3. Dalit Women Celebrating a Synodal Third Space like Mary

Nelavala Gnana Prasuna

A synodal third space is a venue of debate, discernment, and mutual learning in which all are welcomed as co-responsible members of the church. It has been women's strong contributions and selfless efforts that have kept Christianity alive and present in society throughout history. Following in the footsteps of women who have courageously carved out space in both church and society, I seek to contribute to the ongoing discourse on synodality, agency and third space as sites of divine revelation and transformation. Writing from the intersection of my multiple identities as a Dalit, Lutheran, Christian, feminist, ordained minister, theologian, and theological educator, I situate this work within the lived experiences and theological insights that emerge from the margins.

In this chapter, I take the biography of Lutheran woman Bishop Aliveli S. Katakshamma alongside my own life story to illustrate how we celebrate the synodal third space in the Indian setting. Other women scholars and activists like Monica Melanchthon, Surekha Nelavala, Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, Bishop Pushpa Lalitha, Ruth Manorama, Cynthia Stephen, Sister Celia, Aruna Gnanadason, Priscilla Singh, and many others have made significant and visible contributions to the lives of women and the church in India by engaging third spaces as transformative loci. These third spaces have served as critical sites from which they challenge dominant structures and advocate for the empowerment and liberation of marginalized communities, particularly women echoing Pope Francis's vision of "the synod is a process of spiritual discernment, of ecclesial discernment, that unfolds in adoration, in prayer, and in dialogue with the

Word of God."[1] Adding to this, I argue that synodal spaces must also become inclusive and empowering spaces for women. Such spaces are not only safe but generative, enabling women to realize and exercise their full potential by participating meaningfully in the decision-making processes of the church, thereby contributing to its holistic growth and transformation.

My hermeneutical engagement with the church and the Bible is inspired by Dalit women's experiences of shame, untouchability, exclusion, and marginalization in a strongly politicized and divided Indian society. The experiences of women have become a benchmark for the interpretation of the Bible in feminist theology, frequently with the goal of liberating the church and the Bible as well as its readers and interpreters from patriarchal domination. This chapter asserts that women played a larger part in the early years of the church's development not only as chief leaders but also by using any platform which can be named as third-space.

From a Dalit feminist theological angle, I engage with Mary, the mother of Jesus, whose contributions toward the growth of the church are evident through her presence in various occasions and spaces throughout the gospel narratives. John's gospel portrays Mary as an active participant in events such as the wedding at Cana and the foot of the cross, and his portrayal establishes her as a formative theological agency in the early Jesus movement. Drawing similarities with the lived experiences of Dalit women who have historically contributed to and continue to shape the Indian church's life and witness, this study tries to highlight the often-overlooked narrative of Mary's contribution in ecclesial history. While women like Mary played important roles in the establishment and construction of the early church, their contributions are frequently overlooked in synodal epistemologies and the greater historiography of Christianity. Thus, this chapter aspires to provide a framework for reversing the dominant hierarchical exclusive systems of the church towards peaceful coexistence by sharing the experiences of Dalit women and drawing parallels with

[1] Pope Francis, "Homily at the Opening of the Synodal Path," October 10, 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

Mary's leadership in using spaces both within and outside the church as third-spaces.

Using the Synodal third space framework, this chapter emphasizes Mary's voice and compassionate intervention at the wedding at Cana, interpreting the event as a theologically significant moment situated within a third space that is frequently overlooked in dominant exegetical traditions. The wedding at Cana in Galilee marks the first public revelation of Jesus's glory in the Gospel of John, where a moment of social crisis—the shortage of wine—is transformed into an act of divine abundance. This event takes place in what this study refers to as a third space, a liminal and community location outside of religious and political power centres. This event marks the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. The role of Jesus's mother needs an attention in this moment, since she not only draws Jesus's attention to the situation of crisis but also creates space for his mission to emerge. Her actions, both in recognizing the deficiency and directing the servants to do what Jesus tells them, identify her as an active agent both in allowing Jesus to unveil his identity and mission and in contributing to the transition from scarcity to heavenly plenty in the context of third space.

Third Space as a Communitarian Space

In this chapter, I take "third space" as a space that generates communities that are egalitarian and inclusive. As popularized by Ray Oldenburg, third space refers to a place that is neither home (first space) nor work (second space) but a neutral, communal area where people gather, share life and stories, and form relationships outside the structures of family and work. These are the places where authentic community, conversation, and creativity can emerge. Oldenburg, in his work *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*, explains the concept of three "places" or social environments: the home as the first place, work as the second place, and informal public gathering spaces as the third space. Oldenburg's central contribution is actually the concept of the third place—the informal, communal spaces that are essential for civil society,

democracy, and community building.[2] Oldenburg's concept of the third place invites us to consider how informal gatherings at coffee shops, libraries, community functions, and parks, and so forth, might serve as sanctuaries of belonging for those excluded. Third places are spaces which provide opportunities for people to meet and interact and to develop a sense of belonging. Oldenburg identifies eight unique characteristics of third place: 1) neutral ground or a common meeting place; 2) levellers or places that encourage, and are inclusive of, social and cultural diversity; 3) places that are easy to access and accommodate various sedentary and active activities; 4) places (with) champions or regular patrons; 5) low profile and informal places; 6) places which foster a playful atmosphere; 7) a home away from home; and 8) a place where conversation is the primary activity.[3]

