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AGE 24

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Based on its cultural heritage, natural beauty, and diverse citizenry, Pakistan is one of the most unique countries in the world. Yet the current generation of Pakistani youth lacks opportunities to explore their cultural and religious values with their peers in their own communities or with those living in different regions across the country.

Young people under the age of 29 comprise a staggering 63% of the population. It's imperative that they be sensitized to others' beliefs and mobilized to promote intercultural understanding, interfaith harmony, and peace.

All of our major cities are made up of mixed populations. A majority is Muslim. Religious minorities include Christians, followed by Hindus, Ahmadies, Sikhs, and others. Although majority and minority peoples have lived together for many years, there are those who live in isolation. Lack of interaction only increases misconceptions and myths.

The people of Pakistan in general, and young people in particular, are understandably emotional about their faith, which is often misused by fundamentalist and extremist tribal, political, and religious leaders. Social issues are often represented as religious issues to create barriers among sects and religions. Hundreds of religious educational institutions promote fundamentalism in the name of religion, using it to achieve political ends.

Due to this troubling situation, an incident of religious conflict in one area of Pakistan increases tensions between both majority and minority groups in other regions as well. A recent example is the manipulation of young people by extremists in the North-West Frontier Province, resulting in suicide attacks and other terrorist activities leading the army to take action.

These conflicts aside, many young people belonging to different religious groups want to interact in positive, healthy ways. They want to live in a tolerant society. To do so, they need more opportunities for interaction and to build their capacities for mutual understanding and respect.

To address these needs, the Chanan Development Association (CDA), a youth-led organization I founded in 2006, launched Youth-PEACE, a peer education and awareness campaign designed to reduce extremism. Our goal: to create a culture of equality, acceptability, and tolerance among youth based on democratic, non-violent, peaceful principles.

During the pilot phase, we are training 1,350 young peer educators as peace builders. These youth will reach some 5,000 young people living in provincial capitals countrywide. CDA will create safe spaces where these young people can interact and explore each others' religions, cultural values, and concepts of peace through exchange visits. These activities were concluded in June 2010 with the first ever Youth Peace Festival. Following that event, we will expand the campaign to at least 25 additional districts.

We know from experience the pivotal role young people can play in nurturing peace. Not long ago, we led a process in one community in which Christians invited Muslims to break the Ramadan fast at their church, the first time in which Muslim community members had visited any church in the area. The event started with a recitation of the Holy Quran followed by a peace message from the Holy Bible. Speakers shared examples of how the Holy Prophet Muhammad and Jesus Christ spread their messages of peace. Participants were given the chance to focus on values they hold in common and not on their differences.

We recognize that one of the best ways of promoting peace is to celebrate our collective heritage and shared values. For this, young people need opportunities to learn and spaces to positively interact with each other. **Y**