

The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust Newsletter



No 4: November 2012

An ecumenical trust seeking to promote contacts between Christian communities in Britain and those in the Holy Land and neighbouring countries. UK registered charity No. 1081204

Trustees' Annual Report 2011-12

It is with sadness that we lost a great champion of the Christian Community in the Middle East in the person of **Francis Khoo**. Francis brought to the table the wisdom and experience of a lifetime of witness to justice and peace. He died on 20th November, 2011. Donations in his memory were sent to Medical Aid for Palestinians, an organisation of which Francis was a co-founder.

A little earlier in the year, on 19th August, **Samira Hassassian**, the wife of the Palestinian Delegate, Manuel, also passed away. We remember both Christian witnesses with affection and respect.



At the AGM last year we celebrated our **Silver Jubilee** with a midday Byzantine Office at St. James's Church, Piccadilly as the guests of Revd Lucy Winkett. In November 2012 we will celebrate the Armenian Orthodox midday office led by Father Snork at the kind invitation of Revd Dr Vahan Hovhannessian, Primate of the Armenian Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

During the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**, a group of Living Stones and ABCD members went on a pilgrimage to the Living Stones of the Holy Land in Israel and the West Bank. We made contact with Fr Ra'ed, of the Latin Patriarchate and Priest of Taybeh in the West Bank, who was our gracious host in Taybeh as we visited his parish church and the church of the Orthodox community, St. George's. Fr Ra'ed, at our invitation, came to Britain in May and spoke at church gatherings in England and Scotland as well as giving the **Michael Prior Memorial Lecture** at Heythrop College where he introduced us to the work of his church community in Taybeh and its challenges. It was an energetic and well received visit to the United Kingdom.

Meetings of an ecumenical **Theology Group**, chaired by Professor Mary Grey and sponsored and supported by Living Stones, were held during 2011 and 2012. A pattern of presentation of papers and discussion has followed. This work will contribute to the Journal of the Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust, the first of which should be available at the 2012 AGM. This change from a bi annual magazine to an annual journal has been precipitated by the need for a more scholarly approach to our understanding of the issues within the Church communities in the Middle East and in the relationship of our churches in Britain and Ireland with these communities. This has meant that to complement the journal and to replace the magazine we have needed a newsletter. Jo Simister has brought her energy and commitment to this project and we are now into a third edition of this occasional publication circulated to all our members and available freely to our enquirers and visitors.

Similarly our **web presence** is under new management. 'Mac' Salem, a Palestinian from Lebanon now happily married and settled into life in the UK, is our web editor and manager and we are very grateful for his time and expertise. Mac will look again at the accessibility, design and content of our

website over the next twelve months and hopefully bring new energy, encouraging younger adults to contribute and take an interest in our work.

We were present at the **Greenbelt Festival** again in August this year and hope to be so again in 2013. James Penn and Lesley Dawson, Trustees, and Alison Driscoll, our co-ordinator, have helped the rest of us breathe new life into our presence at the event and we are beginning to use the occasion more fruitfully to publicise our work.

Rene Meissner, our Treasurer, and his wife Alison have been updating our **membership** list in new tailor-made software whose cost of maintenance is shared with ABCD who use another copy of the same software. This is another example of co-operation between Christian NGOs working in the same field and it is our intention to continue to develop **active and co-operative links** with as many different non-governmental organisations and charities working to support the Christian communities of the Holy Land as is possible. We also have good relationships with the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre through our President, Duncan Macpherson, and with Embrace (previously BibleLands) and Friends of Sabeel UK through members of our Trustee body.

The Michael Prior Memorial Fund has grown a little over the last year as we have begun to invest securely with Charities Official Investment Fund products and our use of it to support post graduate **scholarships for research degrees** has struggled to find recipients who are able and qualified to access our funds. We are making concerted efforts in the coming year to publicise the opportunity for sponsorship of research into pilgrimage, Christian tourism and theological issues concerning the Christian communities of the Holy Land and will seek to broaden the eligibility for these scholarships whilst still giving preference to Palestinian students.

These are troubling and challenging times for Christians in the Middle East and we hope to be better and more effective partners in their journeying in the coming year.

