



MEDICAL MISSION  
SISTERS

## Sister Eileen Niedfield



Recently the MMS Archives has received some questions about Sr. Eileen Niedfield, a.k.a. Sr. M. Frederic Niedfield, especially about her work in Bhutan. While doing research, I was so impressed by the richness of her long life that I wanted to share her story. - Lucy Hall (MMS Archivist)

Sr. Eileen Niedfield lived an extraordinary life full of faith and love for others. She was born on June 16, 1920, in New York City, and entered the Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries (Medical Mission Sisters) in 1938. This was early enough in Society history that the Sisters were not yet able to make public vows! (At that time, the Catholic Church did not allow publicly professed women religious to practice certain areas of medicine, including obstetrics.) Sr. Eileen made her first profession on August 15, 1941, which was also when Founder Dr. Anna Dengel, Sr. Agnes Marie Ulbrich (one of the “First Four”) and 22 other Medical Mission Sisters – some of whom were already working in other countries - were able to make their first public, perpetual vows.

Sr. Eileen earned her B.A. at Trinity College (now Trinity Washington University) in Washington, D.C. in 1945, and her M.D. from Georgetown University Medical School in 1951. She was in the first class of women admitted to the medical school. She graduated as valedictorian in 1951 and then did her surgical residency at Georgetown. In between graduations, Sr. Eileen also made her final, perpetual vows on August 15, 1946.

In 1953, during her surgical residency, she wrote about her decision to become an MMS:

“It certainly wasn’t sudden. It was the end result of the influence of my parents, teachers, and friends, operating all my life until the moment when I had to get up guts enough to come to the point myself, and get going on my life’s work... No great struggle to become a Catholic. No great parental opposition to religious life. Nothing to fight really, except the old Ego, and that’s a lifetime proposition. No doubt my guardian angel had a hand in all this. But he didn’t tap me on the shoulder. He left things to the ordinary course of human events. He let the “tree grow in Brooklyn.” Which is the way that God usually works in this business of a religious vocation. He gave me the desire for Himself, sufficient health for His work, and the usual talents, judgments, and grey matter necessary. That’s all. And I love Him all the more for it. I’ve found what I was looking for.”

Soon after finishing her residency, Sr. Eileen was sent to India in 1955. After a period of training, she became the medical superintendent of Medical Mission Sisters’ Holy Family Hospital, Mandar, a position she held from 1956 to 1992. She did take a few breaks from this position, notably from 1979-1981 when she worked in Bhutan. Sr. Eileen first went to Bhutan with three other MMS in 1979 on vacation, on the invitation of two Jesuits and in coordination with the Bhutanese health department. According to her writings, it was virtually impossible to visit Bhutan without an invitation during that time because of isolationist policies. The Bhutanese government were looking to improve their health system and so asked Sr. Eileen to return and work for them—strictly in a non-missionary capacity, as Bhutan was and is a thoroughly Buddhist country. Sr. Eileen agreed to a two-year contract and in October 1979 moved to the capital city of Tashigang, where she was the medical superintendent of the Tashigang hospital, a zonal medical officer for Northeast Bhutan, and a health care provider for the monasteries in the area.

A significant challenge in Sr. Eileen’s work in Bhutan was how isolated the villages could be: Northeast Bhutan comprised six health centers, many of which could be reached only by horseback. It was difficult to visit all of them more than four times a year. So, Sr. Eileen and a Canadian nurse volunteer developed training courses for government employees as well as “standing orders” that could be used by teachers, agricultural workers, and veterinarians, so they could address medical emergencies without having to wait the hours or days it would take for help to arrive. The two women also worked with the existing emergency radio infrastructure and trained the radio operators to be health assistants.

Sr. Eileen spoke fondly of her time in Bhutan and the people she met there. The Bhutan government asked her to renew her contract, but she declined as it was hard work, and lonely work. Originally, she had hoped other MMS would join her, but that did not happen.

Sr. Eileen returned permanently to the U.S. in 1992. After a transition period spent in Philadelphia, she moved to San Diego, where she taught at UCSD (the University of California, San Diego) for six years. She volunteered at St. Vincent de Paul clinic where she treated those without homes. She also volunteered at the Owen Clinic with AIDS patients and was employed by the VA where she provided counseling support. Having moved to a new country and culture (twice!) she was able to empathize with and support veterans who were repatriating after years abroad. In an effort to communicate more effectively with her patients at St. Vincent de Paul clinic, she worked diligently to learn Spanish. While she would be the first to admit that language skills were not her forte, and that she never did master Spanish, her efforts and commitment to serving her community demonstrated her deep care and compassion.

In 2001 Sr. Eileen officially retired and moved to Regina Residence in Orange, CA. She passed away there on March 19, 2007.

Sr. Eileen’s life was marked by a dedication to her work and faith. Her ethos can be best summed up in this quote from a June 1998 MMS newsletter, where she talked about her teaching at UCSD: “The main things I try to teach are attitudes toward the patients and their families which show respect for them as being of unique, intrinsic worth as children of God—worthy of our courteous listening and thoroughness, and of an appreciation of their dignity.”



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