



Development through the lens of Peacebuilding in Egypt

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Introduction

by Rowan Mundhenk

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Egypt recently underwent a Country Program Review which suggested that: “peacebuilding become the focus of and lens through which the MCC Egypt program is developed.” Over the last three years MCC Egypt has attempted to turn that recommendation into a reality. Although still in the process of transitioning into a fully peace-oriented program, this issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* seeks to provide insight into the diversity of what has transpired so far.

It is helpful when attempting to understand MCC programming to have a snapshot of the context in which the projects are being implemented. Ten percent of Egypt’s population are Christians who trace their roots back to the apostle Mark and who have maintained a continuous presence in Egypt since the coming of St. Mark in the first century CE. Many Christians feel disenfranchised because of their current minority status. There have been a number of incidents of sectarian violence in the past 20 years, with the severity and quantity of such incidents waxing and waning. Apart from instances of outright violence there is also an overall feeling of being second-class citizens, especially since the previous president, Anwar Sadat, referred to himself as being “a Muslim president of a Muslim country.”

Peacebuilding covers a wide array of topics, including conflict transformation, trauma healing, interfaith dialogue and bridge-building, and increasing awareness about domestic abuse, among other things. MCC Egypt is working to synthesize the traditionally sepa-

rate fields of development and peacebuilding. Development projects are ideal places to bring people together to build bridges of understanding, and peace projects are opportunities to get a broader community perspective on what will most benefit the community as a whole.

MCC Egypt works through local grassroots partners who understand their local communities and culture. MCC provides resources and materials to assist in these local initiatives as well as feedback on ways to measure change and impact. A desired outcome of the initiatives is to help build a culture of peace, and to provide the support and resources necessary to develop a contextualized Egyptian and Middle Eastern peacebuilding theory. Such theory would take seriously the specific, nuanced issues found in the Middle East.

This issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* shares some of the ways that MCC Egypt is attempting to proactively carry out this synthesis. The first article by Maggie Goble offers additional background and descriptions of projects that MCC is currently supporting in Egypt. Father Luke, a Coptic Orthodox priest, offers an article describing the role of peace in the Orthodox tradition. Keith Miller, a former MCC Egypt service worker in Beni Suef, tells about attempts to incorporate bridge-building initiatives into his English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. There is a reflection from Matthew Bucher, a service worker who is offering peace training in El Qosseya, a small town in Upper Egypt. A Coptic Orthodox Bishop’s response to a difficult situation in Iraq

Emotions and Relationships

Dr. Nashat is the director of Ekhlas, one of MCC's local partners in Egypt. He told the story of a woman who had attended several workshops sponsored by the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Beba, El Fashn, and Somasta. The woman's husband had recently passed away, leaving her to care for her teenage son by herself. The son was deeply affected by his father's death, had lost interest in school, and had become argumentative with his mother. She attended a symposium on building healthy relationships within a family and one that focused on human emotions and ways to handle depression. She talked with her son about her husband's death and her feelings following it. Her sharing in this way encouraged her son and he eventually returned to school.

In 2006, an in-depth review of MCC programming in Egypt identified it as a country where peacebuilding could be integrated into the more "traditional" relief and development work that MCC had been carrying out since 1967.

is described by Rowan Mundhenk. There is a summary of the vision, mandate and work on a long-standing MCC Coptic Evangelical partner, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS). Tom Snowden shares a biblical reflection about working for peace in Egypt. These perspectives on

peacebuilding and development in Egypt seek to provide a better understanding about the work of MCC Egypt and its partners.

Rowan Mundhenk is the Program Coordinator with MCC Egypt and works with MCC's local peace partners in the planning and monitoring of their projects

Integrating Peacebuilding into Traditional Development

by Maggie Goble

For much of its history in Egypt, MCC programming has focused on supporting the educational initiatives of the local Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Evangelical Churches. This often took the form of placing English teachers in church-run English programs and primary schools and financially supporting homes for children from unstable or dysfunctional family backgrounds. In addition to educational support, MCC placed nurses in hospitals and supported economic relief and development initiatives in low-income communities.

Over the past several years, MCC has been in a process of self-examination and determining ways that we can better answer Jesus' call to be active peacemakers. In 2006, an in-depth review of MCC programming in Egypt identified it as a country where peacebuilding could be integrated into the more "traditional" relief and development work that MCC had been carrying out since 1967.

Since 2007, MCC Egypt has been seeking ways to actively support local church partners in their efforts to develop an overall "culture of peace." This support takes place at many levels, from small community organizations meeting the immediate needs of local community members, to larger organizations which have the capacity to effect long-term change at a macro level.

Reports of inter-religious tension and violence are not uncommon in Egypt. Christians comprise only ten percent of the overall population and regularly speak of discrimination. In recent years, there have been several cases of monasteries, churches, and Christian-owned businesses being attacked. Often, these violent exchanges are the result of disputes

between two families that have escalated to include the broader community and are often split along religious lines.

In addition to religious differences, Egyptian society is also segmented along social, economic, and gender lines. Twenty three percent of Egyptians live below the international poverty line, earning less than \$1.25 per day. A significant number more are "underemployed," meaning that while their incomes are above the official poverty line they do not earn enough to adequately support themselves and their families. Many unions report labor abuse in the workplace. As low-income Egyptians compete over limited resources and struggle to support their families, it is not uncommon for them to take their frustration out on family members or those they deem as threats, thus contributing to an ongoing cycle of violence.

