

Out of Egypt

Despite increasing persecution, an Islamic-leaning government and economic hardship, Christians in Egypt are seeing a move of God shape the nation beneath the surface.

The Middle-Eastern land known for its rich cultural heritage and its key role in Christian history teeters on the brink of disaster, with raging political unrest threatening to derail President Mohammed Morsi's government in Egypt.

"It seems that President Morsi has simply put Egypt on the edge of a volcano that may erupt at any moment," a Christian leader there says of the Islamic leader. "The rapid developments taking place in Egypt nowadays bring an image to mind—a man standing in the middle of a blowing sandstorm."

Eight months after an uprising ousted dictator Hosni Mubarak in 2011, more than two dozen Coptic Christians were martyred and 200 injured when they protested the demolition of a church in Upper Egypt.

More chaos followed, sparking additional repression, economic instability and the departure of tens of thousands of Christians from Egypt. Today, attacks on Christ's followers in that nation are particularly pronounced in rural areas, according to one church leader.

"Islamic extremism is the main persecution dynamic in Egypt," says a researcher for Open Doors. "With the Muslim Brotherhood in control of the country's legislative and executive power, Islam is becoming more visible."

Yet amid such dire headlines, stories of a great awakening continue to emerge that bring smiles to the faces of countless believers in the gospel worldwide.

Signs of Renewal

A prime example is Kasr El Dobara Church, Egypt's largest evangelical congregation, located in Cairo. With the U.S. Embassy next door, worshippers sometimes find tear gas canisters lobbed into their midst as daily battles take place outside between Islamic protesters and police. Yet over the past three years, attendance at Kasr El Dobara has swelled from 700 to crowds that regularly overflow the capacity of the 2,500-seat sanctuary. Church leaders set up closed-circuit TV broadcasts of the church's five-times-a-week services to accommodate the throngs.

"The numbers of people are multiplying," says church spokesman Fazil Khalil, an assistant to senior pastor Sameh Maurice. "They are coming from every side and every background—people we are not accustomed to seeing, people seeking God."

And more than attendance is on the upswing. Khalil, other Egyptians and those who maintain outreaches to Egypt report a rise in prayer movements, interdenominational unity and a belief that God is about to visit Egypt in dramatic fashion.

"Historically, we know that every time there is political chaos and uncertainty anywhere in the world, we always see the church experiencing true revival," says Shaddy Soliman, pastor of Every Nation Church in Lake Mary, Fla. Soliman regularly returns to his native country, with his most recent visit taking place last July, when Morsi was sworn into office as Egypt's first democratically elected leader.

Soliman says that Muslims who once feared ostracism for visiting churches but who now worship openly with Christians and watch televised services are among the signs of such an awakening in Egypt. "I'm not saying they're not risking a lot to do this, but I am saying this is a new era," he says. "It's greater than ever before, simply because this is the generation of Ishmael. These are the people the Bible talks about, who will receive the message that lasts."

Another sign of renewal is a pair of gatherings that happened last October in the desert 60 miles north of Cairo. The first, aimed at teens and young adults, attracted more than 10,000 for three days of prayer, preaching and worship.

The second, a four-day rally called Count It Right, attracted 45,000, with an estimated 25,000 coming to Christ and 8,000 requesting follow-up visits from churches. Another 5,000 attended a parallel one-day festival in the Coptic Orthodox Cave Church, located in Cairo's massive garbage dump.

Rather than being hidden from the potential backlash of extremists, Count It Right occurred in plain sight. More than 2 million people watched more than six hours of coverage broadcast to the Middle East, Australia and North America by a pair of Christian satellite channels.

Both rallies have proved fruitful, says Khalil, whose church served as the primary organizer. "We didn't have enough ushers to go around praying with the people, with all those standing to ask God for forgiveness and ask Jesus into their heart," he says. "It was a very tough time [in Cairo] because there was no security and thousands of people were running in the streets. We prayed, and everything went smoothly."

Not only was the Holy Spirit's presence notable at the rallies, but Khalil says the events prompted many who were thinking of leaving Egypt to remain so they can see how God will restore the nation.

A Central Role

Known to many as the place that gave rise to Israel's exodus to the Promised Land, Egypt occupies a central role in the history of Christianity. Home to three-fourths of the Christians in the Middle East, it is the birthplace of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which traces its lineage to the mid-first century and the apostle Mark as its founder.

Copts represent the overwhelming number of Christians in Egypt, which is estimated at roughly 13 percent of a population of some 84 million. Though small in number, Egyptian evangelicals include members of the Assemblies of God, the International Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Pentecostal Church of God and the Church of God of Prophecy. Yet regardless of background, maintaining a witness for Christ there has proved challenging, says a parish priest who grew up in Cairo before moving to Southern California at age 14.

