
50 Years of Shepherding Mission in Magyikwin Village

Background

Magyikwin Village is located in Thonze Township, Tharyawaddy District, Bago Region. It lies about 73 miles from Yangon and just 7 furlongs from the Yangon–Pyay Highway.

According to oral tradition, the first settlers were *Myayduu Kalar* (Indians from the Mandalay region in Central Myanmar) who migrated southwards after the fall of King Thibaw, when livelihood opportunities became scarce. They established themselves in what is now known as Magyikwin.

A few years later, two families—the households of U Swar and U Hlwar, of Portuguese descent from Chaung Yoe and Chanthar villages in Upper Myanmar—moved to Magyikwin with the support of their relatives, U Pe and Daw Shwe Nyein. At that time, there were only 27 Catholic households in the village. The Myayduu Indians earned their living mainly through farming on their own farm and those who do not have farm of their own as farm laborers, while U Swar and U Hlwar worked as butchers. Their trade, however, proved incompatible with the livelihoods of the Indian settlers, leading the latter to move out of the village and settle in surrounding fields.

Out of fear of theft and robbery, these Indian families often buried their valuables—gold, silver, and household silverware—in hidden pits on their farms. One such treasure was later unearthed by the father of U Chit Lwin while ploughing. Meanwhile, U Swar and U Hlwar prospered in their trade as butchers, and as their relatives joined them, this occupation became the mainstay of their community.

The name *Magyikwin* literally means “circle of tamarind trees”—*magyee* meaning “tamarind” and *kwin* meaning “circle.” U Swar and U Hlwar named the village after tamarind trees planted at intervals of four furlongs, forming a circular boundary around the farmland. From then on, the settlement became widely known as Magyikwin.

In its early years, the village consisted of three sections: Yay-kan-su, Ka-yin, and Ye-phyan. Later, families from the small nearby settlement of Zee-kone-lay moved in, and the area they occupied became known as Zee-kone. During World War II, the Japanese occupied part of the village, which came to be called Japan-kone.

Today, Magyikwin is home to Buddhists, Baptists, and Catholics, each forming their own communities. Catholics now make up only about one-fifth of the total village population.

The Arrival of the Catholic Mission in Magyikwin

The Catholic presence in Magyikwin dates back to the early 1900s, when a small church was first built as part of Thonze Parish in Tharyawaddy District, Bago Region, under the Archdiocese of Yangon. At that time, the parish was predominantly Karen, and priests from Thonze occasionally visited Magyikwin to provide pastoral care.

According to *The Voice*, a Catholic monthly journal, a wooden church dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus was solemnly blessed in Magyikwin on January 28, 1922, by the Papal Envoy, Dr. Pietro Pisani. By June 1934, church records show that there were 34 Catholic households with about 80 children in the village.

The faith gradually took deeper root through the efforts of lay organizations such as the Legion of Mary and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. Their apostolic works, together with the devotion of the villagers, kept the seed of faith alive. A new small church was later constructed at the center of the village, where regular Masses and worship began on January 12, 1960.

In the early 1970s, the faithful sought more regular pastoral care. Responding to their request, Archbishop Gabriel Thohay Mahn Gabriel of Yangon assigned Fr. Joseph U Thaung Shwe, then parish priest of St. John's Bo-Sun-Pet Parish, Yangon, to also minister to Magyikwin after it was separated from St. Joseph's Parish, Thonze, in 1973. Fr. Joseph spent a few days in the village at a time, and recognizing the social and spiritual needs of the people, he petitioned the Archbishop to invite the Good Shepherd Sisters to serve in the community.

When Fr. Joseph U Thaung Shwe was appointed Bishop of Pyay Diocese in November 1975, Archbishop Gabriel appointed Fr. Anthony U Po Lay as the first resident parish priest of Magyikwin on December 16, 1975. Under his leadership, the Catholic community grew steadily. A new brick church was constructed on a spacious plot to the south of the village and was solemnly dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes on December 25, 1983.

