Voices of Sisters
Ministry



A village in the parish of Fang, in the Chiang Mai Diocese in Thailand, where the Presentation Sisters' mission community operates. The parish includes 21 villages, and the sisters work with all of them through their mission center. (Courtesy of Frances Hayes)



Sr. Frances Hayes

Contributor

View Author Profile

Jancy Selvaraj

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

September 22, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Inspired by the command of Jesus, "Go out to the whole world" (Mark 16:15) and a similar exhortation of our foundress, Nano Nagle, some Presentation Sisters are missioned in the northern part of Thailand, bordering Myanmar and Laos. Our community in Thailand — made up of Indian, Pakistani and Filipina Sisters — is part of our Philippines unit.

So on behalf of the Thai mission community in the parish of Fang, in the Chiang Mai Diocese, Sister Jancy greets you all in the Thai language: "Sawadee kha!"

Our parish includes 21 villages, and we work with all of them through our mission center; we conduct regular visits and awareness programs in six villages. We are connected to about 630 families and 450 children.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, tribal people have been slowly migrating from Myanmar into northern Thailand, and remain concentrated mainly in the border areas between Myanmar and Thailand. The Thai government recognizes six tribal groups. We, the Presentation Sisters, are working with three of the groups: the Lahu, Akha and Thai Yai (the Shan migrant workers).

From 1999 to 2019, we worked in collaboration with the PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) Italian Missionary priests and brothers, and now we work with the Priests of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of the Betharram community. Our ministries include visitation, health care, religious instruction, programs on drug prevention and human trafficking, and enabling the people to gain Thai citizenship and access their rights. Of course, we work with other religious congregations, network with diocesan commissions, and cooperate with Buddhist neighbors for celebrations and interfaith dialogue.

Advertisement

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 3, 4, 5 and 13 are our focus, to empower the people to bring about the changes we hope for in the health, education and gender equality of these people. We depend on the Thai government programs for assistance offered to those with disabilities. In a survey conducted throughout the parish villages we located 18 young people eligible for government aid. We also obtained access to a program making powdered milk available to babies whose mothers are unable to nurse them.

Information on the government program for the identification, prevention and eradication of COVID-19 has been available throughout the parish. We follow the protocols and rules which were announced by the Thai government and the church, conducted awareness programs, and distributed masks and sanitizing lotion for the people.



A group gives a report during a human trafficking seminar. Presentation Sisters in Thailand work with Good Shepherd Sisters to raise awareness about human trafficking among young people, who share the information with their village communities. (Courtesy of Frances Hayes)

In collaboration with the Good Shepherd Sisters, 30 young people participated in workshops designed to inform the participants — and then their village communities — about the problems associated with human trafficking. This also entailed a visit to "red-light areas" of Bangkok and the rehabilitation center operated by the sisters at Pattaya. This new sense of awareness of the issues has created a greater strength of unity and determination to prevent the young people from being lured to the "big cities." The participants have also taken on a more active leadership role within their village community.

We especially focus on the rights and opportunities for women and children, and equitable education for the children, providing board/lodging and transport for children so they can attend the mainstream school, and encouraging them to go on to vocational training or university studies.

Related: Good Shepherd Sisters empower women to escape Thailand's sex tourism trade

Since all schooling is done in the Thai language, it is essential that the hill tribe children learn this very early, although it may be their second or third language. The sisters provide Thai and English lessons for the children at the Epiphany Catholic Centre run by the Betharram priests, as well as providing extension activities in sports, music and recreation. Keeping their own ethnic customs alive is done through community sharing of skills in dancing, handwork, singing and cultural celebrations. The children are encouraged to dress in their ethnic clothes for the Sunday liturgy and keep alive the customs and traditions of their people.

Life for the sisters is certainly very full and in one sense, the restrictions due to the COVID-19 lockdowns have granted a slight reprieve from their busyness; this has given them extra time to do researching and planning for the future development of the people they serve.

Two of the sisters in the local community went on home visits during the pandemic and were unable to return at that time because of lockdowns. I, Sister Jancy Selvaraj, was one of the two sisters left. I developed and offered a PowerPoint presentation on the Thai missions, via a Zoom meeting for the justice contacts and other interested sisters of the International Presentation Association.

I, Frances, am another Presentation Sister eagerly awaiting her return to Thailand! As a member of the West Australian Congregation, I ministered for five years in Thailand and am now waiting for the easing of travel restriction to be able to return. Then I will work as a missionary with Palms Australia, (an organization that facilitates Australian volunteer work) mentoring Thai teachers in their English lessons for the Thai and Karen students at the Thai/Myanmar northwest border.

We continue to rediscover the dynamism of Nano Nagle's charism, unfolding for tribal migrants in northern Thailand so that they will have a future full of hope.

[Frances Hayes is a Presentation Sister living in Samson, Western Australia. With an academic background in education and history, she moved from primary education to religious education to administration in Australia, and later became the English writer at the Apostolic Nunciature in Bangkok from 1995 to 2000. She then returned to Australia to minister as a support worker in aged care, a volunteer teaching assistant with refugee women and children, and a volunteer in an organization that builds connections with homeless and vulnerable people.]

[Jancy Selvaraj is a Presentation Sister who is part of the mission community in the parish of Fang, in the Chiang Mai Diocese in Thailand.]