



Learning from Ancient Churches of Syria and Egypt

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Thanks to Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler for compiling this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter*.

Introduction

by Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is the relief and development agency for North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. Doing relief and development well involves much more than a straightforward matching of needs with available resources: whom we work with and how we work with them are significant issues.

As a church-based agency, MCC has a strong preference for working with churches whenever possible. Since there are no Mennonite churches in the Middle East, partnering with a Christian community requires crossing denominational lines. Traversing church boundaries has led to some unprecedented interaction between Anabaptists and Orthodox Christians in the Middle East.

In this newsletter we examine the development of the partnership between MCC and Orthodox churches through shared service. In the MCC programs in Egypt and Syria, MCCers serve by being seconded to the programs of the local churches, as a general rule, Orthodox churches. The MCC programs, rather than competing with local churches, attempt to augment the on-going witness of existing churches.

In Egypt, MCCers have been serving through secondment to local churches since the 1970s. Linda Herr's article explores how it came about that Mennonites and Coptic Orthodox work together in the social programs of the Coptic Church. Vern Ratzlaff, a former MCC Egypt Country Representative, considers some of his learnings from the Copts in Egypt. Ratzlaff reflects on how

the "communion of saints" has had an impact on his life as a Mennonite pastor in Saskatchewan.

Bishop Matta Roham, an MCC partner in Syria, describes interactions between MCC volunteers and people in his Syrian Orthodox diocese in Mesopotamia. Bishop Matta contends that the "light of God's kingdom shines brightest when Christians, regardless of denomination, work hand in hand in service to God's glory." Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler describe how MCC's Syria program is structured within the institutions of the Syrian Orthodox Church in an attempt to increase the diaconal witness—witness through service—of the greater kingdom of God.

A brief first-person account by Irimi Asaad of the MCC Egypt office follows a conversation between Linda Herr and Bishop Thomas of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. Martyrdom and peacemaking do not often crop up on the same page, but they do so in Bishop Thomas' reflections. It is fitting that an MCC partner like Bishop Thomas links these seemingly disparate strands of the Christian experience. In this and in many other stretching ways, the MCC—Orthodox experience in the Middle East has been a melding of outwardly dissimilar traditions into shared service.

Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler are the MCC Country Representatives for Syria.

Connecting Anabaptists and Copts: The MCC—Coptic Orthodox Relationship

by Linda Herr

Requests for people—
teachers, teacher trainers,
nurses, peace workers,
specialists to work with
those with disabilities—
continue to come to MCC.

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Egypt seeks to support Egyptian churches' life and witness as they work to improve the lives of their communities. MCC places personnel with and makes small grants to a variety of local churches and church-related organizations. The two main denominations of the Coptic (Egyptian) church are the Coptic Orthodox and the Coptic Evangelical (Synod of the Nile Presbyterian), which is the largest of the Protestant denominations in Egypt.

Over nearly 35 years, MCC has developed a unique relationship of trust with local church leaders—Presbyterian, Anglican, and Coptic Orthodox. The Coptic Orthodox trust is significant since it is not bestowed lightly on outsiders. This trust and relationship does not rest solely on connections with high-profile church leaders or development programs with weighty budgets. It has developed largely as MCC workers have joined in the everyday life of communities and workplaces.

The history of MCC committing a series of workers to the Egyptian church is distinctive. Egyptians, Canadians, Americans, and others have woven a tapestry of relationships in MCC's name. Before a recent flood of emigration to the West and prior to the proliferation of satellite channels, low-cost internet access, and the country's cashing in on the tourism market, many Egyptians had limited contacts with the world beyond the Nile River. Today, contacts have increased but the need for real friendships and understanding is greater than ever.

Refugees and Relief Programs

MCC's involvement in Egypt began with traditional relief programs. In World War II and its immediate aftermath, 15 workers served in camps for European refugees in the Suez Canal Zone. The British military and the UN took responsibility for running the camps, and there was little significant contact with Egyptians or Egyptian churches.

After the June 1967 war with Israel, nearly a million people living in the Canal Zone were displaced when Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula. In 1969, Harry Martens and his wife Olga, in a special assignment as MCC Middle East Commissioners, visited Egypt to

meet with church, relief organization and government officials to discern possible MCC involvement. Martens met both Protestant and Orthodox leaders, including the Coptic Orthodox patriarch, Kyrillos VI, and Bishop Samuel.

Bishop Samuel was head of the Ecumenical Advisory Council for Church Services (EACCS) which was responsible for ecumenical relations and social services. While the Egyptian government was responsible for the war victims, it had requested EACCS to assist, and MCC had sent material aid in 1968 to people displaced or otherwise affected by the war through this channel.

Martens' Coptic Orthodox contacts impressed him deeply. His acquaintance with Bishop Samuel developed into an important relationship for MCC within the Coptic Orthodox Church, as he could both interpret the local church and culture, as well as give counsel to MCC.