In a similar vein, Brian Sanders proposes that the church can function simultaneously as both a first place and a third place, intimate like a home, yet open and communitarian like a shared public space. Drawing on Oldenburg's concept of the third place, Sanders challenges the church to reclaim its spatial and missional identity as inherently interconnected. Grounding his vision in Acts 2:42–47, he highlights how the early Christian community gathered in homes (first place) to pray, share meals, and hold their possessions in common. At the same time, they gathered in public places such as the temple courts, embodying their third place a site of mission and witness. For the early church, sacred space was not fixed or institutional but was defined by relational presence and the indwelling of the divine. This fluid understanding of sacredness is underscored by Jesus's teaching: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), a statement that radically democratizes and

[2] Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day* (Prentice Hall, 1991), 144.

[3] Caryl Bosman and Joanne Dolley, "Rethinking Third Places and Community Building," in *Rethinking Third Places: Informal Public Spaces and Community Building*, ed. Joanne Dolley and Caryl Bosman (Edward Elgar, 2019), 2.

decentralizes the concept of sacred space.[4] However, the term "sacred" has frequently been used to exclude people in India based on gender, caste, and class.[5]

This chapter, drawing on the concept of the third space, contends that the church should no longer be confined to a physical building. Instead, the church is embodied in the rhythms of daily life found in ordinary spaces such as homes, coffee shops, streets, shared meals, online forums, and various family or public gatherings. As a third space, the church exists beyond the traditional boundaries of the home (first place) and formal worship settings (second place). It becomes a missional centre where people encounter love, justice, and joy. Within this vision, God's presence permeates unconventional, everyday environments, transforming both domestic and public spaces into sacred and prophetic realms.

[4] Brian Sanders, *Life After Church: God's Call to Disillusioned Christians* (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 175–177.

[5] The hierarchical caste system in India, which derives its legitimacy from religious concepts of pollution and purity, is a major factor in the exclusion of women, Dalits, and Adivasis (tribals). Due to the work they engage in and their places of birth, Dalits and Adivasis are labelled as "impure" or "polluting" by dominant caste ideas, which are frequently supported by Hindu Brahmanical texts and social norms. While women of all religions and castes experience prohibitions from locations considered "sacred," such as prayer rooms in many mosques or altars in churches for reasons of menstruation, women, particularly from the marginalized communities, experience double or triple marginalization for their skin color and other social issues. Silencing the voices and presence of these excluded groups in both the public and spiritual domains, the politics of purity remains an instrument of religious exclusion and social control. In addition to Hindu caste systems, the exclusion of women, Dalits, and Adivasis occurs in religious establishments such as churches and masjids, which frequently perpetuate prevailing cultural ideas of pollution and purity. These forms of exclusion are maintained through interpretations of religious texts and traditions that reinforce purity codes, stripping marginalized communities of full spiritual agency and visibility. See Soma Mandal, "Dalit Women as 'Sexual Carrions': Multiple Jeopardy of Caste, Shame, Stigma, and Pollution," in *Shame and Gender in Transcultural Contexts: Resourceful Investigations*, ed. Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Helene Mayer (Springer Nature Switzerland: 2024), 178–179.

The Journey of My Life: A "Third Space" Experience

Born in a Dalit, Lutheran family I find that my childhood journey has been deeply shaped by experiences that I now recognize as third space experiences. These are the spaces where new identities and understandings were formed during my childhood amidst complex social dynamics. Most of my early years were spent in villages, where our home often became a church. At that time, there were no formal churches in the villages, so our home was transformed into a sacred space where worship and community thrived. My parents used to conduct Sunday worship services at home, instilling a spiritual rhythm in our family's life. Christmas, New Year, Easter, birthday, and wedding anniversary celebrations became more than just celebrations; they were opportunities to welcome neighbours of all faiths and so-called high castes. I recollect a vivid memory from my younger days, when I was in the sixth grade, living in Irakam, an island where my parents worked as teachers. It was the occasion of my younger brother's baptism, which was hosted in our home. The event was not merely a spiritual celebration but also a deeply significant social moment. Members of our family and extended family, along with neighbours including those from communities identified with the so-called high castes, gathered together to witness the baptismal service.

At the time, I was not fully aware of the caste structures that fragment and hierarchize Indian society. Yet, in retrospect, I recognize how, in that sacred moment, the rigid boundaries of caste seemed to dissolve, giving way to a shared sense of sanctity and fellowship. This early encounter left a lasting impression on me, revealing the capacity of Christian rituals to generate alternative, inclusive spaces where the dignity of every person is affirmed. Such moments resonate with what we now understand as a synodal third space—a space of encounter, participation, and mutual recognition cutting across the lines of exclusion. These gatherings enabled us to spread the gospel through hospitality and mutual respect, typically over a shared meal. At the same time, our neighbours warmly welcomed us to participate in their own ceremonial activities, building a culture of

mutual openness, fostering meaningful discourse, storytelling, and connection. These gatherings broke the lines between purity and pollution, touchable and untouchable, religious and cultural, self and other, and fostered a community that valued diversity and upheld dignity. In these dynamic third spaces, my strong identity, founded on faith, inclusivity, and mutual belonging, took shape in the warmth and openness of our home.

