

MEDICAL MISSION NEWS

Winter 2009



Planning for the next six years

Medical Mission Sisters General Chapter, the meeting of our elected delegates from around the world, took place in October in The Netherlands. It is an important meeting for planning for mission for the next six years. The new Society Coordinators are elected at the Chapter.

The Chapter began by identifying our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Strengths are things we are able to do again and again very well. They are characterized by sustainability, effectiveness, and competence. Weaknesses are areas in which we have not been able to do what we would like to do. It is something that we could have done but for which we did not seize the opportunity or harness the energy to do it. Opportunities and threats are things presented to us by the environment.

The identification of strengths was not too difficult, for example: the relevance of our mission, a deep rootedness in God and the missionary spirit, networking, collaboration, internationality, readiness for change, inter-dependence, participative governance and many more.

Naming our weaknesses was a little more difficult. Some things we named were: our difficulty in prioritizing according to our resources; our not being able to align our ministries to human and financial resources leading to over extension; a government structure that is not serving us well; hesitancy to speak our truth; a limited understanding of leadership and service roles as mission.

We could identify opportunities and threats more easily. Some opportunities: a growing awareness of ecological problems, the increasing quest for spirituality, advances in electronic communication, the increase of multicultural communities, international working for justice, ethical concerns regarding science and business. Some threats: secularism, consumerism, growth of fundamentalism, terrorism, hierarchical functioning in the church, global warming, environmental pollution, and the economic recession.

After participating in the celebrations for the beginning of the Chapter, Dutch MMS Bep Tijssen went home and wrote this poem.

International Spirituality

In a world full of hatred and thrust for power,
man against man, nation against nation;
a world full of uncertain technique inventions,
hunger for money and full of temptation;

Where pride and prejudice seem to be common,
self-sufficiency proof of good education;
where torture and killing are seen as a custom
and countless people live in frustration;

In a world where more than ever before
racism exists and discrimination;
where hunger and poverty threaten the millions,
sexual abuse tends to habituation;

In this world we are living, although not from it,
MMS out of twenty a nation,
sharing our ideals and our fire and flame,
in healing presence and humble dedication.

Our internationality gives us inner strength,
unites us, from whatever nation,
into one body, as a microcosm;
as a mirror of a future destination.

May this lively small international group
by the strength of its spiritual vocation,
be a flow of love through goal-directed support
to our needy world population.



A vital issue - the ecological crisis

More than ever, we are experiencing the impact of the devastation of our planet. Earth's resources are exploited uncontrollably by a few, resulting in extinction of some species, widening gap between the rich and the poor, economic and political crisis. Climate change and the increasing frequency of calamities have an untold cost to human lives and other species, increasing displacement of peoples and both internal and international forced migration. The victims of this crisis are the poor and the marginalized, especially women and children. The rhythm of the universe has been disrupted by greed, violence and wars. The impact of the phenomenon of globalization on the poor (including the Earth) is bringing about impoverishment, sickness, and death. Consumerism, individualism, and fundamentalism are eroding the fabric of all societies.

Our belief in Jesus the Healer is drawing us to respond collectively to this crisis. We are being called to make the equitable sharing of resources a reality in all that we do. Efforts to improve access to: basic needs and health services, safe drinking water, unpolluted air, care for the homeless and dying, appropriate and accurate information are some of the varied expressions of our commitment to equity in healing mission from an ecological perspective. We appreciate that healing power unfolds differently according to one's stage in life and capacities. We want to include this acknowledgement of difference in the way we live as a healing presence in our life and mission and celebrate it.



One of the working groups



From left to right: American MMS Suzanne, Indian MMS Elizabeth, German MMS Agnes, Filipina MMS Carmelita

New coordinators and old

Introducing Agnes Lanfermann, elected as our new society Coordinator

Born in 1955 in Kirchhellen, a small village in the northwest part of Germany, Agnes was brought up in a large three generation family, the oldest of the ten children, six girls and four boys. From early childhood she remembers being affected by joy and laughter, sorrow and suffering. This is where she both learned and experienced that growth, birth and death, feasts and small daily life events belong to a normal life process.

During her time in school Agnes came in contact with an international youth organization of Catholic students. This greatly influenced her further development and her way of looking at life. It broadened her vision of the world and German history but also raised new questions in her. The most important question during these years was why? This question led her to study philosophy and theology for six years. She liked the existential philosophers and compared their answers with those of Catholic and Protestant theologians at different universities. But in all this she still could not find the answer she was seeking. The next step was to go to Brasil, to listen to Leonardo Boff, and to live in the slums of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. She volunteered to work with street children and persons who were handicapped, imprisoned and suicidal. These experiences opened her heart to touch with the hearts of other people and as she said "my own as well, and I tasted a bit what my answer could be."