MCC Teachers in Egypt

Urbane Peachy, MCC Country Representative in Amman who oversaw programs in Jordan and the West Bank, followed up on the Martens' relationships and recommendations, in order to place service workers in Egypt. The initial placement was in a Synod of the Nile girls' school in Cairo, and workers arrived just days before the beginning of the October 1973 war. MCC administrators were based in Amman until 1975 when Dr. Gerald Brunk was named Country Representative for the Egypt program.

When Bishop Samuel began an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program on the grounds of the Coptic Orthodox cathedral in Cairo in 1979, he asked MCC to help organize it and provide the teachers. John Derksen became the first MCC worker in a Coptic Orthodox placement. That year, Bishop Samuel was also an MCC guest in the United States.

Two years later, gunmen opened fire on the stand where President Anwar Sadat sat reviewing a military parade. President Sadat died in the hail of bullets. Bishop Samuel was among the VIPs seated nearby and was also killed. Urbane Peachey, then the MCC Middle East Secretary, remembered him as "our" bishop.

During the early years of the 1980s, MCC Country Representatives explored a variety of possible involvements in Coptic Orthodox settings. John Derksen began regular trips to the St. Makarios monastery in Wadi Natrun to teach English and Protestant Reformation History, and about 50 of the 80 monks took English classes. South of Cairo in the cities of Beni Suef and Mallawi, MCC teachers on summer break taught English camps and courses in Coptic Orthodox dioceses.

Beni Suef's Bishop Athanasius asked MCC to work with him to increase understanding between the faith communities present in his city, as well as between East and West. His diocese established evening English courses for adults in a setting where both Christians and Muslims would be comfortable—a church-affiliated school—and the bishop invited the sons of prominent community leaders to participate. The single women whom MCC placed as teachers lived at the convent that Bishop Athanasius had founded, and joined in the daily routines of these Orthodox women dedicated to both keeping the hours of prayer and serving their community in daycares, programs for people with handicaps and the elderly. In the late 1980s, Bishop Athanasius gave a series of monthly lectures in Cairo on the Coptic Orthodox Church to further the MCC workers' understanding of the ancient church.

The summer English program in Mallawi continued for over ten years. MCC continues regular contacts with Bishop Demetrius and Father Johanna there through grants for literacy courses in the farming villages of the diocese. Course participants are mainly women and girls who have not had the opportunity to attend school.

Through the first 15 years of the MCC Egypt program, service workers teaching in Synod schools in Cairo and other cities often numbered a dozen or more, and the MCC program usually included two nurses for a Presbyterian or an Anglican hospital in the Nile Delta. By the late 1980s, the relationship with the Orthodox had progressed to the point where MCC could consider balancing the number of teachers in Protestant settings with placements in Orthodox settings.

Relationships with bishops and other Coptic Orthodox Church leaders continued to grow into working partnerships. In the late 1980s, MCC placed teachers for adult classes in Aswan as well as in Port Fuad, at the Mediterranean end of the Suez Canal. Summer English courses in Cairo's industrial suburb of Shobra el Kheima led to year-round involvement. A similar involvement

developed at a church in another Cairo working-class neighborhood, Ein Shams, and in the Delta city of Tanta.

MCC has shipped meat, milk and other material aid to Coptic Orthodox partners and has sometimes supplied grants for specific needs such as development projects in a church or diocese. An annual grant now goes towards the Coptic Orthodox church's integrated development program.

People remain at the core of the program, however, and requests continue to come to MCC for teachers, teacher trainers, nurses, peace workers, specialists for children and adults with disabilities and more.

Connecting Copts and Mennonites

Among the places that MCC teachers are now involved are evening English programs in Tanta and Beni Suef. In Beni Suef, workers are also involved in church-run schools and, in more informal ways, with a retreat center, a day program for people with disabilities, and children's homes. MCC and the Bishopric of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services recently celebrated 25 years of partnership in the English courses at the cathedral. An MCC occupational therapist lives in a Coptic Orthodox convent in a new, lower-income area of Cairo, negotiating daily life there and helping MCC respond to the growing requests for assistance as church leaders take on the challenges of meeting the needs of people with disabilities.

In each of their settings, MCC service workers live out a practical interfaith dialogue with colleagues, students and neighbors. In class discussions, Arabic lessons, Bible studies and other formal and informal interactions they discover surprising differences in assumptions and beliefs as well as basic similarities.

Bishop Morcos, whose diocese in Shobra el Kheima has received material aid as well as English teachers, understands personally how a relationship with an outsider can allow for learning and growth in surprising ways, and continues to request English teachers for the evening program at his church. He speaks fondly and gratefully of Vern Ratzlaff who visited him as MCC's Country Representative in the mid-1980s. The young bishop had just been called from life in the monastery to a very public role as spiritual leader and church administrator. Bishop Morcos recalls that he learned a great deal about how to approach the new position in discussion with that Mennonite administrator.

By your light we see the light,
O Jesus full of light.

For you are the true light
which brightens all creation.

Enlighten us with your radiant
light,

O You who are the ray of the
Heavenly Father.