Unlike many of my Dalit sisters and brothers, I did not experience the direct pain of untouchability in the ways that continue to persist in village contexts even today.[6] This was largely due to the elevated social status of my parents, who were school teachers, and we lived in rented homes located within caste-dominated neighbourhoods. Their profession and the strategic positioning of our residence provided a kind of social buffer, allowing us to partially transcend the immediate stigma commonly associated with caste.

Based on my personal experience and the findings of my doctoral field research involving three hundred women from the South Andhra Lutheran Church (the church to which I belong), I believe and affirm that conversion to Christianity, access to education, and employment opportunities are the most transformative tools for the emancipation and holistic development of Dalits in general, and Dalit women in particular, in the Indian context. These three pathways—spiritual transformation, intellectual, and economic participation—not only ensure but also constitute acts of resistance against caste and gender-based oppression. The testimonies of

[6] In many Indian villages, the space is often divided into two parts: the main village and the colony. The main village is usually where the dominant or so-called upper-caste communities (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras) live. This area often has better roads, schools, temples, and facilities like water and electricity. The people living here usually have power and control over village decisions. The village area is considered as pure and sacred. The colony, on the other hand, is where Dalit or marginalized communities live. It is usually located on the outskirts of the main village and often lacks good infrastructure. In many places, colonies have separate water taps, schools, or even burial grounds. This separation is a result of the caste system and the practice of untouchability, even though it is banned by law. The colony is considered as dirty and impure place. Today, many people from the colony are fighting for justice and dignity, and churches and movements are working to make these places more equal and inclusive.

the women whom I interviewed demonstrate that the convergence of faith, knowledge, and work can create transformative agency and cultivate new identities founded on dignity, equality, and hope.[7]

As a child, I was not aware of how the concepts of purity and defilement, as well as the unwritten laws of touchability and untouchability, determined who belonged to a respectable community and who was marginalized. Only in retrospect, in the light of my experiences as a Dalit theologian, I have come to understand how synodal third-space epistemology can serve as an antidote to traditions and customs that are oppressive. This becomes especially meaningful as it offers a framework that values such spaces as sites of lived theology, where voices from the margins, particularly women's voices, are not only heard but honoured. In these spaces, stories of struggle and affirmation can emerge, demonstrating that women are more than just passive objects of social convention. Rather, they actively contribute to the development of community, creating meaning, and forging new and life-giving ways that confront exclusion and reimagine belonging.

In my formative years, I was raised within the Christian faith under a framework of disciplined practice. Later, our family relocated to a city parish in Sullurpet, a shift that provided an environment where my faith was both nurtured and deepened, eventually leading me toward roles of leadership.[8] I actively participated in church life, engaging in activities such as Sunday school, youth programs, Women Maha Samaj (Women's Conferences) gatherings, and supporting my family's faith practices. These spiritual engagements were foundational to my identity formation and have remained influential throughout my life.

My university and theological education provided a structure for these experiences, allowing them to take on a more nuanced intellectual dimension. The South Andhra Lutheran Church, my spiritual community,

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[7] For further details, see Nelavala Gnana Prasuna, *Engendering the Divine Image: Conversations with Dalit Women's Experience* (Christian Imprints, 2020).

[8] Sullurpet is a place in Andhra Pradesh, South India, where my family belonged to the St. Michael's Lutheran Church.

played a central role in shaping my growth. I was raised with the assurance that Jesus is the liberator, a saviour who redeems humanity from sin. This conviction took root in my childhood, evolved through adolescence, and continued to mature into adulthood. Alongside this faith, a calling to serve both the Lord and the women in my community also grew within me, deepening my commitment to ministry and service. During my postgraduate studies, I discerned a profound inner call to pursue full-time ministry. With the support and blessings of my church and family, I commenced my theological education at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in 1989, enrolling in the Bachelor of Divinity program, which I completed in 1993. After nearly two decades of theological training and preparation, my longstanding aspiration to be ordained was finally realized. January 12, 2011, holds particular significance for me, as it marks both my ordination and a reaffirmation of my calling to pastoral ministry. On this momentous day, I was ordained alongside three other remarkable women—Rev. Vijaya Kumari, Rev. Smitha Das, and Rev. K. Sirisha. The women of the South Andhra Lutheran Church (SALC) celebrated this milestone with great joy, honouring each of us as newly ordained ministers. This shared celebration underscored the importance of our journey and the expanding role of women in the ministry of our church.

My long-awaited aspiration to become a pastor was finally realized in December 2015, three years after my ordination, when I was appointed to serve in a parish. As pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Satyavedu, I quickly understood that this marked the beginning of a profound journey. The moment was charged with mixed emotions both anxiety and accomplishment. I was deeply moved by the congregation's warm and enthusiastic welcome, especially considering the prevailing gender disparities in both society and the church. From the outset, the congregation has been a tremendous source of support in my pastoral endeavours.

