



Cairo, Egypt

July 18, 2010

Dear Friends,

What do a donkey and a graduation gown have in common on a hot summer day? I can think of lots of unflattering responses! However that may be, both have been part of my ministry to the church in Egypt over the past few months, a ministry that you participate in with us as ELCA members. Let me share TWO SNAPSHOTS of this work, and you will see what I mean.

THE FIRST SNAPSHOT is of a pastor-bearing donkey near Tanagha, Upper Egypt, some 200 miles south of here, on April 11th. Both look happy in the heat, the donkey probably because he doesn't have to go anywhere, and the pastor because he has just preached to a packed church for the second time in 24 hours with a third meeting scheduled for that evening. The Presbyterian Church in Tanagha that invited me turned out to be a lively bunch. Perhaps 150 people packed into a sanctuary about the size of one of our smaller North Dakota prairie churches. Yet it was a crowd rather younger than that of the average congregation in the United States with many young adults and children present, singing spirited hymns led by young musicians on an electric piano and a guitar. All of this was, of course, in Arabic, and my English sermon on the world-changing shape of Easter had to be translated by the capable young pastor there. After church and lunch, folks took me out to see their fieldwork and this donkey, whence this picture.

THE SECOND SNAPSHOT is of a newly-minted master's graduate, Tharwat Maher, standing next to his advisor in Heliopolis, an eastern suburb of Cairo, on May 28th. Once again, both look happy in the heat of the evening despite the heavy graduation gowns. Tharwat has just finished a two-year course on "Christianity in the Middle East" which will help him in his ministry of revitalizing congregations in the Cairo area. His thesis committee approved with honors his 23,000-word master's thesis demonstrating the profound dependence of the founder of Methodism, Charles Wesley, on an ancient Egyptian monk named Macarius the Great, and analyzing the perfectionist Christian piety common to both. Two of our four master's candidates made the deadlines in time to graduate this year. With six candidates in the pipeline, it means we have the potential for a record eight graduates in 2011. Some of these will go on to further doctoral studies, some will be chosen as leaders in their church and society, and some will return to serve some of the hundreds of parishes scattered across Egypt - whence the graduation gown.

I understand these are troubled hot summer days in the church back home, as fellow ELCA members wrestle with recent churchwide decisions to offer some sort of blessing (not marriage) to committed homosexual relationships and to permit a partner of a faithful homosexual relationship to be chosen by a congregation as their pastor (or not).

Many of you are not sure whether this issue is closer to the donkey or to the graduation gown, and that's ok by me. Wrestle away. But as you do, don't forget about our ministries here, and the many people who depend on our work in Egypt and in many places. Remember to pray for them in their church as you pray for us in ours, and to throw yourselves afresh into the fray on their behalf, for that duty and privilege remain ours in Christ.

Your missionaries,  
overseas

