



# The Coptic Church in South Africa: The meeting of mission and migration

**Author:**

 David A. Ogren<sup>1,2</sup>
**Affiliations:**
<sup>1</sup>Department of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

<sup>2</sup>Department of Church History and Church Polity, University of Pretoria, South Africa

**Note:**

David A. Ogren is a research associate of Prof. Graham A. Duncan, head of the Department of Church History and Church Polity, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa.

**Correspondence to:**

Graham Duncan

**Email:**

graham.duncan@up.ac.za

**Postal address:**

Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa

**Dates:**

Received: 03 Sept. 2013

Accepted: 22 Feb. 2014

Published: 15 July 2014

**How to cite this article:**

 Ogren, D.A., 2014, 'The Coptic Church in South Africa: The meeting of mission and migration', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(1), Art. #2061, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2061>
**Copyright:**

© 2014. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS OpenJournals. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Previously identified as an entrenched Egyptian community, Copts have propelled themselves into the greater Africa through two main phenomena: migration and mission. Copts have recast displacement to transcend powerlessness and loss by highlighting the sovereign opportunity to consolidate identity in new contexts and widen the fold of the Coptic community, expressed through ecumenism, holistic ministry, cultural sensitivity and the presentation of the Coptic Church as essentially 'African'. In migration, the Coptic Church creates identity through physical presence (church buildings), recasting the narrative (African originality), employing a rubric of sovereignty (agency rather than passivity) and engaging others ecumenically (gaining Orthodox legitimacy). Beyond reaching out to migrants, much energy has been devoted to mission by establishing institutions, including a missionary training department at the Institute of Coptic Studies and a Department of African Studies in Cairo. In mission, the Coptic Church extends its influence beyond migrants to include non-Copts and non-Christians through ecumenism, social programs and the presentation of Copts as essentially African.

## Introduction

Previously identified as an entrenched Egyptian community, struggling to survive in hostile conditions and under the direction of a historically inward-focusing leadership, the Copts have propelled themselves into greater Africa through two main phenomena: migration and mission. These streams of movement have resulted from difficult political realities in Egypt and spiritual renewal within the Church. In migration, the Coptic Church creates identity through physical presence (church buildings), recasting of the narrative (African originality), employing a rubric of sovereignty (agency rather than passivity) and ecumenism (gaining Orthodox legitimacy). Yet, each of these migration identities also reflects the revived mission of the Church. In addition to changes within the Coptic Church toward Africa, one finds the shift of many African churches' attitudes toward the Coptic Church, evidenced through various collaborative and ecumenical efforts. Copts desire to present themselves as the original African Christianity, and independent churches are looking for a legacy that excludes colonial identification. However, Coptic ecclesiology, which identifies Copts as protectors of the one apostolic church, may sometimes appear at odds with their ecumenical outreach. Whilst ecclesiology is the foundation of Orthodox ecumenism, it often becomes a point of misunderstanding between East and West. For the Orthodox churches, the Church is defined as the body of Christ, who is head of the Church and intimately unified with his body. Due to this mystical relationship, Orthodoxy holds that the Church has always been unified, as Christ cannot be divided from his body (Florovsky & Haugh 1989:138). Therefore, the drive for Orthodox ecumenism is the restoration of a common faith (Timko 1976:139) rooted in apostolic tradition rather than a quest for organisational unity or social collaboration. Orthodoxy ultimately views schism as a break from the Body of Christ (Clapsis 2000:7), alluding to the deep pain that Orthodoxy associate with denominationalism. As Copts expand beyond Egypt and interact with other denominations, the question becomes whether Copts will retrench into historical patterns of identity and structure or integrate into new societies and church types? Furthermore, to what extent will Coptic theology allow for the social integration that has encouraged other denominations to proliferate?

In order to better understand the new dynamics of Christianity in Africa regarding the Copts, I shall, firstly, reference their presence in South Africa. This is a country that is positioned at the opposite end of the continent and includes a multiplicity of denominations, representing the Coptic desire to expand to all of Africa, both geographically and ecumenically. Secondly, this context offers the Coptic Church the chance to highlight both their historic identity and their decision to adapt to different contexts.