Against the backdrop of my life story, I see that for Dalit women, whose lives are often marked by intersecting forms of caste, gender, and class-

based oppression, third spaces become essential sanctuaries of resistance and renewal. These are frequently community gatherings, prayer circles, kitchens, courtyards, or other spaces where people come together to develop bonds, share experiences, and establish collective agency rather than being formal organizations. In these settings, Dalit women frequently voice their theological perspectives, which are based on survival, dignity, and liberation, outside of the prevailing frameworks that have traditionally suppressed or erased them. These embodied experiences when seen from the synodal third-space epistemology become essential for understanding and transformation. In doing so, synodal third space resists colonial and hierarchical conceptions of truth and embraces communal, dialogical, and Spirit-led discernment in which even the most marginalized voices, especially Dalit women, are acknowledged, and they become agents of hope and bearers of divine wisdom.

Mary's Agency in the Third Space (John 2:1–12)

When reinterpreting the episode of the wedding at Cana, several important questions arise about how we understand the portrayal of Jesus and his mother, beyond the miracle of turning water into wine. For instance, how should we interpret Jesus's apparently insensitive response to his mother's concern about the lack of wine (John 2:3–4)? Does this suggest a hassled relationship between them? How close is the bond between Jesus and his mother? While addressing these questions requires multiple interpretive approaches, this chapter does not explore them all. Instead, it focuses specifically on a Dalit feminist perspective, highlighting and celebrating the agency of Jesus's mother as she transforms a moment of lack into one of abundance within a third space.

The setting of Cana itself, which is neither central nor peripheral, serves as a theological third space—a place where new opportunities arise. The first manifestation of heavenly glory occurs in this intermediate area, distant from Jerusalem's power centres and the religious elite. This indicates a ministry that would continuously elevate the underprivileged, overturn established hierarchies and bring abundance where there is

scarcity. A social space created by the wedding feast as a communal, celebratory setting where social roles converge. In this case Jesus's mother, exercises agency and insight, challenging patriarchal and hierarchical structures that frequently make women's voices unheard in public and theological discourses.

Transforming Lack into Life: Celebrating Mary's Agency

Although unnamed—among the four Evangelists, John alone never refers to Mary by her name—the mother of Jesus is introduced first in this passage, highlighting her central role in the unfolding events. She is referred to as "mother" by the narrator four times in these twelve verses, and again four times in her only other appearance in the Gospel, at the crucifixion (John 19:25–27). While the complete significance of her being both "woman" and "mother" becomes clear later, in this moment, her status as "the mother of Jesus" moves the narrative ahead. The narrator then observes that Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding, bringing together the essential players in a scene rich in symbolic resonance, evocative of a messianic meal and the unveiling of God's glory through speech and action. Narrative tension occurs when Mary identifies the scarcity and informs Jesus, "They have no wine." The shortage indicates more than a logistical issue; it represents a social crisis, as running out of wine would have brought shame on the bridegroom and ruined the celebrations.[9]

For the Cana couple to run out of wine was disastrous. The text suggests that many were invited to wedding. John does not tell the readers why they ran out of wine. One can only assume that there might have been a great number of guests. Whatever the cause, it was a matter of great shame to the couple and to their families to have been unable to provide enough wine for celebrations. In such a crisis, Mary would have thought, her adult son can come to their rescue. It is as simple as it this: for example,

[9] Sherri Brown, *Gift Upon Gift: Covenant Through Word in the Gospel of John* (Wipf and Stock, 2010), 114–115.

in our family functions, if food runs out when guests are still there, we will first share and discuss with our own intimate people to resolve the issue and support the hosts. Probably, Mary did something similar in this story. Urban von Wahlde suggests that her actions imply that she is well known to the family at Cana. It is also surprising, however, that she gives commands to the servants without consulting the bridegroom or the steward. Mary acts independently of Jesus. She expects Jesus to respond to her request even though he is initially reluctant to intervene.[10] She may have been a close relative of the bridegroom, as she appears to have played more than just the role of a guest; she seemed to hold some responsibility in assisting the groom's family during the celebration She knew, for example, that there was a lack of wine, which would normally have been handled discreetly so that guests were not aware of it. Her awareness and her initiative in addressing the problem suggest that she was involved in the hosting responsibilities. Furthermore, the different terminology used in verse 2 in reference to Mary (she was there) and to Jesus and his disciples (they were also invited) implies that Mary had a more active, possibly supervisory, role in the event. Whatever maybe the case, she notices that "they have no wine" and acts as an advocate on behalf of the couple and brings the issue to the notice of Jesus.

In his commentary on the Wedding of Cana (John 1:1–12), Pope John Paul II explains Mary's actions as Mediatrix in uniting humanity with her son Jesus:

> Thus, there is a mediation: Mary places herself between her Son and [hu]mankind in the reality of their wants, needs, and sufferings. *She puts herself* "in the middle," that is to say *she acts as a mediatrix not an outsider, but in her position as mother*. She knows that as such she can point out to her Son the needs of [hu]mankind, and in fact, she "has the right" to do so. . . . *The Mother* of Christ presents herself as the *spokeswoman of her Son's will*, pointing out those things which must be

[10] Susan Miller, *Women in John's Gospel* (T&T Clark, 2003), 22.

