

Service to China's Elderly



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The traditional Chinese ethic--*to care for one's own elderly as well as those of others*-- impels the Chinese government to attend to the care of the aged. China's *One child policy* now forcefully promoted, and China's obviously aging population are creating new needs and challenges. The care of the elderly is one such challenge that cannot be overlooked. During this period of openness those working with the elderly look to Hong Kong's services to the aged to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their own services. Fortunately, Caritas-Hong Kong has had more than ten years of experience in providing various services to the aged. Caritas, therefore is an ideal partner for those wishing to capitalize on its expertise.

The Situation

In November 1986, the town of Dongpu in Guangzhou began to implement the *Five Guarantees for the elderly* (meals, housing, medical care, mobility and burial) and built an old folks' home. When Dongpu enlisted the help of Caritas, Caritas arranged for highly qualified social workers and nurses to go there to organize a series of training courses. These courses centered on physiological changes in the elderly, their illnesses, psychological problems, the therapeutic value of physical activities, self-help, social adaptation, human relationships, counseling skills, the importance of small group activities, principles for operating a home for the aged and other matters. Initially, those who attended were staff workers from the homes for the aged and planners and administrators from the county government. There were also representatives from the civil administration and women from the village Women's Leagues. The presence of these different groups created links between the home and the civil district which, later on, developed into a support network.

The Caritas Service Team also arranged for some special-

ized lectures on institutional care to meet practical needs. Instructions were given relating to the attitude of the caretaker, understanding the residents, handling interpersonal problems, communications skills, filing systems, supervisory and programme evaluation methods, etc. Together with the Dongpu team, the Hong Kong team even drew up work procedures and a manual for the staff at the home. To increase the knowledge and practical experience of the Dongpu team, Caritas made arrangements for some to come to Hong Kong to observe first-hand the various services offered in its homes for the aged. Caritas also donated some equipment to the Dongpu home enabling the staff to provide more effective and varied services. These series of contacts and training programmes continued for more than 4 years. The staff at the Dongpu Home was in fact *walking hand in hand with Caritas towards the future.*

At first the participants were only silent listeners. Soon they began to express their opinions and hold discussions and finally to implement what they had learned. They came to experience the care and diligence with which Caritas operates its homes. They saw that priority was placed on the personal development of each individual. They noted the procedures set up for reporting lost property, the skills the members used as well as their attitude toward resolving quarrels among the elderly, and how the family spirit permeated every activity. Persons were shown respect by giving them the opportunity to develop their hidden talents. This insured that their autumn years would be fulfilling and social contacts maintained. Participation in community activities was open to all but each had the right to take part or not. In reality, the services which Caritas offered in these homes was more than just caring for the basic needs of the elderly.

Services were offered also in places other than Dongpu. The Guangzhou Municipal Personnel Bureau needed to develop activities for retired cadres and others belonging to various professional units. Still active, these had potential for further personal development. Most of them were educated and would not be satisfied simply with *two square meals a day and a bed at night.* They wanted activities suited to their interests. With this in mind the Guangzhou Municipal Personnel Bureau planned to improve the quality of its services and requested the cooperation of the Hong Kong Caritas Service Team.

The training programme consisted in a total of 36 sessions and focussed on helping the participants understand the fundamental concepts of community care to the elderly. In order to set up a community that cares, the team provided for laundry services, for meals and meal delivery, purchase of daily necessities, house cleaning and escort services, to name but a few. Centres for the elderly should also provide for a variety of needs such as canteens, laundromats, shower rooms, day nursing services and recreational and educational activities. Such services help meet the needs of the retired elderly and provide services to support the life of the elderly to continue to function in the community.

Caritas shared with the participants its understanding of physiological changes in the elderly and analyzed how they are influenced by changes in society and at home. It discussed the preparation and development of various activities that have therapeutic value for the elderly or are means they can use to help themselves or others. Eighty officials from all the units in the Guangzhou Municipal Personnel Bureau took part in these sessions.

Later, the Guangzhou Municipal Personnel Bureau initiated taking a census in those districts more heavily populated by the elderly. Activity centres were opened in two districts: Liwan and Haizhu. These centres enabled the elderly to initiate self-help projects as well as projects offering mutual support. From the end of 1988 to the middle of 1989, Caritas was invited to assist in the further development of these two centres. Caritas discovered that these elderly were well able and willing to accept new kinds of activity.

In addition to these training programmes sessions offered in Guangzhou, Caritas also sent three staff members to Shanghai in October 1988. These initiated the first of a series of contacts with the *Shanghai Catholic Intellectual Association*. Shortly after the second meeting, both parties agreed to hold a joint study week for serving the aged. The aim was to change the existing mentality held by professionals towards the elderly and bring them to understand the meaning of work with the aged. Organizers of this *Study Week* also hoped to engage community support as well as organize a network for services to the aged.

The *Special Committee for Aging Problems* in Shanghai's Luwan District was also invited to participate. This study week

was the first occasion for the *Shanghai Catholic Intellectual Association* to cooperate with a non-Catholic association such as the Luwan committee for the aging. The participants were staff persons from old folks homes, nursing homes and centres for the aged. Some professionals such as volunteer doctors, nurses and Protestant ministers also came. The training programmes--sessions touched broadly on the theory and fundamental concepts of community and institutional care for the aged as well as on practical experience. At the conclusion of the study week, the participants expressed their interest in the following topics: helping old disabled people, helping the aged face illness and death and giving support to those who care for the elderly. Those who took part unanimously agreed that the service skills offered by Caritas were both professional and scientific--levels they themselves were determined to achieve.

