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First Anglican woman bishop in India says critics have been silent

by Vishal Arora by Religion News Service

New Delhi — A Christian nun who became the first woman bishop of South Asia's Anglican community said so far, her appointment has silenced critics who believe only men can play leadership roles in the church.

Speaking on the phone from the Nandyal diocese in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, the Rev. Eggoni Pushpalalitha, who was appointed a bishop of the Church of South India on Monday, said she faced bias against women in leadership roles "but only until my consecration."

"Those who used to talk about it are now touching my feet," said the 57-year-old bishop, who holds degrees in economics and divinity, referring to an Indian custom of showing respect.

A day before her consecration, she told an Indian newspaper: "Be it any institution, women are always given second-rung treatment. We need to change that by promoting values that teach us to not discriminate and treat all humans the same."

The Church of South India, successor of the Church of England in India, has been ordaining women as priests since 1976, but Pushpalalitha is the first woman elected bishop.

The denomination has nearly 4.3 million members in India and Sri Lanka. One of the 38 member churches of the Anglican Communion, the CSI is a union of varying traditions, including Anglican, Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian and Reformed.

Three other candidates, all men, were also in the running for bishop.

"It was a unanimous decision," CSI Provincial Secretary Mani M. Philip told New Delhi Television. "While many Western churches are debating this issue, the CSI has been leading in revolutionary thinking from women's education to empowerment."

The CSI constitution mandates that 25 percent of all statutory bodies be made up of women.

Pushpalalitha said her election was in line with Indian values.

"Numerous goddesses are worshipped, and women are highly valued in India," she said.

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Pushpalalitha made a vow of celibacy when she was in college. She said her parents dedicated her to God's service before her birth.

The bishop said she believed God created men and women as equals, though she held out that in some cases, men and women have different roles.

"We're first humans and then male or female," she said. "Some of their roles can be different, but in God's mission there is no difference at all."

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