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Abstract

This study examines the contextual, biblical, and theological contexts in which the Good Shepherd Church of India operates, cataloging the challenges faced by India and other nations within the Majority World when seeking an authentic expression of their Christian faith. This study showcases Good Shepherd's origin as a parachurch organization, emergence as a church movement, and the embracing of a theology of dignity that shapes the work today, rooted in humanity's creation in the Imago Dei, compelling cultures worldwide to embrace the living God in indigenously appropriate ways.

Introduction

India is experiencing a remarkable transformation, characterized by bustling airports and the lively highways filled with various modes of transportation, underscored by vibrant billboards proclaiming, "India Rising" (Cohen 2000). With a population exceeding 1.4 billion (Hertog, Gerland, and Wilmouth 2023), the nation has emerged from its so-called third-world status (Silver 2015) to assert its identity on the global stage (Center for Economics and Business Research 2024), positioning itself as a future economic superpower (Worldometer 2025). According to the World Economic League Table, India is expected to surpass the U.S. and China by 2080 (CEBR 2024). However, this narrative exists within a paradox, as the ultra-wealthy coexist alongside the desperately poor (Satapathy 2023), revealing a society vividly illustrated by rich clothing and spicy foods (Shukla and Park 2023, 27-44 and Srinivas 2011, 16), yet plagued by high illiteracy, infant mortality rates, and gender-based injustices (Chandru, Sharma, and Dharmaraju 2022, 743-752). The necessary structures for growth and equity remain lacking, highlighting a deep-rooted injustice where the privileged benefit from systemic disparities.

With this backdrop of India's rising out of the so-called Third World, and after more than sixty years of ministry experience, the Good Shepherd Church of India has emerged as an indigenous church movement that worships in the Anglican tradition, embraces a theology of dignity, and possesses a rich archival history. This study examines the contextual, biblical, and theological contexts in which the Good Shepherd Church of India operates, cataloging the challenges faced by India and other nations within the Majority World when seeking an authentic expression of their Christian faith. This study showcases Good Shepherd's origin as a parachurch organization, emergence as a church movement, and the embracing of a theology of dignity that shapes the work today, rooted in humanity's creation in the Imago Dei, compelling cultures worldwide to embrace the living God in indigenously appropriate ways.

The Good Shepherd Church of India

As an indigenous church movement (Coe 1973, 233-243), the Good Shepherd Church of India exemplifies the confidence and independence of both modern-day Christianity and the ancient church through its Indian designed, led, and sustained ecclesiological structure and activities (D'souza 2007). Established in 1964, it has transitioned from a Western-influenced parachurch organization to an authentic Indian expression of Christianity, focusing on holistic ministry that includes churches, schools, healthcare, disaster relief, and anti-trafficking initiatives nationwide (D'souza 2005). With a commitment to supporting the marginalized and poor, which encompasses over 800 million people in India (Kramer 2021), Good Shepherd addresses the profound physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering stemming from the structural injustice of caste-based oppression (Good Shepherd Church of India 2023). Recognizing that government aid alone cannot resolve these issues (Young 2011), Good Shepherd aims to promote human dignity and flourishing in alignment with biblical teachings, thus becoming a transformative force for the oppressed in Indian society and a leader within the global Christian community.

Striving for Dignity Amid Global Structural Injustice

In her 2011 book, *Responsibility for Justice*, American political theorist Iris Marion Young recognizes structural injustice as existing when social processes place large groups of people under systematic threat of domination or deprivation, while enabling others to dominate or develop their capacities (Young 2011, 52). This form of injustice, distinct from individual wrongful actions or state policies, arises from the collective actions of individuals and institutions pursuing their goals within accepted norms (Young 2011, 39). It is pervasive, particularly affecting the poor and oppressed, and traditional methodologies often fail to address it effectively.

Caste-based oppression in India (Ilaiyah 1996; Wilkerson 2020) exemplifies structural injustice, where its majority peoples endure systemic domination despite constitutional prohibitions against caste discrimination (D'souza 2006). Good Shepherd's Archbishop Joseph D'souza highlights that although the Hindu Vedas fortify the caste system, it was Manu's codification of strict rules that rationalized the oppression of the low caste and women (D'souza 2007). This dehumanization results in various societal structures ensuring that oppressed castes internalize a belief in their worthlessness (D'souza, D'souza-Vali, and Kadwell 2025, 44). As American journalist Isabel Wilkerson states, this dehumanization isolates the oppressed from the privileged (Wilkerson 2020, 141). The Good Shepherd Church of India aims to dismantle these caste-based injustices, advocating for human flourishing as characterized by communion with God, beauty, and wholeness (Sherman 2022, 15-16). However, true human flourishing cannot occur without changes to the oppressive systems that inhibit freedom and empowerment for those suffering under structural injustice.

