

Article

Transformative Diaconia in China: The Amity Foundation as a Case Study

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Abstract: The last decade has seen keen interest among governments, businesses, academe, and the nonprofit sector in the role religions can play in the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030. In China, until the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020, there were conferences and debates about this that increasingly involved the religious sector. This study looks at Christian social practice among faith-based organizations in China, especially its transformative potential, in contributing to sustainable development. It will highlight some of the best practices of the Amity Foundation, a Chinese FBO headquartered in Nanjing, to illustrate how, through a combination of service delivery and advocacy (Chinese style), FBOs in China can help shift official and religious perspectives and attitudes toward a more participatory and sustainable approach to development. Although the term “transformative diaconia” has not been explicitly used by Amity to describe its work, the values embedded in its practice and the impact it has made on stakeholders and policies can be considered transformative. The UN SDGs 2030, which have been strongly supported by Amity’s ecumenical partners and the Chinese government, provide an important frame of reference for Amity’s advocacy work as well as help to identify some of the content for diaconal capacity building for churches in China. Some of the opportunities and challenges confronting FBOs as they transition from service delivery to advocacy will be explored.

Keywords: FBOs; advocacy; christian social practice; transformative diaconia; UN SDGs 2030; sustainable development; women’s empowerment; religion and development; participatory democracy; changing mindsets



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1. Introduction

The launch of the UN Sustainable Goals 2030 in 2015 sparked interest among governments to harness the strengths of the religious sector in achieving its ambitious goals. In February 2016, in an effort supported by the German Federal Ministry for Development Cooperation (BMZ), PARD, the newly minted international Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, brought together bilateral and multilateral agencies and the private sector to strengthen dialogue and draw on the positive impact of religion. Representatives from the Amity Foundation, a Christian-initiated Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) established in China in 1985, participated in the launching of PARD and the important book entitled *Voices from Religions on Sustainable Development* (Singh and Steinau-Clark 2016). Inspired by the event and exhilarated by the renewed interest in “sustainable development” as a goal and a concept in humanitarian work, Amity leaders, with support from its overseas partners, co-organized with the Institute for World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) an international conference in December 2016 on “Religions, Values, Ethics and Development”.¹ Held in Nanjing, it brought together 250 participants from 15 countries representing scholars, development practitioners, religious leaders, and Chinese officials. The event was celebrated as a milestone, indicating the growth and development of the Chinese NGO sector. More importantly, it showed that faith-based organizations (FBOs) were increasingly perceived as having a positive

role to play in China's development and that sustainable development goals can be more effectively achieved through multisectoral, international, and ecumenical collaboration.

This study attempts to demonstrate the positive role of Christianity in China, and its contributions to sustainable development, through the work of the Amity Foundation. By highlighting some of the positive contributions made by Amity in the last four decades since its establishment in 1985, it argues that FBOs can be a valuable resource and asset rather than a hindrance to sustainable development. It will focus mainly on two areas of Amity's impact:

- (1) In transforming the mindsets of officials at local levels toward a more participatory approach to sustainable development;
- (2) In strengthening the participation of Chinese churches in diaconia or Christian social practice that supports social inclusiveness and sustainable development.

Adding to the literature on FBOs as valuable assets in development (Mtata 2013; Cao 2018; Swart 2020) the study will show that in a unique and rapidly changing socialist context such as China where the state retains a strong public role and religions tend to be relegated to the private realm, FBOs like Amity can be effective channels for broader Christian participation in social transformation and sustainable development.

In its methodology, the present study relies heavily on information gathered by the author as a participant–observer of Amity from 1996 to the present. Over the last 25 years, she has worked with the Amity Foundation in various roles as editor (1996–2000), the Amity Hong Kong Office Coordinator/Director (2001–2008), Amity Research Consultant and Board member of Amity Hong Kong (2009–present) and Consultant/Advisor to Amity China (2010–present). Between 2010 and 2014, the author undertook project evaluations of water, biogas, and post-disaster reconstruction projects by Amity in China which became valuable sources of information. The author has also relied on Amity's publications, project evaluation reports, and formal and informal interviews with Amity's founders, leaders, staff, project partners, and participants undertaken over the last three decades.

At the outset, it should be stated that Amity enjoys a unique status in China as the first registered NGO with a faith background and linked to an international ecumenical network related to the World Council of Churches. Its first General Secretary, Dr. Han Wenzao, often referred to Amity as a “Christian-initiated NGO” but since 2016, with increasing references to diaconia related to its work, it has also been referred to as an FBO.²

It should be clarified that the term *diaconia* is a biblical term referring to Christian social service. The *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* defines diaconia as “the responsible service of the gospel by deeds and by words performed by Christians in response to the needs of people”. This wording indicates three components in the understanding of diaconia: it is action, or performing services, by using deeds and words; Christian faith motivates this action and views it as an expression of Christian discipleship; diaconal intervention reflects social reality and seeks in its performance to alleviate human suffering and promote justice, peace, and human dignity (World Council of Churches (WCC) 2022).

Since its inception in 1985, Amity has grown from an organization with a staff of three to one with its own stand-alone office and close to 100 staff members (not counting branch offices and service centers such as the Nanjing-based Children's Development Center (for autistic children), the Philanthropy Valley Center for Elder Care, and several branches of the Amity Bakery which has established itself as one of the very few private establishments employing people with disabilities. How Amity overcame many of the challenges it faced in its early years is well covered in *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Wickeri 2007). Today, Amity has been able to gain the trust of local, provincial, and national-level officials and convinced them of the effectiveness and pioneering nature of its community-based social work over a wide range of projects that cover education, health, renewable energy, gender equality, and climate change. More importantly, Amity has effectively demonstrated that international cooperation with FBOs abroad can be beneficial and contribute to sustainable development.

