

From Daughter of the East to Missionary in the West: The Roads Cynthia Traveled



By Beth Foreman, Features Editor

She calls herself a Daughter of the East and a child of God, and her journey from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia to Canada to Michigan to the Lutheran Women's Missionary League reflects the Lord's beautiful hand in her life.

Only fifteen years ago, Cynthia Khan was a Christian Pakistani woman living in Saudi Arabia, where it was illegal to practice any faith other than Islam. Today, Cynthia serves on the LWML Gospel Outreach Committee and continues to work with her husband as a missionary for People

of the Book Lutheran Outreach in Michigan.

Sitting in a hotel room in St. Louis on a rainy autumn evening, she shares her somewhat paradoxical journey — a daughter of the east who traveled west to reach people of the east.

You've been a lifelong Christian, which is surprising since you were born in Pakistan, an Islamic country.

Both my husband and I are third generation Christians because of missionaries! I was born in 1956 in Lahore, Pakistan, an Islamic country, where I learned all about the Islamic religion and culture. However, my family was already Christian. My grandmother had been a Hindu who came to Christ through Christian missionaries in India. Thanks to these missionaries, who worked so hard to bring the Christian message to the people of India, my grandparents came to know Christ as their Lord and Savior.

What was your life like in Pakistan?

Life was so different when I was growing up as a little girl in Pakistan. I was a tomboy, playing boys'

games with my two brothers, cycling, climbing trees, flying kites, shooting marbles in the street, and so on. Life was so simple, but we had so much fun! It was easy to fill our hearts with joy.

My father went to be with the Lord when I was fourteen years old, and because my mother was a very strong Christian woman, she was always my role model. She never remarried but dedicated her life to serving the Lord by serving others. Her motto was "Live for others." A school principal and owner of a private English School in Lahore, Pakistan, Mother was a living example of commitment and sacrifice. With her encouragement, I attended Kinnaird College for Women, a prestigious women's school in Lahore, and studied psychology and social work.

And then you fell in love and got married?

Well, in the East back in the seventies, we had arranged marriages. My mother started praying for my future husband when I was young. Her prayer was for God to send someone whom He had chosen and who would be a godly husband for me. She believed that the first one to come and ask for my hand in marriage would be God's choice for me.

And when I was twenty years old, my husband's family came and asked for my hand. My mother was convinced this was from God, and she liked everything she saw in the groom, the family, and their strong Christian faith. I got married when I was twenty-two and then went to live with my husband at my in-law's house in the village of Shantnagar.

This is so foreign to Americans. It seems that an arranged marriage might not work.

Ah, yes, but we've been happily married for many years! We have four children, two sons and two daughters. They all live at home with us. Our custom is that if the children are not married, they stay at home. Our oldest son is marrying a Pakistani woman this year, an arranged marriage also.

LUTHERAN WOMAN'S QUARTERLY (USPS 322-660) is published quarterly — spring, summer, fall, and winter — by the Lutheran Women's Missionary League of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993.

Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO. Canada #R129889093.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to LUTHERAN WOMAN'S QUARTERLY, P.O. Box 411993, St. Louis, MO 63141-1993. Annual subscription rates: 10 copies or more to one address, \$4.00 per year; individual subscriptions, \$5.50 per year. Single issues available for \$1.50 plus postage. Call office. (Available in Braille, large print, or on cassette tapes free from Lutheran Blind Mission, 7550 Watson Road, St. Louis, MO 63119.)

Living in this country, was it difficult to raise your family when they were surrounded by a different culture?

When we moved west from Saudi Arabia, we started teaching our children and training them about living in the United States of America. When I lived in the East, I used to think that America would be a wonderfully Christian place to live. My view of America was that it was a free Christian nation. I was very surprised to see the culture is so liberal and seems to be without Christ. It is good to be free to worship here, but my husband and I continued to raise our children with very strict guidelines in our home. For example, we taught them not to drink or to smoke, and we set strict boundaries about dating.

So after your wedding, what kind of life did you live?

As I said, my husband's family was also Christian. His grandfather founded the first Christian village in Pakistan, which was destroyed by a mob of three thousand Muslims who set the village on fire, took away the young girls, and destroyed the ripe crops. This was the result of false accusation of blasphemy against the poor villagers filed by the Muslim clerics of neighboring villages.