Structural Injustice within the Global Missions World

As leaders of the Good Shepherd Church learned about the deep structural injustices affecting the poor and low caste in India, they recognized that those within the broader Good Shepherd movement were also victims of a similar structural injustice. Historically, global missions had been influenced by imperialism, leading to the establishment of churches that mirrored Western nations (D'souza 2005, 25). This colonial mindset evolved into subtler neo-colonialism, particularly regarding decision-making power, authority over biblical and theological knowledge, and financial accountability (Qiao 2018). This ongoing issue obstructs the Church's indigenization and its advancement in diverse cultures, ultimately denying the dignity of the poor, marginalized, and forgotten, despite the fact that they are indeed individuals created in the *imago Dei*. Ultimately, the global mission community's reluctance to promote authentic indigeneity poses a challenge to recognizing the Kingdom of God present with all humanity in all cultures.

Authentic indigeneity in church movements is critical. Imposing Western standards while excluding majority world leaders from dialogue and leadership restricts faithful contextualization and undermines the Church's mission. Generally unknown Japanese missiologist Shoki Coe broke through this barrier with his discussion of *directed contextualization* (maintaining authority of thought while adapting that thought to the local culture), *indigenization* (local cultures given authority of thought, decision making, and freedom to make mistakes), and *organic contextualization* (local people

adapting their thought within their own culture) (Coe 1973 and Stanley 2007). However, it seems there is a long way to go.

For the first twenty-five years, Good Shepherd's Indian leaders did not recognize the denial of their dignity due to the structural injustices created by Western missionary efforts. Though the foreign missionaries, who worked alongside them from 1964 to 1989, were generally loving and well-intentioned, the lack of decision-making power for Indian leaders and financial policies that enforced relative poverty stifled their growth (D'souza, 2007). A 2013 study revealed that enduring neo-colonialism persisted long after foreign involvement ended in 1989, preventing Indian leaders from fully experiencing their God-given dignity (Cate et al., 2013). Recognizing the need for change, the Indian leaders took significant steps in 1998 to reclaim their indigeneity, resulting in the establishment of the Good Shepherd Church of India as a fully indigenous body by 2003 (D'souza 2003). This transformation not only addressed the structural injustices endured but also initiated a dignity-based indigenous church movement that could inspire other cultures facing similar challenges.

Emerging from the legacy of neo-colonialism and structural injustice, the Good Shepherd Church of India has evolved into an authentically indigenous church movement rooted in the Anglican tradition, emphasizing dignity, historical context, and cultural authenticity. With thousands of congregations, it has transformed from a fledgling parachurch organization into a framework that other majority world Christians seeking an authentic expression of their faith can consider as they seek to embody a theology that celebrates humanity's imago Dei. Good Shepherd's commitment to building for the Kingdom of God is evident in its engagement with its archival history and a focus on creating Kingdom Communities that foster worship, catechesis, missions, and unity, all of which resonate with its local culture. Good Shepherd serves as a beacon of hope, encouraging other Christians with the desire to explore indigenous expressions of faith while maintaining a connection to the Ancient Church.

Framework for Ecclesiology: Archbishop Joseph D'souza's Theology of Dignity

Biblical Basis

The Good Shepherd Church of India's ecclesiology is constructed from a biblical foundation outlining a theology of dignity, rooted in Genesis 1:26-2:3 and the incarnation (John 1:1-18). In the creation account of Genesis 1, human dignity is

established and four imago Dei characteristics are defined: community (reflecting God's trinitarian nature), identity (inherent worth), vocation (divine purpose), and flourishing (holistic well-being). The incarnation restores and affirms this dignity after it had been corrupted by the fall of humankind into sin. Jesus personified community, identity, vocation, and flourishing (Athanasius in Lewis 1952, 154). Beyond the incarnation and particularly relevant to Good Shepherd and its Indian culture, practical biblical applications of this theology of dignity can be found in the stories of Dinah (Genesis 34), whose dignity was denied through silence and violence, and the woman at the well (John 4) (Topping 1990), whose dignity was celebrated through Jesus's engagement, highlighting the transformative power of affirming imago Dei in all humankind (Armstrong, Cohick, and Roesse).

