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# The Church in Post Revolution Egypt

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## Introduction

It's a pleasure to be with you tonight, and I am so grateful for the honor of this invitation.

Thank you for coming out tonight to listen to this lecture, and I am so encouraged by the interest you've taken in my country and my people.

As you've seen on the news, events in Egypt have been unfolding at such a fast pace, that it was hard to know what and how much to include in this 45 minute lecture. And I am sure you've also noticed that Egypt has been back on the news again lately, as last month we marked the 3rd year anniversary of the January 25th Egyptian Revolution. But why start the story from the end?

## Church History

Let me take you back to how it all began. I don't mean 3 years ago. I mean nearly 2000 years ago; when the Son of God was made incarnate as a Middle Eastern Man, and moved into our neighborhood (John 1:14). Our land was forever marked by his footsteps, and time was reset by his first breath.

He, himself, followed the Spirit wherever He went, and His followers followed Him to their death, but not before reaching the ends of the earth, beginning with the Middle East. Today, Christ's followers in the Middle East exceed 15 million, in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, and Israel/Palestine. Followers, who've faithfully protected and proclaimed an uninterrupted presence of the church in the Middle East, since the day of Pentecost.

Yes we exist. We exist as Arab Christians. We are the „Forgotten Church.“ And our existence finds its meaning in the testimony of the Holy Spirit 2000 years ago in the Book of Acts chapter 2, and in the activity of the Holy Spirit among us today.

But it would be unfair of me, in fact, untrue, to simply refer to this church as the “Forgotten Church”. The Middle Eastern Church is a “Strong Church”. They've survived major historic events like: The Islamic Conquest – The Crusades – World War I & II – The Holocaust – The Armenian Genocide – the aftermath of the Establishment of the State of Israel – The 6-Day War – The Civil Wars in Lebanon – The Iraq War – the Arab Spring, and today, the chaos following the Egyptian Revolution, and the tragic crisis in Syria.

Through all of this, the Word of God is still proclaimed Sunday after Sunday, from active desert monasteries that date back to the 4th century, to house churches that meet underground. And the name of Jesus is still praised, from the lips of those who faithfully passed down the gospel from generation to generation, as well as from the lips of former terrorists. Our modern-day Paul. Yet, this „Strong Church” has been experiencing a dwindling presence, as it lost many of its members in recent decades either to death or to mass Christian exodus. Like what happened ...

- In Palestine, after the establishment of the State of Israel, where the Christian presence went down from 10% in the 1940s to 2% nowadays
- In Lebanon, that was once a majority Christian country, with 62% Christians in the 1970s, now only 39% of its population is Christian
- In Iraq, where Christians were 8% of the population in the 1980s, are now down to less than 1.5%
- And of course the tragedy in Syria is on-going, no one knows what will happen to the 10% of her population who are Christian. ▶

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This dwindling presence is precisely the reason why we returned to Egypt in September 2011, nine months after the First Egyptian Revolution. After living abroad for 15 years, we sensed an urgent call to move back to Egypt when we did. Already then, during the initial months after the Arab Spring, estimates of 100,000 Egyptians had left Egypt, many of whom were Christians. Today, the estimate rises to 250,000 Egyptians. And though the number of Christians leaving Egypt is small compared to the total number, a real loss is felt because the Muslims who do immigrate tend to be the educated, Moderate Muslims, the ones who usually act as bridge builders between the different groups of Egyptians, based on their understanding of Islam as a Religion of Peace and it was then that God's call came to us: „Comfort, Comfort, My People”. (Isaiah 40:1). Who will now pray with my children in Egypt? Who will encourage them on their journey of faith? Who will walk alongside them in this difficult time of transition and remind them of my promises „Blessed be Egypt, my People.” (Isaiah 19:24)

For the rest of our time together, I'd like to focus on Egypt, on our Revolution, and on our Church. Not only because it's the story I am most familiar with, but also because Egypt is a watershed. What happens to Christianity in Egypt will influence outcomes across the region. Egypt has the largest number of Christians in the Middle East: approx. 12 million Christians, who form 10% of Egypt's population. The majority of these belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, but there are still significant numbers of Protestants and Catholics.

