NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Vietnamese nuns work with people of other faiths to provide free healthcare for poor patients

Joachim Pham | Apr. 7, 2014
Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

In 2009 Sr. Mai Thanh of Our Lady welcomed a practical suggestion from the France-based Fraternité Chrétienne Vietnam Cambodge Laos (FCVCL [1]) that has made a difference in how people in Ho Chi Minh City receive healthcare.

The non-profit, which also provides scholarships for young doctors from northern Vietnam to further their studies in France, proposed that she look for a local partner to help set up a charity clinic for poor people in Ho Chi Minh City.

Sr. Mai Thanh and some local priests involved in interfaith activities and dialogs got together to discuss it. They decided to work with dignitaries from Minh Ly Dao, which is a sect of Cao Dai [2], a syncretic belief system founded in early 20th century Vietnam. One of the Catholic priests, Fr. Peter Joseph Ha Thien Truc, has a mother who is Buddhist and a father who is a Cao Dai dignitary.

?They (Minh Ly Dao officials) appreciated our project and cooperation with them in giving free health care to poor patients,? Sr. Mai Thanh said.

It was a coincidence that at the same time the Minh Ly Dao officials were finally being given government permission to reopen their charity clinic. It was closed by the government after April 1975, when the communists reunified North and South Vietnam.

?This was a big step further to carry out the project,? Sr. Mai Thanh recalled. She worked to seek funding for the clinic and invited Catholic nuns and physicians to work at there.

With help from multiple benefactors, the charity clinic based at Tam Tong Mieu Temple was restored, and basic health care equipment was installed. It was inaugurated in 2011.

Doctor Nguyen Tan Tri, who manages the clinic, said FCVCL helped cover the cost of essential facilities including acupuncture and physical therapy equipment.

Doctor Tri, a Cao Dai follower, said 30 part-time staff members ? including followers of Buddhism, Catholicism, Minh Ly Dao and Cao Dai ? volunteer to serve at the clinic. One doctor also donated electrocardiogram and ultrasound machines.

He said the clinic provides free acupuncture, physical therapy and gynecology and treats patients for diabetes, cardiovascular and digestive problems, inflammation of the joints and muscles, respiratory diseases and other common ailments.

The 71-year-old surgery expert said the clinic?s monthly spending is 20 million dong (U.S. $952) and is covered

by a foreign charity (Aide au Vietnam from Luxembourg) and through voluntary donations from patients.

Doctor Tri said the clinic is open Monday and Tuesday mornings and during the afternoons Wednesday through Friday. On average, the clinic serves 45 patients a day; most of the patients live in poverty and cannot afford to buy medical insurance, but some well-off patients also receive treatment there and make voluntary payments.

He said staff members from various faiths ?work close together in harmony with the key aim of treating patients with loving care. We really respect one another and actively support one another in taking care of patients.?

?The clinic is a model of promoting peaceful coexistence among followers of various faiths,? he said with pride.

Sr. Anne Nguyen Thi Hong Van of Our Lady of Calvary, a physical therapist who is on duty on Thursday afternoons, said she and two others who are Buddhist and Minh Ly Dao start their work at 1 p.m. and leave the clinic after 5 p.m., even though the clinic is only officially open from 2 to 4 p.m.

?We always work overtime as there are so many patients, but we treat them with great dignity, not like inferiors,? Sr. Hong Van noted.

They work in a 65-square-foot (20 sq. ft. m.) room and provide acupuncture and physical therapy to an average of 20 patients an afternoon.

?Patients come here not only to get treatment but to seek real sympathy from us. So we patiently listen to their problems and comfort them,? the 33-year-old nun said.

She said many well-off people also come to get treatment from the clinic because ?they trust religious physicians.?

?I am happy to work with physicians of other faiths to serve patients as my congregation?s mission is to give education and health care to the disadvantaged and people with physical disabilities,? Sr. Hong Van said.

She has been working at the clinic since 2011. Two other nuns of Our Lady also work at the clinic.

In the past Sr. Hong Van worked at the clinic two days a week, but last year reduced her voluntary work by half to make time to attend a theology course at a local church-run institute.

Patients shared their experiences with *NCR*. Ly Thi Mui, who had both her legs broken in a motorbike accident in 2009, said she was treated at a local hospital but still suffered sleeplessness and felt sharp pains in her legs.

?Now I feel better after two nuns have been offering me physical therapy for a year,? Mui said.

Mui, 52, was orphaned as a child and works as a domestic housekeeper. ?I am lucky that I am loved and helped by the staff here. Two nuns always carry me on their shoulders to my three-wheeled motorbike after my treatments.?

Another patient, Nguyen Thi Mai, 58, said she gets massage and heat treatments at the clinic and is shown how to do therapeutic exercises. A stroke left her partially paralyzed two years ago.

The mother of two said she earns 50,000 dong (U.S. $2.38) a day as a lottery ticket seller. There is no way she could afford to get treatment at state-run hospitals.

?A friend of mine introduced me to the clinic, and I have received treatment for a year. I am recovering,? she

said and then ?drove? her wheelchair home after Sr. Anna Nguyen Thi Dung of Our Lady helped her do exercises.

Sr. Thi Dung, who started to work at the clinic in August, 2012, said it impressed her that some patients let others get treatment first or help others to do their exercises and use the therapy equipment. The clinic?s atmosphere is in marked contrast to that of local state-run hospitals, where patients struggle to do time-consuming paperwork and have to pay for costly tests just to gain access to a doctor.

Sr. Thi Dung said ?Working with people of other faiths is an opportunity to understand one another?s religion and to promote friendliness among them.?

Dr. Tri said staff members also make annual visits to people in remote areas and give them free treatment and medicine. They and some local benefactors cover the costs.

Sr. Mai Thanh, 86, told *NCR* she plans to build another clinic to serve poor patients, as FCVCL has promised to cover the cost.

[Joachim Pham is an *NCR* correspondent based in Vietnam.]

Editor's Note: The *National Catholic Reporter* is embarking on a groundbreaking project to give greater voice to sisters around the world. To learn more about this project or sign up for email alerts visit, http://ncronline.org/sisters [3].

Source URL (retrieved on *11/23/2014 - 18:26*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/vietnamese-nuns-work-people-other-faiths-provide-free-healthcare-poor-patients

Links:
[1] http://www.michelmeyer.fr/associations/fcvcl
[2] http://www.caodai.org/web/content.aspx?pageID=1
[3] http://ncronline.org/sisters