



Women on the move – Her Story:



B.V. Subbamma on the right, demonstrating at the 1984 LWF Budapest Assembly, LWF Photo Archive

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| Name: | Dr Bathineni Venkata Subbamma |
| Country of origin: | India |
| Date of birth: | 1925 |
| Date of death: | 2009 |
| Church: | Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church in India |
| Period of mandate: | LWF Executive Committee 1977 – 1984, a delegate at the 1970 Evian and 1977 Dar es Salaam Assembly |
| Short biography: | <p>A native of India, she was one of the pioneer South Indian Lutheran Christian theologians. She was born into a traditional Hindu family from the Kamma community. Kamma is one of the subcastes of Shudra, the fourth caste in Indian social stratification. Bathineni initially had misgivings about Christianity. She thought Christianity was a religion of the untouchables, the Dalits, and Jesus Christ, a god for Harijans (Harijan means God's people, a title given to Dalits by Gandhi). Accordingly she thought Jesus was the lowest of all the gods in India. To her great surprise, her high school teacher Rajagopal Ayyangar, a Brahmin by caste, inspired her to read and reflect on the Bible. Bathineni recalls, "It was unbelievable how my attitude toward it had changed. Until then, because Harijan Christians had introduced it to me, I had been doubtful about the greatness of the Bible. But now the same book in the hands of a caste man captured my interest". After learning more about Christianity, Bathineni had a dilemma about baptism that presupposed rejection of Hindu culture and traditions. She was not convinced that she should give up her caste identity for Christian faith for two reasons: first, unlike the Dalits who get a higher status after converting to Christianity, people from higher castes have to renounce their privileges and culture, which seemed discriminatory, second, she found the church also highly influenced by and organized on the caste system. It seemed contradictory to her that a faith calling for rejection of the Hindu faith (and exclusive obedience to the Christian God) would also be so involved in caste structures. After a long struggle with this social and cultural issue, she found an alternative. She converted from Hinduism to Christianity and started a separate church for fellow Kamma/Shudra converts. She promoted the idea that one did not have to denounce her/his cultural ethos or traditions to embrace Christian faith. This new mission strategy naturally was welcomed by the caste Hindus but rejected by Dalit Christians. Bathineni had an impressive education background. She attended Andhra-Christian College and St Joseph's College of Education in Andhra Pradesh state on the southeastern coast of India, from which she received two bachelor degrees in arts and education in 1947. She earned an MA degree in education from New York Theological Seminary, New York; a BD degree from Christian Theological College, Hyderabad, India; an MA in missions from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA and a PHD degree from Wittenberg University, Springfield, OH. Bathineni subsequently made distinct, controversial and challenging contributions to the Lutheran church in India, especially the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran church in India, in the development of Kamma/Shudra convert churches in Andhra, Christian Ashram Ministry, and indigenization of Lutheran liturgy through indigenous music and cultural folk art. For example, Bathineni's passion to preserve her own Hindu culture and tradition helped her to introduce Telugu Bhajans, a native music of Hindu culture and religious tradition commonly used in Hindu temples, into Christian worship. Similarly, she promoted Burra Khata, a native folk art of telling stories with music, to proclaim the Gospel to Hindus. Bathineni initiated and promoted forums for</p> |

Christian converts, especially women from caste backgrounds, to profess their faith as meaningful and relevant to their own religious cultural ethos. She was a pioneer in organizing annual gatherings of Telugu Hindu converts to Christianity. In addition she served Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church for many years in various capacities and leadership roles. She was the founder of the Christian Ashram movement in Andhra Pradesh to strengthen colonies of disciples through religious retreats. She was also president of the Charlotte Swenson Memorial Bible training School for women based on ashram traditions.

Her services to the church went well beyond the confines of the Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church and India. In 1970, she represented her church at the LWF Assembly in Evian, France, in 1977 in Dar es Salaam until the Assembly in 1984 in Budapest which she also attended. She was a member of the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation (1977 – 1984) a member of the Board of Trustees for the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France and a member of the Association of Theologically Trained women of India.

Bathineni was an orator and an inspirational speaker. She made a number of presentations promoting the Christian Ashram movement. Some of the important publications are: New patters for discipling Hindus (1970), Christ confronts India: indigenous expression of Christianity in India (1973), and women in mission: experiment through Christian ashrams in Studia Missionalia. A missiology publication by the faculty of Gregorian University. In recognition for her many contributions, persistence and perseverance, the church ordained Bathineni in 1999 when she was 74 years old. She died 10 years later at the age of 84.

Moses Penumaka from the book: Abundant Harvest: stories of Asian Lutherans, Edmond Yee and P. Paul Rajashekar, editors and compilers, p.234-236