



ELCA Ministry in Egypt: Not Your Typical Lutheran Mission

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PARTNERSHIP WITH AN ELDER SISTER CHURCH

For many Lutherans acquainted with traditional global mission work, the work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in the country of Egypt requires serious mental gymnastics. In the first place, we find ourselves dealing with an indigenous Egyptian church that measures its history not in decades (the ELCA's thirtieth birthday is coming up next year) or in centuries (the first Lutheran pastor set foot in North America in 1619¹), but in millennia, with founding stories reaching back to the time of Christ.

For instance, in Egypt, Jesus is fondly remembered as having visited their land as an infant (no fewer than twenty-four towns and four monastery sites!²). Egyptians are cited among those first baptized on Pentecost (Acts 2:10), and we hear that an Egyptian from Alexandria made it to the Corinthians with the gospel before Paul did (Acts 18:24). An intriguing argument is made based on 1 Peter 5:13

¹E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 4.

²Otto F. A. Meinardus, *The Holy Family in Egypt* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1997).

What would a Lutheran presence in a predominately Muslim nation look like, and how would it work in tandem with the minority of Christians in that land? The author reflects on this from his own experiences in Egypt.

that Peter wrote his first epistle from the ancient Babylon fortress in what is now Cairo.³ And according to an apparently authentic but undocumented assertion by Eusebius (260–340), the Egyptian church itself was founded by none other than Saint Mark, the author of the second Gospel.⁴ The Christian Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt is the institutional manifestation of these kinds of traditions, but Protestant and Roman Catholic Egyptian Christians certainly claim them as well.

One of the handicaps with which we American Christians have often come to global mission work is a sense that we are the senior partners in the missional endeavor with a thing or two to share with those less experienced. Life with Egyptian brothers and sisters in Christ helps cure us of this problem. For this Norwegian-American pastor, whose ancestral homeland was first evangelized in the eleventh century, it was humbling to live and work among Christians whose church had already experienced a thousand years of history by then.

MISSION ACCOMPANIMENT IN EGYPT

The ELCA is committed to not neglect such a church! There was a day when our predecessor church bodies found it reasonable—even evangelical—to enter a land not our own and begin to share the gospel as we understood it without local invitation and with absolutely minimal consultation with sister churches on the ground. Sometimes this was because there simply was no sister church yet with which to consult! Sometimes it was because we didn’t trust the sister churches available with whom we might have consulted. Those days are past.

At the time of the formation of the ELCA, mission leaders of the predecessor church bodies expressed their intention to witness “with and through indigenous Christian people, churches, institutions, and agencies.”⁵ This deep respect for local Christian input and involvement in our missionary efforts gradually became enfolded in a missiological approach called accompaniment, “a walking together in Jesus Christ of two or more churches in companionship and in service in God’s mission.” Accompaniment recognizes that “each church has primary responsibility for mission in its area,” emphasizes “the mutual respect of the companions” as “a primary reality,” and keeps the companion churches “more closely to their Lord and further informs their mission, as they learn together in the journey.”⁶ In the case of Egypt, it means that we don’t just wander in and attempt witness or service in the name of some foreign ELCA or some newly created, foreign-sponsored Lutheran Church in Egypt. Rather, it means we seek to work with an Egyptian church not just as a tool for our own purposes but as a true companion, the interests

³C. Wilfred Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity: From Its Origins to 451 C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 17–18.

⁴Griggs, *Early Egyptian Christianity*, 19–20.

⁵“Planning Document for ELCA Middle East Ministry,” February 6–10, 1987, DGM Archives, as cited by David D. Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power: Lutherans Encountering Islam in the Middle East* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), 233.

⁶“Global Mission in the Twenty-First Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God’s Mission,” ELCA.org, 5–6, PDF, <https://tinyurl.com/yck8molc>.

and goals of which truly affect the interests and goals of our own church. It means that Lutheran work in Egypt, where there are no Lutheran churches, becomes an exercise in ecumenism in the deepest sense.⁷

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THE MINISTRY OF ST. ANDREW'S UNITED CHURCH OF CAIRO

Although the ELCA was not yet formed at the time and its accompaniment policy not yet formulated, missionaries of ELCA-predecessor bodies entered Egypt at the call of international congregations already recognized in the country, Maadi Community Church in south suburban Cairo and St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo. The latter is strategically located in the heart of Cairo, a block from the Supreme Court building and perhaps three-quarters of a mile from the Tahrir Square of Egyptian-revolution fame. The congregation traces its history to Scottish Presbyterians and others in the Cairo area from 1899, though now its character is more international. Harold Vogelaar, a Reformed pastor serving the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) through its Division for World Mission and Ecumenism became its first Lutheran-sponsored pastor in 1973, and St. Andrew's has been served by a succession of Lutheran pastors and interns ever since—currently by Rev. Kirsten Fryer.

