

Risk of Death Doesn't Stop Pakistani From Preaching Gospel in Homeland

Nathaniel Barkat will chance martyrdom if it means he can bring his fellow countrymen to Jesus

Pastor Nathaniel Barkat, a native of Pakistan, dares to minister in a land that some say is as dangerous to Christians as was Nero's Rome. He's faced death with a faith like the apostle Paul's. And though he's set up a thriving ministry in the United States, his calling is to return to his homeland to preach the gospel at the risk of death.

Barkat was first arrested for preaching the gospel in Pakistan in 1965. As he was being taken to the police station, he remembered that he had once read the book *Born Crucified* about the apostle Paul and had dared to pray, "Lord, could it be possible that I would have an experience like that?"

Today, over tea in the safety of a Southern California restaurant, he laughs about the incident. "I remembered hearing the Holy Spirit saying, 'Your prayer is being answered, and you're failing.' I learned that no one should ever follow other people's experiences."

Perhaps not. He is about to return to Pakistan, where prison and martyrdom for believers lurk.

In a country where Islam is the state religion and blasphemy is punishable by death, International Christian Concern (ICC) reports that persecution is increasing. In March 2002, a hand grenade thrown at worshipers in a Christian church in

Islamabad killed five. On Aug. 5, at a Christian school in the same city, terrorists attacked and killed five. Four days later in Taxila, extremists threw another hand grenade into a chapel at a Christian hospital, killing four.

"God has ordered me to go back. He has protected me in the past, and He will again," Barkat said. "But I walk very wisely. Any time, a bullet can come. I have many enemies."

No wonder. One time a crowd of more than 100 Muslims had gathered outside his home in Pakistan to watch him pray for deliverance for a man who had been dealing with witch doctors and religious priests. He had previously prayed with the man, only to see the demonic influence return. The pastor prayed over the man for hours with no results.

"I was totally exhausted," he said. "So in my heart I called out, Lord, send your fire, and the demons started to scream, 'We can't face this fire.'

"I said, 'Why do you come again and again?' That demon said, 'We don't want to come back, but this witch doctor commands us.'

"I said loudly, 'Is this witch doctor greater than Jesus?' And the demon said, 'No, Jesus is greater,' and all the Muslims heard this. So at 3 a.m., the man was delivered totally."

Barkat, 63, grew up in a tiny village near Lahore, the second largest city in Pakistan. At age 20, he came to Christ in a Christian service and said he was later baptized in the Holy Spirit in a service led by a female missionary from Sweden.

God soon gave him a heavy longing for his people, and after attending an Assemblies of God Bible school in Abbottabad, Barkat led the denomination's largest church in Lahore.

He founded the Christian Fellowship of Pakistan, which oversees 20 churches in Punjab, the most populated of Pakistan's four provinces. His children's home there houses 25 orphans and provides Christian education to another hundred.

His vision is to start schools in all four provinces. He believes in a country where only 1.7 percent are Christians and thousands of Muslim schools teach military tactics that children are the gospel's future.

He prefers living in Pakistan, but travels to the United States when he considers his life is in imminent danger. Since 1965, when he was arrested by the Pakistani army and accused of spying for India, he said the country's secret police have questioned him several times and once threatened to demolish his home because it housed Christian services.

Oddly, he said, on several occasions Muslim officials he had developed friendships with testified for him, in effect saving his life. He said God has paved the way for him to build relationships with several ranking officials. This has allowed him and Samson John, the youngest of his three sons, to maintain a successful church in Lahore.

When persecution again became heavy in 1997, he and his wife, Nisar, left for a time, and with another son, Salik John, planted an Asian church in Denver named Redeemer Asian Community Church.

He said the next year God prompted him to return to Pakistan to start an intercessory prayer ministry in his son's church. Though he laughs at the notion, God is still answering his prayer to share Paul's experience.

"If I die, I die," he said quietly. "As long as He wants me to live, I will live."

Ed Donnally