### The Egyptian Revolution

Three years ago, the world's attention turned to Egypt and watched an uprising, fighting for dignity, bread, freedom and social justice. It had been sparked by the short-lived Tunisian Revolution a couple of weeks prior. No one imagined, not even Egyptians themselves, that this youth-led uprising would last for 18 days, drawing millions of Egyptians to the streets, resulting in a people's revolution that would finally topple President Mubarak after his 30-year reign.

The world's hats came off for what Egyptians accomplished through a largely unarmed revolution. Other Arab nations like Yemen, Syria and Libya were stirred to have their own revolutions, however, theirs sadly turned more violent, with some still on-going in their pursuit of freedom and democracy.

Those were 18 beautiful days, where for once barriers between rich and poor, men and women, educated and illiterate, young and old, Christians and Muslims dissolved into a shared love for Egypt, into a common dream to restore Egypt to its leading and respectable place in the world.

For 18 days, all the things that divided us as a nation took second place, as we stood on each others' shoulders to catch a glimpse of the Egypt we all hoped for. A Free Egypt, A Fair Egypt, A New Egypt.

But the more the people stood their ground, the more violent the resistance from the regime and its police became. And though the January 25th revolution was fairly peaceful, it still cost us hundreds of lives, and thousands of injuries. In Tahrir Square, where most of the protests took place, a nearby church converted their courtyard into a field hospital to treat the injured. And when the other field hospital in the mosque down the street was hit by tear gas, the church opened its door to welcome the Mosque hospital with all its patients and doctors. And there stood in the church courtyard, Christian and Muslim doctors, side by side, treating the bleeding wounds of Egypt.

And when Friday came, the Christians in Tahrir Square, formed a circle of human shields around their fellow Muslim citizens while they kneeled and prayed. And on Sunday, the Muslims invited the Christians to have their worship service from the Revolution's Central Podium. And for the first time in recent history, the name of Jesus was freely worshipped in a public square in Egypt, and a Church Elder told the crowds about the most famous revolutionary in history: Jesus Christ. Eissa The prophet.

Those were beautiful days. And much was accomplished in the months following the revolution. (like the trial of Mubarak and his regime for corruption. The significant rise in political participation, esp. among women, Christians and young people)

Finally, I think that one of the greatest accomplishments of the 2011 Revolution was breaking of the “Barrier of fear”. The suffering which Egyptians once disguised with cynicism, out of fear of the former oppressive regime, was rebirthed in new freedoms: to protest against injustices, to speak and write without the threat of arrest, and to report and investigate acts of corruption. ▶

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## Women Ordination

And I see this “barrier of fear” coming down in my Presbyterian church in Egypt as well. I see it most clearly in the struggle of men and women to open the door for women to be ordained as pastors.

I feel their puzzlement when they witness a man, who wants to become a pastor in the church, he’s encouraged for his love for service and ministry. And when she does, the same people accuse her of going after the title and the power of the position. When she excels in school, and follows her call to become a doctor or an engineer, everyone is proud of her as the „daughter of our church.” But when she excels in ministry, and follows her call to become a pastor, she’s accused of being a rebel and a divider of „our church”.

They see liberties afforded to foreign women pastors in preaching on Sundays and serving communion, but she herself is forbidden to do so, and she wonders is this the honor of hospitality to the stranger or the tyranny of tradition, or both?

They’re tired of biblical scholars talking about women as a „church issue” on the great agenda of the church, instead of a person created in God’s image, redeemed by Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, and called to serve the Holy Trinity in this life and the next. She’s confused between pastors who constantly call on her to make church ministry a priority, and yet they don’t want to make her struggle for justice and equality in the church a priority.

Paul says, „There is not difference between Jew and Gentile, Master and Slave, Men and Women.”

It took the Early Church but a few years to decisively put an end to the debate around the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the first century.

It took the church a bit longer to decisively put an end to the debate around the equality of masters and slaves in the 19th century (1833).

How long is it going to take the church to decisively put an end to the debate around the equality of men and women? Could this be the century? Could this be our time?

But the January 25th Revolution also ushered in a new normal for Egypt – an Egypt we’ve never known before: with the evident absence of tourists flooding our ancient sites, the odd presence of army tanks on street corners to protect people against the 30,000 thugs set loose by prison breaks during the revolution, women carrying pepper spray in their purses for fear of reported mugging, harassment, and kidnapping, men keeping handguns under their driver’s seats to fight off potential carjackers, and the daily demonstrations erupting in various cities by underpaid union workers, repressed journalists, disgruntled university students, oppressed Christians, and discontented Islamists (Explain difference between Muslims as followers of Islam and they are very diverse vs. Islamists who are interested in political Islam and establishing a theocracy, and they too are very diverse to accomplish this goal through reform, education, and social services or the other extreme through violence). Each morning, we had to decide whether it’s safe enough to leave the house, and if we do, which route to take in order to avoid the risk of being caught in a demonstration.

