

## PARTNER PLAN

# Colin Johnston - Egypt March 2018

c/o Evangelical Theological Seminary Cairo  
8 El Sekka El Bedah Street  
Abbasiyya, Cairo 11381, Egypt

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

Dear Friends,



Poster of the President Sisi  
around St Andrew's.

Just opposite St Andrew's Church in the centre of Cairo, there is a massive billboard of a smiling President Sisi; turn the corner, and there are two or three more. It is a sign that the Presidential elections are near. In the UK an election engenders a lot of debate. There are hot issues, and the media provides blanket coverage over who said what and who went where. It is not the same in Egypt. The Presidential elections take place towards the end of March, but there is really no contest. President Sisi is up for re-election, and the only opponent is one of his most ardent supporters, who was perhaps persuaded to stand to give the election a small degree of credibility. Other opponents were arrested, assaulted or simply persuaded to withdraw. After the excitement of the Arab Spring 5 years ago, everything now seems to have reverted to how things were beforehand, and the youth in particular are feeling very disillusioned. The more things change, the more they stay the same. President Sisi has certainly given some stability to the country and from a Western viewpoint he has been

strong in countering terrorism. He has also publicly supported the Christian minority and on Christmas Day attended the opening of the new Cathedral in the new (as yet unnamed) Capital City, which is being built in the desert east of Cairo. His high-profile support has not seeped down to other levels, however, and discrimination remains, and Christians are regularly passed over for promotion or for higher education, for example.



Joint Nuer and Dinka service on Christmas Day

My last letter was just before Christmas, which thankfully passed relatively peacefully. Living in Egypt means that I had two Christmases (a child's dream!). At St Andrew's we celebrated Christmas in December, holding our Christmas service on the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>. There was a large congregation, and the Church was beautifully decorated. On the 25<sup>th</sup> the two Sudanese congregations joined together for a joint service which lasted over 3 hours, at the end of which over 1,000 people enjoyed a Christmas lunch, paid by a congregation in the States. They choose to have chicken and chips from KFC! (I gave it a miss and went to join friends for a Syrian meal). But at the seminary

the 25<sup>th</sup> December is just a normal working day, as the Presbyterian Church celebrates Christmas on 7<sup>th</sup> January along with the Coptic Orthodox Church. New Year is also a big celebration for Christians.

## PARTNER PLAN



The potter at Garagos

The Seminary closed for a few days before Coptic Christmas, so I was able to catch the overnight train to Luxor (it took about 11 hours) and spend a few days visiting some of the pharaonic temples and tombs. I also managed to visit a church pottery project situated 25km out of Luxor in a small rural village. After the constant noise and pollution of Cairo, it was great to get out into the countryside and appreciate the slow pace of life. It was also fascinating to watch the potter at work. It is a small project with only 10 people employed, but they make the most amazing stuff, including nativity sets. The three main Christian denominations all have organisations offering social support by providing small loans to set up businesses and by providing projects such as pottery, carpentry and cotton manufacture, which

help provide incomes in the poorer rural and peri-urban areas. They also provide capacity building for the local population.



Yohanna Katanacho after a meeting.

At the Seminary we have two main semesters, but in January there is a special 'January Term', which is a short 3 week period of intensive classes. We often invite guest lecturers from other countries, in order to broaden our students' horizons and challenge them with new ideas, and this year we invited Dr Yohanna Katanacho from the Nazareth Evangelical College, who taught on Palestinian theology. He spoke about being a Protestant Arab living in Israel and the various discriminations he faced, and that struck a chord with our students who also face difficulties as a minority in an Orthodox-majority Church and a Muslim-majority state. I knew Yohanna from my time in Tiberias, so it was good to see him again. He was well used during his short

stay here, preaching in one of the local churches and speaking at a public seminar.

I always look forward to January in Cairo because of the Book Fair, which is held at the end of the month. It is a big event, popular with the public. Over 700,000 people visited within the first two days of its opening, and certainly when I went there were massive queues of people waiting to get in (I simply walked ten minutes round the corner to find a quieter gate to get in!). It is one of the biggest book fairs in the world, though the vast majority of the books are in Arabic. However, there were also a number of books in English, and I happily spent a good few hours rummaging about the 2<sup>nd</sup> hand stalls. We are also very fortunate in having the American University in Cairo Press, which publishes excellent books on Egypt as well as a wide range of Middle Eastern fiction in English.

While I spend most of my time in the office at the Seminary, I also find myself used to help people with English. Every week I teach Oromo women from Ethiopia who are refugees in Cairo, and I have also begun to take a weekly class for some of the Dinka young people from one of our South Sudanese congregation, many of whom study at Cairo University. Deng is one of them. He combines his studies with a job in a cement factory, where he works long hours with minimal pay and poor working conditions. His one free day is Friday, which he spends entirely at church.

I have also been helping one of our final year students at the Seminary. Magdy is from Alexandria and worked as a computer programmer. However, he felt called to work full-time as a pastor, and

# PARTNER PLAN

so he left his job and studied for the M.Div. degree in Cairo. He has, however, received a call to an Arabic-speaking congregation of around 180 members in Manchester. He had visited it on two occasions in the past, the latter time for an extended period of 6 weeks, at the end of which they invited him to be their pastor. He prayed about it with his family, as obviously it would be a big move for them to make, but they felt it is the right. Magdy has to apply for a visa, and a condition to receive it is that he needs to pass an IELTS English exam and receive a certain grade for each of the four different elements of the exam (reading/ speaking/ listening/writing). It is quite difficult! The congregation caters for the large Arabic speaking community in the North-West of England, many of whom have come to Britain as refugees from countries like Syria, Yemen and Iraq, as well as a lot of Egyptians living in that part of UK. They offer a lot of practical help to refugees, many of whom are Muslim.



Ghiath, my Syrian friend to whom I teach English

Yet another person I speak English with is Ghiath, who is Syrian. He grew up in a 12 roomed house positioned round a courtyard with a fountain in its centre in the old part of Damascus, but on graduation from university would have been drafted into the army. He realised that as a soldier he would either have to kill someone or be killed himself, neither of which particularly appealed! So he ran away, travelling to Lebanon first of all, then to Turkey before finally reaching Egypt, where he has lived now for five years. He has an engineering degree, but now works in a takeaway restaurant serving Syrian food. But he is studying for another degree, at the end of which his dream is to go to Canada. He knows his family are well and manages to communicate with his mother by phone every other day, but realises it would be difficult for him to return to Syria. His English is excellent already, but he says he has learnt it from watching films on YouTube! He has been a way for me to access the Syrian community here, most of whom are Muslim (Syrian Christians tend to go to Europe). Many of the refugee communities in Cairo find themselves

very vulnerable and face discrimination and even verbal and physical attacks, but the Syrians are well-received and seen to be hard-working.

Easter is coming up at the end of March, though again I will have two Easters, as the Coptic Easter is a week later than the Western one this year. I pray that it will be a time of joy and blessings and new life for you all.

With Best Wishes

**Colin**

(Colin's Blog can be found at <https://colinincairo.wordpress.com/>)

## Prayer Requests

- Pray for the Church in Egypt over Easter. Last year two churches were bombed with many casualties. Pray that this year may be a peaceful one.
- Pray that Magdy may give a good account of himself in the IELTS exam and be granted a visa.
- Pray for the refugee communities in Cairo, as they struggle to survive and make a life for themselves. Pray also for the work of StARS, as it affirms and supports refugees, and St Andrew's as it provides a safe place.