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“Everyone has to die. I say you should die for a cause.” These words by Sajid Ishaq summarize the brave stance that the chairperson of the Interfaith League Against Poverty (I-LAP) is willing to take in the name of peace for his country of Pakistan.

Mr. Ishaq is in North America for two weeks to talk about his work with I-LAP – a non-profit, non-government organization within the country of Pakistan that was started in 2004 in response to poverty, injustice and growing tensions between the minority groups and the Muslim majority populations in that country.

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was started in 2004 in response to poverty, injustice and growing tensions between the minority groups and the Muslim majority populations in that country.

“After the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, there was a growing hatred of Christianity by Muslims in Pakistani society,” explained Mr. Ishaq. “There was a need for a bridge to reduce the tensions and the hatred between those groups. I-LAP was started to be that bridge.”

In 2007 and 2009, the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee—now known as World Renew—partnered with I-LAP to respond to natural disasters in the country. Following disasters such as these, World Renew typically responds by mobilizing its field staff in-country and then working through existing church partners. Because World Renew did not have ongoing

programming or partners in Pakistan, it looked for an organization that had similar values that could help them identify and distribute aid to the people most in need. After careful consideration, it decided to work with I-LAP.

When severe flooding affected the country in 2010, World Renew again looked to I-LAP to help them meet people's needs.

"The 2010 floods hit 77 districts in Pakistan, while the 2011 flooding severely affected the Sindh Province. Through World Renew, I-LAP helped 18,500 families by providing food, agricultural inputs, goats, shelter, non-food items, hand pumps, and latrines," said Mr. Ishaq.

This aid was provided to all people in affected communities regardless of their faith, creed, or gender. In addition, Mr. Ishaq used the aid distributions as a time to talk to people about the need to overcome their differences and work together.

"He is a staunch advocate for justice and always promotes peace and harmony at each distribution," said Grace Wiebe, Senior Project Manager for World Renew, who attended several of the distributions in Pakistan.

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This message is important. Pakistan has a population of about 180 million people, of whom about 95- 97% are Muslim. The remaining three to five percent of people represent nine different faiths, but the largest of these minority groups are Christians who make up about 1.2% of the population. Since 1985, these minority faiths have been frequently persecuted, and are often victimized by the 1867 Blasphemy Law and the severe clauses that were added to it in 1985 and put into practice by the government.

In the face of such tensions, it is especially important for people like Mr. Ishaq to speak up. Sajid Ishaq is a Christian whose father is a Baptist minister. His team of 120 colleagues at I-LAP come from a variety of faith groups including Christians, Muslims and Hindus, but their goal is to help people see past these differences and create interfaith harmony.

To do this, I-LAP builds rapport in target communities. This includes abiding by local cultural customs such as dividing men and women into different groups for aid distributions and hygiene training in certain regions, and

selecting only men to be community leaders for initiatives like Disaster Risk Reduction.

“In some communities it is impossible for a woman to go to her husband or another man and say ‘this is how you should do things.’ Instead, we trained the men so that we could be the ones teaching them rather than their wives,” said Ishaq. I-LAP used this process to provide training that would help communities become more aware of their risks to future disasters, find ways to mitigate those risks, and also develop warning and evacuation plans. They were successful.

“After the Disaster Risk Reduction exercise we did through World Renew with communities impacted by the 2010 floods, we have not suffered the same impact as we had in the past monsoons. We have had heavy rains, but did not have the same casualties as the 2010 floods. People were more aware and prepared.”

After establishing this rapport, I-LAP staff can then push for appropriate changes that will help people see past their differences.

“Through World Renew we formed Community Based Organizations in Northern Pakistan. We started 50 women’s organizations and 50 men’s organizations. The men’s groups received seeds and tools, and the women’s groups received goats through World Renew. The groups were encouraged to meet regularly to save money and

work towards common goals. Today, those groups are still meeting twice a month,” said Mr. Ishaq.

Sajid Ishaq also took his commitment to reconciliation one step further. He helped to found a new organization called the Pakistan Interfaith League. While he continues to be the chairperson of I-LAP, Mr. Ishaq also chairs this new movement that can be more outspoken in its advocacy on behalf of marginalized people. He also serves as a Minority Affairs Advisor to the Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf political party.

“I served in the development and disaster response sector for 17 years and people have seen my work,” said Mr. Ishaq. “If you reach out to that many people and you are networking in that many communities, you gain recognition and standing in society. The whole time, I was under surveillance and people watched and were able to see how I worked and what I believed in.”

This has helped Mr. Ishaq build connections with prominent Pakistani leaders from all faiths including clerics and the leaders of Islamic Madrasas. Today, the Pakistan Interfaith League has over 400,000 members from a variety of religious backgrounds and they are speaking up when churches are burned or people misuse the country’s Blasphemy laws.

They are also starting to see results. When a young, disabled, Christian girl was accused of burning pages of the Koran, Ishaq called a press conference that included prominent Muslim leaders speaking up on the girls' behalf. As a result of this effort, the girl was found innocent of all charges, and a Muslim cleric who had "framed" her is now behind bars.

While there are risks associated, Sajid Ishaq believes that the effort is worthwhile for promoting interfaith harmony and peace in the country.

"One good thing about Pakistanis is their resilience," he said. "They have gone through a lot but they don't lose their hope. I also have hope for this country and its people."

October 22nd, 2012 | [News](#)

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