

## Tzu Chi Holds Volunteer Leadership Conference in South Africa

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
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In September 2013, Tzu Chi held a volunteer leadership conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, to spread the foundation's philosophy and recruit new members in a continent in desperate need. In Africa, millions face wars, conflict and hunger and a huge disparity in wealth. The poor and hungry need help – so the mission of Tzu Chi to find more volunteers and satisfy their needs is increasingly urgent.

The event, the South Africa Local Volunteer Leadership Conference, was held in Johannesburg on Sept 21-23, 2013. It was the first time that South Africa Tzu Chi office in Bedfordview hosted a meeting of this size. The classrooms in the building could only accommodate 50 people -- not enough space for 200 volunteers. Through their teamwork, creativity and persistence, the volunteers of the office overcame all obstacles of transport, lodging, rest and sleeping arrangements. They used tents to accommodate the additional visitors.

Usually, for a conference of 100 or more attendees, tents of six by twelve meters are used. This time, however, the office rented white 46 x 15 meters. Under the blue sky and on the green earth, this African-style lecture hall stood proudly, its white purity a symbol of the hearts and mission of the Tzu Chi volunteers who serve unconditionally all over Africa.

That settled the question of the lecture hall but the issue of lodging issue was still to be resolved. The existing dormitories could not accommodate nearly 150 visitors. So the volunteers did their best to maximize the capacity of the existing space by using blankets for bed space, to ensure that the visitors could have a comfortable night's sleep.



They had to solve the lack of washing and cleaning facilities by renting portable toilets and showers. But the portable showers did not come with a supply of water, so the volunteers had to use original methods to obtain hot water; they built water buckets and brought warm water boiled on wood stoves into the showers. The available faucets in the building could not accommodate all the needs to wash hands and dishes, so male volunteers had to build water towers by stacking two metal buckets, bringing water to the top one with rubber tubes and adding a faucet at the bottom.

In order to organize this event and provide a comfortable environment for all local volunteers, the Asian volunteers started their preparations and began to clean the conference facility a month in advance. They took care of all the food and lodging during the event, with the hope that all the local volunteers were well-fed and well rested and would attend the conference with joy.

The temperature was about 20 degrees before the event. During the three days it took place,

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the average temperature dropped to only about 10 degrees because of a cold current. Despite the miserable weather, the local volunteers continued their study in the tent covered with blankets. At the same time, the Asian volunteers worked together to support them and make them feel at home. The male volunteers took care of everything from arranging the site, the transport and the follow-up, to provide the best service. Outside the tents, the cooking team was busy preparing food and desserts day and night.

### Sharing moved volunteers from four countries

It was truly a wonderful opportunity for all the volunteers to come and study together. Apart from the volunteers from South Africa, there were members from three other countries in Africa -- Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Lesotho. They arrived despite the long distances. It took about 18 hours to travel the nearly 1,200 miles from Zimbabwe to Johannesburg, provided that everything went smoothly during the crossing of the border. Once they arrived at the conference site, they spontaneously joined the cleaning of the area. They did this with great joy despite the fatigue from the long trip; they were delighted to meet everybody.



The volunteers from Mozambique also traveled about 12 hours; but the 600-mile distance could not dim their enthusiasm to learn the Dharma. One of them was a volunteer who rarely takes the bus and suffers from carsickness every time she does because of her physical condition. However, she was very clear that she should treasure this opportunity and attend this conference, although she knew that she would feel unwell in the bus.

The conference was held in three languages – English, Zulu and Shona -- to make sure that everyone could comprehend and absorb the courses. Young people full of compassion played a very important role in translating all the courses on site. They had no problem, whether it was from English to Zulu or Zulu to English. This helped the local volunteers who could not understand English and the Asian volunteers who could not understand Zulu. With the help of the volunteers who could understand English, those from Mozambique used the translation tools to render the content into Shona. This ensured that nobody missed anything due to the problem of language.

Cherishing the time to know and share with each other, many volunteers were deeply touched on the very first day. Among them, one story shared by volunteer Buthelezi from Newcastle was very sad. A lady had been abused by her husband, who poured hot water all over the body. Naked, she ran to the hospital in the hope of being saved. But, because this happened at midnight and she had bruises on her body, the guard of the hospital thought she was a ghost and refused to let her in. Fortunately, one nurse approached her with compassion and immediately took her into the emergency room.

Due to the physical and mental trauma, the woman displayed signs of psychological abnormality. After about a month of treatment and recuperation, she could finally go home.

