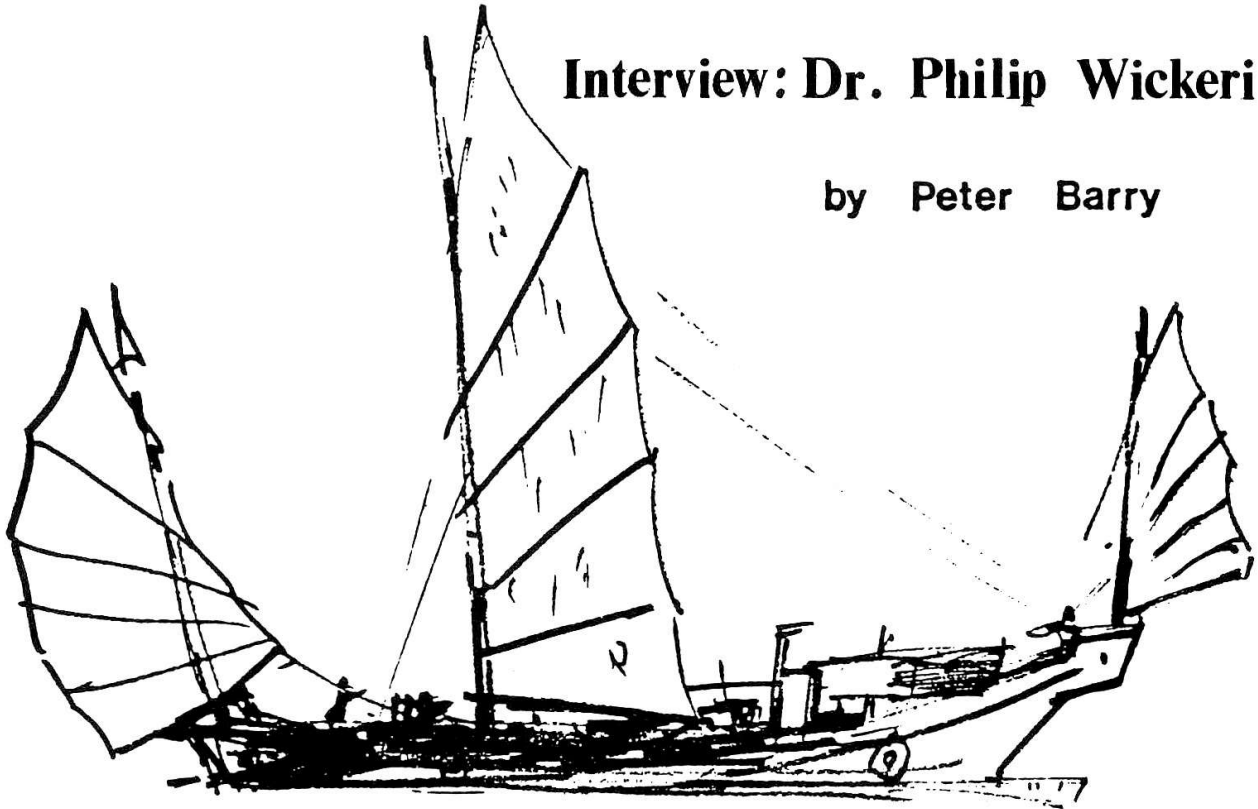


Amity: CHRISTIAN OUTREACH IN CHINA

Interview: Dr. Philip Wickeri

by Peter Barry



The Amity Foundation, a service organization intended to permit Chinese Protestants to play a more active role in China's modernization program, was officially established at the inaugural meeting of the foundation's Board of Directors on April 19, 1985 in Nanjing. The Amity Foundation will promote support for health, education and welfare projects in China. Pilot projects include support for the Nanjing Children's Mental Health Research Centre and the recruitment of teachers from abroad for work in institutions of higher learning.

Bishop K.H. Ting was elected president of the Board of Directors and Mr. Han Wenzao, General Secretary. Several prominent Chinese Protestants participate on the 17-member Board, which also includes non-Christian members.