Recognizing that intentional peacemaking is necessary at many different levels of Egyptian society, MCC is seeking to support local initiatives that promote understanding and empower individuals to contribute to the overall development of Egypt. This has taken many forms.

In recent years, MCC has intentionally sought to support programs where individuals from different backgrounds have the opportunity to gather in a neutral setting, develop friendships, and tackle issues that affect the broader society. In Beni Suef, MCC service workers have collaborated with the administrators of a church-run English program to host the "English Table," a weekly gathering where students enrolled in Diocese-sponsored English courses informally talk about a variety of topics. Students

are initially drawn to the English Table by a desire to improve their English skills and to interact with foreigners. However, as students spend more time with each other and get to know each other through the conversational topics, new friendships are formed. MCC staff in Beni Suef have also participated in the weekly Coptic Friends meeting which promotes dialogue between North American Christians and Egyptian Orthodox Christians. Through these weekly meetings, individuals gain a better understanding of one another and the foundations of a “culture of peace” begin to be laid.

South of Beni Suef, in the small community of El Fashn, the Diocese of El Fashn has received a grant from MCC, supporting their program to bring individuals from different backgrounds together to tackle issues affecting modern Egyptian society. The Diocese regularly hosts lectures open to the public where topics such as the importance of education, gender equality, health and hygiene, and family dynamics are discussed. One of the most successful campaigns launched by the organization was a series of lectures regarding the dangers of female genital mutilation (FGM). This local program was launched in conjunction with a country-wide state-sponsored movement to eradicate the practice. In addition to the lectures the Diocese sponsors “open days” where workshops and activities are offered which not only promote awareness and increase knowledge regarding key issues but also foster friendships and a sense of community.

Another similarly successful MCC-sponsored project invites community members to come together to tackle key issues. This is done, for example, by forming small committees in which community members offer each other study support and address environmental issues. A governing board comprised of both Muslims and Christians is responsible for directing the long-term vision of this project.

Since 2009 MCC has sponsored an initiative by the Orthodox Church to connect low-income households to clean water sources. The program serves both Christian and Muslim households, and families connected to clean water sources attend health and hygiene classes held in church-owned spaces. This helps to remove some of the “mystery” that is sometimes attached to

Christian churches, which are often closed to Muslims. While the long-term goal of the project remains to help low-income families to improve their health, it also provides an opportunity for individuals in an increasingly segregated society to work together to address pressing issues.

Through the Global Family program, MCC Egypt financially supports a home for girls from dysfunctional families. The home is a project of the Evangelical Church, run by a Catholic nun, which primarily serves Orthodox residents. The home is a good example of an ecumenical effort between three religious communities to serve those most in need. In addition to the inter-denominational efforts to meet the needs of the girls, MCC recognizes the home as a violence prevention peace initiative. An MCC service worker visits the home three days a week to provide tutoring and to play soccer with the girls. In addition to supporting the girls’ education, the MCC service worker seeks to develop and model healthy relationships with the girls, based on mutual respect and understanding rather than fear and distrust.

MCC was particularly interested in collaborating with these programs since they are examples of Christian organizations reaching out and serving those in the local communities, regardless of their religious backgrounds. By doing so, the organizations themselves model the change they hope to see in program participants. Additionally, MCC recognizes that peacebuilding initiatives should be contextualized, originate from within the local community and be rooted in partnership. All three organizations demonstrated insight into community needs and identified ways to address those needs.

As MCC Egypt moves forward, we continue to look for ways to integrate peacebuilding into “traditional” development practices as we collaborate with our local partners. These collaborations take many forms but we are blessed to be able to cooperate with local organizations that share MCC’s vision and goals.

Maggie Goble is the Program Planning Coordinator with MCC Egypt. She began her time in Egypt as a SALTER and is near completing the final year of her three-year Service Worker term.

A Story of Child Rearing

Another story from Ekhlas is that of a widow with young children. She was very well known in the community for attempting to use violence to control her children. She would often beat them when they wouldn’t listen to her, but it didn’t seem to have much impact. They used to run rampant, and did not have any respect for her or other members of the community. Her neighbors encouraged her to attend a seminar on child-raising techniques that Ekhlas was hosting. From the child-psychologist at the seminar she learned different techniques of working with her children. Apparently she took the techniques to heart and has not found the need to beat her children anymore. Her neighbors in the community were very impressed by her change.

MCC recognizes that peacebuilding initiatives should be contextualized, originate from within the local community and be rooted in partnership.

Copts as Peacemakers

by Father Luke Rady

Peace is not just a word or a greeting, it is how you live out your beliefs.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (Matthew 5:9).

Who are the Copts? Copts are the Egyptian Christian community. The word Copt is derived from the Greek word Aigyptos (the ancient Egyptian). When Arabs came to Egypt they could not pronounce Aigyptos, due to linguistic differences, and pronounced “Aigyptos” as “Gypt.” Then, when they wrote it, they wrote it with a *ka* so it became “Copt.”

I will provide a bit of history about the origins of Coptic Orthodoxy. Christianity, first brought to Egypt by Saint Mark, spread throughout the country in peace and quietness. Saint Mark came to Egypt to spread the gospel during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero in the first century, only a few dozen years after the Lord’s ascension. He was one of the four evangelists and the author of “The Gospel of St. Mark.”

