

March 2006

Egypt and Transforming Communities

Dear Theophilus,

Get involved in the community. Listen to people. Hear the needs and the issues that are facing them. Then do something about it.

This is the philosophy of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), the outreach arm of the Presbyterian Church in Egypt and the reason that I and eight other pastors went to Egypt in the first place. We were searching for transformation. How can a church thrive and survive in a culture that is ambivalent or even hostile to the Christian message? How does it accomplish so much with so little? How does it affect the lives of the poor, and society in general, so effectively and profoundly?

Let me back up a second. You may recall how we were able to go to Egypt in the first place but it bears repeating. The Lilly Foundation has turned out to be a great friend of the mainline church and is interested in helping churches and pastors attain excellence in ministry. The Akron Area Association of Churches received a grant of over half a million dollars to form small groups of pastors who would pursue this excellence. For almost three years my group has met, talked, dreamed, listened and prayed for understanding and yes, transformation. We have traveled to places across Ohio, Chicago, Washington State and now, Egypt.

The reason for Egypt is simple: CEOSS is one of the best community development organizations in the world. Their work brings transformation to the communities in which they are involved. Most of them are Muslim and they come only when invited. It is illegal to evangelize in Egypt. Harsh consequences come upon anyone who converts from Islam to Christianity. The message of CEOSS does not come through the words of Christ but through its actions.

The image stays with me: four women all dressed in black sitting in a room in the village of Gaafar in Upper Egypt. They are telling us through a translator how they work with CEOSS, community leaders and others in their village to address their many problems. They refuse to take no for an answer. They have overcome apathy and the paralysis that takes over when problems loom large. They rose above the traditional role of women in that culture and their voices are heard. They talk of innovation and persistence and their language, though in Arabic, was one of excitement and joy.

I would love for that excitement and joy to settle upon LCPC. That we might get involved in our community (does it extend as far as Cleveland or beyond?). Listen to people. Hear the needs and issues that are facing them, and us. Then do something about it.

This Lent we are taking up the conversation on how we might make a real difference in our community. How can we? Let's talk.

Grace and peace,

Harry