

Beyond ISIS

I have just returned from taking 19 people to Egypt for two weeks. Everywhere we went, our tourist bus was surrounded by government vehicles filled with armed police. An armed guard was always sitting with us on our bus. Our favorite guard was Abraham. He was always smiling, talking to us, hardly able to conceal the large semi-automatic weapon he was carrying under his suit coat. The Egyptian government wants tourists to feel secure and not be harmed. We are a big source of revenue for them. But, these days, very few tourists can be found in Egypt. The recent downing of the Russian airliner in the Sinai Peninsula and the killings of the Mexican tourists last year have deterred many foreigners from visiting Egypt. But, my group and I were visiting Egypt to see more than just the Pyramids. We were there to support the phenomenal growth of the Church in Egypt and throughout the Middle East.



The Egyptian desert

In recent years, the Church in Egypt can barely keep pace with the dramatic increase of Muslims who are becoming followers of Jesus. According to a number of different sources, there are now between 2 to 4 million Muslim-background believers in Egypt alone. One of the leaders of this new underground church, who had once been a Muslim cleric, exclaimed, "Why have you Christians been hiding the Gospel from us? It is the key to life which unlocks our souls and brings light into our hearts and minds. Please stop being so humble and shy about our Lord, Jesus Christ!" Talk about a quieting moment, it really made my group look inward, and contemplate what he was saying. Are we Christians, especially in the West, being too shy about Jesus?



Ankh - ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal life

During the heart of our trip, we spent four days in the desert praying along with 400 other Christians from around the world who gather each year to pour out their hearts to God, asking that the Gospel continue to grow and expand in the Arab world. In one of our sessions, the speaker asked us to pray for the terrorists. He reminded us that the greatest weapon we have as Christians is prayer. Egyptian Christians, whose backs have been up against the wall for nearly 2000 years, know that the single greatest and most powerful thing a Christian can do is pray. They

believe that prayer moves mountains (Matthew 17:20, 21). As I prayed fervently along with my Egyptian Christian friends, I could feel my own heart soften and become empowered with hope and love as I pictured the lost, dark and confused mind and heart of a terrorist. We were told repeatedly during our trip that all the bombs in the world will never eliminate ISIS or radical Islam; in fact, they will only run the risk of making the matter worse, causing more Muslims to unite against the West.

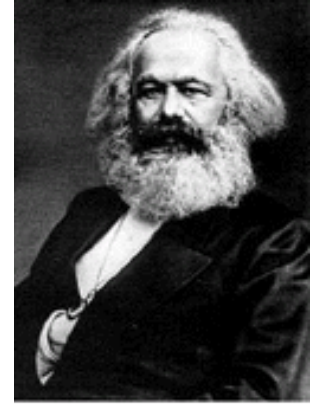
One Egyptian Christian leader told us, "Stop fixating or worrying so much about ISIS. ISIS will be gone soon. It has no life. Its roots are death. We in Egypt have moved beyond ISIS. We hope you in the West do as well. We are doing everything possible now to prepare for our future. Radical Islam or political Islam has been rejected in our country. Morsi and the Brotherhood of Islam were asked to leave by the vast majority of our country, and they will never return. The battle now is in the streets, in the hearts and minds of the people. We Christians in Egypt have now shifted our focus to the poor, destitute, women and children. For too long, these segments of society have been tempted by the promises of Islam which have created only darkness, anger and confusion in them."

In nearly all my trips to the Middle East, I hear Christian leaders talk about light and darkness when describing the effects of the gospel on people and communities. Often things must get very dark before the light of Christ is understood and embraced. As many Muslims are now discovering, often through dreams and visions, the human spirit needs redemption; it needs a savior. It cannot produce light on its own. Life apart from God will eventually lead to dusk and then to darkness. For this reason, let us be reminded, God sent his son into the world to save us and guide us into his light. Zechariah in the second chapter of Luke exclaims, "Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace." (Luke 2:78, 79)



The battle for truth and justice has always been in the streets - not in the upper echelons of power and government. Communism was formed first in the hearts and minds of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Their political philosophy later created the terrible reigns of Joseph Stalin and Chairman Mao. In the same way, Muslims today are wrestling mightily with the true meaning of the Quran and the teachings of Muhammad. And many are discovering that, in the end, Islam is a law-based religion in desperate need of grace, light, and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. During our trip, we heard countless stories of Egyptian Christians ministering to the millions of refugees in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Europe, often being the only people willing to enter the squalor of the camps, offering hope and healing,

especially to the many depressed women and helpless children. In Egypt, Christians are teaching art, creativity, and Christian ethics to families living in poor neighborhoods, in an attempt to demonstrate the beauty and light that emanates from Christian faith. It is in these same neighborhoods that the Brotherhood of Islam and ISIS are doing their teaching and recruiting. Egyptian Christians are remembering that Jesus did not begin his movement in the fancy halls of Jerusalem. On the contrary, he began his ministry among the more common folks near the sea of Galilee. And, it was with them that he began to turn the world upside down, one heart and soul at a time.



Karl Marx

My 19 friends and I are now back home. Our hearts are filled to the brim with hope and a renewed dedication to prayer. We would love if you and/or your church would be interested in supporting a number of different mission and outreach efforts of our Christian friends in Egypt. Each of these projects helps expand and augment the strength of the Egyptian church in its mission work across the Middle East and Europe. It is a critical time in history for Christians worldwide to seize this opportunity to advance the light and love of Christ in some of the darkest corners of our world. May we all be reminded and inspired by these teachings of Jesus that have become the new vision for the growing Church in the Middle East, "You are the light of the world - like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father."(Matthew 5:14-16)