Given the constraints of this paper, it will not go in depth into the characteristics of each stage of Amity's development and the kind of projects it focused on at each stage. Amity did adjust the emphasis of its projects depending on new social challenges that emerged, as well as the concomitant policies of the national government related to development and to the role of religions, as perceived by the state. The study will simply identify specific examples in which Amity tries to overcome policy-related obstacles or hindrances posed by cultural and religious perspectives to its goals.

The UN's launch of the SDGs 2030, closely following the MDGs, helped to mainstream the concept of sustainable development which was defined in the World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 Brundtland report *Our Common Future* as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The extensive 17 goals cited in the SDGs 2030 have given prominence to some of the key elements of sustainable development that include poverty alleviation, the equitable distribution of wealth, fostering gender equality, participative governance, and addressing climate-change concerns.

2. Sustainable Development Ideas Embedded in Amity's Practice

For the Amity Foundation, the concept of sustainable development was hardly a new one. It should be emphasized that in the earliest two decades of its work, between 1985 to 2005, there were already visible and pioneering elements of sustainable development that had been infused into Amity's social practice such as poverty reduction, equitable development, gender equality, participative democracy, and environmental protection. Its partnership with international ecumenical ministries and agencies meant being introduced to concepts of environmental protection and the idea of "Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC)", which had become focal points of dialogue and advocacy in the World Council of Churches (WCC) since the Vancouver Assembly in 1983. The WCC undertook a process of making issues concerning JPIC more central to the belief and practice of its member churches. Having relied heavily on funding and expertise from WCC-related aid and mission agencies based in Europe and North America over the first two decades of its existence, it was not surprising that Amity had been introduced to international dialogues on sustainable development from the very beginning. There were annual conferences or roundtable meetings involving Amity and its overseas partners where such discussions ensued. There was a concern among overseas partners that developmental work should bear in mind the urgent need for poverty alleviation while simultaneously addressing the issue of uneven development in the country.³ Thus, as early as 1991, Amity had been challenged to work in areas much poorer than Jiangsu Province, where it was located. The response from Amity's leaders, especially Bishop K. H. Ting, was swift and, in 1992, Amity shifted its target area of work in poverty alleviation westwards towards "poverty stricken" counties in Guizhou, Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, Gansu, and Ningxia (Qiu 2018).

It was in its rural development work in these remote and highly impoverished areas of China that Amity began to practice some of the important ideas of sustainable development with its local partners which included county officials and village leaders.

a. Participatory democracy and the bottom-up approach to development

The participatory approach to development became an important force in the success of poverty-alleviation projects supported by Amity in the 1990s and early 2000s. The importance of participative democracy in sustainable development is amply noted in SDG 16, which is to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development; provide access to justice for all; and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. A central tenet of participatory governance is that everyone affected by a particular decision should be able to take part in the decision-making process, without discrimination.

In speaking about the integrated rural development project begun with Amity in 1998 in Zhuoquan County, Shanxi Province, a county official, Mr. Yu Wen Youyu, spoke enthusiastically about the enormous contributions Amity had made: "I would say we

have learned a lot about project management and participatory development—our ideas in this respect are much more comprehensive now. In particular, my understanding of participatory development has deepened” (Fiedler and Zhang 2005). It was evident that his experience of working with Amity had begun to change his mindset. His initial skepticism about the consultative methods Amity had introduced to villagers with little formal education soon melted away and he admitted: “Now we use the participatory approach in the whole area we work in and the results are much better than before” (Fiedler and Zhang 2005). He was particularly impressed by the resourcefulness of villagers who had taken part in participatory training programs.

b. Advocating democratic governance

In its project implementation, Amity introduced ideas of democratic governance at local government levels. Large integrated development projects undertaken by Amity aimed at *continuous* improvements in the welfare of local communities and, more importantly, incorporated the formation of “self-governing farmers collaborative organizations” that eventually took over responsibility on matters regarding education, health, infrastructure, forest and grassland reclamation, eco-friendly farming, renewable energy, and cultural heritage preservation (Qiu 2018). The last was vital since many of the poverty-alleviation projects were located in areas populated by national minorities whose religions and cultures were rapidly being undermined by the pace of “modernization”.

c. Gender equality and centering on people

The participatory approach was successfully employed in projects that promoted gender equality such as microfinance in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Amity’s cooperative venture on microfinance with the local government in Shanxi focused exclusively on women (representing the poorest sector of rural communities)⁴ and Yu stressed that one of the main differences it had with government-initiated projects was the model’s emphasis on personal development—it was more than “just taking out a loan”. He discerned that “To achieve this personal growth, you need a lot of training—and training requires a lot of work. The fruit of this work is that people become more active members of society” (Fiedler and Zhang 2005, pp. 90–92).

This observation has been constantly reiterated by Amity leaders. “All Amity projects, without exception, put people at the center. Comments and suggestions of both professional consultants and project beneficiaries are given equal attention”, according to Mr. Qiu Zhonghui, former Amity General Secretary and now the chair of the foundation. He cites Amity’s reforestation project in Southern Guangxi in the 1990s as a prime example of being people oriented. Its success eventually made it a model project promoted by the provincial government throughout the autonomous region (Qiu 2018, p. 29).

3. Alternative Models, Changing Mindsets, and Policies

By the end of its second decade of work, Amity’s practice began moving from service toward advocacy. The evolution in the work and approach of its Social Welfare Division exemplified this. Under the Social Welfare Division of Amity, there had been a transition from providing services and meeting the basic needs of those living with disabilities towards incorporating policy advocacy in empowering the hearing impaired. To an extent, this goal is reflected in SDG 10, which aims at reducing inequality within and among countries. This SDG calls for reducing inequalities in income as well as those based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status within a country.

