

# Some Proposals for British Government Action to Assist Christians in the Middle East: Spring, 2019

*for the Rt. Revd. Bishop Philip Mounstephen & colleagues, from Dr David Salter*

*Please note:* I believe the outline proposals which follow are feasible for implementation, or at least encouragement, by HM Government, and would provide significant benefits to Middle Eastern Christians. The largest Christian community in the Middle East is that of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, who (unofficially) form nearly 20% of the over 90 million population. The proposals result from my voluntary work since 2013 with Coptic communities all over Egypt, principally in the poorest areas, such as Upper Egypt where most Christians live. These areas are particularly dangerous due to continuing (though theoretically unlawful) prejudice against Christians as a minority faith. Thanks to His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, worldwide head of the Coptic Orthodox Church (whom I have met three times in Egypt and once in England), I have been given permission to visit and stay in areas considered too dangerous to be open to senior clergy, foreign diplomats, or even BBC journalists. I have made many Egyptian friends, and set up the very first partnership between Coptic and Church of England primary schools in the two countries, commended by the Archbishop of Canterbury. I believe the proposals below would be usefully applicable in other Middle Eastern countries besides Egypt. This is therefore an “on the ground view” of Middle Eastern Christians in current reality from an actively involved Church of England layman.

## Assist refugees and asylum seekers in “fair and representative” proportions

There is plenty of data to show that Christian refugees and asylum seekers have not been accepted into the UK in numbers proportionate to their prevalence in their countries of origin. The same is true of Yazidis, despite the near-genocide they have faced. When I was a Plymouth City Councillor (2003 – 2016) and involved as Cabinet member or Shadow Cabinet member with relevant responsibility for settlement of such folk, I found it impossible to lobby national Government effectively to address this unfairness, being told that selection of candidates had been devolved to the UNHCR, who principally operate in refugee camps, and in these camps the overwhelming majority of people are Muslim, due to the Christians and Yazidis having “fled” because of feeling intimidated by the majority. As a former full Professor of Moral Philosophy as well as a former elected politician, I find this situation insupportable and reprehensible. Dr Martin Parsons, head of research for The Barnabas Fund, wrote (Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, 23 December 2016): “A recent Freedom of Information request revealed that of 4,175 Syrians granted UK refugee status between September 7, 2015, and September 30, 2016, only 64 were granted to Christians – i.e. only 1.5 per cent, although an estimated 10 per cent of Syria’s pre-war population were Christian. Similar tiny percentages occur for Yazidis...Much of the UK’s problem lies with the UN, to whom the Government continues to outsource its selection of Syrian refugees...” Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, repeated the same message in the *Daily Telegraph* (p.4, 13 April 2017), countered by “a Government spokesman” who said “UK aid is provided in line with humanitarian principles, so whoever needs our help the most gets it first, regardless of race, gender or religion”. But the implementation of such principles is clearly flawed when minorities are so grossly disadvantaged. Either the principles or the implementation should be urgently corrected. **There are sufficient people in pressing need in ALL categories of religion, race and gender for the UK to accept refugees and asylum seekers in fair and representative proportions.**

## Improve staff attitudes at British Embassies and Consulates

I have been told by a number of Egyptians that if they visit a British embassy or consulate they get very surly and often poor service once their name reveals them to be from a Christian background. A large proportion of staff in these offices are visibly Muslim and many seem highly prejudiced. Any Christian applying for a visa finds especial difficulties. **Improvements to staff attitudes should be instituted, requiring genuinely fair treatment, or perhaps a properly staffed desk marked as being for those of Coptic or “other faiths”.**

## Encourage more respectful treatment of pre-Islamic faiths and history in Middle Eastern schools

History teaching in Egyptian schools is heavily influenced by requirements of the majority faith, and so usually skips over everything until the origins of Islam. This is absurdly inadequate in a country with a world-famous cultural history of over 7,000 years bringing in vital tourists. The 600 years of Christian history before the Islamic conquest also tend to be dismissed, and the modern Coptic contribution, although officially respected in political speeches from the Government and Al-Azhar University, is very widely disrespected in practice. **Perhaps the British Council or other agencies could try to encourage a less narrow educational curriculum?**