My thesis is that the Coptic Church's work amongst its migrants cannot be separated from the new missional focus of the past 25 years. This does not mean that migrants become Coptic

**Read online:**


Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

missionaries but that the Coptic Church has redefined migration as an opportunity for expanded ministry and influence. As migrants encounter loss of identity in the new context, the Church provides meaning and connection to them through church buildings and liturgy (the heart of Coptic witness). However, the Church also reaches beyond the diaspora to interact with other denominations and non-Christians. Renewal within the Coptic Church has motivated interest in mission, and migration has given Copts the reason to direct this mission outside of Egypt.

I shall, firstly, provide the backdrop of the Coptic position in Egyptian society in order to elucidate the motivation for migration. Secondly, issues of Coptic migration will be examined before moving on to the Coptic missional response to Africa, particularly in South Africa. Finally, I shall conclude with a few reflections on Coptic migration and mission and its place within the South African context.

## The Coptic social position in Egypt 1900–1968

The historical sweep of Copts in Egypt is much too broad to survey in a few paragraphs so I shall cover the period beginning with the turn of the previous century and ending in 1968 when a Coptic mission school for southern Africa was started (Assad 1972:129). The first point is that non-Muslims in Egypt, as in many other Muslim countries, were organised into a 'millet' system, which separated distinct ethnic groups in order to reduce conflict (Carter 1986:3). The 20th century saw the Copts, for better or (often) worse, as a distinct group awarded the sorts of social stigma inevitable to those considered the lower class. The Coptic Orthodox Church was not only isolated from other segments of society but also from other Christians due to various reform and missionary efforts directed toward the Copts (Carter 1986:7).

Through the 20th century, Muslims and Copts worked together on national issues such as working towards independence from Britain (Assad 1972:121). However, more often than not, the Copts were on the outside of many political processes and felt increasingly ostracised at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists and the deaf ears of the government (Hassan 2003:263).

Then, in the 1950s, coinciding with the creation of a secular state, Copts began to experience a renewal within the church that involved aspects of fellowship (*koinonia*) and service (*diakonia*) (Assad 1972:123). There was a greater focus on reviving communal identity and engendering loyalty to 'orthodoxy'. Teaching and discipleship increased each week, evidenced by the weekly Bible study that Bishop Athanasius would hold for people of all ages (*ibid*:126). The dynamic 'Schools of Church Education' encouraged Copts to serve the church as clergy-in-training and prepare for lifelong service (*ibid*:127). In 1957, an Institute of Coptic Studies began, followed by the mission school for Copts in sub-Saharan Africa in 1968, based in Cairo (*ibid*:129). Lastly, the Church

attempted to connect the Coptic communities by sending deacons out to rural areas, placing greater importance on the poorer Coptic areas and making an effort to move out to 'newer' areas (*ibid*:127).

In these examples, we see a pattern of decreased participation in Egyptian society at large by the Coptic community as well as increased marginalisation and oppression by the government. In light of the dim prospects of the early 1900s, the Coptic Church began a concerted renewal movement to encourage greater identity for Copts. This included focusing on urban and rural areas, formal education and informal Bible studies, increased fellowship and service and the formation of institutes for training. For the Copts, these acts extended beyond desperation to purposefully positioning themselves to thrive in culture, theology and community. This was a promising beginning, but the Copts would need to get out of Egypt in order to realise the full extent of their renewal.

## Issues in Coptic migration Why Copts leave

The issue of migration has not always figured prominently within the Coptic Church as it really began in the 1950s as part of the movement for Egyptian nationalism (Chaillot 2009:207). In the latter decades of the previous century, the diaspora largely resulted from economic and political oppression in Egypt as well as from Muslim persecution that increased in the 1970s (Meinardus 1999:129, 207). The connection of the Copts to Egypt, even in the face of general oppression and rejection, should not be underestimated. It is the home of their fathers, the birthplace of their faith, the cornerstone of identity, belonging and being. To be a Copt is to be linked to the symbols and liturgy of the church (Wakin 1963:169). These are often left behind in Egypt as the immigrant travels on to places where the Coptic Church is not established. To add insult to injury, the government does not allow migrating Copts to take their financial savings with them, resulting in the displaced member arriving in the new homeland with a sense of bankruptcy on many levels (Wakin 1963:169). Disassociated from their family, church and finances, one must sense the incredible urgency which propels Copts to these measures.

