

# Called to Publish in VIOLENT PAKISTAN

*In this predominantly Muslim country, Boaz Gill, of Shaffaf Christian Communications (www.shaffaf.org), finds ways to contribute to society despite threats from extremists.*

**I**nternational media continue to broadcast a flurry of reports of anti-Christian violence in Pakistan. Grenade attacks on churches. Anti-Christian religious figures calling for attacks on churches and organizations. Police exchanging gun fire with religious radicals. Arrests of people plotting further violence.

These reports make it clear that Christianity—let alone Christian publishing—is not welcome by some in this country. Christian publishing in Pakistan is dangerous business. Take the experience of Boaz Gill of Shaffaf Christian Communications, publisher of *Rahbar* (Urdu for “Guide”), one of the few Christian magazines in the country. Not too long ago, he stepped into the Shaffaf offices, located on the second floor of his residence, to look at incoming mail. He noticed a

letter from Gujrat City (a community some 250 kilometers away from Islamabad).

Gill was in for a surprise. The letter was a threat. “We were warned not to publish Christian materials in Pakistan because it is a Muslim country,” he reports. “The unnamed writer threatened us with severe consequences if we did not stop publishing Christian materials. He also advised us to read Islamic literature.”

While *Rahbar* is the flagship of the organization, Shaffaf is involved in other activities “for the advancement of the Christian faith by all means of communication.” This includes producing audio and video resources and books, coordinating seminars and conferences, and implementing various initiatives to “minimize religious prejudice” and “promote harmony.”



*“God wants us in Pakistan,” says Boaz Gill, Shaffaf’s director, “and He will help us.”*

Gill is particularly passionate about his organization’s efforts to build bridges between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority. “Throughout Pakistan’s history, we see hatred, prejudice, enmity, discrimination, and persecution against the Christian community,” he acknowledges.

The events of September 11, 2001 added fuel to the fire. Hatred for Christians became “crystal clear.” Pakistan’s support for U.S.-led action against the Taliban, in Afghanistan, triggered increased violence against Christians.

“One mullah [Muslim cleric] said two Christians would be killed



*Gill participated in a gathering of prayer and fasting for Pakistan held last year in front of the Punjab Provincial Assembly Hall.*



*Funeral of one of 17 Christians killed October 24, 2002 at St. Dominic's Church in Bahawalpur, Pakistan.*

in Pakistan for every Muslim killed in Afghanistan," says Gill, quoting a media report.

He observes that most Muslims, particularly some radical clerics, "believe that Christians have strong relationships with the United States and Europe." Therefore, any time the U.S. or a European nation does something against an Islamic state or population, "Christians are targeted for revenge."

Nonetheless, the hostility is not about to discourage committed Christians. Gill remains surprisingly optimistic that the religious tensions can be contained. "Not every Muslim in Pakistan is ready to kill Christians—not at all," he says. "We have a lot of Muslim friends who are willing to work with us for peace and reconciliation."

Though the country is officially the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, there is no government-approved



*"Muslims and Christians can work together for peace and reconciliation in Pakistan," affirms Gill.*

persecution of Christians. "As far as the government is concerned, they are supportive of the Christian community" says Gill. "We have freedom in Pakistan."

The freedom allows Christians to write directly to the head of state expressing their grievances. After a series of attacks on Christians late last year, Gill sent a letter to President Pervez Musharraf saying the "authorities have failed to give proper protection to Christian institutions and churches."

Gill asked for more resources to eradicate terrorism, yet was also supportive of Musharraf. "We are always with you, strengthening your hands to better deal with people involved in terrorist activities," he wrote.

Gill says most violence results from misinformation and misunderstandings. Christians are sometimes portrayed as enemies of Islam, so Shaffaf launched a program to fight this popular error. According to Shaffaf official communications, the Program for Peace and Reconciliation "seeks to replace violence, enmity, terrorism, persecution, prejudice, racism, war, and injustice with nonviolence, peace, reconciliation, friendship, love and justice."

Though Pakistan has a Hindu minority, Shaffaf's initiative targets Christian and Muslim communities. "We believe," says a Shaffaf communiqué, "that nonviolence is a transforming way of life and a means to radical change."

Shaffaf's main strategy is to reach Muslims through literature distribution and public events. "We reach out with a positive message."

Gill is both an idealist and a pragmatist. After a widely-publicized terrorist attack on a Protestant church in the city

of Islamabad, Gill and others were called by police to discuss the security of Christian institutions. Much to the Christians' surprise, police said they were understaffed and went on to suggest that churches and Christian organizations hire their own security guards and buy their own weapons.

Shaffaf took the police recommendations seriously. They hired a 24-hour guard.

"We also bought two guns—a handgun and a rifle—and informed the police that we have them." Gill realizes possessing firearms is not



*Rahim Gulshad, an elected Muslim official, speaks at a Shaffaf event held to show solidarity with the families of those killed in the Bahawalpur church attack.*

the ultimate answer. "Your life is still at risk," he says. "You cannot deal with violence by violence." The answer lies in taming religious radicalism. "If we can convince Islamic clerics to stop the negative propaganda against Christians, the situation will totally change."

Many Christian professionals are said to be emigrating from Pakistan to escape the violence. "Every second person wants to leave," says Gill. Why is he still there? He is not naïve about his situation.

"Christian publishing in a Muslim country is not easy because of the fanatical and radical groups," he reflects, "but God has kept us in Pakistan. He has given us a vision and responsibility along with the courage to remain firm. We are called to publish in Pakistan." ♦