



The Episcopal Church in Jordan: Identity, Liturgy, and Mission

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ABSTRACT

The article begins with a brief review of the history of the diocese of Jerusalem. By interviewing eight members of the diocesan clergy in Jordan, the researcher desires to explore how the concepts in the title are related to each other within the Jordanian context. Is there a unique identity of Jordanian Anglicans? What is the desirability and/or feasibility of revising the prayer book? Given the declining demographics of Christians in the region, what avenues are open to these ministers to sustain their congregations? Specific care is paid to the topic of incorporating Muslim converts into existing congregations. Also included are some theological reflections on the meaning of liturgy within the Jordanian context and the diocesan policies for the formation of future priests, which have important implications for the future of the diocese.

KEYWORDS: Anglican, Church Missionary Society, dhimmi, Episcopal, Jerusalem, Jordan, liturgy, mission

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide information on the Episcopal Church in Jordan regarding questions of identity, mission, and liturgy. I will begin by providing an overview of the origins of the Anglican presence in what is now the diocese of Jerusalem and Jordan in particular. I will then describe my research methodology, including a list of the clergy whom I interviewed and their respective positions. My purpose in those interviews was to discern how the leaders of the congregations throughout the country understood the relationship

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between the church's liturgy, its sense of mission (with a focus on the possibility of Muslim evangelism), and the general question of 'what is the purpose and position of the Anglican church in Jordan?' I will present some of my own thoughts on a theology of liturgy with a specific concern for the Christian context in the Middle East, which is one of an increasingly vocal political Islamic discourse, which coincides with the demographic decline of the various indigenous Christian communities. Given the great concern of the clergy for the future of the church in the region, what are the implications for its mission and continued presence? Is a revised liturgy desirable, and if it is, is it possible? Also related to the future of the Anglican presence in the Middle East is the question of the formation of future ministers for the church there. My research indicates that the topics of ministerial formation and liturgics and mission are all related to each other in the minds of the priests whom I interviewed. Having examined these topics it is then appropriate to look down the road: how viable is the Anglican presence in Jordan? Given the continuing emigration of Christians and the agreement not to 'steal sheep' from other churches, is there a viable evangelistic mission to Muslims, who make up more than 95% of the population of the country? The last question is related not only to the future of the Anglicans in Jordan, but also to the evangelical heritage bequeathed to them by the Church Mission Society.

The Middle East and the Muslim world have both received a great deal of attention in the press over the last years.² The reasons for this are various and include everything from terrorism to the rapid growth of the Muslim communities throughout the West. With this increase in attention, we can identify two key reasons why the relatively small Anglican community in Jordan should be of interest to us: first, they are in a position to relate the reality of what it is like to be an indigenous Christian in the region, and second, they have a much lengthier history of relating to Muslims and Islam, which is both a religious *and* political civilization. The latter point is of particular import, as the secular tradition of Western Christianity has left it without a robust ability to understand the nature of Islamic dialog in terms of its relation to political change and the concept of rights. The experience of the Anglican Jordanian church provides insights into these various issues.

2. A notable and widely read example of this is *National Geographic's* June 2009 article, 'The Forgotten Faithful' by Don Belt about the dwindling Christian presence in the Middle East.

*Overview of the History of the Diocese*³

The Protestant Episcopate in Jerusalem was founded in 1841, and was a joint venture between the Church of England and the Protestant Church in Prussia. There was hope that Jerusalem would thus become a focal point of unity for the various churches born from the Protestant Reformation, though this would not come to pass.

There were several groups and interests that were influential, indeed essential, to the establishment of Jerusalem as a Protestant see. First was the London Jews Society: they were zealous for the evangelization of Jews throughout the world, and understood that the reestablishment of Israel as a sovereign state and a large-scale acceptance by Jews that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, were events whose prophetic fulfillment would come soon.

Also, the British government desired to expand its influence in the Holy Land, then under the power of the Ottoman Empire. The Russians were responsible for safeguarding the rights of the Orthodox Christians, the French were responsible for the Catholic Christians, and it was judged politically expedient for the British to be entrusted with safeguarding the rights of Protestant Christians. The Ottoman Empire was deeply indebted to the British, who had basically kept the empire intact after the rebellion of Muhammad Ali in Egypt in the early 1830s.

The first bishop in Jerusalem was Michael S. Alexander, a Jewish Rabbi who came to believe that Jesus, son of Mary, was the Messiah promised by the Hebrew prophets.⁴ He was consecrated as bishop on November 7th, 1841. As the number of Anglican parishes increased the huge diocese (in terms of territory) that he and his successors presided over gradually was divided into smaller dioceses, and eventually the Sudan became its own province in the Anglican Communion. The original mission of Michael Alexander was to convert Jews, not Muslims or Orthodox Christians, but for various reasons an Episcopal Arab community developed over time, consisting mainly of converts from Orthodoxy.