This Annual Report and Accounts, once approved by the AGM 2012, will be available on the Charity Commission website, www.charitycommission.gov.uk, Charity Registration number 1081204.

THEOLOGY GROUP REPORT

The Theology Group met Thursday 20th September at Heythrop College courtesy of Anthony O'Mahony. Dr Hugh Boulter presented his paper on "*Dialogue- what is the point of it?*" which considered the purposes, styles and challenges in interfaith dialogue. One of the key issues for Hugh is to be clear about a theology of change as we learn from and work together with other faith communities.

All papers presented to the Theology Group have the possibility of being published in the Living Stones Year Book, the first edition of which will be available in time for this year's AGM.

We are pleased to welcome visitors to the Theology Group and are open to new membership as our visitors become familiar with the Group and its work. If you are interested in visiting any of the following meetings, please write in the first instance to theologygroup@livingstonesonline.org.uk

Here are the dates for the coming year, 2012-2013:

- December 6th, 12-3pm Revd Terry Tastard: *Genocide and its inapplicability to the Middle East*
- March 20th 2013 Revd Robin Gibbons: exact title to follow;
- June 20th 2013 Revd Nadim Nassar: on Syrian Christians (title to be confirmed)
- October 16th 2013 To be determined.

The venue is likely to be Heythrop College, Marie Eugenie Room, but this will be confirmed before the next meeting.



Old City of Jerusalem from the roof of the Maronite Convent

The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Galilee, 2012.

Set of 8 COLOUR postcards £2.50 + 2nd cl p&p 70p;
5 sets £11.25 + p&p £2.50p;
10 sets £20 + p&p £2.50.

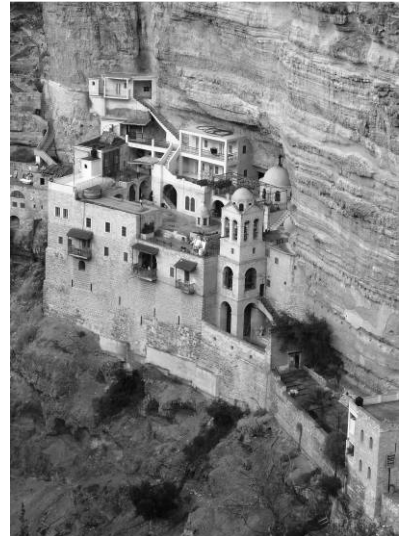
Cheques to 'Living Stones', c/o Mrs A Driscoll, 48 Strickland Way, Orpington, Kent, BR6 9UE.



Vespers in darkness, Armenian Cathedral of St Jameses;



Ethiopian Orthodox blue angel fresco;



Monastery of St George, Wadi Qelt, near Jericho



Drummers and singers at the Ethiopian Orthodox church



Cantors at the Greek Orthodox parish church of St George in Taybeh



Contemplation by the Sea of Galilee



Pilgrims approaching the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem



'How did they divide us?'¹

Mariam Tadros

Ahdaf Soueif (2012), (the novelist, commentator and activist in her new book recounting the revolution day by day), records this central question that was asked by her and many others whilst being dispersed from Tahrir by tear gas and cannons. This question is pivotal in talking about the state of Christians in Egypt.

I grew up in two places: my home and Church. Growing up in the UK I have always been surrounded by my biological family but also my community, Church family. A core part of my identity in being a part of the Coptic Orthodox Church is that it is not just a denominational identity but a cultural, ethical, theological and moral identity. The Church in the UK is intrinsically connecting to the 'mother church' in Egypt and therefore what the Church in Egypt feels; we walk alongside her and feel it too. Growing up in the Orthodox Church, it is ingrained in you from a very young age that you are a part of history, an almost 2,000-year-old Church, the largest in the Middle East and the most heavily persecuted throughout history: the Church of the Martyrs. That depth of history is what gives our Church such a thick skin and, contrary to human nature, history shows that the more the Church has been persecuted, the more it grows. So you see, being a young Coptic Christian in the UK (for me personally) comes with pride, history and a sense of ancientness—combine that with the 7,000-year history of Egypt and you begin to see that there are many, many layers to the make-up of the Church.

