

# Bishop Angaelos of the Coptic Church – Doing God in the Middle East

by **Esmerelda Weatherwax** (March 2013)

## Coptic Cathedral in Stevenage.

Bishop Angaelos began by saying how much he always feels at home here, among friends. Our relationship with the Church of England is one we cherish. Today he wants to give us some insight into what is romantically called the Arab Spring. But if you work in the Foreign Office you will know that it is definitely not a spring.

the real figure is between 15 and 18 million. They are the largest Christian presence in the Middle East. The Copts are the indigenous people of Egypt – direct descendants of the Pharaohs. As you will see from the icons the Coptic language is written in Greek script which was adopted at the time that hieroglyphs died out.

Islam entered the country in 642 and then things changed. From 1253 onwards there were added pressures and this was the time that an 80% Christian nation became an Islamic one. There was an invitation to Islam, if we want to be gracious about it, others would call it enforcement. Christians were second class citizens who had to pay the jizya tax in order to live.

Fast forward to the early decade of this century and under President Mubarak the regime was supposed to be secular, but Christians were hardly represented at all at the highest level of any authority, whether it be health, education, finance.

United Council for Egyptian Churches sounds very interesting. What do you think its role will be?

A. This is an initiative started by the late Pope Shenouda III and the Anglican Bishop of Egypt. Christians can stand together. In the past we relied too much on the Council of Middle East Churches and they have been limited. We are not politicians but we can be a moral compass to Politicians. We must speak loudly as to what is right and what is wrong. That will be our strength. Mubarak tried divide and conquer. He attempted to do this between churches as well as between Muslims and Christians.

Q. What practical steps could be taken to unify the Nation? How can unity be achieved?

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