One story that displays the way Saint Mark spread the gospel when he came to Egypt comes from his time in Alexandria. He came to Alexandria quietly and peacefully and started walking around the streets. After a long day of walking, the strap of his sandal broke, so he turned towards the first cobbler’s shop he saw. As he walked up, the cobbler who was working the awl pierced his hand and screamed in the old Egyptian language,* “Oh, One God.”

Saint Mark, in love and peace, took the cobbler’s hand, washed it, and healed his wound. When the cobbler saw what Saint Mark had done, he began to listen to him about Jesus and believed. What Saint Mark did is following in God’s steps. He did just what Jesus would do, because Saint Mark heard Jesus say “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Peace is not just a word or a greeting, it is how you live out your beliefs. Peace is also the strategic choice for a person who knows God’s plans in his life. Part of what it means for us to be living out this peace is how we seek and ask for our rights. The essential part of peacemaking is actively pursuing our rights, because truth equals freedom and

*This is the language which eventually came to be the Coptic language. Imagine that we Egyptians use Coptic words in our daily life, and we do not even realize that the roots of these words are Coptic. The current researchers say that there are more than 13,000 Coptic words that Egyptians use daily but most people do not even know that those words are Coptic.

God is the truth. As it says in John 8:36, “If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.” Within the truth is freedom and it is through this freedom that we attain peace.

The Coptic Orthodox church believes strongly in beliefs leading to changes in the way the believers live. One of the ways that we attempt to help people live out their beliefs is through the prayers of the Church. Prayer is communication between us and God which builds a relationship between God and us. There are three ways that the Copts develop this relationship specifically in regards to peace. The first way is through the liturgical prayers of peace which are prayed in the Church services. The second way is through personal prayers and calling on God for peace. The third way is the effect of the prayers on the soul and the spirit, which brings about an inner peace that leads outwards.

Taking a closer look at these Coptic prayers, it is clear that they are very peace-oriented prayers. The aim is first to have peace with God, which then grants you that lovely inner peace in yourself that expands outwards to others who differ in color or gender or faith or language. It is even true in regards to things such as plants and animals; it is a general peace towards everyone and for everything. It is because of the fact that it pervades the person and changes them from the inside that the outcome is a general feeling of peacefulness. It affects the totality of a person, and changes their way of acting and thinking.

Prayer gives people deep inner peace, regardless of what is happening around them. It is the kind of peace you would feel just by being in their presence. This person has no other way of dealing with people except by loving and caring for them. He shares people’s sorrows and happiness, pain and joy. She can’t see someone crying or in pain without helping him, and is always willing to help those who need help. He never hurts or causes conflicts for people. Peace of God be with all of you.

Father Luke Rady is a Coptic Orthodox priest and a recent Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) alumnus. He has been working with Matthew Bucher in establishing an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program in El Qossey as well as working with other peace projects in the community.

Stories from My Time as an English Connection Teacher

by Keith Miller

When Ryan, our first Beni Suef SALTer, started teaching English in al-Medina, he had only one student in the first class: Irini.* She became his friend and invited him over to her house. The next year, when I took over his classes, she also befriended our family. We've been to their house many times, for amazing meals, and her two daughters enjoy playing with our kids. We celebrate all our birthdays together, and often meet along the Nile to eat pizza and crepes and play games.

Last year, my wife Sofia gave a course for priests. When Fr. Yakoub, a young priest, finished the course he approached me to ask if I could give him private lessons. I agreed, on condition that he also attend my classes. The class didn't initially gel as most of my other classes had, in part, I think, because some students were put off by having a priest with them. But as they got to know each other, they learned to laugh and chat together. One of the other young men, a Muslim named Ahmed, sat next to Fr. Yakoub. Fr. Yakoub had a car and they lived near each other, so they used to drive back to Beni Suef together. During our private lessons, Fr. Yakoub later confided to me that his relationship with Ahmed was the only friendly relationship he has ever had with a Muslim.

In one of my classes, I had two young students named Girgis. They were friends, always came half an hour late, seldom did their homework, and giggled the whole way through class. I had little hope for them. They only took two classes, and then I didn't see them for half a year. I next saw them at a wedding. They came up and thanked me for my classes. Both had gotten plum jobs in Cairo: one in a bank, the other in a travel agency. For both, English proficiency had been crucial in getting the job. The Girgis taught me that I often can't know the effect I'm having: each student is precious.

One of Sofia's students applied for a job in Cairo. During the interview, he was asked why his English was so good. He said that he'd taken courses at the English Connection. As it turned out, the director of the company

was also from Beni Suef, and had also taken courses with us! That student got the job.

A lot of our students, when they first enter our courses, try to convince us that they deserve to take a higher level than the one they tested into. Abd al-Rahman was the opposite: he deliberately started at level five, though he had tested into a higher level, in order to solidify his grammar. He has now taken all our courses and has become a close friend. We went to his wedding in Port Said last December, and enjoy spending time with him and his wife. Abd al-Rahman works as a computer technician. Because his English is now so good, his boss has asked him to start teaching English classes in the company, which brings in much-needed extra income.

