

Taliban Neighbors

How do you serve as a Christian in a hostile region, where violence has become a norm, where the news for you is rarely encouraging, where you're held down economically, socially, and politically, and where traveling just from one place to another may make you the subject of a kidnapping?

Taliban Neighbors: Christian Life in Northwest Pakistan

by Charles Strohmer

Bishop Mano Rumlshah of the Church of Pakistan was attending a meeting of the World Conference of Churches in Geneva in 2007 when his cell phone rang. Three thousand miles away in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan, his good friend and a leader in Christian humanitarian work, Dr. Reginald Zahiruddin, had just been kidnaped. The bishop, who heads the 70,000-member diocese in the large province, bade a hasty goodbye to colleagues from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt and headed straight for the airport.

Zahiruddin's kidnaping took place two weeks before Christmas. Dr. Reginald (as he is known) is director of the diocese's Pennell Memorial Hospital in Bannu, a town of 50,000, just outside the district of Waziristan, the scene of on-going U.S.-NATO military activity and the Pakistan army's fight against al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas. It took the church nearly a month and 2 million rupees (\$25,000) to secure his release.

He had been traveling to a clinic when they kidnaped him. It was broad daylight, Bishop Rumlshah told me. He was kept chained in shed for 23 hours a day, and his captors kept asking him who was supporting him and why he was there in Bannu. There were always kalishnikovs nearby, and sometimes they would bring in a man who stood nearby sharpening a long knife. And they would end by inviting him to become Muslim. Eventually, word of Dr. Reginald's humanitarian work in the province reached the ears of his captors. And some militant leaders started coming to our hospital to talk to our staff and Dr. Reginald's wife, who has a rock solid faith, asking if they could help. We had long talks with them. Eventually through the jirga [a local assembly of Muslim elders], we got our man back the first week in January. Kidnaping for ransom has emerged as a lucrative small business enterprise in the region

Dr. Reginald's saga could have ended differently, but Kidnaping for ransom has emerged as a lucrative small business enterprise in the region. With its perennially shaky federal government, fragile institutions, nuclear arms, and militant radicals who want political control over those weapons, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, founded in 1947, is considered by most western analysts as the most dangerous nation on earth and its long, mountainous region on the border with Afghanistan is by far the most unruly and violent area. That region is comprised of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the smaller Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA), which, unlike the more settled NWFP, is ruled by centuries-old forms of tribal governance and remains largely autonomous of the rule of Pakistan.

Bishop Rumlshah and his family live in Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP and a strategic frontier city at the eastern end of the legendary Khyber Pass. Peshawar was much in the news in 2008 when during the summer Pakistan's army launched offensives against Taliban who sought to take control of the city, and in December when hundreds of supply vehicles for NATO forces were destroyed by militants. We also have suicide bombings, now, the bishop said. This is something new in this part of the world. Suicide has never been part of our culture. Killing is very common. But suicide is new.

How do you serve as a Christian in a hostile region, where violence has become a norm, where the news for you is rarely encouraging, where you're held down economically, socially, and politically, and where traveling just from one place to another may make you the subject of a kidnaping? How do you incarnate Christ when you live there, in a dark night that does not seem to be ending? I spoke to Bishop Rumlshah about this at St. Joseph the Carpenter Episcopal Church in Tennessee, where he had come to speak about Christian life and the church's work in the region. We try to reenact God's love among the tribal groups.

A humble, gentle man with penetrating wisdom gained through difficult experiences and long suffering, he responded with a question of his own. "Have you ever counted the tangible cost of loving your neighbor when he may be your enemy?" It's a question encountered regularly at the various ministries of the diocese. "In our clinics near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, for instance, it's come one, come all. We only have meager resources, but we're there," Bishop Mano said. "We try to reenact God's love among the tribal groups. If Taliban come injured to one of our border clinics, we never ask them if they are Taliban. That's confidential to them. I'm not trying to romanticize them. It's chilling even to think about. But they show up. They are people, who in a way are very conscious of God. But the face of a suffering God is alien to them. Due to the compulsion of my faith, I cannot hate them. They know they will be offered healing for their wounds in a quiet, humble way. If they feel alienated from others in God's world, we are offering them a relationship that can end that alienation. We believe that a door should always be open to Christ. If you close that door, what are they going to do for Christian witness?"