In the 1990s, critics of Amity, both from the religious and secular sectors, complained that Amity’s work was simply taking on what really should be the responsibility of the government. But Wu Anan, former Director of Amity’s Social Welfare Division, insisted that while this is partially true, “We are involved to let the government know about their responsibility and introduce them to new approaches through our work. If you don’t challenge the government, you cannot change society” (Wu 2005, p. 146). She emphasized the need to integrate “advocacy” in disability work as early as two decades ago.

Speaking presciently in an interview in 2005, during Amity's 20th anniversary, Wu explained:

Looking at our work from the perspective of the Social Welfare Division, I would say that after 20 years, we should move away from being a charitable organization and become more of a development organization. We should be more aware of why we do things, of the rights of people, and of justice. We should do more in influencing policies, not just looking at needs—say a child needing an operation—but challenge the government to be more aware of people's rights and of justice. Foster care and deaf education are two fields where we are now involved in talking policies. (Wu 2005, p. 145)

Wu had been advocating the importance of “bilingual” education, incorporating sign language as a method for hearing-impaired children to improve their social and communication skills at an early age, and to motivate their desire to learn. With the help of overseas experts, Amity promoted highly successful practical models of bilingual education in selected schools. Unsurprisingly, much resistance was expressed by parents, school administrators, and Chinese experts. Parents, in particular, worried that sign language use by their children would only intensify the stigma of hearing impairment. Undaunted, Wu insisted that it was important to engage with “professional authorities”, as these were “technical bureaucrats” who exercised great power in their fields and were listened to by policymakers (Wu 2005). She clearly understood that presenting viable models and changing mindsets would be an important first step in reforming the social welfare system from a top-down orientation toward one that was consultative and people centered.

One study shows that the number of those with disabling hearing loss reached 27.8 million, accounting for 33.5% of the total registered disabled in China in 2006 (Liu et al. 2019). In its most recent effort to support hearing-impaired youth, Amity is raising funds for a project to train “Silent Coffee Masters” by experts in the field. In addition to specialized coffee-making skills, the on-the-job training will include management skills that will promote their employment and create an open, equal, and inclusive employment environment. There are plans to spread and “institutionalize” such training by inviting industry and special education experts to jointly develop a teaching system of customized courses accompanied by an employment manual to help provide a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of coffee knowledge and master practitioner skills. There is no doubt such a project with its person-centered approach will have a transformative impact on the trainees as well as on public attitudes toward people living with disabilities. It will contribute to the mainstreaming of employment for people living with disabilities, empowering them and removing social stigma.

4. FBO–State Negotiations and Changing Mindsets on Top-Down Development

Engaging with local authorities provides opportunities to transform their top-down approach to development. In Amity's experience, social change has to be approached in a holistic way. It is not only the construction of “hardware” or developmental infrastructure, nor meeting the pressing needs of communities that matter but, more importantly, it has to include the “software” of changing mindsets of officials and all other stakeholders in the approach to social change.

In its work, Amity inevitably has had to be involved with county- and village-level governments, bureaus of education, and health authorities, for which it has been criticized. Stephen Ting, former Vice President of Amity, recalled that working with officials was a question that Amity leaders had to discuss very often with local Christian communities. He says, “Why should Amity help the government, they ask? But for us the fact that there is human need should be our prior concern. And we hope that the government will learn something through our work” (Ting 2005, p. 153). Engaging with local authorities provides opportunities to transform their top-down approach to development.

Collaboration and negotiating with local authorities provided opportunities for debate and dialogue on development policies and their implementation. Successfully concluded

projects enhanced local officials' performance. In return, they became more open to receiving ideas from FBOs like Amity. Good examples of how collaboration with Amity has succeeded in changing the mindsets of policymakers and implementors on development can be corroborated in interviews with Amity staff, village heads, and local party secretaries (Qiu 2018). Weller et al. (2018) identify this process as "merit-making" by FBOs that helps to enhance their status and standing with authorities. They observe that, in China, political merit-making is *defensive* as the state controls religious organizations through methods such as financial auditing and registration. Thus, it is in the interest of FBOs to develop political merit with state officials.

In the early decades of reform in China, the need for foreign technology and expertise in social services provided conditions that generated more tolerance for religions from the state. In the case of Amity, its development projects became important channels for access to foreign aid, social expertise, and much-needed professionalism by local governments. Amity's access to such resources, locally and internationally, gave it leverage to identify local partners, locations, and types of projects it would undertake. It could also promote its advocacy of sustainable development principles. Precisely because the social engagements were transformative, such as in HIV–AIDS education and prevention, in the pioneering work with children with disabilities, and in renewable energy and environmental preservation, Amity was able to gain and maintain the government's respect and trust both at the local and provincial levels. One vital consequence was the expansion of political space for FBOs.

5. Upgrading Social Services Creates More Space for FBOs

The 1980s and 1990s were periods in which the Chinese government focused on building necessary infrastructure in both rural and urban areas to facilitate productivity and economic growth. In that context, Amity's contributions to 'integrated rural development projects' were greatly needed and appreciated.

