

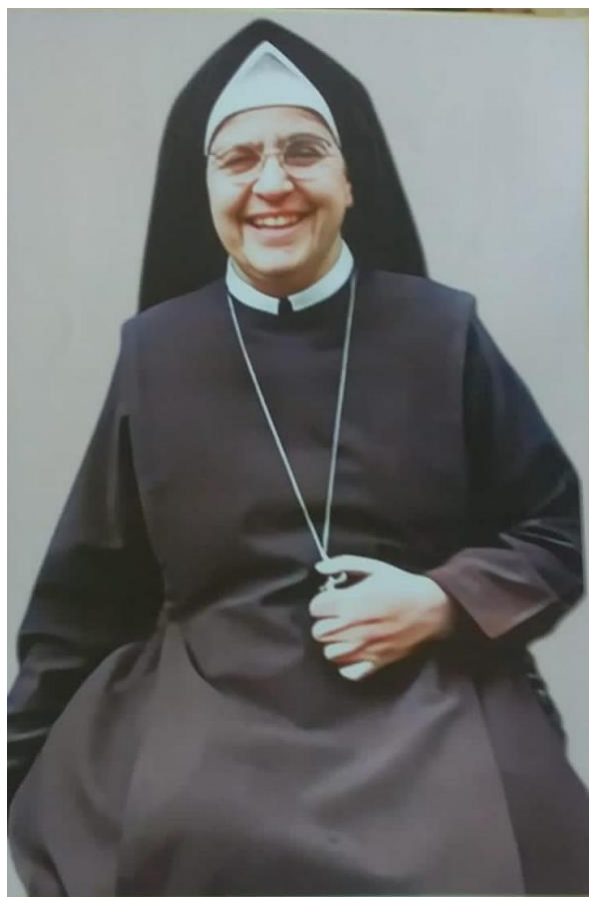
With Healing in Her Wings (Book of Prophet Malachi 4:2)

The story begins a century ago. It was back in 1925. “It takes a village to raise a child,” so the saying goes.

It took two women to raise awareness of what village women and children need to do to survive.

Full access to medical resources administered by women, specifically qualified women doctors needed a change in Canon law.

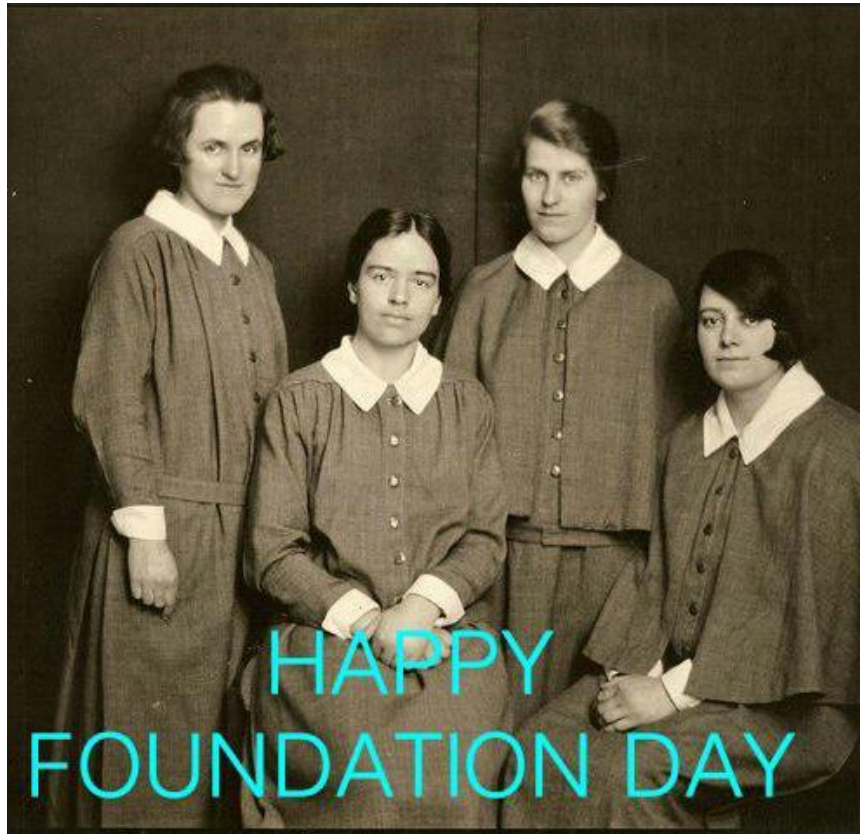
While many worldwide voiced their support at the heart of this hope, Agnes McLaren, physician and Advocate, set the systemic shift in motion. And Anna Dengel, physician and Pioneer who brought the dream to fulfilment by founding the International Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries (Medical Mission Sisters) in 1925” (Quoted from *If you Love: The Story of Anna Dengel* by Miriam Theresa Winter)



Anna Maria Dengel was born on March 16, 1892, in Steeg, Austria. There was never a moment of hesitation in her search to become a Mission Doctor. She qualified in 1919 from the Medical School at University College, Cork, Ireland, and completed a 9-month internship in England.