## Negotiating identity in the new context

As Copts move to new locales, they must face the basic challenge of identity and redefine who they are and how they live out that identity in the new context (Bishai 2010:116). Those traits, taken for granted in the home country, must be re-evaluated and re-negotiated in the adopted country. Even if people do continue their Coptic identity, it may be culturally difficult to express that in the new environment. For example, how do Copts truly express their faith in the absence of the church, which is the seat of collective liturgy and witness? In many cases, the identity of the migrant is found squarely in the Church, and the Coptic Church senses the urgency to establish a physical presence amongst the diaspora as soon as possible (Wahba 2004:989). This

directly links Coptic migration to its mission as the Church recognises its responsibility to care for the diaspora through church structures (Assad 1972:128). Through this dynamic, Coptic presence has grown, even in the restricted region of the Middle East, as new churches were formed in Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, United Arab Emirates, Libya and Oman (Shenoudah 1991:1620B).

### Rewriting the narrative

In the diaspora, Copts have found an opportunity to redefine the narrative of the Church. Since members of the host country have not experienced the same Coptic history, parts can be selected to represent the desired message. For instance, when communicating the Coptic legacy, it is often the 'early glorious era' that is referenced rather than the 14 centuries of Muslim rule (Botros 2006:175–176). This phenomenon goes back to Zerubabel's 'rules of remembrance', which speak to the capacity of a community to choose that which is remembered and that which is forgotten (*ibid*:193). As the Coptic Church retells its story to South Africa, it is recomposing the memories of the church in a way that moves it forward into the new context. This means identifying themes of African originality, freedom from colonial influence and the unbroken apostolicity of leadership rather than the difficult themes of Muslim subjugation and discrimination. This does not mean that other themes are not important to the Copts but that they may not translate well in a different context. It is interesting that, in the South African context, the legacy of survival amidst the millet system of Egypt may actually be a benefit to the Coptic narrative in a post-apartheid environment. In the end, it is clear that 'events that would affirm the Church's adaptation and survival are the ones elected for remembrance' (*ibid*:193).

### Migration and ecumenism

It appears that the act of leaving Egypt is not necessarily a limitation on the Church's influence as it engages Copts with other Christians. The recently departed Pope Shenouda wrote that 'the desire of Copts [*is*] to be fully and unequivocally accepted as orthodox Christians by all members of world Christianity' (Meinardus 1999:123). Migration has placed Copts in a position of dialogue and explanation regarding their faith, forcing the Coptic Church to formulate its identity in a more pluralistic context rather than against Islam only. The diaspora has expanded the sphere of Coptic influence in new contexts by encouraging the concretising of identity and the extended hand of ecumenical outreach. The renewal of *diakonia* is seen as the Church moves out from its historical borders to serve those in other countries (Markos 2001:8). So, migration has broadened the Coptic missional reach through increased dialogue, the quest for legitimacy and interaction with various denominations.

### The sovereign dimension of migration

Beyond the political implications, a sovereign template is also placed atop migration. Bishop Markos, director of Coptic African Affairs, sees the diaspora as a response to persecution

and danger in the homeland and quotes Acts 8:1–4 to describe the phenomena that '... those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word' (Markos 2001:15). So, for some, migration has moved beyond an imposition to an opportunity that is linked directly with the mission of the Church. This perspective provides a way to reclaim and rename the event of migration from one of powerlessness to agency whilst also placing it within the agenda of the Coptic Church. What was once a loss of identity is now reset as the very definition of Coptic mission in the world through the active work of God.

Now that I have reviewed the general issues of Coptic migration, namely identity, narrative, ecumenism and sovereignty, I shall look at the expanding mission of the Coptic Church in Africa in order to deduce how Copts began to look outside of Egypt.

## The migration of Coptic mission in Africa

### A brief history of reaching out

Early Coptic history shows the Copts moving to other parts of Africa. As early as 300 CE, there was activity in Ethiopia with the Church selecting Ethiopian Bishops (Meinardus 1999:132). The Nile served as a natural navigational tool to take the Coptic heritage south. However, the encroaching Islamic empire soon forced Copts to look primarily to the homefront due to increased persecution and marginalisation. It was not until the 1900s that they were able to return to a missional outlook (Watson 2000:73). Around the middle of the previous century, with increased migration and the pull-out of colonial powers, the environment started to open up for the Copts.