The Christians were guilty of what kind of blasphemy?

Christians in Pakistan and almost all Muslim countries lived under the *Shariah*, or Islamic Law. According to this law, if any Christian says anything against the prophet of Islam, Mohammad, it is a death sentence. If anyone says anything against the religion of Islam, it is also a death sentence, without any court hearing or explanation. For Christians who live in Muslim countries, the sword of fear is always hanging over their necks.

You were accustomed to living in fear?

Yes.

What brought you to Saudi Arabia?

About a year after we married, in March 1979, my husband moved to Saudi Arabia in pursuit of a better future. It was a very common thing in the 1970s for people to leave South Asian countries and go to Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, I could not join my husband immediately. He would visit us whenever he could, and finally I left Pakistan in April 1983 with our two children to join my husband in Al Khobar, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia.

Did you ever return to Pakistan?

Yes, after eight years in Saudi Arabia where my husband was able to earn a lot of money, we returned to Pakistan and started a business. We lived a comfortable life with five servants, five cars, and a big house! But the business was a struggle. For three consecutive years, we tried but we failed. Everything we had earned in Saudi Arabia was gone. We had imagined this big business, a comfortable life for ourselves. This was our vision. However, God had other plans for us.

You lost everything?

Yes, and I was spiritually empty. We were stripped of every worldly possession. Nobody could help us, because we were in such debt. No earthly hand could pick us up, but God our Heavenly Father picked us up. I began praying and fasting. I had been born and raised in a Christian home, but I had taken it for granted. I kept asking the Lord to show us where He wanted us to go.

One day I was on the street with my husband when a *Mutawa*, religious police, stopped us.

So what happened when you returned to Saudi Arabia, a country where there isn't much freedom as a Christian?

I strongly believe that God had a purpose when He brought us back to this strict Islamic country. They were difficult times; I stayed at home because I could not go out alone.

Why couldn't you go out alone?

Well, first, women weren't allowed to drive. Our children were three and four at the time, and we lived in an apartment; I had to wait for my husband to come in the evening, and then we would go shopping or for a drive. I soon found out that I had to wear an *abaya*, an Islamic garb that covers from head to toe and a head scarf. One day I was on the street with my husband when a *Mutawa*, religious police, stopped us. He had a stick in his hand, and he told my husband that a wife needed to wear the *abaya* otherwise her husband would go to jail. We got so scared that we went straight to the store and bought the covering.

So you started to wear the *abaya*?

Yes, and for the ten years that I lived in Saudi Arabia, I never took it off.

Most of us can't imagine that kind of life. Tell us more.

Another common practice in the country is that every Muslim man has to say his prayers five times a day. Everything shuts down at the call to prayer — businesses, offices, schools, and every other public



Cynthia with her daughters

place. Saudi national women cannot even show their faces, so they have to wear a veil. Women worked in only two areas — education and medicine, so they could be either teachers or nurses and doctors.

Interestingly, people come to work in Saudi Arabia from all over the world, yet those who are not Muslim are not allowed to practice their faith. They have to keep it to themselves, and it's illegal to bring any non-Islamic religious material into the country.

Censorship?

Yes, everything is censored. If any foreigner brings any religious material of his own faith, he is arrested at the airport, put in jail, and tortured.

So there was absolutely no freedom to practice your religion?

All non-Muslims living in Saudi Arabia are deprived of the basic right of worshipping according to their own religious beliefs; it's illegal to practice your faith if you are not a Muslim.

This must have been difficult for you.

It was. After living under those strict laws for some time, we strongly felt the need to worship with fellow Christians. Obviously, there are no organized Christian churches in Saudi Arabia, but the expatriates had special permission from the king to conduct a Christian worship service in the school gym. The residents of one Arab American oil company living inside a compound were allowed to attend the worship service.

So were you able to attend these Christian worship services?

No, only American and Europeans were given this privilege. All the rest of us, especially third world country nationals, were not allowed to go to this Christian gathering because of our background. But my husband's American colleague, a Christian who attended these worship services, knew we wanted to be there.

So did you receive special permission?

When we expressed our strong desire to have fellowship with Christians and to worship, he talked to other American friends who agreed to take the risk of inviting us over to their house and taking us to church.

Amazing! How did you get into the compound?