In 1920, she crossed to Rawalpindi and took up a job at Dr. McLaren’s Hospital. She speaks of this move in fiery words: ‘I was all fire and flame’. She worked for 4 years. Her experience in that period convinced her that ‘*if any real healing has to occur, an organization of Doctors and Nurses was needed.*’ A religious community of women dedicated to serving the sick had to be

availed. But no such organizations existed. A medical law regarding Religious Sisters serving as doctors was still part of the Catholic Church's canon law. She recognized the need and took action to address it. At one moment, she travelled back to the USA. For a year, she had knocked at every ecclesiastical door and tried to explain the need. She made the cause known. She wrote up a constitution and said – *“Members were to live for God, to dedicate themselves to the service of the sick for the love of God, and had to be trained appropriately according to the knowledge and standards of the time to practice medicine in its full scope.”*



She secured permission in May 1925 and on September 30, 1925, initiated the first community of four in Washington, DC. She said, ‘The impossible of today is the work of tomorrow’. They were initially granted the status of a pious society. But in 1936, Pope Pius XI raised them to the status of a religious congregation. And the dream materialized, and the congregation began to grow and contribute to the Hospital Mission. One hundred years now.

Their growth path took them to the nations.

Being is Becoming

Among the many hospitals that came to be in the order of MMS, many wonderful things occurred. Recalling the story of their establishment in Asia and India, in particular, they have a storybook titled *‘Remember a Labour of Love’* compiled by Sr. Carol Huss and Sr. Anna McDoran. They gathered stories of foreign missionary sisters working in Asian Countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Afghanistan.



Stories of excellent growth are narrated. At one point in the story of the congregation's growth and development, the whole community paused for a moment of stillness. Stay still and know that I am God. Inspired by Vatican Council II of the 1960s, which called for a return to the roots of the congregation's founding purposes, representatives from around the world were convened in the general chapter of the 1970s. It made a turn for the better in the congregation. The chapter reflected on various matters and emerged with a framework of options for the poor. *Intoto*, there was a need to change, taking into account the socio-political reality of the world at large. A socio-political analysis of medical institutions in India followed. And it shocked the congregation to realise that they are not serving the purpose for which they were born. They took an analysis of their work and standing in the context of their religious vow of poverty. They had to make a shift in their living. The option for the poor had to be taken into account. There was a turn in possibilities. French social scientist François Houtart challenged them to weigh how much of the poor visited their hospitals and profited from their survival. Analytically, he showed that they surveyed and reported that not even five percent of their services went to the real needy and poor. Pledging poverty has meaning only if the lives of the committed reach the poor and the needy. My life for the poor is the motto of Jesus. He said, *'Blessed are you, poor. Yours is the Kingdom.'*

And like the Magi visiting the stable where Jesus was born and offering their gifts of Gold, Myrrh and Frankincense at the feet of the Baby Jesus, so the congregation had to offer their life gifts to the poor. That was the challenge. These women took a quick move to that end. A group of them moved from the cosy conditions of the hospital system to the manager's homes in places like Poothura, Mampally, Panakachira, Seluid, Roshni, and similar rural settings.

From 1970 to 2003 and upto the present, the search for the child in the manger continues. Their search and finding is best reflected in a poem by Jane Richardson titled 'Wise Women also came'. Let me quote:

'Wise women also came. The fire burned in their wombs long before they saw. The flaming star in the sky. They walked in shadows. Trusting the path would open under the light of the moon.

'Wise women also came seeking no directions, no permission from any king. They came by their authority, driven by their desire and longing. They came in quietly. Spreading no rumours. Sparking no fears to lead to. Innocent slaughter, to their sister. Rachel's inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came. And they brought valuable gifts: water for washing after labour. Fire for warm illumination. A blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came. At least three of them. Holding Mary in labour and crying out with her in the birth pangs, breathing ancient blessings into her ear.

Wise women also came. And they went as wise women always do. Home a different way'



This image of wise women, not 3 but 4 came into the small village of Poothura, Anchengo, Trivandrum District, Arch Diocese of Trivandrum on 31st July 1975. The first 4 women were named – Srs Luke Cherian, Alice Vadassery, Maria Kumblanthanam and Therma Prayikalam. They were the first 4 to walk into Poothura, a fisher village peninsula lying between Anchengo Lake and Arabian Sea on either side. The delta of the land lies between Muthalakkuzhy and Anchengo Fort. This village is now being erased from the map with all the developments initiated in the place starting from ARDC Project under the Indo-Norwegian Project and now the Vizhinjam Port Project. Sea erosion has swept away numerous houses, and others are under threat. Fishers are compelled to quit the land sooner or later.



