

Faith, Justice, and the Dalit Struggle for Dignity

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Friends, sisters, brothers in faith

We gather in a world trembling under the weight of injustice. Authoritarian regimes are tightening their grip; democratic values are eroding; human rights defenders are being silenced and incarcerated; and wars are waged in the name of profit. The global economy has normalised what should never be normal – a world where greed is rewarded and compassion is punished.

In this moment of deep moral crisis, this General Council must be more than a ceremonial gathering. It must serve both as a warning and a call to courage. A call for the Church to re-imagine its relevance in our times, to reclaim its prophetic role in public life, and to stand fearlessly beside those the world is oppressing. We are being called to rebuild collective resilience, grounded in faith, compassion, and courage.

I speak today as a Dalit activist from India, a voice from one of the world's most historically oppressed peoples. The caste system, which is more than two thousand years old, continues to define who has dignity and who is denied it. Dalits once called “untouchables” and “impure” and “polluted” are placed outside the social order.

Across South Asia and its diaspora, we are more than 270 million. Among us, Dalit women live at the intersections of caste, class, and gender, bearing the heaviest burdens of violence, discrimination and exclusion.

Though India's Constitution promises equality, caste shapes every aspect of life, where we live, whom we marry, what jobs we do, and whose touch is considered “pure.” Caste is not just a socio-cultural practice; it is a political-economic system that dictates who controls land, who heads institutions, and who remains invisible at decision-making tables.

Caste Beyond Borders

Caste discrimination does not end at national borders. Through migration, the South Asian diaspora has carried this hierarchy across continents. It now exists in global corporations, universities, and even within our churches.

Like racism, caste rests on the myth of purity and superiority. Both systems dehumanize, exclude, and sustain privilege. Dalit and Black movements have long drawn parallels between casteism and racism, calling for the decolonisation of our moral imagination.

We have urged governments, international bodies, and churches to name caste-based discrimination alongside race, ethnicity, and gender in every official document. Because what is unnamed, remains invisible.

Caste Within the Church

But perhaps the most painful truth we must confront today is this: the Church itself is not free from caste.

Across South Asia, even among Christian communities, caste dictates social interactions, marriage, leadership, and access to power. Dominant-caste Christians often occupy influential roles from the

pulpit to the parish council, from seminaries to donor agencies. Dalit Christians, despite their faith and service, continue to be segregated, marginalized, and denied equal dignity.

Even conversion has not liberated us Dalits. Many Dalits embraced Christianity as an act of faith and resistance to escape the stigma of untouchability. Yet, our caste identity has followed us into the Church, where we still find ourselves cleaning the pews instead of preaching from them. When caste precedes baptism, we must ask ourselves what Gospel are we preaching?

A Church that remains silent on caste cannot claim to stand for justice. A Church that tolerates hierarchy in its own house cannot heal a broken world.

Dalit Youth and their Lived Realities

Let me turn now to the heart of our struggle – **Dalit youth**.

Dalit young people are among the most vulnerable in our societies. For centuries, education was denied to us by design. Today, despite affirmative action, systemic discrimination persists from biased teachers to exclusion in classrooms and universities.

Dalit students often endure ridicule, social isolation, and administrative neglect. When they take their own lives, we call these tragedies institutional murders because it is not despair that kills them, but systemic discrimination within campuses that does.

Affirmative action in education and public employment has also provoked resentment among dominant castes, creating a hostile environment for Dalit youth who dare to succeed. Lacking the social networks and cultural capital that privilege confers, they enter the job market at a structural disadvantage.

In workplaces, discrimination persists in hiring, wages, promotions, and workplace culture. Even when governments introduce programmes to promote Dalit entrepreneurship or skills training, these are chronically under-funded, poorly implemented, and stripped of intersectional understanding.

Policies are written without Dalit voices, making markets and institutions blind to the realities of caste. As a result, economic inequality deepens, and young Dalits remain trapped between broken promises and systemic barriers.

To transform this reality, affirmative action must move beyond tokenism. It must be redesigned to create real opportunity through investments in public education, mentorship, access to credit, and leadership pathways.