Given the chaotic nature of revolutions in general, and the lack of transparency that marked the prior decades in Egypt in particular, Egyptians went through cycles of trust and mistrust in Everyone and Everything. The Military, The Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak’s former regime, The Western Media, US foreign policy in the region, the Youth who sparked the Revolution, Our State Media, , and the foreign agendas of neighboring countries like Qatar with its ever controversial Al-Jazeera TV channel. This has probably been the most exhausting part for us, because you never knew who was telling the truth and which source of information to trust.

After Mubarak was forced to step down on February 11, 2011, we spent 18 months under the management of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, whom people trusted and respected, because the military had protected the revolution. However, the honey moon lasted only for the first 5 weeks. Feelings of mistrust and suspicion quickly surfaced when a military-sponsored referendum to amend the constitution in ways that favored the Muslim Brotherhood, who although their membership at its peak was estimated at half a million of Egypt’s 90 million, they were the most organized opposition group on the ground, with capacities to motivate and manipulate tens of times their membership. ▶

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This was followed by several incidents of mismanagement and even violence that happened under the military's watch, which proved the incompetency of the Military leaders to manage the country's affairs. So much so, that by the end of their 18 months of rule, many liberal and secular Egyptians were ready to vote for the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammad Morsi, over a former Mubarak-era general in the June 2012 election. We were stuck between a rock and a hard place!

But by that point, most Egyptians, even those who didn't vote for Morsi, were relieved that finally we had a democratically elected Civilian president, and for the sake of stability were willing to give the Muslim Brotherhood a chance, despite their bad record of violence in Egyptian history. However, this honey moon, too, was short-lived. Five weeks after being sworn into office, Morsi decided to

- reinstate the Islamist dominated parliament (July 9), which had been disbanded 3 weeks prior (June 15), by the Supreme Constitutional Court due to an overwhelming evidence of violations in the election process.
- Morsi fired the General Prosecutor in October, replacing him with a member of the Muslim Brotherhood (Oct. 11), and declared that the position would from then on filled by Presidential appointment.
- Morsi worked to decapitate the military through forced retirement of the army generals, installing Brotherhood sympathizers in important positions, and passing another constitutional decree giving himself the right to form a new Parliament.
- Finally, on November 22, Morsi issued a constitutional decree, making his decisions immune from judicial oversight. Egyptians flooded the streets again to protest that decree & more lives were lost.

And thus, in less than 5 months, Morsi had accumulated Executive, Judiciary, and Legislative Powers. And Egypt had a new Pharaoh in the making!

In December, the 100 person Constitutional Drafting Assembly, appointed by Morsi and dominated once again by Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist Groups, cooked up a constitution in record time, and voted on a final draft in the absence of 26 members who had withdrawn (all of whom liberals, church representatives and moderate Muslims). So much was wrong about that constitution, from growing powers for the President, to deteriorating rights for women, minorities, and the media.

The fact that the country was spiraling out of control was only made more definite when word got out about secret negotiations of the International Muslim Brotherhood, to alter borders with Gaza and North Sudan and give up Egyptian territories. These negotiations were seen as betrayals of Egypt's Historic and Cultural identity. Morsi seemed more interested in expanding his party's global interests, than the interests of the nation of Egypt.

In addition to enduring this political pandemonium, the average Egyptian citizen also suffered other frustrations: government incompetence meant power outages and gasoline shortage marked by 5-7 hour lines at gas stations, making Cairo traffic even worse than it normally is. The security vacuum continued, as Morsi failed to re-gather and reform the Police Force. And with the rise of Political Islam came a growing presence of Islamic Fundamentalism, raising tensions between Muslim and Christians, and leaving random attacks on Christians largely unpunished. Last April, unprecedented in Egyptian history, hundreds of Christians were held under siege for hours in the Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic Orthodox Pope, by a mob of Islamic Fundamentalists, led by former prisoners and criminals, to whom Morsi had granted a presidential pardon because they were members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Finally, besides all of this, came repressive practices of the Media and Journalism by Morsi's government. In protest to intimidations and arrests, censorship and forced closures of newspapers and TV stations, on December 4, 2012, eleven prominent newspapers suspended publication for a day, sharing an image on their front page of a person wrapped in newspaper with his feet cuffed in a prison cell, with Red Arabic headlines that read, „no to dictatorship”, „no to restrictions on Freedom”.

