

No tolerance for caste discrimination, says India church gathering

by [Anto Akkara](#)

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Bangalore, India, October 27 (ENI)--Churches in India need to show zero tolerance concerning caste-based discrimination within their ranks, a gathering of Christian leaders in New Delhi has said.

"Casteism is a sin and caste-based discrimination is a crime," said a statement issued from the 22-24 October conference in New Delhi. "Since discrimination is contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, churches will have to be zero tolerance zones with regard to the practice of caste discrimination."

Though the caste system has been officially abolished in India, discrimination against Dalits - low castes treated as "untouchables" - persists. They often have to survive by scavenging and doing menial jobs, while living segregated from higher castes in rural areas.

Dalits account for nearly two thirds of India's 28 million Christians, but many say they face discrimination in churches and Christian institutions, while upper castes hold positions of power.

"The Indian church is in a sorry state. The church will fail if it does not weed out caste," lamented Bishop V. Devasahayam, who heads the Church of South India diocese of Madras. "Christianity is life giving while casteism is a sin and scandal."

The meeting was organized by the National Council of Churches in India, which groups 30 Orthodox and Protestant denominations, in collaboration with the World Council of Churches.

It gathered 80 delegates, including bishops and heads of churches, church scholars and Dalit activists, including members of the Roman Catholic Church, which does not belong to the NCCI. International delegates came from the WCC and the Lutheran World Federation.

"There is a new awakening and sense of urgency to address this issue," Metropolitan Geevarghese mar Coorilos told ENInews on 27 October. "It is not enough that we preach equality for the Dalits. We must give them equal respect and rights in the churches," said mar Coorilos, moderator of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

"This is the not the first time the issue has been discussed," noted the Rev. James Massey, a pastor of the Church of North India and director of the Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies in New Delhi, who addressed the conference.

"What we need is not pious statements but real concrete action," said Massey, who is a Dalit and a former member of India's autonomous National Commission for Minorities.

The Rev. Raj Bharath Patta, executive secretary of NCCI's commission on Dalits, said the conference had set out an action plan to remove caste-based discrimination from the churches.

This is to be the focus of the church council's 2011 Lenten campaign, Patta said, adding that a resource book is being drawn up to fight caste-based discrimination in the church.