



THE LIVING CHURCH

Serving the one Body of Christ

Walking with the Persecuted

By Matthew Townsend

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Father Patrick performing an adult baptism in Azad, Kashmir

Forty years ago, when the Rev. Patrick Augustine was ordained, he prayed that God would bring him to the far corners of the planet. Augustine's prayers have been answered again and again in his ministry, most recently during a spring tour of persecuted churches in Africa and Pakistan.

"I decided to take a pilgrimage and go to places where Christian churches are being persecuted or have been persecuted and stand in solidarity with those brothers," said Augustine, rector of Christ Church in La Crosse, Wisconsin.

Augustine flew into Nairobi, Kenya, and then traveled for eight hours to Garissa, near the Kenya's border with Somalia. This new missionary diocese is the region's first substantial Anglican presence in a century.

The missionary diocese has been planted "where Al-Qaeda Al-Shabaab rules openly," Augustine said, and has "attacked churches, colleges, and punished and killed many people."



April 6, Patrick Augustine dedicating a school building in the Diocese of Garissa.



April 6, 1st grade children receiving gifts.

Planted in 2008, the diocese started with two parishes and now has eight parishes, preschools, and clinics. Augustine said the diocese has helped Somali people with medicine and schooling. A well has also been dug. "They may do acts of terrorism or acts of hatred, but we are gospel people and we reach out with the missionary Diocese of Garissa with the arms of Jesus Christ spread on the hard wood of the cross."

After visiting Garissa, Augustine traveled to South Sudan. He had last been there in 2008, before South Sudan declared independence from Sudan, when he was Canon and Commissary to the Archbishop of Sudan in the U.S. He began his visit at All Saints Cathedral.

There, he met with four bishops and delivered a suitcase of medicines and bags of children's toys donated by Emirates airline. In an area where so many parents were killed or in diaspora, support for orphans and young refugees has been a critical way of developing leaders in the region — even if the process takes decades, Augustine said.



April 11, Mothers Union Leaders spent a day in retreat with Patrick Augustine.

In 1996, for example, the dioceses of Bradford, Salisbury, and Southwestern Virginia helped develop three education centers in Kakuma refugee camp, home to 100,000. In Bor, the largest diocese in South Sudan, Augustine met a parish priest who earned his high school diploma through these education centers. Other leaders who went through the camps had earned degrees in Kampala and returned to South Sudan to help with refugee resettlement.



April 13, Mary, a Dinka Woman Leader at St. Andrew's Cathedral in the Diocese of Bor, presenting a cross to Augustine.

is a parish priest in Andrew's Cathedral, and one is a woman leader.

"Now people have come back after 20 years, back because they are free people now, and I could see that they still recognize those scholarships, provided for children, helped them to get education," he said. "One is a manager for the diocese, one

"They're becoming leaders in the church because they're rebuilding their lives, rebuilding their church, their institutions."

Zimbabwe was next on Augustine's pilgrimage — a place where persecution of the past has given way to a thriving church of the present. "Since this church had gone through exile, persecution — for five years their churches were taken, schools were taken, priests could not return to their parishes houses or to their churches — they spent time in exile, and there was quite a bit of persecution.



April 16, Vicar General Wilfred Kanyemba of the Diocese of Harare and his wife Mary with Augustine. He and his congregation worshiped by the roadside for four years.

"Now they've received their cathedral, received their parish churches, their pastors' houses, schools," he said. "So, they wanted to have, really, a celebration and thanksgiving service."



April 17, Justin Welby, The Archbishop of Canterbury, with Augustine and church leaders preparing for worship.

Augustine joined the Archbishop of Canterbury for that celebratory Eucharist. The service had as many as 10,000 people, he said, gathered in the open air for a three-hour Eucharist featuring a choir of hundreds and "as much incense as they could find."

The priest addressed the crowd, sharing the purpose of his pilgrimage and saying he could see the resurrection present in Zimbabwe. "My whole purpose was to be there while they were celebrating their returning from exile,"

Augustine said. This visit was a highlight on the trip. "I could see beautiful churches, beautiful gardens, and they were pushed out and they were worshiping by the roadside for five years. And had no place to have proper weddings, funerals, or Sunday worship service."

Augustine said this experience has made the church in this place, and in persecuted places, stronger.

“That’s what I find in Kenya. That’s what I find in South Sudan: that these people are not depressed because 2.1 million brothers and sisters have died. They are even more vibrant because they survived. They feel Jesus Christ has been present in their suffering.”



April 17, Chad Gandiya, Bishop of Harare with Augustine at a worship service.

After visiting Zimbabwe, Augustine traveled to Islamabad, Pakistan. He first visited Christ Church in Rawalpindi, where he had previously been vicar. There, the Bishop of Lahore held a three-day evangelism conference. This caught Augustine by surprise. “This church has been under persecution; I’ve just arrived on the soil of Pakistan, and I would say, They will be talking about their survival and they will be depressed and they will be scared. And no.” The 175 people in the parish “were being equipped in how to reach out to their neighbor — who may be Christian, who may be Muslim — but to proclaim the gospel, live out the gospel, share the gospel, and the bishop himself was teaching for three days.”

