

## **The College Motto award 2022**

### **Dr. Susan Sunalini Bijiiga**

Susan Sunalini Bijiiga, tall, soft-spoken girl, ever willing to listen and help hails from a small town called Hanamkonda in Warangal district. Even as a teenager, she committed her life to become a missionary, being inspired by the life of Dr. Ida Scudder. In September of 1993, her prayers were answered as she got MBBS admission in CMC and her motto was reinforced during the fresher's orientation session, when she heard- "you are not here by accident, each of you are here, chosen specially for a purpose". She was active in social services and held responsibilities in the evangelical union during her stay on campus. Her room was always open for sharing and praying.

Following her service obligation in CSI Karimnagar diocese, she came back to work in Medical ICU for a short period but had to discontinue due to her mother's terminal illness. Her mom's sudden demise was a huge blow to Susan...as it was her mother who was Susan's pillar of support and strength. Despite opposition from her family, Susan went ahead to do her post-graduation in Pathology from Osmania Medical College, Hyderabad. Through all the good and bad times, Susan did not forget her calling to serve the Lord. This was further strengthened when she married her husband Mr. Ragland Remo Paul in 2005, who is a social worker with a missionary society called "Reaching Hand Society" (RHS) based in Malkangiri, Odisha. Susan joined Remo in Malkangiri in 2008 after the birth of their oldest son Adarsh, to lead a life fulfilling her calling. Since then, there has been no turning back- it's now been a decade and a half of serving the poorest and the marginalised.

Malkangiri, a Naxal-infested region, amidst mountain ranges, is one of the most backward districts in India, is about 250 km away from Bhadrachalam, where the nearest regular rail and road transport services are available. It has a population of about 6.5 lakhs - mainly constituted by indigenous tribes and Bangladeshi immigrants. Malkangiri, being endemic to malaria and tuberculosis, is also burdened with Sickle cell anemia. The fear of contracting malaria, Naxal activity and inaccessibility prevent NGOs and government organisation from venturing into this region. Hence villagers preferred witchcraft over allopathic medicine. Susan took on the mantle of continuing to serve the people of Malkangiri from her mother-in-law Dr Iris Paul who founded the Reaching Hand Society. The vision of the organization is 'Empowering Families, Transforming Communities and their mission is to reach the unreached in a holistic way with the love of Jesus Christ. They also have a small hospital St. Luke Temple Hospital.

When Susan started her work, she was the only qualified private medical practitioner in that region. As not all villagers can reach St Luke's hospital, village medical camps are the mainstay of delivering primary health care to people in this remote area. Susan works in the clinic till noon and then goes to villages to attend the medical camps. Some days, she has to spend her whole day in medical camps to meet the needs of the villagers. Over the years, a team of social workers have joined work with Susan. She has trained many grass root workers at different levels, about immunization, health and hygiene, treatment for Malaria, identifying common diseases prevalent in that region like Sickle cell anemia, giving first aid for wounds and animal bites,

counselling patients about antsnake venom treatment following snake bite, even before they can come to the RHS clinic. The team is not only involved in delivering primary health care, but also in the socio-economic, psychological, and spiritual development of these marginalized tribal communities. Many times, she has opened her rented house to accommodate the sick and destitute. Susan and her team provide the primary health care, but any complicated illness, they would have to transfer to the Nowrangpur Christian Hospital or to Asha Kiran hospital Lamtaput which is at least 4-hour drive on narrow roads. Today, the society consists of 21 staff which includes Susan and her husband, a lab technician, a pharmacist, a nurse, and a team of dedicated field workers. The society presently works actively in 74 villages.

Susan and her team are involved in imparting education to the prison inmates of Malkangiri district, counselling and training them in various vocations like tailoring, craft using woollen threads, rice jute bags. They counsel the prisoners to get back their self-respect and counsel the prisoners' families to accept them. They also help rehabilitate them once they are out of prison through small business ventures. Susan is highly regarded by the prison officials, hence often invited to many of their official meetings, as they have seen the transformation in prison inmates through her and the team's counselling

Imparting health education in village schools is another front where Susan is actively involved. She visits local schools routinely and imparts health education to children about personal hygiene, community hygiene, first aid and infectious diseases. She coordinates drawing and essay writing competitions where the tribal children and others in the Malkangiri district are encouraged to express their views and ideas. Burdened about the children of villagers, who are not able to go to school, the RHS team delivers primary education to the children by teaching them in the community centre (which is often under the shade of a tree or any house veranda). She also started Vacation Bible value-based Programs in many villages during summer vacation. The love of Christ is imparted through their action and in word.

Women empowerment is another major task that was undertaken to face the challenges of tribals. Through her talks and counselling, she has brought in a tremendous change in their mindset. Now the villagers accept to send their girl children to school, instead of keeping them at home. Giving children for marriage at 14 -15 years of age is common among tribals. Due to regular awareness programs, girl children now wish to marry only at the marriageable age, after having completed their schooling.

Empowering families with good values and initiating discussion based on the incidents around them have encouraged the villagers to take wise decisions regarding children, education, marriage, and contraception. Reaching Hand Society also supports the self-help women groups to learn vocational skills, thereby contributing a considerable income to their families.

During the Covid pandemic, Susan efficiently prepared her staff and village-level workers by teaching about COVID, providing Covid kits and other essentials, to all village-level workers with the generosity of well-wishers and other like-minded organizations. Village youngsters joined hands with the team to set up basic medicines in certain houses in each village, to meet the immediate need of the villagers. Most of

the villages under their work survived both the waves of Covid without much mortality rate. Apart from that, Reaching Hand Society could provide face shields to the District Health care Department and police department, dry food to 24,194 returning migrants during both Covid waves, and dry rations

in two phases covering almost 400 villages serving more than 11,000 families. The team also provided needed essentials for all the prisoners as their relatives couldn't visit during the covid season.

Susan's husband Remo Paul is her constant support, encouragement and companion in all her efforts. He is a regular motivational speaker at many conferences. They are blessed with 4 sons- Adarsh Stephen (14), Jai Daniel (12), Nirbhay Joshua (10) and Adhil Joseph (8).

The education of the children was a concern in such a remote location. The Mission school by IMST was their only choice after prayer. The children are still studying in this school in Malkangiri which is now a recognised CBSE school and well sort after.

During these past 15 years of being in Malkangiri, according to Susan's own words, every healing they witnessed, every blessing they received, is an answer to prayer. Health-related problems did affect her as well as her family including an episode of viral encephalitis in Susan's life in 2017, but they have witnessed the healing touch of God time and again which has supported them and carried them, every time, they were tired and tripped. Over the past 15 years, Susan has seen major changes in the development of the Malkangiri district. Incidence of Malaria drastically reduced. The official report quotes a significant drop in annual parasite incidence to 11 % in 2020 from 44.76 % in 2015. January 2022 has seen a drop of more than 80% in case load compared to January 2020. There is also a reduction in the infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate. Roads are widened, shops with basic/ necessary facilities have opened up, thus bringing development to the district as a whole.

Indeed, Susan being true to her calling, has taken on herself the huge challenge of taking health care to this backward district in Odisha, as well as in the promotion of socio-economic status of the poor, the marginalized and the destitute, and ever willing to serve them through the love of Christ.

The CMC Alumni Association is proud to present the College Motto award for the year 2022, to Dr. Susan Sunalini.