The Good Shepherd Church of India applies this imago Dei theology in its confrontation of structural injustice in India. Good Shepherd's dignity-based framework for Majority World ecclesiology emphasizes community (group accountability) (Lee 2022, 113), vocation (affirming labor and leadership) (Ilaiah 2012, 3-4), and flourishing (addressing immediate physical and spiritual needs) (D'souza 2022). This framework opposes neo-colonialism and caste oppression, promoting holistic redemption and present-day transformation (Good Shepherd Church of India 2023).

Theology of Dignity Explored

Archbishop Joseph D'souza, Good Shepherd's principal theological architect, shaped Good Shepherd's theology of dignity over his more than fifty years of ministry. Born in 1950 near Goa, India, D'souza initially followed Western missions models but recognized their limitations amid rising persecution and cultural shifts post-2000 (D'souza et al. 2025, 1). Influenced by early church fathers, medieval theologians, Bernard Lonergan, and N.T. Wright, D'souza frames his thinking and theological response to structural injustice through an epistemology of love, asserting that God's love is the foundation and rationale for human dignity (D'souza, personal conversation, 2022).

From this starting point, D'souza then constructs a robust theology of human dignity, rooted in the theological framework of Genesis 1, articulated through four foundational pillars. He posits *God's Immanuel Presence* as the ontological core of relationality, wherein the divine intentionally and unconditionally engages with humanity, fostering communal bonds that affirm the intrinsic worth of humanity (D'souza 1999). Second, D'souza champions *Human Distinctiveness*, asserting that each person, endowed with a sacramental quality, possesses unique value that subverts caste-based dehumanization and other systemic forms of marginalization (Cross 2022).

Furthermore, he articulates *Vocational Union with God*, conceptualizing humanity's friendly union as co-laborers with God, tasked with fulfilling ordered and authentic roles, particularly empowering the disenfranchised to effect transformative change within societal structures (Sturdy). Finally, D'souza advocates for *Flourishing and Restoration*, a teleological vision energized by the incarnation, which pursues holistic redemption to ameliorate contemporary suffering and restore creation to its intended wholeness (DeWaal in D'souza et al. 2025, 38). Through this systematic theological construct, D'souza offers a compelling framework for understanding human dignity as an expression of divine intentionality and redemptive purpose.

D'souza's theology of dignity rejects dualistic views of salvation, embracing the physical and spiritual to affirm dignity, particularly for India's poor (D'souza, et al. 2025, 75). The Good Shepherd Church of India's commitment to these principles (Good Shepherd Church of India 2023) manifests in community-based worship, education, and advocacy, inspiring other majority world churches to consider the use and adaptation of this framework in their efforts to combat structural injustice and build for the Kingdom of God in their culture and context (Wright and Bird, 2024).

Findings: A Narrative Approach to Archival Discovery

In the development of their dignity-based ecclesiastical framework for India, the archives of the Good Shepherd Church of India narrate four historical eras that shaped their affirmation of *imago Dei* and the resulting embracing of indigeneity.

Origins (1964-1997)

The Good Shepherd Church of India originated as the India field of the international parachurch missions organization Operation Mobilization (OM USA website). Together, non-Indian missionaries and Indian workers distributed evangelistic literature and shared the Gospel. During this time, an assumed positive ethos of brokenness, poverty, and discipleship was cultivated under the authority of the non-Indian missionaries (D'souza 2009). Their unrelenting leadership (Randall 2008, 45-53), however, caused a persistence of structural injustice (Young 2011, 52): Indians faced neo-colonial control, limited decision-making, and forced poverty, denying their *Imago Dei* dignity in community, identity, vocation, and flourishing. The Indian workers, however, were not aware that this was their plight. The neo-colonial missions world's paradigm for reaching the lost diminished culture-based indigenous problem-solving.

Awakenings (1998-2002)

Triggered by the 1998 persecution of Christians and Graham Staines' martyrdom (D'souza 2000), the Indian leaders awakened to their subjection under neo-colonialism and caste oppression. Answering a "Macedonian call" from India's Dalits and other low-caste people (Acts 16:6-10), Good Shepherd shifted from their exclusive evangelism focus to a holistic ministry, establishing schools and health clinics (D'souza-Vali 2021). They rejected directed contextualization, replacing it with organic indigeneity, affirming *imago Dei* through communal doctrine and present-day transformation.

Chaos (2003-2012)

In 2003, moving past the parachurch world, Good Shepherd became an autonomous church, adopting the Anglican tradition (See Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral). This era was marked by conflict with Operation Mobilization International, as non-Indians resisted Indian autonomy (Good Shepherd Council of Bishops, 2014). Despite lawsuits and opposition, Good Shepherd consecrated bishops in the apostolic succession (D'souza 2014), established an initial large number of congregations (D'souza 2005), and refined its ecclesiology, fighting for *imago Dei* dignity against neo-colonial control (D'souza 2002).

