Voices of Sisters
Ministry



A dry flat area in Western Australia (Frances Hayes)



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I love to recall these lines from Dorothea Mackellar, which I memorized as a student:

> I love a sunburnt country,
>
> A land of sweeping plains,
>
> Of ragged mountain ranges,
>
> Of drought and flooding rains.

And they assure me that Australia will always be my home. But a chance sighting on the Palms Australia website — looking for volunteers to work overseas to share their skills and develop the capacity of local partners — resulted in the opportunity for me to temporarily call another place home. This next phase of my journey will take me to St Joseph's School, Mae Ramat, not far from the Thai-Myanmar border where I will volunteer in the teaching of English.

I was also inspired by the charism of our foundress Nano Nagle, who believed, "If I could be of service in saving souls in any part of the globe, I would do all in my power." I saw it as a way of giving back to the Thai people, whom I love dearly, and also sharing the skills I have developed in my many years of teaching with the Catholic educational system in Western Australia.

Nearly 30 years ago, I went there for a cultural experience, walking the slums of Klong Toey and teaching at Daruna, Ratchaburi. An invitation from the then apostolic nuncio, Archbishop Luigi Bressan, to assist him with his written English materials, allowed me to extend my visit to five years.

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Back in Australia I spent the next 20 years working as a caregiver for the elderly and housebound, teaching English to migrant and refugee women, and helping as a teacher assistant at a school for children from non-English-speaking backgrounds. I remained in contact with the many friends I had made — and many continued to ask me, "When are you coming back?" An opportunity in 2020 to obtain a diploma in

teaching English as a foreign language in Bangkok allowed me to seek out potential opportunities.

The extended delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic put my return on hold, so I watched patiently. Deaths from aging, and illnesses — including those holding leadership positions within my congregation — encouraged discernment and discussion about the timing of my decision.



Mountains between Thailand and Myanmar, formerly Burma (Frances Hayes)

Other factors that affected my desire to return to Thailand now were the inevitable changes facing many religious congregations: declining membership, an aging profile, and the fact that a significant number of religious congregations are investigating new ways of forming ongoing partnerships in their current ministries. They are discerning how to enable their mission and charism legacies to continue into the future.

In most instances, the congregations' financial administration, property management and health care of their members are already being carried out by professional people employed by the individual religious congregation. In Australia, as there are less than 200 sisters in the six Congregations of the Presentation Sisters, a new form of canonical governance and congregation leadership is being discerned. Some of these Presentation congregations are looking at holding (or have already held) their final chapter as a self-determining congregation.

Living away from other members of my congregation has required a lot of prayer and reflection. The support of the leadership team and my congregation during my discernment has encouraged me to think that now is the right time. Their prayerful and physical support has been the most important factor in my decision.

Having celebrated my golden jubilee three years ago, I am among the younger members of the congregation. I will be unable to participate in what may be our final congregational chapter, and since I will be away for all the preparatory gatherings have asked not to be nominated for any leadership position.

With the deaths of eight sisters in the last two years I am aware further deaths will inevitably occur in my absence. Some long-term friends and teachers may not be present when I return. Changes undoubtedly will have occurred. But listening to the voice of God in prayer has made me even more positive that I am doing the right thing in being of service to the Thai people — as has my love for them and the inspiration of Nano Nagle. It is, I pray, an opportunity of doing not only what God wants but also what I want.