The Caritas people, through this Study Week were also able to learn that services for the aged in Shanghai are based on the traditional Chinese concept of *reverencing, cherishing and treating the elderly with kindness*. The Shanghai group uses a flexible strategy in caring for the aged. They house the aged in small units, engage retired people to bring in meals and escort the elderly to the home for baths and for various organized activities. The Shanghai committee also encourages the military and students to help the elderly with their activities outside the home and assist them in their housekeeping chores. They urge the neighborhood to provide home care for the elderly. This series of services is referred to as *domiciliary care* where everybody pitches in. The bridge role played by Caritas by effecting the cooperation between the *Shanghai Catholic Association of Intellectuals* and the *Shanghai Luwan District Committee for the Aged* for a common purpose was a very rewarding experience. Moreover the theoretical concepts of *integration* of service and *networking* were achieved in the implementation of the Shanghai practice model.

Challenges

The staff members of Caritas who went to conduct these training sessions in China experienced quite a few difficulties, both environmental and psychological. Before they departed for the first time, they were filled with trepidation. They did not

know China's expectations or their attitude towards service of the needy; they were uncertain just how to deal with the people and feared they might cause misunderstandings owing to differences in language and background training. Some of these difficulties disappeared when people began to work together.

Our staff, however, encountered enormous environmental problems; suitable accommodations were difficult to find; some facilities were old and unsafe; and the weather often enervating and without air conditioning in the training areas. Power outages were frequent in the midst of lectures and slide demonstrations and, of course, there were the ever present mosquitoes, causing much physical discomfort and insomnia.

There were also notable differences in the progress each participant made. This required on the spot adaptation to meet the situations as they arose. This raised havoc with previously drawn up schedules and plans.

Language was another problem. The government wanted the participants to speak Mandarin. But the staff working in the homes were not well versed in this language. Even some of the high government officials in Guangzhou--not to mention Shanghai--do not speak Mandarin very well.

These training courses presented Caritas workers with challenges. First of all, they used much of their own free time to prepare materials for the sessions adapting them to the level of their Chinese audience. The political structure, social customs and values prevalent in China often led the Caritas team to question themselves. They wondered if they had instilled the spirit behind the social work so that those in China would accept and understand it. Caritas staff members did not know if social work would ever take root and develop there. Had the combination of theory and practice been effective? Were the working models adapted to a value system or to the needs and practice of Chinese society?

Reflections

After four years of conducting many training programmes, the Caritas staff is convinced that the support of the local Chinese government is necessary if this work is to progress in China. Government support, however, does not mean that social work, as a profession, is recognized in China. The au-

thorities see it only as a way to resolve problems. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the spirit, concepts and principles behind social work do not easily fit in with socialism's expectations. Caritas has experienced, however, that its work will not be rejected outright or be forced to fit into another model as long as it meets the needs of society and does not criticize the government's political policies.

Social work in China is not an easy or light responsibility, but there are compensations. It is a reward in itself to see workers who at first were very passive and subjective, content with simply fulfilling regulations, gradually become very active in expressing their opinions, carefully analyzing matters, taking greater pains in caring for the elderly in the homes and being most conscientious in carrying out their duties.

The staff's greatest joy, however, was the opportunity to diffuse the Gospel spirit of love wherever they went. One of the city leaders in China once remarked: "You talk about forgiveness and compassion, and always show love and concern in what you do. You've been involved in Caritas work for a long time now and influenced by the Church. There's a religious quality around you." Whether this was meant as praise or blame is not clear but when our staff members heard this, they were quite happy.

Conclusion

Caritas has in the past 4 years conducted several workshops with various working units in China. It has confronted many difficulties and challenges created by a different environment, working habits and language. Despite these problems the Caritas workers, who took part in these training sessions, were unanimous in affirming the need to continue promoting this work and were convinced that it has produced positive results. China social workers now feel that they are also doing the same work as other professional social workers throughout the world. They know, also, that they are accepted as fellow professionals.

As a matter of fact, *Caritas reveals love in the service of hope*. We carry the force of this maxim about with us each day. Faith germinates it and love cultivates it. Jesus said: "Whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters you do unto me." Caritas people working for the aged in China have drawn

hope from their service to the poor and needy. Caritas has also created hope in China. These series of workshops have strengthened the confidence of those who work with the aged in China. Caritas workers have helped them realize that service to the aged is rendered not because old people are deserving of pity and need others' compassion, but that it is our duty to show love and respect to our elders, seeing that they are the pioneers of our present day society. They are today what we shall be tomorrow. The elderly themselves have noticed that something has changed because the care they are presently receiving has changed.

Two China workers for the elderly who came to Hong Kong for further training learned the importance of the relationship existing between the agency and the community from witnessing it during the *Festival for the Elderly*. They saw first-hand the strength of having people from the entire community bring all their resources to bear on one project with everyone participating to contribute their share.

The standard of living will go on rising in China and in Hong Kong. Medical care will progress and with the present tendency of limiting births, the elderly population will increase faster than the younger population. This points out the need and urgency for on-going development of care for the aged. The progress made over the past 10 years in that field in Hong Kong can offer much to care of the elderly in China. Hong Kong's planned development, the variety of services offered, the skills and knowledge acquired and the cooperation of various professionals can all contribute. Both China and Hong Kong should draw up legislation encouraging and obliging children to fulfill the responsibility they have of taking care of their parents. Legislation on old age insurance should also be enacted. A religious leader once said, "You should use the witness of deeds so that even non-Christians will experience the hope that your service brings with it. They should see in you Christ the Servant of God."
