

'New hope' in turbulent times

World Day of Prayer promotes unity and an end to violence.

BY JAYSON CASPER



In a year marked by violence in the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, and elsewhere, those involved with the World Day of Prayer are looking to the 2015 event with the trust that God can heal a broken world.

"There is a new spirit to share with one another," says Bishoy Helmy, secretary-general of the Egypt Council of Churches, one of the participants in this year's observance.

The World Day of Prayer is a global ecumenical movement of Christian women, including many Presbyterians, who observe a day of prayer each year on the first Friday in March. Participants gather in various locations worldwide to worship, pray, and promote unity and understanding. A worship celebration is written by a delegation from a different country each year.

An Egyptian delegation wrote the worship program for 2014, and Cairo was the site of the main gathering. In light of recent political upheaval and violence toward Christians in Egypt, World Day of Prayer participants lifted up that country in prayer.

"Give us wisdom to know how to go through this difficult period," Helmy prayed.

Though primarily a Muslim country, Egypt is also home to several million Christians. The Arab Spring uprising of 2011 deposed longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak but "was hijacked by Arab extremists," according to Atef Gendy, president of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo. The election of Mohamed Morsi a year later resulted in "a growth of anti-Christian fanaticism," Gendy says. Although a revolution in June 2013 toppled Morsi, widespread attacks on Christians occurred that summer, and many churches were burned, including five Presbyterian churches.

In many Egyptian communities, however, Muslim neighbors banded together to protect churches. And the patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, Pope Tawadros II, says he finds "new hope for Egypt" in the adoption of a new constitution in the country. In September he called for enhanced efforts to end violence.

"If they attack churches, we will pray in mosques. If they attack mosques, we will pray on roads," he said.

During the World Day of Prayer, participants asked God to bless Egypt with stability, improved economic and educational systems, regional peace, and the return of tourism. They also prayed for all Egyptians to know God's love.



Egyptians stand for prayer at an Arabic service on the World Day of Prayer.

"Not many people are ecumenical," says Dalia Hanna, one of the younger Presbyterian World Day of Prayer organizers. "It is getting better now, but there is some fanaticism in all denominations." Hanna was raised Orthodox but worshiped at a Protestant church near her work at the American University in Cairo. "The more I got involved, the more the Lord led me back to build bridges," she says.

She traveled with the Egyptian delegation to the June 2012 World Day of Prayer quadrennial meeting in New York City, engaging with women from around the world.

"We had cultural differences that could lead to conflict," she says. "But when you are exposed to such an environment, you have to learn to be tolerant of others."

Mervat Akhnoukh, board chair for the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, says participants find common bonds through the World Day of Prayer.

"We prayed that our work would be of God, and we became friends," Akhnoukh says.

Participants say the annual observance also underscores the many ways that women can be empowered to live out their faith. "We want every woman to know she is a member of the body of Jesus and should serve him as much as she can, fully integrated in her family, her church, and her society," says Nadia Menis, who has been involved with the World Day of Prayer since 1967. "We want to uplift women concerning their health, their creation in the image of God, and their equality with men—creating awareness throughout the world."

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