

My focus is on the most vulnerable:

Bishop Timothy Ravinder

In an age when public life is too often defined by self-interest and division, Bishop Timothy Ravinder stands out as a rare voice of conviction, compassion, and clarity. A spiritual shepherd, astute administrator, and tireless social reformer, he brings together the humility of a pastor and the pragmatism of a changemaker.

From reopening village schools on the brink of closure to championing solar energy, women's empowerment, skill development, and organizing relief funds for underprivileged children and widows, Bishop Ravinder leads with quiet resolve and a deep sense of purpose. As the Bishop of the Coimbatore Diocese of the Church of South India and Moderator's Commissary for the CSI South Kerala Diocese, Thiruvananthapuram and CSI Tuticorin Nazareth Diocese, Tuticorin, he views faith not as mere ritual but as a daily call to rebuild lives, uplift youth, and care for the Earth.

In this wide-ranging conversation, Bishop Timothy Ravinder reflects on why, for him, helping others is not a choice, but a sacred calling.

How did your early life and your family shape your values and your calling to ministry?

A/ Well, I was born to parents who were second-generation Christians. So, my parents were deeply pious. I grew up in the village of Ketti and studied at an Anglo-Indian school. My father taught in CSI High school and was also an NCC officer; my mother taught in the same school. My father wanted me to become an engineer, and I tried for it—nearly joined Karnataka Vishweshwaraiah Engineering College, but missed the deadline and joined Ramakrishna Mission College for physics instead, aiming for an MSc.

My Father's sudden death changed everything. I had to care for my mother, who soon fell ill. I cleared the UPSC written exam and attended the interview, but my mother's last wish was to see me married. I met my wife, Anny Hemalatha, in church, and we married in 1984.

At the time, I was working with World

Vision in South Tamil Nadu. The shift from technical work to service began there. The Church later invited me to lead a rural development project in Avinashi, a village marked by caste tensions. We worked on education programs and even built a water tank and stayed in a cement structure during the work. That experience shaped me.

The Church encouraged me to study theology. I joined United Theological College in Bengaluru and completed graduate studies. I studied there for four years and completed further studies on the New Testament. It was during this time I began to see life differently—not to focus on myself, but on others.

That's when I fully committed to becoming a priest. I was now a husband and father of two sons—there was sacrifice, especially from my wife. Eventually, I was appointed one of the directors at the Church of South India's head office in Chennai, serving as a liaison between German funders and local communities. Through that role, I supported women's empowerment, drug awareness campaigns, and violence prevention programs. That spirit of service has guided my life ever since.

And in 2013, you were consecrated as bishop?

Yes, I was consecrated as the Bishop in Coimbatore. But before that, I was deputed by the Church of South India to serve as an ecumenical co-worker with the Protestant Church in Baden, Germany. I worked there as a priest, preaching and representing Indian culture and color.

I heard you speak many languages?

Yes, I try speaking seven. In the Church of South India, especially if you're at the head office, it's expected that you know at least three or four languages. You must know Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Tamil, and, of course, English.

I speak three of those fluently. I have a special love for Malayalam and for the people of Kerala—God's own country. Apart

from Indian languages, I also speak Swiss German and a bit of French German—what they call *Allemanisch*. While I was in Germany, I studied High German for three years at Frankfurt University while serving as a priest there.

In your role as a bishop, you have to wear many hats—you're a pastor, a leader, and the front-facing representative of the church. Could you tell me a bit about some of the key measures you've taken since becoming bishop?

One of the areas I've focused on deeply is education. The current education system we have is not adequately preparing our children for the future. We are educating our children out of creativity. Across the world, the arts and humanities are being integrated into systems of innovation—but we continue to push only maths, science, and engineering without asking, who are we educating, and for what purpose? So, creativity must be recognized and nurtured in children.

In my diocese, I made it a point to focus on the most vulnerable: orphans, semi-orphans, children of single parents. These are often forgotten. I believe they deserve a chance to flourish. Many of them are now working in reputed organizations.

The Bishop Relief Fund goes to genuinely deserving students—especially first-generation learners from disadvantaged communities. We verify their backgrounds—whether their parents are daily wage workers or whether they belong to historically marginalized groups—and help them pursue higher education.

Another important area is empowering youth. Today's youth need direction. We must support their emotional growth and teach them to be grounded. I also believe in "teaching them to fish," not just feeding them.

Women's empowerment is another key area. There's still so much violence against women—domestic, systemic, and societal. I've been part of awareness campaigns, rallies, and programs like "Thursdays in Black," which stands in solidarity against



gender-based violence. We try to bring attention to these issues, and ensure women are not just protected, but respected.

Environmental stewardship is also a mission. I've initiated several climate action programs. Recently, at Dr. Somervell Memorial Medical College, Karakonam, we planted trees with students. I always ask that the students themselves take ownership—water the sapling, care for it, and even have their names tagged to it. It builds a personal sense of responsibility. Climate change is real, and we need to do our part to create carbon sinks. Planting trees is one simple yet powerful step.

I always tell young people to make full use of the resources available to them. Both state governments in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are doing wonderful work—providing scholarships, loans, and youth awards. I encourage the youth: go, take it. These are your rights. You can go abroad, return with knowledge, and help build India.

Ultimately, I'm here today only because of God's grace. I could have tripped on a stone and died long ago. But God kept me alive for a purpose—and that purpose is to serve.

I heard you've reopened several schools. Could you tell us more about that initiative, as well as the relief fund and other community programs you've launched?

We are trying to increase the student strength in schools which is been one of my major concerns—because education is critical. If we don't educate our children now, we'll be left far behind while the rest of the world moves ahead. We simply can't afford to close down schools, especially in rural areas. So we do whatever we can to keep them running.

We've reached out to individual philanthropists, leveraged good connections with government officials, and requested their support.

My Predecessor started marriage assistance programs, like the Mangalya scheme. It's a wonderful initiative where we provide livelihood support to help economically struggling young women start families and build a stable life. Though it wasn't my original initiative, I am continuing to support it.

The Bishop's Relief Fund is something

very close to my heart. I started it 12 years ago. Every year, my parishes contribute to the fund. All of it is pooled together and distributed transparently to those genuinely in need. Many families, especially women, now rely on this fund to pay college fees or continue education. Some families wouldn't survive a school term without it. I personally ensure that girls who want to study—if they reach out to me—get a chance. No matter what. Education is the only true equalizer.

I've also been deeply impressed by the skill development programs initiated by the Union Government—especially those focused on traditional crafts like pottery. I am trying to introduce such programs in our colleges. Both the state and central governments—particularly the Chief Ministers of Tamil Nadu and Kerala—are placing a strong emphasis on skill and creative development. I truly appreciate their efforts.

Also, I take particular interest in non-fossil fuels and tree planting. I'm very passionate about alternative energy. Tree planting is the other major effort—creating carbon sinks to reduce emissions.