It is difficult to know where to begin to write from when talking about the 'Arab Spring' and it is even more challenging to write about a topic that most likely in a week or month will be irrelevant and superseded by the latest chapter in an unfolding story. But I started with a quote for a particular reason and I would like to continue to take you on my own journey to understand why that same question is the one I ask over and over:

My parents moved to the UK some 35 years ago now: my siblings and myself were all born, educated and now employed in the UK. However, my parents ever since we were toddlers, wanted us to be connected to our heritage and our roots, so we would travel every summer to Egypt and spend a month or more there and as we have grown older we each together, or separately, visit two or three times a year. From the word go, my parents taught us Arabic so that we could communicate with our families at a sincere and real level and now for me personally that connection allows me to build a depth of relationship beyond what I could have ever envisaged. There is one aspect of this that I want to highlight though and it is this:

Whilst we would spend a chunk of time visiting and staying with family there were a group of people that till today form an essential part of my memories in Egypt: my parent's university friends. Though not one of them is Christian, yet all of them are like brothers and sisters to my parents and like surrogate parents to my siblings and me. All three of us were brought up to believe that there was no difference between our Muslim friends and our Christian ones and the love I received was equal from both. When I think back to those early memories, and then I look at the state of Egyptian communities and the marginalization of the Church today, I do ask that question: How did they divide us?

It is a common fallacy that Christians were protected under the Mubarak regime, that it was better 'the devil you know': during my whole life all I knew was Mubarak as the president of Egypt and all I saw was a deterioration, year upon year, not just of the day-to-day state of the country but the gradual breakdown of the oneness, the Egyptian-ness that bound people, the basic humanity with

¹A. Soueif, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*, London, 2012, p. 55.

which people used to regard each other. If you were to sit with my parents and hear the stories of their youth and how religion was never even a consideration, you would not believe that that was the same Egypt, 40, 45 years ago that you see now. It is a sad, painful truth that over the last decade or two Egyptians have been divided by their religious affinity and this in turn has resulted in increased persecution and discrimination towards Christians and Churches as well as an increasing rift between Christians and Muslims.

It is because of this that when the revolution came about in January 2011 and we began to see images of Bibles and Qur'ans being held up together, the cross and the crescent becoming a symbol of the revolution and hearing those resounding chants of 'Muslims and Christians hand in hand', I began to feel hope again. Hope that people would strip away the labels² they had been stamped with and become Egyptian again—not forgetting that these images were preceded by the 1 January bombing in El Quidisein Church, Alexandria, and the wounds were still so raw. It truly felt like God was moving, as if our prayers for justice were being trumped by something much greater—a binding together of 'the other'—something we had not seen for a very, very long time.

Of course it was short lived when events begun to unfold in Mansheit Nasr, Imbaba, Maspero and other places. There was a constant tension between people wanting to come together and others wanting to take advantage of the situation and use it destructively. It was in those moments that we saw, what I believe can only be God using the bad for great, and something that many of us have prayed and only really dreamed of—80,000 Christians, from all denominations under one roof, praying and seeking God. I remember vividly, sitting in the front of the TV at about 2 am watching this all night vigil, and truly seeing a dream come true. If God was doing anything in the midst of some of the most difficult days Egypt has seen, in the midst of a vacuum, fluidity and air of uncertainty, if I can pinpoint where I could truly see His hand working, it was this—God shaking the Church awake, telling her to mend the broken pieces, to come together, to be a body, to recognise its power unified.

Whilst history tells of the greatest civilization in the world, the reality was that before the revolution, division was not just amongst Christians and Muslims, but more heartbreaking was the great angst between Christian and Christian and, in my eyes, we were never going to solve the former without addressing the latter for 'every city or house divided against itself will not stand.' (Matt 12:25) This was a wake-up call for the Churches that it can no longer live in victim-hood, in the shadows and reality of persecution but that it must rise and be a light, be a voice of peace, that it has to live what its core values teach and preach.