—from the Syrian Orthodox Liturgy,
Hymn of Lighting the Candles

**Christians will be salt,
yeast, light to the larger
community around them.
North Americans informed
by Anabaptist thought
find commonalities with
the Copts in this.**

Many thanks to previous MCC Country Representatives and their writings:

Karen Cressman Anderson, "Chronological History of MCC Egypt" (June 2003).

Jan and Rick Janzen, "MCC Egypt—August 1944 to 31 October 1996" (December 1996).

Vern Ratzlaff, "The Coptic Orthodox Church: Five Essays," MCC Occasional Paper No. 1 (May 1988).

Learning and Growing

Mennonites have discovered commonality in a church that assumes Christian life happens at a congregational, community level. Attendance at Mass is very important, but so is taking care of each other and serving neighbors. What is sometimes called "the Mennonite game" works among the Coptic Orthodox, as well—even those not born to the church can start naming names and finding people in common within church circles.

The Coptic Orthodox church does not have a history of holding and losing political power nor a memory of a "golden age" when church and state were intertwined. The unspoken assumption is that Christians will be salt, yeast, light to the larger community around them. Because of this assumption, North Americans informed by Anabaptist thought find commonalities in Christian faith with the Copts.

Mennonites have developed an appreciation for a society that takes personal faith and organized religion seriously, to the point that economic or criminal tensions are sometimes expressed along religious lines. This means Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt are quite complex and it takes time and a commitment to listening to a variety of people to begin to understand what goes on under the surface.

MCC is building on these lessons in partnership with Bishop Thomas' diocese in rural Upper Egypt where traditions, for better and worse, run strong and the economy limps along. He has visited Mennonite churches and seminaries in North America and receives MCC visitors interested in the dynamics of what goes on under the surface when there are Christian-Muslim tensions. Currently, Bishop Thomas and MCC have developed a project description for an MCC worker and Egyptian Christians to work on the application of conflict transformation principles to this context. This seems a fitting way for the Mennonite-Coptic Orthodox relationship to grow in mutual understanding and appreciation.

The Coptic Orthodox church has come to trust MCC. It is clear that MCC is serious in a commitment to placing workers under local church leaders and being absolutely transparent both to the church and the community about this work: MCC provides practical resources under the direction of Egyptian church leaders and supports the body of Christ in its Egyptian expression. MCC remains committed to building bridges that carry people in both directions.

Linda Herr and her husband, James Wheeler, are currently the MCC Country Representatives for Egypt.

What I learned from the Coptic Orthodox in Egypt

by Vern Ratzlaff

Eighteen years since I left Egypt. In terms of sphinx and pyramid timelines, that's just a little hiccup. But it's 18 years and I keep boring the congregation still with (to me) meaningful reflections on the church in Egypt and its significance for a middle class heterogeneous congregation in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Theological

One of the most evocative phrases in the Apostles' Creed is, "I believe in the communion of saints." Christians across time, across national boundaries, across confessional divides. The liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox church is in a language and of an inordinate length altogether different from Mennonite worship patterns. But at the heart of each is the cross and the attempt to make relevant for our time what faith means

(e.g., in the Orthodox liturgy, the prayer for water for the crops). Two stories to illustrate this "communion of saints".

I was on a bus tour with 45 Coptic Orthodox (CO) people going to monasteries and old churches. One elderly man and I seemed to have the beginnings of a good friendship, even though he knew very little English and I little more Arabic. In one of the churches there were striking icons on the wall. They portrayed scenes from Jesus' life, from the Annunciation to the Crucifixion. The elderly man and I walked hand-in-hand, stopping before each picture, while he read in Arabic what was printed beneath. But when we came to the final scenes of the crucifixion, he fell silent, and at the cross we both began weeping. For at the cross, none who kneels is higher or lower than the one who kneels beside. I believe in the communion of saints.

Charles Cristano, of Indonesia, former president of the Mennonite World Conference, came to Egypt to see how the church there faced life under a Muslim majority. One day I took him to one of the monasteries where Fr. Lukas (a physician turned monk) and I had become friends. I introduced Charles to Fr. Lukas and we began to talk, but then suddenly Fr. Lukas abruptly left. I wondered if I had in some way offended him, but after several minutes he returned, several other monks in tow. "We're going to tell each other how we came to God," he said, "We need to hear each other." And so we shared—these monks who traced their faith to the preaching of St Mark two millennia ago, me with the sixteenth century as base, Charles as a second generation believer. And we told our stories there and felt the love that united us—the communion of saints.

When I returned to Canada and took up a pastoral assignment in the Mennonite church, these experiences could not be forgotten. It is interesting that in Egypt MCC was expected to reach across confessional lines; in Saskatoon the general Mennonite expectation was to concentrate on a Mennonite constituency. What I had been sent to do in Egypt on behalf of Mennonites was not something to be too much concerned about in Canada. I could not do that, and the congregation I'm a part of couldn't either. We have tried to express the communion of saints through ecumenical bible studies, shared church services, inter-church pastoral retreats, inter-church weekly prayer, inter-church baptismal recognition (when there are baptisms, infant or believers, parishes in our local fellowship cluster send greetings to the baptized and/or family; in our congregation we have someone from another parish join us in the baptismal benediction). Baptism is not a sectarian practice, but into the *whole* Christian community. The communion of saints. I learned it in Egypt from my Coptic sisters and brothers.