When St. Andrew's pastor Peter Johnson returned to stateside ministry in 2012, I served as interim pastor of St. Andrew's until our own departure in 2013. What was that like? Well, public worship was in English, not always the first language of the worshipping community, but the only language that we as internationals had in common. Services were held on Friday morning to take advantage of the day of rest offered by a Muslim-majority nation. A second smaller vespers service occurred on Sunday evening after people were finished with work. St. Andrew's was not a large congregation—perhaps twenty-five to forty attended worship on a typical Friday and ten or twelve on a Sunday—but its diversity was amazing: Egyptian, American, Filipino, British, Singaporean, sometimes a Scandinavian, occasionally some other nationality. As with many American congregations, there was coffee fellowship and often Bible study afterward. The church year was punctuated with midweek Lenten services, special events like an international visitor or an ordination, and an occasional retreat to a nearby monastery.

⁷ Grafton (*Piety, Politics, and Power*, 233–35) correctly observes that the impetus to enter Egypt in the 1970s came not from accompaniment, a strategy that evolved later, but from the desire to begin a new paradigm of work among Muslims, as will be discussed below. Yet, the current shape of ELCA work in our own day anywhere in the world makes an understanding of the role of accompaniment critical.

St. Andrew's church was also host to six other congregations that met completely independently at various other times during the week. These included an Arabic-speaking Egyptian congregation that preferred English for worship, several South Sudanese congregations that used Dinka or Nuer, and a Pentecostal congregation, all of which would have had difficulty finding a place to worship in a country where church construction permits were next to impossible to obtain. The ethnic congregations provided an appreciated connection for ELCA relationships with Presbyterian and Lutheran churches in what became South Sudan.

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ST. ANDREW'S REFUGEE MINISTRY

Egypt has long been a place of refuge for waves of people fleeing war and persecution—in recent times, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Iraqi, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Somalian, Syrian, and Yemeni. From 1976, St. Andrew's began noticing refugees from the conflict in the Horn of Africa in its midst, people with time on their hands and nowhere to meet. In 1979, under the direction of LCA Pastor David Johnson, a refugee center was begun in the congregation's guild hall, and "in its early days as many as 115 came for games, conversation and tea."⁸ Initially served simply through active participation of congregational members, the needs of the growing numbers of refugees gradually outstripped members' ability to meet them. In 1986, a refugee ministry coordinator, Nelly van Doorn of the Netherlands Reformed Church, was called, and, for a time, the project became a joint project of St. Andrew's and All Saints' Cathedral. Projects included "a first-rate English program," classes in typing and knitting, a handicraft program, a workshop, and a clothing room. In 2007, ELCA missionaries Dr. Kathleen Kamphoefner and Paul Pierce arrived to take up directorship of what became known as St. Andrew's Refugee Services, or StARS. The informal education provided to refugee children was upgraded to a more formal program that granted a recognized diploma and enabled continuing study at more advanced institutions.⁹ During our time in Egypt, Erin Odgers Chew represented the ELCA interest in the work of StARS.

Today, the grounds of St. Andrew's United Church are a gathering place for literally thousands of refugees, offering them several kinds of services:

⁸"A History of St. Andrew's United Church of Cairo, 1899–2013," church archives, unpublished.

⁹"History of St. Andrew's," church archives.

1. An educational program offers a remarkable range of opportunities, including a Montessori preschool program, instruction of the English-Sudanese curriculum to over two hundred children in grades one through eleven, adult specialty classes in crafts like basic sewing or hair-styling that can help refugees make a living, and professional development courses through the American University of Cairo.
2. The Refugee Legal Aid Program (RLAP) interviews potential applicants for emigration, applies refugee law and policy to their cases, and prepares written submissions to the UN High Commission on Refugees and national immigration authorities as appropriate.
3. Psychosocial Services offers eight kinds of counseling and guidance programs, ranging from immediate crisis intervention to support of unaccompanied children, to organization of support groups around interests like sports, music, or parenting.
4. Community Outreach maintains contact with other community-based services initiated by refugee groups themselves and coordinates collaboration among them.¹⁰

The land that St. Andrew's stands upon cannot be more than perhaps a quarter of an acre—a city lot containing a church, a “guild hall” for gatherings, a guard station, and a number of shipping containers used for classrooms. It is exciting to consider how intensively this modest tract of land has been used, spectacularly serving so many of Egypt's absolutely most vulnerable people.