In August 1957, a revised jurisdictional system was instated and the bishop in Jerusalem became the archbishop and metropolitan for the

3. Additional details appear in, 'The installation of a Bishop in Jerusalem: The Cathedral Church of St George the Martyr, 15 April 2007', in *Anglican and Episcopal History* 75.4 (2007), pp. 549–54.

4. More on Alexander and the early history of the diocese is found in Kelvin Crombie, *A Jewish Bishop in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: CMJ Press, 2006) and Jack Sybil, 'No Heavenly Jerusalem: The Anglican Bishopric, 1841–1883', *The Journal of Religious History* 19.2 (1995), pp. 181–203.

entire Middle East, including Persia (Iran). In January of the following year, the first-ever Arab bishop of the Anglican Communion was consecrated, he was the Rev Canon Najib Cubain, and he was named Bishop of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.⁵ In 1974, the former Diocese of Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria was reincorporated into the Diocese of Jerusalem; those are still the boundaries of the diocese today. In 1976, the Province was inaugurated and given its current name, the Episcopal Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, which consists of four dioceses: Jerusalem; Egypt, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa; Cyprus and the Gulf States; and Iran.

Research Background

In this current project the attempt has been made to explore questions of identity, mission, and the possibility and desirability of a revision of the prayer book. Moreover, I have sought to explore how the Jordanian leadership understood the interconnections between these topics. Interviews were conducted with the clergy residing and ministering in Jordan during the summer of 2006. The interviews generally lasted between 90 and 120 min.

My initial concern when beginning this research was quite narrow, having only to do with the possibility of revising the diocesan prayer book. My area of interest grew quite quickly and organically to include topics that go beyond liturgy. Since the original concern was related to the prayer book specifically, I interviewed only members of the clergy who are the ones who on daily basis use the book and know it intimately. Moreover, the success of any diocese-wide move to revise or change the prayer book would rely heavily on the support of the clergy. A more complete study would certainly include interviews with laity. For what it is worth, my family and I were part of Church of the Redeemer in Amman for two years, and I attended both the English and Arabic services, thus forming relationships with a few Arab lay persons. I say this simply to clarify that I am not entirely ignorant of the life and worship of the Jordanian laity.

Since the information presented here is based almost entirely on clergy working or residing in Jordan, it is important to state that the clergy working in Israel and Palestine do so under quite different

5. More on this important period in the diocese, including that sometimes-tense relations between foreign leaders and the local Arab Christians, can be found in Rafiq A. Farah, *In Troubled Waters: A History of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem: 1841–1998* (Leicester: Christians Aware, 2002).

circumstances. Additionally, Syria and Lebanon are also part of the diocese, but the Episcopal presence there is small and consists largely of non-indigenous congregations, such as the Sudanese and the English-speaking congregations in Syria and the international congregation at All Saints in Beirut.

In doing this research, I interviewed eight Arab priests active in the pastoral and education ministry in the country, as well as four foreign priests (three from Europe, and one from North America). These 12 priests represent, to the best of my knowledge, all the active Anglican priests in the country at the time of the interviews.

All the clergy were asked certain core questions such as, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the Anglican liturgy we use? What is your opinion regarding the use of conversational Arabic versus classical Arabic in the liturgy? And what are your thoughts and desires regarding a revision of the liturgy or the prayer book? As liturgy and questions of revising the prayer book invariably touch on many aspects of the congregations' lives, the interviews generally branched out in a number of directions, and certain issues emerged again and again. Central issues that were important to a number of the clergy included relations among Christians in Jordan, between Christians and Muslims, initial (seminary) and continuing education for the clergy, and concerns about the future of the diocese in general. Questions regarding the future of the Anglican community in Jordan, and of Christians in general were also discussed.

A Theological Theory of Liturgy

There have been a number of influences on the development of the Anglican community in Jordan. These include the evangelical heritage from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy on the Christian population as a whole, as well as the concept of being a bridge between the West and the East, between the liturgical churches and the 'non-liturgical' churches.⁶ The following is thus my own attempt to present the bare bones of a theological theory of liturgy that, in my opinion, can account for these different elements.

6. I use the word 'non-liturgical' with reservation. Ultimately, every church has a liturgy and pattern of worship. Indeed, in my experience it is the churches without a written liturgy that are often most resistant to changes in their pattern of worship. Thus by 'non-liturgical' I mean churches that do not have a written liturgy. In Jordan these would be, for example, the Assemblies of God, the Church and Missionary Alliance, and the Baptists.

The role and function of liturgy is dynamic and it is not possible to provide a permanent definition of the word, though at the most basic level the word simply means *work of the people*. According to this observation, the work or mission of the people is informed and influenced by the liturgy, whether in a strictly cultic sense (as in Lk. 1.23; Heb. 8.6, 9.21), or within the general sense of the wider ministry of the community (2 Cor. 9; Phil. 2). Also, the liturgy creates and sustains 'a people'. That is, when successful, it provides, sustains, and passes on an *identity*. When a person asks the question, '*who am I and what is my role within my wider community*'? his or her answer is informed (perhaps unconsciously) by the liturgy of his or her church. Thus liturgies teach the difference between lay and clergy; Christian and non-Christian; married and single; child, adolescent, or adult; man and woman; and so on. Within the context of the Jordanian church, or indeed other churches in Islamic states, this is especially important.