A New Humanity (2013-Present)

As an autonomous, indigenous church movement (D'souza 2014), Good Shepherd fostered organic contextualization, growing in only ten years to an unbelievable number of congregations. It faced challenges like Hindutva-led persecution (D'souza 2000) and the COVID-19 pandemic (D'souza-Vali 2020), but managed to expand its schools, healthcare, and anti-trafficking efforts. Homegrown economic systems reduced reliance on charity, ensuring long-term self-sustainability.

A Life Changed by Dignity

A narrative from the Good Shepherd Church of India's archival research would not be complete without sharing a story of a life forever altered by God's work through its fully indigenous, dignity-based movement (D'souza-Vali 2023). Kanthamma's early life in rural India was marked by severe poverty, with her farmer parents unable to alleviate hunger or scarcity. Her father's death when Kanthamma was age twelve intensified their struggles, as the community's blame for divine disfavor pushed them toward starvation. Village elders coerced Kanthamma's mother to dedicate Kanthamma as a ritualized prostitute, leading to exploitation and trauma. By fifteen, Kanthamma migrated to

Mumbai's red-light district, enduring stillborn pregnancies and alcoholism. Returning to care for her dying mother, she bore a daughter, who was brutally assaulted at age five.

The Good Shepherd Church of India's field-based leaders intervened, providing restorative care for Kanthamma's daughter at the Good Shepherd Pratigya Safe House and empowering Kanthamma through vocational training to become a peer leader, advocating against child marriages and for children of ritualized prostitutes. Through Good Shepherd's intervention, Kanthamma's God-given dignity was affirmed. She experienced community, identity, vocation, and flourishing as God intended. Kanthamma's transformation reflects the hope of "Thy Kingdom Come."

A Framework for Consideration by Majority World Christians

The narrative on the archival research into the Good Shepherd Church of India revealed a compelling framework for affirmation of imago Dei dignity through embracing indigeneity when developing ecclesiology. For those majority world Christians who are struggling to find an authentic expression of their faith, Good Shepherd offers their framework for consideration and subsequent local adaptation. Good Shepherd hopes to inspire and champion majority world Christians to pursue dignity-based indigeneity in their own way and in their own time. For those who might want additional encouragement and direction, Good Shepherd offers its framework of *Kingdom Communities* for their consideration.

As defined by Good Shepherd, *Kingdom Communities* are local bodies of Christ that break structural injustice through communal, redemptive, and sustainable practices. The Good Shepherd Church of India proposes four practical expressions for implementing and living in Kingdom Communities. First, Good Shepherd promotes *Kingdom Worship* as a corporate, teleologically oriented praxis, deeply embedded in Anglican liturgical traditions, wherein lament and the manifestation of divine glory unite to foster transformative communal worship (D'souza 2023). Second, through *Kingdom Catechesis*, Good Shepherd advocates a structured, communal pedagogy (Lee 2022, 1), using translated and indigenously adapted versions of the Book of Common Prayer (2019) to form new believers, while episcopal governance strategically empowers low-caste leaders, advancing ecclesial inclusivity and social equity.

Further, Good Shepherd envisions *Kingdom Mission* as being anchored in God's covenantal faithfulness, prioritizing dignified vocational engagement and immediate societal renewal over reductive evangelistic metrics (Wright 2006, 531), thus pursuing holistic transformation. Finally, *Kingdom Unity*, in Good Shepherd's framework,

embraces a relational ecclesiology characterized by communal presence, epistemic humility, and generous ecumenical fellowship (Second Vatican Council 1964, para 7). This systematic vision offers a robust theological construct that is relational, redemptive, and intrinsically oriented toward the communal realization of God's Kingdom.

The archives of the Good Shepherd Church of India chronicle its transformation from a neo-colonially influenced parachurch ministry to a vibrant, indigenous church movement. Its theology of dignity, rooted in Genesis 1 and the incarnation, confronts structural injustice and affirms imago Dei through community, identity, vocation, and flourishing. The four historical eras—Origins, Awakenings, Chaos, and A New Humanity—illustrate Good Shepherd's struggle and triumph in achieving indigeneity. By proposing Kingdom Communities, Good Shepherd offers a dignity-affirming framework for Majority World Christians to consider, fostering authentic expressions of faith that honor God and serve their cultures.

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