

Saintly Chinese foster families care for special-needs children

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Buckner
President
Ken Hall
visits with
Zuo Yan
Qing,
director of
the
orphanage
in Urumqi,
China, and
interpreter
Peng Jie.
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(Photos by
Scott
Collins)

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By Marv Knox

Editor

URUMQI, China—"What do you think?" someone asked as a group of Buckner Orphan Care International volunteers filed out of a foster-care family's apartment building.

"Saints," Elvin Smith of Rockwall replied.

His answer was terse, yet sufficient.

The rest of the volunteers understood exactly what he meant shortly after they climbed four flights of narrow stairs. They entered a cramped apartment-maybe 800 square feet, concrete floors, four rooms-crammed with love.

And they met a foster family who labor tirelessly to provide physical and emotional comfort to three tiny special-needs children.



Healthy Chinese orphans such as this baby in the Beijing city orphanage, are prime candidates for adoption.

The foster mother remains with the children—a 15-day-old baby with spina bifida and two older boys with Down syndrome, all of them abandoned by their birth families—almost around the clock. Her teenage daughter works nights in a local café so she can stay home during the day to help her mother, until the father/husband arrives home from work and the son gets home from school.

Wang Jian Hong, director of the Changji Social Welfare Institute, in Xinjiang Province on the far western edge of China, chose this family specifically for this task.

They previously provided foster care for five children—one who was adopted by a Chinese family and four who were adopted internationally.

This family stands out in the number of children under their care, but not their commitment.

Buckner's interest in orphanages—and particularly foster care—in China is fueled by a passion for children and a desire to give them tender care, explained Jeff Jones, operations director for Buckner Orphan Care International.

The theory behind foster care is simple: Children need the loving touch of families, Jones said. "We want all children in families."

Buckner's experience through generations verifies that children in family homes tend to develop better socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually than do children in institutional settings, he added.

In China, as in the United States, recruitment of foster families is a priority—and a challenge, explained Guo Chang Zheng, director of the Shihezi Social Welfare Institute, also in Xinjiang Province.

Finding families who are willing to bring special-needs children into their

homes is one thing. Finding families who can afford it is still another.

The Chinese government pays each foster family only 400 yuan-about \$50-per month per child.

At that rate, the foster families, especially families who care for disabled children, actually subsidize the program. The financial demands upon foster families include feeding and clothing the children, but also providing transportation to therapy and doctor visits, plus all the incidental expenses of raising youngsters.

Orphanages are careful about who they allow to become foster parents, said Zuo Yan Qing, vice director of the civil affairs bureau in Urumqi, the political and commercial hub of Xinjiang, and longtime director of the orphanage in Urumqi, the province's capital city.

Couples must meet stringent requirements regarding education, character, health and stability before they can even be considered for assignment, Zuo explained. To stay active, they also receive training weekly, sometimes daily.

Zuo described recruitment of foster families as difficult. The orphanage advertises for volunteer families through local media, but most learn about the program as information regarding needs spreads from family to family, she said.

Even though the task is daunting-92 percent of children under the Urumqi orphanage's care have special needs-the response has been more than sufficient, Zuo reported. The orphanage has placed 260 children in foster homes, but it still has a waiting list of couples who want to be foster parents.

The growth of foster care in China is most encouraging, Buckner President Ken Hall said. Buckner has promoted foster care around the globe and has

written foster-care protocols and procedures for some countries.

Now, foster care is widespread in China, Jones added. "Every place I've been, there are more children in foster care than in orphanages."

And although he can't prove it, Hall has a strong hunch Christian families are stepping up to provide a significant portion of foster care, both in Xinjiang and across China.

After all, if Jesus urged his followers to care for "the least of these" in society, who could be more "least" than a handicapped, abandoned child in a country whose population growth devalues children?

The faith motivation for foster families won't be known soon, for at least a couple of reasons. Years of communist oppression have made many Christians wary of publicly expressing their religious belief. And, perhaps as significantly, centuries of Chinese reserve and respect for others teach all people to keep their opinions to themselves.

Still, subtle signals support Hall's theory.

He received implicit confirmation of his hunch during Buckner Orphan Care International's recent mission trip to China. At one orphanage, a foster father pulled Hall aside, patted his hand over his heart and said just one word: "Jesus."

Also, Xinjiang is known for its strong and active Muslim population and its Buddhist influences. But Buckner volunteers who visited foster homes did not see a single indication of Islamic or Buddhist influence in those private spaces, where religious symbols of Islam and Buddhism often abound, he said.

So, many of the foster families across China may be exactly who Smith said they are-saints.

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