In the Image of God
TIM 1984-1985

By Rt Rev Dr E. Pushpalalitha, TIM 1984-1985 participant

Photo courtesy of Rt Rev Dr E. Pushpalalitha

When she was graduating in economics from Andhra University, E. Pushpalalitha faced a choice. She had always wanted to be a lecturer, but she says she heard the voice of the Lord. Born in Diguvappad village in Kurnool district of Andhra Pradesh in south India, she had seen "missionaries like Ms Betty Robinson, Sister Butterfield, Ms Hawkins, Sister Mary Kurby, Deaconess Lamb and Rev. & Mrs. Massidon serving the poor and the needy in our villages, praying for and healing the sick, uplifting the downtrodden through education and the proclamation of the gospel. Their commitment, kind and compassionate heart and dedication to serve God and people inspired me for God's mission." Thus, she chose the clerical robe over the professor's gown.

After her degree in divinity from the Andhra Christian Theological College, Pushpalalitha was ordained a deacon on 17 July 1983 and a presbyter on 8 April 1984. On 30 September 2013, the Church of South India (CSI) ordained Pushpalalitha as a bishop, blazing a trail in a mainstream church in India. The denomination, which has nearly 4.3 million members in India and Sri Lanka, is not new to having women as priests, but this was the first time ever that a woman was appointed to the office of the bishop. Currently serving as the Bishop of Nandyal in Andhra Pradesh, Pushpalalitha acknowledges the Training in Mission (TIM) programme of Council for World Mission (CWM) for moulding her.

Since its inception in 1981, the TIM programme has brought together a group of 10-12 young people from the churches and ecumenical partners of CWM for 10 months of intensive mission training.

> ***"Though I was born and brought up in a rural atmosphere, God gave me many opportunities to have a wider ecumenical exposure, experiences that enlighten me to understand the deep concern and need for the mission and ministry of God to serve the community at large. I remain ever grateful to CWM for this,"*** she says.

Pushpalalitha attended the TIM programme in 1984-85 at Birmingham, England, and in Jamaica. Among the 16 who attended the programme from 12 different countries, she represented India. "We were divided into two groups consisting of eight each, and when one group was in England the other was in Jamaica," says Pushpalalitha.

Photo courtesy of Rt Rev Dr E. Pushpalalitha

She says it gave her an opportunity to listen to the pre-independence stories of the participants and also to learn about the liberating power of the gospel that enabled people to recapture life. "TIM gave me an exposure to new cultures, traditions, languages, patterns of life, and values that are distinct from one another," she says.

Her avenues to understanding holistic mission were many and varied: A Home for the Senior Citizens in England; and a School for the Hearing and Speech Impaired and an orphanage in St.Marys, both in Jamaica. As part of the ministry, she was also associated with the United Reformed Church in South Austin, England, and the Hope United Church in Kingston, Jamaica, "where it was a privilege to see even the Prime Minister of Jamaica attend the services."

Photo courtesy of Rt Rev Dr E. Pushpalalitha

"The programme challenged my worldviews and I learnt to love and serve all, irrespective of caste, colour, creed and gender. TIM exposed me to racial discrimination, gender discrimination, apartheid, and gap between the haves and have-nots," says Pushpalalitha.

All this would help her serve the humble congregations back home in Rayalaseema and Nandyal dioceses, which mostly constitute illiterate and poor people. "Though people were illiterate their faith in God has enriched me. I still believe that strong faith and rich traditions can be found among the grassroots rather than in urban centres. There were no proper roads, electricity or modern amenities. However, I used to take care of 12 village congregations, meeting their spiritual, social and emotional needs. There are many instances where God's mighty deeds were experienced. God has used me as an instrument to proclaim the gospel, to build families and communities, resolve issues in the church, buy and develop church properties."

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From 2000 to 2005, Pushpalalitha served as the director of Visranthi Nilayam, the headquarters of the CSI Women's Fellowship and mother house of the CSI Order of Sisters. At present, while continuing the existing projects and programmes in the diocese, her focus is on women's empowerment and skill training programmes for rural girls. They are imparted training in tailoring, computers and spoken English apart from Bible courses. Other programmes in the diocese under her watch include the girl child campaign and awareness programmes on gender equality, child rights, and youth against addiction and abuse.

Bishop Pushpalalitha's priority now is health and educational institutions of Nandyal diocese, a vast area that is spread over five revenue districts. There are 20 schools, one multi-purpose hospital and a school for the blind in the diocese. Some of the schools are as old as 135 years. The new educational policies of the government that support the interests of the rich pose a great challenge to run the institutions, she says.

Maintaining and establishing partnerships with the CSI dioceses and the overseas partners is another area of involvement. "Nandi-Kanya" is the new partnership initiated between Nandyal and Kanyakumari dioceses.

Pushpalalitha is also on the boards of CSI-SEVA, the diaconal wing of CSI, the Andhra Christian Theological College (ACTC), Hyderabad, and the Andhra Pradesh Christian Council (APCC). She is also on the board of the Annual General Body meeting of the United Theological College, Bangalore.

"I am recognised in many forums as the first woman bishop of the Church of South India and given privilege of expressing my views on gender equity, and also holistic mission and ministry," she says.

Photos courtesy of Rt Rev Dr E. Pushpalalitha

At a time when theological debates rage over the role of women in the church, the consecration of Pushpalalitha is momentous. "I didn't find any gender discrimination in CWM; it gave us a good opportunity and privilege to express and share our ideas freely, and though we were from different nations and different cultures it brought us to be the oneness in Christ and to become the family of God."

Pushpalalitha's experience serves as one more reminder of how women, made in the image of God, are on equal terms with men when it comes to not just ministry but all facets of life.

In this she appreciates the good efforts of CWM in making her and her TIM partners "the channel of God's love and grace in the world and to build the kingdom of God on this earth."