

Coptic Orthodox Church, Egypt
Bishopric for Public, Ecumenical & Social Services - BLESS

Orthodox Diakonia & Development Witness in a Multi-Faith Context

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Introduction

- ✦ The Coptic* Orthodox Church of Alexandria in Egypt was founded by Saint Mark the apostle in the 1st century, and is deeply rooted in the authentic Egyptian Culture.
- ✦ Islam entered Egypt in the 7th century and since then, the Coptic Church has been experiencing living with Muslims in a multi-faith context.
- ✦ Over most of these 13 centuries, the Church faced persecution and suffering particularly in the time of Memluks and ottoman Empire, yet it could maintain the Christian faith & preserve the Egyptian Culture.
- ✦ It is worthnoting that the Copts in such multi-faith context did not isolate themselves in gettoes, but they were interacting with others at all levels of social structures.
- ✦ Egypt today is a developing country suffering from overpopulation [about 70 millions] where Christians account for almost 12 millions.
- ✦ It faces many development challenges, the most pressing of which is that almost 30% of the population lives under the poverty line.
- ✦ In the last 3 decades, Egypt has witnessed an increasing Islamic extremism with its concomitant repercussions, nevertheless the situation nowadays has considerably improved.
- ✦ The Coptic Orthodox Church has been actively involved in the society at large serving both Muslims and Christians, emanating from the biblical and theological understandings deeply rooted in the Church life regarding the coexistence with others.

* *“The word << Copt >> & the word << Egypt >> have the same origin ”*

*Biblical & theological understanding of
witnessing in a multi-faith context*

☪ A fact of faith: love of God – filling our hearts – is reflected in our love of neighbour as, The Holy Bible says: “ ‘ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘ your neighbour as yourself ’ ” (Luke 10:27).

From the Christian perspective, the neighbour is every human being irrespective of race, age, sex, religion, ... As said by our Lord Jesus Christ when asked: “<< who is my neighbour ?? >>”, He answered by the parable of the good Samaritan: the foreigner who showed mercy on the person who fell among thieves whilst the Priest and levite looked and passed. (Luke 10).

☪ St. Paul says: “<< For he who loves another has fulfilled the law >>” (Rom. 13:8) “<< through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: You shall love your neighbour as yourself >>” (Gal 5:13,14).

☪ St. John in his 1st epistle says: There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also (1 John 4:18,20,21).

☪ Actually, there is a multitude of verses on how to coexist with others in love, openness & trust in a multi-faith society witnessing for our Lord (Acts 1:8), who dwells in our hearts, not in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth (1 John 3:18) As our Lord Jesus Christ – glory be to him – said: “ you are the salt of the earth .. you are the light of the world ” (Matt 5:13,14).. “Let your light so shine before men, they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

*The main challenges for Orthodox Diakonia
in the Multi-Faith Context of Egypt*

- a) Diakonia is perceived by some Muslims as a way of evangelizing for Christianity.
- b) There is a certain percentage of fanatic & fundamentalist Muslims in all social structures, who do not accept cooperating with the Church.
- c) A little percentage of Christians think that the Church diakonal work should only target Christians.

*Orthodox Diakonia & Development witness
in a multi-faith context in Egypt*

Emanating from the previously mentioned theological & biblical understandings, the Coptic Orthodox Church since the early centuries has considered diakonia in a multi-faith context as an integral part of its mission.

Here are some examples of how the Church currently bears witness through its Diakonal & Development work in the Multi-Faith Society of Egypt:

(1) The Church owns and manages 54 hospitals & a lot of polyclinics across the country offering efficient medical services at affordable prices to both Christians & Muslims, and for poor patients (Muslims & Christians), the services are free of charge. [Historically, the Copts had taken the initiative at the end of the 19th Century for establishing philanthropic hospitals serving both Muslims & Christians].

(2) The Church also owns and runs a number of outstanding schools where both Christian and Muslim students are enrolled. [It is worth noting that the Church was pioneer in establishing the first school for girls in the middle of the 19th century opening its doors for both Muslim & Christian girls].

(3) In the domain of combating illiteracy, the Church has started hundreds of literacy classes in the local parishes all over the country benefiting both Muslim & Christian learners.

(4) The Church is concerned about their congregations to be actively involved in the society by being extrovert not passive towards others, witnessing for the Christian spirit in such multifaith atmosphere through:

- ◀ The various education and training activities by the general bishopric for youth.
- ◀ Reciprocal visits in social & religious occasions at personal & formal levels.
- ◀ Extending invitation to Muslims for Ramadan Breakfast Banquets, which was firstly initiated by H.H. Pope Shenouda III 18 years ago, and later the idea was disseminated to dioceses & parishes.