By the start of the 21st century, the government began to use its growing resources to upgrade the delivery of social services through a process of professionalizing the social-work sector and, concomitantly, a gradual "privatization" of social services. This was driven not only by the need for standardization and upgrading of expertise but also by the increasing willingness to pay for better services among China's growing middle class. At the same time, Chinese society began to take keen notice of the needs of its aging population. It quickly led to the independent growth of private NGOs providing elder care services, for instance. Many small, local NGOs emerged in urban neighborhoods, so much so that Amity was invited by district governments in Jiangsu Province to provide them with capacity building, leading to the establishment of Amity's NGO Development Center.

Accompanying this process, new policies and regulations on religions in 2003, 2008, and 2012 progressively opened-up spaces and provided a legal umbrella for churches to undertake social services. In 2012, six government departments, including the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA), jointly released "Opinions on Encouraging and Regulating Religious Circles' Participation in Public Welfare Charitable Activities", a landmark document extending the space for religious organizations to engage in charitable activities (Gao 2021).

Significantly, as the government began to "buy services" from NGOs, FBOs could begin to tap into social security funds for their work. For example, Amity's International Philanthropy Valley enterprise, a home for seniors which had been turned over by the local government for Amity to manage, included free land and buildings. The initial support from the local government gave the enterprise a boost in providing model services through the hiring of professional social workers and trained nurses. The tapping of social security provisions by residents as payment for services went a long way in ensuring sustainability for the home.

To strengthen the nonprofit sector in delivering services for seniors and protecting their rights, Amity has made it a point to continuously seek innovative ways of delivering

services and advocating for the rights of seniors. Volunteers, both young and older adults, are recruited to deliver food and a range of home services. There are activity centers for seniors to continue “life-long education” that range from the arts and culture to technology-related courses. Annual conferences and seminars are organized involving experts and FBOs from China and overseas to share their best practices and the latest findings and raise professional standards with those engaged in senior-care services all over China ([Amity Foundation Project Report 2021](#)). Annual participation often numbers close to several hundred participants, mostly practitioners running small nursing homes.

6. Embedding Sustainable Development Elements in Amity’s Work

By insisting on a process of consultation, representation, and sharing of knowledge, with stakeholders, Amity has embedded transformative elements into its development work. The installation of new water systems, for instance, requires local farmers to analyze why water systems break down and how to manage and maintain new ones ([Fiedler and Zhang 2005](#), pp. 162–63). This process enables local communities to assume ownership and responsibility for the success and sustainability of projects. Additionally, the emphasis on sustainability explains why training is such an essential part of Amity’s projects. Rural development projects would not only include technical training but also legal training, in women’s rights, for instance, and training in women’s health ([Fiedler and Zhang 2005](#)).

In the Chinese context, the state has been strong in pursuing top-down development. Amity’s experience, from its inception, has shown that a Chinese NGO’s engagement should contribute to a development that is human-oriented and sustainable. This is based on an early awareness that the state cannot do everything—so FBOs, with access to external resources regardless of whether they are religious or nonreligious, can reach where the state cannot. In China, the nonprofit sector can be critical of the government but has less of an anti-state attitude and more of a hope that the state can improve its services for the people. At the same time, there is the view that people should have agency, ownership, and self-esteem in undertaking development initiatives that contribute to a bottom-up rather than a top-down development.

In China, one expression of this has been the Three-in-One concept where participation is seen as three pronged, involving the state (often represented by the local government), the supporting NGO or external funding agency, and the people themselves, usually contributing labor, local knowledge, and, where feasible, cash.

7. Sustainable Development and Funding for NGOs

In the long term, the ability of NGOs to sustain their development work will be dependent on the availability of funding and resources. After indications of the decline in foreign funding for China began to appear at the turn of the century, Amity took seriously the need to embark on domestic fundraising, which began in earnest in 2004. Gaining the trust of the public, the corporate sector, and family foundations was a struggle at the outset, especially for an organization with a religious background. However, the legalization of public fundraising practices in China opened-up new opportunities for the expansion of the nonprofit sector. The China Charity Law is China’s first national-level legislation governing its charitable sector. Promulgated on 16 March 2016, the Charity Law established a comprehensive regulatory system for Chinese philanthropic development that would help promote charitable activities and social progress ([China Development Brief \(CDB\) 2016](#)). Growing wealth, the rise of the middle class, and the explosive growth in the use of the internet created new opportunities for public awareness raising and donations, with support from China’s internet giants, Alibaba and Tencent.

In September 2017, the [China Development Brief \(CDB\) \(2017\)](#) reported that China’s third “9/9 Philanthropy Day” had generated over 1.3 billion yuan in donations, including 829.9 million yuan from the public, 299.99 million yuan from Tencent Foundation, and 177 million yuan from social enterprises. It represented a significant increase compared to the 300 million yuan raised from 6.8 million donors in 2016. The 3-day activity generated

online donations from 12.7 million donors through the Tencent Charity platform, with contributions directed to around 6,466 charitable projects in the areas of educational assistance, medical assistance, poverty alleviation, and more ([China Development Brief \(CDB\) 2017](#)).

In the past eight years, Amity's ability to raise substantial funds publicly is clear evidence of growing goodwill and support from Chinese society. Amity's funding comes from a form of crowdfunding initiated by Tencent and Alibaba. Due to its sound reputation and transparency, Amity has been able to raise considerable amounts through online public fundraising, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it has gained respect and emulation from churches that had earlier misjudged Amity as using church funds from overseas for "secular use". Donations for Amity in 2020 came from individuals (45.7%) and the business sector (44%) ([Amity Foundation's Annual Report 2020](#)). In that year, during 9/9 Philanthropy Day, Amity was able to bring together 232 organizations to raise CNY 66.8 million, ranking eighth among foundations having public fundraising qualifications in the country. Since only registered foundations are allowed to engage in public fundraising, Amity's role has been crucial in harnessing public contributions for distribution to much smaller NGOs that are not foundations and, hence, are not legally allowed to fundraise in public.