> done so that the salvific power of the Messiah may be manifested. (*Redemptoris Mater*, no. 21, emphases added)

Colleen Conway's gender-critical reading of the Gospel of John emphasizes the contrasting portrayals of men and women, noting that while male disciples frequently misunderstand or resist Jesus's mission, female figures like Mary, Jesus's mother, are depicted as perceptive and instrumental in pivotal theological moments. Mary's role at the wedding in Cana reflects this dynamic, as her intervention initiates Jesus's public ministry, establishing her as a theological agent rather than a passive figure. Conway says, "Unlike any other character in the narrative, apart from Jesus, she shares insight with the narrator. She is the character who perceives the problem and makes it known to Jesus."[11] Although her voice is silenced or marginalized in mainstream interpretations, particularly when Jesus's response is misinterpreted as a rebuke, this chapter emphasizes Mary as a catalyst for divine abundance, whose initiative at Cana launches Jesus's public ministry and reveals a theologically rich moment of manifestation. Her initiative in this third space, a community, social meeting outside of the temple or synagogue, exemplifies the theological richness of marginal, everyday locations where transformation occurs.

According to Adelin Fehribach, a reader in the first century who was familiar with the Hebrew Bible's depictions of significant mothers often suggest that Mary's statement about the wine shortage may be a calculated move to further her son's mission. This aligns with a recurring biblical pattern where mothers play a decisive role in shaping their sons' future.[12] Such maternal impact is also consistent with cultural dynamics in larger societal contexts, particularly in India, where mothers frequently act as catalysts in determining their children's futures. While I acknowledge

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[11] Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 72.

[12] Adeline Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom: A Feminist Historical-Literary Analysis of the Gospel of John* (Liturgical Press, 1998), 26–28.

Fehribach's interpretation that Mary's mention of the wine shortage may have been a calculated move to further her son's mission, I argue that it was primarily her compassion that led her to recognize the deficiency and bring it to Jesus, her son, in the hope that he would resolve the crisis. That situation, in turn, paved the way for Jesus to reveal God's glory and begin his ministry.

In this sense, Mary's statement, "They have no wine" (John 2:3), can be interpreted as both a societal concern and a veiled hint about Jesus's public presentation. But Jesus's response "What concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" (2:4), appears to distance himself from both the immediate problem and his mother's implied prompting. This response is interpreted by many scholars as a tense or detached moment, implying that Jesus is refusing to bow to worldly or familial demands. Fehribach refers to J.A. du Rand and Charles Giblin, who state that, "when Jesus appears to be aloof and distant in his answers and exchanges with other characters in the Fourth Gospel, it is a signal that he is actually moving the discussion to a 'higher,' non-worldly level."[13] Fehribach, drawing on a 'theology from below,' argues that the mother of Jesus bypasses her son's initial resistance without directly confronting him. She sees this moment as an opportunity to reassert her maternal role, refusing to let Jesus miss a chance to increase his honour in relation to the bridegroom.[14] Building on Fehribach's reading, I would further argue that Mary's persistence is not merely about honour; she is determined not to let her son miss the opportunity to transform a situation of crisis into one of abundance, an act both in a compassionate and transformative manner.

Mary's observation "they have no wine" conveys volumes of sensitivity and concern for the needy. As noted by Elizabeth Johnson, "Mary stands among the people, herself a member of the group without wine, and speaks the hope of the needy. And that night the poor community of Cana in Galilee becomes the place where God's glory is made manifest as men and

[13] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 29.
[14] Fehribach, *The Women in the Life of the Bridegroom*, 31.

women drink wine, make merry, and celebrate the wedding feast."[15] Scholars like Susan Miller argue that, the Old Testament prophets often refer to abundant wine as a sign of the new creation (Amos 9:13–14; Hosea 14:7; Jeremiah 31:12). At the Cana wedding, Jesus's ability to provide the wine of the new creation points to his identity as the Messiah. His mother's faith serves as an example to John's readers that Jesus will come to their aid even if situation appears bleak. John's repeated references to the "mother of Jesus" however, link Jesus's earthly origins with Mary. The presence of the mother of Jesus highlights the humanity of Jesus in the midst of the account of a sign that reveals his glory.[16] From this angle, she stands in solidarity with women and men around the world who struggle for social justice for themselves and their children and for the society at large.

Mary as Catalyst: The Intersection of Divine Revelation and Third Space at the Inauguration of Jesus's Ministry

In the narrative of the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11), Mary emerges as an active theological agent who discerns the social and spiritual deficiency symbolized by the absence of wine. Her perceptive intervention voiced in the profound words, "They have no wine," leads to an unexpected abundance, transforming lack into plenitude. Her act is prophetic, anticipating divine generosity in spaces marked by scarcity—a theme that resonates deeply with the vision proclaimed in her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:44–55). There, she exalts a God who fills the hungry with good things and lifts up the lowly, revealing her theological insight into divine reversal and abundance. At Cana, this prophetic vision becomes embodied action, as Mary participates in ushering in a moment where the hidden glory of Jesus is revealed through extravagant grace in the midst of ordinary human need. Mary initiates a dialogue that catalyses Jesus's first public sign, positioning herself as an agent within a liminal, third space where heavenly presence intersects with human need. In this communal setting of

[15] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (Continuum, 2006), 291.
[16] Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 25–27.

celebration, the third space becomes the site of divine revelation, abundance, and the inauguration of Jesus's public ministry. Mary is thus revealed not only as a mother but also as a theological catalyst in the unfolding of a new messianic moment, one that brings abundance in the new creation, especially within the context of the third space.