Fr. Anthony U Po Lay served faithfully until his passing on February 25, 2006. Since then, the parish has been shepherded by:

- Fr. Alphones U Ko Lay (2006–2011)
- Fr. Paulus Saw Kalo Htoo (2012–2013)
- Fr. Wilfred Saw Than Win (2013–2016)
- Fr. Pius U Win Ko (MSP) (2017–2024)
- Fr. Thomas Moe Naing (MSP), Assistant Parish Priest (2021–2024)

Since 2024, Fr. Thomas Moe Naing (MSP) has served as Parish Priest, assisted by Fr. Celestine Sa Tiwu (MSP).

The Arrival of the Good Shepherd Sisters

In 1975, Archbishop Gabriel Thohay Mahn Gabriel of Yangon invited the Good Shepherd Sisters to begin their apostolic mission in Magyikwin Village. Their task was to live among the faithful, preach the Gospel, and reach out in service to the predominantly Buddhist villages nearby.

At that time, life in Magyikwin was marked by hardship and deprivation. Although the village was close to Tharyawaddy District, there was no electricity, no hospital or dispensary, and no access to clean drinking water. A government primary school existed, but with very few students. Communication relied only on oral messages or letters carried by travelers, as there were no telephones. Means of transportation were limited to tricycles and boats.

The lack of hygiene contributed to widespread health problems: children often suffered from untreated rashes and wounds, families had no toilets, and personal cleanliness was lacking. Venomous snakes—including vipers and cobras—were commonly found in houses and barns throughout the year. Farmers risked snakebites while ploughing their fields.

Weather conditions also posed difficulties. Summers were extremely hot and dusty, causing frequent cases of cough, asthma, and tuberculosis. During the monsoon, ankle- or calf-deep mud made travel slow and exhausting, often resulting in skin rashes. In winter, without sufficient warm clothes or blankets, families placed straw under their beds to keep warm at night.

Despite these challenges, the people of Magyikwin were united and supportive of one another. Most worked as butchers for their living, and elder children often cared for their younger siblings while parents worked.

The Good Shepherd Sisters unwaveringly accepted this rural mission. In early November 1975, Sr. Cyril James and Sr. Marie Lewis were first tasked with studying the conditions of the village and preparing to respond to its urgent needs. They traveled frequently from Yangon and stayed temporarily with Daw Nyunt Yin (known as Athargyi), a spinster who welcomed them into her home.

After a year, the Sisters purchased a dismantled wooden house from Buhtayar Village. With the help of villagers—U Thaung Sein, U Pan, U Maung Khin, U Zaw Gyi, U Talukphyu, and U San Tint—the timber was transported by bullock carts. Under the skilled leadership of carpenters U Thein Maung and U Kyaw, a tall-posted wooden house with a corrugated zinc roof was built on the plot of land donated by the parishioners. This later became the boarding house.

The Sisters quickly integrated into the community, taking part in religious ceremonies and focusing on the village's most urgent needs: health care, hygiene education, social outreach, music for liturgy, and catechism. With the support of the bishop, the generosity of donors, and the hard work of villagers, a proper convent was eventually constructed. On July 14, 1976, the Good Shepherd Convent, Magyikwin was officially opened, and permission was granted to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the convent. The first three Sisters assigned there were Sr. Helen Angeles, Sr. Cyril James, and Sr. Bernadette Georgie. A grand welcome celebration was organized by the villagers on July 18, 1976.

From 1976 to 2007, the Good Shepherd Sisters lived in this convent and carried out their mission in turns. Over the years, the wooden building deteriorated due to termites, weather, and time. On January 11, 2007, construction began on a new convent, which was blessed by Fr. Alphones U Ko Lay on August 24, 2007. This new convent remains in use to this day, continuing the legacy of the Sisters' missionary presence in Magyikwin.

Apostolic Work and Spirituality

Alongside caring for the spiritual well-being of the Catholic community, the Sisters dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to missionary work in education, health, and socio-economic development, fostering the holistic growth of Magyikwin Village. Although only three miles from Thonze, the village remained largely undeveloped in the 1970s. With no paved road linking the Yangon–Pyay Highway, one had to walk along narrow earth embankments between rice fields. At the village entrance, where no bridge spanned the stream, people either used small boats or waded through muddy ground.

In those early years, the Sisters themselves struggled with the lack of basic necessities such as clean water, electricity, and telephones. Yet from the very beginning, their missionary efforts prioritized faith formation, education, and social development. Working closely with parish priests and the Parish Committee, they focused on the spiritual life of the faithful.