The encouraging growth in public charity made an impact on domestic church-based funding for diaconia. Already in 2008, in the aftermath of the Sichuan earthquake, the spontaneous response and contributions from the religious sector had become noticeable. In 2020, when the pandemic struck, church contributions for combatting the spread of COVID-19 in China reached the sizeable amount of CNY 230 million (or USD 35 million) ([Lin 2022](#)). A large proportion of this was given to Amity through the China Christian Council (CCC) for its COVID-19 prevention efforts. It was a significant gesture symbolizing the growth in mutual understanding and respect between Amity and Chinese churches.

8. Amity as a Channel for Christians' Social Engagement

By registering Amity as an NGO in China in 1985, Bishop K. H. Ting created a channel for Christians to be involved in social service and development projects. In that sense, Amity was often regarded by its overseas ecumenical partners as the "development" or "social service" arm of the churches. It would only be in 2003 before religious organizations such as the China Christian Council were legally allowed to establish social service departments and take part in social service delivery. Thus, as an NGO, Amity was given "lead time" in practicing diaconal service and expanded the political space by offering opportunities for local church engagement in Christian social practice.

A unit for church-run projects was established within Amity to support churches in running small-scale projects such as clinics, kindergartens, and homes for the elderly. Christians were recruited by Amity to serve as volunteers in orphanages, introducing new ways of caring for abandoned children, and giving them hope and self-confidence. The concept of foster care was introduced, enabling orphans to experience being part of a family.⁵ Through Amity, there were a few provincial Christian councils that became involved with local governments in monitoring larger scale development projects such as drinking water systems, reservoirs, and biogas. In this context, Amity's pioneering work helped some local churches and councils gain the respect, appreciation, and, most important, the trust of local governments, reducing skepticism and suspicions of Christian organizations. In some places, working to provide access to drinking water or giving training in HIV–AIDS prevention brought Amity and churches closer to local Muslim communities. Such projects raised awareness among grassroots Christians of the need to work across religious boundaries.

9. Mainstreaming Diaconal Practice in China

This brings to the fore the question of how diaconal practice feeds back into churches to transform theological understanding and further mainstream diaconal practice. I have tried to indicate some of the transformative aspects of Amity's social practice and development

work above. The question still remains: how can this involve the participation of more churches in China? Amity's partnerships with a few provincial councils in the past were exceptions rather than the rule.

To enhance collaboration with more churches on diaconia, Amity Foundation launched the Amity Summer Academy on Diaconia in 2018 with Nanjing Jinling Union Theological Seminary (NJUTS) cohosting the training on seminary premises. The intensive two-week training course on the theological, biblical, and professional elements in the practice of Christian Social Service or diaconia had ambitious goals that included building diaconal teams for local churches, deepening the understanding of diaconia and promoting the expansion of diaconal involvement of the churches. It was also an attempt to institutionalize diaconal training in Amity Foundation itself and to encourage the inclusion of diaconal theology and training in the curriculum of seminaries in China.

Preceding the launch, Amity had held a consultation with church and seminary leaders from different regions of China who had completed graduate studies in diaconia at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong. Participants at the consultation stressed the utmost importance of tracing the biblical roots of diaconia for Chinese Christians, followed by the need to address the challenges of practice and adaptation of what they had learned.

Responding to their expressed needs, Amity's course on diaconia incorporated an excursion into the biblical roots of diaconia, their theological implications, and the various ways in which diaconia could be practiced in highly diverse contexts within China. The practical experience of Amity staff in development-related work was highly valuable and relevant, opening vistas on how to work with local governments, utilize the legal framework, and identify funding support from local sources. Interwoven into theological reflections was the history of diaconia in the ecumenical movement. Lectures and discussions on the relevance of the SDGs 2030 were introduced since they had become reference points for ecumenical involvement and cooperation in diaconia. Biblical reflections were introduced to explain the links to the SDGs 2030 and to generate further critical discourse on its potential and limits.

Amity's Summer Academy has been held twice, in 2018 and 2019, with the participation of local and provincial church leaders, seminary faculty, and leaders of FBOs. The international components were especially attractive to participants. At the first Summer Academy, a history and update of the ecumenical involvement in diaconia and its biblical roots were given.⁶ It was followed in the second year (2019), by an introduction to the UN SDGs 2030, with biblical reflections on each of its goals. In addition to the biblical and theological, participants were introduced to the WCC's efforts in responding to food security and water issues.⁷ Amity staff familiarized participants with the legal and structural requirements for implementing social services in China, registration and governance issues, and how to work with local authorities. Models of church-run projects in healthcare, the disability ministry, and working with the elderly were introduced. An interfaith component was introduced through exposure visits to Buddhist and Taoist temples engaged in elder care and environmental issues.

10. Impact of Amity's Summer Academy in Diaconia

Ecumenical resources on diaconia that were translated into Chinese were highly appreciated by participants and there was a call for more. In fact, NJUTS subsequently established an academic course offering for undergraduates on diaconia in 2019. Simultaneously, but independently, a course on diaconia was also introduced at the Jiangsu Provincial Seminary led by an Amity team.

Providing the biblical basis for diaconal practice in the church led to new perspectives and a deeper understanding of Christian ministry. The concept of the Diaconal Church that integrates worship, proclamation, and diaconia was introduced. Diaconia is now beginning to be understood as an integral component in the concept of "being church".

