanwhile the women in the cooperative have

enjoyed working together and are developing cultural activities too. In some of the villages we saw this sort of cultural revival has led to opportunities opened up by the rapid growth of Chinese tourism, tapestries and food products were being sold at the new Laosicheng World Heritage Site and at Shuangfeng village traditional dinner and folk dance performances are on offer.



After more projects we returned to Nanjing for the 30th anniversary celebrations. Such public events are important, they publicly cement the relationships between Amity and government at local and national levels in the company of international representatives, they also yield implicit commitment to Amity's developing strategy and vision. The many lectures and speeches revealed a growing profile for Amity's Christian foundations, an increasing role for 'fairness' alongside 'material betterment' in official thinking and more public space for new ideas and initiatives.

My impression is that Amity is increasingly clear about its unique contribution to China's economic development and poverty reduction strategy; it brings the dimension of the human spirit, helping people to feel valued and find their way of contributing themselves into a development process that can be quite mechanical. I think some official thinking and academic research is recognising the value of this.



Through the China Forum and Friends of the Church in China, some young people from Amity have, over recent years, spent time in Britain; the value to their work and our relationship has been deep and lasting. The next few years will see the financial dimension of MCB's partnership with Amity directed towards encouraging and enabling young people's encounters; young people will hopefully be visiting

China and working for about a month in Amity projects and young Chinese people will do the same outside their country. This development springs from one of Amity's key concerns, that of building friendship at home and abroad and from one of MCB's strategic priorities, that of people to people contact and of deepening understanding.

*Steve Pearce
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