

# Sisterhood of caring hearts

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**T**OGETHER they have recorded over 200 years of service. But the faces of the five Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (FMDM) Sisters who serve Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital in Penang barely hint of their vast experience.

Upbeat in step and dynamic in character, the group, whose ages range from the late 50s to 70s, carries on the order's quiet but proud tradition of reaching out to the sick.

Sister Cyrilla Baptist, who is in her 60s, remembers how things were during the institution's early days. She was Mount Miriam's first ward sister when the hospital opened its doors in 1976.

"We did everything ourselves, including the cleaning! For many years, there were Sisters in charge of every department, and at its peak, about a dozen Sisters were serving here," says Sister Cyrilla, who is originally from Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

In the mid-1990s, lay professionals - members of the religious community who are not ordained - started to collaborate with the FMDM sisters in the running of the hospital.

"There are only five Sisters here now, but it's wonderful to see how we started with nothing and how far we've come to where we are now," she shares.

The idea of Mount Miriam, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the care of cancer patients, first started in 1963 by Bishop Francis Chan, the first Catholic bishop of Penang who was suffering from advanced cancer.

"He wanted to have a place where cancer patients could be cared for at the end of their lives. The idea was first thrown to the Grey Sisters (the French Sisters of the Foreign Mission), but when they were unable to take on the full responsibility of such a place, the FMDM was approached," Sister Cyrilla recalls.

Since then, the hospital, initially known as the Cancer Nursing Home, has grown by leaps and bounds catering to some 1,450 new patients every year. Mount Miriam, which has a 160-strong staff, celebrated its 35th anniversary on Feb 21 this year.

Sister Cyrilla, along with Sister Jennifer Chan, 71, who previously served in the hospital's administration, are the two Sisters in the current group who were missioned to serve the hospital during its inception.

"First, I was helping in the wards and then I took care of the business office which meant everything from accounts to salaries, leave, going to the bank and getting stationary. Later, I went into pastoral care where I see patients, listen to them and try to help them along in this journey they're on," Sister Jennifer relates.

Having seen hundreds of patients,

Caring for patients, cleaning wards and balancing accounts were some of the duties of the early missionary sisters at the Mount Miriam Cancer Hospital. Today, five sisters remain to help run the hospital and offer pastoral care.



**Reaching out:** The FMDM sisters (from left) Sister Agnes, Sister Pauline, Sister Cyrilla, Sister Katherine and Sister Jennifer have devoted their lives to caring for the sick.

## If we didn't have faith, a houseful of women living together could be terrible!

- SISTER KATHERINE MASCRINHOS

"First, I worked as a staff nurse, then later I went for a theatre course to serve in the operation theatre. I was also trained as an administrator but here in Mount Miriam, I do pastoral care where we try to bring patients to a stage of internal peace.

"For terminal cases, we console and comfort them and lead them to a place of reconciliation with their unresolved issues, no matter what faith they believe in," says Sister Pauline, who was born in Kuala Lumpur.

Mount Miriam, she stresses, is not out to convert patients and the hospital is open about bringing in ministers of other religions to help patients, as further illustrated by the annual inter-faith memorial service that was attended by Christian, Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist religious representatives.

"Every person has a belief of some kind, so we tell them to turn to their own beliefs. The basic point is that everyone has to face death, and when they do, they might have past incidents that they are still angry about or have yet to achieve peace of mind with.

"We are here to listen to them

and guide them to a place where they will be able to let go when the time comes," Sister Pauline explains.

Sister Katherine Mascrinhos, 71, who hails from Batu Pahat, Johor, says as the Sisters reach out to cancer-stricken patients, they in turn are inspired with the resolve and strength of those they help.

"Most patients start out anxious and fearful but as time goes on, they come to a calm where they are growing (individually) and start to realise the things that really matter in life like family and relationships. And even when there are setbacks, they accept them and carry on with life.

"This is something we see again and again and we are so inspired by these patients and their relatives," says Sister Katherine, who works in Mount Miriam's patient education programme.

Sister Katherine shares that living in a religious community can be both supportive and challenging.

"Wherever we serve, the FMDM sisters live together in communities. Of course, we don't choose each other, so it is sometimes challenging.

"In fact, if we didn't have faith, a houseful of women living together could be terrible!" she laughs.

"But living 'sister-to-sister' allows us to support each other and also challenge each other to do better," Sister Katherine chips in.

Sister Agnes Ken, 57, the youngest in the group, owes her passion

to serve to God.

"When I look back at some of the things I've had to deal with, I don't know how I found the strength to face it.

"The energy that I find within (me) comes from God and that's how we all continue doing what we're doing," says Sister Agnes, who has spent three years in Zambia in southern Africa helping HIV and AIDS patients.

Noting that there is no retirement age for those in the Sisterhood, Sister Agnes says her fellow Sisters and daily masses help her in her religious life while she sees cancer patients through their hardships.

"People say cancer is a death sentence but there is always hope. Even at Stage Four (the final stage in the progression of cancer) there is still hope to provide a good quality of life for the patient's remaining days," she adds.

Sister Agnes, who is from Kulim, Kedah and the only one in the group dedicated solely to nursing, says seeing patients at the hospital's annual Survivors' Day always puts a smile on her face.

The most recent one on June 11 saw over 200 cancer survivors and their family members letting loose and having fun with staff and other patients who are still undergoing treatment.

"It's a joy to see patients who have recovered and are back enjoying themselves.

"That is really 'life-giving' to me," she quips.