

# UNITING *for* PEACE

## 'PAKISTAN TODAY - PROBLEMS & PROSPECT'

### Christian - Muslim Inter-Faith Peace Event on PAKISTAN Edinburgh June 11 2014 - Annandale Street Mosque

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'Pakistan Today - Problems and Prospect' was the theme of the Christian-Muslim Inter-faith Peace event held in Edinburgh at Annandale Street Mosque on June 11 2014, arranged jointly by the Mosque authorities, Pakistan Association [Edinburgh] and Uniting for Peace. After welcome and introduction, and readings from the Holy Koran and Holy Bible, there were three presentations followed by Open Forum. Held just after the Taliban terrorist attacks on Karachi Airport, the event proved both timely and of urgent importance.

**Mr. Shahid Farooq**, Secretary, Pakistan Association, said Pakistan had a very negative image in the media and general public, 'equating it with radical Islam', but it was wrong to associate the latter with Pakistan as a whole. Historically, the concept of Pakistan as a state separate from India began in 1930, becoming a reality with independence in 1947. Tragically, it was founded in extremely difficult circumstances of violence and mass migration [Hindus to India, Muslims to Pakistan] with much suffering: "it was total chaos". The new Pakistan lacked basic institutions: "it began with no universities, no army, no police"; yet it inherited ancient cultures and its people were 'the same as Indians'. First under the presidency of Dr. Jinnah, Pakistan since 1947 had known both democracy and military rule. A federal state of 4 provinces, it now ranked as the world's 26th largest economy. Over recent years, "the Afghanistan situation has pulled Pakistan down very badly." After 9/11, US President George Bush threatened President Musharraf that if Pakistan did not co-operate with USA in its 'War on Terror', USA would bomb it very heavily. Anti-US sentiment has helped cause Islamist radicalisation and terrorism.

**Mr. Sandy Sneddon**, Asia Secretary, Church of Scotland World Mission Council, who served as a Mission Partner in Pakistan 1986-2002, said that in giving 'A Christian View' on Pakistan, he did not claim to speak for all its Christians but his understanding had been informed by almost 30 years of conversations with many Pakistanis, both Christians and Muslims: he spoke as a 'critical friend'. Government and people faced several inter-connected problems ['few unique to Pakistan']: "poverty, corruption, poor leadership, politicisation of the bureaucracy, militarisation of the economy, lack of accountability in state institutions, violence against women, extremism and terrorism threatening the security of almost every section of society."

Two issues could be root of these problems: identity, and the relationship between state and people. Created as a 'safe homeland' for Muslims on the Indian sub-continent, Pakistan was declared by Dr. Jinnah to have freedom for all religions, but also "a Muslim state based on Islamic ideals", but not a theocracy. Was this vision realistic, and was it negated in 1956 when Pakistan became the world's first Islamic Republic? Another key strand of Pakistan's identity was *that it is not India*. Pakistan often defined itself *over against India* [understandable perhaps because of the Kashmir dispute], denying many similarities in history and culture. The two countries had fought three times; mutual trade and investment were minimal - a situation diminishing both countries. What did it mean to be Pakistani - for 196 million inhabitants, and millions in the global Pakistani diaspora? Mr. Sneddon hoped for a 'positive, inclusive and affirming' identity embracing Pakistan's diversity. The other root problem was "the damaged relationship between people and the state", one "all too often defined in terms of power and maintaining power", with bribery and patronage rife. This was not just corruption, but due to a "wrong relationship between the people and the state, between ordinary people and those in power": too many people and institutions abused their power and lacked accountability. For Protestant Christians, government's primary responsibility was "to provide for the welfare of the people" - but in Pakistan, where the rich and powerful often avoided paying tax, spending on health and education was among lowest in the world.

Despite these problems, Mr. Sneddon saw 'signs and opportunities' for positive

change - with special reference to *Democracy & Interfaith Dialogue*. Democracy had been uneven post-1947, "but in May 2013 Pakistan witnessed the first democratic handover of power when Nawaz Sharif's party was elected" - a peaceful change of government very important for Pakistan and the region. With recent election in India and currently in Afghanistan, there were for the first time *democratically elected governments in Afghanistan, India & Pakistan* at the same time. "The region is entering a new era." On Interfaith issues, Christian and Hindu communities had lived there for centuries - but today few Christians held high office [only Muslims can be Prime Minister or President]. Misuse of the Blasphemy Law was bad for all: the number of Christians and Hindus charged was disproportionately high: half the 1,400 Blasphemy cases post-1986 had been against Christians and Hindus, even though they were only 4-5% of the population. "These people, often poor and powerless, are often targeted so people can grab land and property". Christians suffered routine discrimination eg.in education, housing, employment - so found it hard to escape poverty. *But things were changing*, eg. various initiatives to bring those of different faiths together. Also, after the attack on All Saints Church, Peshawar, [Sept.2013] Muslims in Lahore held hands around a church to protect its Christians. Mr. Sneddon saw hope in people and organisations working for change: "to promote education, root out corruption, protect women, build better relationships with Afghanistan and India, end discrimination and persecution of Christians and Hindus, build democracy and hold the powerful to account." By such means, a peaceful, stable and prosperous Pakistan could be created for all, regardless of class or faith.

**Rev. Brian Cooper**, Uniting for Peace Churches & Inter-faith Secretary, added further points. For over fifty years, securely establishing democracy in Pakistan had proved difficult, partly because the army was too ready to intervene and not respect civilian rule; elements of the army and intelligence services were known to be sympathetic to the Taleban in Afghanistan; Pakistan, like India, had nuclear weapons - particularly dangerous when Indo-Pakistan relations became confrontational. The main current cause of instability and insecurity was heightened activity by Taliban insurgents inside Pakistan [often having crossed

from Afghanistan]. He recommended a new book: *Hassan Abbas - The Taliban Revival: Violence & Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* [Yale University Press £18.99]. The MMA religious coalition opposed women's rights, religious tolerance and civil liberties, imposed Islamic law and did not back counter-terrorist measures - all helping Taliban to rise. US presence in Afghanistan was highly unpopular in Pakistan, so army could not effectively fight anti-US militants. Post-9/11 saw rise of many terrorist groups, and many in political-military elite were sympathetic to Osama bin Laden. From 2007 suicide bombings [previously rare in Pakistan] became more and more frequent. The Pakistan Taliban, penetrated by Al Qaeda ideology and more lawless than those in Afghanistan, now posed a very real threat to state and society.

Discussing 'An Ethical Foreign Policy for UK?', Rev.B.Cooper recalled this was New Labour's aim in 1997, especially emphasising international aid and promoting human rights - but it was de facto abandoned over Saudi Arabia arms deal and 2003 Iraq invasion. States generally pursued national self-interest, but within international law constraints: could UK have ethical policies with national interest not the prime concern? UK initiatives on climate change, and 0.7% GDP for aid programme especially backing grassroots projects, were good examples; latest was UK as prime mover for June 2014 global conference to outlaw rape as a weapon of war. Ethical foreign policy also involved *not* engaging in military interventionism unless UN- authorised, not promoting the arms trade - but rather using 'soft power' [diplomacy, conflict resolution, economic and cultural links, citizens' peace work, etc] and according priority to working through UN institutions.

After lively Open Forum, discussion of the issues continued over a meal hosted by the Mosque.

**Report by Rev. Brian**

**Cooper, UfP Churches & Inter-faith Secretary**

[*This event was part of UfP's ongoing Inter-faith for Peace programme*]

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