The idea of the liturgy sustaining a community implies a bifurcation in terms of purpose: at once the liturgy must be strict or delimited enough to form a real identity that is not merely lost among the other identities of the person as a member of an ethnic or national group. The liturgy of the community must sustain the sense of the *otherness* of this community and why it is special. On the other hand, a liturgy must establish a sense of identity that is willing and hopefully zealous (insofar as it is Christian) to welcome in others. Otherwise such communities become introverted and their greatest goal simply becomes self-preservation. It is no secret that the churches of the East have at times fallen into this under the *dhimmi*⁷ system which '[breeds] the neuroses of fragmentation'.⁸

A helpful image may be the human family. The identity of the family must be maintained through space and time by a sense of why

7. This concept of *dhimmi* is essential to understanding Muslim-Christian relationships both now and in the past. Under a *dhimmi* contract Christians or Jews (people of the book, or *ahl al kitaab*) are allowed to live within an Islamic state with inferior religious, civil, and political recourses and rights. They pay a yearly tax called the *jizya* and the *dhimmi* contract of protection could be unilaterally repealed by the Muslim ruler without any notification. The word can be used to refer to the contract of protection or to the groups or individuals themselves. The key book on the topic is by the Egyptian-born author Bat Ye'or. *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001). The Ottoman Empire's version of the *dhimmi* system was called the millet system (*millet* being Turkish for *nations*).

8. Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (Oxford: Oneworld, 3rd edn, 2000), p. 205.

the family is important, good, unique, and so on. Yet there must also be a willingness to grow, and biologically that means producing offspring with people from other families. Thus identity is paradoxically maintained only with the awareness of a dynamic and shifting construal of itself. Once identity becomes static it often becomes in itself an idol and people start worshipping Episcopalianism/Anglicanism or Eastern Orthodoxy or Evangelicalism, or what have you.

The missiological implications of such a theory of liturgy are multiple. Within the context of the Eastern Churches, specifically the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, the twin scourges of Islam and Communism have been devastating – far more traumatic than anything that the Western Churches, whether Latin or Protestant, have suffered. Communism made certain promises regarding economic equality that it ultimately and dramatically failed to fulfill, thus leading to its general collapse; during its reign it certainly persecuted Christians zealously and effectively. This can be seen from the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church in the twentieth century had more martyrs than any other church in any century. Or consider the fact that communist Albania is the only country in this history of the world to have ever been officially declared an atheistic state. But its reign was not sustainable because it failed to tie in the most profound needs of the human being, which are spiritual and transcendent, and it failed to deliver the very pragmatic prosperity it promised.

Islam has been much more effective in the long term of delimiting the life of the Christian community by striking at the heart of the liturgy: the ability to welcome in new members. The liturgies of the Eastern Churches certainly became central to maintaining the identity of the Christian *dhimmi*; this is true whether we are speaking of the earliest *dhimmi* contract or the elaborate *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire. If this theory of the liturgy is valid, then baptism actually becomes anti-liturgical once it is accepted that certain people within a community (Muslims) *cannot* receive it. It is anti-liturgical because it announces the emptiness of the *work* of the church, and denigrates the *people* who are working it and for whom the work is done. The foundation of the Church is openness to others, indeed working towards creating openness to others (what we have traditionally called *mission* and *evangelism*). And once a church has closed itself to the other, it has made a decision against the work of the people. For this reason one might say that martyrdom is the most profound of liturgical acts within the Church: it is the Eucharist written on the body.

Within a Jordanian context of scarcity, we must ask the following question: does this then lead us towards a Western evangelical model

wherein numbers (like attendance and giving) are the primary criteria of success? No: the criterion of success for liturgy does not need to be viewed through a Western lens of church growth and popularity. But on the other hand, continuity of a community is certainly important, and many of the churches in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) are declining, and some are on the verge of total extinction. Additionally, the commission of Jesus to make disciples of all ethnic groups and nations, as well as the archetypal example of the early church in Jerusalem, certainly implies that over the long term growth and welcoming people into the Kingdom of God was to be normative. The two ideas must indeed be held in tension with each other, and seeking a reasonable path forward that honors both the biblical mandate for evangelism while not falling into a productionist model that reduces the church to a corporation is a major aim of this paper.

Liturgy and Identity in Jordan

Having concluded our historical and theological reflections, we are now in a position to examine the liturgies currently being used in the diocese. The Diocese of Jerusalem has a Prayer Book that is entirely in Arabic. It was last revised in 1965 and this revision contains elements of then-current prayer books of the Church of England and the Episcopal Church of the USA. There are a number of other liturgies that are used, including one based on a translation of the 1928 Episcopal Church in the USA Book of Common Prayer and the liturgy from the interdenominational Schneller School.

