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Q&As



Sr. ElmaMary Ekewuba, Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria, offers hope and healing to Nigerians living with mental health issues. (Ayo Omotola)



by Ayo Omotola

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When Pope John Paul II visited Onitsha, Nigeria, in 1984, a young ElmaMary Ekewuba's dream of becoming a nun grew stronger. By 1986, she had answered the call, joining the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul and professing final vows in 1988.

Before starting her work at Providence Home for the Mentally Ill Destitute, or PHoMID, in Uyo, the capital city of Akwa Ibom state in southern Nigeria, she had already served marginalized groups: victims of human trafficking, individuals accused of witchcraft, prisoners, and those living with the aftermath of leprosy, seeking inclusion and rehabilitation.

She has dedicated 36 years of her life to a mission of compassion. "Now, my focus is on those battling mental illness," she said.

In a country where about less than 200 psychiatrists serve more than 200 million people, Sr. ElmaMary Ekewuba and her team are offering hope and healing to Nigerians living with mental health issues.



A sign outside Providence Home for the Mentally Ill Destitute is pictured in Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom state in southern Nigeria. (Ayo Omotola)

GSR: Was there a defining moment or life event that inspired you to support those struggling with mental health issues?

Ekewuba: As a young sister, I had [my] first encounter with a young man called Philip, who was abandoned in an empty room. His parents had passed away, and his overwhelmed sister struggled alone as he leaped from window to window. Together, we pulled him down. His sister scrubbed him while I poured water over him. Though [I was] naive at the time, it prepared me for the journey ahead.

What role does your faith play in guiding your approach to mental health care?

As Christians and consecrated persons, we believe healing and restoration occur through God. This conviction drives us to integrate prayer into our work and encourage personal conversion among those we serve. Faith gives us the strength and hope to support individuals on their healing journey.

How do you handle aggressive patients, and is there any mystery behind your fearlessness?

There is no mystery — just courage and faith. I've had patients berate me while grabbing my clothes. Their families were worried, shouting for them to stop, to no avail. However, when I firmly said, "Leave my clothes," they would instantly let go. It is faith and courage.



Sr. ElmaMary Ekewuba, a Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Uyo, is pictured with her beneficiaries. (Ayo Omotola)

How do you balance the emotional demands of your work with your well-being?

Through self-care, prayer and taking breaks [from] work when necessary. I also find solace in reading, researching, re-strategizing and resting.

What brings you the greatest joy in your work at Providence Home for the Mentally Ill Destitute, and how has it enriched your personal life?

My greatest joy is seeing the mentally ill regain their health and reconnect with family and friends.

Can you share a particular story or individual whose journey deeply stayed with you and reinforced your commitment?

One story stands out: a woman who had been chained for four years. During treatment, she attempted to attack us with a machete. Yet, within three months of medical and psychosocial care in our facility, she recovered. She has since returned to her normal life. The story remains a source of joy and motivation for me and her family.

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Have you admitted a financially stable person as a patient? Is there any connection between mental challenges and economic crises?

Yes, we have admitted well-to-do patients. After being healed, one former patient even offered to pay for the facility. I strongly opposed it, but she insisted. However, poverty seems to be the most common underlying factor in mental illness. The financial crisis in the country exacerbated these challenges, but an inability to cope with hardship or endure hard experiences is also a significant contributor.

Aside from spiritual support and medication, can you explain some of your innovative therapies and their impact on patients?

We use several innovative therapies in our healing process, including laugh therapy, storytelling therapy, dance therapy and art therapy. Laugh therapy helps patients release tension, improve their mood and build emotional resilience. Storytelling therapy allows individuals to process their experiences and emotions by sharing their stories, which fosters understanding and healing. Dance therapy encourages self-expression and relieves stress through movement. Art therapy provides a creative outlet for patients to communicate feelings they may not be able to express in words.

These therapies, combined with medical and psychosocial support, have significantly improved the mental health of our patients, helping them regain confidence and connect with others.



Sr. ElmaMary Ekewuba, Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in Uyo, with one of her beneficiaries (Ayo Omotola)

You provide vocational training. After the training, do you provide work tools?

Yes, we ensure provisions are made for work tools for those who complete their vocational training. For instance, one of our recent beneficiaries, an abandoned young mother, was trained as a caterer. After her rehabilitation, we raised funds to secure an apartment and provided catering equipment to support her new start. She is now living independently, working hard and taking care of her child.

Having dedicated 36 years to serving people, what legacy do you hope to leave?

I hope to leave a legacy of compassion built on standard practices and unwavering faith. I want people to remember not just the lives we've touched but the systems

and structures we've put in place to ensure continuity in mental health care. I envision PHoMID as a center of excellence where mental health services are accessible but also dignified and holistic, blending medical care with spiritual and psychosocial support.

Finally, my legacy will be rooted in the belief that no one is beyond healing or hope, regardless of their condition. If future generations can hold onto that belief and act on it, I will consider my life's work fulfilled.

Is there anything else you'd like to highlight about your work or mission?

Care for the mentally ill is expensive. Occasional funding barely sustains our services. We hope that generous individuals and organizations will support us in addressing some of these pressing needs like mobility, medication and feeding.