Catechism classes for children were held before the evening rosary, while the Sisters guided the community in preparing for Eucharistic celebrations—cleaning and decorating the church and carefully teaching children, youth, and adults the rites of the liturgy. Weekly sessions were organized for youth and parents, while mothers' and fathers' groups were established to strengthen family and community life. In times of low literacy, hymns were taught to those eager to sing, deepening devotion and drawing more villagers into active participation.

Gradually, villagers who once stayed away began attending the rosary, the Way of the Cross, and eventually joined the daily Mass, which at first was attended only by the priest and the Sisters.

In late 1985, the Sisters purchased a plot of land adjacent to the church and by February 1986 had built a small temporary hut to serve as a space for catechism, training sessions, and school lessons. With generous support from Mrs. Rhoda Murdock—the elder sister of Sr. Helen Angeles—and her friends from Australia, a wooden multipurpose hall was constructed in April

1995. This hall was later renovated with brick walls and a heat-resistant zinc roof in 2017, thanks to the support of a benefactor from Singapore.

The Sisters occasionally assisted in teaching spirituality-related subjects at the School of Catechists at St. Joseph Church in Thonze while it was still running. Beyond Magyikwin, they also reached out to nearby Buddhist and Christian villages, traveling first on foot or by bullock cart, and later by motorbike or car. These visits fostered friendships and extended both their apostolic and humanitarian mission beyond parish boundaries.

Education

Since most elders of Magyikwin Village had little opportunity for formal schooling and did not encourage their children's education, the Sisters worked to change attitudes and promote learning. While serving as spiritual director of the St. Vincent de Paul organization, Sr. Helen Angeles raised funds through its Yangon branch to support education in the village.

The Sisters began by teaching twenty mothers how to read, write, and speak Burmese. In 1976, they opened a nursery at the convent, providing children with a foundation for holistic development. Over time, the nursery expanded with both local and international support. With help from Malteser International (Germany), a plot of land was purchased in the center of the village and a wooden nursery building erected in 2003. Daw Htar Win, a villager, was appointed teacher. In 2017, the Turkish Embassy (TİKA) donated a new brick building with a zinc roof, which still houses the nursery today. From 2002 to 2011, The Korean Catholic Community (Incheon Diocese), through the Life–Love Movement Myanmar (LLMM), supported the nursery by providing nutrition for children and elders and by donating teaching aids and stationery. Under Sr. Eunan Lawrance's leadership, teachers were trained in Montessori methods: Htar Htar Win and Htay Htay Myint at a Montessori school, and Mary Ann at a three-month program by PSI in Bago. Since its founding in 1976, a big number of children have completed nursery education under the Sisters' guidance (up to 2025).

In 1993, the Sisters began admitting middle-school girls with financial difficulties as boarding students, supporting all their needs. In 1996, they sent these girls, along with another local student, to the Good Shepherd boarding school in Loikaw. Over the years, more girls from Magyikwin were sent to Good Shepherd convents in Mandalay, Loikaw, and Hopin, where they received both basic education and vocational training.

In 1999, with the help of Teacher Nu Nu Htun from Loikaw, five students successfully passed the national matriculation exam. From then on, more students pursued higher education, while others received vocational training to improve their livelihoods.

Since Magyikwin only had a primary school (founded in 1953), middle school students had to walk three miles to Leik-inn Village, while high school students traveled to Thonze. To support

them, the Canossian Sisters provided 20 bicycles. In 2016, through Singapore/Malaysia Mission Partners, Mr. Bernard and Yea Chi's family donated a light truck for student transport, requested by Sr. Rebecca Kay Thi Oo. In 2017, Enfants du Mekong (EDM) provided another truck to meet growing demand.

Encouraged by the Sisters, school attendance increased. Morning classes (7:30–8:30 AM) were organized for primary students, with night study groups for middle and high school students. In the absence of electricity, kerosene lamps and generators were used until 2016, when Ms. Valentina Lwin and Australian donors provided solar panels. EDM later expanded solar support.

The study group eventually became known as “Rose Virginie,” named by Sr. Agnes Pai Tu in 2012, with the motto: *“To live a joyful life with simple acts and high aims.”* Students from Rose Virginie went on to win awards, pass matriculation exams in greater numbers, and pursue university degrees.