The clergy were unanimous that a revised or updated Prayer Book was desirable for a number of reasons. Many clergy also stated that a new Prayer Book would not be well received by the congregations. In terms of a new Prayer Book there were a number of suggestions, such as more occasional prayers like the prayer for peace; services for the blessing or consecration of a house, a church, or a chapel; one priest expressed a desire for sacramental rites to be included like Reconciliation of a Penitent. Additionally, the current Prayer Book does not have a rite for the baptism of an adult.

Interestingly, regarding the central liturgy of the church, the Eucharist, a committee headed by one priest presented a revised proposal to the synod in 2003, but no action has been taken since then. As one priest said, 'it has been left in a drawer somewhere'. Another priest, who was on that committee, said that, 'We prepared something which really I considered was very valuable—being closer to the Eastern churches'. Another priest though did not feel that the proposed liturgy was

beneficial, and when asked about the state of the liturgy and the possibility of introducing changes said that the situation was 'a very sad thing indeed'.

The entire question of drawing closer to the Eastern churches was in fact a concern for a number of the clergy; one said that, 'we do not have an Anglican liturgy that was born from the people here'. The Anglican presence in Jordan was started by the CMS, which was zealously Low Church and evangelical in its approach,⁹ this influence can be seen quite strongly in a number of the congregations. Some congregations alternate between Morning Prayer and the Eucharist on Sundays (or Saturdays, since Sunday is generally a work day). The Church of the Redeemer, which is the largest church in the diocese in terms of membership, does not have a procession with acolytes, does not use incense, and until a few decades ago, did not use colored stoles according to the season of the church calendar.

This question of identity is closely related to the theory of liturgy outlined above: how does the Episcopal Church see itself and want to see itself? As an Anglican Province? As an evangelical church? As an Eastern Church along with the Orthodox, Copts, and Maronites? The link between liturgy and identity is seen very clearly in this instance.

This is not to say that the Anglo-catholic elements have not entered into the liturgy in various churches, but clearly the Low Church, evangelical ethos of the early CMS missionaries has left a strong impression on this community. Many of the priests stated that ultimately the pastor of the church is the most important factor in terms of how elaborate or austere the liturgy will be. One priest explained how some pastors from the West Bank had brought some Anglo-Catholic elements to some of the evangelical parishes of Jordan.

The Eastern churches, whether Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, or Catholic, are often quite different and include numerous processions, incense, intricate vestments, veneration of icons, prayers to saints, the frequent use of the sign of the cross, and so on. It should also be kept in mind that most of the Anglican families come from the Greek Orthodox, Latin and Maronite churches, so at one point the ancestors of today's Anglicans chose to leave those indigenous forms of worship for that of the Episcopal missions. It is within this context that we can better understand what it means to say that the Episcopal

9. For an example see my article, 'Morning prayer, low style, in the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem: Church of the Redeemer, Amman, Jordan, Sunday, 11 March 2007', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 76.3 (2007), pp. 404–408.

churches need to return to a more Eastern form of worship. There does seem to be a tension between the evangelical, Low Church, confident Christianity of the CMS on the one hand, and the Eastern ethos that survived the unpredictable, and sometimes violent, relations with one Islamic ruler after another, lastly under the Ottoman *millet* system.

One of the most revealing questions asked of the interviewees was how it was that their families had come into the Anglican tradition in the first place. All of the clergy but one have at least one parent from the Episcopal Church, many of them have several grandparents who were part of the church. Each narrative was unique, but two factors were salient: the role of institutions, and the explicit teaching of the Bible. With regard to institutions, the Episcopal Church was the first to establish in what is now Jordan, a hospital and a Protestant church. Under the episcopate of the Swiss-born Samuel Gobat (r. 1846–1879), the second bishop in Jerusalem, a number of schools were founded and often attached to these would be a church.

Additionally, a number of Christians were attracted to the emphasis on the teaching of the Bible, something rare in the Orthodox churches in Jordan, both then and now. So simple Bible study groups or Sunday Schools were an attractive element in addition to the services provided by the schools and healthcare institutions founded and run by the diocese. While the bishop did not intentionally try to convert other Christians to Protestantism, people here and there were refused the Eucharist by the Orthodox clergy because they were reading the Bible, and Bishop Gobat claimed that it was his duty to provide care for these Christians.

Some of the priests placed a great deal of emphasis on the teaching of the Bible along with the maintaining of a liturgical form of worship as an important element of Anglican identity. Some of the churches offer weekly Bible teaching, and this seems to be a representation of the tradition of having a church that is at once liturgical and emphasizes teaching the Bible. One priest said that in his area the Latin¹⁰ and Orthodox churches had no Bible studies. Another priest, when asked why the Anglican tradition was special or unique, said that there is a 'very special import on Scriptures, as fountains of our faith, and the need to create a special kind of love and discovery of Scriptures'.