There was also a shift in the understanding of agency in diaconal practice. According to Kjell Nordstokke "It is a shift in the sense that instead of saying we and they, we tried to

realize that we are all vulnerable. We should care much more about each other and search for mutuality in vulnerable relationships than to say that you are always the helper and you are always the one to be helped. This also meant a shift from the institutional framework where the ‘professional deals with the patients’ to a more communitarian or congregational diaconia. We all share resources, experiences, and weaknesses, as we also try to assist each other”.⁸

As some provincial church leaders began inviting Amity to speak on diaconia to leaders and congregations in different provinces, diaconal training began to have a cascading effect. Despite the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amity was able to lead small teams of trainers in diaconia to provincial hubs. Participants have been highly inspired and local churches have begun to become more socially engaged with their local communities, culminating in the churches’ spontaneous donations for COVID-19 prevention in 2020.

Amity’s Summer Academy has become a channel for bringing the global to the local and vice-versa. The involvement of WCC-related theologians and staff in diaconia training brought the ecumenical movement closer to Chinese Christians at the grassroots. Amity continues to send participants to ongoing training on leadership and diaconia by partner churches overseas. Such training at the international level has brought Chinese Christians closer to Christians in other regions.

Interviews with those who have taken part in Amity’s Summer Academy indicate that the vision of diaconia has expanded and is no longer confined to the urgent needs of one’s own geographic region. They are now able to stand at a societal level, to analyze, to think, and to seek solutions concerning society’s sustainability. They can now envision the possibility of working in new areas of social service that would have interfaith aspects and that includes environmental protection.⁹

11. From Social Practice to Diaconal Theology

To a large extent, through Amity’s development work and social services over the last three decades, there has been an accumulation of valuable insights, perspectives, and practices that demonstrate the relevance of diaconia to sustainable development in the Chinese context. This, in turn, has helped transform theological perspectives on the links between church and society.

Bishop Ting, the founding father of Amity, was always concerned about distributive justice and sensitive to the situation and needs of the poor in China. For him, theology is not a neat set of dogmas or principles to be applied. A living theology required “engaging with our neighbors” and, in the process, reading and rereading the bible to better discern the Gospel message. His challenge to Chinese Christians, and for that matter, to all Christians, was the need to be engaged in this world rather than worry about being saved in the afterlife.

In a sermon preached at Riverside Church in New York in 1979, Bishop Ting had said: “In the gospels we often find comments on the compassion of Jesus for others. What we see is not pity, not just almsgiving or condescension, but identification with the weak and poor and hungry, with those deeply hurt by an unjust system, who as ‘non-persons’ are alienated, dehumanized and marginalized—in short, those who have been badly *sinned against*” (Whitehead 1989, pp. 72–73). Bishop Ting has emphasized that it is out of praxis, through identification with the weak and marginalized, that the substance for the contextualization of Chinese Christianity emerges. In the same sermon delivered in New York, he said, “It is when men and women who are sinned against become our concern that God can put in our mouths the word that witnesses to Christ, the savior of sinners” (Ibid).

Social engagement, or the practice of diaconia, provides the substance for theological construction. Our praxis transforms how we think about theology and about what “being church” means. I believe this constitutes the essence of “reconstructing theological thinking” that Bishop Ting had proposed for the Chinese church. The case of an evangelist who was transformed into a health worker illustrates this well. When invited to join Amity’s training of “village doctors” in the 1990s, she initially resisted the idea. As an evangelist, she felt

she would be giving up “God’s work” to do health work, which in her understanding was not God’s work. However, during our interview several years later, she confessed that after two years as a health worker, she now understood that this had been God’s plan for her. Healing people, whether Christians or non-Christians, was part of reconciliation in a broken world. Working with the poor and contributing to the healing process was an expression of God’s love for humankind. Being a health worker, she now understood, entails sharing the love of God and doing “God’s work”. Some scholars call this “grassroots” theology, but it is theological thinking, nonetheless, and such thinking does challenge the church to be faithful to the gospel message.

In the Chinese context, it can be said that diaconal practice comes first, transformation in its different dimensions, and theoretical and theological reflections come later. Good examples of how collaboration with Amity has succeeded in changing the mindsets of policymakers and implementors on development can be corroborated in interviews with Amity staff, village heads, and local party secretaries. These provide evidence of changing attitudes towards agency in social transformation. Rather than a top-down view of change, perspectives of local officials now include participatory development and a consultative people-centered approach.

There has also been evidence of changing perspectives and understanding among Chinese Christians toward diaconal practice. Increasingly, there has been a shift from regarding social service as a “secular” adjunct to mission work and a tool for evangelism to a deeper appreciation of diaconia as inherently integral to what it means to be Christian. As an expression of God’s love for all, social service is given unconditionally to all who need it regardless of their religious or nonreligious affiliations.

12. Challenges and Constraints on Transformative Diaconia in the Chinese Context

The challenges spawned by too rapid economic growth will not be easy for FBOs and NGOs to tackle alone unless there is more cooperation and coordination with different sectors of society. For instance, there have been Chinese media reports of increasing violence against women, children, and the vulnerable. Such antisocial behavior may be less publicly visible but is deadly in the suffering and dehumanization process it triggers. Building communities is a great challenge as extended family structures that provided social stability have been undermined as a result of mobility and rapid urbanization in the last few decades, leaving many of the elderly behind to suffer isolation, poverty, and discrimination. The increasing displacement caused by the impact of unremitting climate change on poorer communities, with diminishing access to water, stable livelihoods, and food security, is daunting in more remote locations. When Chinese Christians look around them, there is no lack of social dilemmas calling for their attention and response.