Moreover, at least three private television networks went dark on the same day, with these words on a black screen:

„You are reading this message because this station objects to continued restrictions on media liberties, especially after hundreds of Egyptians gave their lives for freedom and dignity.” ▶

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Morsi's autocratic, exclusive style of government, and failed economic leadership frightened the Egyptian center is what drove a group of young people to start a peaceful, grassroots movement called "Rebel" to register opposition to President Morsi, and force him to call early presidential elections. ▶ They started on April 28, 2013, and went door to door with the goal of collecting 15 million signatures, as in 2 million more signatures than Morsi received votes in the 2012 election, and would then justify withdrawal of trust.

On June 29, the leaders of the movement announced that they were able to collect 22 million signatures, 7 more million than what they had hoped, and called the Egyptian people to take to the streets the next day.

On June 30th, exactly one year after Morsi was sworn to office, estimates of 33 million Egyptians came out to participate in Egypt's 2nd Revolution. Almost 3 times the endorsement of Morsi a year earlier. The Egyptian Youth had done it again! And yet, Morsi refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of this movement, calling them "a bunch of children." With the streets nearing a boiling point, once again, the Military stepped in to protect the people's revolution, now under the leadership of General El-Sisi, who gave Morsi and the opposition 48 hours to resolve the crisis. And once again the military found its way into the people's hearts.

Refusing to listen to the street and acknowledge the crisis, Morsi got on state TV and gave what many had called "the worst speech of the century", where for 2.5 hours he yelled at us for revolting against him and against Islam, threatening the opposition leaders by name.

Finally, on July 3, General El-Sisi, backed up by the 1/3 of Egypt's people who came out in even larger numbers on that day, and by the nationally recognized political, intellectual, and religious figures of Egypt, successfully removed Morsi from office. And a civilian Judge, Mansour, was sworn in as a temporary President to oversee the transitional period.

### Post Morsi Days

Although some were expecting the worst, for most of us, our divorce from the Muslim Brotherhood turned out to be more messy than we anticipated. Morsi supporters refused to acknowledge the second revolution and quickly used their oil money and media resources. Mainly through Al-Jazeera they persuaded the world that this was a Coup d'état, and not a second revolution by the people. The world struggled to define what happened in Egypt last summer, because while they recognized that Morsi came to office through a democratic process, they also admitted that he didn't respect the substance and essence of democracy. He came up the democratic ladder, and once in power, he pulled it up behind him like you would a ladder of an attic. European countries came to that realization much sooner than the US and Canadian governments. They acknowledged that he was not the President of all Egyptians, rather the President for his own group only, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Political Scientist struggled so much to understand what happened on June 30th, that they finally came up with a new term to describe it: „A Democratic Coup de'etat”.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, Morsi supporters set up two major sit-ins in Cairo, with thousands of people refusing to go home until Morsi was back in Office. Several attempts at reconciliation and dialogue were initiated by the temporary government, some Military leaders, political and religious figures. Military planes dropped leaflets urging people to go home, promising not to pursue them. This went on for 42 days, but to no avail. No conversation would be possible until Morsi was back in office.

Meanwhile, 2 middle class neighborhoods were completely cordoned off, and turned into a kind of urban refugee camp, with original residents forced to show their ID cards every time they wanted to leave or return to their homes. This forced many to abandon their homes and business all together, not knowing what they'd look like upon their return. A stage was set up for the frequent speeches that mixed politics with inciting religious messages declaring that anyone who goes against Morsi, is in fact going against Islam, and thus against God. Prophecies were received in those sit-ins about the nobility of their cause, and there were claims that the angel Gabriel himself appeared, affirming the honor of martyrdom for this cause.

