

CERTIFICATE FOR MERITORIOUS SERVICE

Dr. Nirmala Sarah Tharien was born and brought up in Oddanchatram, where her parents the late Dr. and Mrs. AK Tharien, founded the Christian Fellowship Hospital. Right from an early age, she imbibed the spirit of the place, the simple and humble way of life it espouses, and a deep sensitivity to the needs of the disadvantaged and the marginalized people.

Dr. Nirmala joined Christian Medical College, Vellore for her undergraduate medical studies in 1977. Here too, the friendships and fellowships formed over Bible studies and the Evangelical Union helped her grow in faith and cemented a desire to '*work in a small place where there is a need*'. She particularly remembers one Bible Study, when the Speaker asked the students to pray for any one tribal group of India. Dr. Nirmala chose the Bondo tribe, little realizing the paths God would take her to.

She married Dr. Varghese Philip, alumnus of the Batch of 1974, whom Dr. Nirmala gently calls '*adventurous*'. After a few years in Chandag (Uttarakhand) and Oddanchatram, they returned to CMC Vellore for their postgraduate training, with Dr. Nirmala specializing in Anaesthesia. They then went back to Oddanchatram for two years, all the while praying and hungering to be led to an area of great need.

Along with two other doctor couples, they decided to start a medical mission in Odisha, one of the least developed states of India, and they chose Koraput district, officially a 'deprived district'. In June 1991, the small team reached Lamtaput and began their work with, among other tribes, the Bondo tribals, the same group Dr Nirmala had raised her heart and hands to God decades earlier. It was in a mud hut with a cow-dung floor that the team began their work. Dr Nirmala recalls a patient requiring emergency surgery, and all she had was a small apparatus given by her teacher, Dr. Valerie Major. From those humble, challenging beginnings, rose the Asha Kiran Hospital, truly a 'ray of

light' in the barren landscape of Lamtaput. The Hospital and the Asha Kiran Society epitomizes a model of healthcare that goes beyond the conventional norms to include nutrition, agriculture, public health and education. Of Asha Kiran, Dr. Nirmala humbly says, *“God provided, He opened doors, brought other people, and we have the satisfaction of simply doing what God planned.”*

After about eight years in Asha Kiran Hospital, Drs. Nirmala and Varghese joined the EHA and moved to New Delhi. The big city seemed unfamiliar, yet Dr Nirmala found fulfillment in initiating 'Shalom', a care centre for persons with HIV, drug addicts etc. She continued this work while working in the Hoskote Mission Hospital near Bangalore. The adventure continues, as she and Dr. Varghese are now based in Papua New Guinea, working with the Mission Aviation Fellowship.

Her life defining moment came when she asked God to take care of her two daughters-their education and life plans. And Dr. Nirmala gratefully testifies to the loving mercies and grace of a faithful God. Thus, even when she walked through the valley of shadow of a malignancy, that required almost a year of treatment, surgery and chemotherapy, she trusted the purpose and provision of God.

There is a beauty and grace in the humility and unassuming manner that characterizes Dr. Nirmala. It comes from one who has completely and faithfully given of herself to others, and thus to God. It comes from knowing that when we *'take that step into the darkness of the unknown/we must believe that one of two things will happen/There will be something solid for us to stand on/Or we will be taught to fly'* (Patrick Owen)

Dr. Nirmala's life and work is a reflection of the College motto, *'Not to be ministered unto but to minister'*. Christian Medical College is proud to honour Dr. Nirmala Sarah Tharien with the Certificate for Meritorious Service for 2018.