

Annual Conference

U.S. Visit

The difficult situation here

Feb. 92  
2 Bd, Abbane Ramdane  
31024 ORAN, ALGERIA  
February 1992

Dear Friends,

Many thanks to many people! It has been a joy to receive <sup>so</sup> many cards, letters and holiday greetings. And how good it is to be assured of your continuing interest, concern and prayers. It reinforces our sense of fellowship in the context of love and grace, making it easier for us to express our most humble apologies for not writing sooner. We had intended to write well before the Christmas rush; but having failed to do so, it seemed reasonable enough to wait till we get our annual supply of change of address notices in our Dec.-Jan. mail.

We must also apologize for the omission of three lines in our March letter last year. Page 2 ended in the middle of a sentence, and page 3 began a new paragraph! The last full sentence on page 2 should have read as follows: "They also point out that, while there was no immediate link between the recent tragic events in the Gulf and the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict, there is a very real historical link of both political and economic dimensions that simply will not go away." There were other printer's errors of less gravity, but we will mention just one other. In line 3 of page 2, the word "reaction" should obviously be "CREATION".

Well, what have we been doing besides the usual? In early June, for the first time, BOTH of us were delegates to our Annual Conference in Switzerland. It was Carol's very first trip for such an occasion. Even David, though a full member of the clerical half of the Annual Conference, goes only once in about three years. The three United Methodist pastors seconded to the Protestant Church of Algeria and a few other United Methodists here are considered a kind of mini-district attached to the Annual Conference otherwise made up of three Swiss districts and one in France (mostly in Alsace-Lorraine). We are really more like a "removed" (as in distant) appendage and send only one ministerial and one lay delegate each year.

The meetings this year were held in Schaffhausen, but our <sup>host</sup> best family lived in a nearby village in a German enclave. We crossed the German-Swiss "frontier" twice a day with no controls of any kind. We had to look carefully to see the marker that indicated the border. Some years ago, this enclave was integrated into the Swiss economy and all border controls were removed. Everyone in the village of about 1000 people have both German and Swiss addresses and German and Swiss phone numbers. However, they pay only German taxes, vote only in German elections and have German license plates on their cars. At one point the enclave is only 1/2 mile from Germany proper, but it is still surrounded by Swiss territory.

Incidentally, our Swiss bishop presides over an episcopal area as vast as it is varied. He is also bishop for United Methodist churches in Austria and Yugoslavia as well as in all of the eastern European countries recently liberated from Russian-dominated communist regimes (except Romania). At least on a short-term basis, he will also have some responsibilities related to new contacts and new work in the Baltic states and Russia (and possibly in Belorussia and the Ukraine).

We were back home from Annual Conference only nine days before leaving on our three-month journey. Our finely honed schedule allowed us 24 hours in Paris to see two families, 36 hours in England to see people from three families and one week, split in two at the beginning and end of our North American tour, to see seven families and a member of our own extended or "adopted" family in Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto.

That left most of our time for the States, including a gathering of our colleagues from around the world, meeting in Atlanta. We devoted 29 days to visiting 39 churches in Iowa, offering us also the experience of testing 28 beds in 29 nights and covering 1800 miles of Iowa highways.

Time was likewise given to visiting doctors and a dentist. The results were satisfying; we came back assured we are in very good health for our age.

More satisfying yet, of course, while also more frustrating in some ways, was our time with family here, there and yon. It was the here, there and yon scatteredness of the family that made for frustration as we had too little time with most of the members.

Some feel we are overdue in reporting on the boys, so here goes. Paul, who will be 32 in April, received his Ph.D. in physical chemistry on Dec. 15. He is staying on at the University of Tennessee in a post-doctoral research position. John, 30 this month, had hoped to finish his doctoral dissertation in solid state physics at Arizona State University before Christmas but is now aiming at finishing this winter to graduate in May. Mark, 27, has been working as a veterinarian in a small-animal clinic west of Chicago since March first of last year. It is a hospital that can keep five full-time vets busy. Jim, who turned 26 last month, is continuing his work and study at Kansas State University in computer science. He has his research assistantship to keep him going and hopes to complete his Ph.D. in 1993 to complete the row of four doctorates in 4 years (Mark having received his in 1990).

A few letters have been asking us what is going on over here in this country. We are not sure we know and are not convinced anyone else really knows. Nevertheless, we can give you some indications that may be helpful. In 1989 we wrote about the radical change from a one-party system to one of proliferating party organizations. At least 55 parties are now recognized. Obviously, many of these are of no real significance. (We should also note in passing that newspapers and magazines have jumped from about 10 to around 140!). The change came after the October riots of 1988 that marked the final and nearly total rejection of the old National Liberation Front. It had been living off the wealth of trust and respect built up through the 7 1/2 years of war for Independence and the following decade when much was done to help build a more just and modern society. However, a one-party political structure and a centrally planned economy made for great concentrations of power and once more revealed the truth in Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Patriotic zeal and self-sacrifice for the common cause became lost in a vast field of multiplying and meaningless slogans camouflaging the emptiness of innumerable promises and the accumulation of privilege and wealth among nearly all those who had the "right connections." The cancer seems to have spread through the whole body politic much faster than any observers had realized. Even many of the smallest fish were determined to imitate the big fish to try to get at least a bit of "their share" any way they could.

At the same time, more and more of the oil wealth (quite modest in comparison with that of Arabia, Iraq and Iran) had to be spent to import subsidized food, other food and manufactured goods to appease, if not to satisfy, one of the fastest growing populations in the world. When the bottom fell out from under the oil prices in the mid 80's, the old one-party government was no longer able to subsidize the public in a life-style to which the people had become accustomed. The real extent of the corruption and increasing indebtedness of the country could no longer be concealed. The emperor had no clothes. The growing disparity between the privileged and the non-privileged, coupled with the more flagrant forms of corruption, triggered those 1988 riots that forced the changes to a multi-party political structure and a more and more decentralized economy.

