



Struggle for Truth and Justice: Nirmal Minz of Northern India

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In 2007, when two Roman Catholic priests, Alex Ekka and Augustine Kerketta, asked how he would summarize his life of more than eighty years, Bishop Nirmal Minz replied that his was a life marked by the constant struggle for truth and justice, particularly for the indigenous people of India.¹ This essay is a story of that servant of God, for whom the gospel of Jesus Christ has been the sure foundation upon which to invest his life for the sake of truth and justice.

EARLY LIFE

As a young man of only thirteen, Nirmal Minz faced a serious crisis. His dear sister Monica, whom he loved much, suddenly passed away. Stung by this blow, his young and sensitive mind was driven to probe the destructive power of death. In his still-forming faith, Minz looked to the Bible, and he felt assured that he had found his answer in John 11:25, when Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.

¹In 2007, Bishop Minz narrated his life history to Ekka and Kerketta, who translated, compiled, and edited this into a book in Hindi: *My Autobiography: Struggle for Truth and Justice* (Ranchi, India: Bishop Minz’s Family, 2007).

As leader of the church in North India, Bishop Nirmal Minz has dedicated his life to the struggle for truth and justice, especially for the indigenous people of his region. For him, the dynamic power of the gospel of Jesus Christ has led to a new vision for society.

Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.” His mind was put to rest by this encounter with Jesus, and his sorrowful heart was filled with hope and faith by Jesus’ promise. Not only were his doubts dispelled, but Minz also heard Jesus calling him to take up the cross and follow him. Jesus became the Lord of his life, and Jesus’ body, the church, became the chosen field for the young Christian’s service and loyalty. Even as a college student, he demonstrated his commitment to Jesus by taking leadership in a youth organization of the church and, even more important, in initiating a new movement of revival among young people. Leaving behind the opportunity of a government job that would have been available to him because of his academic record, he went to seminary in Kolkata (Calcutta) and completed his BD (MDiv) in the year 1953.

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HIGHER STUDY IN THE USA

Minz’s sharp intellect and leadership qualities were recognized early on, and he was given opportunity to study for the MTh degree at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, in 1957. After his return from the United States, he was offered a teaching position in Indonesia, but even after waiting for two years he could not go, due to visa problems. In the meantime, M. M. Thomas, the famous lay theologian and former General Secretary of the World Council of Churches—then director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore—invited him to be a part-time member of the institute in 1962. His first assignment was a study of the church in Kerala. It was an eye-opening experience for Minz to find gross injustice within the church, where the high-caste Christians discriminated against the low-caste Christians. He was shaken to see that low-caste Christians were seated apart from those of high caste and that this discrimination was imposed even in the burial ground. In his young idealism, this experience was heart wrenching. He realized that the church was not acting as God’s kingdom of justice and truth. When he received a Lutheran World Federation scholarship for his PhD study, which he completed in 1968 at the University of Chicago, he investigated matters of truth. Taking Mahatma Gandhi’s deep commitment to truth and his own Christian experience of truth, Minz wrote his dissertation on “The Significance of M. K. Gandhi’s Thought for a Theology of Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India.”

MATURE LEADERSHIP

With his PhD in hand, Minz joined Gossner Theological College as a lecturer. Soon, however (already in 1968), due to the demise of the principal, he was requested to assume leadership of the seminary. This new responsibility and privilege

stirred him to imaginative and creative leadership. Two initiatives of Dr. Minz as principal had particularly lasting impact on the theological training and life of faith in the church. Realizing that effective theological education required good facilities and infrastructure, he solicited international funds for a seminary building. The building was built in 1973 and remains as a testimony to his bold leadership. Though he was trained in the USA, Minz's theological reflection was always rooted in the local cultural soil. To contextualize the Christian faith in the local culture, Minz encouraged the use of the *mander* (a tribal drum made from skin and clay). The tribal drum had previously been banned in the church, not by written law but through long practice. As a theologian and reformer, he could not continue this tradition. The seminary became the first place to use tribal drum and dance in a major religious function, thus facilitating the contextualization of the Christian faith in the indigenous tribal world of Chotanagpur.² The move stirred controversy, however, about the propriety of tribal drumming in church. For the first time people were forced to evaluate what they were taught about their own heritage and to consider accepting the tribal drum as an enriching gift to the life of the church.