Apart from the miracle of turning water into wine, the Gospel of John presents the inauguration of Jesus of Nazareth's public ministry at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1). Through this evocative story, the evangelist introduces a series of symbols and signs that not only characterize the nature of Jesus's ministry but also unveil the essence of the messiahship of the Logos, as powerfully proclaimed in the prologue (John 1:1–18). This unique event is infused with themes like revelation, the messianic meal, water, wine, signs, "the hour," and the glory of the Son. Therefore, the first indication (2:11) refers to the early days of Jesus's public appearance. The evangelist writes to encourage and enhance his readers' confidence in the good news, the gift of truth that Jesus brings into the world (1:14–17). Significantly, the revelation of what faith involves begins not at a temple or synagogue but at a wedding feast—a liminal third space in the ordinary village of Cana in Galilee. Crucially, Jesus's mother initiates the moment of revelation by raising attention to the shortage of wine, allowing for divine intervention. In this respect, she plays an important part in unveiling Jesus's glory and igniting the start of his public ministry, serving as both an intercessor and a witness to the unfolding scene of divine abundance.

John presents mother of Jesus as a unique person in this pericope. John establishes the close relationship between Mary and Jesus as mother and son. John demonstrates Mary's influence upon Jesus, and he associates Mary with the purpose of Jesus's mission. Her intervention is also connected to a sign which leads to the faith of the disciples (2:11). The disciples recognize Jesus's identity as the Messiah and Son of God and believed in him at the Cana wedding. The mother of Jesus leads Jesus to

perform his first sign which looks forward to the abundance of the new creation.[17]

To celebrate Mary's act is to recognize and uplift the countless unnamed Dalit women who, like her, perceive the unspoken gaps in their communities and courageously speak into them. To celebrate Mary is also to create liturgies, spaces, and theologies that remember not just the miracle of water turned to wine, but the deeper miracle that a woman's voice became the catalyst for divine revelation. Dalit feminist theologians thus emphasize that transformation frequently starts on the periphery, in the mundane, unnoticed, and commonplace locations that serve as third spaces. These are the locations where the Spirit works through brokenness and resiliency, and where—via discernment, solidarity, and hope—transformation happens, and lack turns into life.

Dalit Feminist Reimagination of Church by Recreating the Cana Moment

In India, the status of a Dalit woman can be better understood through the words of feminist sociologist Gail Omvedt. She compares the Hindu caste structure to a pyramid of clay pots, with Brahmins at the top, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Sudras, and outcastes at the bottom. Men are at the top of each clay pot, while women of their caste are at the bottom. Dalits are at the bottom, and Dalit women are even below, like crushed and discarded powder.[18] Dalit women's identity in India is prescribed and ascribed by the dominant caste traditions and cultures. Dalit feminists affirm that Dalit women are "thrice oppressed," by untouchability, subordination, marginalization, inequities, exploitation, deprivation, and prejudice.[19] However,

[17] Miller, *Women in John's Gospel*, 28.

[18] Aruna Gnanadason, "Dalit Women: The Dalit of the Dalit" in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal and V. Devasahayam (Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1985). See Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Sage, 2004).

[19] Leo Sequeira, "Human Response to Dalit Women Today," in *Dalit Women in India: Issues and Perspectives*, ed. P.G. Jogdand (Gyan, 1995), 121; Neelam Gorhe, "Social Development

educational programs and reservations have aided Dalit women in obtaining education and work, raising their standing and identity in society. Adding to that, conversion from Hinduism to Christianity has brought tremendous transformation in the lives of some sections of Dalit Christians. Dalit women of some Christian denominations have pursued theological education since the 1990s. Consequently, Dalit feminist theologians of these churches are emerging as a power, bringing transformation both in the church and society.

My contention is that women in the church are recreating the Cana moment by becoming a third space that is dynamic, inclusive, and a place where people are seen, heard, and transformed. By paying close attention to the community's needs, identifying what is lacking, and allowing God's presence to be shown through group action, pastors, especially women follow Mary. In particular, female pastors frequently contribute to caring, relational, and justice-focused leadership that reframes the church as a place of healing, communication, and emancipation. Women in ministry today echo Mary's leadership at Cana, creating sacred spaces not through authority alone, but through discernment, hospitality, and bold faith. Here I find deep connections with Mary's compassionate leadership and her selfless act of recognizing the lack and working to turn it into plenty.

My own pastoral journey has been dotted with Cana moments though not without challenges. I have found a sense of fulfilment in translating theological insights into language accessible to people of faith in everyday contexts, which allows me to address issues of justice as they arise. Celebration of special Sundays like Women's Sunday, Youth Sunday, family prayers, and family celebrations provide me with a space of inclusion and respect for marginalized individuals. For example, when one of our church members lost her husband, I was called upon to lead the memorial service. Seeing an opportunity to address harmful widowhood practices, I persuaded the then-lady president of the Parish Council

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and Dalit Women," in *Dalit Women in India*, 147; Kumud Pawade, "The Life of a Dalit Woman," in *Dalit Women in India*, 157.

