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# MCC's Steps toward Peacebuilding Education in Egypt

John F. Lapp

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has engaged in educational ministries in Egypt for more than fifty years, sending generations of North Americans to teach nursing and English and to otherwise support ministries of a wide range of Egyptian churches. This history of MCC presence in Egypt embodies respect for and response to the Indigenous church's invitation and valuing of MCC's philosophy of education. Over the decades, MCC's program has shifted from peacebuilding as a byproduct of its educational activities toward peacebuilding education as its primary focus.

## MCC-Egypt Partnership: A Brief History

MCC began working in Egypt in 1944, providing relief aid to Eastern European refugees displaced in Egypt. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, MCC responded to the enormous refugee situation in Egypt and soon began coordinating with the Coptic churches, both Evangelical and Orthodox. Early support largely took the form of material aid, but during the 1970s the relationships shifted toward providing Canadian and US nurses/nursing education for church hospitals and English teachers for Christian schools of all levels. While an international agency's emphasis on English-language fluency could be considered an imperialist function, by the 1970s Egyptians themselves strongly valued proficiency in English as critical to both individual and national progress. By the 1980s, MCC was providing many teachers to Egyptian church schools, in Upper and Lower Egypt and in Cairo.

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## Christian-Muslim Relationships in Egypt

Egypt has one of the oldest of the Orthodox churches (founded by the Apostle Mark in ca. 42 CE) along with numerous other Christian denominations. Together, Christians make up about 10 percent of the largely Muslim 110 million total population of Egypt today. While the leaders of these large Muslim and Christian communities have mostly cordial and respectful relationships with one another, sectarian tension remains just under the surface—and sometimes emerges as localized violence. “In this context, MCC’s church partners speak of having a prophetic voice and being salt and light, taking responsibility for a role in improving society and for peaceful community relations.”<sup>1</sup> And “MCC’s most satisfying involvements have been with partners who see [MCC’s] services as a resource for the entire community, bringing Christians and Muslims together in a service the church provides.”<sup>2</sup>

## Shifting to a Peacebuilding Focus

As MCC increasingly incorporated such attitudes, its 2007 program review proposed “that peace-building become the focus of and lens through which the MCC Egypt program is developed.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while providing English-language skills in a developing country was extremely important—both for individuals and the nation’s advancement—with the transition to a new century, MCC recognized that its language-education resource was also a strategic and effective incarnation of God’s will that God’s children live together in peace.

Keith Miller (Cairo 2000–2003; Beni Suef 2006–2009) relates two stories capturing both these aspects from his Beni Suef experience:

In one of my [English] 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 Girgises taught me that I often can’t know the effect I’m having: each student is precious.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Mennonite Central Committee Workbook, “Egypt” (unpublished report, 2007), 58–60; 59.

2 MCC Workbook, “Egypt,” 60.

3 Ronald J. R. Mathies, Amany-Haidy Ishak, and Giacomo (Jack) Hijazin, “‘We Are More than Partners, We Are Family’: A Country Program Review (2002–2007) of MCC Egypt” (unpublished, 2007), 14.

4 Keith Miller, “Stories from My Time as an English Connection Teacher,” MCC Peace Office Newsletter 41, no. 1 (January–March 2011), 5–6.

In another of Miller's classes, group dynamics did not seem very good, apparently because one of the students was a priest, which made the others uncomfortable.

But as they got to know each other, they learned to laugh and chat together. One of the other young men, a Muslim, sat next to young Father Elias (pseudonym). Father Elias had a car and they lived near each other, so they used to drive back to Beni Suef together. During our private lessons, Father Elias confided to me that his relationship with [this other student] was the only friendly relationship he has ever had with a Muslim.<sup>5</sup>

Hisham Rasmy, MCC Egypt associate, spent his formative years in Beni Suef. He remembers a Muslim friend sharing how deeply he appreciated the opportunity to learn with the MCC teachers. This same friend, when hearing another Christian student complain about how difficult it was to learn English, encouraged him: "These teachers are very good, and we will be thankful in the future."<sup>6</sup>

And the students learned more than just English:

