

Claire recalls the AFI team in Polambakkam (in 2011)

[For the nurses of the team, the work in the hospital was monotonous. The lack of acknowledgement of their services and the poor perception of the medical profession towards nursing was making them miserable.]

For a long time I was not aware of this situation. Living and working together in a restricted place was a real difficulty for the team and the fulfilment of each one. We had no occasion to go out individually as the distance from the nearest towns – Pondicherry and Madras was more than 90 km. There was little few public transport at that time and we had no car until 1969. In retrospect, I realise that I, being the doctor in charge of the Centre and the team leader up to 1966 at the same time created a tense situation as I did not provide sufficient breathing space for my team mates.

Dr. Hemerijckx declared that he was an AFI and took part in some of our activities like the evening prayers. This also created some problems in the team by limiting our own personal interactions. We did not discussed them in the team. In the campus, we were a bit isolated as a foreign group "on the other side of the road". At one moment, we were four or five AFI living and moving as a group. That cut us off from relations with our neighbours. After 1966, only two of us lived there and we were completely integrated with the staff and their families. (...)

The difficult living conditions may explain partly the quick turn over of the AFI at Polambakkam.

Hélène Eenberg, a French nurse, found the team life difficult and Dr. Hemerijckx a hard task master. She left the AFI in 1958 and went back to nursing in Lyon.

May Flynn, a Canadian, took over as "Maitresse de maison". She picked up Tamil very fast. Unfortunately her health was fragile. She could not tolerate the climate and the conditions of life at Polambakkam. She returned to Canada after one year.

Thérèse Théoret, a nurse from Canada, replaced May in charge of the house and worked in the hospital. She went on leave after 4 years and did not return.

Godelieve Houtart, a Belgian nurse, came to take charge of the rural leprosy workers training. This was in great contrast to the training of nurses in Belgium that she was used to. She was soon asked to join the Tiruvalla team where she was more at home.

Carmen Lanthier, a Canadian nurse, joined the team which was in need of reinforcement. After two years, in 1964, she was called back by the AFI council to take charge of the AFI training centre at Montreal. She came back later.

Maria Sievert, a German doctor had recently joined the AFI. She found it difficult to adapt to the "primitive" conditions of the Centre. She joined a nearby well equipped German hospital in 1963 and left the AFI.

Dolores Laliberteé, a Canadian nurse, joined the staff of the hospital and the out patient department. She, along with Francine my niece, started some social activity with the *dalit* women of the village. After 4 years at Polambakkam, in 1966, she went on leave, on coming back she joined a post graduate programme at the College of nursing at new Delhi. (...)

The fact that we lived in a village committed to leprosy work under the government cut us from the Christian community. We did not have the opportunity to contact young people and introduce them to the AFI. Some young girls were referred to us by friendly priests but it was too distressing for them and their families to have to live in a village and especially in contact with leprosy, that was a

stigma in the educated class of the society. We had a resident priest with us for about five years. The first of these was a wonderful French Jesuit, aged 77, in India since 1911. He was affected with leprosy. We treated and cured him, he shared with us his rich experience in Tamilnadu.

From the point of view of team life, as we lived and worked together, there was a lot of informal exchange. But at the formal level I cannot say there was sufficiently deep interaction to help us grow as persons. I did not develop deep friendships except with Simone and Carmen. Even with Simone, there were times when there were silences and no real communication. It was again much later in life, that we found ourselves again and developed deeper friendship. As team leader, I was asked to send reports to the council. For the most part they were matter of fact reports, but I do remember one occasion when I had to report on personal happenings and this caused hurt. I remember Simone commenting that I was insensitive.

(...)

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