

Life at the Hub of the World

By Abu Bethany

Did you lose something?

One delightful Arabic proverb states: 'He who has lost something cannot give it away.' (*faqid ash-shay' laa yu9tithi*) I begin with that pithy line for a simple reason. Our family will soon celebrate the fourteenth anniversary of our arrival in Cairo (the 'hub' referred to in the title of this article). I admit that I have often looked up from my plough to cast my eyes upon greener pastures in some other corner of the Arab world. However, the Holy Spirit has not yet let me leave (whether by choice or by coercion!). Over the years, my passion for this great city has gone through phases of depletion and rejuvenation. Currently, I am in a state of rejuvenation. I hope it stays that way. So, even though I have occasionally lost it along the way, I want to share with you a growing passion for ministry in a major urban centre of the Middle East. In doing so, I hope to be able to 'give it away'.

Seize the Day

I think we are at a unique moment in the history of the growth of the Kingdom of God in the Middle East. The recent wars and political shifts are producing change that is reverberating throughout the area. We are seeing the Islamic right wing scramble to disassociate itself from Usama Bin Laden. Arab world rulers are making serious commitments to improve their human rights records. Even the educational apparatus is reviewing the highly

Islamic content of its Arabic language curriculum, not to mention the radical Islamic content of its religious studies programme. When these shifts are coupled with the overwhelming intrusion of the media—in particular, Internet and satellite, of the nineties—we have the necessary ingredients for very significant social, political and even religious change in the resistant Middle East.

While these changes reflect God's providential work to extend his Kingdom here, they should be viewed in tandem with the new environment of readiness in the historic church. In Egypt, the evangelical church is half a million strong. That is a significant force within Islamic society. If you add to that number the 9 to 12 million Coptic Christians, you are looking at about 12 percent of Egypt's population. (Government figures are closer to 8 percent.) However, these Christians have been here for centuries, except for the evangelicals who are newer to the scene. Why does their presence make a significant difference today? Answer: the Holy Spirit.

When John Hogg, Samuel Zwemer, Temple Gairdner and others came to Egypt in the late 1800's and early 1900's, they sensed that God would use the native Egyptian Christians to take the Gospel to the Muslims of Egypt. Over the past century, the wisdom of that approach has been questioned. Some mission activists have felt at liberty to sidestep the

established church in their quest to see the church from Islamic background. Criticism could easily flow in both directions. The best efforts of some of the most gifted Western missionaries has produced little fruit in terms of a lasting church. Small house groups have been brought together, but the continuity of such groups, particularly in the aftermath of the missionary's departure, has been a sore spot. This has left the missionary open to the criticism that he has not fully understood all the dynamics at work in the Egyptian society. On the other hand, the evangelicals of Egypt have not been overly aggressive in their quest to see the birth of such a church. A smattering of believers from Islamic background has integrated into the church, but this could not be characterized as a movement of any great proportions. Have the evangelicals been too tied to the forms they inherited from their mother churches in the West? Has the political situation and social stigma of conversion hampered the flow of new believers into the Kingdom? Has today's mission force failed to recognize and benefit from the presence of a faithful church? Yes, yes and yes. It seems that the time is right for re-evaluation. We need to have enough humility to admit that we have not yet seen the breakthrough we looked and prayed for in this urban centre of the Muslim world.

All is not lost, and that is why we return to the Holy Spirit. Believing that God is sovereign and that the Holy Spirit is still about his work of convicting of sin, righteousness and judgment,

I have to believe that we are on the verge of something in Cairo, in Egypt and in the Muslim world.

Firstly, there is a new environment of readiness within the Egyptian church. Visionary leaders are challenging church members to go beyond their family borders. Students are busy learning how to share their faith with Muslims. Muslims are being invited to evangelistic gatherings. Writers are writing, and media is being distributed. This may sound like normal fare to the reader. However, ten years ago this was not the case. Muslim evangelism was a taboo subject within the Egyptian church. The atmosphere today is very different.

Secondly, it is small, but the Arab mission force is here to stay. Egypt is a primary sending country. Others include Sudan, Lebanon and Jordan. Surely, this is the work of God's Spirit! I have just enough experience in Arab missions to know that these brothers and sisters face many of the same battles we do. They will need us to stand with them in their calling to disciple the nations. I hope they find us ready. I have to admit my bias in saying that the Arab missionary movement is a ministry phenomenon that thrills me more than most any other. The presence of Arab workers in virtually every country of North Africa and the Middle East is a work of God that we must embrace with utmost enthusiasm and joy!

Thirdly, innovative and perceptive leaders are being added to the numbers of Muslim background believers. These believers are articulating and acting out their own vision for reaching

the Muslim world. Often, they act largely independently of the church, although not in defiance of it. They are simply pursuing the objectives they believe will impact their families and society for the cause of Christ. The result is a rich, multi-faceted ministry, authored, I believe, by the Holy Spirit. By the way, they are also networking extensively with similar believers throughout the Muslim world.

Fourthly, as mentioned previously, political, social and economic events are conspiring to create a new openness in the Muslim world. Since the political is in the forefront of everyone's mind, let us consider the economic factors. Egypt depends on the West. Egypt's government and many Egyptian institutions garner money from the West. In much the same way, the Egyptian church is partnering to a greater and greater degree with Western churches and organizations. Is this dependency or inter-dependency? You decide. What I do know is that the times are changing. The creation of the global village is a reality. Money flows back and forth across the Atlantic in great waves. When a Western company finds a suitable market in Egypt, it creates an Egyptian entity to exploit that market. Increasingly, the church is following suit. Hopefully, their investment in Egypt is not of the exploitive variety. Nevertheless, it looks remarkably similar. The reasoning goes like this: We want to reach the 10/40 window or some unreached people group. There is a potential work force in Egypt. There are also some willing Egyptian managers to manage our

resources (national churches and their leaders). We will invest our resources through a partnership with the Egyptian workforce and managers. Does this not sound like the West bullying its way into missions in the East? No, in this writer's opinion, the partnership idea is working quite well. All parties agree upon the agenda. Resources are brought to the table from the West as well as from the Egyptian church. Then the objective is pursued. Personally, I am growing more sympathetic to this kind of collaborative partnership, feeling that it is a legitimate pursuit of the Great Commission, not a new religious colonialism.