Beyond reaching out to migrants, there was great energy devoted to establishing institutions, including a missionary training department at the Institute of Coptic Studies and a Department of African Studies in Cairo started by Pope Kyrillos in 1962 (Meinardus 1999:135; Watson 2000:73). The Pope elevated the Coptic outreach into Africa by writing, 'the African project of the Coptic Church is given priority over any other project' (Meinardus 1999:135). In 1965, the Papal office was renamed as 'Pope of Alexandria and of All Africa', further emphasising the fact that the Coptic Church was approaching Africa through terms of mission for the first time since the 7th century CE (*ibid*:135). In the late 20th century, Coptic focus on the greater Africa continued through the charismatic approach of Bishop Shenoudah, who held that Copts were responsible for growing the Kingdom of God in Africa (Lagerwerf 1978:26). This historical shift in attitude of the Coptic Church towards Africa inspired Watson to consider Copts as replacements for white missionaries who were leaving the continent (Watson 2000:74).

Coptic renewal is also catalysed by monasticism, a foundational aspect of not only Coptic spirituality but also of Coptic leadership (all Patriarchs come from the monastic

ranks). Influential monks like Matta al-Miskin popularised the writings of the desert fathers for a new generation, establishing a publishing house and emphasising spiritual experience (O'Mahony 2007:173). Rather than a simple withdrawal from the world, Copts view monasticism as a battlefield in which Christians can see God at work.<sup>1</sup> Monastic centres have sprung up throughout the world where Copts have gone, a South African example seen in the May 2007 beginning of the Saint Mark and Samuel the Confessor Coptic Orthodox Monastery (Saint Mark and Samuel the confessor, 2007) being established in the Klipfontein area (*Coptic Orthodox church of South Africa – part 1*, 2009). This Coptic revival also encouraged a feeling of patristic responsibility towards not only their own migrants but other believers elsewhere (De Gruchy 1997b:26).

Bishop Antonius Markos began official missionary efforts into Africa in 1976 (Grafton 2007:104). Soon, the African Orthodox Church (a schism from the Anglican Church) and the Eritrean Orthodox Church joined the Patriarch of Alexandria (Bonk 2007:104). This great reorientation of the Coptic agenda saw rewards in leadership in 2002 as two South Africans were ordained as priests, one from the Sesotho community and one from the isiXhosa community (*ibid*:104). Since this initial revitalisation of its mission, the Church has expanded into Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Uganda and South Africa (Meinardus 1999:135–136). Between 1974 and 2004, over 200 new churches have been built outside of Egypt, displaying a concerted effort both to go where Coptic migrants had travelled and to expand the influence of the Church in non-Coptic areas (Wahba 2004:989). It is important to note that Orthodoxy in sub-Saharan is not limited to the Coptic Church. Throughout the 20th century, Greek Orthodoxy was also active in nine African countries through baptism, teaching, evangelism and starting seminaries (Hayes 1996). The historical relationship between Greek (Eastern) and Coptic (Oriental) Orthodoxy has been oft contentious due to the schisms originating at the Council of Chalcedon (Frame 1994:51). However, many gains toward unity have been made through the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1980s and 1990s ('Report of an Eastern Orthodox-WCC Consultation' in Limouris 1994:89) and through various pan-Orthodox conferences that have removed the mutual anathemas and distrust exacerbated through time and space.

Through its mission, Copts believe they have something unique to offer Africa. The Coptic Church is presented as having little to none of the power trappings experienced through the colonial church. According to Markos (2001:133), Egypt's 'page is absolutely white' regarding past abuses felt by sub-Saharan Christians. There is an attempt to consolidate Coptic identity but also an effort to bring the larger African identity under the umbrella of 'orthodox' faith.

As they move out of Egypt, Copts also want to learn from the gains and mistakes of other Orthodox churches (Malaty

1993:347) and express their Church, '... not as valuable monumental pieces of antiques but as a living experience which can be tasted and enjoyed' (Malaty 1993:348). They want to connect organically with other local contexts and offer a fresh spiritual experience that goes back to the beginning of Christianity. The Report on Orthodox African witness reflects this by stating, '...Orthodoxy holds the key to a truly enculturated Christian Gospel in Africa' (Fitzgerald & Bouteneff 1998:101).

## South Africa

### Apartheid

Coptic migration and mission to South Africa must begin with a brief survey of the apartheid system, with a special emphasis on the role of the local church. The post-colonial context left South Africa wrestling with how the various social groups should relate to one another. The then system of segregation was not working, and much unrest was evident. Integration was a failure, and many were clamouring for a new approach that would solidify the position of white people in South Africa (Giliomee 2003:391). Apartheid was rooted in the desire of Afrikaners to remain independent from others' interests (*ibid*:386). Theoretically, each group could be self-determined. However, white people had power over the economy, politics and military whilst black people had only sheer numbers (*ibid*:387).

