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Vietnamese nuns give the disabled a chance to live better

Joachim Pham | Dec. 6, 2013
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Mary Le Minh Thuy Khuyen gently massages the legs of a woman, attentively listening to her health, family and business problems and giving her useful advice.

"I earn 4-5 million dong ($190-$235) monthly. I use the money to cover medical treatment when my parents get ill, repair their houses and help my siblings," said Khuyen, who is blind from birth.

The 30-year-old is among 20 visually impaired people working at a 15-bed massage parlor run by Lovers of the Holy Cross sisters near their motherhouse on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City. On a daily average, they give 60 customers massages that cost 60,000 to 80,000 dong each.

The workers obtain massage certificates by a local college of medicine. They are also given free food, accommodation and education and are treated with care by the nuns.

"We no longer live alone and had a complex about our physical disabilities, but are proud to bring joy and good health service to other people," Khuyen said.

"We are deeply grateful to the nuns who provide us with opportunities to live a normal life like others and integrate into society in a self-confident manner," said Khuyen, who has five siblings. Two of her siblings also suffer visual impairments and are supported by nuns. They are from the southernmost An Giang province.

Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Anne Nguyen Thi Hoa, who runs a center for the visually impaired in Ho Chi Minh City, said her indigenous congregation provides free food, accommodation and education for some 300 people with visual impairments ages 5 to 30 at its eight centers throughout the country.

Most of the visually impaired people are from poor families who live in rural and remote areas. Many are orphans.

The nuns are moved to serve the many people with visual impairments that have no access to education and vocational skills and are considered burdens to their families and society.

"We give them good opportunities to enter higher education so that they can develop their natural abilities and stand on their own two feet," Hoa said.

Hoa, 59, said visually impaired children are sent to study at state-run schools for those with sight. Nuns teach them Braille, computer skills and how to play musical instruments.

She said 14 visually impaired students from her center are studying English, mathematics, special education, psychology and pedagogy at local universities or colleges.

They have to overcome more practical difficulties than other students when there are no learning aids for

students with impaired vision. They still suffer the social stigma attached to those with physical disabilities.

"We have to patiently encourage our students to pursue their studies with determination. Next year some students graduate from universities and they will work at our centers," Hoa said.

Visually impaired children also make artificial flowers, rosary beads and key holders that are sold to tourists or at Christmas galas.

They are from various faiths -- Christianity, Buddhism and indigenous Buddhist sects of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai -- and they attend Mass and prayers together.

"We are a real family, although we are from different areas and faiths," said Maria Le Thi Anh Xuan, who entered the center in 2009.

Xuan, 22, teaches others at the center how to produce handmade items.

"My life changed and I am happy to work with the nuns and visually impaired people," she said. "It is high time for me to help give opportunities for other people with physical disabilities to promote their life."

Hoa said the nuns provide nursery education for children and use part of their income to cover the costs of the centers.

Lovers of the Holy Cross Congregation, based in the Thu Duc district, has 346 members working with poor people and doing missionary work in six dioceses in the country.

Vietnam records 7 million people with physical disabilities among its total population of 90 million. Only 3 percent of them are given vocational skills and have regular jobs.

The International Labor Organization reports the rate of unemployment among people with physical disabilities is 30 percent, higher than other groups in Vietnam. Few people have access to the government's financial support programs. Only 0.4 percent out of 1.5 million people who are given vocational skills in the country each year are those with physical disabilities.

ILO estimated that Vietnam loses about 3 percent of its gross domestic product as the result of the exclusion of people with physical disabilities from the labor market.

Vo Thi Hoang Yen, director of the Disability Research and Capacity Development, said most programs and centers for people with physical disabilities still use charity models in which givers are seen as superiors while recipients are lower in rank and wait for support from others. This model limits the abilities of people with physical disabilities.

"We have to change their views, help them discover their abilities and give them services, not gifts, to stand on their own feet," Yen said.

[Joachim Pham is an *NCR* correspondent based in Vietnam.]

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