Sister Sheila Devane is a clinical psychologist and set up a community mental health service in Tanzania in the late 1990’s. A qualified nurse before joining MMM, she also trained in midwifery. Now she has become a frontline mental health worker in Trinity College Dublin (TCD) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the services TCD provides is a mental health service: the Student Counselling Service. Sheila has worked there part-time for the past 7 years. TCD also has a public response team - a group of staff from across the college who volunteer to lead out on a major crisis such as a terrorist attack. The team began to meet in early January 2020. They were concerned about the potential impact of a virus then travelling through Wuhan City in China. TCD responded quickly partly because of the large number of Chinese students in the college, most of whom were at home for the Chinese New Year. Many eminent medical scientists working in TCD such as virologists, immunologists, physicians, infectious disease experts, and medical statisticians recognised that a major problem was coming.

By early February every department began to ramp up its plans. Students were supported in vacating residences in twenty-four hours. Others were helped to get necessary documentation to transit through airports of countries already in lock-down. Visas were arranged for others who could not travel. Those infected went into isolation. Teaching in each faculty switched over to online and final medical year students had exams eight weeks early so they would be ready to deal with the expected surge in patients. Some laboratories had to be left open and operating. These are the powerhouses from where much-needed vaccines may come. Others had to be temporarily closed or moved across to the national laboratory facilities.

All this organising didn’t prevent a sense of confusion and uncertainty. Students were now all over the world on mobile phones, tablets and laptops, trying to get enough broadband to follow a lecture, submit an essay, take part in a tutorial or be present at a counselling session.

The Student Counselling Service played a leading role in the public response to COVID-19. Sheila said that it was clear that the service was needed more than ever. In under two weeks the forty people involved in providing counselling support continued to work virtually from home – some as administrators; others on outreach, managing communication and social media; others providing student learning support; still others on the peer to peer team keeping in touch; and counsellors reaching students across the world by tele-counselling. Video links are also planned.

Sheila commented, ‘We are busier than ever as the need for mental health support escalates in situations of uncertainty and threats of death. For students who are trying to study from home it is far from ideal. Many are in countries where preventative measures are weak. Others are in parts of Ireland where broadband is fragile or non-existent. Others are back in homes from which they needed to escape. Others are so anxious that they find it hard to manage themselves in this new, uncertain world. Counselling is one of the big supports they look for and we are here.’
In addition to counselling clients Sheila is part of a small team providing psychological support to new frontline doctors and third and fourth year student nurses. She draws on many years as a nurse and on experiences in other crisis situations. She has taken on more student clients than normal because trainee and student counsellors are now not available to work alongside counsellors.

Despite the challenges, Sheila says, ‘I am happy to serve as a member of this truly wonderful service in TCD. I also proudly continue a tradition of collaborative service in crises and emergencies well known to the Medical Missionaries of Mary since its foundation.’