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I have a friend who is a Roman Catholic priest - Fr Yousuf Gill, who is a Pakistani. He is not the sort of priest that springs to the mind of a European since he rarely wears a collar and never wears the vestments normally associated with a Catholic priest, but rather the traditional dress of the people of Pakistan.

HOT PRIEST OF LORALAI...



Over dinner in the Presbytery in Multan, a city of Punjab Province in Pakistan, an elderly and somewhat irreverent Catholic priest from Sri Lanka explained to me that Catholic priests fall into three categories - cold, lukewarm and hot. Cold priests display no initiative and are considered ineffectual by the Church hierarchy. Lukewarm priests display limited initiative but do what is expected of them by the Church hierarchy. Hot priests have minds of their own, are thoroughly effective in bringing Christianity to the people and are sometimes a thorn in the flesh of the Church hierarchy. He then went on to say that in his opinion, Fr Yousuf falls firmly into the category of hot priest! Allow me to explain.

Fr Yousuf is the incumbent of Loralai, a parish which is almost the size of Wales, in Baluchistan - a lawless, barren and dangerous province of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan and to set the scene. I should like to describe his parish. Over 95% of the inhabitants of Loralai are Muslim (the remainder are Christian & Hindu), and 100% of the population is extremely poor by any standards. Tribal conflict is commonplace, exacerbated by tens of thousands of Afghan refugees living in tent encampments in the nearby mountains. The law of Islam prevails, encouraged by zealous Muslim leaders, some of whom are the fundamentalist Taliban who have been responsible for the closed society in Afghanistan, which has led to its isolation.

The streets of Loralai and other neighbouring towns in the Parish are a noisy, dusty cacophony and totally devoid of women, all of whom are restricted to their homes according to the strict Muslim tradition in these parts. The vast majority of the men have long, black beards, wear turbans and long cloaks and view a white person with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. In fact I was told that mine was the first white face to be seen by most people in Loralai.

It is in this community that Fr Yousuf has found his true vocation within the Catholic church. He was appointed to the Parish a couple of months ago, and had the option of running the Parish at a distance from Quetta, the capital, some 200 miles away and of living in the relatively comfortable Parish House there. However, he believes that to be effective in his ministry of living the gospel of Christ he should be living amongst his people. Christians and Hindus are very much an oppressed minority in Baluchistan, and in the Parish they live in mud houses - literally. There is no sanitation, no health care, intermittent electricity, and worst of all, almost no educational facilities, and none whatever for girls and women. Fr Yousuf, who lives right in the middle of all this, considers education to be the key to social improvement and the only way for poor people to lift themselves out of poverty. To this end he has initiated a very radical scheme - at least radical for this very conservative part of the world.

Women have few rights in these closed communities; their status and role is very different from that of women in most other parts of the world since they are restricted to their homes and are totally subservient to the men in what is a totally male-dominated society. In this context, Fr Yousuf has begun to establish educational centres in towns & villages to educate girls and women to a very basic level, such education being available equally for those of all religions - Christian, Hindu and Muslim. The only condition to be met is that the girls/women should not be receiving education and are therefore effectively illiterate.

During a few months spent in Ireland and north Wales earlier in the year, Fr Yousuf encouraged groups of Christian people from all denominations to start to raise funds to underpin the costs of establishing these centres. The groups have been designated the Umeed Partnership (umeed being the Urdu word for hope) and funds have started to be raised locally and in Ireland. There is also a Umeed Partnership group in Pakistan. There will be publicity for this venture locally shortly.

As a result of the efforts of the Umeed Partnership in Anglesey, Fr Yousuf has already established nine education centres in his Parish. Each is based in a closed neighbourhood in either a private house or a community building, and

comprises two or three teachers and between 40 and 70 girls/women (and occasionally small boys) of, and I emphasise this, all religions. The education that is being given is very basic - just the elements of Urdu (the national language of Pakistan), English and arithmetic. (Most of the 80 or so local languages in Pakistan are spoken but without a written tradition). However, it is clear to me that in the few weeks since the establishments of the centres, life has been given a new dimension to the girls, and especially the women. They are exceptionally positive, clearly enjoying the freedom to interact socially and to escape for two hours each day from the constraints of their male-dominated homes. I was very concerned that men, and especially Muslim men, would resent the influence of Fr Yousuf on their families, but it seems that as long as he does not try to convert non-Christians to Christianity (which he won't), his enterprise is welcomed. Fr Yousuf knows that an evangelical approach would not be tolerated in this community, but he believes that by providing the means for women to improve their lives through education, he is serving God in the best possible way by showing the love of Jesus for the poor and underprivileged.

to me is that Fr Yousuf is indeed a Hot Priest! He is extremely well-regarded by all sections of the community and has adopted the role of conciliator in disputes arising from ethnic, cultural or religious differences. Whilst he is not overtly promoting the Christian faith above Islam or Hinduism, I feel that he will, by example, show the love that Jesus has for all humankind. Inevitably, having had first hand experience of the work of Fr Yousuf, I wish to support the Umeed Partnership however possible, and encourage like-minded people to do similarly. Whilst financial support is the obvious way by which people in Wales can help in educating underprivileged girls and women, providing basic educational materials is also very valuable, and I would appeal to anyone, especially those who may have a connection with a local school, to support the effort by donating first reading books (English) and basic arithmetic books, all of which should be in good condition. I will arrange for any such books to be delivered direct to Fr Yousuf. Donations to support the work of Fr Yousuf may be sent to me at the address below, from which further information may be obtained. Cheques should be made payable to The Umeed Partnership (UK).



John Perkins with the Umeed partnership members in Duki

The demand for places by girls & women in the centres is increasing. More centres are planned, and will be established as soon as teachers can be found. At present the teachers are unpaid, but it is planned to give each a token payment (effectively pocket money) with effect from January 2001. Also, the teachers will receive a basic training by government-trained teachers in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan.

I felt extremely privileged to be given the opportunity of being taken to the hearts of many closed communities throughout the Parish of Loralai. I experienced the feeling of humility to be offered such generous hospitality by such poor but warm-hearted people - Christian, Hindu & Muslim. What is clear

From the early days of the Christian church, when congregations were being formed throughout the near east following the journeys of Paul, teaching and learning has featured in the wider mission of the church. Over the centuries the Christian church has been involved in educating people, and this has led not only to the spread of the gospel of Christ, but also to improvement in the quality of life for those who have been lifted from illiteracy. With this in mind, let us remember the work of Fr Yousuf and of the Umeed Partnership in our prayers, and ask God to continue to inspire him in his work.

John Perkins