

Dear Family, Friends, and Sponsoring Congregations,

About 5:00 a.m., Tuesday morning, February 1st, we were awakened from an overdue sleep by our leader Peter Johnson's voice. "I just got a call from our taxi driver," he was telling his family. "They're closing the road to the airport at curfew's end. We have to get out now."

The twelve of us ELCA and PCUSA missionaries had been planning an 8:00 departure in time to make the second day of state department evacuations of Americans from Cairo, Egypt, after the demonstrations that rocked the Arab world. Two days of attempts to use domestic airlines and a night on the airport floor had proved fruitless, and we had made a community decision to try again that morning, this time with the embassy-chartered option.

Yet, if it were going to work, it seemed it would mean breaking curfew. As the gates to our concession swung open, I remember the uncertainty of driving out into the dark, knowing that our trip was illegal, not sure how the checkpoints ahead would receive us, a bit anxious about whether we would make it at all.

Twenty-seven blockades and several dozen tanks later we were at Hall 4 of Terminal 1. It turned out that neither soldiers nor vigilantes were particularly interested in Americans heading home. The smiles and farewells that greeted us each time were representative of Egypt's welcome to us through the past year-and-a-half. We were not leaving enemies; we were leaving friends.

I felt bad about the colleagues I was leaving behind. Dr. Atef, president of our seminary, was joining other faculty and staff in defending the seminary against looters each night. All across the city citizens on every street had banded together to "defend their property and their honor," as they called it, when national police forces were withdrawn and dangerous persons were permitted to leave prison. As rail and internet services were cut, the spring semester was postponed to insure the safety of our students. Surely it was an uncertain time for all who remained behind.

In the boarding line of our plane we learned where our flight was going: Istanbul, Turkey. Turkey! Who would have thought even a day ago that our destination would be Turkey?! We had been trying to get to Amman, Jordan, the day before when Egyptian Air showed itself unable in the crisis to field enough pilots to run their scheduled flights. And the day before that I was still struggling with the prospect of evacuation at all! How quickly events had moved.

We never saw Istanbul by day. It was dark when our taxi deposited us at the hotel, when we ate a festive community meal in the restaurant, when some of us ran up the hill to see the famous Hagia Sophia cathedral-now-mosque, when word came from Global Mission that they were moving us out in the morning. It was still dark when we boarded another plane for Amsterdam and on to Minneapolis. It's a shame to pass through such an historic city as the seat of the Eastern Roman Empire in only ten hours in the dark.

But we were relieved to step off the plane in Minneapolis last Wednesday. A welcoming committee was there with coats and rides to Missionary Furlough Apartments. After four consecutive nights of 1-5 hours of sleep, we either slept the sleep of the dead or struggled despite our weariness with jet lag. Little Andrew Johnson commented that it was nice to be in a place where there was no gunfire. We had to agree.

Like all refugees everywhere, we don't know where our lives will take us from here. Will Egypt settle down and we will be able to return next week? Or next month? How long can we maintain a holding pattern if it doesn't? How will our ministries fare while we are gone? What if we can't go back? In a small way we can now better imagine what Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghanis, and Darfurians wonder as they find their lives wasted by circumstances not of their choosing.

Thanks for holding us and all those in uncertain circumstances in your prayers.

Your missionaries,

Mark and Linda Nygard

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