Every week we have English Table at a club along the Nile. This is a time for students to gather and chat informally. Initially we invited all the students, but as attendance has grown, we've had to limit each English Table to one class. At one English Table last year, I was sitting with some Muslim and Christian students. One of the Christians started talking about the fast that was coming up (Coptic Orthodox Christians fast for about two-thirds of the year). As she talked, it became clear that the Muslims had no idea what the Christian fasts were like. The rest of the English Table turned into a nice sharing time, with each group talking about the rules governing their fasts, and the difficulties and advantages of fasting.

Two of my favorite students have been conservative Muslim sisters: Rania and Ola. They took courses from levels five through ten, and were delightful students: always on time, their homework always done. With my encouragement, they began doing extra writing assignments, on topics of their choosing such as the role of women in Islam and the situation in Palestine. Ola also wrote lovely fiction, including one 30-page novelette. After they finished level ten, Ola decided to pursue her dream of memorizing the Qur'an, but Rania has gone back to level five because she couldn't bear to give up the English lessons. For one English

The English Table turned into a nice sharing time, with each group talking about the rules governing their fasts, and the difficulties and advantages of fasting.

*The names of the Egyptian students in this story have been changed

Table, we brought a blind Christian friend, Demiana, who speaks excellent English. She and Rania got to talking. After our month-long break last year, I found out that Rania had arranged to meet with Demiana twice a week for informal conversation in English.

I was delighted that the English Connection allowed them to find each other.

Keith Miller was an MCC Service Worker with MCC Egypt in Cairo from 2000 to 2003 and in Beni Suef from 2006 to 2009.

In the Midst of Egypt

by Matthew Bucher

“I don’t think Number 22 would ever work in Egypt.” We were examining the *198 Methods of Nonviolence* handout as part of a workshop on how to seek nonviolent strategies and solutions to conflict. Each participant had been asked to choose three strategies that may be effective in their context and three strategies that they felt had no chance of success. I quickly scanned my copy of the list to see which strategy was inappropriate for the Egyptian setting. As soon as my eyes came across “Number 22, protest disrobings,” my mouth dropped open and my mind began to search for a successful “disrobing,” or at least of a situation when disrobing could be justified in Egypt.

I love living and working in El Qosseyia (325 km./200 mi.) south of Cairo, Egypt. This town, which is in the midst of transitioning from a farming village to a city, remains rooted in a blessed visit that occurred almost 2,000 years ago. During the Holy Family’s sojourn to Egypt, they resided just outside the current city of El Qosseyia for six months and 10 days. Jesus’ presence at this site fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 19:19 that “there will be an altar to the Lord in the center of the land of Egypt.” After consulting a map, the stone where He lay, now surrounded by the Monastery of El Muharraq, is indeed at the center of Egypt. Both Christians and Muslims venerate the site and visit it frequently to pray and to relax with family and friends.

This historical awareness permeates most every aspect of Egyptian life, especially that of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Tracing its origin to Saint Mark’s preaching of the gospel in first century Alexandria, the Coptic Church is currently the largest Christian denomination in the Middle East. The most succinct description of the Coptic Orthodox Church’s identity would be the “3 M’s” of monasticism, martyrdom, and the Holy Mass.

Discovering the manner in which monasticism and the Holy Mass enrich and identify the Coptic Orthodox Church has been a wonderful experience. Likewise, visiting the tomb of St. Mena and hearing of the devotion of St. Demiana and St. Athanasius have helped me understand the power of faith and memory in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Although the stories of Egyptian martyrs are new to me, I share with my Egyptian friends about the Anabaptist martyrs like Dirk Wilhems, Michael Sattler, John Kline, and Ted Studebaker.

Living in Egypt has been full of adventures, surprises, and challenges. As an American and a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker living in Egypt, I have repeatedly faced three specific challenges during my work and life in Egypt.

The first is the irrefutable fact that I will return to the United States at the end of my term. Despite my acceptance into the community and my own realization of coming to call El Qosseyia “home,” it is unlikely that I will live in El Qosseyia indefinitely. Part of my project entails facilitating trainings on the topics of negotiation, trauma healing, and conflict mediation. During the trainings the group discusses and practices strategies that, when implemented, may transform the status quo. However, changing the accepted and the comfortable is neither easy nor painless. In addition, it is possible that I will not be present in El Qosseyia to stand shoulder to shoulder with these workshop participants when “training” becomes “real-life action.” This reality chastens my preparation and delivery, and while always encouraging pro-active and creative solutions to violence, I constantly stress that we need never seek victimization to build peace.

Number 22

It is true that Number 22: Protest Disrobings may not be an appropriate action in Egypt. However, it is a powerful tool for nonviolent social change that has been used by women for centuries in Africa and other contexts. The documentary “Pray the Devil Back to Hell” tells the story of Leymah Gbowee, a leader of the women’s movement in Liberia. Gbowee led her fellow women in utilizing this tactic as a means of gaining access to peace talks and helping to secure a peace agreement, an end to the violence and the election of the first female leader. Visit the following links to learn more about Liberian women utilizing Number 22: <http://www.liberiaseabreeze.com/?p=2136> and <http://www.praythediabacktohell.com/>

The second challenge is the incredible responsibility to listen, to experience, and to be present. Every day I hear of, and sometimes witness, events of discrimination, trauma, and persecution. Theories explaining the reasons for economic stratification, religious violence, and governmental collusion, which so often cushion the awareness of injustice, melt away in the presence of a friend's personal experience.