From 2017–2025, about 100 disadvantaged students received financial aid from EDM for their education. After Cyclone Nargis (2008), malnourished girls from Ayeyarwaddy Region and nearby villages were admitted as boarders, supported in both education and basic needs. Sr. Grace Chia, IJ, provided training for Teacher Francis (2016) and Teacher Myat Thet Htar (2024–25) at PSI.

During the pandemic (2021), under Sr. Magdalena Sandar Win, students continued learning through home-based group classes in spacious houses. From 2021 onwards, Sr. Rosaline Lay Khine organized online English courses, which continue to this day.

Beyond formal education, the Sisters organized summer courses in piano, guitar, violin, and games, with musical instruments donated by Cardinal Charles Maung Bo. Workshops for parents and youth were also conducted on childcare, nutrition, health, family planning, and women's well-being. In collaboration with government, NGOs, and religious groups, they arranged trainings on human rights, child protection, anti-trafficking, migration, and prevention of violence against women.

Graduates of matriculation and universities now serve as staff and mission partners in education projects. With the Sisters' continuous efforts, education in Magyikwin has steadily advanced, and the villagers themselves are now taking initiatives for community development.

Healthcare

From their earliest days in Magyikwin, the Sisters observed the poor health conditions of the villagers and began offering basic services, drawing on their own training in nursing and health care. In the early years, they set up a self-help clinic in a room on the convent's ground floor. In March 1991, a small brick dispensary was built next to the convent with the help of Mr. Phillip

Stonehouse. In 2002, with support from the Congregation's headquarters, a new community dispensary was built near the nursery at the village center.

Visiting doctors and nurses, including Dr. Julie from Yangon and Dr. Linn Wai Phyo from Myeik, provided care. Volunteer doctors from Thonze and medical teams from the Archdiocese of Yangon also gave regular support.

Treatment costs were eased by donors, notably Mr. Uros Ivanko of Sonja Hope Foundation. Alongside treatment, the Sisters organized health talks and educational films to promote healthier lifestyles.

Over time, as families gained access to hospitals and transportation improved, the need for a local dispensary declined. The Magyikwin dispensary was officially closed on December 31, 2018. Today, patients in need of urgent treatment or specialized tests are referred to the Good Shepherd Health Center in Yangon, where they continue to receive assistance.

Village Development Projects

Although located near the Yangon–Pyay expressway, Magyikwin long suffered from poor infrastructure, lack of electricity, and scarce water supply. With the support of donors and local leaders, the Good Shepherd Sisters coordinated many development projects:

Electricity

In 1986, Sr. Louis Horgan, Province Leader of the Far East Asia Province, raised funds to purchase a generator. With the assistance of Mr. Robin Andrew (cousin of Sr. Joan Andrews), electricity was briefly supplied to the whole village in 1988. However, the project was discontinued after one month due to various constraints. From 1993 onward, a new generator provided electricity for the convent and boarding students, enabling night study. Later, donors contributed solar panels and lightbulbs, further supporting students' education. Finally, in 2019, the entire village was connected to the national electricity grid at the Yangon–Pyay Expressway, ensuring consistent power for all households.

Water Supply

Water scarcity was one of the greatest challenges. In earlier days, villagers fetched water from neighboring villages or relied on a hand-dug pond, which was neither potable nor reliable during the summer. This affected the health of the community. On the sisters' advice, four abandoned reservoirs were repaired, and rainwater harvesting was introduced. A new reservoir, named "Metta," was also dug to the east of the village. In March 1978, the sisters helped dig the first tube well. In April 1986, Fr. Gregory Lazum Naw Din (Myitkyina Parish, Kachin State), who had expertise in locating underground water, was invited to dig another tube well. In 1989, donor

support enabled the construction of a brick water storage tank, improving distribution. In April 1995, a new tube well was funded by the family of U Zaw Moe Naing and Daw Myat Myat Htwe (Yangon). Another was later added through the support of Sr. Ramani Silva, Provincial of the East Asia Province. In 2007, Sr. Amy Martina secured assistance from Fr. Noel Saw Naw Aye (now Bishop), who funded the digging of 11 tube wells, each serving about ten households.

