



Members and animators of the Judith Forum participate in a gathering on May 26, 2026, at St. Mary's Forane Church in the Diocese of Thamarassery, Kerala, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)



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Mary Paulose's world collapsed when her husband died in a road accident in 2016.

"I was shattered and lost all hope in life," said the mother of two, who lives in Pulloorampara in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala.

She struggled with grief and anxiety for several months until a member of the Sisters of the Destitute came to her house.

"The sister told me about a forum for widows her congregation had started in my parish and asked me to come and share my pain with others," Poulse recalled while talking to Global Sisters Report in May.

She said she joined [Judith Forum](#) reluctantly.

A decade later, she serves as the forum's president for the Thamarassery Diocese and spends her time helping new widows emerge from isolation.

Sr. Reni Jose, a member of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel and Judith Forum's diocesan animator, said Poulse is among the more than 1,000 members from 60 of the diocese's 123 parishes.

"Our congregation began the forum as a small initiative to help grieving women, but soon it became a rare collaborative ministry of women congregations to offer compassion and support," the 64-year-old nun told GSR.

Jose said many widows, especially in rural areas, lead a withdrawn life after the death of their husbands. "Most of them are housewives with no individual income, so [they] lose financial security when the husband dies. Others become emotionally isolated within their families," she said.

The forum was launched by the Carmelite Sisters on Oct. 16, 2016, in Thiruvambady, a town in Kerala's Kozhikode district, in collaboration with the Thamarassery Diocese's family apostolate and pro-life ministry. Eventually, five more congregations joined the mission.

Fr. Jose Pennaparambil, the forum's founding director, said the ministry is the church's recognition of the hidden suffering of widows.

Inspired by Judith, the biblical widow remembered for her courage and faith, the movement initially focused on widows but later included single and separated women, the priest told GSR.

"Our diocese has some 4,000 widows and many remain invisible even in the church," he said.

What makes the ministry distinctive is its intercongregational structure, Pennaparambil said. "It helps women congregations work together."

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Along with the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel, involved in the ministry are the Sacred Heart Congregation, Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate, Franciscan Clarist Congregation, Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the Sisters of the Destitute.

"Congregations with different charisms working together as one group is the beauty of the Judith Forum," said Franciscan Clarist Congregation Sr. Jancy Maria, who leads the forum in the Chakkittapara parish.

The nuns coordinate the forum's parish units where women gather for prayer, counseling, Bible reflection, cultural programs and mutual support.

Jose said some units also organize pilgrimages, home visits and income-generating activities such as rosary making, soap powder production and food processing.

She said she sees the forum as God's new mission to help restore women's dignity and visibility.

As similar movements arose in other dioceses with different names, the Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council combined the initiatives together in 2022 under the Judith-Naomi Forum.

The Judith-Naomi Forum's constitution, released in 2024, describes its mission as promoting the spiritual and material advancement of widows through fellowship and collective support. Its motto reads: "Awake, and awake others."

The forum also addresses practical needs, Pennaparambil said.

In several parishes, it supports the education of children, provides women medical assistance, and offers interest-free loans.

Jose said the forum recently built a house for a homeless widow with two small children to mark the 40th year of the Thamarassery Diocese's formation.

Carmelite Sr. Geetha Kurian, former animator of Mariapuram parish unit and a recipient of the forum's best animator award in 2025, said their biggest challenge is to fight social stigma attached to widowhood.

"When the husband dies, the woman gets labeled as a widow. I tell them to come out and celebrate. We have organized many cultural programs and events to help them overcome their sorrow," Kurian told GSR.

She recalled a woman thanking her for making her widowhood joyful. "Now we have good companionship among us. You have broken our chains," Kurian quoted the woman as saying.

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Adoration Sr. Melvin Alappattu said the forum also helps the nuns experience unity among various congregations, something that is "rarely seen at the diocesan level."

The 71-year-old nun said the collaboration strengthens both the ministry as well as the nuns involved.

"When different congregations share one aim, they get better ideas and more time for people," said the nun, who helps the forum in Vilakkamthode parish.

Maria said the parish structure makes the outreach personal.

"Each congregation works in its own parish, which helps more accessibility and connection with the people," she said.

The forum has its challenges, says founder priest Pennaparambil.

"Some parish priests are not interested and some women, especially those in cities, hesitate to join because of the fear of being publicly identified as widows," he said.

In some cases, family members prevent elderly women from joining the forum, said Mini Mathew, the forum's diocesan treasurer.

At the same time, the ministry has already transformed countless lives, she said.

Philomina Vattachira, a forum member in Mariapuram parish, said she felt lonely and abandoned when her husband died in 2013, leaving behind their two sons.

Now, like Poulose, Vattachira travels to various places to organize prayer gatherings and meetings for other widows along with animator nuns.

Poulose's son and daughter are now settled overseas while she lives alone in Pulloorampara.

"After joining the forum, I realized widowhood was not the end of life. I tell this to others. We become a family for one another," she said. "Now, I understand why God took my husband away," she said.

Pennaparambil wants other widows in the diocese too to join the forum with the nuns' help.

"When sisters act together and think together for the kingdom of God, wonderful things happen," he said.