

Up close and personal - Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood

The nuns who built Mt. Alvernia Hospital SINGAPORE



The FMDM community in Singapore share in Mary's motherhood - they conceive, birth and nurture the life of Christ in their hearts, in community and in society.

Mention the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) Sisters and not many will know who they are, but mention Mt. Alvernia Hospital and almost every Singaporean will know of it - the only Catholic hospital in Singapore, recognized for its quality medical care and for its compassionate pastoral care. The mountain where St. Francis of Assisi received the stigmata, celebrates its feast day on Sep 17, the feast of the stigmata of St. Francis. Sister Wendy Ooi, fsp, gets close and personal with the women behind Mt. Alvernia Hospital - the FMDM Sisters.

AS THE NAME IMPLIES, the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood is an international Catholic congregation of sisters following Christ in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. Willing to serve anywhere in the world, their mission is to share in Mary's divine motherhood. As Mary conceived Christ in her womb and brought him forth for the world, so they are called to conceive Christ in their hearts and bring him forth for the world today, nurturing the life of Christ in those they encounter.

By being a channel of God's maternal love, they help others to recognize the loving presence of God in their daily experiences.

Although healthcare has been a major part of the mission of the FMDM Sisters, today their mission is finding new ways of expression. Their present ministries are diverse and geared especially to the family, children and women.

A relatively new congregation

THE CONGREGATION started out in 1886 when a community of lay Franciscan women started taking care of poor children in Holly Place, London. By 1896, they became a religious congregation known as the Missionary Sisters for the Home Missions.

The Sisters were first trained as nurses in 1925. Their first hospital, Mt. Alvernia, was opened in Guildford, Surrey in 1935. In 1937, their first appointed Mother General, Mother Francis Spring, brought a new vision to the congregation. She sent out Sisters from England to open missions in Africa.

In 1947, the congregation was pontifically approved and renamed the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood. Today there are 350 FMDM sisters in England, Scotland, Ireland, Rome, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore.



Right, the FMDM sisters were the first religious order to enter maternity ministry. With many of the sisters trained in midwifery, they have probably delivered hundreds of thousands of babies around the globe since their foundation in 1886.

FMDM Logo: What it means



Mary's role is to bring the Saviour, Jesus Christ, into the world. Mary, therefore, conscious of this universal role, graciously offers her Son to the world. She is not keeping him to herself in a tender embrace. The Christ-child in his turn - inseparable from his mother - has his arms outstretched to reach out and to welcome all peoples. It is a missionary attitude the FMDM Sisters have chosen to imitate.

Left, Trafalgar Home, the "Leper Camp" of Singapore in 1949 was staffed by the FMDM Sisters.



Mission in Singapore - by default

THE FMDM'S HISTORY in Singapore can be traced back to 1947 when three Sisters with some Irish Franciscan priests set off from England to Anlu, China.

However, the Sisters were ordered to abandon their mission to China as Communist troops advanced. While taking refuge with the Maryknoll

Sisters in Hong Kong and praying for the opportunity to return to China, the Lord revealed another plan for the Sisters.

News reached them that Bishop Michael Olcomendy of Singapore was looking for a nursing order of religious sisters who might be interested to take over a women's tuberculosis hospital operated by the Colonial Government.

As early as January 1951, vocations from Singapore and Malaysia started streaming in; they were sent to the Motherhouse in England for their initial religious formation and professional training.

The dream to build a Catholic hospital in Singapore was conceived as early as 1952, but Mt. Alvernia Hospital was only opened on Mar 4, 1961, and was staffed, then, entirely by the Sisters, many of whom were trained as nurses, midwives, physiotherapist, radiographers, lab technicians and dispensers.

Over the years the hospital has expanded from a 64-bed hospital to a 303-bed acute general and maternity hospital with two medical centres.

Right, venturing the sampan, the FMDM Sisters braved the waters to collect blood donations from sailors.



