





## The Peace Maker

Paul-Gordon Chandler, founder of the Caravan Festival of the Arts, hopes the initiative can help bridge the gap between East and West

By Hana Zuhair

**A** foreigner's computer was stolen from his house in Maadi. The rector of his church decided to deal with the situation proactively. He visited the imams of the five mosques in the vicinity. Because he had already met them, he felt comfortable enough to ask them to mention the incident in the Friday sermons and to remind people that according to the teachings of the Qur'an, stealing is *haram* (forbidden). A day later, a little boy went to the foreigner's house to return the computer. When the boy was asked who gave it to him, he simply looked behind him towards a man standing on the corner.

This is how Reverend Paul-Gordon Chandler puts his ideas of religious co-operation into action. A strong believer in building bridges between Islam and Christianity – East and West – he tries to practice what he preaches to his congregation, writes in his books, and discusses publicly.

A charismatic and eloquent speaker, Chandler is an American Episcopal priest who is currently the rector of St. John Church in Maadi. He's the author of several books including the best selling *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths* and a devoted advocate of interfaith "friendliness", as he likes to refer to it.

"At the end of the day we are all trying to connect and serve God, Allah, but we

tend to always focus on our differences," Chandler says. "I'm trying to break the stereotypes that [each has] of the other [...]. The goal is to help people understand the other better and look sympathetically on them with good will, appreciation and love. And for those religiously oriented, to [each] pray for the other."

His friendly mannerism that is strongly evident in his warm smile and inviting attitude makes him an easy person to listen to. The assertiveness that resonates in his voice is reassuring. His use of logic in his argument gives his words weight. His silver ring that bears the engraving of a cross and a crescent reflects the personal nature of his message.

Chandler is no stranger to working with other cultures. He spent the first 18 years of his life in Senegal, where the majority of the population is Muslim. This experience was the initial trigger of his passion for building bridges between Christians and Muslims, or East and West.

He then traveled back to the US, where he completed his Theology Degree in Wheaton University. He then went on to complete his Seminary, a post-graduate study in theology, from Chichester College in England to qualify him to be a priest. After graduation, he worked in religious publishing and development organizations mostly in Africa. Chandler joined the Anglican Church in the United States as a priest in 1993.

His work always meant that he had to

deal with people from different walks of life, but it was the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States that really helped crystallize his mission.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the increased resentment towards Muslims in the West made Chandler realize that he needs to use his altar and sermons to spread the message of peace through dialogue with 'the other' as opposed to fearing 'the other.'

"I was on my way back that day, but being in Malaysia, being in a Muslim country, I could quickly see the tension, the polarization that was going to take place between Islam and the West or Christianity, East and West," says Chandler.

Chandler opted to leave his prestigious job as president of the Relief and Development Organization in Washington, and move to Egypt along with his wife and two children. His initial plan was to stay for three years. His mission – to challenge Westerners' preconceived views of Muslims through three aspects: education, practical work in civil society and spiritual experiences. Eight years later, Egypt has become a place where he can influence other churches in the region to follow his lead of focusing on harmony and understanding.

"I think Egypt intrigued me because I have always seen it as the capital of the Middle East," he says. "Certainly in terms of media, but [also] in terms of the heart or the soul of the Middle East. It's rich in all things historical [including] ancient Christian and ancient Islamic [history]."

There aren't many places that have both of that in the world."

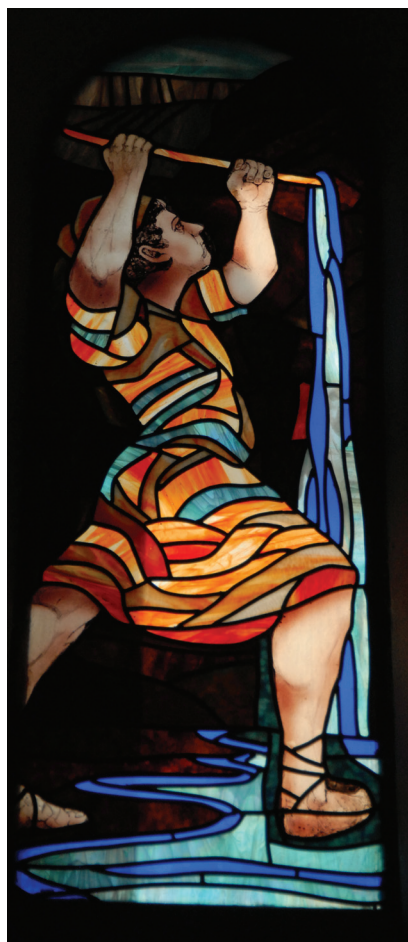
Even his church, St. John, is a part of this rich religious history. Built in 1931, it serves around 35 nationalities and 30 different church traditions. Most patrons are foreigners from different parts of the world. Chandler describes it as an "international church." Through the church, Chandler reaches Westerners and helps them widen their understanding of the Muslim community they live in.

