

Building bridges in tense Kashmir

“A political settlement alone will not bring peace to the region. It must be part of a larger, spiritual, political, social process of healing that includes a rebuilding of a pluralistic society in the Kashmir valley.”

THE REV. BRIAN COX

While his Santa Barbara congregation prepared for Christmas, the Rev. Brian Cox of Christ the King Episcopal Church was in Kashmir, providing leadership and training to young people trying to bring peace to a region on the brink of war.

On the day of the minister's arrival, Muslim militants in Pakistan carried out a terrorist attack on India's Parliament, killing 14 people. By the time he returned home on Dec. 22—just in time to preside over Christmas services at his church—an armed standoff was under way on the India-Pakistan border.

The 51-year-old parish priest, an expert in faith-based diplomacy, has been working on building bridges between the disputing parties in Kashmir for more than a year.

“It's a very tense situation right now, and we are doing our work at all levels,” he said, noting

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Meanwhile, in South Asia ...

As a South Asian summit began in Nepal, Pakistan on Friday announced the arrests of 130 Islamic militants, including leaders of two militant groups that India says were behind a Dec. 13 attack on its Parliament. New Delhi reiterated its refusal to engage directly with Islamabad, saying it was waiting to see if the crackdown will last. **STORY ON A12**

“Kashmir had never been part of a religious fundamentalism. It was a place of coexistence, with different traditions living together. And now we are trying to put the genie back into the bottle.”

FIRDOUS SYED BABA

Firdous Syed Baba, 36, is the former leader of a militant movement seeking a state for Kashmiri Muslims in the India-controlled portion of the region. Today he renounces violence in all forms and leads the Kashmir Foundation for Peace and Developmental Studies there.

Tahir Aziz, 32, also a Muslim, is from an autonomous region of Kashmir known as “Free Kashmir,” indirectly controlled by Pakistan. A former government worker, he now coordinates the Human Rights Desk of the Kashmir Institute of International Relations.

Mr. Syed Baba and Mr. Aziz have much in common: a homeland, a faith, and a commitment to peace. And yet a tension is present as they share their stories with a reporter, proof of the difficulty in forging peace in a region with differing national, tribal and religious loyalties and conflicting views over Kashmir's history

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STORIES BY RHONDA PARKS MANVILLE ■ NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Minister presses reconciliation efforts

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that he attended many meetings with high- and mid-level political and civic leaders, participated in a forum on peace and reconciliation, and held training sessions on faith-based reconciliation with a growing community of young people interested in forging peace.

He was dispatched there by the Washington, D.C.-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, which he serves as a team leader for Kashmir and vice president of dispute resolution training. The agency does not promote missionary work or proselytizing, stating that its mission is to "facilitate increased understanding between policy-makers and diplomats on the one hand, and religious leaders on the other, in resolving differences between people, communities and nation-states."

"Our goal in Kashmir is to start a movement of faith-based reconciliation among the young," said the Rev. Cox. "A political settlement alone will not bring peace to the region. It must be part of a larger, spiritual, political, social process of healing that includes a rebuilding of a pluralistic society in the Kashmir valley."

Bridges need to be built between the disputing factions, he said, and a "fresh moral vision" must be established which addresses prejudice, hatred, stereotyping, forgiveness and social justice as the foundation for a peaceful society.

"Our hope is that this work will help change the climate of hatred and that it will provide a vision of reconciliation for Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus" living there, he said.

It's an interesting time to be working in the field of public policy and religion, the priest acknowledges. In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the role of religion in politics and public life is being debated as never before, and ironies have abounded.

For example, Americans flocked to houses of

worship in record numbers following the attacks, and bookstores reported record sales of the Bible and other religious texts. And yet the terrorist attacks were carried out by religious extremists of the Muslim faith, reportedly in the name of God.

"If anything, the importance of religion in international affairs has been brought to the fore and cannot be ignored," said the Rev. Cox. "Diplomacy in this area will require people who can integrate theological thinking with sociopolitical thinking. Faith-based diplomacy is based on the idea that foreign affairs need to be grounded in a moral vision."

Like his pastoral work in Santa Barbara, his international peace work is carried out behind the scenes. But he believes that such efforts can have a profound effect on social change.

While in Kashmir two weeks ago, he held a reconciliation leadership training with 12 men from the Kashmir region, all Muslims, although some were loyal to India and others to Pakistan. As part of the training, the men were asked to make a threefold commitment: submission to God, commitment to each other, and dedication to the movement of faith-based reconciliation. The goal is for the movement to grow and spread to include people of differing faiths and loyalties, such as Hindus, Buddhists and tribal people.

"I am trying to help young Muslims understand that the essence of their tradition is reconciliation," said the priest. Two of the men he worked with in Kashmir, Tahir Aziz and Firdous Syed Baba, are now studying with the Rev. Cox at Pepperdine University, where he is an adjunct professor teaching a graduate seminar in faith-based reconciliation. They will be in the area for six weeks, and plan to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington later this month.

As a young man, the Rev. Cox planned a career in international politics, but became disillusioned. His parish priest in Whittier spoke to him about entering the ministry, and during his final year as an undergraduate in college he answered "the call."