A press release issued on the day of the inaugural Board meeting described Amity as "a people's organization, independent of any church body". The goals of Amity are three-fold, the press release states: to contribute to China's social development, to make the fact of Christian participation more widely known to the Chinese people, and to strengthen the ecumenical sharing of resources and promote friendly relations between Chinese and foreign peoples.

In order to get a more complete understanding of the background and work of the Amity Foundation, TRIPOD, on May 21, 1985, interviewed Dr. Philip Wickeri, Overseas Coordinator of the foundation, at his home in Shatin. Excerpts from this interview are given below.

TRIPOD: Can you tell us something about the background of the Amity Foundation, how it got started, and what prompted its start at this time?

Dr. Wickeri: The Amity Foundation arose out of discussions among Chinese Christians about how they might better contribute to their nation's modernization efforts, and at the same time help to make the Christian presence more widely felt within society. I presume this had been talked about informally for a considerable amount of time, but my understanding is that actual discussions leading up to the foundation of Amity began in December of last year.

Q: Would you describe the establishment of the Amity Foundation as a departure from the Three-Self principle of the China Christian Church?

A: As announced at the press conference held in Hong Kong (March 21, 1985) and reiterated at the inaugural meeting of the Board of Directors on April 19, the Foundation does not represent a departure from the Three-Self principle because it is not an effort to raise money for the promotion of the church in China, or for the promotion of Christian work in China. I think it is an unique approach because what Chinese Christians are actually saying is that they should play a more active role in working for society and in developing international relations; but they are saying this in a way that is not,

as one mission board staff director put it, trying to "make points for the established church".

Q: Then Amity will support projects of a social rather than an ecclesiastical nature?

A: Yes. The purpose of the Foundation is to support efforts in the fields of health, education and welfare in the People's Republic of China, and as it stands now, there are several different kinds of projects that we are considering. One of these is support for the ongoing work of the Nanjing Children's Mental Health Research Centre, which has a variety of clinical research training and community health programs in China aimed at serving the needs of the broader society. We in the Amity Foundation think that this centre is making an unique contribution to society, and therefore we would like to find a way to contribute to its development.

Q: How did you choose this particular project?

A: Chinese Christians looked into existing institutions doing work in the fields of health, education and welfare, but which are at present inadequately funded. As a Chinese people's organization, Amity is anxious to support such projects as the Children's Health Research Centre. The decision to support this project was made by the Chinese Christian leadership of the Foundation, who feel that this particular kind of project, one which is helping children and child psychiatry in China, would be a good place to begin. Other projects being considered are support for a children's hospital, a children's welfare organization which helps orphaned and handicapped children, and other kinds of rehabilitation projects for the elderly, as well as for handicapped people... There is also the possibility of assisting a centre that produces artificial limbs for people who have suffered some kind of industrial accident.

