

Persecuted in Pakistan: A Christian educator survives a beating

by [Titus Presler](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue



Edwardes College in Peshawar, Pakistan, set up a memory corner for students and alumni who were killed in a bombing in September 2013 at All Saints' Church, also in Peshawar. Photo courtesy of [Titus Presler](#)

The headline of an Anglican News Service article read, "Church of Pakistan college principal beaten."

I am that principal.

Before the attack there were other acts of intimidation and violence as the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a Pakistani province known for religious extremism, intensified its attempt to seize control of the only college still nominally under the management of the Church of Pakistan. Religious freedom is at stake, for the Pakistan constitution provides that all religious groups have the right to manage their own institutions.

Agents of the military Inter-Services Intelligence had threatened me and Bishop Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters and instigated campus demonstrations at Edwardes College in Peshawar, where I serve as principal. In January they intimidated faculty and staff and physically abused a Christian administrator. At that point it was unsafe for me to be in Peshawar, so I monitored events from Islamabad, where I was hosted by a Muslim who supports the rights of religious minorities.

The drama revolves around the college, which was founded in 1900 as the first institution of higher education along the Afghan frontier. It is currently owned by the Church of Pakistan, which was formed in 1970 from the ecumenical union of

Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians. How did Edwardes, long a model of dignity and decorum, become the scene of threats, agitations, and violence?

Edwardes is not a Christian enclave: 92 percent of the 2,800 students are Muslim, 7 percent are Christian, and 1 percent are Hindu or Sikh; 90 percent of the 105 faculty members are Muslim; and the campus includes a mosque as well as a chapel.

The sources of the current conflict are complicated, but they highlight trends in Pakistan, particularly in regard to the status of its religious minorities and the mission of their institutions.

Higher education in Pakistan is marked by rote teaching and learning, outdated syllabi, and faculty seniority systems that discourage research and innovation. Edwardes offers degrees through the University of Peshawar, but it has prided itself on open discourse and character development. The college's Integrity Project, initiated in 2012, offers weekly discussions on topics relevant to a society afflicted by religious extremism and sexual violence: purposes of education, discernment of talents, ethical understanding, gender respect, diversity tolerance, community responsibility, and servant leadership.

In 2012 the church and the college mobilized to seek degree-awarding status so that Edwardes could design its own degree programs. The provincial Ministry of Higher Education supported the project enthusiastically and provided a \$3.125 million grant to encourage more doctorates, expand the library, upgrade laboratories, and fund a new academic block. A new charter specified that the institution's sponsoring body would have a majority on the governing board and that the head of the sponsoring body (the bishop) would be the chancellor.

The proposed governance structure sparked conflict. The indigenous church had exercised oversight of the college from 1940 on, but in 1974 the provincial governor installed himself as board chair with a majority of government appointees. The church lived with the new arrangement for fear of losing the college entirely in the nationalizing trend of the '70s and the Islamizing trend of the '80s. But unlike full-scale nationalizations of the period, the shift at Edwardes cited no law or policy and did not abolish or even revise the college's church-designed constitution. Thus it had no legal basis.

The church's effort to reclaim what is its own by history, law, and constitutional right provoked a violent governmental effort to grab the college and challenge its church sponsorship and ownership. The Diocese of Peshawar is attempting to rectify the situation, but it has limited resources, and it ministers in rugged territory where the Taliban and the Pakistan military are battling for control.

What happens to interreligious relations in Pakistan in the 21st century is important for the global community. Pakistan is the world's sixth largest nation, predicted to become the fourth largest by 2050, and it is the second largest Muslim-majority nation. It was established in 1947 as a haven for South Asian Muslims alongside Hindu-majority India. Constituting 96 percent of the population, Muslims are the overwhelming majority, but a persistent minority siege mentality has prompted persecution of Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. Extremist tendencies are aggravated by the legitimization of jihad as a modern military tactic against Soviet and, later, NATO forces in Afghanistan and by the continuing ideological contest in Pakistan between Saudi Wahhabi and Iranian Shi'ite strands of Islam.

The wider world is familiar with religious persecution in Pakistan: the 2011 assassinations of the Christian religious minorities minister and the Muslim Punjab governor for opposing the blasphemy laws; the Badami Bagh riots in Lahore in March 2013; kidnappings and forced conversions to Islam of Hindu women in Sindh; the bombing of All Saints Church in Peshawar in September 2013, when 128 Christians were killed and about 170 wounded. In February of this year the Pakistani Taliban warned the Kalash, a polytheistic people in mountainous Chitral, to convert to Islam or face death. Many media outlets express outrage and despair at such events, as do millions of moderate Pakistanis—but in private. Silence prompted by fear of retribution keeps extremists powerful.

At about 3.5 million, Christians are probably the largest religious minority, and any increase in numbers makes them a target. Decades of discrimination have left 80 percent of them in menial jobs. Yet the churches have contributed substantially through their clinics, hospitals, schools, and colleges. These institutions also ensure that oppressed Christians have a channel for educational advancement and professional careers. Edwardes represents the Church of Pakistan's one opportunity to contribute to the struggling higher education sector and thereby enhance its Christian witness.

Now the church's opponents wish to end this witness in favor of majoritarian hegemony. Those directly involved are not bearded mullahs but college graduates who have been influenced by the Taliban and the religious parties. There have been sectarian riots and books suppressed at the University of Peshawar. At Edwardes some instructors and students objected when passages from both the Qur'an and the Bible were cited in a discussion: they wanted no non-Muslim religious text included. Yet in a society where cultural discourse is intertwined with religious discourse, this kind of discussion is exactly what's needed: we must cultivate critical thinking, including the analytical ability to separate proposition from proselytism and the readiness to experience difference as an opportunity for discovery rather than as a threat to community.

In February of this year, I received a safe-passage letter from Pakistan's Interior Ministry and traveled back to Pakistan to appear in Peshawar High Court to support the diocese's lawsuit against the government's takeover bid. On our way out of the city, ISI agents flagged down me and my host, tore up the safe-passage letter, and hauled me into their vehicle. For about eight minutes two agents, one on each side, beat me with fists while the agent in the front seat accused me of being a CIA agent, warned me to leave Pakistan, threatened to kill me, and ripped the work visa out of my passport. My host argued strenuously with agents who were keeping watch outside and prevented a worse outcome by securing my release. In mid-April I arrived home to my family in Vermont, where I remain while the church works to resolve the situation.

As we drove away from our attackers, the prayer that came to my mind was this: "Friend Jesus, this and so much worse is what your Christian brothers and sisters have been experiencing here in Pakistan for so long. This and so much worse is what your Muslim brothers and sisters and others have been experiencing here for so long. Now I know it firsthand. I'm not thankful for the beating, Friend Jesus, but I am thankful for the knowledge. And for still being alive."

Solidarity has been intrinsic to my ministry in Peshawar, but now I was feeling it as never before. My prayer is that Christians who live in free environments will join in prayer and mission with those Christians who are keeping the faith under pressure.