In 1987, the administration of the hospital was handed over to the laity and the Sisters today concentrate on pastoral care. In 1993, the Assisi Home and Hospice, an outreach service of Mt. Alvernia Hospital, was opened for the care of cancer patients.

From 1973 to 2002, the Sisters also ran the Villa Francis Home for the elderly poor and destitute.



This home is now run by Catholic Welfare Services. Healthcare, however, is only part of the mission of the Sisters. Today, the 22 FMDM Sisters in Singapore serve in a wide range of ministries: Family ministry / Health care / Pastoral Care of the Sick / Hospice/Palliative Care / Faith Formation / Retreat Ministry / Spiritual Direction / Parish Ministry / Education / Care of Children with special needs / Migrant Ministry / Prison Ministry

Sister Barbara Pereira provides emotional and spiritual comfort to a patient at Mt. Alvernia Hospital.

Thoughts on life as an FMDM Sister



Sister Linda Sim receives parental blessing - 12 years late

Linda Sim joined the FMDM Sisters despite family opposition, and has never looked back. She tells Sister Wendy Ooi, fsp about her journey. TRAINED IN TAE KWON DO as a teen, Linda Sim wanted to serve Singapore either in the army or the police but could not meet their height nor weight requirements (at least 5' 2" and 120lbs). Thus her decision to serve the Kingdom of God by entering the convent came as a bombshell to her parents. She recalls, "When I told my mother about my vocation, she almost died. She said, 'No way would I allow you. Wait till I die, or till your brother gets

married.'" Linda was 19 at that time and she waited for six years, until her younger brother and only sibling completed his 'O' levels, before she entered the convent in 1979. She shares, "I entered without

blessings from the family. I never said goodbye." Her parents attended her first profession in 1983, but "they came with the hope that I'd change my mind," reveals Sister Linda.

Upon profession, she was trained in the various departments at Mt. Alvernia Hospital to acquaint herself with the ministry of the FMDM Sisters. In 1984, Sister Linda was sent to the FMDM Motherhouse in England. Her parents visited her there. At the airport as they were returning to Singapore, Sister Linda's mother said to her, "Do whatever God wants you to do." Recounting that memorable moment, Sister Linda says, "She finally gave me her blessings. I waited so long - 12 years - to hear that."

"Gradually, because we prayed for light and strength, we were helped to see Linda's desire to be a nun as a call from God," her parents, Victor and Elizabeth Sim, shared later in a Marriage Encounter newsletter. "The fears we had are now no longer real, instead it is our joy of seeing Linda happy in her way of life." While in England, she was trained in Business Administration. This prepared her for the position of hospital administrator in the only Catholic hospital in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe where she served for three years.

She returned to England in 1993 and became the assistant mission coordinator. "We sourced, sorted and shipped supplies and materials like used hospital beds, gauzes and clothing to our outstation missions of Zambia and Zimbabwe."

Later, Sister Linda also worked in spiritual direction and in formation as a novice directress. When she eventually returned to Singapore in August 2004, Sister Linda took over as Mission Awareness Coordinator of Mt. Alvernia Hospital and Assisi Home and Hospice. Her role, she explains, is "to ensure that the mission, values, charism of FMDM continues in some form in these two establishments".

Working closely with the chief executive officers of these institutions, Sister Linda orientates new staff and provides ongoing education for existing staff. The challenge she faces is to "strike a balance - to imbibe our charism and being viable".

It has been 25 years since Sister Linda entered the convent. On her spiritual growth thus far, she reveals, "At the beginning, I was concerned with what I can do for God. After my first mission in Zimbabwe which enhanced my own spiritual life, I realize more now what God is doing in my life, the richness that I've been blessed with. He is a God who provides and continues to provide." She adds, "Interruptions used to distract me. Now they are where I meet my God. He cuts and intervenes in my daily programme and is at work in the events and people who touch my life and this nurtures my own prayer life." Like Mary at the Annunciation, Sister Linda continues to surrender to God, trusting in his fidelity. She says, "I find more peace abiding in the mystery and awesomeness of God instead of wanting to know. For those who need certainty or assurance, know that with God all things are possible."