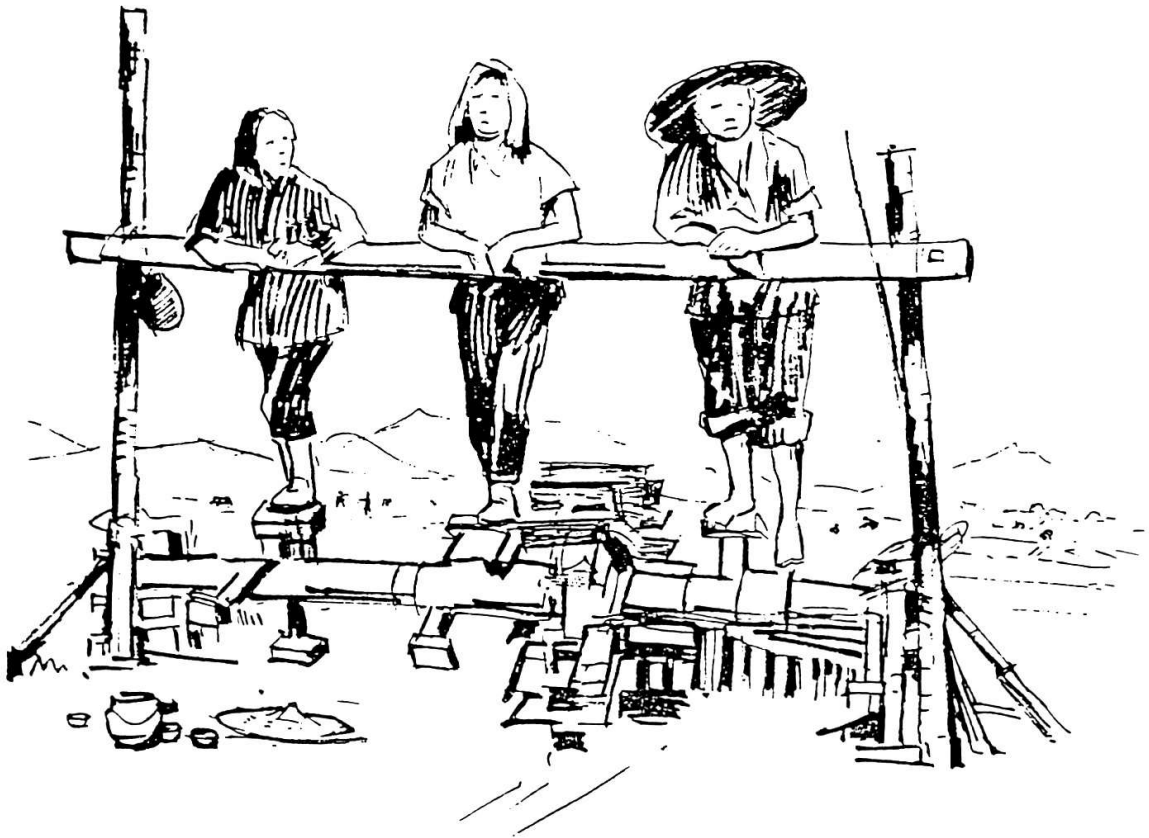
Q: You use the word "support". In what way would these projects be supported?

A: The initial support for health and welfare projects will be in the form of requests for seed money and continuing

funds from groups both in China and overseas. In the case of the Nanjing Children's Mental Health Research Centre, following discussions with the staff there, we would be looking for funding for scientific and technical instruments which would help them to continue their on-going programs of research.

Q: Would the funding agencies have any say in the use of the funds?

A: When there is a similar request for funding from a group here in Hong Kong or in any other part of the world, the agency which issues the request will generally provide some kind of report to the funding agency, and may also offer an opportunity for its representatives to visit the project. This same procedure will be followed by the Amity Foundation. Of course, the day when there was a paternalistic kind of control exercised by funding agencies should now belong to the past, and the Amity Foundation is not requesting any funds with strings attached.



Q: What about other projects? There has been some talk of a teachers program, and also the possibility of support for a printing facility.

A: Let me describe the teachers project because that is what I have been most involved with during the last few weeks. Planning began in February of this year, and its aim is to recruit teachers from church agencies and other overseas organizations who would come to China to work in institutions of higher learning. We anticipate that somewhere between 15 to 20 teachers will be coming very shortly to serve in institutions in Jiangsu province, teaching courses in English as well as German. This is really an unique kind of project because it is the first time that a Chinese organization like Amity has requested teachers. We hope the teachers will arrive in China in August, after which there will be a short orientation session before they are sent out to their respective units. We are hoping that by encouraging this program we will be able to increase our relationship with church agencies overseas who are willing and able to supply qualified—and I want to emphasize qualified—language teachers to work in China. These teachers would be working at some of China's better known universities, as well as in schools that generally do not have access to foreign language teachers. For example, one request has come from the Nanjing Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and as one who has long had an interest in that, I am in some ways tempted to go there myself.

Q: How would this program of recruiting teachers differ from other programs for recruiting foreign language teachers for China?

A: This is a program organized by the Amity Foundation, which will also be the receiving organization for the teachers. At present, there are a variety of ways in which language teachers go to China. Some are contracted individually through universities, others through the Foreign Experts Bureau. This particular effort involves the activity of the Amity Foundation in helping to make the connections and solicit support for the ongoing work of education and educational exchange in China.