Till today you will hear many Christians, rightly or wrongly, assert that the revolution was all a masterpiece of the Islamists, wanting to take power and drive the Christians out. Whilst this may be the agenda of some, and in some ways an agenda currently being realized, we must never forget those images, that truth of Muslim, Christian and Christian standing side-by-side declaring their humanity above their religious affiliation. As Tariq Ramadan (2012)³ puts it so eloquently, we cannot be like 'those who lost faith in the ability of human beings to assert themselves as the subjects of their own history.'

I recently attended a sermon given by Revd Dr Sameh Maurice, the head Pastor of Qasr el Doubara Evangelical Church in Cairo, and he reminded people that this is the Church's moment to have an effect on history. It is in this most difficult moment of uncertainty, persecution and battle that the Church needs to respond to that call to be the change the country needs.

As the Orthodox Church faces that extra challenge of being without a permanent leader, it must all the more look deep within itself, into its depth of spirituality, history and teaching and remind itself of how powerful it is and has been in the past. The next year for the Orthodox Church will be one of

²I use the term labels because here in the West and in the media as a whole, we love strap-lines and we like to make everything black or white, good or evil—and the label I refer to is that of Persecuted church—yes, the Church in Egypt is persecuted but let us keep that as a description not a noun. When you turn an event into a noun you box it in and it is hard to break free from it.

³T Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, Penguin, London, 2012, p. xi.

re-adjustment, change and a new direction, perhaps a perfect opportunity to cultivate renewal; but it must step up to that challenge and it must enter into the next year with humility and openness.

I recognise how easy it is for someone living in the comfort of the UK to make statements like that but this comes from endless conversations with youth, priests, bishops, activists, servants, congregation members, taxi drivers—all of whom want to see Egypt flourish, that want to see it in peace, that want to go back to the days when the only reason you would know if a person was Muslim or Christian was if they happened to have an obvious name. There are wonderful people, doing amazing things in Egypt and I am blessed to encounter just a handful of them through my work, and it is such a shame that all we hear on the news is the stories of division—never the ones of unity. But I have never been so encouraged as I have been in the last 18 months. We just have to continue to live in this ever-present tension of great unity and great division.

People always ask me what I think will happen in Egypt and I genuinely cannot even give an educated guess. The situation at the moment was both predictable and otherwise. What the future holds is uncertain. We are living in total fluidity and just as I write this I have been sent an article with the title: 'Islamists threaten to exterminate Egypt's 10 million Coptic Christians over film'.⁴

What I fear is how people will survive whilst it gets worse before it gets better. I have a hope though for the region that many find annoyingly naïve, but if we do not have hope, what do we have left? If we cannot believe that a better future is actually possible and can be realized, what good is our next breath? If we cannot put our hands together and work through the darkness to bring light, will we not just always be living in a nostalgic mythical past and never able to build the future? I am capable of being realistic and seeing the truth in front of me, but that does not stop me from being able to dream and hope and live within the current reality to change it for the future.

The last 18 months will certainly be in history curriculums in decades to come and if I have learnt anything it is these two things: 1) the extent of darkness there is in the world and that if you are disturbed by the darkness, that is likely to be a call to a light in those places; 2) humanity's capacity to endure but more so its strength to change things. That is what I truly stand in awe of for this year—people finding their voice, finally realizing that they are no less than anyone else and that no-one has the right to dictate to you whether you deserve life or not. My hope lies in the fact that people have re-found their voice and are able to shout out freely when something is not right and enough is enough. My prayer is that this will be the foundation on which the new emerging world stands—freedom, justice, accountability, responsibility and giving and sharing life.



What is certain though is that the Church has stood the test of time for centuries, and seen darker days than it is seeing right now and for me the key to Egypt having a positive future is if firstly the Church unifies itself, and secondly that Egyptians return to being just that and let go of the divisions that are counter to their nature—7,000 years of history and not one civil war, that is what sets Egypt apart. And for me that is what will bring Egypt back together.

Coptic Orthodox Cross

Reads: Jesus Christ, the Son of God

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic_Orthodox_Church_of_Alexandria

⁴<http://www.inquisitr.com/331973/islamists-threaten-to-exterminate-egypts-10-million-coptic-christians-over-film-2/>—the film referring to the American produced YouTube film entitled 'Innocence of Muslims' that caused mass protests and outrage across the Muslim world.



