

Chinese church offers social help

NANJING, China (CNS) — About two dozen students clad in red sweat suits danced around the small room, twirling brightly colored fans in rhythm with the music.

The students ranged in age from 13 to 43, but their mental capacity did not surpass age 12. Thirty-two students attend the Ark-Nanjing Special Education Center, run by the Nanjing Diocese with support from the local government; about 10 students live at the center and go home every other weekend.

Some students have autism, some have Down syndrome, some have a nervous condition, said Sister Maria Zheng, a member of the Sisters of Mercy of the Nanjing Diocese. She and another nun are part of the nine-member staff, some of whom sleep in the room with several children to help them during the night.

Special education is just one of many social services offered by the Catholic Church in China, where the government has recognized that religious communities have a role to play in social welfare activities. Social service officials say China has 23 million of its 1.32 billion people living in absolute poverty, unable to afford the most basic goods and services.

Five Chinese Catholic dioceses have established social service centers, and the social service center of Shijiazhuang Diocese in Hebei province has become the first Catholic agency to be registered as a nongovernmental organization by the Chinese government. Staffers at the various centers run medical clinics, visit AIDS patients, help rural communities get clean water and provide legal aid. Some dioceses offer scholarships for students because basic education is not totally free.

In addition to its other programs, the Diocese of Shanghai has begun helping migrants, although some staffers feel like “we don’t know how to begin,” said Sister Mary Pan Xiufang, a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary who works for the diocese.

Shanghai has 17 million residents, but government officials estimate at least 3 million migrants live in China’s largest city. Many have migrated to get jobs in the city’s booming construction industry.

The diocese has renovated one of its properties to offer housing to young women who came to the city but were unable to find jobs, said Sister Mary. One parish has formed a migrant support group and offers Bible study, among other activities. Sister Mary said that at the Chinese new year, when people traveled for days to be with their families for a special meal, parishioners cooked a meal for the migrants who could not return home.

The diocese rents office space to get money to fund some of the programs.

“In Shanghai we got a lot of properties back” after they were expropriated by the government, Sister Mary said. “Of course, not all” properties were returned, she added.

The Xi’an diocesan social service center has 14 staffers and gets support from Misereor, a German Catholic aid agency, and Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops’ international relief and development agency. The diocese runs its programs on a yearly budget of \$517,000.

Father Stephen Chen, director of the Xi’an center, said more than one-quarter of its work is related to getting clean drinking water for people, especially in mountainous areas.

Like many Catholic social development programs, the water projects begin at the grass roots. For instance, said Father Chen, if the project involves getting potable water, farmers and villagers decide how and where the pipes should be laid. Local government officials will be asked to help with the project.

“We provide the water, but we ask the government to provide the electricity,” Father Chen said.

The center has started 20 minilibraries in Catholic villages, and Father Chen said he hopes in a few years that every Catholic village will have such a library with books for all ages. The agency also funds children’s orchestras and works in HIV/AIDS prevention training.

Diocesan staffers also work with the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, providing training for some of the nuns to work in medical clinics.

About one-quarter of China's rural villages have no medical care available.

At the clinic in the village of Daying, the sisters offer patients a choice between being treated with modern medicine or traditional Chinese medicine. In mid-March, a young woman with an intravenous drip line walked past a heavy padded blanket that covered the doorway to the room where patients were treated with herbal medicine.

Money from the clinics helps fund some of the nuns' other programs.

Upstairs from the Daying clinic, several of the community's nuns run a school for mentally disabled students from surrounding parishes. The Chinese name of the school means "the heart is happy."

Sister Tong Xiaoya, who runs the school, said 18 boys and two girls, ages 2-18, live at the school. Some attended public school but did not do well.

Every other weekend, the children go home to visit parents, she said.

The school's greatest need is for transportation, she said, because when the parents cannot afford to come get their students, two or three sisters accompany the children and must take public transportation. Some students live as far away as Xi'an, and the hour-and-a-half bus ride taxes their ability to behave, she said.

Sister Xiaoya said the staff hopes to have room for more students when the diocese is able to remodel a nearby building it purchased. She estimated the cost of remodeling at about \$2,000, because the nuns do much of the work.