Christians are an impoverished, tiny minority among the province's 17 million Muslims (mainly Pashtuns), but the diocese, a merger of Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists, is very active, running well-established, albeit underfunded programs, including schools, a vocational training center, two hospitals, small clinics, literacy programs and work apprenticeships, micro-credit plans, rehab facilities, and youth camps. "We have also begun a movement called 'faith friends', in which people of different faiths move as friends," Bishop Rumalshah said. But there are two sides to their life in the province. "On the one hand, it is a privilege that God enables us to serve others in such a hostile environment, but the other side is that the community who cares for others in turn receives discrimination. We are very vulnerable."

Christians in the province face religious and economic discrimination and political suppression. During testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Rumalshah once spoke about an ever-present political threat, the implementation of sharia (Islamic law). Although the sharia codes are only practiced selectively in Pakistan today, some clerics and mullahs want to implement them in a way that would give non-Muslims the status of dhimmi (conquered, protected people). If that should ever occur, the bishop told the committee, "We will be treated like a conquered people and offered protection only after paying a special tax. But how could we become a conquered people in our own homeland?" Politically, little viable help has come from Pakistan's federal government to improve this regional situation.

Even apart from official dhimmi status, the church in northwest Pakistan is a church of the poor. Christians in the province are "economically paralyzed and under severe hardships," Rumalshah said. The diocese has calculated that 85% of its members are severely deprived because they are either stuck in the most menial of jobs or perennially unemployed. Unlike in the West, "there are no opportunities for advancement. We are in a situation like the old European Jews and old south Asians, where the majority communities would not give them jobs. The few jobs that open up are offered first to family, then clan, then tribe, then to someone recommended to you regardless of qualifications. Christians are last in line."

Politically, little viable help has come from Pakistan's federal government to improve this regional situation. The Muslim democratic vision of Pakistan's founding father and first head of state, Mahomed Ali Jinnah, who is said to have held Europe as an ideal, has been persistently short-circuited throughout Pakistan's turbulent history. Military coups have abrogated existing constitutions and imposed long periods of martial law leading to militarization of the political system and then to new constitutions. And political assassinations, such as the death in December 2007 of the popular democratic reformer Benazir Bhutto, are not uncommon.

Pakistan's current constitution (its third, written in 1973), states that "adequate provision shall be made for the minorities . . . to profess and practice their religions and develop their cultures." And it guarantees "fundamental rights" within the provinces, "including equality of status, of opportunity and before the law, social, economic and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, and association." In 2007, minority communities throughout Pakistan celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of Jinnah's historic August 11, 1947 speech, in which he rebuked "the evil of neoptism and jobbery" and said that the new government should be impartial and organized by law and order, equality for all, and religious freedom. "You are free," he proclaimed to the peoples of new nation. "We are starting in the days when there is no discrimination, no distinction between one community and another.... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all . . . equal citizens of one state."

For the minorities, however, it has not gone well. Rumalshah said:

Freedom and equality of rights and all the rest is only on paper for Christians, and not the reality. The constitution says one thing, but even the courts do something else. The worst part for us are the ordinances under which a Christian's testimony in court is counted for only half that of a Muslim's. This is the heart of the problem with the blasphemy law. In court, if a Muslim accuses a Christian of blasphemy against the holy prophet, the Muslim's word counts for twice that of the Christian's. This is why most blasphemy cases end the way they do. And a Christian woman's word in court is one-quarter that of a Muslim male. I have more legal rights in my adopted country of Britain than in my native Pakistan, where I am discriminated against because of my religion. A Christian woman's word in court is one-quarter that of a Muslim male

More immediate opportunities for the diocese to see injustices redressed may occur through the provincial government, which has a degree of governing autonomy apart from the federal government. A remarkable example of what is possible occurred in the summer of 2005, when the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), a Christian political think tank dedicated to relational diplomacy, invited Akram Khan Durrani, the popularly elected chief minister of the NWFP, to Washington DC. The trip was politically risky, both for IGE and for Durrani, because his party, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, has been portrayed, not without reason, as anti-American.