Psychological

It seemed to me that the renewal that was moving in the Coptic Orthodox church was affected in large measure by the renewal of monastic life and the cultivation of spiritual disciplines taught to, and modeled for, the membership by the monks. Student weekend retreats were physically exhausting. I would do my thing (usually a bible study), then students would come to talk, and by the time I was longing for sleep, they would invite me to a prayer session lasting into the morning hours. Living in hostile university surroundings, the students craved these weekends for the spiritual strength and Christian commu-

nity they provided. There was an urgency in their pursuing prayer, study and fellowship, for this was how they would be able to face the testing back at university in a Muslim culture.

And the monasteries provided the venue for students and others to come for spiritual sanctuary and sustenance. Ironically, the large numbers who came for teaching from the monks "interfered" with the monks' own need for contemplation, etc.—they were the victims of their own "success."

One of the bishops was still also the "abbot" of his monastery; his diocese numbered over 250,000 people, and he worked very long hours. But each month he took a three-day retreat at his monastery. He needed that time, he said, to be able to do his work.

Fumblingly, I have tried to keep some of this. Occasional time at a nearby retreat center, praying the morning hours (I use Celtic prayer books now, not Coptic material), and feeling guilty about not doing more, keep the vision alive. And the congregation takes prayer and other spiritual disciplines seriously. Our annual board/congregational retreat alternates between "business" sessions and spiritual nurture.

Sociological

When I arrived in Saskatoon, one of the big community issues was whether the Lord's Prayer should be said in the public schools, along with bible readings. Ironically, those who clamoured most loudly for the Lord's Prayer in school never used it in their own church worship services ("too Catholic"). Having observed the church in Egypt, a church that for almost its entire life has existed under persecution, harassment or discrimination, and still is a strong presence, I was bemused by our North American Christian emphasis on the need for state and public institutions to prop up Christian sociological distinctives. The church in Egypt had done okay without political support of its values; the early church did alright without it; and I once read a book that claimed our Anabaptist communities did fairly well without that as well. This was another point of similarity between the Coptic Orthodox and us Mennonites—we both know what it is like to be in the minority; we both have a history of martyrs.

The churches in Egypt (Coptic Orthodox, Evangelical, Catholic) have almost always lived in an era of pluralism. As did the early church, its members soon discovered that you could share the marketplace with your

Blessed is He who put on Adam
and by means of the Wood
of the Cross
made him leap back into Paradise.

— St. Ephrem the Syrian,
4th century

**At the cross, none
who kneels is higher
or lower than the one
who kneels beside.**

He repeated several times:
take care of the children.

neighbours, even though you worshipped in different temples. The church in Egypt has developed a sociological perspective that echoes the early church in its ability to live in the context of religious pluralism. In the West we haven't caught on to that yet. We expect the state to buttress our institutions to effect enforcement of our private values (Mennonites are often at the front of the letter-writing campaigns). The church in Egypt is a paradigm of God's people as exiles and pilgrims.

Pastoral

A week or so before I left Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox patriarch's secretary phoned and asked if I would take a few minutes with the patriarch after his next bible study session. I agreed, and felt somewhat badly that a western schismatic would take time away from the faithful gathered to speak to the patriarch. What I had thought of as a few minutes, stretched into more like 45 minutes as he reflected on MCC and Coptic Orthodox work together and in the teaching that he and I had several times done jointly at priests' gatherings, etc. What are you going to do when you get back, he asked. Probably go into parish work, I replied. He then delivered an earnest exposition on pastoral responsibilities and outlined a long-term

agenda for me. (I confess that I have not done everything he told me to do.) But at the end, he repeated several times: take care of the children. And I had seen how *he* did that, kneeling in the dusty streets, this bearded spiritual leader of ten million Coptic Orthodox—kneeling on the ground as children crowded around him for a blessing, a hug, a word.

The patriarch's parting words have been a major focus in our congregation: how to make children feel safe, accepted, part of the community, loved into faith. As I move into retirement and leave the congregation, one of the things I will miss most is the contact with the children. And I have a Coptic Orthodox patriarch's pastoral theology to thank for that.

Different liturgies, different histories, differing languages, but the same cross. Yes, I believe in the communion of saints after my Egypt years as I never understood that phrase before.

Vern and Helen Ratzlaff were MCC Country Representatives in Egypt 1982–1987. Since then Vern has been on the pastoral staff of Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

In Mesopotamia: The Syrian Orthodox and MCC Volunteers

by Archbishop Matta Roham

The first time I encountered Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was in 1991 when I met Mr. Roy Hange who had come to Damascus, Syria, to teach English classes at St Ephrem's Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary. Although I had done my theological studies in the United States, I knew very little about the Mennonite Church. When Roy began his work at the seminary he was able to establish a good network with other parishes and congregations of different Christian denominations.