The teachers encouraged those of us who were more able, to help those having trouble. Even as a child, I would help my younger "brothers" in the orphanage. Now, I make sure my children are learning, and I encourage them to learn good English. Also, I always felt great respect from all of the MCC service workers who taught us. They really wanted to build good relationships with the people here. One teacher once told me: "Don't say bad things about Muslims or any other people. Have respect for everyone." Mennonites taught us respect, not only for Muslims but for other Africans, and people of any color speaking any language."<sup>7</sup>

## Training the Trainers

With a transition away from long-term teacher appointments for Egypt, occasioned both by local (political/security) and global factors, MCC has moved into a more "training of trainers" mode. Maintaining the peacebuilding lens for its work in Egypt, Ayman Kerols serves as a peacebuilding associate, overseeing how the MCC program pursues this agenda. Kerols—a former International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) participant and graduate of Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) and Summer Peacebuilding Institute (SPI)—is proud that MCC has provided opportunities for international peace education.

Many Egyptians are now aware of Restorative Justice theory and techniques, including the importance of forgiveness in dealing with personal and societal

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<sup>5</sup> Miller, "Stories."

<sup>6</sup> Hisham Rasmy, personal interview with author, September 5, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Rasmy, personal interview.

trauma. Kerols is convinced that such advanced training, building upon the foundation of the “safe space” such as that found in MCCers’ English classes, helped create a newfound sense of community. Kerols notes that such community was exemplified, for example, during the 2011 revolution, when Beni Suef avoided the destruction of churches that other Egyptian locations experienced; the city’s churches were actually guarded by Muslim friends!<sup>8</sup>

Kerols understands “peace” as fundamentally different from other development work. With most development, one can observe an immediate impact. But peacebuilding is a process of education that can only be measured in attitudes and behavior over time. It is hard to change habits, so it is a matter of planting seeds and hoping for the best. When we support educational opportunities for potential peacebuilders, Kerols notes, we do not simply hope that the newly trained peacebuilders will go out and train others and then move on. We hope and pray their very lives will be changed—and that their changed lives will impact those watching them.<sup>9</sup>

## Teaching the Children

Over the decades, although MCC has engaged people of all ages in creative peacebuilding efforts, the agency has strategically focused its education work on children because children can be taught a culture of peace from scratch. They don’t have to unlearn bad habits. A focus on setting children on a path toward lifestyles of peace has led MCC in central Africa to develop a program known as “Peace Clubs.” Kerols has helped coordinate an online Peace Club “Training of Trainers” for partners in several Middle East countries, with an initial plan to take the concept and contextualize “Peace Clubs” within this region:

We hope this will not only be used in church/Sunday school settings but could also be used in all the churches’ primary/secondary schools. We are excited that many of our Egyptian church partners have really jumped onboard with this program. We are hopeful that the children-at-risk programs might change not only the individual kids, but really change whole families and communities—including male-female dynamics—and reduce conflict and abusive behavior of all kinds.<sup>10</sup>

## MCC’s Continuing Partnership with Egypt

MCC partners have noted the many benefits that English education has brought to communities throughout Egypt. MCC’s unique style in this sphere has con-

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<sup>8</sup> Ayman Kerols, personal interview with author, September 8, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Kerols interview.

<sup>10</sup> Kerols interview.

currently contributed to a broader recognition and understanding of the Gospel of Peace. Individuals and communities have expressed deep gratitude for both explicit and implicit “peacemaking” training as they look for new ways to work at longstanding challenges.

Emil Wadie, Egyptian friend of MCC, colorfully describes how God can work cross-culturally:

MCCers changed the stereotype view of US people, generally viewed through movies and TV series. . . . The presence of MCCers in Egypt all those years has baffled the minds of almost every Egyptian they met. Many Egyptians dream of going to the US to work and live there. For the opposite to happen was almost unbelievable to many of the people MCCers encountered. The effect of bafflement faded to some extent, and a look of appreciation and probably admiration took over in the hearts of many Egyptians to see that some people in the world still have the spirit of serving God as they serve some of his people.<sup>11</sup>

MCC will continue to listen and learn from our partners in Egypt, always seeking to better contextualize witness and service in this beautiful and ancient culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Emil Wadie, email letter to the author, October 15, 2022.