

Chapter-6

Dignity Freedom Network

DFN was founded in 2002 in Greenwood Village, Colorado as the Dalit Freedom Network by Nanci Ricks of Colorado and Bishop Joseph D'Souza who is the President of the All India Christian Council (AICC), CEO of the Indian arm of the global missionary group Operation Mobilization, and bishop of the Good Shepherd Church of India, the largest growing church movement in India. The founding board members were Ricks, D'Souza, Bob Beltz of the Anschutz Corporation, Peter Dance of India Ministries-USA, Melody Divine, an advisor to former Congressman Trent Franks, Ken Heulitt of the Moody Bible Institute, Gene Kissinger of the Cherry Hills Community Church, Kumar Swamy of Operation Mobilization-India, Rich Sweeney and Cliff Young of the Christian rock band, Caedmon's Call.

DFN has operations in the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. The organization's operations in these countries are largely centered around fundraising and advocacy.

The Dalit Freedom Network is a partner of the All India Christian Council, a nationwide alliance of more than 2,000 Christian denominations, mission agencies, institutions, federations in India. As per D'Souza's biography on The 700 Club's website : "The Dalit Freedom Network grew out of the AICC's need to facilitate work in the United States and other nations.

In 2018, the organization changed its name from the Dalit Freedom Network to the Dignity Freedom Network to reflect their expanded mission.

PROGRAMS

DFN has four programming areas: education, healthcare, economic development, and social justice advocacy. In the year of 2017, DFN's USA arm alone had raised \$1,706,228 and spent \$2,235,867 on programs, administration, and fundraising.

Education, Healthcare & Economic Development

DFN claims that their schools and health care, anti-trafficking, and economic development programs have directly impacted an estimated 14 million people across 6,000 communities in India.

DFN operates 107 English medium schools, known as Good Shepherd Schools, for 27,000 children in India, in partnership with Operation Mercy India Foundation (OMIF), an initiative of the Good Shepherd Church of India. From 2010 to 2018, the

schools have graduated more than 2,300 children. The school curriculum consists of English, math, science, as well as religious content such as Christian songs, Bible verses, and lessons about Jesus Christ.

Its micro-entrepreneurship program for women has secured over \$2.8 million in microloans from local banks for women in Pondicherry, Tamil Nadu.

In healthcare, DFN has sent dozens of medical teams to Dalit villages for preventative care and in response to emergencies. In villages, they provide care in a clinic through dentists, doctors and nurses, and also educate villagers on hygiene and preventative health care. After treatment, DFN and other associated evangelical workers will pray with the patient, share the Gospel, and attempt to convert the patient to Christianity.

Advocacy

On October 6, 2005, DFN hosted a conference entitled *Racism and Caste Based Discrimination in India: Implications for the US-India Relationship*, where talks were given by Udit Raj and Kancha Ilaiah, both prominent critics of the caste system who advocate for Dalits to convert out of Hinduism. D'Souza also testified at a United States Congressional hearing on the same day.

In July 2006, DFN and Christian Solidarity Worldwide spearheaded a letter co-signed by other Christian evangelical groups to former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in support of reversing Freedom of Religion laws that protect vulnerable people from religious conversion through enticements or coercion.

In 2005 and 2006, DFN was involved with the California textbook controversy over Hindu history where they opposed revisions proposed by Hindu groups regarding the portrayal of their religion in history textbooks. As a part of a 2006 Federal lawsuit resulting from the controversy, a subpoena revealed that DFN attempted to portray themselves as a Dalit organization rather than a Christian missionary group on their Wikipedia page.

D'Souza has been recognized as international experts on the caste issue and has been invited to testify in the United States and internationally on the subject of Untouchability. D'Souza has also frequently been cited by the Christian Coalition and other Evangelical Christian groups in the United States. He testified before the UK Conservative Human Rights Commission on April 4, 2007. Both Ricks and D'Souza testified before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus on the effects of Untouchability on women.

Criticism

The DFN and other similar NGOs have also been criticized by authors Crystal Hsu and P. N. Benjamin, Chairman of the Bangalore Initiative for Religious Dialogue, for working as "safe houses" for lobbyists engaged in destroying the cultural heritage of India. Hsu and Benjamin assert that NGOs are using endemic problems with caste discrimination as a pretext to gain a foothold in Indian society