News
Social Justice



Bethany Sr. Bhagya Thalichirayil interacts with "Didi" (red), a senior resident, and Sujatha (left), the youngest resident of Asha Bhavan, a home for disabled and abandoned women at Ichilampady, a village in Karnataka state, southwestern India. (Thomas Scaria)



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A woman with an intellectual disability, known only as Sangeetha, was abused by a group of lorry drivers and abandoned at Nelyady, a town in the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

Some Catholic nuns noticed Sangeetha roaming the town and brought her to their convent.

That was 13 years ago.

Sangeetha prompted the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ, also known as the Bethany sisters, to open Asha Bhavan (abode of hope), a home for disabled and abandoned women, at Ichilampady, an interior village near Nelyady, which is approximately 230 miles west of Bengaluru, the state capital.

Didi was the second woman the nuns picked up. Since they did not know her name, the nuns called her "Didi" (elder sister).

When Global Sisters Report visited the center on August 1, Sangeetha and Didi, both Hindus, shared their traumatic experiences and sang together, revealing their improved state of mind.



The residents of Asha Bhavan and its director Sr. Bhagya Thalichirayil at Ichilampady, a village in Karnataka, southwestern India. (Thomas Scaria)

Sr. Bhagya Thalichirayil, Asha Bhavan director, said that women's empowerment is their congregation’s main charism, sharing that Asha Bhavan is among 29 centers her century-old Syro-Malankara congregation manages for disabled and abandoned women in various parts of India.

"Like Sangeeta, we have picked up several women from places where truck drivers usually stop for their food, rest or bath," said the 49-year-old nun, who prefers to be called by her first name.

Truck drivers plying long routes on highways often pick up destitute women and girls and drop them at various locations after sexually exploiting them.

Asha Bhavan has 31 such residents.

"It is not easy to manage the place. I am its director, but in practice, I am just one of them, eating and sleeping with them,” said Bhagya, who cooks for the residents and

bathes them. She also takes them to therapy sessions at a hospital in Mangaluru, 42 miles west of Nelyady.

When GSR visited the home, Bhagya had just returned from Mangaluru, where she had taken 12 women requiring urgent psychiatric care.

One of them was Lakshmi, whose legs were broken and tongue was cut by a gang of beggars. Some lay missionaries rescued her and brought her to the Bethany nuns two years ago.

The center’s daily routine includes prayer, yoga, classes, entertainment, household work and assisting on farms and animal husbandry. "Not all can contribute, but we have given a role for everyone, so they feel productive and dignified," the director said.

At times, the residents beat and bite Bhagya and her companions. "They use bad words, but we are used to all that," she added.

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Another resident, who goes by Sujatha, said she came to the home as a 10-year-old girl. "My parents wanted to poison me as they considered me a disgrace to the family," Sujatha, who has minor autism, told GSR.

She said she ran away from home when she learned about her parents' intentions and found shelter in a police station.

"The police brought her here," Bhagya recalled. Sujata, now 21, helps with chores at the center located on a four-acre farm.

Bhagya said she was a teacher, but went to the center to rest after a surgical procedure and found something more. "I converted my contemplation into compassion and got into the lives of these women," she added.

Although she has a room in the convent, she stays with the women in an adjacent building with limited facilities. "I really enjoy being with them, and they become part and parcel of my life," she added.

Bhagya recently stayed to care for the residents while her two companions went to their headquarters in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala's capital, to join their centenary celebrations.

"I am not afraid to be alone because I have some strong women like Anusha," said Bhagya, as she introduced GSR to a nurse who came to the home suffering from depression and anxiety-related issues developed from a strained relationship.

"I am a helper and a resident at the same time," the Syro-Malankara nurse told GSR. Although she has relatives nearby, she prefers to stay with nuns for peace and happiness.



Bethany Sr. Bhagya Thalichirayil prepares to distribute medicine to the Asha Bhavan residents. (Thomas Scaria)

According to Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, the congregation’s superior general, "Bethany sisters are an embodiment of contemplation in action," who carry forward a mission grounded in love across continents and cultures.

The congregation, which is deeply linked to the Syro-Malankara Church, was born from "a longing to renew the church from within and uplift the most vulnerable from without," Kuzhinapurathu explained.

"Our sisters play a crucial role in bringing people to our fold through prayers, home visits and pastoral mission," she said, adding that there are more than 1,000 members who live in 178 convents spread across 16 Indian states and missions in Ethiopia, Germany, Italy, South Africa, Switzerland and the United States.

“Whether working in parishes, schools or mission territories, our sisters engage in a spiritual ecumenism where unity is forged through shared prayer, suffering and service rather than doctrinal confrontation,” Kuzhinapurathu explained.

She told GSR that her congregation manages 16 healthcare centers in remote and underserved regions, as well as institutions for orphans, the elderly and persons with disabilities. Her congregation also manages 182 educational institutions for women.

The Bethany leader said they have 369 mission centers for catechesis, women’s empowerment and rural development, in addition to special schools for children with intellectual and physical disabilities. They also conduct programs for migrant workers, form disaster response teams and provide trauma-informed pastoral care.



Cardinal Baselios Mar Cleemis, head of the Syro-Malankara Church, with Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, superior general of Bethany congregation, (center) at the centenary celebrations of the Bethany congregation in Thiruvananthapuram, capital of Kerala state, southwestern India. (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

Cardinal Baselios Mar Cleemis, head of the Syro-Malankara Church, applauded the Bethany sisters for fostering unity and peace within the church and empowering women.

The Bethany sisters are "a blessing to the universal church," said the cardinal who was the guest of honor at the congregation’s centenary celebrations on August 2 at St. Mary’s Cathedral, Pattom, a Thiruvananthapuram suburb.