Joined to the political realities was the influence of neo-Calvinism, that all things must be seen in terms of God's sovereignty (Elphick & Davenport 1998:142–143). This had the powerful crossover appeal to missionaries, churches and politicians. Apartheid was the 'marriage of ... mission strategists and secular nationalists' (Giliomee 2003:385). In 1950, at a people's congress, it was determined that the 'Christian' solution would be to protect each of the nations within South Africa by allowing the independent development 'according to its special needs' (Elphick & Davenport 1998:145). This was the context that the Coptic Church encountered upon its arrival.

### Copts in South Africa

Twentieth-century Coptic efforts in South Africa began in 1948 when Ayoub El-Anba-Bishoy was sent to consider opening a South African Diocese (Markos 2003:18). Bishoy baptised an isiZulu man, Mr Simon Khobe, who would prove crucial to the survival of the Coptic Church in South Africa during apartheid (*ibid*:18). Eventually, both Bishoy and his replacement left in 1968 (*ibid*:17). Since land was not purchased, a formal diocese was unable to begin (*ibid*:17).

During apartheid, it was very difficult for non-whites to obtain visas to enter South Africa (Markos 2003:19), making it almost impossible for other Copts to come and assist local congregations. There would be about a 40-year gap between the initial Coptic foray into South Africa and its later revitalisation. During this tenuous period, it was Simon Khobe who continued to learn and teach Coptic beliefs and

<sup>1</sup>The narrative of the desert 'battlefield' is highlighted by the desert fathers, especially Macarius (who greatly influenced Miskin). This theme is also seen in Macarius's *Fifty homilies* (1992) and Egan's (2010) *Sounding in the Christian mystical tradition*.

traditions to his isiZulu compatriots. He became a self-proclaimed pastor of the Coptic Church in this intermediate time (*ibid*:18–19).

In the summer of 1991, F.W. De Klerk (the then South African president) visited Kenya and announced that the visa restrictions for South Africa would be removed (Markos 2003:21). This opened up a new season for Coptic work and also encouraged the hope of purchasing some land in order to start a diocese. The idea of land and the church is very significant to Copts due to the linking of mission and liturgy. The hope of a South African church became a reality on 31 August, 1992 as the transaction for land was finalised in Parkview, Johannesburg (*ibid*:43).

The Copts continued their ecumenical approach in this once (and arguably still) fractured environment. They worked with the Russian, Ethiopian, Greek and Indian Orthodox churches, assisting with land purchases and vouching for bank accounts (Markos 2003:118–131). Another denomination, the African Orthodox Church, was officially welcomed into the Coptic fold under the Patriarchate of Alexandria (*ibid*:70). However, Copts' very different definition of ecumenism, based on their ecclesiology, can also lead to misunderstandings and a perceived abuse of power. Tensions have been introduced between Copts and other denominations, often directly proportional to their expansion into traditionally non-orthodox areas of Africa. This includes the issue of enculturation (the extent of Coptic accommodation). Whilst Coptic theologian Attia (2001:13) states that 'the ecumenical movement is not an arena for triumph of one church over another' the Coptic Church, like many churches, have historically attempted to influence others' theology, church structure and ecclesiology. This attempt had led Turner (1984:106–110) to consider the possibility that Copts were allowing their ecumenical ventures to become missionary strategies. One example of this is the need for Coptic 'converts' to be re-baptised into the Coptic Church. Since the Coptic Church does not officially recognise baptism from other churches, those wanting to become Copts must also accept the Church's specific interpretation of the sacraments (though the attitude towards Catholic baptisms may be relaxed in the future) (Newton 2013).

The Coptic mission in South Africa also reflects a cultural sensitivity. Both Bishop Markos and Pope Shenouda saw the importance of using local languages and cultural forms to introduce and strengthen the Coptic Church (Markos 2003:83–84). Some of this cultural accommodation can be viewed in some YouTube video sources. They show South Africans singing in harmony at a Copt-sponsored church camp (*Coptic Orthodox Church of Africa – part 1*, 2009) (traditionally, Copts will sing in unison, as this is considered more pure). The videos also show the mixing of Coptic and isiZulu worship styles and the Coptic liturgy in South Africa, which was done in English but chanted in the Middle-Eastern style. South Africans led the liturgy until the Eucharist, at which time an Egyptian Coptic priest took over the duties (*Coptic*

*orthodox Divine Liturgy celebrated in South Africa* 2011). This may speak to the power imbalance that still exists between Copts of Egyptian and Copts of South African descent. Or, it may represent the complex training the Coptic clergy goes through before being regarded as competent (Meinardus 2002:104).