In those years Agnes could not imagine becoming a nun but after visiting the Medical Mission Sisters, listening to their ideas and seeing their way of life, she changed her mind and entered MMS in Germany in 1981. She dreamed of returning to Latin America but soon came to see the needs of the church in Germany. She studied pastoral psychology to try to bring questions of human life to the questions of spirituality as a life-giving source and to serve as a background for accompanying people in their spiritual journeys.

Living in Frankfurt she became more deeply attuned to the complexity of suffering and evil in Europe, especially in Germany. After serving as District Coordinator in Germany, Agnes was elected our Sector Coordinator in Europe. She has lived in Frankfurt for the past twenty-five years. She teaches at the Jesuit University as well as giving workshops for the training of formators at the Institute of Mission Spirituality. Since 2002 she has been involved with integration and formation of sisters and associates in Germany.

Introducing Elizabeth Vadakekara new Assistant Society Coordinator

Elizabeth was born the eighth of nine children, six boys and three girls. Four of her brothers became priests and all three girls chose religious life. Elizabeth's zeal to be a missionary, a long-cherished desire, came true when in 1965, she joined MMS in Kerala, South India. Right from the start she was sure of one thing, that one day she would be able to go to faraway places and serve people. After profession of first vows in 1968 she was assigned to the Ithithanam kitchen to feed about forty members. Looking at this job as a challenge helped her to come to like cooking and to see it as a hobby. Soon she was sent to Mundakayam Medical Trust (MMT) hospital for a couple of months of hospital experience. When asked to go for medical studies she was reluctant as she wanted to go out as a missionary at the earliest possible time. She spent her next five years at Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, Punjab. An analysis made during her village posting showed her the clear difference between institution-based health care and community-based health care. This was an eye opener for setting directions and for her own understanding of health, healing and wholeness.

As an intern and junior doctor Elizabeth spent the next five years in MMS hospitals in Patna and Mandar. In spite of forty-eight to seventy-two hours duty at one stretch, she says that it was one of the best times of her life. In early 1980, the venturing spirit and the deep trust and faith in God led her to Bongao in the Philippines. It was a leap into the unknown that deepened her faith and trust in God. By the end of five years, malaria had the upper hand. Practically all the staff as well as Elizabeth got sick and the hospital had to be closed for three months.

The next twelve years of her journey were in South India participating in the mission of MMT hospital replacing senior doctors, being first on call, taking night duty, and being part of the administrative team. However, her main focus was developing community health programs in different villages around the hospital. The aim was to create awareness among people regarding the evolving concept of health, healing and wholeness and to equip them to take charge of their own lives. Analysis of why it was difficult to retain trained staff created an interest in psychiatry.

Elizabeth upgraded her skills in child psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry of Maudsley Hospital in South London then worked as a research assistant in a suicide prevention project attached to the government hospital in Trivandrum, Kerala. She also joined an NGO as coordinator of a crisis intervention center that responded to the increasing number of suicides, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS in Kerala.

Elizabeth had served for two terms on the District Assembly and as a delegate to the Tenth General Chapter and was elected as Sector Coordinator for India. All this widened her perspective of the total Society. This experience deepened her love for the Society and made her enthusiastic to contribute wholeheartedly to shape its future. This quote from Dutch MMS Godlieve Prové summarizes her concept of the functioning of an elected leader. "The leaders in the Society are truly empowered to keep the Society moving and responding to the needs of today, but in spite of this authority, nothing will move, nothing will change without the full and free collaboration of the members. The secret of all effective change is in the maximum participation possible of all involved and touched by it. The membership is indeed the foundation of any change and renewal and real growth have to come from the members. It is their responsibility; it is through their participation that things will happen."

*Our leaders keep us
responding to the
needs of today*



Elizabeth and Agnes give a reflection on the gospel

Our associate members

The presence of three associates, one each from Germany, Indonesia and the USA as invitees to the chapter promoted lively exchange on the meaning of associate membership and their role in the Society. Along with eight associate visitors from Germany, they provided a strong witness of their commitment to the healing charism. Their interactions during the chapter were sensitive and helpful. They proved themselves to be companions with us within the charism of healing and were welcomed as participants in the groups forming to write the themes selected by the chapter for development.

MMS and associates are called to the one healing charism. The focus of associates is to integrate the spiritual energy of Christ the Healer into their life and work. We share a spiritual vision that inspires a desire to be a healing presence in the world, but we do not share the same lifestyle. The lifestyle of MMS is shaped by the canonical requirements of public religious vows while associates make a commitment to live the vision and values of the Medical Mission Sisters community within the context of their own lives and responsibilities.



The German Associate members

Haven for Ecological and Alternative living - HEAL

A community of Medical Mission Sisters in The Philippines started HEAL in 2008 as a response to the challenge of the ecological crisis.

Their vision is of a world where humans live in harmony with the rest of creation through living with one another in a just and healing way. Their mission is to contribute towards the realisation of this vision for humans to learn to move from a stance of destroyer of the earth community to a stance that is mutually enhancing.

