

Eric Sarwar is an ethnodoxologist, composer, writer, and teacher. He is also an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan and founder of the Tehillim School of Church Music and Worship in Pakistan. He is currently studying for a Th.M. degree at Calvin Theological Seminary.



Recently, I had an assignment to read and respond to the book *150: Finding Your Story in the Psalms*, by Kevin Adams, for a worship course with Dr. John D. Witvliet at Calvin Theological Seminary. I was surprised to see my own name mentioned on page 17, along with Pope John Paul II (and I warmly thank Adams for counting me in the ranks of rabbis, monks and Dietrich Bonhoeffer)! I felt very humbled reading my story of attack, in the chapter entitled “Dragon Slayers.” But within two years of the events of that story, on March 23, 2012, I once again entered in the “Mouth of the Dragon” by singing psalms through our mission’s “Psalms and Sufis” project, in which we shared and distributed a book of Psalms and the Gospels in the Sindhi language at a Muslim Sufi shrine in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup>

I first saw Pakistan as a mission field during my M.Div. program at Gujranwala Theological Seminary (Pakistan) in 1999. In a class on missions and evangelism, our teacher talked about the “10/40 window.” For a couple of decades different organizations--for example, Operation Mobilization, Campus Crusade for Christ (now known as “Cru”), and individual local missionaries--attempted to reach out to a majority of people through informal “back doors,” such as distributing Christian print materials. If they were accused of evangelizing, sometimes they were beaten, or arrested by police and jailed. When I began planning to reach out at a Muslim Sufi shrine, I knew that I wanted to enter through the front door and not hide anything. For generations the Christian church in Pakistan was silent and passive toward reaching Sufi shrines. But after working and networking for three years, on Friday, March 23, 2012, colleagues and I were able to proclaim God’s name and interact with Sufis at Shah Latif Bhattai’s shrine. We did this by singing psalms. This was the first time in Pakistan that anyone had approached Sufis through the book of Psalms. We named this trip “Love, Peace, and Harmony through Music and Spirituality.”

### **My story with psalms**

The book of Psalms is much loved and was the first hymnbook in Pakistan. There is a story of a villager in Pakistan. One day his landlord asked this poor, illiterate Christian worker a heavy and deep theological question: “Why do you Christians call Essa [Jesus] a Son of God?” Fearfully, but faithfully, the man responded, “I don’t know why we call him that, but one thing I do know...” and he sang a simple, popular psalm, “May his [Christ’s] name endure forever” (Psalm 72:17).

<sup>1</sup> Video available at <https://vimeo.com/album/2880961/video/95810655>.



The first psalm that I memorized was the 23rd; the other psalm that I used to hear often in my hometown of Essa Nagri, Karachi, was Psalm 119:17-24, sounded from the loudspeakers of churches every morning and evening. For me, the most memorable psalm is the 51st, which my maternal grandfather Dr. Mohan Lal, a converted Hindu musical guru and my first raga teacher, sang at evening prayer time every day in *raga purvi*, confessing his sins. During theological studies I was fond of singing Psalm 18 at the annual Sialkot Convention. After returning from seminary my first public performance was with “All Karachi Punjabi Zabor Competition,” which later became a festival.<sup>2</sup>

I was personally so blessed and overwhelmed by this book that when I was praying for the direction of my ministry while studying at Gujranwala from 1999 to 2002, I received a vision to start a school of church music and worship in Pakistan. I named the school *Tehillim* (the Hebrew name of the book of Psalms). I remember that a month before graduation our teacher called me into the library and handed me a translated book of Psalms, called *Punjabi Zabor, Desi Ragan Wich*, published in Banaras, India, in 1908. This book contains verse-translations of Punjabi *Zabor* (psalms), with Western music notation for all 150 Punjabi *Zabor*. The translation and melodies were created by Immam Din Shahbaz, and English missionary Anita Coden notated the melodies in Western staff notation, in order to help Western missionaries sing along with local believers.

In 2004 I contacted Frank Fortunato, of Heart Sounds International, and invited their team to visit Pakistan and help us to record psalms. We produced Punjabi (Zabor) Psalms 1-9, with original melodies from that same notated book. This recording was launched at the Sialkot Convention in 2005. As a songwriter and composer I produced albums for children and Sunday schools: for example, setting Psalm 34:11-15, “Come, my children, listen to me,” to the tune of ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.’ Our second album included favorite verses from various psalms, and our third album featured Psalm 148:1-2, 12-13. In 2009 I produced a youth album *Awake!* and dedicated it to persecuted Christians in Pakistan; this album included Psalm 119:9-13, along with other scripture-based songs.<sup>3</sup> During the last couple of years, Psalm 137 has been a favorite subject for me to use in teaching, preaching, and challenging Christian artists and communities of faith in the Indo-Pak diaspora in Western countries to keep their identity and roots with their first worship book, the Psalms.

### Background of outreach

My father gave our Psalms CD to a Sindhi-speaking friend who worked with him at a government school. This friend is a journalist and Sufi music promoter. He was so inspired by listening to the psalms that he asked to meet me. For security reasons, I initially refused, but I finally met him a year later at our studio in Karachi. During our conversation I expressed my interest in visiting a famous Sufi shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai, the great poet-laureate of Sindh. His collection of poetry, *Shah Jo Risalo*, comprises nearly thirty *surs*, or musical compositions, with hundreds of verses. Each chapter has a distinct theme presented by the poet through depiction of characters of famous folk romances. From the 17th century to the present, people of Sind considered this poetry a sacred interpretation of their holy book, the *Quran*. Shah Latif’s influence on the

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Annual-Psalm-Festival-Pakistan/587456324631647>.

