News



Nazareth Srs. Anice Vattukulam and Nisha Chemmanam (center) play carrom with the members of Asa Nilayam Pakal Veedu (Abode of Hope Day Home), a home for the elderly at Kallanode, a village in the Kozhikode district of Kerala, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)



by George Kommattam

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Nimmy Pothiyittel smiled as she watched elderly guests argue cheerfully over a carrom game at a day home the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth manage in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

"Laughing with others gives them new energy," said Pothiyittel, who serves as a coordinator in Asa Nilayam Pakal Veedu (Abode of Hope Day Home) at Kallanode, a remote village in Kozhikode district.

Nazareth Sr. Sheela Palamoottil, who started the home with the then local parish priest in April 2023, said the center is their answer to a serious social problem Kerala faces — the growing population of lonely elders.

The nuns first came to the parish in 2014, invited by the Diocese of Thamarassery to establish a school or clinic.

"Our first task was to visit homes in the parish. What we heard again and again was about loneliness. We realized that loneliness was a way of life for many," Palamoottil, now 79, told Global Sisters Report.

She recalled that parents managed everything alone — household chores, illness and grief. "There was no space just to be together," she said.

The nuns responded by organizing a monthly gathering in 2018 for elders in the parish hall. "As attendance grew, the scale of the problem became impossible to ignore," said Palamoottil, who left Kallanode a year after converting part of their convent into a day home.

The sisters' Pakal Veedu (day home) functions between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. The day begins with conversation and sharing, followed by the rosary, light yoga or stretching. The elders watch videos, eat a simple lunch together, and spend the afternoon playing games such as carrom and rummy.



Nazareth Sr. Nisha Chemmanam welcomes Annamma George Periyampuram to Asa Nilayam Pakal Veedu (Abode of Hope Day Home), a center for the elderly at Kallanode, Kozhikode district, Kerala, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)

The nuns charge no fees. "This place is meant for anyone who is lonely. Most of them live on modest pensions or depend on their children working abroad. We did not want money to become a barrier," said Sr. Anice Vattukulam, the current director of the center and the convent superior.

She works with Srs. Nisha Chemmanam, Gracy Thombrakudy and Anne Philip, who care for 18 elders, all 70 and older.

Fr. Jino Chundayil, the current pastor, says the nuns' center has brought great relief to the parish, as aged parents now live alone in 200 of its 500 families. Their children have gone to other countries or other Indian states to continue their studies

or find jobs.

"Loneliness has become one of the biggest unspoken problems in every home, especially after the death of a spouse," Chundayil told GSR in January.

He said lonely and dejected elders are a social issue in all dioceses in Kerala.

Fr. Kurian Puramadathil, who directs the Diocese of Thamarassery's work with migrants, commended the Nazareth nuns. He estimated that more than 30% of Catholic youth in his diocese now live in 23 foreign countries, in addition to many other Indian cities.

"We are collecting parish-level data to understand the real picture. But everywhere, the situation is the same. Children leave, and parents stay back alone," the diocesan official told GSR.

According to Puramadathil, the Nazareth nuns' initiative comes as Kerala ages faster than other Indian states.

According to the Kerala Migration Survey of 2023, about 2.2 million people from Kerala now live overseas. A study by the Sankala Foundation found that nearly 1 in 4 people will be older than 60 in the next decade, making elders 22.8% of the population.

"What migration has left behind is a growing population of elderly parents living alone," Palamoottil explained.

Chundayil said low-cost, community-based initiatives, like the sisters' day home, offer a practical and humane response to the demographic shift. He wants other parishes to start similar centers.



The members of Asa Nilayam Pakal Veedu (Abode of Hope Day Home), a center for the elderly, pose for a photograph with Srs. Anice Vattukulam and Nisha Chemmanam in front of the Nazareth convent at Kallanode, a village in Kozhikode district, Kerala, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)

Vattukulam said they welcome visitors from other places, as all parishes in Kerala face the same situation. "They want to see what we are doing with the elders," the 70-year-old nun said.

Gracy Arimattam, a cancer patient and the first to come to the center, said the only thing she wants in the morning is to go there and forget her loneliness.

"I used to get up to a long, quiet day at home," said the 70-year-old mother of a son and two daughters who work in Dubai.

Her children sometimes made video calls to manage family matters from afar, and her neighbors occasionally visited Arimattam and her husband, Jacob.

That routine changed after the nuns opened the day home.

Now, Arimattam dresses carefully, gathers her things, and heads to the center like a child going to school, while her husband, Jacob, stays at home.

Pothiyittel said the day home is a second kindergarten for many elders. "They are enjoying their second school days," the 47-year-old coordinator said.

Palamoottil recalled that initially the elders were first withdrawn and quiet, but soon they forgot their years of unspoken grief.

"When we are alone, our problems seem bigger, but when we come together, our worries vanish," said Mathew Thannikkapara, a 71-year-old regular participant.

Sindhu Elampassery, a nurse who monitors the elders, said that laughter has helped improve their health.

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Johny Karakkattu, 76, a former taxi driver who had seldom laughed before visiting the day home, agreed. "Now laughter has become my routine."

Mathew Mundayani, an 83-year-old former banker, recites poems and songs he learned at the center. "This place keeps me alive," he told GSR.

Not everyone agrees on how to address the issue of Kerala's elders. Fr. Mathew Kulathingal, Thamarassery diocesan director of Alphonsa Palliative and Geriatric Care, wants Kerala to urgently set up full-time eldercare facilities.

"Day homes are helpful, but we also need more old-age homes. We have already started one project, and it is fully sold out," he told GSR.

K.F. George, a veteran journalist in Kozhikode, says children leave their parents alone as they are torn between opportunity and responsibility. "Parents are reluctant to burden them. This is where the church must respond."

Arimattam said she has found the answer in the Nazareth Sisters' day home.

"Earlier, we waited for time to pass. Now the day goes by so quickly. Life has begun again."