Voices of Sisters
Q&As



Sr. Sonia Francis Vaikathussery, a member of the Congregation of Teresian Carmelites and a clinical acupuncturist, treats a patient at the Perpetual Succour Mission Hospital in Maradu, India. (Courtesy of Sonia Francis)



by George Kommattam

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Sr. Sonia Francis Vaikkathussery has worked as a clinical acupuncturist, caring for people with chronic and difficult-to-treat conditions for more than 25 years.

The member of the Congregation of Teresian Carmelites now directs the alternative medicine division of the Perpetual Succour Mission Hospital, managed by her congregation in Maradu, a suburb of Kochi, the commercial capital of the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

In 2022, she received the Arogya Ratna (Health Jewel) Award for alternative medicine from the Holistic Medicine Research Foundation for her service in alternative and holistic medicine.

Vaikkathussery spoke to Global Sisters Report about her healthcare ministry, faith, and experience of accompanying people through illness and suffering.

***GSR*: What drew you to acupuncture?**

Vaikkathussery: I was drawn to acupuncture because it is considered to have less side effects and can offer hope to patients who have found no relief through other treatment options.

I chose this alternative medicine because I was attracted to it by a nun who was an expert in acupuncture in our congregation. I was moved by the way it helps people reduce their pain and ailments.

I have used acupuncture in my work with those suffering from paralysis, arthritis, spinal problems, ulcers and non-healing wounds.

What have you learned from treating patients?

I have seen many people with extremely difficult circumstances because of conditions such as diabetic ulcers. I could treat those at risk of losing their limbs and help them avoid amputation.

We can use acupuncture to help our people lead more peaceful and meaningful lives.

I consider that God intervenes through me. When patients leave after treatment with tears of gratitude in their eyes, I truly experience the meaning of my life and ministry.

Your motto is "The doctor treats, God heals." What does this mean to you?

It expresses my deep belief that God is the true healer. God has the power to heal every illness, and he uses humans as his instruments. As Luke 18:27 reminds us, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."

Even in hopeless cases, I have seen remarkable healing through prayer.

How do you combine faith and treatment?

I pray for each patient before treating them. I also request prayers from priests, nuns and friends before I begin the treatment. In our hospital, we play Christian devotional songs to calm the minds of patients.

I try to bring together medical care and faith, so that patients feel supported not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually.

How do you approach patients who have lost hope?

I approach them with compassion, patience, prayer and a deep sense of faith. I know God is able to give hope to those who have lost hope.

We treat each patient with love, prayer and compassion, and see Jesus in them. This helps even those who have lost all hope to return home peacefully.

Any unforgettable healing stories?

For me, every healing is unforgettable. But one case stands out. P. G. Kumar, a 77-year-old retired engineer, had undergone surgery on his heart and legs following an accident. One day, he fell in the kitchen and gradually became bedridden. Doctors ruled out any chance of recovery.

His wife brought him to our center. They were Hindus, but had great faith in our prayer. They would often ask me to pray for him. I also asked others to pray for him.

After we started treating him, we saw changes. After six months, he could move around and do his daily activities independently. Today, he even drives.

To see a person who had completely lost hope regain his mobility and independence was deeply moving.

How do you care for patients with difficult illnesses?

Many patients who come to us have been suffering in different ways for a long time. They come to us as the last resort. Many are physically, mentally, financially and spiritually exhausted.

We take time to understand each patient's condition and carefully assess them through different diagnostic approaches. We then decide on an appropriate approach to their care. We plan treatment according to each patient's needs and severity of illness.

I have an eight-member team to help me. We approach everyone with equal love, care and respect, whatever their religion or caste may be.

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Does your congregation support your work?

My superiors first recognized that I was an apt candidate for healthcare ministry, especially after seeing how I cared for and assisted our senior sisters.

Our congregation was founded by Blessed Mother Eliswa Vakayil, and our charism is centered on compassion, love, and care for the poor and those who are suffering.

My superiors always support this mission. They also pray for us and encourage us.

Why did you become a nun?

When I read Jeremiah 1:5, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you," I remember what my mother went through when she was carrying me.

She had several health problems, and the doctors advised her to terminate the pregnancy. But my mother refused.

She told them that even if she had to die, her child should live. I believe that God had a plan for me even before I was born.

My father did not want me to become a nun, but my mother was supportive.

After the first year of my three-year bachelor's course, I told my father that I wanted to join the convent, but he refused and became gloomy. Seeing his pain, I dropped my plan.

But the next year, I felt I could no longer ignore my call. I told my father that I could not live peacefully without responding to the call.

Eventually, he permitted me. I left my studies and joined the congregation.

I became a nun before my parents' death. They could see my ministry and the people I served. My father told me, "God has chosen you for his work."