After explaining the evangelical, Low Church tradition of the CMS, one priest of an influential parish commented that in time the liturgy

10. Throughout the Middle East the adjective *Latin* is often used to refer to the Roman Catholic Church, while the Arabic cognate for *Catholic* (*katuliik*) is used to refer to the Greek Catholic or Melkite Church.

had become a very important part of the people's religious life and was like a bridge between the Eastern and Western churches: 'In the Anglican church you have a Reformed theology in a liturgical setting Anglican is "high and hazy, low and lazy, but broad and easy"'. He attributed the quote to an unnamed Bishop of London.

In terms of changes in liturgy of the Prayer Book in general, several things were suggested:

- The cycle for biblical readings is yearly; it should be changed to a bi- or tri-annual cycle.
- Summarizing or shortening some of the Communion prayers.
- Addition of prayers for peace, the consecration of a house, and the consecration of a chapel.
- 'The [Episcopal] Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East has missed out on liturgical renewal. Rather the focus was on issues of ethics, justice, and peace. These were central, so we missed out on liturgical renewal'. Thus the two themes of liberation and liturgy must be studied together and the liturgy revised in light of the developments in the other area.
- More emphasis on pastoral care and sacramental rites, born from 'a holistic approach to the life of the community'.

In general, any revision would have to be very conservative if it were to be accepted by the congregations. It should be more Eastern, which presumably means closer to the liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom used in the Orthodox churches in Jordan. Interestingly, while themes of justice and liberation are emphasized at the diocesan level,¹¹ none of the clergy stated a desire to see these themes represented in the liturgy. One pastor said quite plainly, 'Sixty years now of this problem with Israel... people are tired of hearing about politics', and expressed his congregation's desire for a shift towards 'teaching, and taking care of families'.

Education of Clergy and the Role of the Pastor

Related to the difficulties in revising the prayer book and church's liturgies, was the question of ministerial formation. Obviously, where one studies for the priesthood will make a profound impact on one's theological and liturgical viewpoints. And, in fact, a number of the clergy expressed dismay at the state of education in the diocese. One highly educated priest explained that the various ordinands attend a

11. By then-bishop Riah Abu El-Assal.

number of different seminaries around the world. This is indeed the case, and the clergy had studied everywhere from Australia, to Egypt, to the USA, to England, and France, among other places. There is a seminary in Jordan, Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminaries (JETS), but the diocese does not send anyone to JETS to study. Of course, within Anglicanism there are a great variety of traditions—from evangelical to Anglo-catholic, to progressive — and the clergy in Jordan, though there are not many, do indeed reflect this variety.

The diocese does have a college in Jerusalem, but it does not offer the traditional M Div, which most pastors study for. Rather, it offers shorter seminars that are attended mostly by foreigners. Whether or not it would be desirable or possible to transform Saint George's College into a traditional seminary remains to be seen.

One priest lamented, 'Through 19 years I have received a maximum of five books from the bishops. We have very few books — none in Arabic. I don't care what church they're from [...] Even if [the book] is very controversial I tell the bishops we are like wells, we will dry up! Find one priest in our diocese who has gone for a revival [sabbatical]'.

The problem, then, is two-fold: first, regarding seminary education there is no seminary that at once can speak to the Anglican identity of the diocese while also addressing specific theological, historical, and political realities that are unique to Arab Christians; second, continuing education for the clergy is virtually nonexistent. The reason for this seems to be a lack of desire or resources on the part of the diocesan leadership though. There certainly is a desire among the clergy to continue learning about topics like theology and pastoral practice.

The multiplicity of sources of education and thus formation can be seen in differences regarding pastoral practice. One of the older priests was very pessimistic regarding the younger generation of clergy: 'pastoral care now is nil compared to the past...I used to make 20 visits a day ...Now I don't see a priest making a visit, even for sick people'. When asked about the future clergy he said that they are not disciplined, and that Anglicanism is a tradition that emphasizes discipline, such as preaching and pastoral visitation. 'What I am saying is really half the truth; the real truth is horrifying. That is why I'm afraid for the church'.

To the Western Christian it should be pointed out for the sake of clarity that visiting friends and family is traditionally a cornerstone of Arab society. The preference for pastoral visits over other sorts of contacts such as e-mail or scheduled church functions is thus in many ways a specific instance of a more general disjunct between an older generation and a younger one for whom visitation, while still important, is not necessarily foundational.

Consider, on the other hand, the comments of one younger priest regarding the role of the pastor. The priest attracts us to follow Christ, he says. But many people do not understand the liturgy, 'they are not connecting'. It is important for people to feel that the pastor is living the spirituality, so there needs to be heartfelt expression in reading the prayers, for instance.

One priest is responsible for what is called in the diocese the youth, though it refers to what Western churches would call young adults, most of whom are in college or are professionals. His approach was to emphasize challenging doctrinal teaching. He said that he is not against things like games and picnics at retreats, but he sees a portrayal of the Christian faith as demanding as central to the future of the church, especially in terms of retaining the interest and loyalty of young adults. He strongly emphasizes the evangelical concept of internal, voluntary, spiritual conversion. As an example he says that many young Christian women in Jordan marry Muslim men (it is illegal though for a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man), but if she has made this decision of spiritual conversion, then she would not do so. (The topic of marriage and thus the religion of the children is very important to the future of the diocese, and of Christians in the Arab world in general. This is a topic we shall return to later.)