Q: Would most of the teachers recruited be Christian?

A: In that they will be volunteers from both Protestant and Catholic church agencies we expect they would be Christians.

Q: Would they participate in local worship services in China, or would they have their own separate services?

A: The teachers will be encouraged to participate in the life of the local worshipping communities, if they so desire.

Q: Would these teachers become involved in proselytizing?

A: They are coming to teach English, not to proselytize. Proselytizing by foreigners is forbidden by Chinese law, and it is also against the wishes of Chinese Christians.

Q: Would you like to say anything about Amity's printing facility project?



Proselytizing by foreigners is against the wishes of Chinese Christians.

W: I believe TRIPOD has already spoken to the United Bible Societies about this. (Cf. The following interview in this issue of TRIPOD: Eds.) Let me add that we are delighted to be able to enter into this relationship. As it now stands, this could easily become the most modern printing facility in Jiangsu. Last week when we were speaking with Dr. Eugene Nida, a Bible translator and consultant to the UBS, we asked him for a formal statement on the Foundation to be used in our publicity. He said: "The Amity Foundation provides a creative opportunity to make an important contribution to the life of the world's largest nation. The programs are realistic, and the potential is enormous." I would underline the significance of, and my own personal agreement with, Dr. Nida's words on this point.

Q: Going back a moment to the Amity Foundation itself. You use the term "a Chinese people's organization", Can you tell us what that means?

A: A Chinese people's organization (or minjian tuanti) is an organization which is set up independent of other organizations in China. The Amity Foundation itself was started on the initiative of Chinese Christians, particularly Chinese Protestants, who seek to cooperate with others in society for the purposes which we have outlined above. Just to repeat the three-fold goals of Amity: the Foundation seeks to contribute to China's social development and efforts towards modernization, to make Christian involvement and participation more widely known to the Chinese people, and to strengthen the ecumenical sharing of resources and international people-to-people relationships. This Foundation will be a cooperative effort among Christians and non-Christians in society, but one which has a special kind of relationship to the Christian enterprise in China. It is a separate structure from the Chinese Church, and also structurally and organizationally separate from the Chinese government.

I know in the West there are Christian oriented foundations which are also separate from both church and government, and while the situation is vastly different in China, it would not be out of place to compare the Amity Foundation with other such educational and welfare organizations in those countries. In fact, there are similar

organizations in the United States, where the percentage of Christians on the board is lower than that of the Foundation.

Q: As a people's organization, what is the relationship of Amity to the government?

A: Amity has received encouragement and support from the government but it is not related to it in any formal way. The staff in Nanjing has requested that the government simplify procedures for such things as receiving teachers. But it is not something that is in any way an extension of the government. In a socialist society I do not think there is the kind of adversary relationship between the people and the government that can be found in some other systems. We would hope that our relationship with the government would always be mutually supportive and based on mutual understanding, for that would facilitate our working together for something that all of us desire.

Q: We have talked a lot about Amity in China, and the support it has received from Chinese Christians, people and government. What has been the response to Amity abroad?

A: Let me just say one other thing about the response to Amity in China. There, the response has been most favourable and the proposed projects have generated a lot of interest both in Jiangsu Province and in other provinces as well. This is something that I have found personally gratifying, especially when I returned to the university where my wife Janice and I taught for more than two years. There I found my friends had a keen interest in and support for the kind of programs that Amity would like to develop.

Overseas we have just started to make contacts with various churches and church-related organizations. From those who have received information on Amity, in Asia, in North America and in Europe, we have found a great deal of encouragement and a very enthusiastic response. The Foundation is not seeking to raise large amounts of money in undesignated funds, but rather it is trying to be a channel for the flow of finances and personnel in support of specific projects. Certainly a great deal of

interest has already been expressed in the teachers project and the United Bible Societies project. They have received generally good publicity all over the world. As for other projects which are still in the planning stages, we have been encouraged by the favourable response of the overseas visitors. I should emphasize here that the seed money for the Foundation comes from Chinese Christians themselves. While they will not be providing the major amount of financial support for projects, I think it needs to be stressed that the Christian community in China will be supporting the Foundation to the best of its ability.

