

## Egypt's Change of Government Stirs Fears of Persecution

With attacks on Christians already increasing in the Middle East, the resignation of longtime Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak has triggered fears among some that the region's largest non-Muslim population—Egypt's 7 million Coptic Christians—could be at risk. Copt leaders in the United States said they are terrified that a new Egyptian government with a strong Islamic fundamentalist bent would persecute Christians. They are quietly lobbying the Obama administration to do more to protect Christians in Muslim countries and are holding prayer vigils and fasts at Coptic churches across the country.

"Mubarak [was] the best of the worst for us," said Rev. Paul Girguis of St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church in Fairfax County, Virginia, which has about 3,000 members. "If Muslim extremists take over, the focus will be extreme persecution against Copts. Some people even predict genocide." The Coptic Church is one of the oldest Christian institutions in the world and is based in Egypt.

Some major U.S. Christian figures, including well-known evangelical leaders and representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, declined to publicly discuss the situation in Egypt, saying they wanted to avoid bringing dangerous attention to the country's Christians by appearing to complain or to advocate for a particular political outcome. Their trepidation stems from repeated attacks on churches in Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of Christians have fled in recent years, and from the New Year's Day bombing of a Coptic church in Egypt that killed almost two dozen worshipers and wounded nearly 100.

## This Month You Can . . . Send a Note of Thanks

John Kralik's life was falling apart. He was going through a painful second divorce, his girlfriend had left him, his law firm was failing, and he was growing apart from his children. One day he decided to focus not on what he didn't have but on what he did have. To express his gratitude, he wrote a handwritten thank-you note each day to someone who had shown him a kindness—a relative, a colleague, a coffee shop barista. Immediately after starting this note writing, positive developments began to take shape in his life. His book about his experiences is *365 Thank You's: The Year a Simple Act of Daily Gratitude Changed My Life*.

Who could you thank today? Why not start a year's worth of thank-yous? A simple, short note will bring a smile to others and may help you change your life as well.



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# CHURCH AROUND THE WORLD

## NEWS OF SIGNIFICANCE TO CHRISTIANS

Some news that's encouraging—some disturbing. Please read with discernment. Watch and pray.

### Focus on . . . *Austria*

Austria is a nation of culture, music, art, and beautiful scenery, but its people are, for the most part, spiritually empty. While 84 percent of Austrians believe in God, very few have met him personally. Both Austria's long-standing Catholic culture and the Lutheran and Reformed churches have been in decline for decades—annual membership loss in most Catholic churches is more than one percent. Most church growth has occurred in evangelical and charismatic churches—but they account for only 0.5 percent of the population.

Pray for

- the pastors needed for the multiplying evangelical churches
- full-time Christian workers—Austria has more citizens serving God outside the country than inside
- outreach to the immigrant workers who make up more than 5 percent of the population
- the local Bible colleges and pastor training courses



## Muslim Population in U.S. to Double in 20 Years

There were about 2.6 million Muslim adults and children in the United States (0.8 percent of the U.S. population) in 2010. That figure is expected to rise to 6.2 million (1.7 percent) in 2030, according to the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life report. Most of the growth will be due to immigration and higher birth rates among Muslims. Christians are, however, expected to still make up by far the majority of the population. But by 2030, Muslims are predicted to be as numerous as Jews in the United States today.



*I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them.* —1TIMOTHY 2:1

## Start-up Indiana Church Uses Sex to Sell Message

New Day Church, a year-old congregation in Hendricks County, Indiana, is finding that sex helps sell its message of faith. An edgy marketing campaign asking, “What happens when God gets between the sheets?” promotes a sermon series focusing on the link between sex and religion. Members of the congregation will hear Pastor Denis Roy discuss God’s take on topics such as intimacy, pleasure, sexual preference, pornography, adultery, and even sexual healing.

Though churches are always evolving to meet the needs of parishioners, New Day’s efforts are part of a larger outreach trend nationwide, according to Philip Goff, director of the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. A growing number of mostly start-up churches are trying increasingly creative approaches to appeal to people who either have strayed from church or had no interest in organized religion, Goff says.

“One of the things many of these new churches are trying to do is imitate culture to bring in people, instead of sitting back and critiquing it,” he says. “This is a trend that is going to be with us for a long time, because preachers are realizing they may have to turn to nontraditional means to attract younger members.”

