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Catholic Church in China pioneers HIV and AIDS care program

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Father Joseph Zhang, a Roman Catholic priest from China's Liaoning province, saw AIDS for the first time during a visit to Bangkok, Thailand, in 2003. On the trip, he visited a Catholic center treating people living with the virus, learned about the pandemic and received a note of warning from a fellow priest.

"He pointed out that AIDS will be a big problem for China," Zhang said. He went back to China convinced that caring for people living with HIV and AIDS was the church's responsibility.

Zhang returned to Thailand in 2004 with six nuns and a lay member from his diocese to visit Catholic centers and learn about prevention and care of people affected by HIV and AIDS. "All of us had the same feeling and experience," Zhang said. "We thought this is a call to the church. We need to do this."

No other religious group had yet taken up the issue in Shenyang, Liaoning's capital city, nor the region's rural areas, and there was no local tradition of civil society involvement in HIV and AIDS. Government health agencies were providing care across the province, Zhang said, but were understaffed and stretched thin.

Recognizing that most people knew little about the virus, Zhang knew that education about HIV and AIDS was the first step. He contacted government health officials and asked them to train many of the province's 200 nuns. He also approached officials from the government's religious affairs bureau, which liaises with China's approved religions.

Government officials were receptive, but Zhang said many Catholics in the diocese questioned whether the work was "church business." He pointed to the Bible in response.

"At Jesus' time, it was the lepers. At our time, it is the people with HIV and AIDS. If Jesus was alive today, he certainly would do something," Zhang said.

Needing support, Zhang contacted Catholic Relief Services, the international humanitarian arm of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. In March 2005, with CRS backing, the Catholic Social Service Center of Liaoning Diocese began serving people affected by HIV and AIDS, offering counseling, support groups, financial assistance and home visits.

The prevalence of HIV infections in China does not approach those of Asia's worst affected nations. A 2006 report from UNAIDS estimated .1 percent of China's adults between the ages of 15 and 49 are infected with HIV, compared with 1.4 percent in Thailand. But the report warned that the infection rate in China is increasing.

The center cares for 20 patients on average in Shenyang, none of whom are Catholic. But Zhang said the caseload is increasing as the center staff learns about people living with HIV and AIDS in other communities. One staff member who was not originally from Shenyang returned to her home diocese to start a similar program there. Local schools have asked for more information and education about HIV. And noting that government agencies are reporting cases of HIV and AIDS in remote regions of Liaoning, Zhang says, "Next year our mission is going to expand into the rural areas."

Zhang, who was ordained as a priest in 1992, was teaching in a seminary before his first trip to Thailand. At that time, he said, he believed education was the most important

service he could provide.

“Now I think serving people is the most important,” he said. “Without serving other people, our faith is not complete.”

By Hilary Roxel

Media Coverage