The missionary work has also emphasised training local leaders for the future of the Church (Markos 2003:98). Interestingly, Copts see the value of culture as reciprocal. This is evidenced through the plethora of observational tours and training sessions in Cairo on which Coptic trainees are sent where they tour sites of major Old Testament events as well as study with specialised Coptic instructors (*ibid*:99–104).

Another benchmark of Coptic work in South Africa is holistic ministry, involving spiritual, physical and economic needs. Vocational centres have been opened in Gugelethu and Nongoma to increase job skills for locals (Markos 2003:114). Copts advance their stance on social issues through the lamenting of polygamy, homosexuality and single motherhood (*ibid*:117), and they reveal a desire to 'fix' these issues by engaging in social justice, healing and liberation. In this way, Copts realise that the church, in general, needs to get beyond simple anti-apartheid and anti-colonial stances and engage in complex social change (De Gruchy 1997a:481).

## Conclusion

Coptic migration began as a response to their historic social position in Egypt. Renewal within the Church in the middle of the 20th century coincided with increased numbers of diaspora, and mission coalesced with migration to expand Coptic influence throughout Africa. In their new host countries, migrants worked through issues of identity and communicating their story. The Coptic Church brought clarity through a physical presence (church buildings), recasting of the narrative (African originality), employing a rubric of sovereignty (agency rather than passivity) and encouraging ecumenism (gaining Orthodox legitimacy).

The Coptic presence in South Africa began in 1948 as a response to the growing affinity of sub-Saharan Africans with trans-colonial Orthodoxy. As opportunity reopened in 1991, Coptic leadership realised they had much more to offer than simply shepherd the diaspora. South Africa became a destination of migration for disenfranchised Copts, but renewal within the Egyptian Church was the impetus for this expanded mission to South Africa. The narrative of displacement was rewritten to transcend powerlessness and loss and highlight the sovereign opportunity to consolidate identity in new contexts and widen the fold of the Coptic community. This was accomplished through *koinonia* and *diakonia* and expressed through ecumenism, holistic ministry, cultural sensitivity and the presentation of the Coptic Church as essentially 'African'.

The Coptic Church is presenting itself as both immanent to the South African experience and transcendent of the

apartheid past. The Coptic mission seems to overcome some of the separating tendencies of apartheid. Markos writes that, unless missionaries are sent out, 'we are limited – I would even say imprisoned – in our respective communities...all our energy goes to fight each other...' (WCC: Commission on world mission and evangelism & Lemopoulos 1989:213). For the Bishop, the very act of going changes the perspective of missionary and host community, removing fear and suspicion and encouraging *koinonia*. Yet, Copts still identify with the oppression of the millet system into which they were forced in Egypt so they are naturally quite attuned to the marks of social abuse and segregation of South Africa's past.

Historically, Egypt is seen as a beacon of liberation and redemption (De Gruchy 1997b:33). African Instituted Churches (AIC) became increasingly enamoured with North Africa, both in Scripture (Ps 68:31, 'Princes shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands') and in politics (Ethiopia's defeat of Italy) (Muchi, Osha & Matlou 2012:7). The thought of venerable Christian communities in Egypt and Ethiopia was very appealing to AICs searching for continuity with Christian legacies independent of, and predating, colonial interference (Barrett & Padwick 1989:11). The Coptic Church also identifies with AICs by recognising shared issues of marginalisation at the hands of churches and governments (*ibid*:34). The continued success of the Coptic Church in South Africa (and indeed, all of Africa) will most likely depend on their ability to present the purity of their origin, address pastoral needs in African ways, adapt to various denominations and provide a Christianity that links the traditions of Egypt to the rapid changes going on in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Coptic expansion out of Egypt provided the Church with new situations in which to practice their skills of survival and identity. The question becomes: What will change more – the Coptic Church or the context into which it is moving? Differences in church structure and leadership can lead to conflict, and whilst the Coptic Church is generally a fixed, hierarchical organisation, AICs are often less rigid. Coptic episcopal leadership structure has not always blended well with the more flexible context of AICs, which often establish leaders through communal transmission, rather than apostolic succession (Daneel 1987:195). Also, the degree of adaption may affect the Church's future migration and mission. For a community so closely tied to Egypt linguistically and culturally, the prospect for integration into new contexts may demand greater openness to new forms. This is already beginning to take place as Copts introduce other languages into their liturgy and welcome non-Egyptians into their churches (Immerzeel & Van der Vliet 2004:990). The full impact of the multi-denomination context of sub-Saharan Africans on the Coptic Church remains to be seen as there exist possible tension between the plethora of AICs with their schismatic tendencies and the 'one' church advocated by Copts. However, Coptic leadership is wrestling with these questions, and former Pope Shenouda declared that