This is how it worked. We would go to the security gates on Friday morning where the security was tightened even more because of the Christian church service. We would give the name of the American family to the security guard, who would then call them. He would ask if they knew us and if they were expecting us. Then they would come to the gate, let us in, and take us to the worship service.

What kind of a risk were you and this American family taking?

All of this took place at the risk of our lives and the lives of the family who took us in.

Was it worth the risk?

Yes, indeed! I experienced the most spiritually strong and lively church in my life. The unity that I witnessed was powerful. There was a visible hunger for God's Word. Believers rejoiced at the opportunity for Christian fellowship and worshipped in truth and Spirit.

They were thankful for the opportunity to worship in the midst of persecution?

It is so true that the church grows stronger under persecution.

And this experience, living with that kind of fear, was a good one for you?

I thank God for being born in the East and under persecution because those life experiences and circumstances made a huge difference in my life. To actually experience God's grace, we need to allow Him to work in our lives whether it's hardships and trials, persecution or spiritual warfare. Being born in a Christian home does not make us a strong in Christian faith. In fact it could become just a routine. Even Christians living in Muslim countries tend to live the same ritualistic life that they witness around them; but the Holy Spirit uses hard times to draw us closer and show us His truth. I feel so privileged that the Triune God chose me, an ordinary person from a third-world country, to reveal His Will, His Truth, and His Light. He opened my eyes so I could see very clearly why I went through hardships and trials.

His Word became so real to me. He transformed me inside out and opened my mouth to share the Truth of His Word with those who do not know it.

Tell us about the big leap from Saudi Arabia to Michigan, especially to The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Well, by this time, my husband and I strongly felt His calling to serve Him full time. We started praying for the Lord to lead us, and we would follow Him. Howard Russell, our American friend who made arrangements for us to attend the fellowship inside the compound, was instrumental in introducing us to the LCMS. He used to hide Christian material in his coat pocket and smuggle it into Saudi Arabia for us to read. He gave us copies of *The Lutheran Witness* and the *Lutheran Woman's Quarterly* as well as other Christian material. I read the *Quarterly* and noticed the back page with the names of the officers. I believe that God gave me the idea to write to the LWML President and express my desire to serve the Lord! I had no idea what Lutherans were or the LWML was all about, but in 1993 I wrote a letter to [then] President Ida Mall [see sidebar, next page]. I told her that I was a Pakistani woman living in Saudi Arabia, and I wanted to serve the Lord, to share the wonderful story of God's love through Jesus Christ.

Did you immediately pack up and move to Michigan to join the LWML?

No. I wrote the letter, and then I forgot about it. I was constantly praying for God to show us the way and to lead us. First, we applied for Canadian immigration, which was easier to obtain, and we received it within five months. And in 1994, we began our life with our four children in a rented house in Clarkson, Mississauga, near Toronto.

We started going to St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Mississauga and took the newcomers' class. One Sunday, Pastor Randy Duncan, a missionary pastor from Detroit, Michigan, came to preach about missions and outreach. He told us about the mission outreach known as People of the Book Lutheran Outreach (POBLO), founded by the Dearborn circuit pastors who felt the need to reach out to Muslims in the Dearborn area, which is full of Muslims — mainly Lebanese. The name of the mission was taken from the *Quran* (the Muslim holy book). People of the Book are Jews and Christians who had the Book (message) before Muslims, so this seemed an appropriate name for a mission society that reaches



Cynthia with her two sons and a spiritual son

out to Muslims. Pastor Randy was the first missionary called to work among Muslims.

How did you begin your work with POBLO?

I met with Pastor Randy and told him my past and how my husband and I wanted to serve. He prayed, asking for the Holy Spirit to give us direction. He also told us that POBLO was looking for more missionaries for outreach to the Muslims. Promising to pray about our work with POBLO, he left our church. After four or five months, he returned and said, "Every time I pray, I see you and your husband in front of my eyes. I know that you are the couple God wants me to work with."

Then did you pack up and move to Michigan?

We first moved to Windsor, Ontario, and started commuting every day across the Ambassador Bridge to the Detroit area for seven years. We loved going to work every single day! When we started, we didn't know anyone except Pastor Randy. We were the first Eastern missionaries to join POBLO. Today POBLO has 28 missionaries working in the United States, Canada, and in four countries overseas.