The third is that in any situation, especially when working in the field of peacebuilding, patience and flexibility are absolutely essential. Thankfully, I have had plenty of opportunities to both practice and observe these qualities. I am also thankful that I can pinpoint an experience where I felt these attributes were epitomized.

In early 2010, the daughter of a priest in a nearby diocese was killed crossing the street after getting off her school bus. Although Bishop Thomas, my supervisor, did not know this priest personally, he visited him at home to extend his condolences. After visiting the priest and his family, he returned and we sat down for dinner just after 11:30 p.m.

There were quite a few people at that meal that evening, but conversation was subdued. The Bishop finished his meal and sat silently in his seat. One of the workers at the house offered to make him tea, but he politely declined. At every meal I had previously eaten with the Bishop, the refusal of a hot beverage was often a precursor to his immediate departure from the table. However, this time, he remained at his place. After a few minutes I said to him, in English, "Bishop Thomas, if I felt as tired as you look, I would go to bed." He looked at me with a half smile and then replied. "Well, if I get up right now, the man sitting at the end of the table will not be able to finish his meal. When I leave, he will leave, and I want to make sure he is finished eating before I go up to bed."

I was not able to respond. This man who wielded so much power, who had suffered that day with the death of the little girl, and who never had free time for himself, willingly gave up a few precious minutes so a meal could be completed. What tremendous grace and awareness. His startling example of patience and flexibility continues to inspire me as I seek to strengthen relationships in Il-Qosseyia.

Disrobing, disrobing, what is a good example for disrobing? I stated my agreement that "Number 22, disrobing" may not be appropriate for Egypt while wracking my brain to produce a reason for its inclusion in the

An Adventure in Cross-cultural Sharing

The views of individual Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) service workers concerning military service are not necessarily the same as those of Christians or partner agency personnel where MCCers work.

In a recent Peace Committee Meeting in Egypt the topic was whether Christians should serve in the military. A story was told of Maximilius who refused to serve in the Roman Army during the 3rd Century. He stated that "I cannot serve in the army. I must obey God."

An Egyptian member of the committee, Mr. Magdy, stated that serving in the army is not disobeying God. In Egypt, he went on to say, serving in the army is the fulfillment and cementing of one's citizenship. Prior to the 1860s, Egyptian Christians were not allowed to serve in the army because they were viewed as a potential 5th column—traitors. Mr. Magdy views such service as necessary for full citizenship. One should serve with honor and dignity. He reminded us that the current Coptic patriarch, Pope Shenouda, served his military time and wrote a treatise distinguishing killing while in the military and committing murder as a private citizen. Many Coptic saints, such as Abu Safen and St. Moros, used the sword as a means of protection.

I shared with the group that as part of my adherence to Christ's teachings to love my neighbor it is hard for me to fathom that training to kill in defense of a nation state is not a contradiction of that command. Many Anabaptists revere those who attempted to transform violence through nonviolent means, such as Dirk Wilhems, Ted Studebaker, and John Kline.

It is clear that the role of the army in Egypt is different from that of the United States. Military service in Egypt is mandatory and often involves more traffic direction and guard duty than active training.

This was the first exchange of some depth within the Peace Committee where members vocally expressed an opinion regarding MCC's work. The dialogue, in which each member participated, was an excellent exchange of beliefs, opinions, and personal experiences. Respect for and interest in each other's opinions provided the foundation for a serious discussion of deeply-held beliefs. Because of the strong relationships being formed, I have high hopes for continued discussions of this nature.

—Matthew Bucher, MCC Service Worker

list. Then it hit me! "What about Isaiah," I asked. "Doesn't the story of Isaiah, Chapter 20 provide us with a good example for this strategy?" One of the participants quickly opened her Bible and read the six verses of Isaiah, Chapter 20. Following almost thirty seconds of silent thought, one man loudly proclaimed, "but I still do not think it would work in Egypt!" I smiled, nodded, and suggested we focus on the other, more "appropriate" strategies.

Matthew Bucher in an MCC Service Worker working in the Diocese of El Qosseyia with the Coptic Orthodox Bishop Thomas. He has been in charge of doing peace training for local Christian leaders as well as networking amongst different local organizations doing peace projects for the past three years and recently started work on an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) course for El Qosseyia with a peace emphasis.

Theories, which so often cushion the awareness of injustice, melt away in the presence of a friend's personal experience.

A Coptic Orthodox Bishop's Response to Iraq

by Rowan Mundhenk

There is at least one voice, however, which continues to stand strong and serve as a pillar of forgiveness, active love, and undying faith in the power of the God he has dedicated his life to serving.

If the Christian community is active in the community, working with the poor and the needy, and getting to know their neighbors through acts of love and service, it will help the wider community to know them better and respect them as people.

“The most important thing is to not fear. Fear is what the terrorists are trying to instill and so as soon as we let fear creep into our thoughts and start changing our lives, they have already won without having to actually do anything to us.”

—Bishop Thomas

Bishop Thomas came up to address the MCC Egypt staff on the first day of their Fall retreat at the Anafora retreat center which is run by his El Qosseyia Diocese. On this particular weekend it was very busy as quite a few large groups had decided this would be a good time to visit Anafora, but he had a few spare minutes to say hello to MCC Egypt.