the domain of God is 'not for Catholicism or Protestantism or even for the Coptic Church ... the church in Africa must be African to the Africans' (Glasser 1977:407). There exists both a sense of Coptic opportunity in sub-Saharan Africa and attempted sensitivity to the local church context.

These issues, including the impact of the recent 'Arab Spring' upon emigration, Coptic resources and mission endeavours, will likely need to be further developed elsewhere. At this point, Coptic migration and mission appear to be linked and enjoy the political and religious openness of South Africa. Migrants go out, representing Copts in new contexts. The Church offers migrants identity and connection through buildings, liturgy and a redefined narrative. In turn, the Coptic Church extends its influence beyond migrants to include non-Copts and non-Christians through ecumenism, social programs and the presentation of Copts as essentially African.

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Prof. Graham Duncan, Dr Brian Stanley and Dr Elizabeth Koepping for their support, feedback and insight into my research and writing.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## References

- Assad, M.M., 1972, 'Coptic church and social change in Egypt', *International Review of Mission* 61(242), 117–129. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.1972.tb01019.x>
- Attia, M., 2001, *The Coptic Orthodox Church and the ecumenical movement*, Bishopric of Youth Affairs, Abbasseya, Cairo.
- Barrett, D.B. & Padwick, T.J., 1989, *Rise up and walk!: Conciliarism and the African indigenous churches, 1815–1987*, Oxford University Press, Nairobi.
- Bishai, S.A., 2010, 'Collectivism, communication, and cultural conflict: The dialogical acculturation of Christian Egyptians in the diaspora', PhD dissertation, College of Communication and Information, Florida State University.
- Bishopric of African Affairs, n.d., *Saint Mark and Samuel the confessor: Coptic Orthodox monastery, South Africa, 2007*, viewed 11 February 2014, from <http://www.copticafrica.org/monastery.html>
- Grafton, D.D., 2007, s.v. 'Coptic Church,' in J. Bonk (ed.), *Encyclopedia of mission and missionaries*, Routledge, New York, pp. 99–107.
- Botros, G., 2006, 'Religious identity as an historical narrative: Coptic Orthodox immigrant churches and the representation of history', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 19(2), 174–201. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2006.00277.x>
- Carter, B.L., 1986, *The Copts in Egyptian politics*, Croom Helm, London.
- Chaillot, C., 2009, 'The life and situation of the Coptic Orthodox church today', *Studies in World Christianity* 15, 199–216. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/e1354990109000574>
- Clapsis, E., 2000, *Orthodoxy in conversation: Orthodox ecumenical engagements*, WCC Publications, Geneva.
- Coptic Orthodox church of South Africa – part 1*, 2009, viewed 22 November 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9p-ljDKGQ>
- Coptic orthodox Divine Liturgy celebrated in South Africa*, 2011, viewed 22 November 2012, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYRSMqSM7kY>
- Daneel, M.L., 1987, *Quest for belonging: Introduction to a study of African independent churches*, Mambo Printer, Gweru.
- De Gruchy, J.W., 1997a, 'Christian witness at a time of African renaissance', *Ecumenical Review* 49(4), 476–482. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1997.tb00312.x>
- De Gruchy, J.W., 1997b, 'From Cairo to the Cape: The significance of Coptic Orthodoxy for African Christianity', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99, 24–39.
- Egan, H.D., 2010, *Soundings in the Christian mystical tradition*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN.