Into this terrain, the MMS Sisters came and sought a house to stay. They rented a fisherman's hut and three cents of land and started living among the fishermen's families. With no walls or fences around. It was unthinkable that women religious of those times would expose themselves to such precarious situations. These sisters chose to live like any other in the fisher community of the place. No walls separated their living space, and they had no water except from a public tap, which they had to stand in line for at the late hours of the night to collect two or three buckets full for the four of them to use for cooking, bathing, and washing clothes. They had no proper toilet facilities. Their toilet was made of logs of wood stuck out into the lake on 2 beams. The toilet was covered with just coconut leaves. They did not have coats or tables. They slept on the floor on mats. They served food in the same space. Welcome guests in the same space and sit in prayer in the same space. Conditions were so precarious. But the sisters moved into the place with willingness and happiness to be part of the community, after the model of the Son of Man, who was divine, accepted the human form and the image of the poor in everything except sin.

I remember them moving out early in the morning after their morning ceremonies, walking the road to join the fishermen's home and their work, like beating husks to make rope. They moved from home to home, talking to women, mothers, and gathering their children to the Balavadis—such stressful living. I cannot think back now, all the hardships they bore. But their presence brought new life, energy, and joy to the villagers. A real blessing. They empowered the youngsters, especially young ladies, teaching them to become Balavadi teachers and health instructors. The whole village was caught up in the mesmerism of personal hygiene, cleanliness of homes and surroundings, and this led to social empowerment. The wave of change was so radical. I remember the words of introduction in this context written by Pope Francis in his autobiography, *Hope*.

It so typifies the life and involvement of these sisters. Let me quote – *'All is born to blossom. The book of my life is the story of a journey of hope, a journey that I cannot imagine separated from that of my family, of my people, of all God's people. In every page, in every passage, it is also the book of those who have travelled with me, of those who came before, of those who will follow.'*

An autobiography is not our private story, but rather the baggage we carry with us.

And memory is not just what we recall, but what surrounds us. It speaks not only of what has been but also of what will be. Memory, in the words of a Mexican poet, is a present that never ceases to pass.

It seems like yesterday, and yet it is tomorrow. People often say wait and hope, so much so that the word '*esperar*' in Spanish means '*to hope*' and '*to wait*'. But hope is above all the virtue of movement and the engine of change. It is the tension that brings together memory and utopia to build the dreams that truly await us. And if a dream fades, we need to go back and dream it again, in new forms, drawing with hope from the embers of memory.

We Christians must know that hope doesn't deceive and doesn't disappoint. All is born to blossom in an eternal springtime. In the end, we will say only – '*I don't recall anything in which you are not there.*' (*Hope* by Pope Francis).

The sisters embody exactly what the Pope said through their lifestyle of identity and involvement over the last 50 years. – I don't recall anything in which you are not there. Over the past 50 years, 44 sisters from the two communities of Poothura and Mampally, young and old, learned and qualified, offered their lives in absolute surrender to the fisher community in myriad roles. My life for my people had been their motto, well engraved in their mother foundress's sweet chiming words that show up in her life story, coded with the words 'if you love'

Every one of them who crossed the arches of Anchengo village, chanted the words put up in the life story of Mother Anna Dengel.

It rhymes like this –

*If you have real love
You are Inventive.
If you love, you try to find out
You are interested.
If you really love
You are patient you are long suffering.
Certainly, if you love
You accommodate yourself.
If you love, you want to give
You are tireless, selfless and generous.
If you love, you really try to serve and not just work.
One does not spare oneself in one's love.*



The sisters, each of them, from Luke Cherian, Philomin Mary, Regina Nariamparampil, Imelda (the senior I recall), to the vibrant youngsters from Mercy Kootiyani, Patricia Kuruvinakunnel, Therma Praikulam, and others, have proved to be genuine lovers after Anna Dengel's vision. As every one of them came out vibrant with the vision of the congregation recognising and vowing to the prophetic call of Micah6:8 *'This is what God now asks of you – 3 things that I want you to do. To act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God'* (Song by Liam Lawton in his CD – *Into the Quiet*). The sisters have fulfilled their vows of virginity, poverty and obedience in wonderful ways. Over the period of their process of living with the concept of *'being is becoming'* They grew in their declared identity of being *'the healing presence in a wounded world'*. They evolved, saying – *'a broad spectrum of health care'*. Initially, providing professional (Quality) medical care was the focus of the Medical Mission Sisters' service.



