

## *In the beginning*

### IT'S IN THE BLOOD

If you're from the Arab World, Christianity is in your blood.

It's hard to believe, but seventeen centuries ago, multitudes of Christians lived among the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East. If you had travelled around the southern Mediterranean in, say, the fourth century AD, you would have been walking through one of the great heartlands of Christianity.

By that time the Church in North Africa and the Middle East was already:

- *Ancient:* the book of Acts tells us that 'Libyans' and 'Arabs' were among those who responded to the first Christian preaching on the day of Pentecost.<sup>1</sup>
- *Influential:* Carthage in Tunisia and Alexandria in Egypt were (along with Rome) the leading cities of the Christian world. They were home to the most influential writers and theologians after the apostles themselves: Clement, Tertullian, Origen, Augustine.
- *Popular:* As early as the third century AD, Tertullian, writing in defence of Christianity, could declare, 'We are a great multitude, almost a majority in each city.'<sup>2</sup>
- *Widespread:* The gospel travelled deeper into North Africa and the Middle East than ever Roman rule did. Relics of church buildings, for example, have been found in North African villages too remote for Roman records.<sup>3</sup> The Christian faith progressed in the Gulf, into Iraq, and down the Nile far into what are now Sudan and Ethiopia.