

# Taliban neighbors: Christian witness in Pakistan

by [Charles Strohmer](#) in the [January 13, 2009](#) issue

Bishop Mano Rimalshah of the Church of Pakistan was attending a meeting of the World Conference of Churches in Geneva last year when his cell phone rang. Three thousand miles away in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, his good friend and a leader in Christian humanitarian work Dr. Reginald Zahiruddin had just been kidnapped. 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 kidnapping 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 ongoing U.S.-NATO military activity and the Pakistan army's fight against al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. It took the church nearly a month and 2 million rupees (\$25,000) to secure Dr. Reginald's release.

"He was kept chained in a shed for 23 hours a day," Bishop Rimalshah told me. "His captors kept asking him who was supporting him and why he was there in Bannu. Sometimes they would bring in a man who would stand nearby sharpening a long knife. And they would end the interrogations by inviting him to become Muslim."

Eventually, word of Dr. Reginald's humanitarian work in the province reached the ears of his captors. "Then militant leaders started coming to our hospital to talk to our staff and Dr. Reginald's wife, 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."

It could have ended differently. 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 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. Rumalshah 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 this past summer when Pakistan's army launched offensives against Taliban who sought to take control of the city.

How do you serve as a Christian in a hostile region, where violence has become the norm, where the news for you is rarely encouraging, where you're held down economically, socially and politically? How do you incarnate Christ when you live *there*, in a dark night that does not seem to be ending? I spoke to Bishop Rumalshah about this at St. Joseph the Carpenter Episcopal Church in Tennessee, where he had come to speak about the church's work in the region. 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 daily at the various ministries of the diocese. "In our clinics near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, it's come one, come all," he 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. 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 demands 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 in the midst of the province's 17 million Muslims (mainly Sunni Pashtuns), but the diocese—a merger of Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist churches—is very active, running many well-established, albeit underfunded programs, including 13 schools, a vocational training center, two hospitals, several small clinics, literacy programs, work apprenticeships, microcredit plans, rehab facilities, youth camps and interfaith groups. But there are two sides to their life in the province, Bishop Rumalshah said. "On the one hand, it is a privilege that God enables us to serve others in such a hostile environment, but the other side of it is that the community that cares for others in turn receives

discrimination. We are very vulnerable.”

Christians in the province face both 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 Shari’a (Islamic law). Although the Shari’a 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 Senate 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?”

Even without 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,” Rumal shah said. The diocese has calculated that 85 percent of its members are severely deprived because they are either stuck in the most menial of jobs or perennially unemployed. “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 relatives, 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 founder and first head of state, Moham med Ali Jinnah, who is said to have held Europe as an ideal, has been persistently short-circuited throughout Paki stan’s turbulent history. Military coups have abrogated existing constitutions and resulted in 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 former prime minister and 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.” For the minorities, however, all is not 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 evidence 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 land of Britain than in my native Pakistan, where I am discriminated against because of my religion.

More immediate chances 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, D.C. The trip was politically risky, both for IGE and for Durrani, because his party, the *Mutta hida Majlis-e-Amal*, has been portrayed, not without reason, as anti-American.

Durrani had a political agenda for the province that included seeking passage of controversial Islamic legislation based on *Shari'a*. "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, cultivates relationships and implements initiatives between Christians and Muslims in the NWFP. "Durrani and his advisers never had a direct experience of America before, 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 of 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. “It has facilitated a warm relationship between the chief minister and myself,” Rumalshah told me, “as well as two important construction projects.” Dur anni’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 38 mosques on the campus,” Rumalshah said. “Building a church on the campus had always been denied to us in the past.”

Christians in the diocese are not naive about the ongoing struggles they will endure, but they have determined to live out the gospel in visible, caring ways, identifying with real people in real situations. They get this from Bishop Rumalshah, who got it from working alongside Mother Teresa early in his ministry over 40 years ago. Rumalshah described his experience:

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 that 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 the 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 the NWFP, Rumalshah seems to have translated this experience into a practical Christian faith that seeks to build relationships and community on the common interests, values, and concerns that are shared even by 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, but he also sees it as basic to the diocese’s service: “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 and embracing him,” he told me. “This is where your faith is tested. 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. This is not wishful thinking. This is real thinking about a forsaken region.”