

TESTIMONIAL GIVEN AT THE DOCKS, November 20, 2016



Hello! Our names are Nouha and Georges Said. We have been married for 32 years and have been members of the Syrian Teams for 30 years. We have three children.

Before we talk to you about the Teams Movement in Syria, allow us to talk to you first about the Christians in Syria. Syria

is the cradle of civilisation and the cradle of Christianity. Damascus and Aleppo are two of the oldest towns still inhabited in the world. As you all know, Damascus is where St Paul had his revelation and his personal encounter with Christ. It is from Damascus, and spreading throughout all of Syria, that Christianity took off and grew. It is in Antioch, formerly a Syrian town, that the first believers in the Church were called Christians.

Syrian Christians were able to preserve this tradition and remained established in their country despite the various invasions and wars. Before 2011, Christians represented 10% of the population, that is more than two million people. Currently, only half of them remain. But the worst happened to Aleppo where there were more than 200 000 and only 50 000 remain today. Various Christian communities exist in Syria. For example, in Aleppo, there are six Catholic bishops, (Syriac, Maronite, Chaldean, Greek, Armenian and Latin), three orthodox ones (Syriac, Greek and Armenian) and two evangelical pastors (Arab and Armenian).

These Christians lived in perfect harmony with the other populations. In and of themselves, because of their different communities, they constituted a living example of ecumenism. This is true too in the Teams where couples come from different communities and where the Spiritual Counsellors are from different rites.

The Teams Movement started in Syria in 1972 with a first Team at Lattakia on the coast, with the help of a Lebanese couple and Spiritual Counsellor. The common language was French because all the couples were French-speaking. The Movement developed subsequently in the towns of Damascus, Aleppo and Homs. In 2011, there were more than 60 Teams, but this number has fallen since then due to massive emigration after the recent war and now is at 30.

Numerous couples and Spiritual Counsellors of different nationalities came to Syria to run sessions and to ensure the international connection. The last session was in Saidnaya (near Damascus) in 2011, right at the beginning of the disturbances that have since invaded Syria. It was run by To & Zé, the International Leading Couple, who are present here today.

This demonstrates the importance of international help to isolated Teams, or Teams in training as was the case in Syria. This help was practical in various ways:

1. Access to all publications in the French language, that were translated into Arabic. It was the only way to accompany the new Arabic-speaking Teams. These texts in Arabic are currently available on the Syrian Teams website and have enabled the Movement's expansion in new Arabic countries (The Emirates and Jordan).
2. For a long time, the Teams Letter written in French inspired Syrian Team members through the various testimonials it published. Our first Syrian Letter appeared as a flyer in 1995 and a few more years were necessary before we were able to produce a true Letter that comprised testimonials from Syrian Team members as well as an international section.
3. International solidarity was apparent at the large Teams' gatherings where the Syrians were able to participate thanks to the generosity of others. And the couples who have left Syria these past years have observed everywhere in the world that the hospitality of Team members is always generous, and we personally can testify to that for France.
4. Cooperation between Syrian and Lebanese Teams is an example to be followed, because the Teams managed to overcome the current hostility between the two countries and were able to undertake joint actions that brought them closer (joint gatherings and sessions, joint publications and translations).

The war that engulfed Syria almost six years ago has caused the death of hundreds of thousands of people and has had disastrous consequences from all points of view:

1. The movement of a large part of the couples to other regions of the country that are more secure and the emigration of almost half of them abroad.
2. The devaluation of the local currency has tremendously increased the cost of living and led to unprecedented unemployment, which effected the financial survival of Teams. One of the results was the stopping of the Teams' Letter and all new translations or new subject topics.
3. The fact that travel is difficult in the country, and even sometimes in the same town, has led to the reduction in mobility and attendance at Team meetings.

Despite all of the above, the Teams continue to do more or less what they did before. The monthly meetings are maintained and there is even information and documentation that has arrived in order to train new Teams with new couples. There are always opportunities for the Teams to gather and pray together and even celebrate with a small buffet meal. Last August, the Syrian Teams, especially those from Aleppo, mustered the courage to leave the town via a long, hard and not always securely protected road and drive 8 hours to go on their annual week-long retreat.

Finally, we would like to share with you what our own Team from Aleppo has been through. Originally, it was made up of six couples and a Spiritual Counsellor. Currently, there is only one couple left there with the same Spiritual Counsellor. The other couples have been scattered: one is in another Syrian town, another in Lebanon, another in the USA, another in Canada and ourselves, who have been in France for almost three years.

Only the couple that stayed on in Aleppo has put together a new Team with other couples. We remain in contact with our former Team members via internet and share all our news as well as our prayer intentions, so that the ties that we forged over such a long time are maintained.

We had the opportunity last month, while we were visiting Aleppo, to participate in a meeting of our new Team there, to meet up with the Responsible Couples from Aleppo and to start the New Year with an unforgettable mass.

On that visit, we saw that the glow of the first candle of the Syrian Teams remains alive and radiant despite all of the ordeals and we realise that the Holy Spirit, who accompanies the Church through the intercession of the Virgin Mary is very much present.

Thank you to Thérèse and Antoine who gave us this opportunity to talk to you and thank you for your patience.