Q: Do you think there is a danger that some overseas Christian organizations might use Amity as a means for their own ends in China?

A: Amity seeks only to serve society. I think it will act to educate such organizations away from any kind of possessive mentality. We are not encouraging the reestablishment of denominational structures in China, and we have said this to some institutional representatives overseas who mistakenly thought that Amity would mean the reestablishment of denominational social service organizations in the People's Republic. Such activity would be damaging to the unity, the very precious unity, which exists in the Christian community in China. And it does not recognize that Amity is an organization separate from the Chinese Church.

Q: A moment ago you mentioned you returned to the university where you taught for a number of years. Can you tell us about that visit?

A: I went to Nanjing in April, shortly after the first meeting of the Board of Directors of Amity. Most of my time there was spent looking into possible projects and meeting with the new staff of the Foundation. I was kept very busy, but I was happy to be able to renew old friendships with people at Nanjing University. Janice and I shall be returning this summer for a six-week teaching program in the Foreign Languages Department.

Q: You mentioned the Board of Directors meeting. Could you tell us something about its composition?

A: The first meeting of the Board was held on April 19, and it was a full-day meeting. There are 17 members of the Board of Directors, including three honorary presidents: Wu Yifang, former president of Nanjing Teachers College; Chen Yuguang, former president of the old Nanking University; and Kuang Yaming, former president of the present Nanjing University. Bishop Ting serves as the president of the Foundation and Han Wenzao is the general secretary. All together there are 17 members of the board, 14 of whom are Christians. The Board is entirely Chinese, but the possibility of establishing an International Board of Advisors is being considered. This would help to give more overseas input into the direction the foundation should take in developing its international relationships.

Q: Can you tell us something about how the Board functions?

A: The Board oversees and gives guidance to the overall work of the organization; the staff of the Foundation is accountable to the Board. This, I think, is quite similar to the way overseas boards operate.

Q: What is your own role in Amity?

A: I am secuded by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to serve as the overseas coordinator for the Amity Foundation, at its invitation. I am temporarily based here in Hong Kong. My job is to help interpret the work of the Foundation to overseas groups, to act as a liaison person, and to assist with some of the potential projects that the Foundation is trying to develop in China. It is a very demanding job, and I might add, one for which my background has not given me much preparation. But I learn as I go along, and I find the work very meaningful.

Q: What are the office facilities like in Nanjing?

A: There is a small office at Nanjing Theological Seminary and a staff under the direction of Han Wenzao, who is the general secretary.

Q: How do you see the Amity Foundation developing in the future?

A: We are trying at this point to move slowly. I would hope that over the next year or so we would be able to say something more concrete about the projects that I have already mentioned. There have been inquiries about the Foundation from many different parts of China, and we are taking it more or less step by step. We want to use a slow and methodical approach to our work as it unfolds over the next few years.

Q: What do you see as the theological significance of Amity?

A: When we asked a young woman at Nanjing seminary to design our brochure for us, she came up with a symbolic design of the five loaves and two fishes. I found this to be a significant representation of how a young Chinese Christian sees this new venture in Christian social service and ecumenical sharing. As a serving organization, it will be an outpouring of what Christians have to give on the level of service.

My own perspective on the work that lies ahead is that Amity will support the good work which we see already taking place in Chinese society. I see the Christian as acting to help bring that work to fulfillment. I think it is not only possible, but highly desirable and mutually beneficial for Christians and socialists to work together.

Let me add that Chinese Christians have spoken a great deal about the significance of the cosmic Christ in their understanding of their faith, understanding Christ in terms of the fulfillment of the purpose of God in all creation, inside and outside of the church. It is also in this way that I see the Foundation interpreting its own work as it relates to social service, education and other institutions in China.

TRIPOD: Thank you, Dr. Wickeri for giving us a fuller understanding of the Amity Foundation, and the Christian task it has set for itself. We are sure that the work of Amity will continue to hold not only the interest of Christians everywhere, but their prayers and support as well.