

Diocese works to eliminate stigma of AIDS

SHENYANG, China (CNS) — For World AIDS Day, the nuns leafleted the train stations in Liaoning province, and members of parish youth groups handed out information at parishes.

But while many agencies offer AIDS awareness programs for World AIDS Day each Dec. 1, the Diocese of Liaoning offers such programs year-round, said Immaculate Heart of Mary Sister Fabian Han Fungxia, head of the HIV/AIDS program at the diocesan Catholic Social Service Center.

The Shenyang-based diocese offers HIV/AIDS workshops in rural areas during the winter months, when farmers do not have to be in the fields and have more time to attend. During the 2005-2006 school year, the diocese focused on AIDS awareness in parishes; this school year it is focusing on schools, especially technical schools. Sister Fabian said this hits high-risk groups of teens and young adults.

"We found that the young people are very eager to learn" about HIV/AIDS, although at first they are embarrassed to talk about it, she said.

In January, the diocese hosted an ecumenical conference on HIV/AIDS, focusing on how to build a network of support in China. In February, at the request of the provincial center for disease control, the diocese organized an HIV/AIDS conference so people working with HIV could exchange information.

Sister Fabian, who earned a degree in pastoral counseling and spiritual care at Fordham University in New York, said the church is working to reduce the stigma of AIDS in her diocese. For instance, she said, sometimes, when the diocese offers counseling sessions, provincial health officials are invited so that people living with HIV/AIDS become comfortable talking to them.

Sister Fabian and Father Joseph Zhang, executive director of the social service center, get financial support from the diocese and Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency. The center gets technical

assistance from the Hong Kong AIDS Foundation and Maryknoll, which works extensively with AIDS patients in Africa.

At the end of 2006, the official government count was 686 people living with HIV in Liaoning; of those, 120 had full-blown AIDS. However, unofficial estimates put the number of people living with HIV/AIDS at 3,000 in Liaoning province alone, said Sister Fabian. She said AIDS is spreading from high-risk groups — young people, drug users and the gay community — to the general population.

Nationwide, official government figures said 650,000 Chinese were living with HIV/AIDS by the end of 2006, "but experts have already predicted the number is over 1 million," said Zhang Liwei, associate general secretary of the Amity Foundation, a nongovernmental organization set up to help fund social service work for the Protestant church in China.

Sister Fabian said that in Jianchang County many people have little schooling, so when diocesan staffers or volunteers visit patients' homes they spend time educating people about the need to take their medicine as scheduled.

She said that in Jianchang between 1993 and 1995 many poor parents sold their blood for income.

"They developed clinical AIDS and they could not take care of themselves," she said.

She told of one man who built a house in 1993, then sold his blood to pay for the roof. He acquired HIV and passed it on to his wife. The couple has four girls, and "now they cannot take care of themselves," she said.

"We provide scholarships to two of the children," she added.

Selling blood for money also was common in central China's Henan province, said Zhang, whose foundation is the largest nongovernmental organization working on AIDS in China.

In Henan, Zhang said, people buying blood took the plasma and reinjected red cells back into the person's body, reusing needles. He said one research paper he read said one person sold blood 32 times in one month.

"This is really something; it's a terrible tragedy in China," he said, noting that the problem was exacerbated when local officials tried to cover it up. "Even up to date this is a very sensitive issue."