<sup>3</sup> Audio examples are available at [www.thetehillim.com](http://www.thetehillim.com).

people of Sindh is immense. He has captivated their minds and souls with his poetic genius, and his verses are known by men and women alike, with no divide between rural and urban or poor and wealthy. The Sindhi language is indebted to Shah Latif, who has enriched its vocabulary through parables and imagery adapted to the Sindhi environment. A few days after my conversation with my father's friend, he arranged permission to visit the shrine.

The book of Psalms has been our main bridge to interact with Sufis. So we prepared four psalms and translated them into Sindhi. Psalms has been translated into lyrical poetry only in Punjabi, and it was new experience for the whole team to translate and sing the psalms in Sindhi, set to *kilwara*, the Sindhi 8-beat rhythmic cycle. Our friends who arranged this trip told us that we would have only a half-hour to interact with Sufi singers, another half-hour to meet Shah Nissar Husain Latif, chief priest of the shrine, and a final half-hour to present psalms at the shrine. On that Friday, our team of ten people left Karachi at noon. My father, Sarwar Nasir, prayed for the team, and then we met our four Sindhi friends who would be our guides. We drove the four hours from Karachi to the Hala district, near Hyderabad, where we met up with two more Sindhi friends: one a writer, poet, and artist, and the other a singer, composer, and teacher of classical music, leading a music academy in Hyderabad.

### Interaction with Sufi singers

We arrived at Bhit Shah, where one of the lead singers from the Sufi group welcomed us and led us to a small house for rest, and to meet the principal of a Sufi music school there. After a while, a music teacher arrived and we discussed the music history, poetry, style, genre, training, raga, and singers. Singers have maintained continual musical performance at the shrine, 24 hours a day, for over 300 years. The teacher and his students played *tambora* (five-stringed instruments created by Shah Abdul Latif) and sang ragas composed by Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai. Tradition prohibits anyone from joining them without permission from the head of the shrine, and without training in this style of music and poetry. Like the Levitical families in Solomon's Temple in the Old Testament, these songs also belong to families who have specific musical duties. The families who performed for us on that evening are considered the most experienced and highly respected among Sufis at the shrine.

### Reception at the shrine

In the evening, Syed Nisar Hussain Shah, the current head of the shrine, received us at his home--a beautiful hundred-year-old mansion. He welcomed us with open arms and sat with us on the floor. He expressed his happiness with a speech, saying that it was the first time that any church or Christian organization had visited the shrine. The room was full of devotees, as well as journalists who were there to report on this meeting. After we shared our thoughts and purpose—promoting religious tolerance, love, and peace—our host invited us for a return visit for the birthday of Shah Latif, on May 22, 2012, to present psalms at an all-night event, along with Sufi singers. During this meeting I presented him with a gift: a picture of Christ on the cross, and also a copy of the New Testament and Psalms in the Sindhi language, as a token of love, peace, and harmony.

His love and openness amazed us, removing our fears. Onlookers understood that this was a special event indeed. After our brief meeting, our host asked his son to lead us into the shrine and visit the tomb. A procession escorted us to the shrine, accompanied by special red-colored linen sheets, and opened the inner door of the grave for us. I saw this as God opening the door for us to engage with Sufis. This door is usually opened only for high officials.

After visiting the grave, we all sat on the floor in the large courtyard and prepared to play and sing psalms. Hundreds of visitors gathered around us, and we distributed the gifts of the image of Christ on the cross and the Sindhi New Testament and Psalms to four key leaders. Then our team was ready to sing; we started with Psalms 145, 139, and 148. In the 300-year history of the shrine, this was the first time psalms been sung there in the Sindhi language. People heard the word of God, and we believe we planted a seed of faith in the listeners. Our Sufi friends were so touched by the singing that they asked us to record these Sindhi psalms for broadcast on Radio Pakistan. It was not in our schedule, but what a great opportunity to share the word of God through the radio! After the recording session, we attended a tea sponsored by the Bhit Shah Press Club. On our arrival, the president of the Press Club, and other journalists, welcomed us and we shared our thoughts about the trip. We learned that all the major Sindhi newspapers and television channels would be covering this visit.

We arrived back home the next day, thankful to God for this amazing visit. All the team members were so excited and motivated by this experience, inspired afresh to share the Gospel and word of God through singing and artistic interaction with Sufis. We believe that God opened the door for us to share him among these Sufis.

### **Annual concert at Bhit Shah**

This initial visit removed the fear from our team and has also given us continued opportunities to share psalms and other scripture-based songs. A month after our visit, we received an invitation from shrine to bring our full band and group of singers to participate at the 365<sup>th</sup> annual convention of the shrine. We accepted this invitation. After prayerful consideration, we choose psalms and few other Christian songs, along with one English song: “When the Spirit of the Lord is within my heart, I will sing like David sang.” Our whole band, with musical instruments and traditional dress, attended that festival, performing for thousands of Muslim devotees. At the end of festival the head of the shrine presented a tambora instrument to our team as a token of appreciation and friendship.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> See photos at: [https://www.facebook.com/tehillim.pakistan/media\\_set?set=a.355998394453189.95036.100001290952736&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/tehillim.pakistan/media_set?set=a.355998394453189.95036.100001290952736&type=3).