

Book Review

Jonathan Andrews, ed., *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*

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The Church in Disorienting Times deals with the important topics of persecution, suffering, emigration, hopelessness and desperation facing the church today in many countries in the Middle East. It is edited by Jonathan Andrew, and the articles in the book are written by several indigenous Christian leaders who have written analysing the socio-political and religious conditions of the twentieth-first century in their respective countries of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, to name a few.

The purpose of this book is to inspire and encourage the Christian communities in the Middle East to continue to abide by God's call on their lives without becoming paralyzed by fear or taking on a victim mentality as a minority living in Muslim majority countries. The hope of the book is that Christians will find their full identity in Christ and realize they belong to the larger body of Christ around the world. Middle Eastern Christians can thus bring hope and transformation in the midst of the suffering and hopelessness in their communities, such as the contributions many Christians have brought to the poorest areas in Egypt, including those inhabited by the garbage collectors in Egypt.

Persecution and suffering are not new realities facing the Church in the Middle East. There has been a long journey in history in which the suffering of the Church has taken different forms. The difference today is the wide range of socio-economic, political and religious conditions, which vary from one country to another.

No country's Christians have suffered more than those in Egypt. The Coptic Church has experienced more martyrdoms than any church in history. This suffering has strengthened the church because the Coptic Church was already strong, but in other communities where the church was weaker the persecution almost destroyed the church. Unfortunately the book fails to show this latter, destructive result persecution.

The Christians in Egypt live not only with persecution but also with discrimination. In Egypt there are two very different groups when it comes to dealing with persecution. One group do not complain about the persecution and do not care if they become equal citizens like the majority in the country or not. But there's another group who desire and seek 100% equality with the rest of their countrymen at every level. However, the government is not able to protect the Christians in the way this group want.

Persecution and suffering among Christians can lead to hopelessness and despair. Minoritization, where Christians become marginalized to the point where moving to the West for

a better life becomes the norm, is an increasing problem for the Church in the Middle East. In Iraq it has not been only Christians who have suffered because of the horrible war. Other ethnic groups have also felt that emigration was their only choice. In Syria various ethnic groups have suffered as well, but there many Christians have stayed and found opportunity to reach out in their communities with Christ's love.

In Palestine the situation is different. In this section of the book the author focuses more on the suffering that Palestinians – Muslims and Christians – both endure because of the Israeli occupation. There is much truth in this point, but the book does not give enough consideration to the situation of Evangelical Christians who live in the shadow of Islamic militants. One glaring omission is the total lack of any consideration of the various Christian organizations operating in Gaza, such as the Palestinian Bible Society. Such organizations have worked faithfully over many years, bringing encouragement and hope in the midst of much suffering, especially among the Christian community. There is a great deal of injustice suffered by the Church in Palestine, but the believers there try to follow Christ's example of self-giving love, believing that justice will follow. This is the model followed mostly in the Egyptian Coptic Church as well. In their suffering they have sought to love and forgive their persecutors, believing that justice will come to them sooner or later.

The book's stories of real Christians who stayed and others who returned after they lived many years in the West, as they felt God calling them to return, are inspirational. Of special note is the interfaith work in Lebanon, where Christians and Muslims met in dialogue to work together with their neighbors for the benefit of their communities. The book tries to encourage Christians to stay where they are by finding God's call on their lives where they already live. This call is to stay where God has placed them in order to have a positive influence through their faith in their own societies and, at the same time, not to criticize those who chose, for a variety of reasons, to emigrate.

I love the examples given of how the Psalms and the Book of Lamentations have been used as guides to help believers live out their faith under persecution.

One Syrian Evangelical pastor notes they do not have many Evangelical pastors in Syria because many of them in middle-age leave for the West to improve the life of their families economically. The book poses the question of what can be done, if anything, to stop this loss for the church. Perhaps the answer is to find ways of improving their lives in Syria. Another initiative which would help would be if Christians could establish small businesses to improve the lives of their families and thus not be dependent on their oppressors. The book discusses the importance of discerning God's call on individuals' lives, particularly in deciding whether to stay in one's home country or discerning whether the call to leave is really from God.

The Church in Disorienting Times is quite rich in convening the many experiences of wonderful leaders. Even so, in such a short book it is not possible to go as deep as one would like in every country discussed. At the same time, the challenge is for the editor to keep a coherent sense of focus as the accounts move from one country to another in each chapter. By and large he has succeeded. The reality is that God in His wisdom has placed us as Christians in the Middle East for his own purpose (Acts 17:26) to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and to give voice to the message of reconciliation in our societies (2 Corinthians 5:19).