I began to work with MCC to address various social issues within my diocese in north-east Syria, positioned between Turkey and Iraq, after the Gulf War erupted in 1991. Roy visited my diocese in Mesopotamia to see how the needs of the refugees arriving from Iraq could be better met. We cooperated in assisting these refugees both spiritu-

ally and financially. MCC sent food and clothes which were subsequently distributed among the refugees via church committees. We felt very sorry when Roy and his new wife Maren left Syria in 1997 to undertake a new assignment.

Shortly after, I visited Damascus and was introduced to the new representatives for MCC, Mr. Eldon Wagler and Mrs. Jane Emile-Wagler. I also met their little son, Anthony, and shortly after their arrival God blessed them with a daughter Mary. I invited them to visit me in Mesopotamia to get better acquainted with my diocese and to hopefully continue the work which we had begun with Roy Hange. The Waglers' response was positive in every way and they soon revealed qualities similar to Roy and Maren—they are humble, contented and loving people. Having met the Waglers, I

was left feeling assured that the work of MCC would continue effectively in our country.

With the Waglers we were able to continue supporting the refugees who had fled from Iraq to Syria and were living at the Al-Hol Camp close to the Iraqi-Syrian border. MCC continued to support these people with clothes and food.

In the early 1990s I had the opportunity to visit the MCC headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania, and to witness the spiritual and social work that stems from there. I still remember the warm, heartfelt welcome that I was given and the sense of Christ's presence in both of our churches: among the Syrian Orthodox in Mesopotamia and the Mennonites in Pennsylvania. I felt that Christ was building bridges between the churches through committed volunteers like the Hanges and the Waglers.

Children also play a role in the Orthodox-Mennonite relationship in Syria. The first time the Waglers visited Hassake was in the spring of 1998 during Holy Week. One day after the Holy Liturgy, the church's brass band was playing some beautiful songs at the back of the church. Anthony was greatly impressed by the music and attracted to the trumpets. When we returned to the parish house later, three-year-old Anthony took a broom stick and proceeded to march up and down the corridor blowing industriously into one end, as if it were a trumpet! Since that first visit, Hassake has become a place of wonder for Anthony and Mary. The Emile-Wagler children, through their time in Syria, have come to embrace the culture, and speak Arabic as comfortably as they speak English. They are a treasure for their family and the church. We pray that these children will one day continue in the footsteps of their parents, serving the forthcoming generations in Syria.

Seven years ago my diocese, in cooperation with MCC, started a summer program of English instruction for the children, youth and adults of Hassake. The Waglers and other MCC teachers like Mark Lehman, Esther and Nathan Koontz, and Nathan Musselman have worked with us through these early years of our program. If it were not for the MCC volunteers, it would have been difficult to improve the level of English in our schools. The MCC volunteers have also been able to build truly fraternal relationships with the students and their families.

The MCCers have many friends here in Hassake, and in their spare time after the English lessons they visit the families of their students. They have not only taught our children English, they have also helped to develop their personalities and have broadened our children's vision of life. Some of the Muslim students who have joined the courses now feel that we all belong to one common human family. We sense that the MCC teachers, through their inviting style of teaching, have managed to build bridges between the Christian society and the broader society in Hassake. They are very much a part of our society and of our families. From Damascus, the Wagler family stays in regular contact with the families and friends in Hassake—calling and receiving calls on celebrations like Christmas, Easter and other holidays.

Every year when the summer English course draws to a close and the MCCers leave for Damascus, we all eagerly await their return the following summer. Whenever the Waglers do have some spare time, however, they do not hesitate to come to Mesopotamia, sometimes with their colleagues from MCC, to visit us and to cultivate the growing relationship between our two traditions. MCC should be very proud of such volunteers who today labor like the Apostles did at the beginning of our Christian faith.

The MCC-Syrian Orthodox work together in Mesopotamia has also extended to the securing of support for various projects with our local church: establishing English language libraries and computer labs, funding development projects like digging a well, in addition to supporting needs in our private schools.

I congratulate MCC for having such volunteers who are projecting, through their lives, a bright image of the Church of Christ. Without the help of the MCCers, it would have been impossible to fulfill my vision of social work in the Syrian Orthodox in Mesopotamia. I believe the light of God's kingdom shines brightest when Christians, regardless of denomination, work hand in hand in service to God's glory.

Eustathius Matta Roham has been the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Jazireh and Euphrates since July 1990. The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch is a continuation of the historical Christian faith in Mesopotamia.

Resources for further Reading

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MCC and the Syrian Orthodox Church: Akron and Antioch

by Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler

Introduction

The history of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) presence in Syria spans less than two decades, with program and in-country personnel beginning in the early 1990s. This relatively young country program has been a modest undertaking from its inception, with a small number of MCC volunteers working with and through the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. MCC has consciously placed volunteers within the structure of that Orthodox Church. While the Syrian Orthodox–Mennonite relationship may seem on the surface to be an odd couple, it has proven to be fertile grounds for increased mutual understanding and appreciation of two distinctly diverse traditions.

