News



Sacred Heart Sr. Treesa Palackal, founder of Hrudayaram, a counseling center managed by the Sacred Heart Sisters at Kannur, conducts an empowerment camp on Aug. 8, 2019, for children of Puthumala, a village devastated by a landslide earlier that year. (Courtesy of Rincy Augustine)



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On some mornings, Muhammad Basheer would wake up with the thought that he would die on a specific day. Although the date would change, the fear always returned. He consulted doctors and psychologists. Some treatments helped, but he never found the relief he was looking for.

He suffered for nine years until 2014, when he came to Hrudayaram, a counseling center managed by the Sacred Heart Sisters at Kannur, a town in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

"For the first time, I found someone who did not dismiss my fear or minimize it," Basheer, who is now 38, told Global Sisters Report.

At Hrudayaram, Sr. Treesa Palackal, a clinical counseling psychologist, helped the Muslim schoolteacher overcome his fears.

"I have not experienced the problem since then," said Basheer, who continues to associate with Hrudayaram.

Sr. Rincy Augustine, director of Hrudayaram, told GSR that Basheer is among some 325,000 people with mental health issues Hrudayaram has helped in the past 26 years.

> 'Families are the backbone of society. When relationships heal, the whole community benefits.'
> —Sr. Treesa Palackal
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Patients come from all over Kerala and its northern neighbor, the state of Karnataka.

Augustine, who has a doctorate in psychology, said people come to the center with pain from trauma, anxiety, addictions, family conflict or grief.

"We combine scientific counseling with a deeply human approach. We walk with them, step by step, toward healing," she said.

Assisting her are 12 companions from her congregation trained in psychology and psychotherapy, as well as a lay counselor and a family therapist.

The center has programs for adolescents, couples preparing for marriage, married couples and families.

"We address not only symptoms but the relational and emotional contexts of the patients' struggle," Augustine said.

Palackal, who founded Hrudayaram on July 4, 2000, and directed it until she became a provincial in December 2021, said the center's programs aim to understand "the deeper origins of emotional pain."

During counseling, Basheer told her that his mother had three miscarriages before his birth. When she conceived him, she feared that he might not survive.

"That unspoken anxiety was passed on to him in subtle ways. Through psychotherapy, we helped him trace the fear's origin. That awareness was the beginning of his healing," Palackal, 71, said over the phone from Peravoor, some 30 miles east of Kannur.



Sr. Treesa Palackal, founder of Hrudayaram, a counseling center managed by the Sacred Heart Sisters at Kannur, speaks during the center's silver jubilee program. (Courtesy of Rincy Augustine)

Basheer said he came to the center after reading a newspaper advertisement for a counseling course facilitated by the sisters.

"I joined a diploma course in counseling psychology mainly to find a solution to my fear of death," he said.

The center requires its students to undergo therapy as part of the course.

"When I shared my fear, they did not tell me to ignore my fears or to be brave. Slowly, I understood where the fear was coming from."

Palackal, a former schoolteacher, said she noticed that most personal struggles began within the family. "When the family heals, the individual also begins to heal."

She said that some of the children she taught were labeled as troublemakers or did poorly in their studies.

"When I visited their homes, I realized what we saw in the children was only icebergs. The real issues lie at home," she said.

She left teaching to study psychology in the Philippines. After returning, she opened Hrudayaram, where she could address emotional wounds through professional counseling skills and compassion.



Sacred Heart Srs. Rincy Augustine and Jyothis Palackal stand with students during a "Smart Teens" program held at the sisters' Psycho-Education Centre in Iritty, a town in the Kannur district of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Rincy Augustine)

She told GSR that Hrudayaram focuses on its patients' families. "Families are the backbone of society. When relationships heal, the whole community benefits," she said.

Today, Hrudayaram integrates multiple therapeutic approaches, including cognitive behavioral therapy, psychodynamic therapy, family therapy and person-centered therapy.

"Our approach is scientific, but always compassionate," said Augustine, who joined the center in 2006.

She recalled helping a boy three years ago who was unable to speak and afraid to leave home. "With patient counseling, he gradually regained confidence. Even today, he keeps in touch," she said.

Augustine said people usually hesitate to seek help for their mental illness, and that healing begins when people feel heard and understood.

The sisters at Hrudayaram conduct youth leadership initiatives, parenting education, and promotion of communication and emotional resilience. They also train people in counseling.

In 2006, the center set up its Community College of Counseling Psychology, affiliated with Kannur University.

"It is the first community college of counseling in Kerala," said principal Sr. Jyothis Palackal (no relation to the founder). "Students learn not only theory but the art of listening with empathy. And they become agents of healing in the places where they live and work."

The college has trained more than 720 students through part-time programs over the years. The college offers a post-graduate diploma in counseling psychology and another in learning disability.

Its students are teachers, lawyers and others who serve in various parts of India.

In 2010, Hrudayaram opened a family counseling center at Koodali, 10 miles northeast of Kannur, and six years later, a psycho education center at Iritty, 25 miles east. In Iritty, it also opened a mental health care center in 2023.

The center has an alumni association, Hrudayaram Enclave of Alumni and Resource Team. Their motto is "May happiness embrace the entire world."

The association serves as a substitute for Hrudayaram, providing support in emergency situations.

"Whenever there is a crisis, our trained members respond," V.V. Renesh, an association coordinator, said. "We are ready to help people return to normal life through counseling and psychotherapy."

Hrudayaram has also stepped in to help victims of natural calamities and accidents.

When floods devastated parts of Kerala in 2018, Hrudayaram's counselors worked with government agencies to help victims and their families cope with loss and displacement.

The counselors also helped the victims of the 2017 Cyclone Ockhi and the survivors of the 2019 Puthumala landslides.

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K. V. Latheesh, former director of the National Health Mission, said that Hrudayam has helped many disaster survivors move from trauma to hope.

"Their compassionate service to those affected by disasters is truly beyond praise," he said.

Hrudayaram also intervened when nine children were killed in an accident involving a van carrying school children at Perumannu, a village near Iritty, in 2012. They visited every affected family, stayed with them and continued follow-up until they regained stability.

K. K. Shailaja, Kerala's former health minister, praised the center's services, particularly its help to fishermen rescued during Cyclone Ockhi.

"They had survived physically, but emotionally, they were broken," she said. "Through patient counseling by Hrudayaram people, the survivors gradually regained hope and strength."

"Recognition is encouraging, but the real reward is seeing lives change," Hrudayaram's founder said.