

FMDM ministry of presence to world's poorest continues



The Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood's regional superiors who attended a meeting in Singapore from January 12-27. They represented Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Nigeria, Scotland, Singapore, Zambia, Zimbabwe and their Motherhouse in Surrey, England.

Meeting in Singapore for the first time, Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) Sisters renewed their commitment to carry on their ministry of presence to the poorest in the world. Eleven regional superiors and members of the Central Leadership Team (CLT) met for two weeks, from Jan 12-27, as a follow up to their General Chapter meeting in 2013.

"We're not going anywhere different. We will continue to keep ourselves relevant in today's world," emphasised Sr Jane Bertelsen of the CLT, which is based at their Motherhouse in Surrey, England. The superiors represented Australia, England, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, Nigeria, Singapore, Scotland, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the Motherhouse.

Traditionally focused on healthcare, the FMDM Congregation have over the years also become involved in education, spiritual direction, parish work, migrant/refugee work, special needs and justice and peace ministries. They respond to where an urgent need is felt.

In fact, Mount Alvernia Hospital in Singapore and Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital in Penang are the only hospitals now run by the Sisters. "Health is about wholeness. It's not just about physical well-being but the well-being of the whole person," said Sr Ellen Munn, regional superior in Zambia.

"So wherever you are...if you are working towards making a person whole, or helping to make a person whole, then you are looking at the person in a very different way. You are looking at the person with dignity; what does that person need now besides getting her wounds healed?"

Work with poorest

The Sisters have been present in Africa since 1946. The mission is growing and vocations are on the rise, but at the same time the challenges are great.

In Nigeria for example, the Boko Haram terrorist group is affecting the daily lives of the Sisters and the communities they serve. The terrorists have set off bombs in the marketplace, not far from where the Sisters live. "It's a tense place to live and work in," said Sr Jane.

FMDM missionaries are taking a strong leadership in the Damietta Peace Initiative between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, "keeping the balance of harmony" in the area, added Sr Helena McEvilly, also from CLT.

Ministering to the displaced is an urgent work for the Sisters, who attend to them through counselling, medical care and food aid. "There are thousands of people who have been chased away from their homes. The villages have been burnt to the ground," noted Sr Helena.

In Zimbabwe, the rise of "prophetism" by Christian individuals who breakaway from their churches, is a major concern. Without any training, these individuals start a "church" and exploit people's poverty by promising prosperity, said Sr Yeyani, regional superior in Zimbabwe.

Witchcraft and Satanism are also growing with self-proclaimed religious teachers playing on the African culture and traditional beliefs. A "prophet" might say that a Catholic, who is having problems, is possessed by a spirit. If the Catholic finds that the prophet's "exorcism" works for him, he might just leave the Church, especially if he hasn't been helped by the Church, added Sr Yeyani.

Finally, in Zambia, the Sisters' largest mission field in Africa, the growing number of ageing missionaries returning to their home country has been affecting the mission, noted the regional superior, Sr Ellen Munn.

FMDM missionaries, who arrived in Zambia 68 years ago, built up the country, especially in the rural areas where they established schools and hospitals. These institutions have since been turned over to the local diocese or other local Religious congregations, but missionaries continue to be needed to train their staff.

In addition to being part of peace initiatives, the Sisters are involved in prison ministry, education (including those with special needs), basic healthcare, school chaplaincy, parish work, hospital pastoral care and primary evangelisation.

In Singapore and Malaysia, the Sisters are also involved in special needs education and HIV/AIDS ministries. In Malaysia, the Sisters assist kids living in shanties along the railways outside Kuala Lumpur by providing a proper place to study and supervising their homework. The brightest are being helped to further their education overseas after secondary school.

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