Fresh out of seminary school in 1975, he took a job

leading a parish at the edge of the Southern California desert. What happened there "turned out to be a prophetic symbol of my life's work," he said.

Two congregations were to share his services, but they were estranged by a number of long-standing disputes. His first meeting erupted in name-calling and shouting, but he negotiated a settlement that lasted his entire tenure.

"And so it was that my first official task as an ordained pastor was to serve as a peacemaker and reconciler," he said.

Nine years later, in 1984, the minister lived for several months in South Africa while on sabbatical. There he was inspired by fellow clergy members who faced formidable odds to carry out their work.

"I went to South Africa to do teaching and training of clergy and lay leaders," he said. "In the end, it was I who was being shaped by friendships and experiences."

The minister's international reconciliation work has taken him to some of the most violent places on Earth, including the Sudan, Israel, Russia, Bosnia, Kenya and Zaire. In 1990, he founded the European Reconciliation Fellowship, which focused on promoting faith-based reconciliation work with political and religious leaders in East Central Europe. He has made more than 20 trips to the region.

In 1996, he founded the Reconciliation Institute of Santa Barbara, which focuses on promoting faith-based reconciliation according to the principles of Jesus "as a transforming moral vision for communities and as a means of intervention in highly conflicted situations and in deeply divided societies."

Here at home, he has conducted training sessions for local members of the clergy, as well as leaders from the black, Latino and Jewish community.

His greatest hope for the future is to do more work in Santa Barbara, with the dream that one day it is seen as "the city of reconciliation."

"That's a vision that reflects God's heart and vision for people, and that's really my understanding of the Gospel, people being reconciled with God and with each other."

Ex-militant renounced violence to seek peace

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and who is to blame for the troubles there.

Both men are staying in Santa Barbara for six weeks of training in faith-based diplomacy. Their mentor is the Rev. Brian Cox of Christ the King Episcopal Church, an expert in faith-based reconciliation, who is currently assigned to work in Kashmir by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy in Washington, D.C. The men attended the Rev. Cox's graduate seminar this week at Pepperdine University Law School, where he is an adjunct professor.

On the Pepperdine campus in the hills above Malibu, with a majestic view of the Pacific below, the two men from Kashmir shared their thoughts about peace, politics, and their homeland.

Mr. Syed Baba left the militant movement that he led for 10 years in 1996.

"We thought that by resorting to violence we would be able to sort out our problems," he said. "But Pakistan took over the movement, and encouraged it and formulated it, and the

nationalistic issues got blurred and foreign interests took precedence," he said.

"When terrorism becomes part of diplomacy, it turns the lives of people upside down. I was able to see this. Kashmir had never been part of a religious fundamentalism. It was a place of coexistence, with different traditions living together. And now we are trying to put the genie back into the bottle."

Mr. Syed Baba is critical of Pakistan for encouraging radical "foreign elements" and foreign political interests to poison the Muslim movement he was once a part of. But he doesn't like to dwell on the political issues.

"Let's have some different approaches, working people to people, working together, to break the isolation that exists between people," he said. "The faith-based reconciliation movement is teaching us how we can enrich ourselves."

Mr. Aziz, for his part, views India, not Pakistan, as largely responsible for the current troubles and human rights violations in the region. He cites India's refusal to adhere to United Nations resolutions for a cease-fire and observers in the disputed territories of Kashmir as just one of the problems

preventing peace.

But he is hopeful nonetheless, believing that the involvement of the United States is critical.

"The globe is changing," he said. "After the Sept. 11 attacks, the superpowers, particularly America, realized they have a role to play. They see now that by not taking action, they have unintentionally intensified some of these activities.

"The world now sees that there is no dispute restricted to a local area, and with nuclear powers (both Pakistan and India have nuclear weapons), the world community realizes that it cannot leave this area alone, to solve (problems) itself."

Through the Rev. Cox's trainings, Mr. Syed and Mr. Aziz are learning to listen to one another. They are trying to understand the wounds and the suffering the other has experienced and to respond with compassion. Forgiveness, making apologies and amends, and repentance are part of the faith-based reconciliation work, too.

"And that is why I am here, to learn these skills," said Mr. Aziz. "I am able now to see the other factors involved in this dispute, and that is a positive development."

F.Y.I.

Firdous Syed Baba, a former leader of a militant Islamic movement in Kashmir, will speak on "Understanding the Mind and Heart of the al-Qaeda Movement" at Christ the King Episcopal Church, 5073 Hollister Ave., on Monday.

A question-and-answer period will follow his 45-minute address, which begins at 7:30 p.m. The event is free.

Mr. Syed Baba is a founder and former leader of a Kashmiri militant movement, to which he no longer belongs. Today he is president of the Kashmir Foundation for Peace and Developmental Studies in Srinagar.

Mr. Syed Baba is visiting the Santa Barbara area until Jan. 9. During his visit, he is attending a graduate seminar at Pepperdine University on "Faith-Based Reconciliation" led by the Rev. Brian Cox of Christ the King Episcopal Church.