First Contacts

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the constituents of MCC—the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches of North America—had virtually no contact before the last half of the twentieth century. Geography and different church traditions precluded the two groups from interacting in any meaningful way. The Syrian Orthodox Church is an apostolic church that traces its roots back to Antioch, where Christians were first called by that name (Acts 11:26). The Syrian Orthodox have preserved the language of Christ, Syriac/Aramaic, which they still speak in some homes and use in all celebrations of the liturgy. The church has historically been centered in the Levant, in Mesopotamia and in southwestern India. Only in the last century did the Syrian Orthodox spread to the West, when they fled severe persecution at the hands of the Young Turks in the ashes of the Ottoman Empire.

But it was not the diaspora and the physical presence of Syrian Orthodox Christians in Western Europe and North America that initiated contact between members of this ancient church and the children of the radical reformers. Rather the connection originated in Syria, when Anabaptists working with MCC Jordan began making the trip to Syria from Jordan. At several points in the 1980s, Jordan Country Representative Ed Epp and other MCC personnel travelled from Amman to Damascus, the seat of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, to meet with

Patriarch Zakka I Iwas, other clergy and members of the Middle East Council of Churches.

LeRoy Friesen followed on the road to Damascus in the summer of 1988, having been commissioned by three Mennonite missions and service organizations (MCC, Mennonite Board of Missions and Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities) then involved in the Middle East, to do a major study of their work. Friesen called on the heads of the Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic and Armenian Orthodox in Damascus. In his report Friesen recommended that Mennonites deliberately cultivate and deepen relationships with the Middle Eastern churches: “We are all of common stuff. Mennonite commitment to work with them [Middle Eastern churches] toward the goal of together becoming increasingly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ needs to be strengthened.”¹

Establishing a Country Program

Following the recommendations that came from LeRoy Friesen’s visit, MCC began exploring further ways of working with local churches in Syria. The political climate in the late 1980s did little to encourage a Syrian church to seek out interaction with a Western church organization such as MCC. Syria was at the time a Soviet satellite state, and any connection with the West was viewed askance. While Syria’s designation as an “enemy state” by many in the West may have been an incentive for MCC to seek involvement in Syria, it was a formidable barrier for the Syrian churches in considering whether they should invite and host a Western church non-governmental organization (NGO).

MCC had a strong missiological orientation to work with and through a local church, and it was also a logistical necessity. A Western NGO could not register in Syria, whose socialist government made little space for civil society. Without a local church or organization being willing to support MCC, having a program with personnel in country would have been very difficult, if not impossible.

In 1990, MCC Asia Co-Director Ed Martin put the question of a possible MCC placement with the Syrian Orthodox Church of

Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God. If we sin against our brother, we have sinned against Christ.

—St. Anthony, 4th century

Antioch to Patriarch Zakka I Iwas. Patriarch Zakka responded favorably, and suggested placing an English instructor at St. Ephrem's Clerical Seminary, then located in the Old City of Damascus. In 1991, Roy Hange moved into the seminary as the first MCC personnel placement in Syria. He was in effect seconded to the Syrian Orthodox Church, an arrangement that still holds for MCC personnel to this day. The Syrian Orthodox continue to secure residency for the MCC personnel, no small gesture of trust in a country where Western NGOs were and are still viewed with significant suspicion.

MCC Syria Today

Because MCC personnel work within the structures of the apostolic Syrian Orthodox Church, virtually all of MCC's work is through local institutions, typically institutions of the local church, and MCC maintains no structure or institutions of its own. This stance is a response to LeRoy Friesen's call for "revolutionary subordination"² to Christian brothers and sisters in Syria in the hope that MCC's gifts can be grafted into the church's witness to the Anointed One.

The position as English instructor at St. Ephrem's Seminary has remained the cornerstone of MCC Syria's personnel involvement, even with the seminary's move outside Damascus to Maret Seydnaya in 1996. Teaching seminarians, the future leaders of the church, meets a specific need at the seminary and gives MCC a recognized niche in society. St. Ephrem's Seminary is described by the Syrian Orthodox as the "beating heart of the church", and MCCers have been privileged to take part in formation of the next generation of priests, monks and nuns. And by introducing visitors to St. Ephrem's, MCC visitors are able to taste the fruits of ecumenical exchange that the seminary forum provides. One participant of an MCC-sponsored tour in 2000 described singing with the seminarians as an "experience that took me to heaven. But then I remembered that if I were in heaven, my wife would surely be standing beside me, singing along as well."

The area of education remains a strong emphasis for MCC Syria, at the seminary and in other church-run programs. In addition to actual language teaching and training of teachers, MCC has provided grants for or procured computers, libraries and electronic educational tools for church-run institutions. MCC has established several daycares, and MCCers remain closely involved in these as resource persons. Social services to margin-

alized communities include working alongside several Catholic agencies, with l'Arche community for people with mental handicaps, an infant/mother care program and a street children program. MCC Syria continues to advocate quietly in the realm of peacemaking, primarily through the translation of MCC Peace Shelf texts into Arabic, by supporting local peacebuilding seminars, and by sponsoring participants to the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University.