COLLABORATION WITH AN EGYPTIAN PRESBYTERIAN SEMINARY

Most Americans are surprised to discover that there are several hundred thousand Egyptians who count themselves Presbyterian or evangelical. They are the fruit of the outreach of generations of American Presbyterian missionaries beginning in 1854.¹¹ Today, approximately three hundred congregations form the Evangelical Church of Egypt (Synod of the Nile). The seminary of this church was founded in 1863 on a houseboat named the Ibis that visited villages and conducted classes up and down the Nile. Eventually, this teaching moved to a school building upriver in Assiut, and in 1926 to its present location in Cairo. With over three hundred students, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC) is the largest Protestant Arabic-speaking seminary in the world. It offers a number of degree programs, including an MDiv program for future pastors of the church, a graduate program for church leaders, and a multitude of course options for interested laity.

Lutheran participation in the seminary's program began when Harold Vogelaar, mentioned above, worked to set up a Center for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims there. Dialogue was a relatively new and controversial approach in

¹⁰ *StARS: St. Andrew's Refugee Services*, <http://stars-Egypt.org>.

¹¹ See Stanley H. Skreslet, “The American Presbyterian Mission in Egypt: Significant Factors in Its Establishment,” *American Presbyters* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 83–95.

the Egyptian church at the time, and, in the context of the charged national religious environment, the seminary eventually decided that only Egyptians should be teaching Muslim-Christian relations. The library that Vogelaar had been building eventually flowed into the seminary's Center for Middle East Christianity many years later, but Vogelaar's successor, Mark Swanson, continued conversations on another perceived seminary need: the educational gap that ETSC graduates faced when they sought advanced studies overseas.¹² In the late '90s as Swanson prepared to leave for doctoral studies, it seemed possible for his position to be used to begin a graduate studies program. Michael Shelley was called to be the first director, and ELCA personnel have continued to fill that position ever since, providing a deeply appreciated service to the Synod of the Nile.

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I was the fourth director of the program, serving from 2009 through 2013. What was that like? Well, I found myself part of a team of about a dozen mostly Egyptian professors and surrounded by scores of young Egyptian students—robust, joking, sportive, singing at the top of their lungs during chapel, dead serious about their faith in a world where there were social penalties for being a Christian. A sixth of them were my concern—the Master of Arts students—and they followed one of four tracks: (1) biblical studies, taught mostly by my Dutch colleague, Willem de Wit; (2) Christianity in the Middle East, taught mostly by me; (3) organizational leadership and management, taught by visiting international professors and managed by my coordinator Fouad Shaker; and (4) theological studies, just getting organized when I left.

I enjoyed many gifted students while I was there. The greatest hurdle for the Egyptian students in our programs was mastery of the English language sufficient to achieve the required 500 score on an American international English test called TOEFL, administered by the American embassy. Once admitted, they faced thirty-six credit hours of coursework and a thesis of sixteen to eighteen thousand words, all in English. Over a period of two years, our students pursued a chosen topic in some depth, such as a comparison of reference to Abraham in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and the Gospel of Matthew,¹³ or the contributions of Al-As'ad Hibat Allah Ibn al-'Assāl through his translation of Luke.¹⁴ Just as important, they also learned the kind of academic discernment and discipline necessary to continue advanced studies overseas at schools like the London School of Theology or

¹² Interview with Mark Swanson, May 12, 2014.

¹³ Sameh Ibrahiim Farag, "Many Will Come from the East and the West . . . Abraham in Philo of Alexandria and in the Gospel of Matthew" (MA thesis, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, 2012).

¹⁴ Vevian Farok Beshara, "Al-As'ad Hibat Allah Ibn al-'Assāl: His Contribution to the Formation of New Identity of Copts in Egypt Through His Critical Translation of the Gospel of Luke" (MA thesis, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, 2011).

Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg. Such students returned to Egypt to become leaders of the church and teachers in the seminary. Non-Egyptian students also came to us from places like Norway, Italy, or the United States, drawn by the opportunity to do Middle Eastern studies in the Middle East context. At ETSC, I found myself embedded in a thriving institution of an indigenous church, appreciated for what I represented—the fellowship and support of American Lutheran Christians—and for what I was able to bring—academic discipline at the service of a strong faith tradition.

