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# The Plain Truth<sup>®</sup>

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← Yousuf, with his wife and child.

### The birth of 'Hope'

But Yousuf realised that if he was to help these people more, he needed further training himself. So he enrolled at Dublin University in Dublin to do a Master's degree in Development Studies. While at university, he used his vacations working as a relief parish priest when regular parish priests were absent from their parishes.

And it was during this vacation work that he spoke often of his work in Pakistan. About the great need to empower

by Gerrie Bayley



while Yousuf did the work out in Pakistan. Before accepting money, however, Yousuf requested that a responsible person should return with him to Pakistan to validate his work. John Perkins, registrar of Bangor University agreed to return with him, and was able to endorse the work that Yousuf was doing.

Yousuf returned to Pakistan in July 2000, and was sent to the town of Loralai close to the Afghanistan border. There was no presbytery in which he could live, so he rented a single room in a mud house with the use of a communal toilet, and began the work of assisting the women of Loralai, Quetta, and other neighbouring border towns. Within three or four months he had established fifteen Adult Education Centres for Muslim, Hindu, Pashtun, and Christian women.

The women are taught sewing and embroidery skills, and Umeed Partnership assists them

**F**or fourteen years he was a well-loved Catholic priest responsible for an enormous parish in Baluchistan province, Pakistan. In fact, his parish was Baluchistan province. And to help him in this massive task he was supported by just four assistant priests.

Much of his work took place in the very poorest areas bordering on Afghanistan. Here he established community projects working with Christian, Muslim and Pashtun women. Let me tell you about this inspiring man – Yousuf Gill. Working with this diverse group of women confirmed in Yousuf's mind that women were indeed very much second-class citizens. Strictly confined to their homes and whose children were often looked upon as a source of cheap labour.

Seeing this oppression, Yousuf decided that the best way to help these women would be to establish centres, where they could be trained in marketable skills. In this way they could contribute to family finances, and gain a small measure of independence. And the anticipated opposition from their menfolk was largely overcome when they began to see additional funds coming into the home.

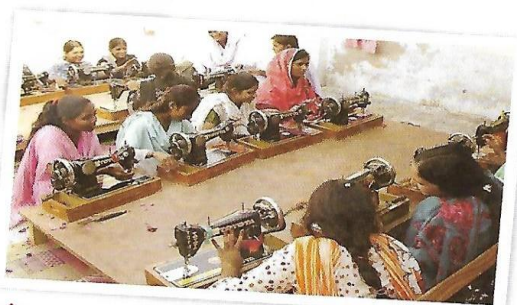
# Bringing 'Hope' to the oppressed

women, get the children off the streets and out of slave labour. Interest was high and as a result of this encouragement, in June 2000 Yousuf called a public meeting in Menai Bridge Catholic Church Hall. Thirty people attended. A decision was reached to form a charity to support the work Yousuf was doing and to raise funds to help those suffering oppression. Thus Umeed Partnership was born. Umeed (pronounced 'oomy-yed') was chosen by Yousuf as it is the Urdu word for 'Hope'.

The North Wales part of the partnership agreed to supply funding



↑ Umeed woman with her embroidery. to become self-employed with 95% of them succeeding in these ventures. In addition to the skills centres for women, Umeed has founded carpentry skills centres so that young men and boys can also earn a living. There is so little for these young men that they are easily recruited into terrorist organisations, and Yousuf is hoping



↑ Teaching sewing to Umeed women.

to provide an alternative for them. An outlet has been opened in Lahore to sell the work and Yousuf is investigating the possibility of selling their goods in the UK and Europe, and possibly in the USA too.

#### A solution to every problem

Yousuf is an extraordinary man who looks for solutions rather than seeing problems. When the fact that he was an unmarried man working with single women was questioned, he consulted with the Catholic hierarchy, who



↑ Umeed woman with her embroidery.

agreed that he should get married. But then he had to find a wife. Hearing of his predicament, a close friend came to Yousuf with a proposition. 'Why don't you marry my sister Shanean?' Understandably, Yousuf replied that he needed a little time to think about it – which was also the same response Shanean gave. So they thought about it for a few days and then decided they would marry.

That was ten years ago. They now have a nine-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter. After a few months Shanean's mother gently suggested to her daughter that perhaps she should stop calling her husband 'Father'. She

now calls him 'Yousuf'. Yousuf doesn't try deliberately to promote the Catholic Church. He has no need to. Umeed demonstrates Christ in action, and for this reason he gets no opposition from

Muslims or other non-Christians. Indeed, he is regarded as a 'neutral' and is even called upon to mediate in disputes among the other religious groups!

In addition to the adult skill centres Yousuf has opened two Middle Schools for school age children, as there are no state schools in these desert areas that are close to the Afghanistan border.

The people in one small village asked if Umeed could help them by providing a school for their children. The only room available was a disused fodder hut.

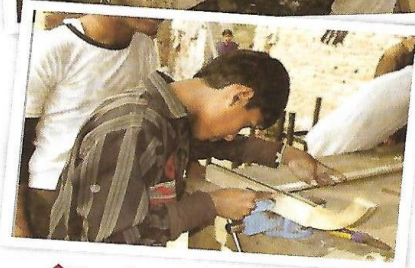
Not discouraged, Yousuf and his helpers cleared it out and converted it into a classroom. Which gives an insight into one of Yousuf's philosophies: 'Start with what you have and make it work.'

Transport is a problem. At the moment Yousuf uses his wife's car, but the roads of the area vary from appalling to non-existent. Umeed is raising

funds to buy a four-wheel drive vehicle.

In this part of the world, crime against, and abuse of, women is endemic. A common occurrence is for a landlord or other creditor to force a family into selling a young daughter for 'marriage'. As a means of helping these victims, Umeed has founded hostels for abused and battered women, and a legal aid service.

As a result of centuries of ignorance, male dominance, superstition and poverty that have created this society, there is a never-ending work to be done. But a start has been made with one remarkably dedicated man at the helm – Yousuf Gill. ☐



↑ Umeed carpentry skills centre.



**The Umeed Partnership is a charity registered (no 1087846) in both Pakistan and the United Kingdom to support a project which offers opportunities for empowerment of women in the tribal communities of western Baluchistan, one of the remotest and poorest areas of Pakistan adjacent to the border with Afghanistan.**

If you would like to know more, visit the Umeed website: [www.umeedpartnership.org.uk](http://www.umeedpartnership.org.uk) or you can write to them at: Umeed Partnership: 81, Victoria Rd West, Prestatyn, Denbighshire, LL19 7AB.

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