Conclusion

Patriarch Zakka described the spiritual unity that binds the Syrian Orthodox and Mennonites as "a unity of people like us who have Christ in our hearts." MCC has no illusions about an imminent Mennonite theological union with the Syrian Orthodox Church or with any Orthodox churches, for that matter. Anabaptists will keep on being Anabaptists and the Orthodox will continue being Orthodox. But in MCC Syria we live a stimulating frontier where ecumenical concerns forge new grounds on which we can relate. We live in a borderland where a shared concern for diaconal service for God's kingdom shrinks historic distances between our two traditions. The differences do indeed remain: perhaps they should linger on, as a tribute to God's diverse creation. In service, however, we can celebrate a unity that far exceeds our doctrinal differences.

A local Orthodox bishop once commented to MCC personnel: "Western mission groups like to come here and try to work. When things don't work out, they go and leave us local people with the mess. But you have stayed with us. You feel like a part of us." MCC Syria endeavors to strengthen and to build the capacity of the local churches in Syria. Perhaps the Akron-Antioch connection is not such a long stretch after all, when it is part of a diaconal witness of the greater kingdom of God.

Eldon Wagler and Jane Emile-Wagler are the MCC Country Representatives for Syria.

Notes

1. LeRoy Friesen, *Mennonite Witness in the Middle East: A Missiological Introduction* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000, 2nd Edition) p. 179.
2. *Ibid.*, 172.

Love silence above all else,
for it brings you near to fruit
which the tongue is too feeble
to expound.

—St. Isaac of Syria, 7th century

You, MCC, have
stayed with us.

Conversations with Bishop Thomas: Thoughts on Peacemaking and Martyrdom

In 1990, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) approached the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, to request a representative to join MCC's "Bridging the Gulf Tour" in North America to voice the opinions of Arab people concerning the Gulf war. The Pope requested that Bishop Thomas represent the Coptic Orthodox, and so the friendship between Bishop Thomas and the Mennonites began. MCC later arranged for Bishop Thomas to study at AMBS in Indiana during the January 1994 inter-term, after which he spoke at the MCC annual meeting.

Bishop Thomas is responsible for the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Qossey in rural Upper Egypt. The population of this area (the town of Qossey and 29 surrounding villages) is about 25–30% Christian. Twenty five Orthodox churches with 35 priests and several churches from other denominations, including Coptic Catholic and Synod of the Nile Presbyterian, serve a Christian population of about 100,000. The Diocese runs development programs, which include income generation projects and a school.

The diocese also runs a retreat center in the northern desert near the Wadi Natrun monasteries.

A main purpose for the retreat center is to provide a space for European and Egyptian Christians to meet each other and broaden understandings of and appreciation for the other churches. The church is also developing an organic agriculture training center there.

Bishop Thomas' acquaintance with Mennonites and MCC over 15 years has allowed a mutual understanding of similar approaches to peace. Conversations with him have informed MCC program and international visitors. He explains the historical roots of conflicts which often take a religious veneer, whether between East and West or within local villages, or discusses the need to equip church leaders to deal with the conflicts they face daily. Currently MCC and Bishop Thomas are planning to place a peace worker in Qossey to resource lay and ordained church people, as a catalyst for applying conflict mediation with a Christian perspective to the Egyptian context and developing the church's response to a changing society.

Coptic Orthodox Christians identify deeply with suffering that may result from being true to Christ. They tell stories of martyrs in church services; depictions of saints who have died for their faith are on the walls in churches and homes. The liturgical calendar is based on the one which the pharaohs developed to mark the agricultural seasons along the Nile but the years begin counting with the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 284 AD, an era marked by severe persecution of the church.

Bishop Thomas agreed to share some thoughts on the relationship with MCC and insights on several issues with MCC Egypt Country Co-Representative, Linda Herr.

How would you describe the relationship between the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Qossey and MCC?

One of the beautiful things of the relationship between MCC and the Coptic church is that experience of the long road that we are still traveling together. It started with an injection of aid and has led to focusing the goal that is shared between us.

How do we share a vision for peace?

Working out how to live in this world with the concept of pacifism, with peacemaking and peaceful responses, is a common goal of the Coptic Orthodox Church and MCC. The beauty of today's relationship is the clearer vision of the wisdom of pacifism. In the Coptic church, we see this as incarnation: God came to us first of all as a peacemaker. His reaction to us was very active pacifism: not punishment, not revenge, but "peace be with you." The goal that we need to work on together is not only making peace but also creating an awareness of the power of pacifism.

I imagine if only—and this is only in my imagination—the United States' policymakers would have sent a message of forgiveness and peace to the whole world after September 11. The shape of the world would be different today. One gun brings another gun but a hug invites another hug. The power of active pacifism is not yet experienced by many nations. It looks like weakness, so we need to work together to present examples of the power of the active paci-

Be persecuted, rather than
be a persecutor.