## Support requests for Christian security provision at Christian places of worship

In the church attack in Tanta on Palm Sunday 2017 the death toll was reduced to 29 by a watchful guard. But all too often guards’ deployment and operations do not inspire confidence. In 2013 I first visited the ancient Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor, being driven on an unpaved, unlit track 20 km across the Western Desert *in the dark*. Since 2013 I have visited the Monastery a number of times, coming to know the track well

both by day and night. In 26 May 2017 a number of Christian men, women and children were massacred on this very same track by terrorists operating in broad daylight. 28 were killed and 25 injured, of whom five died later in hospital. These people were literally martyred when they refused to deny their faith. Guards were then posted – in daylight hours only! – on the main road where the track leaves it, with two more at the Monastery gates, these two having to be fed by the monks who themselves are being starved of visitors and supplies. Despite these guards, on 2 November 2018, while I was in Egypt myself, a second daylight massacre occurred on the desert track actually within sight of the Monastery, leaving 7 Christian pilgrims dead and 10 injured. The Abbot of the Monastery is His Grace Bishop Basilios, whom I know well to be a most remarkable and peace-loving man. He and his monks are relying on their prayers. Also last November I spent some days at the annual Festival of St. George in the Western Desert on the way to Kharga oasis, with allegedly two million (!) other attendees. Most are Christian but some are Muslim (St. George is considered equivalent to the mysterious Muslim holy figure Al-Khidr). Most Muslim women were in full *burkhas*, which are practical because of the huge amounts of dust. But *burkhas* can, and sometimes do, conceal bombs. At the airport-style security gate, there were NO female guards to frisk those in *burkhas*, and when I passed through carrying keys, a watch and a (metal) digital camera, NO alarm was triggered. Guards typically just sit around smoking all day. This very feeble “security” allegedly costs the Monastery of St. George a massive 20% of their takings from the Festival, which could otherwise be used to further alleviate local poverty. Christians do not feel that guards at churches are numerous or committed enough. **They would like to supplement them with their own Christian guards, but currently these are not permitted. Could the FCO give moral support to these requests?**

#### More Embassy or British Council staff should directly experience ordinary life away from Cairo

Organisations such as Amnesty International do a good job of documenting political issues in Egypt, and progress towards resolving them. But population, economic and environmental pressures continue to grow. This is rarely reported inside or outside Egypt, being something of an embarrassment to these proud people and likely to be prejudicial to the crucial tourism industry. Poverty is especially acute in Upper Egypt, where most of the Christian population live. Many villagers have only around 100 LE (Egyptian Pounds) per month to live on, and rents to landowners outside the village are typically 300 – 600 LE per month. Rents have risen over 15% in 5 years and *rentiers* are normally quite ruthless, so houses are dilapidated, overcrowded, or both. In 2017 the Egyptian pound was devalued by a further 50%, making people even poorer. Last year a kilo of mutton (for “celebrations”) cost around 180 LE, or around £8.50 at the time. Here the same meat would have cost around £6 or £7, and our incomes are usually very much higher. Fish is unaffordable too, so many live mainly on beans and bread. People describe their situation to me as “struggling”. Also, interfaith problems can arise suddenly at any time, often involving kidnappings of Coptic girls who are forcibly removed and married off to Muslims, like an 18-year-old kidnapped just days after I left a mudbrick village near the area in 2016. Girls’ names and identity cards are changed to Islamic forms within days, and cannot be changed back to Christian ones. In September 2014, *Daily News Egypt* reported there had been 239 Christian kidnappings for ransom in the previous six months, mostly in Upper Egypt, and Copts had had to pay 21 million LE for their return – which sometimes never happened. Ransoms reduce many already poor families to abject poverty. The 20 Copts martyred by Da’esh in Libya in 2015 went to that war-torn country fearful, but desperate for work. Housing standards of both Muslims and Christians vary enormously, from villas in Cairo to mudbrick houses little changed from Pharaonic times. Most live in small overcrowded flats. A Coptic friend of mine is the retired headteacher of a girls’ secondary school, now terminally ill with lung cancer, yet due to his very small pension he must live in a rented, fifth-floor, lift-less, flat in the backstreets of Luxor with his diabetic wife and four grown-up children, two of whom are severely learning-disabled anencephalic daughters. The ca. 38 square metres of this typical tiny flat is divided into a corridor-sized living area, a corridor-sized kitchen, and small curtained-off sleeping areas. His only son is 36, and still cannot yet afford to get married. This is the condition of a *middle-class* Christian family in Upper Egypt - I know of families in far worse situations! Legal safeguards are still ineffective and prejudice against Christians means that education and jobs are really hard to come by. **Besides appropriate diplomatic contacts, HM Government could assist community projects to help directly at local level. I know of many, and could provide introductions to those with whom I am already volunteering.**

#### Support joint Muslim-Christian craft training workshops to encourage interfaith respect and cooperation

This is a superb idea from HRH Prince Charles, following a personal report I wrote for him in 2016 about community development work by several Coptic monasteries in Upper Egypt which have, *inter alia*, workshops for woodworking and metalwork. He suggested that joint training sessions for both Muslim and Coptic craftspeople could encourage interfaith trust and cooperation. Last year I visited The Prince’s School of Traditional Arts in London to sound them out about organising such training in Egypt, perhaps based at their centre (Jameel Arts) in Fustat, Cairo. However, they said that they believed their own staff from London would need to attend and that this would require a significant budget which they could not source. **Perhaps HM Government could fund at least a pilot scheme? Some £30,000 would be highly cost-effective in terms of positive publicity for what is, in Governmental terms, a very small expense.**