

Egypt's Anglicans hopeful despite tough times

The small Christian community has faced harassment but priests believe interfaith dialogues are bearing fruit.

Peter Schwartzstein, *Al Jazeera*, 18 Jan 2014



Christian communities have faced violence and intimidation during political unrest in Egypt [AFP]

Last summer, as unrest raged in Cairo, Egypt's small Anglican community started looking for a way out. One family made for Canada, another went to Australia, and several emigrated to the United States.

As exoduses go, Anglican emigration has been small compared to the torrent of fleeing Coptic Orthodox migrants, but with approximately 3000-4000 congregants, the Anglican Church's problems over the past few years have mirrored those of the wider Christian population.

When modern Egypt's worst bout of sectarian violence erupted in August, few Anglicans were left untouched by the fallout. Two of the Anglican community's 15 churches were attacked, while only the timely arrival of the army spared a third, and those inside it, from an irate mob intent on setting it alight.

The Coptic Orthodox community accounts for at least 95 percent of Egyptian Christians, and "when there are difficulties, they're usually the ones to suffer," said the Reverend Drew Schmotzer, an Anglican chaplain in Cairo. "But we're a minority within a minority, and we're not strong on numbers."

Political ramifications

Many supporters of deposed president Mohammed Morsi accused Christians of inciting the military to topple the Muslim Brotherhood government, and most Christians cheered his group's ouster. The only pro-Morsi Copt Georgetown University found when searching for a speaker turned out to be the leader of the Egyptian Nazi Party; and Anglican leaders say support for the coup was an inevitable result of a divisive presidency.

"All Christians and moderate Muslims suffered under Morsi. His form of Islam was not the same as most Egyptians," said Bishop Mouneer Anis, a London and Los Angeles-trained doctor, who leads an Anglican diocese that extends across North and East Africa. Many Egyptians, who supported the Brotherhood in democratic elections, would dispute that assessment.

Anglicans - like other Christian denominations - have long complained of workplace discrimination in Egypt, but they say this became particularly acute as religious conservatives came to dominate government posts. "I felt as if I was a foreigner in Egypt," said Bishop Mouneer.

The worsening situation for Christians was brought sharply into focus when the church tried to purchase a patch of land for a summer camp on the Mediterranean coast. The local governor agreed to the sale, but another functionary, an ultra-conservative religious bureaucrat, refused to sign off, saying that Christians had no place buying land in a Muslim country.

"People started to appear as if we were in Afghanistan," said the Bishop, who swiftly called Al-Azhar Mosque, where the Grand Mufti issued a fatwa enabling him to pursue the project.

Social conservatives

In everyday life too, Christians, who are thought to make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 85 million people, struggled with the imposition of new social rules.

"Life became more of a problem for ladies, because more and more Muslim women wore hijabs, and so Christians were seen as easier," said the Reverend Yessua Bakheet, whose clerical dog collar is often mistaken for a neck brace when he walks around his neighborhood. Two men sporting the long beards associated with strict Islamic observance tried to snatch one of his parishioners off the street last year, before she beat them off.

But despite their somewhat precarious position - or perhaps because of it - Egypt's Anglican church is something of a model of interfaith cooperation. To visit the Cathedral compound in Cairo's affluent island district of Zamalek is to encounter an extraordinary mishmash of

Dinka-speaking South Sudanese, expatriate Koreans and beleaguered Syrians waiting to be processed in the UN refugee center next door. About 90 percent of the students who attend Anglican schools and clinics are Muslim, while most of the Cathedral's administrative staff are Coptic Orthodox.

Relations between many of the Christian churches are often fraught, with Coptic Orthodox authorities wary of Evangelical and Catholic efforts to proselytize among its flock. But the Anglican Church's limited reach in Egypt has meant it is perceived as largely unthreatening by the bigger Christian denominations, which are prohibited from trying to convert Muslims.

"We've always accepted the Coptic Orthodox as the mother church, said Bishop Mouneer, whose parents were originally Coptic Orthodox and who acknowledges there's still some distrust of Anglican overtures among some of the older Orthodox clergy. "We were the only ones to have arrived in Egypt having asked the permission of the Patriarchate of Alexandria," he added.

The Anglican Church has often acted as an unofficial intermediary with Al-Azhar, and has assumed a more active role since the Vatican's relations with Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning soured under Pope Benedict. It was instrumental in launching the "priest/imam" programme last year, which has sought to bridge sectarian differences by bringing together 50 Muslim and Christian clerics from areas most afflicted by religious rivalries. And it seems to be going well.

After one event, an imam and priest returned to their hometown together in a public microbus. Another passenger angrily chastised the imam for consorting with Christians, but the imam calmed him and sought to change the man's mind.

The very fact that the Anglican Church has endured, as other remnants of Britain's 70-year occupation of Egypt have withered, is something of a puzzle.

'No liberals here'

Early missionaries expired in the heat and dropped dead from Tuberculosis, while the post-WWII collapse of the Egyptian monarchy and subsequent expulsion of the foreign communities emptied Anglican churches of congregants and priests.

Sixty years after the withdrawal of the many thousands of British soldiers and civil servants who had formed the core of the Anglican community, the church is still grappling with its colonial associations. The cathedral's war memorials and plaques are mostly in storage, while

the church prefers to be called the Episcopalian, not the "English" church in Arabic.

The break from Anglicanism's English roots doesn't end there. Egyptian Anglicans practice an unusual blend of Eastern and Western Christian traditions. They celebrate Christmas when Westerners do, but mark Easter a little later in the year with the Coptic Orthodox.

More tellingly still, for an Anglican church whose British and American branches are torn between competing conservative and moderate factions, its Egyptian wing remains united in its opposition to same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay priests. "We don't have any liberals here," the Reverend Bakheet said with a grin. "We refuse to ordain homosexuals because the Bible says so."

After several anxious years, Anglicans feel their prospects in Egypt are looking up. Bishop Mouneer, for one, is happy with the new constitution, which he believes affords Christians greater protections.