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Even while principal, Minz's concern was not limited to theological training but included the broader needs and challenges of society. Thus, when three young postgraduate students requested that he open a liberal arts college, it was like giving voice to his own inmost desires. The beginning of Gossner College—named after the man who sent the first four missionaries to the Ranchi region—revealed Minz's educational vision. In the first meeting to consider the opening of a college, a free-will offering was collected as seed money. Less than two dollars were raised as the offering! Instead of being discouraged, Minz took up the challenge, trusting in God's provision, since he was convinced that the college would fill a great need in society. True to his sense of justice, Minz put in place two fundamental principles for the institution: first, the ten initial teachers were all given equal monthly compensation; second, the school would give preference to applicants with "third division" (lower) tenth-grade test scores, rather than those with "first division" scores, as was the norm in all good colleges. Implementing this gospel value paid great dividends as the college soon became a destination for poor and less privileged students. Starting a college with so little money and with no building of its own (the college operated in three different rented buildings for about twenty years) was a remarkable feat, testifying to Bishop Minz's courage and commitment.

²Chotanagpur is a geographical region in the southern part of the state of Jharkhand in North India, where tribal people are in the majority and the church is predominantly tribal.

Under Minz's leadership, the college acquired a high and respected place as one of the premier colleges of the region soon after its inception. His profound commitment to tribal culture led him once again to take unprecedented steps. Bishop Minz is credited with having introduced the teaching of tribal and local languages at the college level for the first time. Such local languages, which had been choked out up to this time by the dominant languages, suddenly found a new lease on life. A direct outcome of this linguistic initiative was the introduction of tribal and local regional languages also at Ranchi University.

Bishop Minz's initiatives did not end here. In 1960, as a newlywed couple, the bishop and his wife, Paracleta Minz, were living in a large bungalow of six rooms at the Lutheran church campus in Ranchi. Ranchi was a center of education, where many girls came for higher education, but the church had no hostel for them. The Minzes realized that they did not need more than two rooms, so they converted four rooms of their house into a girls' hostel. This encouraged the church to open a girls' hostel in a better facility at a later date.

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From the beginning, Minz has been a committed ecumenical leader. When he returned from the United States, he learned of unsuccessful efforts to establish a YMCA in Ranchi. The national YMCA representative sought Minz's help, and a committee was formed with the bishop as chair. Under his leadership, the Ranchi YMCA was established.

In the 1960s, differences among the churches in Chotanagpur led to serious conflict. Ecumenical collaboration was a challenge, because the individual churches were primarily concerned with their own interests. In those days, a survey of the condition of tribal people of the region opened the eyes of leaders about the pathetic situation of the tribal people who made up the predominant membership in their churches. An ecumenical seminar was organized to discuss the situation, resulting in the formation of an ecumenical group called Alliance for Development. Bishop Minz was made the chairperson of this committee, which marked the beginning of an ecumenical nonprofit organization established to undertake developmental work in the area. Many felt a local name should be given to this agency, and Bishop Minz suggested "Vikas Maitri" ("Friend of Development"), which was agreed upon by all. Vikas Maitri remains a premier church-governed developmental agency.

JUSTICE: AN ISSUE WITHIN THE CHURCH³

For a man committed to Christ and to Christ's vision of justice and full life for all, the experience of injustice in his own church was very painful. Earlier, while working for the Christian Institute for Religion and Society, Minz had experienced and studied injustice and discrimination in the churches in Kerala, South India. Now, he had to deal with the problem in his own church, where he found a pattern of discrimination by the majority Munda tribe against the minority Oraon tribe. The church constitution and structures regularly favored the Munda people, simply on the basis of their numbers. Bishop Minz, who belonged to the Oraon tribe, saw a need for a new constitution that would provide equality and justice among the church members rather than continuing a "democratic" system that invariably gave preference to the majority.

The church adopted a process of constitutional revision, but the new constitution, founded on mandates of the gospel that addressed the issue of diversity and equal participation for all regions and in all units, could not be implemented because of the resistance of the majority community. This produced a crisis from which the church could not recover. As a result, a new church was established in 1977, called North Western Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church. Bishop Minz was one of its main leaders.

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Since the split was caused by administrative reasons and not theological reasons, there has been a hope and desire to restore peace and harmony between these churches. Both churches are still in search of peace and reconciliation. Bishop Minz has been a committed leader to this process. According to him, the church is grounded on the truth of Jesus Christ and hence its structures must be just. Otherwise, the church loses its credibility for insiders and outsiders alike. Minz became the first bishop of the new church when the office of bishop was established in 1982.⁴

One of the cardinal principles of the new church, again spelled out by Bishop Minz, was self-reliance. And after more than thirty years, the church has become a model for many Indian churches for how an Indian church can not only survive but grow in ministry on the basis of its own God-given resources.⁵

³This too-brief discussion of a larger issue is based partly on Bishop Minz's own reflection, found in *My Autobiography*, 14–16, and also on my own reading of the history of Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church.

⁴The episcopal system of church polity itself was a bold step at that time. Since most Lutheran churches did not have bishops, many of them spoke against it, but Bishop Minz led the church council to accept the office of bishop in order to distinguish the church system from forms of secular organization.