Another priest expressed the important link between education and mission: '[The Church] needs to redefine its identity and its mission. We don't have one clear vision specific to the Episcopal church of the area'. Since each priest is educated at a different seminary or university, their exposure to theological ideas and authors is varied, and since continuing education is virtually nonexistent, a sustained conversation regarding the mission of the church is difficult. A lack of continuing education may also contribute to the perceived generational gap. Finally, in addition to these conditions, the fact that the various congregations in the diocese worship in three different languages (or four if one considers Sudanese Arabic as its own language), and it is easy to understand why the clergy do not feel that there is a unified diocesan vision.

Possible suggestions for addressing these problems would include a diocesan selection of two or three seminaries that embody that ethos of the diocese. Seminarians studying in the West might receive additional training on indigenous topics, while students studying in the Middle East could receive supplementary education on Anglican topics like liturgy, theology, and especially history. A specific example of this might be medieval church history. For many in the West it is a period of secondary importance when compared to the Patristic era or

the Reformation. It is possible there to graduate with an M Div and know nothing about medieval church history. But for the Christians in the Middle East this is a focal period containing the rise and spread of Islam and the schism between the sees of Rome and Constantinople.

It is also certainly possible to hold a yearly or biyearly retreat for the clergy in Jordan, with guest speakers who can teach and converse about theology, missiology, and pastoral practice. (At the very least this will provide a time for discussion and reflection for all the clergy in the country perhaps the few clergy in Syria and Lebanon could attend as well, if there are no problems in getting entry visas to the country.)

Finally, the possibility of establishing a provincial seminary, probably in Jerusalem, Cairo, or Alexandria, could also be brought up.

Episcopal Ministry in Relation to Jordan and the Future

The bishop of Jerusalem at the time of the interviews was Riah Abu el-Assal, a native of Nazareth, who became the diocesan bishop on 15 August 1998, and retired in April, 2007. A primary focus of Bishop Abu el-Assal's ministry had been one of exploring the implications of Liberation Theology with regard to the difficulties faced by the Palestinians. Thus, there has been at least the perception that he has aspired to unite the role of prophet and bishop into one: overseeing the lives of the individual communities and safe-guarding their doctrinal purity, while also operating as an advocate against corruption and the oppression of Palestinians by Israeli Jews, and to a lesser extent Zionist Christians. On the whole he is now (in 2009) a largely unpopular figure.

The idea of combining the role of a bishop and a prophet is certainly interesting. There is no indication in the New Testament that this is permissible – or if it is permissible, that it is desirable. Moreover, the pattern of prophetic denunciation we see in the Bible always includes willingness to prophecy against one's own people. Thus the absence of prophetic denunciation against the corruption and nepotism of the Palestinian Authority, say, or the perpetual internecine fighting between political parties like Hamas and Fatah, or the lack of denunciation against the governments of Jordan and Syria for prohibiting the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, are also occasions of concern among those who try to evaluate his ministry as a Christian prophet. It is no way clear how that 'prophetic' ministry has served to help the clergy and churches in Jordan to grow and mature.

One of the questions that was raised during the interviews with the pastors was regarding the future of the congregations in terms of growth, specifically numerical growth. Protestant Christians are a

minority of a small minority in Jordan. Christians form only about three percent of the population of Jordan, and the primary church is the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. Working under the Patriarch of Jerusalem (who is Greek, not Arab) is the bishop of Philadelphia (Amman), who is responsible for the churches in Jordan.

While a good number of the first Anglicans came from the Orthodox Church, it is not the practice of the Episcopal Church here to actively recruit or proselytize Orthodox or Latin (Roman Catholic) Christians. In fact, ecumenical relations were mentioned by a number of priests as being an important part of the role of the Episcopal Church in the region.¹² Moreover, the Tractarians in the Church of England opposed the establishment of a see in Jerusalem because they held that see to already be occupied by the Orthodox Patriarch. In the interviews, the tone towards the Orthodox and Latin Churches was friendly, and the clergy genuinely desire greater interaction with these communities. Thus the proselytizing of Christians from the older churches as a form of church growth is neither viable nor desired.

A number of the priests were disappointed by the lack of attendance of their own Episcopalian Christians. One priest pointed out that one of his two churches was still experiencing divisions over issues from several decades ago. This is a consequence of the family-based (or one might even use the word *tribal*) understanding of identity. Pastors provided estimates of attendance and membership for a few of the churches in the country: Saint Paul's in Jabal Ashrafiyyi in Amman has a membership of about 150 with an average attendance¹³ of 15; Saint Luke's in Marka has a membership of about 100 with an average attendance of 20; For the city of Amman one priest estimates 2000 Anglicans and an average attendance of less than 200 for four parishes and about 100 at Church of the Redeemer; another priest estimates that there are at least 1600 Anglicans in Amman, and that fewer than 20% attend regular services in the four Amman parishes. There is clearly room for improvement in the area of motivating non-attending Episcopalians.

