

Report on a visit to Pakistan

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Aims

- To accompany the Vice President Designate on a visit to the Church of Pakistan
- To experience church life in the country and explore some of its issues
- To meet with the Moderator of the Church of Pakistan and discuss partnership issues
- To learn about some initiatives in the dioceses of Raiwind and Multan

Background

Pakistan is a country of 180 million people and officially 95% of them are Muslim, within that 5% minority half are Christian, there are also Hindus, Sikhs and other minorities. The vast majority of Christians find themselves among the poorest of the poor confined to low status work and very poor education. The primary aim was to give the Vice President Designate a rounded view of Pakistan and the Christian church there. Thanks are due to my brothers in Christ the Bishops of Raiwind and Multan who were unstinting in their hospitality and assistance. While I had substantial discussion about future partnership between our two Churches, for the purpose of this report I simply recount a few illustrative examples of our encounters.

The Visit



An interesting project which received a start-up grant from the World Mission Fund (WMF) is 'Building Bridges for Peace and Development'. We visited a health centre it runs to serve some communities of brick kiln workers. There are over a million workers in Pakistan who are tied to their employers by some sort of a loan. These 'loans' are often passed through the generations and repayment is almost impossible. Families live together on the brick kiln sites and while it is illegal for children aged less than fourteen to work, enforcement is difficult. We spent some time watching the brick making and were distressed by the hard conditions and the back-breaking nature of the work. At the health centre staff told us how the low wages mean that diets of adults and children are severely restricted and respiratory diseases caused by dust are common.



The women's desk of the Diocese of Raiwind is supported by WMF and in the poor Christian colony of Youhanabad runs basic vocational training courses in both nursing and sewing for vulnerable young women with the aim of giving them a chance to escape poverty and the pressure to work on the streets. We passed one of the churches in this area which suffered an attack one Sunday last year killing several worshippers.



Raiwind Diocese runs a special school, Dar ul Mussarat, which as we visited it was preparing for its 25th anniversary. It is a ground-breaking initiative for Pakistan, where people with disabilities, especially those with learning difficulties, are generally kept out of sight.

During our visit to Multan Diocese we were unable to stay with the Bishop as the army had security concerns and our travel in the Diocese was under the eye of an armed police escort, though we did not really feel vulnerable at any time. We visited two Christian villages where we received effusive welcomes – we didn't really appreciate the celebratory fire of semi-automatic weapons, but realized that the Christian community was undoubtedly delighted at our presence. At a celebration of World Women's Day we watched dramatic portrayals of a variety of social issues including training for women and women's rights within the family. Rachel formally opened a refurbished school in Khanewal and we saw at first hand the impact (and cost) of new government legislation that requires church schools to be surrounded by 2m high walls, barbed wire and with armed guards on reinforced gates. We heard too of the impact of land disputes and 'land-grabbing'.



Rachel spoke at an inter faith gathering in the Cathedral compound in Multan attended by most of the religious minorities including Shias, Sikhs and several Christian denominations as well as the majority community. Multan is a very historic city – well established by the time Alexander the Great attempted in vain to conquer it and we were formally received – garlanded, shawled and fed - at a Muslim shrine within the historic fort complex.

Rachel Ullmer has spent many years in Pakistan and for the last three has been based in the Diocese of Raiwind training teachers in many of the church schools. We had good conversation about her work and plans for the next three years and had an evening out in Lahore – including an exciting auto-rickshaw ride!



Our final evening was taken up with a gathering of Christian and Muslim leaders in Lahore which would have challenged perceptions of Pakistan and of Islam for anyone who only reads the Western media. Leaders from some of the largest madrassas and a member of the national Islamic theological council joined Christian bishops in recognizing that neither religion could or should be aiming to take over the world, but that the clarion call should be to recognize each faith as a religion of peace. A woman who has just completed a PhD on Islamic Feminism was a respected contributor to the discussion and several concerted strategies for developing an inter faith peace agenda in Pakistan were aired including intentionally working for more members of parliament to be committed to inter faith dialogue.



Steve Pearce March2016