News



Sr. Concilia Chemhere of the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood (second from left), helped establish the congregation's new spiritual center at Mater Dei Hospital in Zimbabwe. The sisters established the hospital in 1953. (Courtesy of Concilia Chemhere)



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Bulawayo, Zimbabwe — April 3, 2024

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In a country where millions are reeling under the psychological strain of a long-running political and economic crisis, Franciscan sisters in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, have started a spiritual support center.

The Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood in January opened the Franciscan Center, offering psychological counseling and other social services. The sisters are a missionary congregation who established the Mater Dei Hospital in 1953. The hospital, one of the few fully functioning health institutions in the city, if not the country, is today run by a board of trustees that includes the Franciscan Missionaries.

The spiritual center is located at the giant hospital, making it a convenient presence for patients and prospective clients across this city of about 1.5 million people.

Patients come from the country's vast southwest region, highlighting the needs of millions amid few medical facilities. According to the Franciscan nuns, the center will also offer workshops and retreats, helping the sisters build a self-sustaining apostolate.



Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood Sr. Concilia Chemhere helped establish the Franciscan Center. (Courtesy of Concilia Chemhere)

Like many missionary congregations established in the country decades earlier, the Franciscan sisters have faced declining financial support from abroad. This has meant exploring new revenue streams that will help run their convents and formation houses at a time when no one has been spared the country's economic turmoil.

They are constantly looking for self-sustaining projects, and the Franciscan Center is part of those efforts.

The spiritual center is expected to go a long way toward helping locals deal with mental and psychosocial challenges, which experts say have driven many into substance abuse.

"This comes about as a response to the needs of the people of Bulawayo, having realized that in this city, we lack facilities that hold a holistic approach to life," Sr. Concilia Chemhere, the Franciscan Missionaries of the Divine Motherhood accountant driving the establishment of the Franciscan Center, told Global Sisters Report.

City officials have long been concerned about the lack of facilities that offer professional counseling services and the high demand for such services in public institutions. The country's health facilities are already stretched amid a lack of resources and specialized health professionals.

"We believe through our Franciscan charism that we have something more to offer to God's people as our spirituality is all-inclusive. Our main aim is to make the enjoyment of God available to all through the lens of our Franciscan charism, vision and wisdom for the world," Chemhere said.

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Acknowledging the need for quality services, she added that the Franciscan sisters are also engaging with trained professionals to offer counseling and spiritual direction.

It has become common for city local courts to direct psychological evaluation of residents involved in court cases. And because thousands of health care professionals have left Zimbabwe to seek opportunities outside the country, residents have been unable to get help.

The Franciscan Center finds itself well positioned to meet those needs.

"We realize that so many people are broken and struggling spiritually, and our creation is hurting. Hence, our call and desire is to bring healing in all its forms," Chemhere added.

Zimbabwe has a long history of trauma, including the Bush War that brought independence, the early 1980s disturbances that claimed the lives of thousands of civilians, and successive post-2000 elections marred by political violence.

The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference has also raised concerns about the effects of the country's economic hardships. They also noted that poverty and unemployment were driving many into drug use.

In turn, this has added to other psychological pressures, dysfunctional families and a litany of challenges. The Franciscan sisters hope to be part of that spiritual healing.

"We wish to uphold human dignity through holding talks that enable one to attend to their emotions, to grow in self-knowledge and to attend to spiritual growth through engaging with Scriptures and spiritual direction," Chemhere said.