12. For more on the history of the relation between Anglicans and some of the Orthodox Churches see Geoffrey Rowell, 'Eastern horizons: Anglicans and the Oriental Orthodox Churches', in Nigel Aston (ed.), *Religious Change in Europe, 1650–1914: Essays for John McManners* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1997).

13. We cannot use average Sunday attendance in reference to the churches in Jordan since Friday is the Muslim holy day and Sunday is a work-day for most Christians. Thus many churches hold services on Saturday evening or even Friday morning. The attendance estimates are for these main weekly services.

Particularly challenging to the clergy was the question regarding the viability of welcoming Muslim converts into the churches, a concern outlined above in the section on liturgy. One interviewee said that, 'Civil laws don't allow us to evangelize. You don't have a right to say anything against Islam'. He explained that even if Muslims don't use the word *dhimmi* very often, the concept still has a powerful influence in social relations between the religious groups. Muslims enjoy rights that other groups do not, and it is legal for Christians to convert to Islam, while it is illegal for a Muslim to leave Islam. One priest said, 'If any Muslims change [religions], it is allowed to kill this man'. Indeed, according to the Prophet, the punishment for apostasy is death,¹⁴ though it is not actively enforced by the Jordanian government. On the other hand, it is widely believed that there are ways in which a family can carry out an honor killing and avoid legal prosecution. Another priest, upon being asked what happened to Muslims who converted to Christianity, said, 'That is simple: they kill him'.

The *dhimmi* status of Christians thus lingers in Jordan because it is and always has been an integral aspect of Islamic society: 'Even if Muslims don't say it they still believe that non-Muslims are a *dhimmi*'. Within the larger Christian community in the Middle East the converts to Christianity from Islam generally keep it secret for fear of persecution. Muslims who do convert then, even if they are welcomed into a church, Episcopalian or otherwise, cannot contribute to the life of the community for fear of visibility. A large-scale, public conversion of Muslims to Christianity would almost certainly bring about a wave of persecution against Christians of all sorts. The continuation of a Christian community within a country like Jordan is contingent on the unspoken agreement that Christians forfeit rights for the sake of the permission from the Muslim community to continue to exist. Thus they are 'entrusted to the conscience [*dhimmi*] and generosity of the Muslims', as one pastor put it.

14. The most poignant and clear hadith on the topic is this: Narrated Ikrima: Ali burnt some people and this news reached Ibn Abbas, who said, 'Had I been in his place I would not have burnt them, as the Prophet said, "Don't punish (anybody) with Allah's Punishment"'. No doubt, I would have killed them, for the Prophet said, "If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him"' (*Sahih al Bukhari* 4:52:260). All four major schools of shari'a (Arabic *madhaahib*) are agreed on the topic that the shari'a regards apostasy (*ridda* or *irtidaad*) as a capital crime requiring execution for males. There are different opinions regarding whether the apostate should have a chance to recant or not. A helpful background on the topic is Frank Griffel, 'Toleration and exclusion: Al-Shafi'i and al-Ghazali on the treatment of apostates', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 64.3 (2001), pp. 339–54.

One pastor remarked on this stressful situation, saying, 'The community grows stronger when there is pressure. We are starting to be under pressure in Jordan. We see it on TV, talks, in our lives with Muslims. Christians become more hated due to Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, etc. They view us as agents of crusaders or people who love [then US President George] Bush'.

Is it possible that the problems of low attendance and the general lack of interest in evangelizing Muslims are related? If the Good News is not good enough to share with Muslims, despite the sacrifices that this action might entail, then why is it good enough to cause someone to sacrifice his or her time of rest and relaxation on Saturday evening or Sunday? There are certainly historical grounds for exploring an Episcopal mission to Muslims. While Michael Alexander focused on evangelizing Jews, later bishops hoped that Arab Episcopalians would carry out this work. For they would be equipped with what the missionaries perceived to be the reformed gospel of evangelical Anglicanism, the sacraments, and the cultural and linguistic knowledge that most Westerners could never acquire.¹⁵ A Western-style evangelistic campaign is neither possible nor desirable, but acknowledging how important the topic is and listening to the experiences of Muslim converts as well as other Arab Christians working in this area could provide at least the raw material for an intentional and fruitful conversation among the clergy, possibly leading to the formulation of a clear vision or plan for the diocese, or at least the churches in Jordan.