Be crucified, rather than
be a crucifier.

Be treated unjustly, rather than
treat anyone unjustly.

Be oppressed, rather than
be an oppressor.

Be gentle, rather than zealous.

Lay hold of goodness, rather than
justice.

—St. Isaac of Syria, 7th century

fism. We in the Coptic Church and MCC have great examples and history of this. We need to learn together how to play the same guitar and pluck the strings to play a symphony of harmony and peace, to present it to the world with the hope that they will join in singing together a song of peace.

What do you see as some of the challenges of peacemaking, of creating this music of peace?

One day a man and his son came to visit me. As soon as they sat down, the man started to complain about his son's refusal to eat. He was a bit angry and the child was angry with his father, as well. I clearly saw this anger, so I took the boy aside and whispered confidently in his ear: "If you eat the sandwich you will be as big and as strong as your dad." The son thought for while and when he came back he asked in a trusting voice if it was really true. "Yes indeed," I said. He picked up the sandwich and ate it quickly. I was happy to see the child was convinced and I continued talking with his father. After a little while I felt a tiny hand tapping on my shoulder. The boy looked at me, looked at his father, and looked at himself. "I did not become big as you said," he said, disappointed.

These words made me stop and realize the big mistake I had made in searching for a short-term solution and not searching for a deeper, secure solution for this conflict. I should have taken my guitar and plucked the string of wisdom, the string of feelings, the string of culture, of spirituality, of practicality, the string of good results and fruits, to try and understand why the child did not want to eat.

Many of our conflicts today are solved in the same way as I acted with this child. And that is the challenge of peacemaking, finding the deeper, real, solution to a problem.

What does it mean to have a living history of martyrs?

A martyr defends life and is working for dignity and truth. In the Orthodox concept, a martyr is not created only by the fact of dying. A martyr is someone who works for life, defending the dignity of life and liberating others from darkness. The martyrs of our church all stood for righteousness and death was the consequence. They didn't seek death, they took a stand for life.

Life is a whole. There are different forms of life: in the womb, in the earthly flesh and outside the flesh. Our earthly lives must be good, clear and righteous. As long as every-

thing around us moves with us in the right direction, all goes well. But if there is something which hates life and causes death, then our death becomes a bridge of gold to life in the spirit. Life in the flesh and life in the spirit are united in the mind and heart of the martyr. Life is one from the time we are conceived until eternity.

We do not work for death but if it comes, we accept it as the fruit of standing for life. We believe in living for life, not in dying for the sake of dying.

Are there political implications of martyrdom?

Life is one and martyrdom is unifying. Nations fail their people when they see separation as protection. If we are not able to extend the unity of life to all nations, and connect lives with other lives, we are not working to bring together all of creation.

Let's take one example from the historical political realm. In the third century, the Persian and Roman empires were at war. Christianity, however, was growing at nearly equal rates in the two empires. The blood of martyrs was flowing on both sides and this bloodshed created unity between people in the empires. Egyptians, who were part of the Roman Empire, were praising Jacob the Martyr in Persia. This bloodshed allowed for a flow of love between warring nations, creating a unity in the church that was stronger than the separation by war.

When Constantine declared Christianity the political religion of his empire, he created a separation between Christians in the Roman Empire and Christians in the Persian Empire and their martyrs. The stream of love between martyrs was cut off by this political separation. Martyrdom in these empires was life-giving and stood for truth in all nations.

Even now, the Persian Empire and its heirs cannot appreciate Christianity, as it is the religion of the enemy. The West, as the heir of the Roman Empire, still carries blame religiously: any political decision is seen to be a Christian decision. Constantine's political decision separated Christians and allowed for an attitude of death.

In the current era, martyrdom is returning to the practice of standing for life and defending human truth to the last drop of blood. It stands up for life in all nations and allows for the flow of love. There will be people everywhere standing for truth. The stream of life flows in all nations to heal death and separation of any people from the community of Christ.



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First Person: My life as a Bridge

by Irimi Asaad

When I was younger, I always wanted to take English courses. But I couldn't because they cost too much for my family to afford. Then in 1991 they announced at my church that they were going to start English lessons. My parents encouraged me to enroll in the program offered through St. Mary and Archangel Michael's Church.

So I started studying English in 1991. When I left the English program in 1997, I was one of the teachers! It was at this Coptic Orthodox church that I got to know the Mennonite Church through the MCC service workers who taught in the English program. Among the countless things I received from the program were self-confidence, friends, language skills and modern teaching techniques.

This is not just my story. This is the story of everyone who was part of that English program, whether as a student or a teacher. We all received many practical and social benefits from the program.

I consider this time of studying and teaching English to have been a preparation period arranged by God to give me what is far beyond my own understanding. God was preparing me for my work with Mennonite Central Committee. Now as an MCC Egypt staff person, I am really happy to work as a bridge between the two churches, for the benefit of both.

Irimi Asaad has been an Administrative Assistant with MCC Egypt since 1997.