

# SPOTLIGHT ON MISSION

Positive stories  
Valuable work



## Dalit Freedom Network extends its hand to India's "untouchable" children

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ChristianWeek Staff

VANCOUVER, BC—To be a Dalit, a member of the lowest caste in India, is to be nobody, an “untouchable,” an outcast.

But 11 years ago, an international network formed to help the Dalits find freedom from oppression. In 2006, an office was started in Canada.

“Our purpose...is to be a voice for the Dalit people of India...the lowest caste of the Indian society, who suffer poverty and discrimination,” says Sherry Bailey, executive director of the Dalit Freedom

Network (DFN) in Surrey, B.C.

DFN wanted to know how best to help the Dalits. So they asked.

The Dalits expressed the specific desire to have their children cared for, and given a chance at breaking the cycle of suffering at the bottom of Indian society.

“We are responding to the Dalit’s requests themselves,” says Bailey. “They’re asking that we help their children by providing an English education and a biblical worldview. We’ve said yes we will help you...we build schools that provide English education through Indian teachers.”

*continued on next page*

### Spots

- The Dalit people have been oppressed by the caste system of India for more than 3,000 years
- India is home to roughly one billion people, about a quarter of whom are Dalits .
- Seventy per cent of Dalits live below the national poverty line.
- Dalits are denied access to public wells, public parks, basic medical services, and education.
- In India there are approximately 250 million Dalits who do not have access to enough food, health care, housing and clothing.
- Many restaurants reserve drinking glasses for exclusive Dalit use, so as not to have non-Dalit people drink from the same glass.
- Despite being labeled “Hindu” by the ruling caste, Dalits are not allowed to enter temples, become priests, or even read Hindu scriptures.
- The Dalit community gathered on November 4, 2001, in New Delhi to express their cry for freedom, and declare an ideology of personal and spiritual freedom, as well as acceptance.

# DALIT FREEDOM NETWORK CANADA

250 MILLION DALITS  
UNTOUCHABLE  
ENSLAVED  
EXPLOITED  
OPPRESSED  
SOLD  
BUT THERE IS  
**HOPE**

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Though 20 per cent of all university seats in India are reserved for Dalit students, many are unable to qualify for them, as they do not meet language requirements. This is because most village schools do not teach English, which is required for university.

Many university grads seek work in computer-related occupations, another area where English language skills are a must-have. Dalit children often don't finish their schooling or even start in some cases due to discrimination or because they're needed to help their parents with farming duties.

Since its inception, DFN International has built 105 schools and currently sponsors more than 24,000 students through donations. The Canadian arm of DFN International sponsors 16 of the schools, with other international offices providing support elsewhere.

In addition to teaching children English, DFN provides a biblical worldview at the request of Dalit parents.

"They want a Christian worldview, a biblical worldview because [it] answers the question[s] of 'where I came from, why am I here, and where am I going,'" says Bailey. "The creation story is a very important story for Dalit people; they learn that they're created by a God who loves them, that they're created with value and worth and that every [person] is equal."

Being given freedom of religion is also important to the Dalits. "They don't want to be told that they are whatever religion they are, they



Photos courtesy Dalit Freedom Network

want to choose."

A number of challenges face the DFN, most notably, getting a response from would-be supporters. "The challenge is getting Canadian people to stop and listen to a new need...when they hear the story, they're compelled [to learn more and get involved]." The responsibility of DFN is to tell the story, she says, "and it's up to God to lay it on people's hearts to who will be connected with that story."

Through the work of the DFN, thousands of children have been impacted and transformed. They have been given a fresh start, and legitimate opportunity to gain the skills required for achieving the freedom their parents seek so desperately for them.

DFN is still looking ahead toward future projects, and remains focused on reaching out to more Dalit families. More classrooms and desks are needed at two DFN-built schools in India, in response to the growing number of children being given education in those villages.

"Our goal as an international network is to have 1,000 schools all across India. Our goal is then to keep providing schools in these rural villages for children. As [our children] graduate...they will be able to make an impact on their community."

For more information, visit [www.dalifreedom.net](http://www.dalifreedom.net).



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