

PARTNER PLAN

Colin Johnston - Egypt December 2017



c/o Evangelical Theological Seminary Cairo
8 El - Sekka El - Bedah Street
Abbasiah
Cairo 11381
Egypt

Blog: <https://colinincairo.wordpress.com/>

Advent Greetings! I am sure that by now all congregations are well into the Christmas season with nativity plays, parties and all the various services. In Cairo, however, it can be difficult to imagine that we are in Advent, as temperatures remain in the 20s during the day, and there is little sign of any Christmas lights or trees, nor is there the pervasive playing of carols or Christmas songs on radio or over a supermarket tannoy. 25th December is a working day in Egypt, even at the Seminary - most Protestant Christians join with the Orthodox in celebrating Christmas on the 7th January. All

of which is good, as we concentrate on the actual season and not on the paraphernalia surrounding it.

Since I last wrote, the 'Fall semester' at the seminary has started (The American Presbyterians were in the forefront of the mission to Egypt, so we adopt the American terminology), and the new intake of 11 full-time M.Div students have integrated very well. I have enjoyed getting to know them: they are a friendly bunch and after their 4 year course will become pastors. They range from



Ayoub and family - 15 years on!

Amen, a 'son of the manse', who is 24 and comes straight from studying Engineering and who plays the piano at chapel, to Ayoub (Arabic for Job), who 15 years ago gave up his comfortable job in the civil service because he felt God was calling him to plant churches. To the dismay of his family he packed up all his belongings and moved to the Suez Canal area with his wife and 2 young sons where he has planted 4 congregations and worked in the volatile North Sinai area. Now he feels he has sufficient leaders in the congregations to allow himself to study at the Seminary. In addition to the M.Div students, there are 90 new MAT students, studying for a Master in Arts in

Theology. Most have no intention of seeking to become ordained, but they are involved in their local congregations in different ways and want to know more about theology or counselling or biblical studies. The lay people in the church here are very involved. While some of them are from Cairo and can attend lectures, the majority live in other parts of Egypt and study online through distance learning. In fact we have launched three new online courses this year, and we have now

PARTNER PLAN

students in Dubai, America and London studying with us – and even two in Namibia, though admittedly they are Egyptians who can cope with the Arabic, which is the language of instruction.



Eating Sugar Cane

This year has been the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It has been a big event in Egypt and has been marked both at the seminary and by the church at large. Our chapel services this term have had reformation themes, and several of our students and lecturers have taken part in special workshops both in Egypt and Jordan on the Reformation. The Presbyterian Church also celebrated over a weekend in November, with a panel of international theologians one night, and a spectacular service-cum-concert the next. The highlight to me was the orchestra and choir which gave a rousing selection of hymns associated with the Reformation but finished with a wonderful medley of Egyptian tunes. The packed church was on its feet by the end in sheer delight.

The students who are studying for ordination are full-time and have therefore to give up their jobs. Their spouses and families also have to remain at home, which means that the married students often travel back home at weekends to connect with their families. It can be difficult combining all their studies with anxiety about their families and how they are coping. Once a term however there is a 'Student day', when the families join them for the weekend at the Seminary, and the wives (no



Students at trip to Pyramids

female pastors yet in Egypt!) have special talks, though the Saturday is a relaxed day when everyone plays games and eats sugar cane! A couple of weeks later, I accompanied one of the students, Moody, to his home in Minya to stay with his wife and daughter. Minya is the heartland of the Presbyterian Church in Egypt, and many of our students come from that area. It was good to visit, and I was invited to preach at a church in one of the less salubrious suburbs, Gad El Seed. It was situated in a warren of narrow alleyways, but the warmth of the welcome was amazing. In

2013 there were tensions in the country, and the Army took over power from President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. In Minya tensions came to a head when a fanatical mob began to burn churches and destroy Christian property. My host, Moody, was staying with his grandmother at that time, and their building was destroyed, and he only managed to escape carrying his sick



One of the choirs at the Rededication Service

grandmother out in his arms. Similarly, the church at Gad El Seed was the first to be burned, and all the hymnbooks and bibles destroyed. It was apparently a very tense and dangerous time, but the whole community rallied round, and now the church has been rebuilt. At the time about 70 churches were damaged and destroyed, but the message of the Church was one of forgiveness rather than retaliation. (For a longer account of this trip and other stories, please read my blog post at <https://colinincairo.wordpress.com/>)

In late November we had a lovely service rededicating St Andrew's Church. The church had been in a poor shape, with the floor collapsing, the roof leaking and some of the windows blown out in a bomb blast and covered with cardboard. Work

PARTNER PLAN

was carried out over the summer, and now it is looking super with a new floor, new ceiling, walls re-plastered and repainted and windows all replaced. The Church is used by 7 different congregations, including the English-speaking one which I attend, and choirs from some the different South Sudanese and Ethiopian congregations took part in the service. We also had visitors from the Church of Scotland and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It was a super service, and afterwards we enjoyed some Syrian and Yemeni snacks. However, on my return to the Seminary, I heard the news that there had been an attack on a mosque in North Sinai and that there had been many deaths. In fact, over 300 people were killed. It was a damper on what had been such a joyous day. In fact because of the tragedy in the Sinai some



At the Unaccompanied Young People Event

difficult decisions had to be taken, as that evening there was a function organised for many of the young refugees to celebrate the Unaccompanied Youth programme winning the Ockenden prize. Should it be cancelled because of the deaths in Sinai? In the end it was decided to go ahead, but to keep it low-key, and I think it was the right decision, as these young people have suffered so



students and spouses at Student Day

much already in their lives. It would have been too ironic if their celebration had to be cancelled because of the mindless violence of others. Our Rededication weekend ended with a bazaar at St Andrew's with stalls displaying all sorts of handiwork from the refugee community – and of course there was lots of food from Syria, Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan. All the funds raised went to the Emergency Fund (All the refugees are in desperate need of help, but this fund gives assistance in extreme circumstances).

Have a wonderful Christmas. I pray that it will be a season of joy and of peace for you and for all the world. At St Andrew's we buck the Egyptian trend and celebrate Christmas in December with a Candlelight service on 24th, while on Christmas Day there is a joint service for our South Sudanese congregations. They come from rival tribal groups who are often at loggerheads in South Sudan, but here in Cairo they can worship together and afterwards enjoy a Christmas meal together – and to me that sums up the Christmas spirit.

Merry Christmas
Colin

Students at Retreat at start of the semester