They are demonstrating a way of living to reduce our ecological footprint through organic farming, buildings made from renewable and local materials, the use of renewable sources of energy like solar, wind and biogas and zero-waste management. They are looking for ways to preserve biodiversity. They are using "Permaculture" (permanent agriculture) which is about designing sustainable human settlements, caring for people and the earth and redistributing surplus.

The HEAL community is introducing alternative healing methods that are affordable, accessible and available to the communities in the area and beyond. They conduct seminars and retreats to deepen understanding of the earth as a presence of God and make healing of the earth a way of life. The aim is to see the sacred in all things and all things in God.

A visitor to HEAL from Pakistan writes about her experience: "When I came to this place I was very amazed seeing all this beauty made by God. Many times, it came to my mind that God is so great and beautiful, like this Nature. As I reflected on the relationship of plants, earth, human, animals, water, air – they cannot live without each other. There is a relationship between them all. This is the circle of life where LIFE is always in the centre."

Another visitor writes: "It is interesting to know that Creation Centered Spirituality embraces the whole "web of life". Rituals, processes of the earth, permaculture, eco-crisis, the new story of creation and human participation help me to think critically how I can be a part of spreading the vision and mission to save Mother Earth. I believe that the aim of the program is wonderful because it guided us all to reconnect to the web of life. I am happy to recognize that I am part of the cycle and each one has a connection in my inner self, to my whole being."

Filipina MMS Anne writes "Our mission here is one of "sowing the seeds" to all who come to HEAL. We know that the seeds may fall on good grounds, or on rocks and maybe blown away. It is a place hopefully that we awaken the consciousness to the beauty and grandeur of creation and therefore the CREATOR. HEAL is a place where LIFE is lived with the rhythm of the Earth, where the resources of the Earth are received with reverence and joy. It honours the sacredness of all forms of life and is a witness of God's expression of LOVE, as revealed in creation..



MMS community at HEAL



Seminars deepen understanding

Mission with homeless people

Right after Easter German MMS Maria Goetzens received the highest public award of the Republic of Germany for her mission with homeless people. Through this award the health needs of homeless and the commitment of all those who serve them came into the public limelight - a great joy and honour for all involved. The award was presented by the minister for social affairs, thus Maria and her team (including German MMS Theresia Foerster and Anke Boeckenfoerde) went to Berlin; and MMS from Berlin also attended this celebration.

Maria has been managing an clinic for homeless people in Frankfurt where homeless persons can have a cup of coffee, talk, get a bath and fresh clothes, get needed medicine and be referred for further medical care, along with three-night passes to area shelters. Maria encounters homeless addicts, people who are psychologically ill, handicapped and mistreated. Going out daily in a medical van, Maria or one of the volunteers checks on those with known health problems. She also visits homeless people at the "regular" places they sleep for the night.

Maria worked as a volunteer for 3 years. She had been searching out the poor and marginalized in Frankfurt when she heard about the plan for this program, which is funded by Caritas. However "It became obvious to me that political awareness is needed, as well as professional know-how," she explains. "In addition to my involvement with the homeless and working on behalf of them in fighting for their rights with political bodies and health insurance I learned how essential it is to let my daily experiences be touched by God's unconditional love. I also realized that collaboration and networking with non-government and government organizations, religious groups, and health care associations is important in influencing politics and making changes possible. I have discovered that I have to work for changing unjust structures in order to work for the good of the poor. It is one thing to cure their diseases, and another to look for their God-given potential and to use it for healing."



Light dispels darkness

Light dispels darkness. In India the festival of lights, Diwali, is a celebration of victory of good over evil. It is harvest time and so the blessing of prosperity and the eradication of poverty is prayed for. Indian MMS Bernadette Poovathunkkal who has returned to India from mission in London a year or so ago writes about the celebration of Diwali where she now lives.

Festivals and holidays brought a change in the routines in Deepashish. Each one got into activities contributing her share to make the holiday a special time. Diwali preparations went on for days for the people of our area, especially for the Bengalis. On the street right in front of our house, is their usual location for making an enormous "Pandhal." Similar ones were also around the city, but our area topped to be the best, a shrine at least eighty feet high made of sheets of bamboo painted and decorated in a very artistic and creative way. This work of art was completed on the eve of Diwali when we were awakened to the rhythm of the drums. The noise and the excitement put us in the mood of celebration too.

It was a very lovely day indeed, with meaningful liturgy and other festivities adding colour to it. We were blessed with our visiting MMS who joined in our celebration. At dusk, when sun was setting our Deepashish shone with the lit clay lamps merging with the myriads of other lamps and lights around our neighbourhood and city, bringing God's light and vanishing the darkness. As we lit our lamps, we joined with you all in prayer for blessings for those at the Chapter.



*Celebrating
Diwali*



*at the
Chapter*



*Wishing
you
Joy at
Christmas
and in the
coming year*

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