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Q&As



Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, the first woman to head the major superiors of Kerala, the southwestern Indian state that has produced the largest number of Catholic religious men and women in the country. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)



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Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu is the first woman to head the major superiors of Kerala, the southwestern Indian state that has produced the largest number of Catholic religious men and women in the country.

The member of Sisters of the Imitation of Christ (Bethany), congregation under the Syro-Malankara Church, is the president of the Kerala Conference of the Major Superiors that has more than 40,000 members.

Kuzhinapurathu also coordinates and collaborates with members from the Syro-Malabar and Latin Churches, the other two rites that make up the Catholic Church in India. She became the president on June 7, 2023, at a joint meeting of the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council and the religious superiors.



Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ opens a leadership training for the members of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors in 2023. (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

The Kerala unit is part of the Conference of Religious India, the national association of the major superiors, with more than 130,000 members, among them 103,000 women.

Kuzhinapurathu spoke to Global Sisters Report about various challenges faced by the religious congregations in India — dwindling vocations, aging members and the culture of working together.

***Global Sisters Report*: You have completed six months as the first woman president of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors. How do you look at it?**

Kuzhinapurathu: True, it's a big task! Ours is a big family — 470 major superiors of around 40,000 religious working in Kerala. More than this number serve dioceses and missions outside the state. The fact that we are all members of the same family makes my work easier, although challenging. Since we all know each other, we spontaneously support each other, and stand with everyone who needs help. Our formula is "self help and mutual help." The new post gives me an opportunity to work closely with the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council on issues affecting the religious and the church.



Members of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors, representing more than 40,000 members, are pictured at a planning meeting of the common activities after Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu took over as the conference's first woman president in June 2023. (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

What have you achieved so far as the president of the conference?

I have completed a few months only, so I cannot claim any great achievements. But during this period, we came together a couple of times to express support to the suffering Christians in Manipur [the northeastern Indian state affected by ethnic violence since May 3, 2023] and have arranged accommodation, food and educational facilities for several students from there. We organized a training for nuns from different congregations to develop their leadership qualities and instill in them the spirit of collaboration. One good thing about our conference is that we have members from all the three rites and we enjoy working together.

What are the strengths of this conference? What has it contributed to the Indian church?

Our regional body has 267 congregations for women, 71 for priests and 17 for brothers. Kerala accounts for only 1% of the total land area of India and contains about 3% of the country's population, but more than 70% of India's Catholic religious, clergy and missionaries come from here.



Bethany Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu leads a solidarity march to express support for the victims of ethnic violence in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur. The Kerala Conference of Major Superiors has arranged shelter, education facilities and employment for hundreds of Manipuri youths in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala. (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

How could Kerala produce so many missionaries who now serve all over the world?

One of the reasons for the Kerala vocations was due to the deep faith passed on from generations to generations from the time of St. Thomas the Apostle [who is believed to have arrived in Kerala in A.D. 52]. Kerala has India's oldest church. The state has given birth to several religious congregations for both men and women. Mine is one of them.

Does this trend still continue? Do congregations still get vocations?

No. Unfortunately, Kerala faces an alarming decrease in religious vocations now, especially to the women congregations. Many formation centers and novitiates of women religious have just one or two candidates. Most sisters in our convents are over 60 years old. However, some congregations engaged in parish ministries seem to get enough vocations.

I do not see a decrease in faith or derailing of religious values in Catholic homes in the state. Vocations are dwindling because of several factors. One major reason is that most Catholic families have just one or two children and parents don't prefer sending them to convents or seminaries.



Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, right, and Sr. Shalini Tharayil, members of the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ, are pictured in front of the generalate in Kottayam, central Kerala. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Any other reasons?

The creeping of materialism into the Christian homes, attractions for girls to the lucrative nursing profession, and negative reports about religious life have affected vocations. Many children from Kerala migrate to other countries for studies and they eventually settle down there. Social media too has tremendous influence on children.

How do religious congregations address this problem?

We do not have enough sisters to continue the existing missions or safeguard our institutions and assets. Many congregations have started lay associations as an alternative. It is high time we promoted a new way of committed life, with or without vows, encouraging young women to become lay apostles.

Some congregations now recruit candidates from north and northeastern Indian states, especially in tribal belts where the church is rooted. The congregations also work closely with the bishops' council.



The Kerala Conference of Major Superiors joins the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council and lay associations a protest to demand justice for the victims of ethnic violence in northeastern Indian state of Manipur on June 25, 2023. (Courtesy of Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu)

Do you think cases of nuns' sexual exploitation or suicides have led to the decrease in vocations?

I don't think so. True, some incidences of sexual exploitation and suicides of young nuns have been reported. But they are isolated cases. Kerala seems to report more cases of suicide or suspicious death of nuns. The state also accounts for more suicides compared to other states in India. The reason is that Kerala registers all such cases unlike other states. The suicide cases among nuns in Kerala seem more since their population is also more.

Like other sections of society, nuns too undergo psychological problems like depression and anxiety. Psychological interventions may help, but we will fail if we do not find a spiritual solution to those issues.

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You said earlier that many girls have chosen the nursing profession. Do you consider nurses as missionaries in their rights?

Healing is an essential ministry of the church, and nurses are handmaids of the health care. In this sense, nurses are also missionaries. We find Christian nurses from Kerala spread around the globe. In many countries, they keep the faith alive and transfer their deep-rooted faith and spirituality to their patients and their family members. Although they do not take religious vows, they are formed by their faith and follow the ethical guidelines of their profession.

Not everyone can become nurses. Nursing is a vocation, a divine call because only those called to this profession can be good health care professionals. Movements such as Jesus Youth have helped them become effective instruments of God.

How did your conference tackle the liturgical disputes in the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese?

A great number of religious congregations, especially women, are based in the archdiocese. Some have their headquarters in the archdiocese that has more than 3,000 sisters. As a body representing religious congregations in Kerala, the conference has advised the sisters working in the archdiocese to be careful in dealing with the dispute. It is a concern of the archdiocese, not an issue of the religious congregations there. But we hope and pray for a solution soon.



Sr. Ardra Kuzhinapurathu, the first woman to head the major superiors of Kerala, is pictured at the entrance of her motherhouse in Kottayam, central Kerala. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Can you say something about your own vocation?

I am from a traditional Catholic family belonging to the Syro-Malankara Church, one of the Eastern churches in union with the pope. I am the eldest of five siblings and my parents supported me to become a nun. Both my family and my church have influenced my vocation and the choice to join the Sisters of the Imitation of Christ.

From my childhood, I was so curious about studying the history and growth of the Oriental church in Kerala, especially my Syro-Malankara rite. The church unification process and the foundation of my congregation were simultaneous and interlinked. I joined the convent in 1978 and on Dec. 26, 2023, I completed 43 years of religious life.