Committee (PCC) and other members to support me in abandoning hegemonic traditional practices that are frequently observed even in Christian contexts, such as breaking bangles, removing flowers (South Indian women often decorate their hair with flowers), wearing only white sari, or hiding her face (a common practice symbolizing misfortune). Despite some opposition from members, we were able to effectively challenge these conventions with the help of the church's office bearers. The woman who lost her husband and the family accepted our suggestion to forgo this tradition that pushes women into forced widowhood.

This was a landmark moment for the church, as we were able to take a significant step toward addressing enforced widowhood. After the service, a young woman shared her own painful experience, in which her bangles had been broken with the approval of a male pastor. Her story underscored the need for more women in ministry, where they have the potential to foster a third space within the church—a synodal space in which all individuals are treated with dignity and respect, transcending traditional boundaries and biases.

There are many other instances where women pastors can create Cana moments in ministry. In many parts of India, it is customary for families to host public thanksgiving celebrations when girls attain puberty. While such rituals mark a significant biological transition and are often framed as celebratory, they are also embedded within broader socio-religious frameworks that perpetuate menstrual stigma. Major religious traditions such as Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam contain purity laws that have historically construed menstruating women as ritually impure, often resulting in social exclusion and internalized shame. I was invited by one member of the congregation to lead a prayer at such a celebration. Although personally I have reservations about participating in the public ritualization of puberty, I chose to use the occasion as a platform to challenge entrenched taboos around menstruation.

Drawing upon the biblical narrative of the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25–34), I offered a brief theological reflection that reframed menstruation not as impurity, but as a sign of life and divine

blessing. Drawing on the gospel story of the woman with the flow of blood, I emphasized that Jesus did not consider himself defiled when she touched him. Instead, power went out from Jesus into her while she was still menstruating. The narrative portrays a woman who, despite being marginalized due to her condition, actively seeks healing and is publicly affirmed by Jesus. Through this reinterpretation, I invited the gathering, which included individuals from various caste and religious backgrounds, to reconsider the dominant discourse surrounding menstrual blood. The positive reception of this message suggests that theological interventions can serve as effective tools in dismantling stigmatizing beliefs and affirming the sacredness of women's bodies.

The pastoral vocation has provided me with opportunities to freely discuss societal difficulties such as forced widowhood, caste issues, menstruation impurity, and gender discrimination, as well as to preach the gospel that provides fullness of life through joy, peace, harmony, and equality. Sometimes I feel deep gratitude at the end of the day, knowing that God had given me a tremendous opportunity to bring out the leadership potentials of both men and women. In the light of my own experiences, I reaffirm that women's entry into pastoral ministry offers a great chance to develop a synodal third space that encourages relational leadership, shared discernment, and inclusive involvement in church life. Women, who often face social and spiritual vulnerabilities, have found it easier to talk to me, particularly on sensitive personal and familial issues, precisely because I am a woman. This dynamic illustrates the unique pastoral gifts that women bring to ministry especially in areas such as pastoral counselling, emotional support, and relational care. Women pastors are well-positioned to foster the church as a third space of trust, healing, and empowerment. In doing so, they enable others, particularly marginalized individuals, to access the spiritual and emotional resources they need to live life in abundance and live more meaningful lives.

All the same, women's ordination and their entry into pulpit ministry does not ensure that all ordained women get a fair or dignified treatment. For example, The United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India

celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of women's ordination in September 12–15, 2022 at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College Campus, in Chennai, South India. Around a hundred pastors attended the celebrations from all over India. The four-day celebration was filled with joy and thanksgiving for cultural diversity and advancements, but also with sober moments when women pastors and theologically-trained women shared stories about the barriers they continue to face in their ministries. I was present in the celebrations. Many women shared that persistent challenges remain, including disparities in pay, transfers to remote areas, and the politicization of ordination processes. In some instances, women are ordained but are not entrusted with congregational leadership, effectively marginalizing their pastoral vocation. While acknowledging these issues which are rampant in the Indian church, I argue that the creation of a third space must also involve a commitment to structural justice and the full recognition of women's ministerial authority.

The life story of Aliveli S. Katakshamma, another Dalit Lutheran Christian woman, testifies to women overcoming structural constraints for exercising agency in the synodal third space. Katakshamma left her geographical home location and her worship community, the South Andhra Lutheran Church, though she was the daughter of Rev. Dr. Benjamin, the first Indian President of this Church. She was born in Renigunta (Tirupati), Chittoor District, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, South India. Katakshamma studied in Chennai, the capital of the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu, during the 1950s, and later worked as an English teacher in Andhra Pradesh. She then began mission work in Andhra Pradesh, where she received theological and pastoral training. She went to the United States, where she studied at the New York Theological Seminary and became the first woman to get a doctorate in theology from a Lutheran seminary, in Minnesota in 1968, at a time when opportunities for women to study such subjects were extremely rare in India. She held a number of significant positions in the Lutheran world. She served as the World Council of Churches' Commissioner for Faith and Order and as an

exchange visitor for women from the American Lutheran Church. After marrying Rev. Paul Raj who was pastoring a congregation of the South Andhra Lutheran Church, they both left their home church and established Good Samaritan Evangelical Lutheran Church (GSELC) in the tribal belt of the states Andhra Pradesh, Odissa, and Chhatisgarh in 1972. By 1982, the church had 50,000 baptized members.[20]

