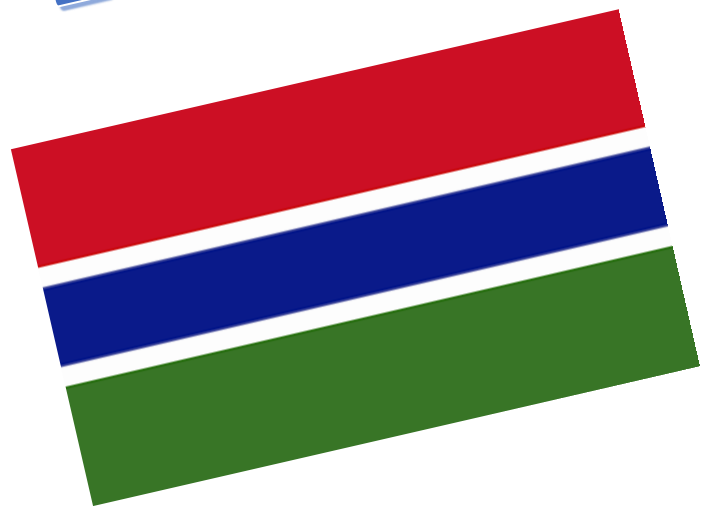




**First Marist
Community in
Gambia
9-11-1984**



First community in Gambia (1984).

After some years of missionary presence in Senegal, the Marist Sisters, wanting to broaden their missionary vision in West Africa, presented a restructuring project to the then Superior General, Sister Margaret Purcell, for discussion at the 1984 General Chapter. Until then, the Marist Sisters' mission depended on the Province of France. This project consisted of establishing the mission of Senegal as an interprovincial mission dependent on the General Administration.

This request coincided with an invitation from the Bishop of Banjul, Archbishop Michael Cleary, to establish a Marist religious presence in Farafenni, on the north bank of the River Gambia.

The Gambia is a former British colony stretching along both sides of the River Gambia. The Gambia forms a quasi-enclave in Senegal, penetrating more than 300 km inland, and the majority of its population is Muslim, as in Senegal. The populations of Senegal and Gambia share the same cultures and languages. It was the colonial administrative division that differentiates them and their official languages.

The General Chapter of April 1984 approved the new foundation in The Gambia. On 9th November 1984, Sister Margaret Purcell (Australia), having completed her mandate as Superior General of the Congregation, left for the foundation of the new mission in Gambia, Farafenni, together with Sisters Marcelline McCormack (Ireland), Ruth Davis (Australia) and Elizabeth Laroque (Canada). They were welcomed by the Regional Superior, Sister Marie Emmanuel Duclos, accompanied by some Marist Sisters from Senegal and the Vicar General of the Diocese of Banjul, Father Vincent Comer. Margaret, Marcelline, Ruth and Beth (Elizabeth) stayed in the Gambian capital for the first few days before settling into their new community.

The population of Farafenni, a town on the border with Senegal, was young and children did not have the opportunity to go to school or began school only after 8 years of age. Adults with an average education didn't have many opportunities for their future. This observation was a strong call and the pioneering sisters set about

responding without delay. With the help of benefactors, they built two classrooms in the parish to accommodate the first pupils. They also trained young girls who could in turn teach the children.

The quality of this pre-school teacher training school impressed the diocese, and very soon other young women and men from all over The Gambia were sent to Farafenni to benefit from this training. There was as yet no government or lay structure for training pre-school teachers.

The parish priest, Father Michéal Flynn, accompanied the sisters on a tour of the parish and the surrounding deserts. Marcelline and Beth became involved in social and parish ministry, more specifically in the promotion of women and the training of catechists.

The lack of logistics and medicines made the task even more difficult. The health structure lacked basic facilities such as running water and electricity. There was only one doctor in the region and the mortality rate, particularly among children, was very high. Ruth was in great demand and many sick people came to her in the community to ask for her help. For the record, Ruth cared for a two-day-old baby with a high fever by feeding it by syringe in a humidicrib made out of a box she had prepared. Here's a short story from one of the founders about a day at Farafenni.

"We quickly got used to our new way of life. In the evenings, we played cards, listened to music on our little CD players, listened to the BBC news when we had electricity and prepared teaching materials for Margaret's children. Father Flynn had a generator, so we had electricity most evenings when he was there."



House -Farafenni



Farafenni Chapel

The following year, in 1985, a new community was established at Fajikunda, not far from the capital Banjul, to house a formation community. In the same year, the communities of Senegal and Gambia became the Missionary Region of Senegambia, attached to the General Administration. The Superior General at the time was Sister Cathaldus Burns (Bridie).



Fajikunda house



Fajikunda nursery school

In addition to formation, the Fajikunda community was involved in education, parish ministry and the promotion of women.

Sister Beth who was then transferred to Fajikunda was given responsibility for the training of catechists in the diocese at the Gambia Pastoral Institute.

Over the years, the Marist Missionary Region of Senegambia has welcomed many sisters from France, Ireland, Italy, Canada, USA, England, Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Fiji.