⁵Recently, some congregations in the United States, through the World Mission Prayer League in Minne-

OTHER NEW INITIATIVES

Bishop Minz became the driving force behind many other new beginnings as well. For example, he initiated and provided leadership for a radio ministry in the Oraon tribal language. This radio ministry still reaches out to many Oraon speakers.

In 1995, the church was preparing to celebrate the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the arrival of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this region. In one of the early planning meetings, Minz inspired lay leaders to start the church's own missionary organization. This organization was to be formed after the pattern of the Gossner Mission of Berlin, which had sent the first four missionaries to this region. As a result of this new NWGELC initiative, a handful of lay members came forward and pledged support for mission work among Oraon tribal people who had yet to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. The Missionary Sewa Sahvagita (Fellowship of Missionary Service), as it is called, has now grown to three hundred church members who have pledged to support the preaching of the gospel to people in remote areas. At present, there are eight missionaries sent by this organization. Minz's leadership and his spirit of self-dependence have provided the inspiration for this work.

As a theologian, linguist, and a person dedicated to biblical education for the laity, Bishop Minz led the church to translate the entire Bible into the Oraon tribal language—a formidable task, but one that met a very significant need. Within a few years, the members, pastors, and leaders were able to translate the whole Bible into the Oraon tribal language. Despite the limited resources of the NWGELC, especially compared to some other churches in the region, they raised the needed funds to publish the Bible in 2000 on the occasion of the church's sesquicentennial.

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Inspired by both his understanding of theology and his concern for justice, Bishop Minz led the church to take another bold step: sending women candidates for theological training for pastoral ministries. This initiative finally led the church to pass a resolution to include female pastors in the ministry of word and sacrament, and the first two women pastors were ordained in 2000, the anniversary year. By then, Bishop Minz had retired from active ministry, yet the seed that he had sown now bore fruit. This was the first time that women candidates were ordained for the ministry of word and sacrament in North India.

Even after retirement, Bishop Minz has been active in the ministry of the church. He was instrumental in the decision to start a Bible school in 2000, in which he also taught as a part-time teacher, and then to upgrade this Bible school

sota, have begun to partner with NWGELC in its vision for a Theological Learning Center for leadership development. With that partnership, a facility is being built.

to a seminary in 2007. Because of the credibility he had earned as a theologian, administrator, and teacher, the church asked him to lead this seminary as acting principal for a year.

Bishop Minz's theological vision included the whole society, with a special place for the marginalized and the victims of injustice. He distinguished himself by speaking against injustices perpetrated against the tribal people of his place, writing to raise the consciousness of tribal people about injustice, and even actively participating in organizing a peoples' organization for resistance against injustice and exploitation. He is one of the very few Christian leaders who enjoys wide acceptance as a tribal spokesperson.

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Bishop Minz's initiatives derive from his conviction about the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He has written, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ has created a new people out of the Adivasi/tribal/indigenous people."⁶ He affirms the gospel as "a dynamic power" behind his "new vision for society." For him, the dynamic power is God's truth in Jesus Christ, and the new vision lies in God's promise of justice to all.⁷ This confidence in the gospel is the basis for his participation in the struggle for the emancipation of tribal people in Jharkhand. He gave leadership to the Jharkhand movement (a people's movement for a separate statehood for the tribal people within the constitution of India) as an active member of the Jharkhand Coordination Committee. His deep and genuine commitment to raise the indigenous tribal voice led him to participate in the organization called Indian Council of Indigenous and Tribal People, where he served as chairperson of its Central Zone. Bishop Minz has represented this organization at the Working Group on Indigenous Tribal People of the United Nations in Geneva. His tireless efforts for genuine emancipation led Bishop Minz to participate in social, religious, political, and cultural aspects of tribal community life. In all these involvements Bishop Minz has been known for his great integrity, humility, and highest ethical standards—all of which reflect the true source of his life, Jesus Christ.

The life and ministry of Bishop Nirmal Minz has been a gift to the tribal community in Jharkhand and beyond. He lived his own maxim that if one invests God-given time, God-given intelligence, and God-given wealth for the sake of society, there will be change and even miracle. The struggle for truth and justice remained the overarching theme of his life—as pastor, theologian, scholar, moralist,

⁶Nirmal Minz, "Survival of Adivasis in India," in *Pearls of Indigenous Wisdom*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2007) 85.

⁷Bishop Minz wrote about this in his book *Rise Up My People and Claim the Promises* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997).

revolutionary, activist, and anthropologist. In all of these roles Bishop Minz's effort was to facilitate a new vision, especially for tribal society.⁸ ⊕

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⁸Teleshphore P. Cardinal Toppo speaks of him as a valuable gift of God to tribal community in India, in "Dr. Nirmal Minz: Agrani Adivaasi Chintak," in *Indigenous People of India: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Joseph Marianus Kujur and Sonajharia Minz (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 2007) 26.