There are now more detailed studies by Chinese scholars showing the stages in legal reforms that have given more space for FBOs to operate, the different types of FBOs, their impact, and the social and political impediments to their more active participation in Christian social service.¹⁰

In what he describes as a two-tier structure of “state” and “citizens”, with no independent intermediary structure between the state and the people, Gao Jianguo foresees that the development of various social organizations, including religious organizations, trying to become intermediary forces, will be tightly restricted by the state (Gao 2021). State attitudes and policies are still highly influenced by a limited understanding of Christianity given its lingering image as a “foreign religion”.

Secondly, suspicions continue to exist at both the state level and among ordinary Chinese that Christianity tends to be narrowly focused on proselytism and that social service constitutes a tool for conversion. This is a highly sensitive and contentious issue in a multicultural and multireligious context such as China.

One fundamental block to Amity’s work with local churches has been the limited theological understanding of diaconia as an integral part of the Church’s mission. It was common for Chinese Christians to suspect humanitarian work as ‘secularization.’ In

churches where activities are narrowly focused on the “main mission to plant and grow churches”, working with local government was seen as going against the fundamental understanding of “church”. This constituted a key impediment to the understanding of Amity’s work in the decades between 1985 and 2008.

At the practical level, churches in China often do suffer from a lack of funding, personnel, and expertise. The rapid growth in church membership in the 1980s and 1990s took place primarily in the countryside where those who attended worship services had very little education. Poverty was still very sizeable and it was difficult for most churches to organize social services to serve the poor and marginalized. Today, the growth in church membership in urban areas has helped to mitigate this as more educated youth, professionals, and entrepreneurs are joining churches.

Clearly, the practice of *transformative* diaconia by church practitioners requires addressing the issue of service standards and professionalism. Chinese scholars have called for policymakers to formulate clearer regulations so as to encourage religious social service institutions (or FBOs) to improve in areas of governance and project management (Gao 2021). They propose more collaboration between professional social workers and FBOs in standardizing the latter’s organizational management and professionalization of services.

At the same time, in the context of the great religious diversity in China, interfaith dialogues and collaboration in social services are essential to ease whatever suspicions and tensions there might be among different religions. Such collaborations provide opportunities for mutual learning and mutual understanding.

The role of academe in transforming levels of religious tolerance towards Christians and policy changes cannot be underestimated. Transforming the perspectives of academics is a crucial element in the making of policy inputs in the long run. In all major universities in China today, there are departments of philosophy and religion that help raise levels of religious literacy among both believers and nonbelievers. FBOs working with the academe, research centers, and professionals help to expand public awareness and trust in Christian social practice, strengthening and deepening understanding of diaconia. The former Director of the Institute of World Religions, Xinping Zhuo, has produced wide-ranging works on the positive role of religions in China, both historically and in the contemporary era. Under his leadership, the institute cohosted twice with Amity groundbreaking international conferences on themes such as “Christianity and Modernization” in 1994 and “Religions, Values, Ethics and Development” in 2016.

13. Conclusions

In China, much attention has been paid to the issue of uneven or inequitable development. Despite having achieved a historic first in lifting close to 80% of its population out of extreme poverty in the last three decades, the Chinese government continues to seek to close the wealth gap that has widened rapidly. This had been exacerbated by the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the country resulting in more than 65% of China’s population living in cities in 2022. Villages in remote rural areas have experienced a “hollowing out” as the young and able bodied have sought better income and living standards in urban centers through massive rural–urban migration, leaving the elderly, disabled, and very young behind.

In such a rapidly changing context, this article has tried to highlight the following social and political elements that have empowered Amity to play a substantive role in advocating sustainable development relative to its size and identity as a faith-based NGO:

- (a) its ecumenical network of overseas partners that encouraged debate and engagement with values and goals related to sustainable development from its inception;
- (b) its openness to change, to experiment, and to partner at different levels with local government officials, scholars, and experts. In this sense, Amity engaged with government perspectives and policies on development, seizing opportunities to start innovative and trailblazing projects that contributed to social transformation by providing viable and relevant models of sustainable development;

- (c) its continuous engagement with churches in China at the local and provincial levels, including the establishment of a unit in Amity dedicated to working with churches in diaconia, has contributed to its ability to harness the strengths of local churches in pushing sustainable developmental projects in environmental protection, preventive health care, disaster relief work, and the disability ministry;
- (d) its strategic foresight in partnering and drawing together multiple sectors of Chinese society in working for sustainable development, including religions, the academe, government, business, and nonprofits.

Amity's approach to development work has strongly supported important and pioneering efforts to address the question of how religion can promote sustainable development and why Amity has succeeded in certain aspects despite political, social, and professional obstacles. As pointed out by Caroline Fielder, based on her extensive field research in China in the first decade of the 21st century, the emergence of Chinese FBOs in both rural and urban settings has given them the opportunity to become "mediating institutions" between individuals, communities, and the state (Fielder 2014).

This study is a highly limited attempt to demonstrate how social change takes place in China through the collaboration between FBOs and local government officials. Given that the legal, social, and political framework in China tends to be more controlled and constraining compared to those in developed countries, social practitioners concerned about social change tend to "grab the space" and the opportunities to "push the envelope". All these are construed as contributing to China's reform and openness.

This is in marked contrast to the actions and behavior of NGOs in more "liberal" settings where the tendency is to resort to critical and confrontational approaches towards government and policymakers at the levels of policy formulation and implementation. In the Chinese context, where the democratic space is constantly undergoing pendulum swings of openness and constriction, and where local government interpretations of national laws can vary considerably from region to region, Chinese FBOs tend to "do more and speak less", relying on the development of participatory models to empower local groups and communities.

