

How we see our role here.
 (New revised version)
 + July independence days
 + elections

From 1981 till now (Feb. 1997), a kind of civil war between government security forces and extreme fundamentalist factions has caused around 60,000 deaths including about 100 or more foreigners. Call warned to leave or be killed by extreme fundamentalists. 19 Cath. nuns, priests & lay brothers have been murdered including our dear friend & brother in Christ, the bishop of Oran.

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Dear Friends:

This is the month not only of the American 4th of July and the French 14th (Bastille Day) but of the Algerian 5th of July. The old French regime here, under Charles de Gaulle, organized a referendum that gave the Algerians a chance to show by a massive vote that they did, indeed, want total independence rather than some limited autonomy under French sovereignty. That was hardly a surprise to any neutral observer, but how blind we all can be at times in the face of unpleasant facts. Anyway, de Gaulle proclaimed Algeria's independence on July 3rd. However, after seven and a half years of bloody warfare to gain their independence, the Algerians were not prepared to accept independence as a gift by the proclamation of the foreign occupant. No celebrations were held till the Algerian provisional government officially declared July 5th as their independence day.

That was in 1962. This year the 5th came just after the most significant Muslim religious holiday, the Feast of Sacrifice (related to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, who Muslim tradition says was Ishmael rather than Isaac—see our letter of December 1977 about this day's celebration). It was also at the beginning of a weekend here (Thursday afternoon and Friday being the weekend). Hence the 5th got little notice except as it served for many to have a very long weekend.

Also because of the religious holiday falling ^{that} at time this year, the "4th of July" reception at the U.S. consulate was moved up to July 1. We were there and met the ambassador and his wife, who had come from Algiers for the occasion. Then, since David is the "head" of the local Protestant community, that always includes French citizens, we are always invited to the 14th of July reception as well. Often we have gone on vacation or to the States before that, but we were able to attend again this year. It is held in one of the court yards of the old French Lycee (now half Algerian and half French) where all four of our boys finished their secondary studies. We still meet some of their former teachers as well as parents of other students that were in class with our sons.

Our last letter mentioned changes occurring here. On June 12th, elections were held for all municipal councils and the 48 regional legislatures (the regional governors still being appointees of the central government). To almost everyone's surprise, the fundamentalist Muslim party won an outright majority in most towns and regions. In very rough terms, 1/3 of the electorate abstained from voting and another third voted for the religious party. About 1/6 voted for the old National Liberation Front of the former parties. Many of the new parties put up no candidates or only a few in selected contests. Nobody really knows yet just what this will mean. In any case, the much more significant elections for the national legislature will almost surely not take place for at least another year or two.

To answer a number of letters and inquiries, we have written a new statement about our general situation and work here. While the statement in the letter of April 1978 is still quite relevant for the most part, we wanted to expand and update it. Here for all of you is a revised edition of the newer version.

→ We see our role here as basically four-fold --

1) Helping to maintain a Christian presence in this Muslim land in terms of humble, loving service wherever possible. That service must be very humble indeed, for there is no great felt need for our service. However, there is a great demand for studying English, and Carol has served as an English teacher. David also served two years in the English Department of the University of Oran, but Carol stayed on there for nine years (1975-84). She then taught courses at the U.S. consulate and also private lessons for the next five years. This past year she has been setting up her own English library. She has helped a small number of English teachers and students with advice and books over the last six years but can now be more effective and help a larger number. The library will also make reading available to native speakers and other interested readers of English. In addition, she is offering courses to help advanced students prepare for the TOEFL exam offered periodically at the U.S. Information Service in Algiers.

Since the fall of 1990 the library has been serving more than 100 people each year.

→ one-party system. The other 1/6 voted for one or another of the various new

We also try to serve by making it easier for our foreign friends here to adapt and adjust to life in a new cultural setting that creates various levels of culture shock. It helps many of them to have a better understanding of, and more appreciation for, this country and its general culture so that they leave here with more positive feelings and experiences and fewer negative ones. That, too, is a very humble way of serving.

2) Helping maintain an ecumenical oriented Protestant community that would soon disintegrate without active pastoral leadership. Most of the community has been made up of black African students here on various scholarships plus foreign technical aid people of all kinds. This has made for an extremely diverse group from many countries and nearly all continents as well as from the whole spectrum of church traditions (Anglican/Episcopalian to Pentecostal and 7th Day Adventist as well as one or two Catholics nearly every year). Most of these people come here for short periods of 2-5 years and would never get together without a stable pastorate and church center. This small community is dwindling as Algeria seeks and accepts fewer and fewer foreign workers and switches from French to Arabic as the language of instruction in nearly all subjects even at the university level.

3) Helping cultivate the wider ecumenical fellowship with the Catholic community, much larger than ours though still a tiny and almost wholly foreign group like us. We share deeply and often with one another and prepare our people to return to countries all around the world with a new understanding of brotherhood in Christ between Catholics and Protestants. We have had some of each tradition that had to come here before they came to understand and accept that people of the OTHER tradition are ALSO Christians!

4) Helping build bridges of understanding between Christians and Muslims. Muslims are tempted to see Christians as the blood-thirsty Crusaders of the Middle Ages, the exploiting colonialists and imperialists of very recent memory, the unconditional supporters of modern Israel against the whole Palestinian people and/or the representatives of a morally decadent Western civilization. On the other hand, Christians are tempted to see Muslims as wild-eyed terrorists, backward but oil-rich Arabs and/or fanatical fundamentalists. Both sides tend to see the worst in the other compared with the best in their own tradition and history, and then it is easy to become smug and to glory in the fact that one's own camp comes out looking far superior in the comparison! For example, on the Christian side, very few know much about the truly spiritual elements in Muslim faith or about the rich cultural heritage of medieval Islamic civilization or about present-day simple folk and/or intellectuals with generous hearts and no desire to enter into the hysterics of the fanatics. Unfortunately, a few fanatics can go a long way, as we can see in the Christian context in Northern Ireland. Seeking in very humble ways to cultivate friendship, understanding, neighborliness and sharing as well as some attempts at more formal dialogue is a part of this undertaking and ministry of bridge-building. Especially in this context, we must continually pray and strive for patience, understanding and all the other gifts of love acting out faith and radiant with hope.

OUR 4-FOLD MINISTRY OPERATES MOSTLY OUT OF OUR PARSONAGE located just above the small sanctuary. Of course, we have formal worship services downstairs but only about twice a month. We also travel quite a bit for visits and meetings elsewhere. Indeed the parish theoretically covers 1/3 of the entire country, which is nearly 1/2 times bigger than Texas. Nevertheless, our parsonage remains the true center of our ministry. It often seems like "GRAND CENTRAL STATION" as Protestant parishioners, Catholic brethren and Muslim friends come and go. David's study naturally doubles as counseling office and prayer chapel but also serves as an annex for postal and telephone services for parishioners who live in situations of impossible mail delivery and without phones. A few of Carol's former living room activities are being transferred to the new library downstairs in what has been a multi-purpose room just off the sanctuary. Nevertheless, the living room continues to function as chapel for occasional worship services and most of the time as a variety of other things: tea house, literary salon, prayer chapel, overnight guest room, counseling office, English lesson classroom, ecumenical Bible group meeting room, Carol's study and come-in-and-have-a-chat living room.

God bless you all on mission where you are; and may He bless us, our house and all who pass through.

Fraternally yours,

Dave & Carol Butler