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After the burning, she left her house in a hurry to save herself; now that she was allowed to check out of the hospital, she was naturally eager to see her three young children. After she returned, however, what awaited her were ashes of what used to be her house. She learned that, during her stay in hospital, one of the children touched an outlet while playing with a nail, inadvertently causing the fire that burned down the house. They had no way to escape and lost their lives to the flames.

Her children had passed away, her house was burnt down and her husband had vanished after the violence. She had suddenly lost everything and could not even afford to pay for the children's funeral. The loss of her loved ones made her lose her will to live. Fortunately, Tzu Chi volunteers gave her care and companionship immediately after learning what happened. They not only raised money for the funeral, but also helped to rebuild the house. Up to this day, the volunteers make house visits, hoping that she can soon leave behind her sadness and grief.



On a happier note, Johannesburg volunteer Lyndipa shared her life-changing experience -- from being cared for to taking care of others as a Tzu Chi volunteer. Many volunteers at the conference were touched by her story and shed tears of compassion.

Due to a chronic condition of not being able to stand up or move about, Lyndipa used to stay at home and rarely went out. Before she was introduced to Tzu Chi, she never thought she had the ability to help others. Even when Tzu Chi volunteers invited her to a rehabilitation room, she was still skeptical about the possibility of her standing up again. But, after a year of hard work, she went from not being able to stand up to being able to walk 500 meters while pushing the wheelchair. She realized that one cannot underestimate oneself. With perseverance, anything is possible. Now, in addition to continued rehabilitation and encouraging new entrants to do rehabilitation, she also takes opportunities to be a volunteer by giving massages to those who need to be taken care of. She vows to work for Tzu Chi as long as she can move. Her resolve deeply touched the hearts of the volunteers at the conference.

### **Sharing medical knowledge**

In planning the conference, the organizers found that many local volunteers were working with care recipients with tuberculosis, meningitis and cerebral strokes. Therefore, they arranged a series of classes related to medical care, including how a visiting volunteer should share his or her experiences, rehabilitation in the field and other medical knowledge.

A Tzu Ching alumnus Xiao Ya-xue is a physical therapist in South Africa. She drove 300 kilometers to attend the conference. In her course, she not only shared practical medical knowledge but also taught basic physical therapy exercises to help the volunteers look after the care recipients. All the volunteers found it very useful and learned it with joy. Doctor Chen Min-xian from South Africa was also invited to talk about the common symptoms he observed during his rural area visits -- such as tuberculosis, polio and cerebral -- and how to prevent such

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infections and care for these diseases.



Volunteer Molia from Zimbabwe really appreciated the medical classes arranged by the conference team. This was because the branch in Zimbabwe started physical therapy for care recipients in June last year; they were serving more than 200 patients. In only three months, they found many who needed help with physical therapy. Molia said that, because the volunteers had never received medical training, they only knew that massages help to relieve the pain. She has learnt a lot from the classes. She believes that her fellow volunteers who came to the conference would benefit greatly from the medical training and apply it to great use in Zimbabwe.

Volunteer Nampho from Lesotho told her fellow volunteers that she had been in touch with many tuberculosis patients and was not sure how to help relieve the discomfort of this disease. She increased her understanding of this disease and learned useful tips on how to relieve the pain. She said she would bring the knowledge back to her community and share it with the villagers to benefit everyone.

Apart from the medical courses, because of a lack of documentation volunteers in South Africa, there are few records of the foundation's work. To preserve these inspiring and moving stories and record events, the media team at the conference took the chance to train the local documentation volunteers. Through the sharing of experiences and mentoring, they shared the mission and goals of documenting the culture of Tzu Chi's humanism. So they invited the South African documentation volunteers to help document all the small group discussions to make a more complete record and ensure that the touching stories were not lost due to the language barrier.

### **Vowing to Spread the Dharma Across Borders**

The South Africa Multinational Volunteer Committee which started this year shared the challenges they face in their work of spreading the dharma across borders. Whatever the difficulties, the volunteers are determined to keep their promise to Master Cheng Yen, to shoulder the mission of spreading the dharma, on behalf of Master, in the land of Africa, and send love to all who are suffering.

This cross-boundary love has started to sprout and grow in Swaziland and Mozambique. Victoria, who used to be a care recipient and is now a volunteer, said that she appreciated the volunteers' love and care that helped her recover from a past life of sorrow. When she was abandoned by her husband and gravely ill in bed, she watched her children live off trash on the streets. She had lost hope. Fortunately, with the love of her second husband and the Tzu Chi volunteers, she has rediscovered the confidence to live. Now each day that she is not volunteering is a waste of a day.

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