

## PRESS RELEASE

### **International Women's Day 2022 Mother Teresa of Pakistan, Dr Ruth Pfau**

**London, 8 March 2022:** Today, [St Francis Leprosy Guild](#) commemorates the work of Dr Ruth Pfau who devoted more than 55 years of her life to fighting leprosy in Pakistan. International Women's Day is celebrated annually on 8 March. It is an opportunity to reflect on progress, call for change and celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extraordinary role in the history of their countries and communities.



**Dr Ruth Pfau. Licensed for use: Alamy**

# ST FRANCIS LEPROSY GUILD

Ruth Katherina Martha Pfau, born on 9 September 1929, was a German–Pakistani Catholic nun of the Society of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary and a physician. She moved from Germany to Pakistan in 1961 and devoted more than 55 years of her life to fighting leprosy in Pakistan. Ruth was honoured with the Hilal-i-Pakistan-, Hilal-i-Imtiaz-, Nishan-i-Quaid-i-Azam-, and the Sitara-i-Quaid-i-Azam award. She was also awarded Germany’s Order of Merit in 1969.

Ruth helped to establish 157 leprosy clinics across Pakistan that treated over 56,780 people. Fazaia Ruth Pfau Medical College and Dr Ruth Pfau Hospital are named after her in Karachi. She died in August 2017 and was buried with full state honours; the first Christian to be given a state funeral in Pakistan.

Ruth founded the Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre (MALC) in Karachi in 1980 which is a 64-bed hospital that operates ten sub-centres. The centre provides urgent and ongoing medical care, as well as financial and emotional back-up to people with leprosy. SFLG has supported the centre for the last fifteen years.



# ST FRANCIS LEPROSY GUILD

**Medical staff caring for a patient with leprosy at a Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre, Pakistan.**

**Copyright: Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre**

[Through its TRACE operating strategy](#), SFLG is now working with MALC in a joint Active Case-Finding project to reduce the spread of leprosy, especially multibacillary cases, in the high endemic areas of Landhi Korangi and Maskan-e-Rahat, through early diagnosis and treatment and awareness raising.



“Ever since I joined SFLG, I’ve become more and more aware of the incredible women who have dedicated their lives to people with leprosy,” said SFLG’s Chief Executive Officer, Clare McIntosh. “Ruth Pfau is one such incredible woman,” she continued. “Thanks to her legacy, the Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre in Karachi has healed and supported numerous people with leprosy, like Badeea.”

Badeea was a contented homemaker, who had been married for five years, when she noticed blisters and numbness in her hand. Her husband was so concerned that went to the centre to seek advice, where she was diagnosed with leprosy. She was terrified when she was admitted to the hospital for the first time. She said: “when I saw the disfigured faces of other persons affected by leprosy, I wondered whether my fate would be like them or would I die.”

Thanks to Multidrug Therapy and the medication she received at the centre, Badeea became free from leprosy and the risk of developing disabilities and ulcers caused by the disease. Badeea says: “now just speaking with her doctor brightens my day.”



**Badeea, who was treated for leprosy at the Marie Adelaide Centre in Karachi. Copyright: SFLG**

"Ruth gave hope to innumerable people like Badeea. She proved through her work that serving humanity knows no boundaries. It's quite possible that she could, like Saint Teresa of Calcutta, be declared a saint. A saint, of course, is someone who has shown heroic virtue during their life. Ruth is certainly such a woman," Clare continued.



Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre (Pakistan) known as MALC, has been working in Pakistan for over 60 years in Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. For more case studies about people with leprosy that have been supported by the Marie Adelaide Centre [please visit our website](#)

## International Women's Day

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## CONTACT DETAILS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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## About SFLG

St Francis Leprosy Guild (SFLG) is a UK-based, Catholic charity that is working towards a -leprosy-free world. We support the work of over 40 leprosy centres, clinics, hospitals, care homes and leprosy-related projects. We work in 13 countries worldwide in Africa, Asia and South America where leprosy is endemic.

## **About leprosy**

### **1. What is leprosy?**

Leprosy (also known as Hansen's disease) is a complex, chronic neglected tropical disease caused by the *Mycobacterium leprae* bacterium. It affects the skin, the upper respiratory tract and peripheral nerves in the hands and feet, and the eyes. Leprosy can affect anyone, at any age, but it is linked to poverty, malnutrition, and genetic susceptibility.

Leprosy remains an important health problem in low and middle-income countries worldwide.

### **2. How is leprosy transmitted?**

It is thought that leprosy is transmitted via droplets from the nose combined with prolonged, close contact with infected individuals.

### **3. How is leprosy diagnosed?**

Leprosy is difficult to diagnose at its early stages, but it often presents as numb patches on the skin. Currently, the most reliable method to diagnose leprosy, is a slit-skin-smear test in the laboratory.

Leprosy may incubate for up to twenty years before presenting with any signs. If leprosy remains undiagnosed like this, the person affected may unwillingly transmit the disease throughout a community. However, within a short period of receiving multidrug therapy, a person affected by leprosy will no longer be infectious. If leprosy is diagnosed in its early stages, it can be treated readily, and it will not cause disabilities. Preventing disabilities from developing means people with leprosy are less likely to suffer from the stigma and discrimination that can destroy their livelihoods and entire lives.

### **4. How infectious is leprosy?**

95% of most populations have a natural immunity to leprosy. The remaining 5% become vulnerable, mainly through poor nutrition, poor living conditions, lack of hygiene and a weakened immune system. Leprosy is not hereditary.

### **5. Why are people with leprosy often so disfigured?**

People with leprosy lose all feeling in the affected areas and as a result, there is diminished awareness of harm from trauma or heat. Without treatment, the lack of sensation can lead to permanent damage to skin, nerves, limbs, and eyes. It can also lead to the development of reoccurring, lifelong, hard-to- treat ulcers.

## **6. Is there a cure? How is leprosy treated?**

Leprosy can be cured using multidrug therapy (MDT), available at no cost to patients from the World Health Organization. If MDT is taken in the early stages of the disease, permanent damage to nerves is completely avoided.

## **7. How many are affected by leprosy in the world today?**

The latest WHO statistics reveal that in 2019 there were 202,185 new cases of leprosy diagnosed. Of concern and indicating ongoing transmission, the number of children newly detected was nearly 15,000.

These statistics do not account for those people who have leprosy with no symptoms or, who are not diagnosed and are unwittingly transmitting it to their communities. In addition, the statistics do not include those individuals who have been treated for leprosy, but whose disabilities, caused by leprosy need ongoing healthcare needs, or those who are subject to leprosy stigma and discrimination.

## **8. Which countries have leprosy, where is leprosy endemic?**

\*The WHO has identified 23 global priority countries for leprosy, where 95.9% of the global total of people detected with leprosy are found. The 23 countries are: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Comoros, Cote Ivoire, DR Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Kiribati, Madagascar, Micronesia, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Somalia and Tanzania.

The highest number of people newly detected with leprosy in 2019 live in India with 114,451, followed by Brazil with 27,863 and Indonesia with 17,439.

\*WHO Weekly epidemiological record, Global Leprosy Update 4 September 2020, 36, 2020, 95, 417-440 <http://www.who.int/wer>