Despite these odds, Dalit youth continue to rise. They lead movements for justice, create art that reclaims dignity, and build solidarities across caste, gender, and race. Their faith is not passive belief; it is radical resistance. Their hope is revolutionary.

The Global Nature of Caste and Its Intersection with Power

Caste is omnipresent across South Asia, manifesting in countless ways from people forced into manual scavenging to women exploited in the name of ritual, from segregation in tea stalls to silent exclusion in job interviews.

It operates not only through social customs but also through the architecture of power in markets, bureaucracies, and politics. The same logic that once dictated who could draw water from a well now shapes who can access capital, technology, and leadership.

Globally, caste travels with migration, embedding itself within South Asian communities abroad. Racism and casteism mirror each other both construct hierarchies of worth and both thrive on silence. Dalit movements, therefore, align themselves with anti-racist struggles worldwide, recognizing that our liberation is bound together.

But the practice of caste-based exclusion continues unabated even within faith communities. Conversion has not erased caste; instead, caste has adapted itself into new forms. Dalits within the Church still face segregation in social life, restricted participation in leadership, and barriers to ordination. Meanwhile, those from dominant castes continue to hold the reins of decision-making not only in religious institutions but in philanthropy, government, and business.

For this reason, Dalit activists and theologians have urged both regional and global churches to officially recognise caste as a global moral issue and to eradicate “caste-based discrimination” in their foundational texts alongside race, gender, and ethnicity. Only by naming it can we begin to dismantle it.

The Call to the Global Church

In this time of unprecedented global inequity and polarization, the Church holds a historic opportunity to move beyond symbolic empathy toward structural and transformational solidarity. The world needs the Church’s charity; it needs its courage, its willingness to dismantle systems that perpetuate inequality, including those within its own walls.

Over the next five to seven years, I urge Churches to commit to the following priorities:

1. **Annihilate Caste-Based Discrimination and All Hierarchies of Exclusion** Explicitly recognize caste as a moral and structural problem. Integrate its analysis within all Church frameworks for justice, equality, and inclusion. The Church must actively engage in caste-sensitization, truth-telling, and institutional audits to root out systemic discrimination at every level of its operation.
2. **Advance Dalit Youth Leadership and Collective Agency** Move beyond token representation to genuine investment in Dalit and marginalized youth, particularly young women and gender-diverse persons. Support leadership development, education fellowships, and mentorship programs that equip young people to shape theology, governance, and social justice advocacy from their lived experiences.
3. **Reimagine Theological and Faith-Based Education** Embed intersectional analysis including caste, gender, race, class, disability, and sexuality into theological curricula. Promote scholarship by Dalit and minority theologians, ensuring that theological knowledge reflects the full diversity of God’s people.
4. **Strengthen Economic and Digital Justice for Youth** Encourage churches and ecumenical bodies to engage with questions of economic justice, digital inequality, and decent work – issues that define the futures of millions of young people. Support Dalit youth in accessing skills, technology, and resources to participate in emerging economies with dignity and security.
5. **Foster Interfaith and Transnational Solidarity Movements** Build partnerships between Christian, Muslim, Jews, Buddhist, among others and secular social justice movements to confront shared structures of casteism, racism, and patriarchy. The Church must see itself as part of a broader moral ecosystem committed to peace, pluralism, and the preservation of human rights and dignity.

6. **Ensure Accountability and Reparative Action within the Church** Establish mechanisms for monitoring inclusion and justice commitments including independent reviews, data transparency, and reparative measures for communities historically marginalized within Church structures. Accountability must be the measure of faith in action.
7. **Reclaim the Prophetic Vocation of the Church** The Church's moral strength lies not in neutrality but in clarity, in taking sides with the oppressed. Whether in Manipur, Palestine, Sudan, Congo, or the Dalit settlements of South Asia, the Church must stand where human rights and dignity is under siege. To follow Christ is to stand with those crucified by the systems of our day, and to act courageously and without compromise.

May we and our churches rise again, in purpose and with conviction, to build a world where no one is made to feel lesser in the eyes of God.

Thank you.