An example of the vigor, or lack of vigor, of the church in terms of growth was mentioned during one interview. The priest explained that the last time a new Episcopal church was founded in Jordan was in the 1990s, but it was not so much starting a new parish, as splitting off a part of the Church of the Redeemer to establish the parish of Saint Paul's in the neighborhood of Al Ashrafiyyi. Another pastor lamented that the percentage of population of Jordan that is Christian has gone down from 8% to about 2% during his lifetime. He also

15. Indeed, a large number of Protestant missionary groups held to this strategy, it is called The Great Experiment and characterized much Protestant mission from the nineteenth Century on. On the balance though the great experiment was a failure. Good resources on this topic are Lyle Vander Werff, *Christian Mission to Muslims: the Record: Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the Near East* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1977) and Peter Pikkert, *Protestant Missionaries to the Middle East: Ambassadors of Christ or Culture?* (Hamilton, Ontario: WEC Canada, 2008).

commented on the irony of towns named after convents, which used to be entirely Christian, but now do not have a single Christian family.

Matthew Walter is an American priest, then from the Diocese of Pittsburgh, but he and his family have lived in Amman for over 7 years, and he assists at the Church of the Redeemer on a regular basis in the Arabic-language service. On being asked about the possibility of planting a new church in Amman, he pointed out the difficulty involved, since such a process would inevitably involve subtracting parishioners from other churches, and thus lead to acrimony.

Another foreign priest, the chaplain of the English Speaking Anglican Congregation in Amman, commented that he suspected that the present generation of Arab Christians could be the last one that has numbers significant enough to make a distinct impact on the direction of society and culture here.

One objection that is often raised when the question of evangelization of Muslims is raised is this: first we must worry about our own congregations, then when they are healthy we can engage in outreach. But the spiritual dynamic embodied in the Scripture and many of the churches of the emerging world reflect the reverse of this dynamic: when a church becomes concerned with sharing the gospel and welcoming in new members, including entire families, people are more interested in their church, including people who have not been regularly attending. Why is this? Simply because it is exciting to see the impact of the gospel on peoples' lives as they experience substantial healing in the areas of emotional, spiritual, and physical wholeness. When you have new members teaching the Scripture becomes not simply an optional program that could be added, but something utterly essential. Also, new converts tend to bring an excitement and devotion that challenge the sincerity and points of view of the congregation. When accompanied by appropriate pastoral care and teaching this can be an opportunity for real growth in the life of the congregation. The only other route whereby the Episcopal Church in Jordan could see substantial growth would be a confluence of increased birth rates and decreased emigration. In any case, such a move towards a more robust engagement of the Muslim population would require cooperation and strong leadership from the bishop, in addition to cooperation from churches and leaders who have some experience in that area of ministry.

Conclusion

The status of the Episcopal Church as it exists in Jordan is precarious. Continuing emigration, relatively low birth rates among the Christian

population, and the lack of desire or ability to extend an invitation to Muslims (>95% of the population) to become part of their churches all coalesce. The picture is one of stagnation, it is not as bad as the decimation of the Chaldean community in Iraq, but neither are there the numbers to create a proper and sustainable sub-culture, as is the case with the Copts in Egypt. This situation corresponds to a kind of liturgical stalemate: there is an awareness that the liturgy should be revised for several purposes – to make it more intelligible to the younger generation, to reflect the Eastern roots of Christianity in Jordan – and preliminary steps have been taken in that direction, but that is all. In 2006 it was realistic to look forward to the installation of a new bishop and hope for movement in these areas, but the breakdown of the Anglican Communion and geo-political events in the diocese (Lebanon, Gaza) have made movement on these issues of secondary importance.

It is not impossible, however, to picture the Jordanian leadership taking up the mantle of a patient, respectful outreach to Muslims. The nature of this outreach would not preclude the possibility of conversion and would be a continuation of numerically small but significant understanding of Anglican witness. If we look close to home we find the irenic but evangelical witness and work of Kenneth Cragg (b. 1913), former assistant bishop in Jerusalem. If we look further away we find men like Hassan Dehqani Tafti (1920–2008), himself a convert from Islam and bishop of the Diocese of Iran from 1961 through 1990. If we look back in time we find the creative combination of medical mission and apologetics of Abdul Masih (1776–1827), an ex-Muslim, medical doctor and Anglican priest.¹⁶ Examples could be multiplied, but certainly the Anglican Communion as an expression of catholic Christianity has demonstrated time and again both the will and ability to constructively engage in the evangelization of Muslims. It would not be difficult for the Anglicans of Jordan to draw on this aspect of their heritage and explore how to put what they learn into practice within their own context.

While the picture of stagnation mentioned above seems accurate to me, there are other some positive possibilities for ministry as well. The Anglican leadership in Jordan understand themselves to be a bridge-building community, one that enables different communities to meet

16. An enjoyable and brief introduction to the life and work of Abdul Masih can be found in Graham Kings, 'Abdul Masih: Icon of Indian indigeneity', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23.2 (1999), pp. 66–69.

in a space comfortable to both. There are resonances with both the non-liturgical evangelicals and the Greek Catholics. The Church has deep roots both in the Arab world and close relations to Western Provinces like The Episcopal Church and the Church of England. If the stagnation described above, which is a real existential challenge, can be reversed, one can expect the Church in Jordan to use this unique status to bring together disparate communities to promote Christian unity in a region where it is sorely lacking.