- Elphick, R. & Davenport, R., 1998, *Christianity in South Africa: A political, social and cultural history*, Oxford, Cape Town.
- Fitzgerald, T.E. & Bouteneff, P., 1998, *Turn to God, rejoice in hope: Orthodox reflections on the way to Harare, Report of the WCC orthodox pre-assembly meeting and selected resource materials*, World Council of Churches, Geneva.
- Florovsky, G. & Haugh, R.S., 1989, *Ecumenism II: A historical approach*, Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz.
- Frame, R.L., 1994, 'Leaders ending 1,500 years of official schism', *Christianity Today* 38(1), 51.
- Gilimee, H., 2003, 'The making of the apartheid plan, 1929–1948', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29(2), 373–392. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070306211>
- Glasser, A.F., 1977, 'Blessed be Egypt my people', *Missiology* 5(4), 403–409. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/009182967700500401>
- Hassan, S., 2003, *Christians versus Muslims in modern Egypt: The century-long struggle for Coptic equality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hayes, S., 1996, 'Orthodox mission in tropical Africa', *Missionalia* 24(3), 383–398.
- Immerzeel, M. & Van der Vliet, J. (eds.), 2004, *Coptic studies on the threshold of a new millennium II: Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Coptic studies*, Peeters Publishers and Department of Oriental Studies, Leuven.
- Lagerwerf, L., 1978, 'African independent churches: Developments in ecumenism and theological education', *Exchanges: Bulletin of Third World Christian Literatures*, April(19), 23–63.
- Report of an Eastern Orthodox-WCC Consultation on 'Orthodox Involvement in the World Council of Churches', Sofia, Bulgaria, 1981, in G. Limouris (ed.), 1994, *Orthodox visions of ecumenism: Statements, messages and reports on the ecumenical movement 1902–1992*, WCC publications, Geneva.
- Maloney, G.A., 1992, *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, transl., ed. and with an introduction by George A. Maloney, preface by Kallistos Ware, Paulist Press, New York.
- Malaty, F.T.Y., 1993, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*, Sporting, Alexandria.
- Markos, B.A., 2001, *An introduction into theology of mission*, Coptic Bishopric of African Affairs, Johannesburg.
- Markos, H.G.B.A., 2003, *Come across ... and help us (Acts 16:9): The history of reviving the mission of the Coptic Orthodox church in South Africa, 1991–2003*, Coptic Orthodox Bishopric of African Affairs, Johannesburg.
- Meinardus, O.F.A. 1999, *Two thousand years of Coptic Christianity*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- Meinardus, O.F.A., 2002, *Coptic saints and pilgrimages*, American University in Cairo Press, Cairo.
- Muchi, M., Osha, S. & Matlou, M.P., 2012, 'African unity: If not now, when?', in M. Muchi, S. Osha & M.P. Matlou (eds.), *The Africana world: From fragmentation to unity and renaissance*, pp. 1–21, Africa Institute of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Newton, J., 2013, 'Egypt: Bishop hopes Coptic Orthodox church may recognize catholic baptism', *Independent Catholic news*, viewed 13 February 2014, from <http://www.indcatholicnews.com/news.php?viewstory=22588>
- O'Mahony, A., 2007, 'Tradition at the heart of renewal: The Coptic Orthodox Church and monasticism in modern Egypt', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 7(3), 164–178.
- Shenoudah, P., 1991, 'Coptic migration', in A.S. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic encyclopedia*, Claremont Graduate University/MacMillan, vol. 5, pp. 1620b–1624b.
- Timko, P., 1976, 'Orthodox ecclesiology and ecumenical practice', *Worship* 50(2), 137–145.
- Turner, H.W., 1984, 'Reflections on African movements during a missiological conference', *Missionalia* 12(3), 103–114.
- Wahba, Z., 2004, 'Life of the Coptic church outside Egypt', in M. Immerzeel & J.V.D. Vliet (eds.), *Coptic studies on the threshold of a new millennium: Proceedings of the seventh international congress of Coptic studies*, Leiden, the Netherlands, August 27 – 02 September, 2000, pp. 989–1000, Peeters Publishers, Leuven.
- Wakin, E., 1963, *A lonely minority: The modern story of Egypt's Copts*, luniverse.com, Lincoln, NE.
- Watson, J.H., 2000, *Among the Copts*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton.
- World Council of Churches: Commission on world mission and evangelism & Lemopoulos, G., 1989, *Your will be done: Orthodoxy in mission, CWME consultation of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches, Neapolis, Greece, 16–24 April 1988*, WCC Publications, Geneva.