Father Joseph Boules, who oversees St. Mary & St. Verena Coptic Orthodox Church in Anaheim, Calif., says centuries of persecution have enabled all Christians in Egypt to learn to live with militants trying to disrupt worship services and terrorize prayer meetings. "Christians in the Western world are living in true freedom," says Boules, whose parish has recently welcomed a number of Egyptian refugees. "A lot of times people don't realize what a gem they have—their freedom and being able to practice their faith freely."

Yet persecution can stimulate spiritual growth. Boules points to the terrorist bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria shortly after midnight on New Year's Day 2011, an incident whose shockwaves reverberated worldwide. Landing a week before the Orthodox celebration of Christmas, many feared the attack would dim turnouts for those services. Instead, attendance doubled. It was an amazing show of faith, since people came not knowing if they would be the next martyrs.

"It was just another day of Copts living in Egypt where we are attacked," Boules says. "We don't react in any illegal way. We don't carry weapons or condone burning of the Quran or mosques or anything like that. We would never do that. It's against the core of Christ's teachings about love."

Nor was that Christmas display of faith a temporary phenomenon. Later in 2011, more than 72,000 gathered at the Cave Church for an all-night prayer meeting. Soliman labels

“11/11/11” as a pivotal event that marked a turnaround in the country’s denominational divisions.

As evidence of the change, a Coptic priest was among the speakers at Count It Right. Bishop Tawadros, the Coptic pope appointed last November, has proven receptive to evangelicals and Catholics. “Before that, there was a lot of division between church leaders,” says Soliman, who led an Arabic-speaking church prior to planting an inter-ethnic congregation three years ago. “They didn’t cooperate or visit each other’s churches. Today we see the exact opposite. The charismatic movement there is uniting Orthodox and evangelical.”

The Internet and modern communications are also playing a role in the spiritual groundswell. Once isolated from the rest of the world, today millions of Egyptians can access the Bible online or watch networks like Alkarma TV, a California-based operation that reaches all of Egypt via satellite and boasts thousands that have accepted Christ and have called to request Bibles and other literature.

Unity in Prayer

Some believers in Egypt prefer to keep a low profile, like Ammon Shakir*, whose church suffered a gas bomb attack earlier this year. But that hasn’t deterred Shakir from being faithful to the prayer movement he has helped lead—a movement whose origin he traces to small gatherings in the 1990s and early 2000s that eventually spread to five cities.

Those efforts steadily accelerated until they encompassed thousands of Christians and key spiritual leaders in 2011, prompting weekly prayer meetings. Today there are ongoing gatherings hundreds of miles from Cairo, and Shakir says the support of the Coptic pope fosters this unity. Shakir also says God recently told him that He will take His people out of bondage so the entire nation will know His identity.

“With the crisis happening in Cairo, the light is growing

stronger and stronger,” Shakir says. “There is a real move among churches, and thousands are praying. In all the cities, you see children—8, 9, 10 years old—crying for revival. The move of the Holy Spirit and the prophetic movement is taking place. We expect this year will be a year of harvest.”

Still, amid this spiritual excitement, an intercessory missionary says that Christians in Egypt need the prayers and encouragement of fellow believers in America. David Armstrong* says regular visits can help inspire Egyptians and relieve their weariness, steadying their peaceful demeanor, which he says is key to reaching the increasingly divided Muslim population.

“We have to pray for the unity found in Ephesians 3:14-21, that they will grow in love in the midst of great difficulty,” he says. “There’s a real sense of danger. They need peace and protection.”

Jerry Dykstra, media relations director for Open Doors, saw the difference this personal touch can make during a visit in February 2012, when he arrived in Cairo a few days after rioting took place in the distant city of Port Said, which touched off an uproar in the capital city as well.

Upon Dykstra’s arrival, a ministry operative told him, “You don’t know what it means to come at a time like this, that you would come to pray with us and come to tell the world the story of what’s happening in this region, whether it’s Egypt, Syria or wherever.”

“Somebody being there physically to hear their story was important to them,” Dykstra says. “Two years after the Arab Spring, it looks like it’s turning into Arab Winter. Christians were hoping this would be good news, but what we’re seeing [with] the election of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood taking over control is very discouraging for them.

“They are in desperate need of our encouragement. They are in

desperate need of our prayers. They mentioned they are being persecuted at a higher level since the election of Morsi. Churches are burning, and Coptics and Christians are not getting jobs they're qualified for."

Still, Soliman says such oppression has a positive side. "People are crying, but they are crying out to God in absolute desperation," he says. "Their hope in government, or democracy, or the West is all failing them. They see that there is no way except through God."

** Name changed to protect person's identity.*

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Sameh Maurice, senior pastor of Egypt's largest evangelical church, describes three facets of God's move in Egypt at