When presented with a letter from MCC offering support and condolences to the Middle Eastern Christian community as a whole, Bishop Thomas began talking about a topic which has probably not been far from his mind since it happened. On the eve of Halloween (October 31st) a militant group entered a Catholic Cathedral in Iraq and took over 100 people hostage inside. They demanded, among other things, the release of women they claimed were Muslim and were being held hostage in monasteries by the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. The standoff with security forces ended with an attempt by the anti-terrorist unit to take the Cathedral by force, and the subsequent killing of over 40 hostages. After this event there was a threat from the group which claimed responsibility for the hostage situation that something similar would happen in Egypt if the women were not released.

The general response to the threats of violent repercussions in Egypt has been one of fear. Security has been heightened around the country, with special attention being given to church buildings and Christian groups who attempt to meet or go on trips. The heightened security has naturally heightened feelings of trepidation, and a general uneasiness has started to seep into the Christian community throughout Egypt. There is at least one voice, however, which continues to stand strong and serve as a pillar of forgiveness, active love, and undying faith in the power of the God he has dedicated his life to serving. Being influenced by the response of the Amish community to the 2006 school

shooting, Bishop Thomas gathered the workers and residents of Anafora together the day after the horrendous events in Iraq and had them participate in a prayer for forgiveness. While the natural response to events and threats such as these would be to hide away in fear, Bishop Thomas encourages Middle Eastern Christians to use this as a way to show the love and care that Christ calls on us to show our enemies.

He used the phrase “active-love” as the appropriate response to the events and the threats involved in the Iraq incident. He called on the members of his diocese to move outwards and to spread love and fearlessness to those in their communities. Bishop Thomas even referred to a past event in his life where there were threats against him personally, and said even then, when it was very specific, the best thing that he could do was to not show fear and to continue lovingly caring for those around him.

He stressed that if the Christians in the community collapse in on themselves, and remove themselves from the rest of the community, it is much easier for the rest of the community to be influenced by other perspectives about the Christians. However if they are active in the community, working with the poor and the needy, and getting to know their neighbors through acts of love and service, it will help the wider community to know them better and respect them as people.

Bishop Thomas and his El Qosseyia Diocese have been in partnership with MCC Egypt for 15 years. He is a Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI) alumnus and has worked closely with MCC on different peace projects around Egypt. He currently has an MCC service worker living in his Bishopric who has done conflict transformation and peacebuilding trainings in the area for the past three years.

Advocacy and Policy Reform in Egypt

by CEOSS

The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Service (CEOSS) is an Egyptian Christian development organization headquartered in Cairo, Egypt that is dedicated to social and cultural development, individual well-being, social justice, and inter-cultural harmony. It delivers its services regardless of gender, race, religion, or beliefs. As a Christian voice promoting pluralism and mutual respect in an Egyptian context, CEOSS encourages the participation of Egyptians from all segments of society—Muslim and Christian, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, powerful and powerless—to work together toward common goals. CEOSS reaches out to more than 2 million Egyptians annually in more than 100 rural and urban communities.

CEOSS facilitates direct negotiation between Egyptian citizens in poor rural and urban communities and governmental officials at the local, governorate, and ministerial levels. These public servants are thereby strengthened in their capacity to recognize and respect citizens' right to participation. CEOSS helps citizens and government officials consider how existing procedures, structures, and processes can be reformed to secure appropriate levels of participation and decentralization.

CEOSS encourages open and frank dialogue between citizens, community-based organizations (CBOs), the government, and media. As a result of training and capacity building, communication is based on mutual respect and solid information instead of blame and hostility. Through this dialogue, stakeholders come to agreement about responses needed to meet citizens' demands. Journalists and television reporters are empowered to strengthen the climate of democratic debate. The media is also encouraged to increase the amount of information available to citizens and civil society organizations.

Many powerful examples of the lasting effects of advocacy work can be seen in the efforts of various networks across Egypt. One group published a manual listing gov-

ernment laws and services related to disabled persons and distributed this report to both citizens and government officials. As a result of community action, a hospital in a city in Upper Egypt has reserved one day a week for free examinations for those with disabilities, and the Ministry of Health has trained medical personnel to recognize disabilities in infants. Government service providers and health care clinics have improved facility accessibility by installing ramps and Braille signs. In Cairo, the local Ministry of Employment offices responded to citizens' concerns by ensuring that officers enforce laws that protect the safety of children working in private businesses.

Through its intensive work with working children, disabled individuals, and fishermen in impoverished communities, CEOSS has found a startling lack of services and programs addressing their needs. As a result, CEOSS builds coalitions of people who advocate to activate existing laws and influence policies. Working together with local CBOs, CEOSS has empowered people to form associations and advocate for their rights.

CEOSS uses a multifaceted strategy to empower citizens and promote advocacy and reform. CEOSS helps citizens understand the rights outlined in such documents as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the International Bill of Human Rights—all approved by the Egyptian government.

MCC has partnered with CEOSS since 1975. This partnership has included work on rural development projects, sponsoring CEOSS staff to attend the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University and funding conflict resolution trainings. MCC and CEOSS are currently working together on developing a Peace Center in Cairo.

These excerpts and examples have been drawn, with CEOSS' permission, from www.ceoss.org.

