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Ministry



Medical Mission Sr. Eliza Kuppozhackel, who founded Ayushya Centre for Healing and Integration, explains various medicinal plants in her herbal garden. (Thomas Scaria)



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The century-old Medical Mission Sisters, a congregation that has provided health care services in several countries, now promotes alternative therapies in India after leaving their multispecialty hospitals.

"In the past few decades, we have handed over most of our hospitals to local dioceses or other women's congregations as part of the shift in our focus," Sr. Lilly Joseph, head of the South India province, told Global Sisters Report on Sept. 29.

Sr. Eliza Kuppozhackel, a senior member, said a paradigm shift in their health focus happened after the congregation underwent a "soul-searching exercise" in the 1980s. They analyzed their mission in the sociopolitical context emerging from the Second Vatican Council and questioned the relevance of institution-based health missions.

The members redefined their mission as a "holistic healing mission" and developed new ministries at the grassroots, addressing environmental, empowerment and justice issues, Kuppozhackel told GSR.

She said the congregation had given its members the freedom to choose their ministry.

Joseph said most of the congregation's 200 members in three Indian provinces are doctors, nurses, psychologists or other health professionals.

They chose "healing in the heart of the wounded world" as the theme for their centenary year, which opened on Sept. 28 at the Anna Dengel House in Ithithanam near Changanacherry in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.



Changanacherry Archbishop-designate Thomas Tharayil of the Eastern Catholic Syro-Malabar Church lights a candle with Sr. Lilly Joseph, provincial, to mark the inauguration of the centenary celebrations of the Medical Mission Sisters on Sept. 28, 2024, in Changanacherry, Kerala, southwestern India. (Courtesy of Sr. Lilly Joseph)

"We acknowledge that the world is wounded not only with ill health but also with war, climate change, exploitation of women and children, and several other realities," Joseph explained.

She said their congregation first started to fill a need in health care service a century ago.

The congregation was started in 1925 in Washington, D.C., by Anna Dengel, a laywoman doctor from Austria. She came to the U.S. a year earlier from Rawalpindi, now in Pakistan, and then in the undivided India, where she saw many Muslim women and babies dying because they were denied gynecological services by male

doctors.

Joseph said Dengel envisioned a religious community of women health professionals dedicated to God and caring for needy women. In the U.S., she raised funds and started the congregation with three other like-minded female doctors.

Joseph said they were forced to change their focus as the health field has become a "business, controlled by drug mafias and corporate houses."

Business houses and corporate firms have opened multispecialty hospitals and diagnostic centers everywhere, competing with each other and "literally exploiting the poor," the 68-year-old nun explained.

Kuppozhackel said they did not want to compete with others, "so we did not upgrade our hospitals as super specialty facilities."

In response, the 80-year-old nun founded Ayushya Centre for Healing and Integration, an alternative healing center at Changanacherry in Kerala. "I promote integrative healing and alternative therapies as my mission and have trained hundreds of students in alternative medicines," she told GSR.



Medical Mission Sr. Eliza Kuppozhackel, the founder of Ayushya Centre for Healing and Integration, poses outside the center at Changanacherry in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, which was once the congregation's novitiate. (Thomas Scaria)

Sr. Joan Chunkapura, another senior nun, said their founder started health care services to help those denied them. "It was the need of the time, but now the scenario has changed," she told GSR at Immaculate Heart of Mary Hospital, the only hospital they manage in Bharananganam, Kerala, as it still serves poor villagers.

Most of their hospitals were named "Holy Family," and over the years, they transferred their institution in Mumbai, western India, to the Ursulines of Mary Immaculate; the one in the national capital to the Archdiocese of Delhi; the Holy Family Hospital in Patna, the capital of the eastern Indian state of Bihar, to the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth; and another one in Koderma to the Franciscan Clarist Congregation.

They handed their hospital at Mandar in Jharkhand to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India to start its medical college for tribal people.

In Kerala, the nuns donated their hospitals to local dioceses. "Most of these hospitals were built during 1940s-50s, and we have handed them over [for] free, even with our bank balances," Chunkapura told GSR.

She said the "giving away was painful, but it was in line with our new vision" to serve those on the periphery. She has worked with people with alcohol and drug dependence in the past four decades.



Medical Mission Sr. Joan Chunkapura, a psychologist who works among people with alcohol and drug dependence, is pictured in front of their only remaining hospital, Immaculate Heart of Mary Hospital at Bharananganam in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Thomas Scaria)

Besides alternative medicine and drugless therapy, the nuns serve fishermen communities and people affected by HIV/AIDS or cancer, conduct community health camps, and combat tuberculosis, malaria and other infectious diseases.

