

Anglican Commentary

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I've often wondered: Why wasn't I born in a Muslim Family. After all, Pakistan is 95% Muslim. It's a mystery to me. I thank God for bringing the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to my grandparents. My grandfather was a teacher and an ordained Presbyterian minister who became an Anglican minister of the Gospel in the 1920's. My father, graduated from the Scottish Presbyterian Murray College, Sialkot in 1929 and joined an Indian Ashram based in the Anglican Church. He was an itinerant Indian Sadhu who carried a Bible and a Book of Common Prayer to teach, preach and heal as a Christian monk throughout sub-continent of India. The Anglican Bishop of Lahore encouraged my father to join the Lahore Divinity School. He was ordained and then became a parish priest in the early 1940's.

I was born into an Anglican household. In childhood, I watched my parents say the morning and evening Prayer Office from the Book of Common Prayer. As a child, and later as a young adult I regularly joined my parents at Morning Prayer and Evensong in our parish church. I sang songs in Urdu, Punjabi and English. Our father taught us "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty", "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and Venite, Jubilate, A Song of the Three Young Men, Song of Mary, Te Deum Laudamus so we could sing them by heart. We sang them every day as part of our prayer and praise. We attended "The Great Litany" service every Wednesday afternoon in our church. It was pretty natural for us to love our Anglican heritage.

My father shared many stories of the Anglican missionaries who came to serve the Indian sub-continent. These dedicated men and women filled with the love of Christ brought the Gospel to us. A story of Rev. Lawrence Woolmer who came to serve as a missionary in charge of the very large Anglican district of Gojra in the diocese of Lahore in early 1946, remains with me. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) had given him a new car for his travel. Gojra was the CMS headquarters where there were boarding Schools for boys and Girls. Poor Christian children from villages were brought there to receive education from age kindergarten to high school. As Rev. Woolmer arrived in Gojra there were no funds available to support the education of the poor children. These boarding schools were about to close down. Rev. Woolmer sold his new car to keep those boarding schools open. He bought a bicycle and traveled with native priests and evangelists and covered a huge area under unbearably warm temperatures. The first Pakistani Bishop was educated in Iver Hostel, Gojra. Many doctors, nurses, native priests and teachers educated in those boarding schools became future leaders in the Anglican Church in Pakistan. Rev. Woolmer later was appointed as the Bishop of Lahore, he confirmed me in 1965.

In my early upbringing I learned that we are an Anglican community of the worldwide church. Living in a small (often oppressed) community - you were constantly reminded of two things; Christians were a minority and second class citizens. As a youth it boosted my morale to know I belonged to a church family of Asia, Africa, Europe and Australia and North America. As a senior priest, my father was a Rural Dean and then Archdeacon of the Diocese of Lahore. Visitors from many countries came to visit our Diocese. It was a great experience to meet people of many nationalities worshipping in our Diocesan

Cathedral. My deep love for the variety and breadth of the richness and traditions of the Anglican Church grew more and more.

In 1977, I attended the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, Kenya as a youth member from the Church in Pakistan. The youth delegates were staying in a college hostel where we slept in bunk beds. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Donald Coggan and his wife decided not to stay in a five star hotel downtown Nairobi but stay in this college hostel. I had the pleasure to travel every morning in a rickety old bus with Archbishop and his wife to the conference site. His daughter Ruth Coggan served in the Northwest Frontiers of Pakistan as a doctor. Archbishop invited me to be his assistant the day he was going to give a report as Chair on the work of the Bible Society to 3,000 attendees. It was an awesome experience to carry his brief case and stand behind him while he delivered his speech. Later while I served in Vienna, Virginia as a parish priest I met Lord and Lady Coggan many times when he came to be a resident at the College of Preachers at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. It was an amazing experience to be in the company of a man whom I dearly admired.

I have been subscribing to a magazine "YES" of the Church Missionary Society in London. In 1992, I received a copy of "YES" magazine with a picture of a Sudanese Bishop Nathaniel Garang, Bishop of Bor. Inside there was a story of the persecuted Sudanese Church. This story kept me awake. I prayed, wept and imagined who I could help in a land where two million mostly Christians were killed and more than 4 million people were displaced by the Islamic government of Sudan. The Church in Sudan was the fastest growing Church in the Anglican Communion. The Islamic government wanted them to convert to Islam and accept Sharia law. The Lord was doing an amazing work among the Southern Sudanese and great numbers of people were professing "Jesus Christ as Lord." The Lord put the burden on my heart for the Suffering Church. I knew firsthand the difficulty and discrimination as a Christian in an Islamic Pakistan. I prayed and God opened doors for me to be the spokesperson of the persecuted church. I was invited four times to testify on the Capitol Hill before the United States Congressional Committee Hearings. I was appointed in 2001 as the Canon and Commissary to the Archbishop of Sudan in the USA. I visited Sudanese Churches a number of times and wrote a book "Hear My People's Cry" an eye witness testimonial to inform churches and civic organizations. I helped to bring many orphan children into boarding schools to educate them in Kenya and Uganda.

After my visit in 1996 I experienced the wide spread sufferings of Sudanese Christians and the power of their living faith I wrote down in my journal:

The living faith of the persecuted church has grown from the Cross of Christ. The Cross has become their proud symbol of the strength to live and die for Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus in this land of oppression and killing fields have adopted the Cross to symbolize the only life they want to live. In the sign of the Cross they conquer the forces of darkness, oppression, hatred and evil. To them, the Cross represents their daily struggle, the pain of betrayal, suffering, affliction and the triumphant faith to follow Christ. "For the message about the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the POWER OF GOD." (1Corinthians 1:17).

I believe being an Anglican lies at the heart of my faith - it's an experiential encounter with the risen Christ. He who hung on the hard wood of the Cross welcomes everyone that they may come within the reach of his saving embrace. Jesus equips us to be an instrument of God's peace and healing hands in areas of conflict and pain. I have been involved in areas of persecution to promote peace and harmony where there is war, hatred and lack of love. My Anglican identity as bearer of the Gospel to all conditions of human beings enables me to be a witness of the love of Jesus Christ through caring and sharing and inter-faith work of reconciliation.

Anglican churches have been in the thick of the fight against the racial divide in South Africa to bring justice to the oppressed to restore dignity to all God's children. In the Northwest Frontiers of Pakistan we are operating schools and hospitals in today's hostile environment to serve, clean and heal the wounds Al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists who attack to harm and kill Christians. The church bravely serves and spreads the light of Christ with the message of life in a culture of death. Thanks be to God for past and present Anglicans both lay and ordained whose faith inspires them with the vision of God's love for whole of humanity without making distinction of religion, creed, color and language. The Anglican Church is a Communion for All God's people. Alleluia!