Chandler realized that for his message to reach more people, he had to expand his base audience. Once again, the solution to that challenge came from his time in Africa. During his time in Senegal, he had developed a passion for art. "I've always been passionate about the arts...I grew up in a society, Senegal, that is very creative. The Senegalese are the artists of Western Africa. Think of the music. Youssou N'Dour grew up in my neighborhood. So I was surrounded by the arts."

In fact, one of the first things he did when he first moved to Cairo was commission stained windows for his church. Chandler went to Al Azhar, an area where many stained artisans work, and requested custom-made windows that incorporate the signature Arabesque style with Christian motifs. The rest of the windows feature historic stories from the Bible and the Qur'an, creating a mosaic of colors and authenticity to St. John Church. The largest two windows were put up on the week of 9/11 in 2005, as Chandler threw a celebration in the presence of several Muslim sheikhs.

"Here we are using the skills, the giftedness [and] the style of an Islamic approach and of a Muslim to enhance our worship," says Chandler. It was this merge of art and faith that inspired Chandler to create his Caravan project. Launched in 2009, the Caravan showcases and sells the work of unique Western and Middle Eastern artists, with the proceeds going to charity.

For Chandler, the Caravan is a means of exploiting beautiful arts to bridge the gap between Christians and Muslims. In its first year, the Caravan had around 2000 attendees, by its second year they reached up to 4000, which indicates the kind of



Molsen Allam/Egypt Today

**Chandler asked artisans near Al Azhar to design stained glass windows for his church.**

success Chandler was hoping for.

"It was so successful [the first year], we had about a thousand people come on the opening night. Everybody was shocked, that we had this many people. For an art exhibition in Cairo you don't get this usually, so then we decided to have more artists."

Last year the Caravan was expanded to include film, music and literature. The project gained enough buzz that international Egyptian actor Omar El Sherif was the guest of honor. But more importantly for Chandler's mission of creating interfaith dialogue, the late Sheikh Al Azhar Ali Gomaa attended on the opening night.

This year's Caravan Festival of Arts was scheduled to start February 3, but was postponed because of the protests in Tahrir Square. At press time, a new date had not been set or guest list confirmed.

The art exhibition is expected to feature 45 Eastern and Western artists, including Egypt's leading contemporary artist Mohamed Abba.

Despite the Caravan's success, Chandler still pursues other ways to promote his mission. He continues to write books and attends as many speaking engagements in the United States as possible. He says he has quite an impressive following among moderate and open-minded Christians and certainly Muslim Westerners. But his success never comes without criticism and even some accusations. His best-selling book based on the life of a self-proclaimed Muslim follower of Christ received great reviews as well as accusations from conservatives implying he was trying to lead people astray.

"When I talk about waging peace on Islam, people sometimes have trouble with in the West. I just spoke in Virginia and I thought the talk went really well. The title of the talk was "Waging Peace on Islam in the Spirit of Christ," now the people who liked it the most were the very broad Christians, the open minded Christians and the Muslims," says Chandler. "After I got back to Egypt, my host there sent me the letters to the editor in the local newspaper calling me the 'anti-Christ.' And this is quite amazing because people get so focused on their box of understanding and their box of belief, and everybody outside that box is wrong."

But Chandler simply brushes off the criticism, saying that worldly prejudices have caused most people to forget the connection between all Semitic religions. During his speaking engagements, he reminds listeners that Jesus is from the Middle East and encourages his listeners to pray for one another and for stronger faith. Chandler believes that true faith will always help create bridges between people. Those who only see the gaps between religions, he says, are the ones with the weakest faith.

"Both of us — Christianity and Islam — come from the Middle East," the inspirational priest says. "If we lose our true sense of identity and where we come from, then we don't understand that we are actually all Middle Easterners at heart." **et**



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