I had no idea what Lutherans were or the LWML was all about, but in 1993 I wrote a letter to [then] President Ida Mall ...

What kind of work did you do when you first started working with POBLO?

My first assignment working at POBLO was to work as a teacher at St. Michael Lutheran School in Wayne, Michigan. This was the agreement between us, POBLO, and the school. They gave us the space in which to work, and I taught half days.

Our actual outreach started slowly. Pastor Randy gave us a phone book one day and told us to highlight ethnic names and to call those people. I would teach while my husband highlighted names. We would also go into the community and find ethnic groups by going to vegetable markets and ethnic food stores. For example, I would pretend I was buying

vegetables, and then I would initiate a conversation. "Where do you come from?" I'd say to a woman looking at vegetables. Then she would reply, "Pakistan," or, "India." And I'd respond, "So, how do you cook this vegetable?" The Holy Spirit gave me the boldness to do this. The commitment was there; the enthusiasm to serve my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and to reach these people was so big.

Nowadays, I train others in outreach, and we have so many different methods.

Another program was our English as a Second Language classes. Pastor Randy's wife and I would pick up interested students and bring them to the church, Good Shepherd, in Canton, Michigan. Those women were amazed that we would take time to do this. They'd ask us how we could find time. I would answer them by saying, "We are able to do it because we have Christ's love in us and we are compelled, in turn, to share this with others. His Word tells us to love our neighbors. This is what we do."

Our outreach was first to meet their physical needs, and learning English was important. We also established Tried and True, a thrift store, to

generate funds for missions. POBLO has also planted churches that worship in various native languages. The people don't always feel comfortable in a very Anglo congregation.

Today, I continue to work with POBLO and Faith Lutheran Church, Troy, Michigan, where ethnic ministry is active. We now have All Nations Lutheran Church and Faith Tamil Church where Pakistanis and people from North India and South India can hear God's Word in their native language and find fellowship and support.

And to think that this journey started with a letter.

The Lord prepared me all this time to use me for His work. Through my experiences living in strict Islamic countries, He taught me to be an effective missionary. My passion is to share the Gospel — the Good News of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ — and I do that everywhere I go. Through daily prayer and the reading of His Word, the Holy Spirit guides me and gives me different ways — the right words at the right time. Praise be to God for every step and every road!

It started with a letter.



In 1993, Ida Mall received a simple letter from Cynthia Khan, a Pakistani woman living in Saudi Arabia who shared her story and her desire to serve the Lord as a missionary. Not surprisingly, as LWML President, Ida received numerous letters from men and women

around the world, sharing similar stories of faith and mission work. "I received these kinds of letters frequently, and I would usually send them on to LCMS Missions."

But there was something different about this letter. "It wasn't the words or the handwriting," Ida remembers. "I don't really know why, but I could not forget that letter," Ida recalls. "I could not let it go."

Although Ida didn't usually write a personal response to these letters, she answered this one.

"It had to be the Holy Spirit! I was drawn to respond to Cynthia's letter." Ida distinctly remembers sitting down with a plain piece of paper and a pen. However, she didn't write on

Dear Mrs. Mall,
Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!
At Last, I was able to reach you, it was great talking to you on phone, I was thrilled and excited like a small child after talking to you.
I wanted to...

LWML stationery as an official representative of LWML. "I remember writing the letter in long-hand," Ida reflects. "It was a personal letter to encourage Cynthia," Ida says.

Time passed. "For a long time, I didn't know what happened to Cynthia and her family. I didn't know how things turned out for her."

Then, two years later, Ida received another letter, this time from Randy Duncan, a young pastor who was involved in outreach to Muslims in the Detroit area, requesting a grant from LWML. Pastor Duncan had already met Cynthia and her husband and had asked them to join him in his mission work. Ida recognized Cynthia's name and remembered her first letter. Recalling Cynthia's fervent faith and passion for outreach, Ida worked hard to see how the mission grant could receive support. "[We received] a grant for two years, and People of the Book Lutheran Outreach (POBLO) was born," Cynthia states.

Today, nearly fifteen years after her first letter to Ida, Cynthia's story has come full circle. After speaking at the LWML Assembly of Leaders Conference in St. Louis last fall, Cynthia shared her story. "The puzzle was complete, and everything fell into place," declares Cynthia.