Katakshamma was consecrated as bishop on October 27, 1996.[21] The words of Bishop Katakshamma during her consecration ceremony offer significant theological and pastoral insight for the creation of synodal third spaces. Her affirmations challenge deeply ingrained gender biases and encourage the church to adopt a more inclusive and justice-oriented perspective. She stated, "Man and woman were made in the image of God. Therefore, rather than highlighting gender distinctions, our fundamental calling is to perform God's work." She added, "My church has taken a firm stand against male chauvinism . . . . It is time that male-dominated spaces everywhere encourage women to see themselves as equals."[22] These bold declarations reflect a commitment to dismantling patriarchal structures and reimagining the church as a space where shared leadership, equality, and mutual respect can flourish. By 2002, the church had become self-sufficient and without the financial support from national or international agencies; the church was able to organize programs from the resources available within the church. One of my students, Sabitha, who is doing her Master's, hails from GSELC. In her words: "Bishop Katakshamma was a

[20] "Death of Asia's First Woman Bishop Mourned by Indian Lutherans," *UCA News*, November 6, 1997, ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1997/11/07/death-of-asias-first-woman-bishop-mourned-by-indian-lutherans&post_id=10346.

[21] S. Sivanand, "A Lady with a Mission," *Outlook India*, October 7, 1996, outlookindia.com/national/a-lady-with-a-mission-news-202322; "Woman Ordained Lutheran Bishop, Reportedly First Woman Bishop in Asia," *UCA News*, November 18, 1996, ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1996/11/19/woman-ordained-lutheran-bishop-reportedly-first-woman-bishop-in-asia&post_id=8493; see also Nikhila Henry, "India Gets First Woman Anglican Bishop from Andhra," *Times of India*, September 28, 2013, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/india-gets-first-woman-anglican-bishop-from-andhra/articleshow/23176743.cms.

[22] "Death of Asia's First Woman Bishop."

role model, established schools, orphanages, churches, and especially worked hard towards the empowerment of women and I am one among those women. She served the church in various capacities for 20 years."

Bishop Katakshamma embodied a third-space of freedom and God-given identity through courageous actions transcending the limitations of her physical home and the traditional boundaries of her inherited church community and establishing another church among the vulnerable community. Her boldness represents a profound act of resistance and vision, one that is particularly significant within the Indian Lutheran context, where such leadership by women remains both rare and deeply impactful. Drawing from both her journey and my own pastoral experience, I contend that the church holds the potential to become a synodal third space—an open, relational, and transformative environment. To do so, the church must commit to dismantling entrenched dichotomies and double standards, and instead reconstitute herself through practices of solidarity, radical inclusion, and relational warmth. This vision invites the church not only to welcome diverse voices but also to be reshaped by them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how Dalit women celebrate a "synodal third space" like Mary at the wedding of Cana. Here, Mary's prophetic agency that catalyzed Jesus's first public act offers a powerful paradigm for reimagining the church as a synodal third space—one rooted not in hierarchy, but in relational discernment and inclusive action. Mary's intervention established a liminal third space where divine purpose met human need, launching a ministry that operated outside of traditional ecclesiastical organizations. This theological moment is profoundly connected to the actual realities of women in ministry, especially in places like the Indian Lutheran Church, where the path to ordination and full ecclesial participation has been long and difficult. My own pastoral experience, alongside that of pioneers such as Bishop Katakshamma, demonstrates that women can and do establish third spaces of trust, healing, and transformation. When the church welcomes such places,

which are defined by solidarity, vulnerability, and shared leadership, it becomes more than just a place of worship, but also a living manifestation of God's inclusive and liberating presence in the world.

This chapter began by engaging with Pope Francis's understanding of synodality as an ecclesial discernment process that takes place in prayer, adoration, and dialogue with God's word. To this, my study adds that synodality also necessitates honouring others and engaging in dialogue with those around us, particularly women and the marginalized. From this perspective, the synodal third space emerges as a vital ecclesial and social reality, a space of mutual learning, discernment, and radical inclusion, where all voices are welcomed, especially those historically silenced. The plentiful conversion of water into wine in this first sign serves as a metaphor for the new creation, a third area where human frailty and divine mercy coexist. Thus, Mary's agency serves as an example of how women can be changing agents by exhibiting relational leadership that connects divine action with human need. Mary stands between the human need and divine possibility, much like many women in ministry who mediate between broken social structures and God's promise of wholeness. Her liminality makes her a prototype for third-space leadership.

Women have for long made substantial, often unacknowledged, contributions to the life and growth of the church. In particular, in India, Dalit women, through their acts of resilience and leadership, have created transformative third spaces within and beyond ecclesial structures. Leaders such as Bishop Katakshamma, who founded a new ecclesial space outside her original church community, and my own experience as one of the first women ordained in the South Andhra Lutheran Church, demonstrate the potential of women's leadership to foster healing, joy, and renewal, mirroring Mary's prophetic action at the wedding in Cana using the church as the third space.

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