Finally, on August 14, 6 weeks later, the police force, backed up by the military went in to disperse the sit-ins. The first dispersal operation was effective and efficient with limited violence. However, the second dispersal operation at Rabaa Square, turned into a massacre of 1000 people, from both sides, and some innocent by-standers, and twice that many injured. A war zone in the heart of the city. ▶

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It was not until the next morning that many of us woke up to the news that several churches in the South were burned or attacked by Islamic Fundamentalists in retaliation of the dispersal of the sit-ins. That Wednesday, August 14, became known as “Black Wednesday.” Over the next 72 hours, the number of attacked churches would rise to 60, which is a low number compared to the attacks on other homes, schools, orphanages, businesses, Bible society shops, and even cars that belong to Christians.

The church in Egypt hasn’t experienced anything like this since the times of Roman persecution of the 3rd and 4th century, under the times of eradication under the Muslim Mamluk rulers of the 1400s. Once again, the Copts of Egypt get caught in the cross fire. And as so often happens in history, when chaos erupts, minorities become the scapegoat.

Ramez Atallah, the director of the Bible Society in Egypt wrote:

„The main reason why the Muslim Brotherhood focused on the “soft target” of Churches and Christian institutions was their assumption, that like typical Middle Easterners, the Christians would retaliate in kind and destroy Mosques and Muslim properties thus initiating a civil war in Egypt. Their plans were completely foiled when Christians across the nation, wisely guided by their leaders, did not retaliate at all!!

This remarkably unexpected response was a powerful testimony to the whole nation and many Muslim leaders stated that by not retaliating the Christians saved Egypt from the tragedy of a civil war, and foiled the devious plans of the Muslim Brotherhood!”

More such violent attacks occurred in cities and towns across Egypt, taking many innocent lives, so the government imposed a curfew for 3 months, banned the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization in September (9/23), and finally declared them a terrorist group on December 25, 2013, after a deadly bombing of the Police Headquarters in the Delta city of Mansoura.

Nowadays, despite regular reports of terrorism and military responses, the average Egyptian feels more safe and more hopeful about stability than we have since January 2011. Life is, once again, at little more predictable: shops re-opened, and traffic flows through city streets once barricaded by tanks. Curfews are off, and people feel more safe to go to work or out for dinner. The trains are running, and people are once again able to travel in between cities, now that the police are back in full force. Schools have resumed their session with few interruptions due to demonstrations, except on a handful of university campuses due to trouble caused by Muslim Brotherhood students.

And even though we don’t yet know the full extent of the terrorism we’ve seen these past weeks, or what will come with the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, we keep in mind that recent threats from the Muslim Brotherhood, to attack churches on Christmas Eve and New Year’s, went unrealized. And we know that their threats to stop the referendum two weeks ago, failed outright. In fact, the new constitution passed by an overwhelming majority of 98% with a voter turnout of 39%. This is quite significant when compared with Moris’s constitutional referendum, which passed by 64%, with a voter turnout of 33%.

As a nation, to move forward, fundamental changes need to occur in our public education system, reform must come to our economic and governing structure, renewal of our Egyptian spirit of unity needs to be fostered and a culture of religious tolerance and respect developed. We must also restore safety to our cities if we are to regain the tourists’ trust. And beyond all this, justice is still far off for many ▶ innocent political activists, and journalists who have been unjustly imprisoned or killed.

So where does that leave us? What does that mean for us as the church in Egypt, almost 3 years post the Arab Spring, between an Ousted President, a Deposed President, and a Temporary President?

Is it true that the Arab Spring is the Arab Christians Fall?

Well, it depends on who you talk to. Some Egyptians think that the church, and the Mosque and the Economy, were all better off under Mubarak’s regime. They are convinced that for all of Mubarak’s corrupt and oppressive practices, his determination to keep Islamic extremism at bay ensured the safety of the Egyptian church, and the moderation of Islam under his watch. He did that by arresting (often without trial) members associated with suspected extremist groups as such Christians face the new Egypt, afraid, unsure, and unprepared. ▶

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However, there are Christians in Egypt who would answer the same question with a resounding NO.

The Arab Spring is not the Arab Christians Fall! They say, „if only you could come visit us, worship with us, and make it your hobby and discipline to watch the invisible hand of God, then it’s a definite „No”.”

They see the invisible hand of God in the Christians renewed participation in the nation’s public life. After decades of hiding within our walls in isolation and fear, we’ve moved from survival to engagement mode, and are finally taking a central and visible role in weaving the fabric of the New Egypt.