Where Do We Go From Here?

In this kind of environment, what is the role of the expatriate missionary? I will start with some wrong answers.

The first wrong answer is that we will plant the church that the Egyptian church is not willing to plant. Wrong. It has not happened yet, and that is not because it hasn't been tried. I'm not saying we should not be involved in church planting. The attitude that we will do what the church here has left undone is arrogant and unacceptable. As we plant the church, we must plant it hand in hand with the brothers and sisters who are here.

The second wrong answer is that we are the brokers between the Western church with its resources and the Eastern/Egyptian church with its potential. Wrong again. Think global village. Egyptians are quite well informed about what is going on in the West. They go there often and even minister

in Western churches. Nobody wants a broker, especially not a Western missions pastor. He should come to Egypt to deal directly.

The third wrong answer is 'go home'. The work is not done. The Muslim world has yet to be significantly penetrated by the Kingdom of God. The church keeps Kingdom momentum when it is an 'all nations' church like that of Antioch. Our perspective and approach will enrich the church in the Middle East and assist in its Kingdom-expanding mission.

So, do we just integrate into the church and serve wherever we can? Well, not exactly. A lot depends on the gifts God has given us, but generally, if we accept a regular teaching and preaching role in an established church, we stunt the growth of those within the church who should be developing their own gifts. As missionaries (sent ones), our commission is to help the church move to a new level of Kingdom expansion. How?

The Catalyst

Webster defines 'catalysis' as 'an alteration in the speed of a chemical reaction effected by the presence of an agent or substance that itself remains stable'. That agent or substance is called a catalyst—not a perfect parallel to our role as expatriate missionaries, but you get the idea. We are agents reacting with the local church and Islamic society to bring about enhanced change within this society and, specifically, within the church.

Here is how I've seen it work. The expatriate missionary comes to town.

His ideas are fresh and new but also untried and often unsuitable to the culture. As he integrates into the culture and acquires the language, he begins to react to the local people. They affect his views and alter them to some degree. He, as well, affects their views, and the change process begins. I enjoy telling new missionary arrivals in Cairo that when I came to this city, it was unwise to speak of Muslim evangelism in the evangelical churches. That was fourteen years ago. Today those same churches are running training programs on how to share your faith with a Muslim. No missionary can take the credit for that, but the overall mission effort has played a role in bringing about this change within the church.

Another area where missionaries have been change agents is the church-planting movement. Until the very recent past, church planting was viewed traditionally as buying a building, hiring a full-time pastor, etc. These days, seminars are held all over this country, advocating a new kind of church planting. Although not a majority view, church leaders are more willing to consider a flexible approach to church planting, mobilizing non-professional ministers and using existing facilities. It is fair to say that missionaries have made a notable contribution to this change in thinking. I believe the change will have a lasting impact on the Egyptian church and on the Egyptian society as a whole.

A third area where expatriate missionaries can be agents for change concerns the relationship of the histor-

ic churches with the believers who have come to Christ from Islamic background. The call of God on our lives to reach Muslims with the Gospel provides us with an innate faith that God will mature them to the highest level of servant-leadership in his Church. Often the expatriate's faith in the new believer goes beyond the level of confidence that he/she enjoys from the church. There are obvious negative and positive implications to this reality. The expatriate worker may tend toward naiveté, while the national Christian leader who has been burned a number of times may be overly cautious. The expatriate may, if he has established credibility with the church, act as a promoter and door opener for the new believer. As the church's confidence in the new believer increases, new doors will open for other brothers and sisters from Muslim background. The result can be a growing sensitivity and awareness of the unique needs of Muslim background believers in the church community. The cycle of ministry draws from this awareness in all its evangelistic discipling and church-planting activities.

Two words of caution come to mind if we are to be serious about the 'catalyst' ministry. The first is that you may be tempted to think that because you are not an up-front teacher/preacher, you can be slack on ministry skills such as Arabic, theology, Church history, understanding of cults, and counselling. Nothing could be further

from the truth. The catalyst missionary has a unique position, having the ear of local church leadership and a broad view of the Church internationally. If we do our jobs well, we will be sought out to advise and consult in the church's most critical decisions. Your ministry skills should be well honed for use when the opportunity arises.

Secondly, what I am advocating here is a distinct departure from what I read and hear in the avant-garde mission meetings. If carried out well, the expatriate will not be 'in the sun' in the ministry 'solar system'. Activities and plans will not centre on him/her. On the contrary, he will rally around local leadership, whether of Muslim or historic Christian background. To my way of viewing it, this is not a 'reactive' ministry posture as opposed to a 'proactive' one. No, the expatriate must still carefully examine his opportunities and select those that have the best Kingdom-expanding potential. We are proactive but with a servant attitude. I cannot find a better way to express it than in the words of the greatest man born of women, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' The catalyst missionary has inculcated this heart attitude. He promotes nationals, and he uses his influence to facilitate their ministry and enhance it. He acts as a Barnabas to as many Pauls as he can find. He is proactive with an attitude—the attitude of the cross.

As they say, 'If you've lost it, you can't give it away'.