CEOSS' Examples of Empowerment

- Fishermen in the Egyptian governorate of Beni Suef have been empowered to meet with the water police, the General Authority for Fish Wealth Development, and the Beni Suef Fishermen's Cooperative to learn about laws pertaining to fishing and about the rights and responsibilities of fishermen.
 - After attending intensive training seminars in communication, leadership, creativity, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, youth in two poor communities in Cairo used photography, murals, and video animation to take a stand against discrimination toward children, girls, and women.
 - Citizens and members of nine local councils have cooperated to enhance the local councils' transparency and responsiveness to the communities.
 - Disabled young people in the governorates of Cairo, Minia, and Beni Suef formed network and petitioned local disability offices to improve the quality and availability of services offered to disabled persons.
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Working for Peace in the Land of Peace

by Tom Snowdon

Dostoyevsky makes the point that the revolutionary cells of pre-Communist Russia were full of people who, while advocating for justice and fairness and equality in their homeland were filled with hatred, violence, and even murder.

How can we ever hope to be an influence for peace in our world when we do not have peace in our own actions? How can we ever have peace in our own actions when we do not have it within ourselves?

“In our work for peace in our community, are we going to attract all those ‘peace’ activists? We simply don’t want them around here.” This statement was made by one of the most peace-loving and peace-advocating people whom I have met. She had seen some folks advocating for peace who looked angry, bordering on violent. Upon reflection, I would have to say that I have found this piece of hypocrisy in my own heart. I have found myself promoting something and managing to do it in a manner which was in total contradiction to the very principles I was promoting. So, the peace activist can be on the verge of violence, the marriage counselor is getting a divorce and the mediation expert seems constantly to be the chief source of conflicts at their office. Seriously, it happens.

In his book *The Possessed (The Devils)*, Feodor Dostoyevsky makes the point that the revolutionary cells of pre-Communist Russia were full of people who, while advocating for justice and fairness and equality in their homeland were filled with hatred, violence, and even murder. They had been consumed by their righteous cause to the point that they had lost all perspective on their own actions. They were living examples of all they opposed. Since Dostoyevsky had spent considerable time in these cell-groups himself, one has to give credence to his assessment of them.

Working for peace is never easy. There are always challenges to peacemaking. First of all, the greatest challenge faced by all who work for peace: the human condition! I have been intrigued in recent years by the picture in Genesis chapter three, where God comes to be with Adam and Eve after they had eaten of the forbidden fruit. When questioned by God, Adam says, “I was afraid and hid from you.” When asked if he had eaten from the tree, he answered, “The woman you put here with me gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” When God asked Eve about this, she responded with, “The snake tricked me into eating it” (from Genesis 3:10–13).¹

What a picture of humanity! Psychologically we are fear-filled, even panicky. Theologically we are hiding from God. Sociologically we are blaming others for our own actions. The obvious point is that peace must be built

inside ourselves before it can ever flow from us to our world. This is why I have found myself cringing at times when I have heard some Christians complaining about pietism. Yes, of course, we can become so pietistic, so focused on our inner lives that we have little interest and time to serve others in practical ways. However, we can easily become so focused on our missions of peace and justice that we lose our way and convey a message which is a painful contradiction to peace. How can we ever hope to be an influence for peace in our world when we do not have peace in our own actions? How can we ever have peace in our own actions when we do not have it within ourselves?

Then, there is the matter of our context here in Egypt. The biblical record tells of many journeys to Egypt. Here, the family of Jacob found refuge in the time of famine. Here, even Mary and Joseph came to seek safety from the threat to their infant son, Jesus, a journey celebrated here in icons and traditions of their stopping and staying in many places. Egypt was, at least at crucial times, the biblical place of plenty, safety and peace.

Today, Egypt does not escape from the tensions which are gripping our world, economic tension, religious tensions, tension over water resources, east and west tension, tensions between old and new. Society seems to be moving quickly in many opposing directions at the same time and one wonders if there are ways to peaceful solutions and accommodations where fear and suspicion can be replaced by respect for others and even mutual regard and appreciation. Peace is the centre of our MCC work in Egypt as we partner with the Christian churches here. They serve their communities in basic things like Arabic literacy, English literacy and support for those in need. In supporting these activities with MCC personnel and resources it is our hope that peace will be built between religious groups, between men and women, and between those who have much and those who have very little.

This context and these involvements point to a second challenge to being a peace-worker. Here in the Middle East, there is the long memory of the crusades, when western European armies ravaged the region. Western Christians were violent, promiscuous, and seemed to have a sense that lands far from their homes should be under their con-

trol. The image has not been altered by more recent history, down to the present moment. Further, most people here have not travelled to the west and Europeans and North Americans are still thought of as Christians. Yet the stereotype which portrays us in the minds of many is created by this difficult history and by what is seen in the western media, especially Hollywood movies. As difficult as it may be to accept, it is often assumed that western Christians are like the characters in these movies; violent and promiscuous, with a sense that lands far from their homes should be under their control. In the minds of many, nothing has really changed in a thousand years!

Given our human propensity to be less than pure in our peace efforts and the difficult reputation which follows westerners in this context, it is obvious that we have much to overcome to be peace people in this culture! How do we proceed? I want to suggest that peace is not the absence of war and violence. It is the loved presence of God flowing out of us to others. Peace is found, first of all, inside of us and is cultivated by our efforts (usually called spiritual disciplines) of cooperation with God's Spirit. "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:21, 22).