A WHOLLY NEW APPROACH TO ISLAM

The roots of the current work of the ELCA in Egypt go back to the 1960s. At that time, one of its predecessor bodies, the LCA, began looking for a way to begin work in the Middle East with a fresh paradigm. Christian attempts at conversion of Muslims over the centuries had not been particularly successful. LCA mission leaders wondered if there might not be another way? Could Lutherans design a “wholly new approach to Islam” that could constitute a “conversation” that “did not simply seek to change their religious identity”?¹⁵

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The result was what came to be called the Schein-Neudoerffer Plan after its formulators, Fred Neudoerffer of the LCA mission division and Bruce Schein, who was sent to the Middle East to explore the possibilities. It consisted of a five-prong coordinated approach to Lutheran work in the Middle East that would be centered in Jerusalem. It would include an educator, a social worker, a pastor, an Islamicist, and a coordinator with other churches and programs.¹⁶ As it developed, the person who was eventually called as the Islamicist, Harold Vogelaar, felt strongly that the center of Muslim-Christian interfaith dialogue needed to be not in Jerusalem but in Cairo, where the Al-Azhar University was. Future ELCA witness in the Middle East was accordingly divided, mission presence in Jerusalem coming to focus on justice for Palestinians, and mission presence in Cairo emphasizing a fresh engagement with Islam.¹⁷

While the force of the unified Schein-Neudoerffer strategy was compromised by this division, ELCA mission personnel in Egypt never lost interest in the prospect of engagement with Islam. Its expression can be marked in many ways. First

¹⁵ Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power*, 202, 206.

¹⁶ Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power*, 206.

¹⁷ Grafton, *Piety, Politics, and Power*, 208, 212.

there was Vogelaar's effort to create the Center for Dialogue between Muslims and Christians at ETSC. Then there is the work at St. Andrew's, too, where its programs place Muslims and Christians without distinction in positive daily interaction. In fact, Muslims serve prominently on the refugee ministry staff, filling critical roles alongside their Christian colleagues. Certainly, in the work of this church, the original hope of the founders of this Lutheran Middle Eastern mission may be said to be fulfilled daily. For here, a conversation is occurring—a mega-conversation actually, involving tens of thousands of lives and spanning many decades—that attempts to address complex realities and affect outcomes far beyond simply seeking to change people's religious identity. Identities may indeed be changed, and no doubt occasionally are, as natural life witness from people of both religions impresses someone on the other side. But the refugee work doesn't begin or end there; it has other goals. It's part of the "new approach" that was hoped for.

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From 2009 to 2013, I spent most of my time at the seminary. How did the prospect of Islamic engagement play out in my ministry? Well, it is not possible to teach Christianity in the Middle East without discussing Islam. It was part of our daily conversations in class. Moreover, my Egyptian students were not neutral in their feelings about Islam. All of them had stories to tell of difficulties put upon them or their churches by a society that favored Muslims. All of them had Muslim friends and all of them knew how to get along with Muslims, but all of them had strong reasons for being Christian, not Muslim.

My wife and I had a highly educated and open-minded Arabic teacher who had taken the hijab some years before and practiced her Islam seriously. The slightest appearance of proselytism had to be avoided in that society, so it was a rare occasion for a veiled young person to enter the seminary grounds. Through our relationship with this teacher, however, it was possible for me to invite her and for her to accept to address our class on Christian-Muslim dialogue. With dignity she presented her views during her address, and with patience and reserve she bore my students' rather sharp remarks during question-and-answer time afterward. Nobody expected that anyone would be converted—that was not the goal—but everybody emerged with a respectful and thought-provoking experience to digest. My position at the seminary allowed me to make it happen.

But it didn't fall to me alone. One of my Egyptian colleagues, Dr. Tharwat Kades, was tasked with facilitating Christian-Muslim interaction in Egypt and in Germany. He was known at the highest governmental levels, and he was able to secure participation from leading Muslim and Christian leaders. Kades occasionally organized dialogue conferences on boat trips up the Nile River, and my students and I were invited. English was used to accommodate the international

participants, and I as a native English speaker was asked to be secretary. The assignment permitted me to draw attention to many significant contributions by the participants, such as the need for public education to equip children with knowledge of the beliefs of the other persuasion, or the need for a culture that would let children grow up feeling that they had nothing to fear from the other side. The resulting article was printed in the newsletter of the Synod of the Nile, and my portrayal of the valuable conversations was seen all over Egypt. In this way, I became part of a wider mutual conversation. Neudoerffer and Schein would have been pleased.

SUMMARY

In this article, we have emphasized several aspects of the work of the ELCA in Egypt. First, it breaks traditional stereotypes of missionary work: we didn't enter to start our own competing church, and we cultivate a deep respect of our ecumenical partner. Second, our participation in St. Andrew's United Church enhances that church's witness (seven congregations!) and helps it grow a thriving refugee ministry that engages volunteers from all over the world to benefit the lives of thousands of Cairo's most vulnerable. Third, our contribution to the graduate studies program of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo permits gifted students to prepare for advanced study and leadership positions in the Synod of the Nile. And finally, an abiding commitment to a certain brand of engagement with Muslims creates spaces for Christians and Muslims to strive together for worthy goals while getting to know one another better. It's not your usual Lutheran mission, perhaps, but then we have a faith that expects the Spirit to do new things once in a while. Sometimes, it seems, like in Egypt, we are even permitted to be a part of them. ⊕

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