It should be stressed that social change in China is approached in an incremental fashion and has typically been achieved through the promotion of viable, replicable "models" that are then employed on a much larger scale. Rather than debate and confrontation with the state, practical evidence presented by viable models are often more efficacious in effecting change. Change is thus pursued through a project implementation process that includes negotiating with local authorities, the use of "modelling" and shaping of narratives that put substance and local context into state-articulated policies.

According to Heilmann (2008), economic, social, and political changes in China have generally been implemented based on a *decentralized model of experimentation encouraged by the state*. (Italics mine) This policy process in which the central policymakers encourage local officials to experiment with models of problem solving and feed them back into national policy formation has been a prominent and unique feature of China's economic transformation. It has decisively shaped the making of policies in domains as diverse as rural decollectivization, foreign economic opening, promotion of the private sector, state-sector restructuring, and stock market deregulation (Heilmann 2008).

In the social domain, this model or approach has been adopted by the Amity Foundation and it seems to have worked quite effectively in both rural and urban contexts. In a UN study, the importance and necessity of "changing official mindsets" has been emphasized in the process of implementing the SDGs 2030 (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Public Institutions and Digital Government 2021). This study has tried to show that successful models were presented by Amity in project areas such as afforestation, renewable energy, gender equality, HIV-AIDS education, and work with the disabled. Many of these projects had brought about a "change of mindsets" among local leaders and officials and led to the adoption of viable models on a much larger scale, eventually influencing policies.

Throughout its almost-40 years of practice, Amity has continued to be innovative and pioneering, providing inspiration and replicable models for social transformation. Engaging in transformative diaconia, its increasing attention to advocacy is a logical extension of its earlier work which had already incorporated values of sustainable development that inspired a more caring approach to nature and Creation, and which focused on participative, people-centered development rather than a trickle-down approach to social and economic change.

In Amity's advocacy of participatory development, recognizing the agency of farmers, women, and marginalized social groups in determining priorities and outcomes was a new concept and its acceptance by local officials and partners has been transformative in local communities where it has worked. The insistence on democratic governance, including the equal participation and leadership of women in community-wide projects, led to visible changes in communities such as the election of women as village heads.¹¹ Amity's projects have led to the empowerment of women, those living with disabilities, and the elderly.

Today, climate change mitigation is urgent and essential; thus, it is important for Chinese Christians to participate in the search for viable solutions for the country and for the rest of the world. This is why engagement with the SDGs 2030 by Chinese Christians can be seen as a moral and theological imperative. To this end, Amity's experience in advocacy and sustainable development work has become a valuable asset for the Chinese church.

Carlos Ham has written about the empowering diaconia model in his description of the work of the WCC:

From the perspective of our Judaeo-Christian tradition, empowerment takes place in mutuality, in partnership, in a spirit of power-sharing, a process of reaching out to the other with the love of the triune God and is, therefore, intrinsically linked with diakonia. Nowadays, many local churches are being empowered for diaconal work as a result of their ecclesial condition and of being urged on by the needs of the people. Empowerment and diakonia are integral parts of being a missional church; people are emerging self-empowered for action, becoming subjects of their own destiny, and beyond being simply objects of aid and charity. (Ham 2014, p. 111)

He goes on to explain the five dimensions of empowering diaconia, one of which is the *transformative* dimension referring to "a diakonia that will be effective through concrete prophetic actions towards social transformation and justice" (Ham 2014).

For practitioners of diaconia, Bp. Ting has warned against pity and condescension. In his understanding, working with the marginalized, exploited, and oppressed requires identifying with them. Charity is not what is needed but the transformation of a system that is unjust. Transformative diaconia is a long-term commitment and goal for FBOs and churches to work towards. To this end, there must be continuous training and capacity building given that diaconia has to be practiced contextually and in response to changing conditions.

Based on its success in the previous decades, the Amity Foundation has much to offer in the capacity building of more FBOs in China not only in the domain of social service but also in linking diaconal practice to theological rethinking and reconstruction in China.

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Notes

- ¹ Papers delivered at the 2016 conference in Nanjing have been compiled in the volume (Zhuo et al. 2018)
- ² According to Elizabeth Ferris, faith-based organizations are characterized by having one or more of the following: affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious beliefs or affiliation and/or decision-making processes based on religious values (Ferris 2005).
- ³ This goal of eliminating poverty and inequality was eventually articulated in SDG 1 which aims to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. Its objectives include ensuring that the entire population, and especially the poorest and most vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, access to basic services, property and land control, natural resources, and new technologies.
- ⁴ SDG 5 on gender equality advocates the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. In Amity's projects, the concept of equality for all women and girls has cut across most of its projects.
- ⁵ The term Amity Grandmas was used to describe Christian volunteers who offered time and extraordinary care to toddlers in government-run orphanages, transforming both the children and the staff.
- ⁶ The keynote lectures and biblical studies were given by Kjell Nordstokke from the VID Specialized University in Norway.
- ⁷ Manoj Kurian from the WCC explained the engagement of the ecumenical network in food-security issues.
- ⁸ Based on an interview by Martin Lachmann with Kjell Nordstokke in Nanjing, September 2019.
- ⁹ Based on the internal Amity Project Report on "Amity Summer Academy in Diaconia 2019".
- ¹⁰ See for instance the article by Gao (2021).
- ¹¹ This was amply demonstrated in the postdisaster rehabilitation project in Woyun Village, Mianzhu, Sichuan in 2008 when Amity had insisted on the formation of the Woyun Village Rebuilding Committee with 50% of its membership allocated to women based on village-wide elections. (Based on an evaluation report on the Woyun Village Reconstruction Project submitted to Bread for the World by Theresa Carino in 2009).

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