Sr. Rose Vypana, in her late 70s, has organized health awareness and medical camps in remote villages in the past four decades while heading the community medicine department in the Bharananganam hospital.

The winner of a national nursing award from the Indian president in 2008, Vypana was also involved in ecological projects to preserve village rivers and water reservoirs. She now manages a working women's hostel at Kottayam, about 20 miles southwest of Bharananganam.

Some nuns have also worked in government institutions.

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Sr. Vijaya Puthusseril served as the chief nursing officer and associate professor at the Regional Cancer Centre in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Kerala, for nearly 20 years.

"This appointment gave me much deeper experience," the 70-year-old nun told GSR.

After retiring ten years ago, she trained volunteers in palliative and family care for the Archdiocese of Changanacherry. She also manages a YouTube channel on palliative care.

Similarly, Sr. Deena Philip Medayil, a medical pharmacist in Bharananganam, shifted to psychology and psychotherapy. She trained in "brain wave therapy," a form of psychotherapy in mental health.

Sr. Elise Moothedam, a nursing tutor for 35 years, welcomed the paradigm shift but suspects it has made missionary vocation less attractive.



Senior Medical Mission Sisters who took part in the transition process of their mission are pictured: from left are Srs. Philo Varghese, Deena Philip Medayil, Pia Poovan, Eliza Kuppozhackel (center), Dolores Kannampuzha and Elise Moothedam. (Thomas Scaria)

"I have taught thousands of nurses, but none wanted to join religious life," she lamented. "Many want to become a doctor or a nurse, but not a religious sister," she said.

She recommended starting the Medical Mission Associates with their former students "so that our charism is transferred through them to the world."

Since the 1950s, the congregation has promoted associates in Indonesia, the Philippines, Germany, and the United States but not in India.

Sr. Pia Poovan served in Attat Hospital, Ethiopia, as a surgeon for about 50 years before returning to India. The nuns started the hospital in an abandoned seminary in 1969. It is now managed by the local Catholic diocese.



Medical Mission Sr. Dolores Kannampuzha, 92, at the Anna Dengel House in Changanacherry, Kerala (Thomas Scaria)

"Although the hospital was handed over to the diocese, I continued with it at the request of the diocese," said the nun, now resting in their home for seniors in Changanacherry.

Sr. Dolores Kannampuzha, who is now 92, worked with homeless people, people with HIV/AIDS, and cancer patients in Kottayam in coordination with the local

municipality.

She founded the Cancer and AIDS Shelter Society in Kottayam in 1999 in collaboration with the government and other local community organizations.

The paradigm shift has also brought them some challenges, the provincial says.

"Those who had proposed the shift are now aged, and we don't have many young members to carry forward their vision," she said.

She said most of their members in India are above 75, and many cannot continue their missions and ministries.

She recalled joining the congregation when it was undergoing discernment. "I did my novitiate by staying in fishermen communities. I received my formation in challenging situations that strengthened my vocation," she added.

The Medical Mission Sisters are not attached to parish ministries like other congregations, which further reduces the chances for new vocations, Joseph explained.

However, two young members, Akhila and Kresenyasa, made their first profession during the centenary inauguration program.



Senior members of the Medical Mission Sisters celebrate the first profession of two nuns on the inaugural day of their centenary celebrations on Sept. 28, 2024, at the Anna Dengel House, Changanacherry, in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Sr. Lilly Joseph)

The provincial also said the congregation had taken "real risks" when it handed over their hospitals for free.

One of her tasks now as the provincial is to ensure proper care for the elders.

"Those who took over our institutions are not bound to offer subsidized medical care to us," she explained.

"However, we are grateful to the Archdiocese of Delhi and the Holy Family Hospital at Mandar for offering free treatment for our members," she added.

However, some do acknowledge the congregation's contributions.

Archbishop-designate Thomas Tharayil of Changanacherry, of the Eastern Catholic Syro-Malabar Church, who opened the congregation's centenary celebrations, said the Medical Mission Sisters pioneered health ministries in India.

"The vision and mission of the nuns and their dedication and commitment have laid the foundation for the healing ministry of the church," he added.

Joseph said they have announced a project to support 100 people to mark the centenary. "We will give houses, wheelchairs, medical treatment [and] education sponsorship according to each one's requirement."

At the same time, she is not worried about their current challenges. "We trust in the providence of God, who will continue to guide us as healing handmaids of the Lord," she added.

This story appears in the **HIV/AIDS Ministry** feature series. View the full series.