Next, he went to Peshawar near the Afghanistan border and capital of the northwest frontiers of Pakistan. Frequently invaded and a hotbed for terrorism, Peshawar has seen incredible violence inside and outside of churches. At All Saints on Sept. 22, 2013, two suicide bombers came and detonated explosives just after a service, killing 127 and injuring around 250 of the 600 gathered that morning. “The church, their walls are white, and so the flesh of human beings was hanging on those walls for several days,” Augustine said.



All Saints Church, Peshawar, Pakistan

“It was powerful to be in a church which is a church of real martyrs, and the blood of the martyrs is really soaked into that soil where I was standing and preaching. Feeling their presence, feeling their cries, feeling their prayers.”

On the morning Augustine visited, the church was full from the altar to the entrance with 500 to 600, some of them still suffering from injuries during the explosion and from persecution for their faith. While there, he met a nurse who had been falsely imprisoned for blasphemy after praying in the name of Jesus Christ for patients in her hospital. “She was arrested, put into jail, tortured for ten years,” he said. “It has affected her kidneys, her hearing, and she was very badly beaten many times. But she’s not given up. She was present there. She had a smile on her face. She asked me, ‘Lay your hands on me and pray for me that I can continue to be a nurse and an evangelist, and be the healing hands of Jesus Christ.’”



April 24th, Sunday worship service at All Saints Church, Peshawar, Pakistan



Sunday, April 24th, Augustine, greeted by the church leaders, preached at All Saints Church, Peshawar, Pakistan.

Members of these churches face the threat of violence and death every day. But, as he said, they are not under the ground yet. "They're above the ground and living their faith, and witnessing for Jesus Christ."

Augustine then went to the Diocese of Lahore, where he was ordained, in the week after his 40th anniversary of ordination.



April 28, Augustine arrived at cathedral Church of the Resurrection, Lahore to offer his thanksgiving to God where he was ordained on April 25, 1976.



April 28, Augustine with Irfan Jamil, Bishop of of Lahore and his clergy of the Diocese of Lahore.

"God has opened so many doors," he said, reflecting on conversations with Pervez Musharraf (president from 2001 to 2008) about building peace in Kashmir, his travels around the world, and his work within the Anglican Communion.

From Augustine's perspective, churches in North America may struggle to understand persecuted churches because life is so different.

"We are a church in a place of affluence," he said. "Our culture's issues have sometimes taken over, and we have

not been able to see very clearly, with compassionate heart and eyes, our brothers and sisters who do differ with us."

Augustine said those cultural differences are causing Anglicanism to struggle in preserving its identity and unity. "What has happened is that sometimes we don't know their issues are ... persecution, safety, security. The issue is poverty, lack of jobs, hunger, and nakedness. Not enough clothing, no housing, no electricity.

"In some places, their issues are survival," he said. "Last week, 13 Christian girls were raped in a certain area of Lahore, and nothing has happened."

Getting bogged down in debates in North America, he said, may cloud an understanding of people facing these dangers. During these visits, Augustine made it clear that he was not there to sort out disagreements, telling bishops, "I'm here only with the Gospel, and I'm here to stand in solidarity. I'm here to pray with you in the name of Jesus Christ."

The goal is to rebuild trust through these relationships and through prayer. Indeed, Augustine suggests that Episcopalians pray for persecuted churches if they cannot visit: "Take one country at a time and share one or two stories and ask people to listen to the cry of these people, learn about their living faith, and pray for them during the prayers for the people.

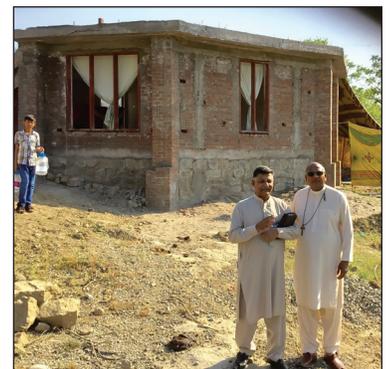
"This is a reality," he said. "We hear about Syria, we hear about Iraq, we hear about Iran ... Pakistan, the Sudan, Nigeria. There are so many places.

"We should know that the most persecuted community in the world is a Christian community. Every day, Christians are killed. Dozens and dozens every day," he said. "It's not just a myth. It's not just a made-up story. It's a reality" in which girls are raped, boys are killed, and work is impossible to find, even with an education.

"Churches can be the advocates. We're not demonizing any religion, not Islam," he said. "We are gospel people. We reach out our hands of love with everybody, even to our enemies. But I think we should accept reality ... that Christians are being severely persecuted and discriminated at present in Islamic countries.

"The Episcopal Church can be the advocate for the suffering church."

For more information on building relationships with persecuted churches, write to Augustine through Christ Christ's website.



May 1, Augustine dedicated a new church building in Gulpur in Azad, Kashmir.