- Many churches offered public lectures and panels to provide their members with political education and resources for voting.
- Others hosted a blood drive to meet the shortage in the blood banks, due to on-going acts of violence.
- Others organized and hosted Christian-Muslim Dialogues, and opened their doors to the community in ways that overcome the barriers of traditional churches and mosques.

They see the invisible hand of God in the growing unity among Christian churches in Egypt: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. In the timing of the newly selected and truly wise and Godly Pope, who desires ecumenicity, and has led the newly established Council of Churches in Egypt for the past 10 months.

They see the invisible hand of God when they read the Bible Society’s new pamphlets, cleverly picking up on the national theme of “Re-building Egypt,” offering the story of Nehemiah rebuilding the wall, and thus maximizing every opportunity to prove to the Muslim majority, that though our numbers are small, our presence is effective, and that Egypt lives in us as much as we live in it.

They see the invisible hand of God peeling the mask off of Extremist Islam. More and more Muslims are becoming disillusioned with Political Islam, having experienced first-hand its empty promises, incompetency and irrelevance to the modern world. Intertwined with this disillusion is a search for truth, justice and security, not only in this life, but in the life after. They’re looking at us, their Christian neighbors more appreciatively, and are openly asking questions of faith and understanding. The Arab Spring is Not the Fall of Arab Christianity – in fact, it may just be its Renaissance. I am not denying or undermining the real trouble on the ground. Life has been hard for the Egyptian church over the past 3 years, and for all Egyptians for that matter.

But I see the Egyptian Church as actually flourishing, and taking its stand. This is not a flourishing as defined by the world. We have different standards to measure by. But it is measurable nonetheless.

It is a flourishing with kingdom standards, upside down, inside out, godly standards.

When I see a revival in the prayer movement in all churches in Egypt, and around the world for Egypt, I say the church is flourishing.

When I see the seminary in Cairo, where I work, bursting at the seams, opening two new branches in the past 3 years, in Alexandria in the North and Menia in the South, I say the church is flourishing.

When I see Christians, Egyptians and Foreigners, determined to stay in Egypt during these difficult times, and live out their calling as Christ’s suffering and living presence, I say the church is flourishing. We don’t know where we’re going from here, but we know that God will go before us wherever the roadmap might take us. And we know that in his sovereignty he has a perfectly good plan, where nothing that we’re going through now, or might go through later, takes him by surprise.

He is the faithful head of the church, the caring and protective bridegroom, who’ll never let harm come to his bride. He will continue to intervene in His way, in His time, in Egypt, in Syria and in Libya, too. And as we wait. . . we watch . . . and work . . . and pray . . . and worship. ▶

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## Concluding Story

We worship like this little church in a Southern Egyptian Village did, on a Sunday morning last August. Except that Sunday was different. The church members and church families woke up, got dressed and went to church, as usual. But that church service was different.

The children ran into the church courtyard, where a tall Palm tree would always greet them. But that Sunday, the Palm Tree looked different. Why was everything so different?

It's because that Sunday came only 4 days after what's come to be known as Black Wednesday. That Sunday was different, because this church was one of the 60 burned churches.

It was also different because for the first time, the congregation had to walk through a fence of human shields formed by their Muslim neighbors to protect the Christians while they worshipped, against any further terrorist attacks. The blackened bottom half of that palm tree in the courtyard was a sign, an indication of what the people should expect once inside their church. As the members walked in, there was nothing to see except the black and grey shell of their familiar sanctuary, and whatever the fire hadn't consumed, the smoke did.

This was their church where they had worshipped generation after generation. Where some of them had gotten married, where some of them were baptized, where some of them had buried their loved ones, where some had played their first hymn on the church piano even before their feet could reach the peddles, and where some had first heard their call to ministry.

### This was their church.

That Sunday, church was no longer defined by its traditional architectural beauty of wood and stone, but simply as pastor and a congregation gathered around the Bridegroom, adorned as precious living stones. For He himself is our Home and Host, and we are His building.

No one sat that morning for the pews had turned into ashes. Every single person stood there for the whole length of the service: child, youth, adult and elderly; yes even the elderly who complain at home of back pain and leg pain, stood there for 2 hours worshipping God.

No ones' eyes followed words in a book or on a screen, for those too have been consumed by fire. Their voices rising with the comforting sounds of their hearts, and their psalms found their way to the father's heart – they worshipped Him. Their faces reflecting a mix of joy, pride and persistence – all bathed in lament, in repentance, and in deep gratitude that no lives were lost.

