

Claire writes about her return to Belgium (in 2011)

After 1975, when I was alone in Polambakkam, there was a mutual understanding between the family of Alex, a work colleague, and myself that we were one family. Alex and Clara had seven children and in our old age, we thought we would live together. We bought a house at Chingleput. Unfortunately both of them passed away earlier on. Nevertheless, I continued to live in Polambakkam and my commitment to my other AFI team in Ramallah kept me busy. I accompanied Geo in her last years and continued my team life with Huguette in Mauritius. This did not give me the time to think of myself, as I too was growing older. When this suddenly dawned on me, I, for the first time, was confused and insecure. I had not planned where I would be although there were several invitations. I felt loneliness for the first time, I was confused and could not make up my mind about where I would settle. Eventually I decided to return to Belgium where I am now happily settled in the home of the Little Sisters of the Poor.

At this moment I must say that belonging to the group is also significant. There were welcomes from all, although I was not in a state of mind to think seriously. As there was room for me in the Home, I accepted that. This transition was made easier by the presence of Beatrice and Peggy who are also in this home, and the rest of my family with whom I have always had a good contact. I remain a member of the Palestinian unit and with the grace of good health I am still able to travel to meetings of the unit, see Huguette in Mauritius and to get back to India every year.

When I visited Belgium while still in India, I was taken aback by the fact that many of the AFI in Belgium lived alone in their flats. I felt that some of them suffered from being alone and I was concerned. The solution that I was fortunate to find in being in the home I feel is ideal. I must say that the AFI who are younger, are also very caring and thoughtful. The open house on Tuesday noon at Rue Smith, thanks to Paula, is also a way for us to get together and interact. Happily the AFI group seems to be growing, though slowly, in other parts of the world, and keeps us young and alive to the changing times.

Hence on the whole, I think I have had a very privileged life. I lived in the country that I liked, in the villages looking after chronic patients and was able to keep in touch for a long time with patients and their families. Now back in Belgium, I feel comfortable and cared for.

(Notes from Claire, written at Trivandrum in 2011, for a booklet coordinated by Nalini Nayak, "The story of AFI-MISH in India")