Veronica Yao

Sister Veronica imparts the simplicity of Saint Francis to the children in her charge.

"I WAS VERY MUCH attracted to Francis of Assisi - his love for Jesus made visible through his relationship with the whole creation and all the people. He showed us the interconnectedness of all God's creation. He is a good steward of our environment and an instrument of peace. I have a lot to learn from him throughout my religious life. As a religious sister, I follow the example of Francis of Assisi, to love God wholeheartedly, to follow Jesus'

teaching daily, and to act justly wherever I go."



Jean-Marie Andrews

Sister Jean-Marie takes pride in being the region's archivist.

"I DO NOT look at life as a religious sister as an institutionalized kind of life! It has always been for me more like a move from one family to another. The transition may have been painful, leaving home and family but my graced response to God's call made the sacrifice easy to bear. It is over 50 years now since I left home and family, but the family bond has not diminished, rather it has grown stronger; the more I value family life in the community with sisters, all striving to love each other and live up to the commitment they made to follow the Lord.

"I was trained as a radiographer. Later I took up a course in pastoral care. I am also a member of the Life Direction Team and am engaged in retreat work. My present occupation in the convent is a very challenging one, and I find joy in being the Archivist for the FMDM Region of Malaysia/Singapore."



Florence Wong

Retired from nursing but Sister Florence continues to be a spiritual mother to many.

"AS A MIDWIFE over the years I have assisted many mothers to bring life into the world, and as a nurse I have worked in different areas of alleviating pain and suffering which has taught me the meaning of the compassion of Jesus. The present situation in Lebanon, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia reminds me of the time I was serving in the refugee camps in Jordan and my passion to serve life.

Today, although I have retired from active nursing and midwifery, I continue to serve life in being 'a midwife in the spiritual life'. Currently I am a member of the Life Direction Team giving spiritual direction and retreats. I facilitate workshops for Midlife Growth and Living the Golden Years Well, and participate actively in the pastoral care of the sick at the Church of the Holy Spirit."

Angeline Lim

Sister Angeline hopes young women with missionary zeal will join the FMDMs.

"IN MY 'EARLY' YEARS of formation, religious life was structured (and monastic), and in some ways it was easier to live as a religious sister. I felt fulfilled and remember with nostalgia and fondness of my early years in the rural mission of Nigeria (nine years) and later in Jordan (three years).

"Life was simple in the missions and I learnt to be innovative and creative where there was limited clean water supply, and having to rely on diesel generators (when they work!) for electricity. There was a great sense of bonding between missionaries and we enjoyed life in general.

"To be a religious in Singapore where there is affluence (in sharp contrast to the simple lifestyle in the mission in Africa) is very challenging for me. My experience in Africa has taught me to be grateful and appreciative of all that is readily available and in surplus, and to remember the many who are struggling to bring bread home to the families who are hungry not only for basic food, but for healthcare and education. Most of all, life in the missions has taught me to be joyful and hospitable even when hungry for food and with lack of proper housing.

"For me, to be a religious is to be happy where I am being planted and not to pine for what has passed, but rather to live in the present moment wholeheartedly, cheerfully!



"I would like to encourage young women who are daring, adventurous, and with a missionary zeal to bring God's Word outside Singapore, and (to encourage anyone) who has a strong desire to commit herself to God and the church as a religious sister, not to be afraid to take the plunge into the deep.

"The sense of peace and fulfilment is indescribable. When you say 'yes' to God, he will give you sufficient bread for the journey to sustain you, and you will have 'good, sensible and cheerful companions' to give you support and nourishment needed for the road."

For young women who are interested in our way of life, you are most welcome to visit us at: St. Francis Convent, 810 Thomson Road or visit our website at: www.fmdminternational.co.uk

Article by Sr. Wendy Ooi, fsp for Catholic News Singapore