

Indian nuns brought hope to victims of devastating Kerala floods

Ouseph Pappachan, a physically challenged farmer in flood-ravaged Kerala, said he and his wife are alive now because of Sister Regin Mathew.

Pappachan was among more than one million people who took refuge in relief camps as unprecedented floods battered 12 of Kerala state's 14 districts during July and August, overwhelming the region's dams.

Last summer, priests in the Edmonton Archdiocese could only watch and pray as a once-in-a-generation flood wreaked havoc on their home state in southwestern India

Back home, farmers say nuns helped them through the worst of the flood aftermath.

"I did not feel like living after floods destroyed all I had. But the sister convinced me there is life beyond such personal tragedies," said Pappachan, a Catholic.

Sister Mathew, a member of the Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate, recalled finding Pappachan suffering from severe anxiety after the floods washed away his coffee trees, vegetables and cash crops on his half acre of land.

"I told him that he can recover everything provided he did not give up. We also promised him our help to restart life," she said.



Sister Regin Mathew, right, helped Vincy Joy, a 42-year-old woman, overcome trauma after floodwaters submerged her house in Mananthavady, India, a town in Kerala state. Saji Thomas, Catholic News Service

Since 2000, hundreds of depressed farmers in Pappachan's district of Kerala

state committed suicide, according to a local priest in charge of Kerala relief efforts for the Church. Recent suicides mostly are attributed to flooding woes, but earlier ones have been due to factors like crop failure and debt.

In late November, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan told the state legislative assembly that the state lost about \$4.36 billion because of the floods.

Incessant rains, pushing water levels above the danger marks, forced Kerala to open 35 of its 58 dams in a frantic move that left no time to evacuate people before the onslaught. Authorities, who were waiting for the monsoons to subside, said the dams were close to bursting, and they were left with no other choice.

Nearly 2,000 landslides in two hilly districts added to the state's misery. The floodwaters damaged 75,000 houses and submerged more than 111,000 acres of farmland.

At least 474 people died in the floods, most of them when the deluge was worst Aug. 15-20, said Father George Vettikattil, who heads the relief operations under the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council, in the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. The floods affected more than 5.41 million people, he estimated, based on data from various jurisdictions.

Kerala's 32 Catholic dioceses deployed more than 200,000 volunteers for rescue, relief and rehabilitation work among those affected. They managed camps, distributed food and supplies, mobilized fishermen to rescue stranded people and cleaned houses.

"We worked together to restore people who were at a crossroads," said Father Vettikattil. He credited women religious for playing a crucial role of bringing hope to flood victims.

Sister Mathew said she was shocked when she heard that 15 farmers in one district died by suicide because of the recent floods. "There was an urgent need for the church to intervene to boost the farmers' morale," she said.

She visited farmers' houses to console families affected by suicide and to identify those under stress. "We help them rebuild their shattered lives," she explained.

Even local civic bodies sought the church volunteers' help.

Philomena Antony, a member of Pappachan's village council, said members approached Sister Mathew for help after desperation among the farmers became alarming. The council wanted the nun's team to prevent the village from having to report another farmer's suicide.

Sister Mathew said flooding is not the only reason the farmers are distressed. They also suffer from alcohol dependence, chronic illness, family conflicts, marital disharmony and poor self-image because of poverty.

Church volunteers in other parts of Kerala tell similar stories.

Sister Selma George, who works among flood victims in Changanacherry, a central Kerala region, said they struggle to give “a new lease on life” to the flood survivors.

Kuttanad, a low-lying region under the Changanacherry Archdiocese that is considered the rice bowl of Kerala, experienced floods three times this year.

So, the church’s immediate focus was to provide victims food and shelter, said Sister George, a member of the Missionary Sisters of Queen of the Apostles. “But we also found that they needed mental and psychological support as most have no desire to live,” she said.

Rosalie Antony, a widow who underwent counseling, described Sister George and her volunteer team as angels who helped when everything appeared lost. “They cleaned our house and made it ready for us to move in. They provided us food and medicine and assured their support for us,” said Antony, who works as a maid in several houses to feed her two adult daughters.

Sister George and her team spent time with the family and counseled them individually and collectively.

“Sister told me to live for my children. Until now we were alone; now we have become part of a larger family,” Antony added.

Sacred Heart Sister Treesa Palackal, a clinical psychologist, traveled from northern Kerala with 60 trained counselors and psychotherapists to work among those affected by floods in the Ernakulam District. They counseled thousands individually and in groups.

“Counseling and psychotherapy help the flood-hit people overcome their traumatic experiences during floods,” she said.

Thomas is a freelance journalist based in Bhopal, a central Indian city. This article is part of a collaboration between Global Sisters Report and Matters India, a news portal that focuses on religious and social issues in India.