The sex sermons aren’t New Day’s first provocative attempt to reach out. An earlier series called “How to Live with Idiots and Morons” focused on the Bible’s advice on how to get along with others.

“Often there is a disconnect between people and church,” Pastor Roy says. “Sex is one of those issues that people are dealing with, and we believe God has the answers.”

Bill Payne, a parishioner at New Day, says he and other members support the efforts to draw people in, although he hopes they don’t go too far to stay relevant and lose sight of the ultimate goal—spreading the Word.

## 60th Annual Observance for the National Day of Prayer

The National Day of Prayer is an annual observance held on the first Thursday of May, inviting people of all faiths to pray for the nation. It was created in 1952 by a joint resolution of the United States Congress, and signed into law by President Harry S. Truman. The NDP Task Force is a privately funded organization whose purpose is to encourage participation on the National Day of Prayer. It exists to communicate with every individual the need for personal repentance and prayer, to create appropriate materials, and to mobilize the Christian community to intercede for

America’s leaders and its families.

The 60th Annual National Day of Prayer will take place Thursday, May 5. Millions will unite in prayer at thousands of events from coast to coast. The theme is “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and is based on Psalm 91:2, which states: “I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust’” (ESV). Joni Eareckson Tada, who is the Honorary Chairman of the National Day of Prayer Task Force for 2011, will join Shirley Dobson to lead the nation in prayer.



## Islamists Seize Land from Believers

Islamists in Somalia have ramped up their efforts in persecuting Christians who attend Bible studies by confiscating their land. Members of Al-Shabaab, an Islamic extremist group that controls regions of Somalia, seized farmland from Christians who converted from Islam as a message announcing that believers are not welcome in the region. International Christian Concern (ICC) reports that eight farms have been confiscated since January 19, and believers have fled from their homes and gone into hiding. The confiscated farmland was given to businessmen who support the efforts of Al-Shabaab.

Jonathan Racho, ICC’s regional manager for Africa, says that in these cases, Christians were able to escape without physical harm. “But in this case, it’s

amazing—and it’s God’s protection for the Christians to leave the area without being hurt,” he shares. “So Al-Shabaab is depriving them of their livelihood by taking it over and giving it to their supporters.”

Racho says that Al-Shabaab, which has vowed to purge Somalia of any Christian influence, pushes a “sick version” of Islam. The extremist group has killed 23 Christians since 2009 and has terrorized the region by destroying Christian cemeteries and a Christian library. But despite the increased persecution, the church in Somalia continues to grow.

“Christianity presents them with an escape from the violence that surrounds them,” Racho explains, “and when they come to Christ, they feel the peace and they have that guarantee of eternal life.”

## 2011 Church Membership: Southern Baptists Decline; Jehovah’s Witnesses Increase

Church membership for more than a third of the nation’s largest churches took a hit last year while nonorthodox Christian churches are on the rise, a new report on denominations finds.

The Southern Baptist Convention, the nation’s second largest denomination, reported a .42 percent decline in membership to 16,160,088 members, according to National Council of Churches’ *2011 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*. Still dominating the list of the nation’s top 25 mainline churches is the Catholic Church, which posted a .57 percent growth to 68.5 million members.

But a few church bodies regarded as cults by some Christians continue to increase in size. Ranked 20th in size, the Jehovah’s Witnesses denomination reported a 4.37 percent gain in membership, with 1,162,686 members total. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which didn’t make the top 25 list for at least the past two years, squeezed onto the list this

year in the 24th spot. The denomination—which observes the Sabbath on Saturdays instead of Sundays—now has 1,043,606 members, up 4.31 percent.

Also, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—also known as the Mormon Church—grew 1.42 percent to 6,058,907 members. Mormons are about 1.7 million members behind the 3rd largest denomination in the U.S. and Canada, the United Methodist Church, down 1.01 percent.

Overall, total church membership declined by 1.05 percent over 2010 to 145,838,339 members.

“The direction of membership (growth or decline) remains very stable,” said the *Yearbook’s* editor, Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner. “That is, churches which have been increasing in membership in recent years continue to grow and likewise, those churches which have been declining in recent years continue to decline.”