That kind of transition is never easy, as the experience of Eastern Europe is also showing us. Here the problem has been compounded by the fact that some 25 years of repression of dissent had forced most opposition into a religious mold. In a country which has been 99% Muslim for many centuries, it was hard to repress the non-violent forms of opposition forming under the cover of the mosques and in the name of the Islamic faith. That movement was successfully manipulated and dominated by the extremely conservative-fundamentalist elements inspired primarily by the numerous extreme fundamentalists "imported" in the 60's and early 70's. They were mostly Egyptian and were largely concentrated among the huge numbers of teachers brought in to help Arabize the instruction in the primary and secondary schools.

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In the context we have described, it became increasingly easier to convince many of the underprivileged as well as some others that all their problems stemmed from failure to follow strictly the "divinely ordained Muslim law" worked out by the religious legal experts during the 7th through the 9th centuries. "Take care to follow God's laws scrupulously and He will take care of you." "A vote for the fundamentalist party is a vote for God." "A vote against us is a vote against God!" That is powerful sloganeering in a population where most people's personal and cultural identities are tied up with their religious identity. It seemed to appeal especially to the growing ranks of unemployed youth and others filled with total revulsion for the old government party. However, many others, especially among the intellectuals and the least religiously inclined, were duly scandalized by the attempt to monopolize the name of Islam and force it into a very narrow and harsh legalistic structure ten centuries old.

When the new constitution of 1989 made the multi-party system possible, the old party still ran the government and had its nationwide network intact. Yet it was totally discredited in the eyes of nearly all but those who had vested interests in it. The fundamentalists were already well organized and had effective control of the majority of the mosques across the country and did not hesitate to use them as the primary base of their political structure and action. Other parties had to start from scratch. As a result, in the municipal and regional elections of June 1990, the fundamentalists won an astounding victory. Roughly 1/3 of the electorate did not vote, 1/3 voted for the fundamentalists, 1/6 for the old party and 1/6 for the others all together. An overwhelming majority of local and regional councils came under fundamentalist control. The regional governors, however, were still the appointees of the central government.

In the elections held last December 26 to fill 430 seats in a new national legislature, 41% did not vote and 12% had votes nullified. Only 47% cast valid ballots. Only about 24 1/2% really voted fundamentalist; but that won them 188 seats as opposed to 15 for the old party and 28 for another party and independents. That left 199 where no candidate had won a clear majority. The winners would be determined in a second round of voting between the top 2 candidates in each case. The fundamentalists were clear favorites to win in enough cases to expect a 2/3 majority in the new legislature, enough to change the constitution provided the president would go along with them. Their plan was to try to force an early presidential election rather than wait 2 years as would normally be the case.

Now one of the great ironies of all this is that the constitution of 1989 stipulates there shall be no political party based on religion. Yet the old government party allowed the fundamentalist party to form and flourish. Was it part of a plan to create a monster that would frighten people into voting for the discredited old party as the lesser of two evils? If so, it backfired.

The majority of the 75% who had not voted for the fundamentalists were truly frightened at what was happening, lamenting the other great irony of the situation, i.e., the fundamentalists taking power democratically while preaching the overthrow of democracy. Indeed, their stated aim was to change the constitution or simply throw it out and establish a Muslim state, drawing on the different examples in Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Sudan. In spite of the election results, it does seem rather clear that a majority of the population does not want that kind of political expression of Islam/developed here. In fact, a recent opinion poll (probably not very accurate but still somewhat indicative) showed that even 1/2 of those who did vote fundamentalist did not do so with any desire of seeing the old traditional Muslim law fully implemented. They were just opposed to the old party and wanted, naively, to believe in all the promises of a better future. It also seems fairly clear that many abstentions reflected a "plague on both your main parties" coupled with a lack of enthusiasm for any of the others and an even greater lack of political maturity, even among some university professors, which kept them from seeing how their non-vote was handing a majority to the fundamentalists in the first round of voting.

In this context, before the date set for the second round, the president dissolved the old legislature and then resigned. Without a president of the legislature to succeed him and to organize new presidential elections, the next in line should have been the president of the High Judicial Council. However, the constitution had only foreseen the possibility of the DEATH of the president and NOT his act of RESIGNATION while there was no president of an active legislature. The High Security Council, with the army behind it, then took over and created a new High Council of State and, in a stroke of genius, named as its president one of the heroes of the revolution, who has been in exile since the early days of independence. He is seen by many as a "clean" hero, a fellow victim of the corrupt old party. The High Security Council also canceled the second round of voting, effectively stopping the whole electoral process indefinitely. This brought a sigh of relief from large segments of the population.

The new body (High Council of State) is now trying to enforce decrees that the mosques cannot be used for party politics and is ordering the arrest of fundamentalist leaders who violate that rule or even call openly for a total rejection of the High Council of State and for insubordination in the army. At the same time, they are working with the old government, now an interim government in which many changes may be expected, to try to get the economy moving again. And then, sooner or later, they must get some kind of electoral process going to elect a new president and a new national legislature. These are indeed difficult times! So we must continue to pray for peace, stability and greater fairness and justice in both the political and economic spheres. There is still great potential here. May it soon be harnessed for the benefit of all the people.

Please accept our belated wishes for a new year, blessed with the conscious presence of God in your lives along with the love, peace and joy which that can bring.

Fraternally yours,

David & Carol Butler