Housing and Village Layout

In the past, houses and streets in Magyikwin were disorganized, with little planning for sanitation or movement. Through the coordinated efforts of Sr. Benedicta Phillip, the village chief, and municipal officials at township, district, and regional levels, the village was reorganized with systematic streets, separate paths for people and animals, and a circular road around the settlement. Farmers received 60' x 80' land plots, while daily wage laborers were allotted 40' x 60' plots. Families unable to build homes were given assistance. With support from the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, corrugated zinc roofing sheets were distributed, and sanitary toilets were introduced to improve hygiene and living conditions.

Roads and Bridge

Access to the village was once extremely difficult. Villagers had to walk along narrow embankments between rice fields and cross a stream by boat to reach the main Yangon–Pyay Expressway. Over time, a paved road was gradually extended, and villagers constructed a wooden bridge across the stream. As the wooden bridge deteriorated, the Embassy of Turkey (TİKA) funded and built a concrete bridge in 2018, greatly improving transportation and connectivity.

Livelihoods and Economic Uplift

From the very beginning, the sisters sought not only to educate the children of Magyikwin but also to uplift the livelihoods of families struggling with poverty. With financial assistance from St. Vincent de Paul, Yangon, an investment fund was established to help households raise pigs and run small home-based shops. In 1981, four young women were selected for a one-month livelihood training program at the Good Shepherd Convent in Yangon. By 2000, to provide income opportunities for young women unable to continue their studies, the sisters introduced handicrafts training, such as making rosaries and yarn products, and helped market them locally and internationally. In 2001, villagers also received training in candle-making through the support of Mary and Josephine Mellican, Phillip Mellican (Australia), and Marie Chiong (United States), enabling them to earn a regular income through their skills.

Vocational Training and Nutrition Program

In 2004, under the initiative of Sr. Joan Andrews, a nutrition program was launched for children and elderly persons from disadvantaged families. This program was supported by Fr. Peter Joe, Mr. Daniel Thomas, and Mr. Roh from the Korean Catholic Community (Incheon Diocese). In the same year, with donor support, two parallel buildings were constructed to house a kitchen, tailoring hall, and library. The Korean Catholic Community donated sewing machines, and villagers received training in tailoring, rosary-making, and other handicrafts. By selling their products, families began to earn a sustainable income.

Employment opportunities for the unemployed were further expanded through investment capital provided by Karuna Mission Social Services (KMSS), Yangon, and the Good Shepherd Lay Partners from Singapore and Malaysia.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the sisters launched a “Donate Your Surplus, Take What You Need” initiative to support struggling families. With assistance from the Czech Embassy, they distributed rice, oil, beans, noodles, and eggs to about 300 households across Magyikwin and nearby villages.

Training and Empowerment of Youth and Women

The sisters organized regular youth gatherings to guide young people in making wise life choices. Several young women were sent to Good Shepherd vocational training schools in Yangon and Mandalay, while others received training in:

- nursery teaching
- nurse aid
- bakery and cooking
- computer skills
- hairdressing
- English language
- sewing

These programs opened new pathways to self-reliance and dignity, empowering both youth and women to build a better future.

Employment and Staff Development

Over the years, some villagers found work as mission partners of the Good Shepherd Sisters, serving in roles suited to their skills. To foster their holistic growth, the Sisters organized work

plans, spiritual formation, prayer sessions, and experience-sharing. These practices deepened their mission spirit and improved their outlook on life.

To ease financial struggles, a **micro-credit scheme** was introduced in 2013 with support from Mr. & Mrs. Grantham (Norway). In 2020, a **Self-Help Group (SHG)** for women was formed to reduce household financial burdens through savings and awareness training.

Continuing Mission

Over the past 50 years, the mission of the Good Shepherd Sisters has brought remarkable progress in the health, education, socio-economic conditions, and spiritual life of the people of Magyikwin. Yet, challenges remain.

Remaining faithful to the motto of their Foundress, St. Mary Euphrasia— *“A person is more valuable than the whole world”*—the Sisters continue to serve with dedication, together with their 15 mission partners and staff, fostering hope and resilience for the future.

As we celebrate 50 years of shepherding mission, we give thanks for God’s boundless grace and the unwavering spirit of the Sisters missioned in Magyikwin Village. May the next 50 years continue to be a testament to faith, love, and the care of the Good Shepherd.