But along with curative care sisters also established training programs and schools so that the local people could learn to take care of themselves. Over time, the community became more involved in preventive and promotive health services, including immunization campaigns, nutrition, health education and community-based health programs. Training programs were also expanded to include not only professional schools of nursing, midwifery, and technology, but also simpler grassroots courses for village health workers, traditional birth attendants, and health animators.

What Healing Can Mean:-Mother Anna Dengel often reminded our sisters that a religious community has a task to do, a service to render, to be all arms to reach out in the name of Christ to the 101 human needs. In 1967, at the age of 75, she stepped down as Superior General of the Medical Mission Sisters, many of the needs were long met by the hospital, health centres and training programs in over 40 nations that were begun under her leadership.

But she had also laid the vital groundwork for our sisters to explore more fully what it means to be a healing presence among people in need, what it means to empower others, and to bring them to an awareness of their fundamental right to life and health.



Our community's understanding of justice is essential to genuine healing. It is now being implemented to address problems of widespread poverty, hunger, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, inadequate housing, and unsafe water supplies. This understanding originated with Anna. She saw how unjust and oppressive the structures were that kept Muslim Women from health care. And she worked intentionally to renovate them through action and dialogue.

'To be a healing presence means taking seriously the enormous suffering in our world and the massive power of those structures that militate against the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of the entire health community. It is for us to search out the causes as best we can, to acknowledge our complicity in much of what goes on, and to accept our responsibility. But also to rejoice in the immense privilege of struggling alongside people and communities everywhere for the path to greater life, peace and justice' (MMS 75 years of healing presence in the year 2000. www.medicalmissionsisters.org). They claim to be a healing presence. *We now grasp that we can't have health for people on a sick planet, no well baby clinics on thriving communities on a devastated planet. Unless the earth yields pure water, clean air, rich soils for food, healthy trees, and vibrant ecosystems, the human community cannot move forward into the future with vitality and good health. This fact is obvious; the need is urgent. The task we face in all parts of the world is monumental'* (ibid)

It is all in this purview of the vision that we see the MMS in their mission in Poothura – Mampally area for the last 50 years. We see Sr. Luke in those days sitting in the newly established post office at Poothura, serving as Post Mistress, bringing in communication from the outside world, and she communicating at her leisure times, conscientizing people as they walk in for their postal needs. Sister Therma, with her background in B.Ed. Training that envisages a Balavadi teaching plan tailored to the coastal belt, accompanied by walking with young women and empowering them to become Balavadi teachers in their Own Communities.

Sr. Mercy Kuttiyani moving among the youth with street dramas and puppet plays to conscientize the village on health issues HIV and political problems. Sr. Alice Milady, with her background in public health nursing training, is taking employment in the government sector so that she can serve the poorest of the poor in the fishing villages. Patricia Kuruvinkunnel and Philomin Mary are engaging in political action through the trade union movement of KSMTF, participating in demonstrations and agitations for the rights of the fishing community, and engaging in hunger fasts and other agitational methods, following the Gandhian Model. Sr. Philo Varghese and others are making efforts to promote cleaner sanitation, including the construction of over 500 additional latrines and a people-managed public latrine. Every one of them worked and contributed in their respective capacities and continued to be involved up to this moment.



It has been widely assessed that their involvement was extremely radical in transforming the entire village into a powerful community. I hold several paper cuttings, photography and articles to testify to the fact. I just hold out two titles that came out in the Malayalam prominent weekly 'Kala Kaumudi', Vol. 409 and Vol. 457, with the title 'God's Shepherdesses on an Agitational Friend'. There are articles in 'Sathyanadham', 'Deepika', 'Mathrubhoomi', 'Intercontinent', 'Health for the millions', 'Jeevadhara', 'Vidyajyothi' and many other journals that brought out the points of the involvement of the MMS among the fishers and the transformation that their living with the fishers brought in the villages of Trivandrum Coast with a specific accent in Anchengo, Poothura, Mampally and the Kerala coast through their political involvement.

Anyone who visited the places in 1970 will recognize and appreciate the changes that have been brought about by the Medical Mission Sisters' involvement over the past 50 years. A one-sentence description of the situation would be from Malachi, the prophet. The sun of justice shall arise with healing in her wings – Malachi 4:2

It is all about the transformation, change in thinking patterns, and mobilization into action that the MMS inspires. Sisters served like in Mao's China, going to the villages, living among them, and transforming the lives of the poor. Hurray to every sister, living and dead, who has achieved this transformation. Greetings to them on the 50th anniversary of their involvement, which has brought about transformation and healing.

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