

Egyptian Christian Escapes Death, Seeks to Aid Persecuted Church

Maged El Shafie hopes to raise awareness about religious liberty abuses in his homeland and other parts of the world

An Egyptian Christian who was brutally tortured for his faith by Egypt's military police is now a political refugee living in Canada who has used his freedom to start an international organization for persecuted Christians.

Maged El Shafie, a 27-year-old law student who fled his native land in 1999, endured horrific physical abuse after the police discovered he started an underground Christian organization that eventually grew to thousands of people.

"I was physically tortured for seven days because I wouldn't give the police the names of my Christian friends," El Shafie told Charisma. "I had my hair shaved and was hung upside down with my head submerged in boiling hot and then ice cold water. I was threatened with killer dogs. I was tied to a cross for three days, had my back slashed with a knife and then had lemon juice and salt rubbed in the wound until I finally fell unconscious from the pain."

He later woke up in a hospital and, after recovering, was declared mentally ill by the government and placed under house arrest for eight months. One of his house guards then confided that a military court had secretly sentenced him to death on charges of trying to change Egypt's national religion to Christianity from Islam. That night, El Shafie fled the country, crossing the Red Sea on a jet ski while dodging

military ships and bullets.

When he reached Israel, he was jailed for 16 months until the United Nations declared him a political refugee. With the help of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem (ICEJ), El Shafie changed his name to Mack Smith, was given a passport and a disguise, and immigrated to Toronto in February 2002.

Although El Shafie's relatives have disowned him for converting to Christianity, he says the church in North America has rallied around him like a family. He credits the ICEJ with saving his life and is now a spokesman for the organization.

"Maged is a terrific young man with a passion for the Lord," said Donna Holbrook, the ICEJ's Canadian director. "He's an eloquent ICEJ spokesman who is well-received when he accompanies me into synagogues and to other Jewish gatherings. That's quite unusual considering he's an Egyptian ex-Muslim, but Maged has a knack for bringing diverse groups together beautifully."

El Shafie started One Free World International, a human-rights organization for persecuted Christians, in July 2003 and began broadcasting River of Love, a weekly Arabic-language radio show, the following October. He said 425 Egyptian Muslims have come to the Lord through the River of Love program.

With offices in Toronto and Washington, D.C., One Free World is currently raising funds to buy farm machinery and other practical tools to send to persecuted Christians in Egypt, China, North Korea, Sudan and Saudi Arabia. El Shafie also speaks frequently at churches, schools and human-rights

organizations about the plight of persecuted Christians.

One of 67,000 Egyptian Christians to be jailed and tortured for their faith, El Shafie plans to sue the Egyptian government for the torture he endured. "The U.N.'s resolution on freedom of religion states everyone in the world has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and freedom to practice that religion in public," he said. "Suing the government sends a clear message that Christians won't tolerate abuse of their basic human rights."

Roughly 20 percent of Egypt's 79 million citizens are said to be Christians, but El Shafie says most of them practice their religion by just going to church on Sunday. He said construction of churches, publication of Christian materials or public declaration of the gospel are all grounds for imprisonment and torture.

He suspects that secret government agents may one day catch up to him, but he said his love for his fellow countrymen is stronger than his fear of death. After a recent TV appearance where he discussed a book he co-wrote that lists names of Egyptian government officials involved in the torture of Christians, he said he received several threatening phone calls and e-mails.

But he says Christians who will take a stand can make a difference, and he urges the Western church to intercede for persecuted Christians, as well as send e-mails to politicians and ambassadors of countries that violate Christians' rights.

"Persecutors like the Egyptian government need to get the message that persecuted Christians will not give up their

faith," he said. "They are dying, but they are still smiling. You can kill the dreamer, but you can never kill the dream."

Josie Newman in Toronto

For more information on One Free World International, contact riveroflove001@.