Durrani had a political agenda for the NWFP that included seeking passage of controversial Islamic legislation based on sharia. That is why we wanted him to come to Washington, Josh White told me about Durrani's visit. White, a fellow at IGE and a leading specialist on Pakistan politics, lived in the NWFP for a year and has a strong interest in Christian-Muslim dialogue. Durrani and his advisors never had a direct experience of America before, White said, and there was very little that people in Washington knew about this party, which is very influential in that crucial region.

Although it was an unofficial visit, IGE arranged meetings for Durrani and his staff with individuals at the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council. They also spoke at the Brookings Institution and toured Ground Zero. There was a lot of open, honest dialogue with them, White explained. We certainly were not convinced by the end of these conversations that their political agenda was entirely innocuous, and they still had a lot concerns about American policy. But we each came to appreciate to some extent where the other was coming from. And there were moments on both sides when the situation became more human. We saw this as a learning process, as a goal in itself.

The effect of IGE's mission on the diocese has been direct and beneficial. The changing situation that is developing through IGE, and especially the role being played by Josh White, is significant, Rumalshah told me. It has facilitated a warm relationship between the chief minister and myself, as well as two important construction projects. Durrani's provincial government backed both projects, politically and financially a new church to replace a deteriorated structure in Bannu, and a new church building on the campus of Peshawar University. There are thirty-eight mosques on the campus, Rumalshah said. Building a church on the campus had always been denied to us in the past.

The gospel does not come as a disembodied message, wrote Leslie Newbigin. It comes alive when there is a community which lives faithfully by the gospel and in that same costly identification with people in real situations as we see in the earthly ministry of Jesus. These seem apt words for the Christian life being demonstrated in the province a place back in time, as it were where Christians seek to imitate Christ by succoring others in their sufferings. This life is not about solving the problems of the modern world, not is it done from a position of human strength.

Christians in the diocese, however, are not naive about the struggles they will endure, yet they remain determined to live out the gospel in visible, caring ways, identifying with real people in real situations. They get this from Bishop Mano, who got it from working alongside Mother Teresa early in his ministry over 40 years ago. He described his experience to me: Before she was well-known, I had a placement for about six months with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, caring for the poor on the footpaths of Calcutta.

Before she was well-known, I had a placement for about six months with Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, caring for the

poor on the footpaths of Calcutta. At the time, up to a million people had their abode on the footpaths. Couples would mate there, mothers would breast feed their children there. Even during monsoon season they would cook and sleep there. That was their daily experience. My own experience there, especially seeing the love for others that Mother Teresa practiced so tirelessly ? to prepare the young for life and the old for death ? has influenced me for the rest of my life.?

In northwest Pakistan, Bishop Rumalshah seems to have translated this shaping experience into what the Bible would see as a wisdom-based way of life ? a practical Christian faith that seeks to build relationships and community on the common concerns of life that are shared even among people who are different. ?We have one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all,? said the bishop, who frequently quotes these words of Paul in Ephesians. He relies on this Christian tenet for his own spiritual strength, and he sees it as essential to the diocese's service, saying: ?We all have a common God, common ground, and common interests on which to have relationships. And it is a privilege that God enables us to serve here in the name of our faith.?

For Bishop Rumalshah and the Christians of his diocese, this means ?smelling the sweat of your enemy, embracing him. This is where your faith is tested,? he said. ?The whole area is becoming Talibanized. What can we do? We live there. Our basic premise is conscious engagement and incarnational presence, which is service leading to a relationship. You cannot cultivate a relationship by remote control. You have to be there, physically, with them. That is at the heart of it. And we have space in that region as a church to do it. This is not a wishful thinking. This is real thinking, real thinking about a forsaken region.?

(Charles Strohmer is a visiting research fellow of the Center for Public Justice. He has written on issues of religion and foreign policy for numerous publications and is currently writing a book on wisdom-based U.S.-Mideast relations (see: Wisdom Project Précis).

Copyright. Permission to reprint required.
Comment on the essay here