

Sr. Irene Mathias FMM

(First Indian Principal)



Original Name: Sr. Irene Mathias fmm

Nationality: Indian

Education: M.A. Chemistry

Active years as Principal: 1 June 1968- 1978

Sr. Irene Mathias became the first Indian Principal of the College with effect from 1 June 1968, and Sr. Sheila O'Neill became Vice-Principal. The late sixties and early seventies revealed post-colonial sentiments of greater freedom and participation in decision making. Stella Maris became a trend setter in undertaking an introspective search for self-evaluation. The process took two years and a team from AIACHE involved the entire college in discernment. The report spelled out recommendations, and the leadership of Sr. Irene enthused concrete steps. Library facilities and student services were improved, opportunities were provided for the professional growth of the faculty, and inter-disciplinary projects were introduced. Another important outcome was the performance evaluation of staff by students at the end of the year.

Students were given more responsibility in the organisation of extra-curricular activities, inter collegiate programmes, debates, seminars etc. Student Union was given juridical status as the Student Union Constitution was drawn. She encouraged the students to draw their own Student Newspaper and was named "Udaya" Staging a theatrical play for the public became an annual feature and a fine tradition.

To reduce the transport problems of the students and to facilitate greater involvement in extra-curricular activities, the college working hours were changed to 9.15 a.m. to 3.15 p.m. In 1972 the strength of the college rose to 1800. A characteristic feature of the college was that study, sports, extra-curricular activities, social service and Catholic Action were all given importance, whether for the thirty-two students of 1947 or for the 1800 of 1972.

A new Chapter in the history of Stella Maris began in 1972. This was the Silver Jubilee year of the college.

The National Service Scheme:

In the academic year 1968-69, the National Service Scheme (NSS) was officially inaugurated. Training was offered to the two hundred students who signed up for literacy work, kitchen gardening, and public health services. Camps of three to ten days' duration organised for staff and students served to create a greater awareness of the rural social realities. With an increase in enrolment to four hundred in the following year, two slums in the city were adopted where a dispensary, small savings scheme and literacy classes were opened. Five major community

development projects were implemented in the Jubilee year 1972, in the village of Vippedu and in the tribal area of Javadi hills. The emphasis was on working with the people and the village panchayat (local government) for provision of water, transport and medical facilities which were later sanctioned by higher authorities. Community oriented services were begun later under the leadership of Sr. Christine Antony and the Community Service Scheme (CSS) became a co-curricular activity in the college. The English department took up the project of teaching English to bus conductors of the city, the Science Department taught chemistry students to do water analysis in different slums, while others carried out food and soil analysis to check on adulterated food and the effect of pesticides.

Association of Social Workers was inaugurated on 18 August 1972 to gather the SMC trained social workers for common projects

Shanthi Bhavan

A sponsorship programme was introduced in 1969 to maintain the physical, mental and social wellbeing of impoverished children. Under this programme children grew up in their own families, with financial assistance given for schoolbooks, fees, uniforms, midday meals, and medical aid and conveyance charges to go to school. Through meetings, sessions, literacy classes, group and individual counselling, non-formal education of parents was assured. The NSS students of SMC coached the more backward children. Beginning with twenty children in 1969, the beneficiaries of the sponsorship programme increased over the years. With family assistance, foster care and other programmes being started and with funds coming from abroad and from the government the Stella Maris Social Welfare Centre became an independent unit and was named Shanthi Bhavan – the House of Peace.

Nava Nirmana

In 1966 Sr. Pauline Grutzner, Australian, professor of Sociology at Stella Maris College launched a one-year training programme for community development workers in 1969. Since the course was sought after, hostel and classroom accommodation became inadequate. Misereor, the German Catholic funding agency, generously gave funds for this without even requesting the usual one-third management contribution. Commenced in 1971 and completed a year later, the three-storey residential building on the Stella Maris Campus was named Nava Nirmana, Sanskrit for *new creation*, this name summed up the aim of the Social Institute. Recognised by the Government of Tamil Nadu, it was affiliated to the Board of Technical Education in 1972 as a two-year diploma course in Community Development. The course offered two branches of specialisation, one in community development and extension education and the other in childcare and institutional management.

Extract from: The Journey Continues by Dr. Sr. Sheila O'Neil fmm, former Principal
Pgs. 499- 501.