



Sr. Alice Kasmel Vadakkethundil, member of the Daughters of Our Lady of Mercy, interacts with students at Karuna Speech and Hearing Higher Secondary School in Kozhikode, a town in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (George Kommattam)



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On a rainy day in July, Bindu Anandan came to Sr. Alice Kasmel Vadakkethundil to invite the nun to her daughter's wedding.

Vadakkethundil, the principal of Karuna (Mercy) Speech and Hearing Higher Secondary School in Kozhikode, a city in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, thanked the 49-year-old Hindu woman while accepting the printed invitation.

"Sister, you are the first person we are inviting to the wedding. Without you, we have no celebration," Anandan said.

Standing near her was Abinav Anandan, her 19-year-old son, who is a graduate of the school, which helps students with hearing impairments.

Vadakkethundil, member of the Daughters of Our Lady of Mercy, told Global Sisters Report that the school has become part of the families of its students, past and present. The bonds the nuns create with the families "are forever; that is why they keep on coming back," she said.

The school was started in 1980 by the local unit of the Rotary Club. After two years, the club invited Vadakkethundil's congregation to take over the school. Later, the Calicut Diocese donated land for the school.

The 53-year-old nun, who became the principal in 2003, said the school has taught some 2,000 children since its inception.

The school now has classes for kindergarten through 12th grade, divided into two sections — high school and higher secondary school.

Sr. Roseline Joseph, the high school headmistress, said the government-aided school has a total of 136 students who are taught by 30 staff members, including seven nuns. They have a few day scholars, too.

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Joseph said the school provides therapeutic support, vocational training and skill development, besides special education.

"Our aim is to bring the students to the mainstream and empower their families to walk with them with hope and happiness," she said.

She also said educating hearing impaired children is only part of the school's ministry. "For us, helping parents matters the most," she said.

Joseph said the parents' first challenge is to accept their child's hearing problem.

Vadakkethundil, who has three decades of experience in special school education, said the ministry is personal for her.

"My father was deaf. So, I have a special love for special children," she told GSR.

Vadakkethundil said she has seen many families struggling with the uncertainty of having specially challenged children.

"Parents often need special counseling as much as their children need special education," said the nun, who has a masters' degree in counseling psychology to help empower parents of such children.

Leela Balakrishnan, a Hindu woman, said the uncertainty continues long after the child is diagnosed with a hearing impairment. Her daughter, Remya Balakrishnan, studied at Karuna then completed a bachelor's course in computer science and secured a job in the Kerala government's tourism department.

"Parents like me often worry about what will happen to our child after school. Finding a job is very difficult. My whole world revolved around my daughter. I even left my career in civil engineering to help her become independent," Balakrishnan told GSR.

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Jaseena Shoukath, a Muslim mother, said the nuns have helped her family to accept that their only child is deaf. "The school's support helped me accept and believe that there is nothing to worry," she told GSR.

Shoukath accompanies her daughter to the school each day, waiting on the school premises along with other parents.

"We spend time on the campus sharing experiences. We feel strengthened in each other's company," she said.

For the nuns, the empowerment often begins by being there when a family needs them the most, Vadakkethundil said.

The nuns visit students' homes across Kerala to study the challenges they face in their lives.

Parents also call them when they need guidance or support.

"When they call us, we listen to them, pray for them and guide them," Vadakkethundil said.

Every year, Karuna invites experts to conduct awareness and guidance programs for parents.

"Our aim is to help parents understand hearing impairment, recognize their child's abilities and realize how they can support their kid's development. The program also gives parents an opportunity to meet like-minded people and keep connected," she said.

The school has a consistent 100% percent pass rate in examinations and excels in arts and sports. They are state champions in special schools' competition.

Bineesh John Paickatte, president of the Parent and Teachers Association, credits the nuns and teachers with the school's achievements. Paickatte left his job at the Kerala government's transport department and moved to Kozhikode to admit his son in the special school. His son, Edwin John, is in the 12th grade.

"They know each student by name. That makes a real difference," the 47-year-old Catholic told GSR.