This interaction within us between God's Holy Spirit and our own spirits is the place where peace is built. It is here in Egypt where St. Anthony, the founder of monasticism, abandoned his life as a rich young man in the late 200's C.E. to pursue God in solitude and prayer. He said, "The city of God is within the human heart, and the good that God asks of us is within, and demands only that we submit our wills wholly unto Him."² He taught that this is done by prayer on the positive side and by crucifying the "passions" on the negative side. Anthony taught that prayer had to be fervent and from the heart because it was the link binding the individual to the Creator. The "passions" refer to our tendency to have our every desire fulfilled. These are what draw us away from our God.

Prayer must be cultivated on the one hand while these distracting and imprisoning tendencies must be curbed on the other hand. Along this journey of prayer and self control, one enters the very presence of God. Peace and joy grow in the place where anxiety, dissatisfaction and striving had dominated. The journey is not easy, however. We have temptations and set-backs which require us to persevere and exert effort. Yet, little by little, we can become peace-filled people. It is said of St. Anthony, that "... intimacy with God made St. Anthony as tenderhearted and as compassionate as the Master he served."³ Another way of expressing this is to say that we can actually become the likeness of God, a true expression of the image of God in which we are all made.

We are MCC foreigners and MCC Egyptians working alongside our Egyptian church partners. We must all seek to cultivate this peace within ourselves as we endeavor to cultivate peace in this land. How else can we proceed with integrity? We can begin to promote peace by experiencing it in our own lives.

"O King of peace, grant us your peace; for you have given us all things. Acquire us unto Yourself, O God our Savior, for we know none other but You, Your holy name we do utter. May our souls live by Your Holy Spirit."⁴

Tom Snowdon is the MCC Egypt Co-representative with his wife, Judith Snowdon. Tom served as the MCC Canada Peace Program Coordinator from 1997–2000. Tom and Judith were MCC program administrators in Eastern Canada from 2000–2010.

Notes

1. Biblical quotes are from *Good News Bible*, American Bible Society, 1976.
2. Iris Habib el Masri. *The Story of the Copts, The True Story of Christianity in Egypt, Book I, From the Foundation of the Church by Saint Mark to the Arab Conquest*, Merry Springs, California: St. Anthony Monastery, pp. 85, 86.
3. *The Story of the Copts*, p. 85.
4. Prayer from *The Liturgy of St. Basil*, The Coptic Liturgies, The Holy Kholagy, Mahabba Bookshop, pp 142, 3.

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I suggest that peace is not the absence of war and violence. It is the loved presence of God flowing out of us to others.

Reflections from the Editor

by Lawrence Rupley

Following the next issue of the *Peace Office Newsletter* (April–June 2011), my time as editor will end. This will mark the end of a six-year stint since I became editor following the untimely death of my predecessor, Mark Siemens. I want to express my thanks to Mark, and to *Newsletter* colleagues Judy Zimmerman Herr and Bob Herr, Amy Erickson, Alain Epp Weaver, and Krista Johnson.

As editor, I sought and received much counsel and many suggestions for topics from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) International Program Department area directors, the peace education director of MCC US and the peace program coordinator for MCC Canada.

The Mennonite Central Committee *Peace Office Newsletter* began publication in 1970, and has been published four times per year since 1995. It has intended to be a forum for serious but concise discussion, focused on one topic per issue. It has reflected on and preserved learning from the experience and work of MCC and of other individuals and programs related to peacemaking and peace-building. It has included viewpoints from a variety of writers on each topic.

Stories are an important way to share. This *Newsletter* has been a forum where stories of peacemaking efforts from around the globe can be shared, primarily with a North American audience, even when English is not the first language of the authors.

The *Newsletters* have sometimes focused on a country or geographic region where MCC is involved. In recent years those countries would include Iran, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, the Military Counseling Network in

Germany, Indonesia, Rwanda and Burundi, Paraguay and China, while the regions of Latin America, southern Africa, and western Africa were featured. At other times a particular *Newsletter* has focused on a topic of importance to peacebuilding, such as cluster bombs, healing trauma following war or natural disaster, global food security, mining justice, and the role of military forces and peacebuilding. It was helpful to hear from *Newsletter* readers via a questionnaire in 2005 that this publication helped them to better understand complex issues as well as MCC's work.

The MCC *Peace Office Newsletter* is supported by a particular grouping of Anabaptists. But one of its great strengths is that it deliberately includes stories from a variety of religious faiths. It is my hope that the *Peace Office Newsletter* can continue to be a resource that helps us better understand each others' cultures and beliefs and the issues that confront each of us in an increasingly complex and inter-connected world. That is indeed a necessary part of peacebuilding. Best wishes to Krista Johnson when she becomes editor.

Lawrence Rupley trained as an economist and taught for a number of years. He and his wife, Melody, were MCC Co-representatives in Burkina Faso 1985–1990 and Nigeria 1997–2000. He assisted with tour and travel arrangements for the Mennonite World Conference Assemblies in 1984 in Strasbourg, France, and 2003 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In 1994–1995 he worked with MCC Communications and Latin America departments to prepare international debt and economic education materials, and was author of the "International Debt Primer" published in 1995. He began as Peace Office Newsletter editor in 2005.

The *Peace Office Newsletter* is published quarterly by the Mennonite Central Committee International Program Department. Editor is Lawrence Rupley. Consulting Editor is Krista Johnson. Opinions expressed in this newsletter reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of Mennonite Central Committee.

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