

FRANCISCAN MISSIONARIES OF THE DIVINE MOTHERHOOD

70 years of service in ZIMBABWE

History

In 1948 Bishop Arnoz of Bulawayo earnestly appealed to Mother Francis Spring, Mother General of the FMDM Sisters, to build a Catholic Hospital in Bulawayo. His main concerns were to uphold ethical procedures and that priest would be notified when sick patients needed sacraments. Mother Francis and her Council agreed to this request. They planned to build a small hospital. Bulawayo Municipality donated 25 acres of land and Fr Andrew blessed the plot and the building began.

Mother Francis sent 4 pioneering sisters to Bulawayo to oversee the construction that was already underway. These were: Srs Mary George, Mary Laetitia, Mary Brendon and Mary John Forest. They arrived on Feb 2nd 1952 and were most generously accommodated by our dear Dominican Sisters while the hospital was being built and while they acquainted themselves with the healthcare system in this country. Mother Francis sent money for the building of the hospital but due to unforeseen hurdles the funds did not stretch as far as building a convent, so the sisters used the 4th and 5th floors of the hospital as their convent until 1971 when a beautiful convent was blessed and opened now known as St Phillips- on whose carpark we are gathered today.

Sadly, Bishop Arnoz had died before the completion of the hospital and on 15th August 1953 it was blessed by Bishop Adolf Schmidt and ceremoniously opened by Sir John Kennedy the Governor at the time, under the title of Mater Dei (which is Latin for Mother of God).

In Hwange the Anglo-American Mining Corporation having heard the good reputation of the sisters at Mater Dei, asked Mother Francis to send sisters to undertake the management of the newly built mining hospital. Mother Francis agreed and sisters took on Hwange Colliery Hospital. A training school was soon opened as an initiative from the sisters for the training of young African student nurses. The nurses produced from this school were highly sought after for their reputable practice and many medical institutions were keen to be associated with them. It still functions well even to this day.

In 1958 FMDM sisters responded to the govts request to administer and staff a home for the Mentally Disadvantaged children. It was named St Francis Home and we ministered there until 1976. The aim of the sisters was to make it truly a home inclusive of children of all races and backgrounds but the socio-political climate at the time was not conducive. The govt eventually took back the home.

Continuing with their ministry with the handicapped and underprivileged children, the sisters in the early 80s worked at Sibantubanye Day Care Centre in Luveve Township and later established Simanyane Centre in the heart of Bulawayo. Both institutions are still functional today.

In 1983 a Novitiate was opened in Vic Falls for young indigenous Africans to train to be FMDM Sisters. The first Zimbabwean to be professed is Sr Helen Doyle and we are honoured to have amidst us today. In 1989 some sisters moved to Fatima Mission to evangelise there and for the last 29yrs sisters were involved in teaching, parish work and empowering the local people with life skills. With encouragement from Bishop Prieto of Hwange diocese, some sisters moved from there to open Lubhancho House in Hwange to assist people affected by HIV/AIDS at a time when the pandemic was ravaging the country In Hwange the Anglo- American Mining Corporation having heard the good reputation of the sisters at Mater Dei, asked Mother Francis to send sisters to undertake the management of the newly built mining hospital. Mother Francis agreed and sisters took on Hwange Colliery Hospital. A training school was soon opened as an initiative from the sisters for the training of young African student nurses. The nurses produced from this school were highly sought after for their reputable practice and many medical institutions were keen to be associated with them. It still functions well even to this day.

Many developments (structural and administrative) have taken place over the years spearheaded by our sisters leading to the hospital we seen now and it was in true missionary spirit that Mater Dei Hospital—our pride and joy—was handed over to the Board of Trustees in 1999 and some of our sisters remain a part of that board to this day.

Although our initial mission in Zimbabwe of healthcare has evolved over the years, our sisters are still active and visible in the country in parishes, working with the youth, working as spiritual directors and retreat givers, working as hospital chaplains and offering general nursing and midwifery.