### For where does the beauty of the church lie?

It's in a character born out of suffering and perseverance, which in turn gives birth to Hope, the kind of hope that doesn't disappoint, because the Love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Romans 5:5).

And where pillars have fallen, windows have shattered and walls have caved in, we could see heaven more clearly. And if you stood there quietly enough, it was as if you could hear the gentle whisper of God: "heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?"

Commenting on these tragic church burnings, the Coptic Orthodox Pope, who is the symbolic religious leader of all Egyptian Christians, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants, said: "these churches are just buildings. We are the true church. Whatever churches that were burnt are our offering up to God, and a small ransom to pay, to get our Egypt safely back free from terror and violence."

After the service was over, there stood the palm tree in the courtyard. It's blackened bottom presenting a challenge to the church's kids, who'd normally climb it to pick some dates while their parents socialized after church. But not to worry, necessity is the mother of all inventions, and Egyptian kids are clever. ▶

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And so, one by one, they began to pick up rocks from the rubble of the church, and to throw them at the Palm tree, hoping the tree would drop some of her fruits. And what was a tragedy became a parable of hope. Is it possible that the church is like a Palm tree? The more rocks you throw at it, the more fruit it yields.

My prayer for the church is that it yields more and more fruit as we remain engaged and invested in the present and future of our country, and that we will be faithful, holding in tension the truth that we are in the world but not of it. To do this, we will need to pray and work. And you will need to pray, and learn about the Forgotten Church, and about the world of Islam. I am not asking you. I am commissioning you as prayer partners on behalf of the Egyptian Church and the entire Church across the Middle East. Till Jesus returns, and all will be made Well. Don't worry about us, it is Well with our Souls. And we'll continue to pray „Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus”

### Concluding Song

So what do you say we do that right now. We pray together with, and for, the Arabic-speaking church using the gift of sung prayer from their words. I'd like teach you a song from Egypt about Peace, and how poignant it is that we receive this message of peace from the one region in the world that has a monopoly on the world's prayers for peace.

The chorus goes like this:

Salam, Salam, the peace of God to every race  
Salam, Salam, the peace of God in every place

Salam is the Arabic word for peace. Let's try the chorus together with the words and notes on the screen  
Now that you know the chorus, let us pray this litany together, where I will say some prayers based on Psalm 142, and I invite you to respond with the words of the song between the prayers.

Prayers of the People / Scripture: Psalm 142

Leader: Lord, to you we lift up our souls. We cry out: “You are our refuge, our portion in the land of the living.” We pour out our complaint before you; before you we tell our trouble. Set us free from distress, that we may praise your name. Lord, to whom shall we go? You fill us with joy in your presence, eternal pleasures are at your right hand.

People sing: Salaam/Peace, Salaam, Salaam the peace of God to every race. Salaam, Salaam the peace of God in every place. (refrain from “Salaam/Peace” GSW 45)

Leader: Lord, we pray for the governments of the world. For leaders of nations to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before you. For leaders of the Western world to stand for what is right and not what is popular or expedient. For leaders of the Middle East to confess and confront corruption and selfish ambitions. Give them boldness, Lord, to put an end to extremism on all sides, and spread peace in our lands.

Sing: refrain from “Salaam/Peace” GSW 45

Leader: Lord, we pray for the Church Universal, your church. Help her remain faithful to your calling to be light and salt in the world. And for the church in the Middle East, for her witness to Christ in that land, encourage and uphold her, Lord, in the palm of your hands. We pray for those who are persecuted and daily suffer on account of their faith. Protect those who minister on the front lines of evangelism. Shield those who come to faith in you despite threats from family and governments. Forgive us our silence, dear God. Lord, you open doors that no one can shut. Keep our doors open, and where they are shut, we beg you open them.

Sing: refrain from “Salaam/Peace” GSW 45

Leader: Lord, for two thousand years you have guided your church in the Middle East, the land of your incarnation. Sustain her in times of conflict and fear. Empower her to be an instrument of your peace and reconciliation. Continue to be a Father to those who have lost parents, husbands, wives, or children because of war. Continue to be a sanctuary for those who are refugees or homeless because of displacement. Continue to provide for those whose homes and fields have been confiscated. Let your justice roll down like a river, your righteousness like a never-failing stream. Give us peace that transcends all understanding to guide our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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