(5) As part of the Church witness, it shares its Christian perspective through participating in national coalitions & networks pertaining to various social issues as:

- 1- Family Planning.
- 2- Violence against women for example: Female Genital Mutilation.
- 3- Child Rights.
- 4- Environment.
- 5- Drug addiction.
- 6- HIV /Aids.
- 7- Cloning.
- 8- Organ transplantation.
- 9- Globalization.

(6) The Church is concerned about the physically and mentally disabled by establishing a number of specialized centers providing care in all aspects for developing their potentials & integrating them in the society.

Also, it provides training courses for both Muslims & Christians, who are willing to serve those disabled ones.

(7) In response to the emerging challenge of drug addiction in Egypt, the Church has set up a program called << Best Life Program >> addressing this problem through prevention, awareness building, outpatient clinic, rehabilitation & family counseling.

(8) In the development domain, the Coptic Church in 1962 founded a general Bishopric for Public, Ecumenical & Social Services [BLESS] to be the development arm of the Church introducing new visions and approaches towards << Diakonia based on Development >> i.e. shifting from charity to development whereby people are empowered to be self-reliant instead of being dependant on charity.



BLESS Development work

The main BLESS Development Work is currently implementing Comprehensive Integrated Development in 29 poor and marginalized communities, working with the whole community [both Muslims & Christians] for an abundant life for all (John 10:10).

The development process goes through the following stages:

1- Stage of Selection:

The target communities are selected according to certain criteria, where field workers are selected.

2- Stage of Training:

The selected field workers are trained to acquire the necessary skills to undertake the development work in their communities.

3- Stage of Needs Assessment:

Using a method called Participatory Rapid Appraisal whereby the community members (Muslims & Christian) participate to identify their needs.

4- Stage of Formation & Training of Development Committee:

A Development Committee is formed of active local leaders, assisted by BLESS to lead the development process in each community.

5- Stage of Planning:

Field workers (F.W.), Development Committee members (D.C.) & local people (Muslims & Christians), assisted by BLESS work upon the outcome of the Needs Assessment to design a proposed plan taking into consideration the available resources.

6- Stage of Implementation:

Implementing the planned development activities through 7 programs & 3 support centers as follows:

Programs:

(1) Community Organization Program:

Empowering the target communities to become self-reliant making the best use of local & external resources through:

- Mobilization of local people;
- Coordination & harmonization between different groups respecting diversity;
- Capacity building of community leaders;
- Networking with GOs & NGOs;
- Advocating for their needs.

(2) Health & Environment Program

a) Improving primary health care standards in the target communities through:

- Health education via home visits, classes, seminars, etc...
- Nutrition classes;
- Poly and mobile clinics;
- Combating FGM practice.

b) Improving women reproductive health through:

- Health care of pregnant women;
- Family planning services.

c) Improving the environmental conditions in collaboration with the Government through:

- Clean-up campaigns;
- Tree-planting campaigns;
- Sewage disposal by setting up pit latrines;
- Potable water installation;
- Electricity supply;
- Roof construction.

(3) Economic Development Program

Improving the economic conditions in the target communities through:

- Training on feasibility studies;
- Vocational training;
- Income generating projects.

(4) Rural Development Program

Improving the agricultural techniques & livestock production in the target communities through rural club activities.

(5) Child Program

- 1- Developing nurseries.

2- Establishing clubs for children aged 6-12 where they can practice:

- Games;
- Skill development activities.
- Social activities;

(6) Education Program

Liberating the illiterates from all forms of ignorance to be able to play an effective role in their communities through literacy classes & awareness building about public issues.

(7) Youth Program

Preparing youth to be leaders in their Church and Society particularly in the field of development through:

- Youth meetings;
- Conferences & seminars;
- Specialized training courses for youth leaders in Bible study, counseling, family education, management, communication skills, development issues, etc..
- Festivals;
- Publications;

Support Centers:

1- Coptic Center for Human Resource Development {BLESS training Center}.

2- Coptic Center for Social Studies:

Providing BLESS with up-to-date studies on the social & development issues.

3- Coptic Center for Public Relations.



In conclusion, after a number of years of BLESS Development work in the target communities, it is realized how great the impact it leaves on the lives of the whole community (both Muslims & Christians) in terms of meeting their needs, increasing their awareness, changing their attitudes & improving the relation between them. It is the witness of Orthodox Diakonia & Development in a Multi-Faith Context.

This has been partly an articulation of the Church Diakonal & Development Work in a Multi-Faith Society through which the Church witnesses for Christian Spirit and the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ by offering love & Mercy to all people fulfilling the words of our Lord – glory be to him – “ you are the salt of the earth .. you are the light of the world ” (Matt 5:13,14).. “ Let your light so shine before men, they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven ” (Matt 5:16).