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MEMBERSHIP entitles you to our regular newsletters, a copy of the Living Stones Journal to be published annually, free attendance at conferences and other major events, news of our Scholarship programme, notification of pilgrimages and much more. For current news and other items see our website at www.livingstonesonline.org.uk.

Please send your form to 48 Strickland Way, ORPINGTON, BR6 9UE together with EITHER a cheque for £20 payable to Living Stones OR the Standing Order Mandate. If you are a UK tax payer please ALSO complete the Gift Aid form. **Personal Details:**

Name:
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E-mail address:

I am also interested in: (please tick as appropriate)

- serving on the Living Stones Committee as Trustee
- contributing articles or news items about the churches in the Middle East
- participating in a Theology Group
- attending conferences in London; Oxford; Birmingham;
 Durham; Edinburgh; Cardiff
- receiving the Journal
- receiving newsletters, etc, by e-mail attachment

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To the Manager of
(name of your Bank/Building Society)

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Postcode:

Please pay the sum of twenty pounds/ £20 annually on:
..... (insert date) **until further notice in writing**

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Your account name:

Your account number:

Your Bank Sort Code:

To:

LIVING STONES Account No: 8913 7808; Code: 09-01-55

Your signature:

Date:

Your Address:

Postcode:

DONATIONS & LEGACIES

Living Stones is very happy to accept donations and to help with legacies. Both can be Gift Aided.

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As a registered charity, Living Stones can recover basic rate tax on your membership and other donations provided you pay UK income tax or capital gains tax equal to or more than the amount of relief LIVING STONES is claiming in the tax year that the donation was made.

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 2. You can cancel this declaration at any time by notifying LIVING STONES.
 3. If you pay tax at the higher rate, you can claim further relief in your Self-Assessment tax return.



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity PILGRIMAGE to JERUSALEM 2014

with the Living Stones Trust

Saturday 18th – Thursday 30th January 2014

with optional 2-night Galilee extension to Saturday 1st February

- ❖ *Participate in the Jerusalem Week of Prayer for Christian Unity programme*
- ❖ *Worship with a wide range of local Christian denominations (Greek Catholic, Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Armenian and many more, plus the more familiar Anglican, Lutheran, Quaker and Roman Catholic churches)*
- ❖ *Find out why and how the churches differ, by looking at the causes and results of their history*
- ❖ *Find out about the challenges Christians face and how we might support them from outside*
- ❖ *Encounter the wider work of the various Christian communities, visiting educational, health and social care centres, for example – several of the trustees have links with these*
- ❖ *Support Christian-run enterprises, by staying in local religious communities and visiting Christian businesses*
- ❖ *Meet with Christian clergy and community leaders in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah and Taybeh take time to explore, or join with other local activities, on the free days.*

Guide Price (to be confirmed) – for half board accommodation and all costs in the advertised programme, including fees, tips and lunches on activity days.*

Option:	sharing	single supplement
Jerusalem – 12 nights: (Sat 18 th – Thurs 30 th January)	£900	£250
With Galilee extension – 14 nights: (Sat 18 th Jan – Sat 1 st Feb)	£1100	£300

NB: It is possible to book for the Week of Prayer only, 8 nights in Jerusalem. Price on application.

Deposit (*cheque payable to Living Stones*): **£200**
Deadline: **31st October 2013.**

* Does not include:

personal spending, flights, personal travel/health insurance,
lunches and activities on 'free' days.

Participants should arrange their own flights, expected to be approximately £450 with British Airways or £150 with EasyJet, if booking well in advance; Living Stones will arrange transfers for people arriving/departing on these airlines, as per the programme, at a small charge).

REGISTRATION OF INTEREST:

If you like the aims listed here, and you would like to register your interest (with no obligation), please notify Jo Simister, (josimister@yahoo.co.uk, 81 Corbet Close, Wallington, Surrey SM6 7AR). You will be sent the Proposed Programme and Prices in early 2013.