



Women on the move: Her story!



Name: Prasanna Kumari
Country of origin: India
Date of Birth: 4 January 1950
Date of death: 16 March 2006
Church: United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India
Period of Mandate: 1997 - 2003

Short biography: Born in Kanakondur of Andhra Pradesh to Hindu converts and evangelists Mulpuri Basaviah and Sesharathnamma. The fourth among six children, she became a widely known theologian, church leader, activist and prophetic advocate of human rights, particularly women's rights.

After a basic education in Mitralaya school in Bangalore, Kumari received a bachelor of theology degree from the Hindustan Bible Institute, Chennai, in 1975, a BD degree in 1978 and an MTh in 1982 from the United Theological College, Bangalore. She was married to Samuel Meshack of the Indian Evangelical Lutheran Church in November 1978. From 1978 to 1979 she was a social worker in the Kalrayam Hills project of the Arcot Lutheran Church (ALC) and then joined her spouse in his ministry as pastor in Kolar Gold Fields, Karnataka. She was mother of two daughters, Prema and Priscilla.

In 1982, Kumari joined the staff of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India (UELCI) as secretary to the Women's desk (1982-1992). While holding that position, she also taught New Testament and Women's Studies at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College (GLTC) from 1985-1992. She was conferred a doctor of divinity degree, *Honoris Causa*, by the Academy of Ecumenical Indian Theology and Church Administration in Chennai in 1997. From 1999 to 2005, she was at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) pursuing a doctoral degree in systematic theology and writing a dissertation titled "Dalit women's experiences: a theological imperative for constructing Indian feminist theology". During this time she was diagnosed with cancer and this weakened her physically. But she was resolute in her aim to finish and succeeded in the writing a major part of the thesis. LSTC awarded her the doctor of philosophy degree posthumously in May 2006.

Kumari held several important positions in the global as well as in the national church. As a member of the ALC, she was one of the first two Indian Lutheran women – the other was Parimol Kishu of the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church, to be ordained in 1991. She was associate executive secretary of the UELCI from 1989 to 1992, and from 1992 to 1999 she served as the first woman executive secretary of the UELCI. She served as regional coordinator of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Committee on Women in Church and Society (1984-1989) and was a member of the Lutheran-orthodox dialogue (1986-1992). She was chair (1991-1997) of the Advisory Committee for Theological Education in Asia. In 1998, she was part of a high-powered delegation and fact-finding team led by the then president of the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) K. Rajaratnam, to assess the atrocities committed against Christians in the Dang District of Gujarat. In 1999 at the first Asian Lutheran International Conference, convened in Hong Kong, Kumari was one of the 10 persons elected to serve on the first ALIC steering Committee. From 1990-1997, Kumari served on the LWF Council as chair of the program committee for theology and studies and from 1997 to 2000 she continued to serve on the same committee as a member. She was elected vice president for the Asia region of the LWF (1997-2003). From 2000-2003, she was chair of the then newly created LWF Standing Committee for World Service. In her capacity as the Asia region vice-president, Kumari was one among three women LWF representatives who signed the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification on October 31, 1999 in Augsburg, Germany.

Kumari had several publications to her credit. Among them, perhaps the most well-recognized is *From Federation to Communion: the History of the Lutheran World Federation*, which she co-edited. She was also an editor of *Reader in Feminist Theology* and *Feminist Theology Perspectives and Praxis*.

Kumari was renowned for her pioneering efforts that resulted in the introduction of women's studies as a core subject for theological education at GLTC. This paved the way for other theological institutions in India to do the same. She was also instrumental in developing the first master's program in women's studies within the theological academy in India. As a leader she was a role model for many women in the church and championed passionately for the cause of women and the poor in India. She initiated several projects and organized women in the slums to fight for and claim their rights to livelihood and emancipation. She was able to connect successfully with the marginalized in India as well as the powerful in church and politics. At the time of her death, on March 16, 2006 Kumari was 54 years old and serving as vice president of the NCCI and head of the department of women's studies at GLTC.

In his tribute to Kumari's tremendous contribution to the life of the church globally and nationally, LWF General Secretary, Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko said in a statement: "she will be remembered "in the Lutheran communion as a strong advocate for equality among women and men", her fearless struggle for justice, her compassion toward the poor and the vulnerable, and her devotion to helping women find their equal place in church and society. Dr Noko cited Kumari's conviction that "working for and with the poor" was one of the effective ways to witness for Christ in India. This was evident through her active participation in several projects aimed at assisting women living in slum areas to claim their rights to livelihood and progress (LWI).

Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon from the book: Abundant Harvest: stories of Asian Lutherans, Edmond Yee and P. Paul Rajashekar, editors and compilers, p.338-341