



أبروشية الكنيسة الأسقفية / الأنجليكانية بمصر وشمال أفريقيا والقرن الأفريقي

The Episcopal / Anglican Diocese of Egypt
with North Africa and the Horn of Africa

“Together for a New Egypt”

The Imam-Priest Exchange

First Year Report: 2013



Executive Summary

The ‘Imam-Priest Exchange,’ an interfaith initiative of the [Episcopal / Anglican Diocese of Egypt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa](#), brings together Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Egypt to build genuine relationships and facilitate mutual understanding, and in so doing create practical models for peaceful co-existence and social harmony. This paper reports on the first year (2013) of this initiative. During 2013, 30 priests and 30 imams met four times. This project will be run over a period of three years, with a new group selected each year.

Background to the Project

Context in Egypt

The project aims at reducing religious tension through practical dialogue. The need for dialogue has become more critical after the 25 January 2011 Revolution because of the inter-religious strife leading to incidents of tragic sectarian violence including the burning of churches and clashes. Most imams and priests in Egypt have not had the opportunity to engage each other, both theologically and relationally, which shows the relational divide among religious leaders.

It is clear that religion will play a significant role in shaping Egypt's future. Muslim Imams and Christian leaders need to address religious harmony and the importance of unity, because it is known how fragile the inter-religious relationships are and the dangerous consequences of the alternative for Egypt's future. Much work lies ahead toward finding ways that both faiths can live peacefully together. Initiatives that address the deep roots of the sectarian dilemma are urgently needed. The 'Imam-Priest Exchange' initiative focuses on ending sectarian strife and establishing a society that respects and honours religious diversity, living and working together in harmony.

Partners

Bait il-Aila (House of the Family), a group which brings together Christian heads of denominations and Muslims leaders, is the sponsor of this initiative. This endorsement increased the credibility and impact of the initiative. The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is the financial sponsor of this initiative.

The initiative is co-ordinated by the Anglican Church in Egypt, under the leadership of the Most Rev. Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis. The project is supported and endorsed by Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayyib, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar al-Sharif, and the Pope Tawadros II, the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Selection of Participants

The imams were nominated by al-Azhar al-Sharif with the knowledge of Dr. Mahmoud Azab, the advisor to the Grand Imam for interfaith dialogue. The Coptic priests were nominated Bishop Armeya (the Coptic Orthodox Bishop for interfaith dialogue), the Catholic priests were nominated by Bishop Yohanna Qolta (Metropolitan Bishop in the Catholic Church), the Presbyterian priests were nominated by Rev. Dr Andrea Zaki (vice-president of the Evangelical Church in Egypt), and the Anglican priests were nominated by the Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis (Bishop of the Anglican Diocese).

The goal was to select imams and priests from areas of previous conflict or current tension. The participants in 2013 were from Sohag, Assiut, Suez, the Delta region, Alexandria, and Cairo.

Another goal was to secure an imam and a priest from the same geographical location so they could work together in their local areas. Unfortunately, as Al-Azhar and the Coptic Orthodox church did not provide the final names until 3 days before the first meeting it was difficult to secure imams and priests from the same area. Therefore, after the first meeting, 10 more participants (5 imams and priests) were added so that we could have imams and priests from the same areas.

In addition, after the meeting in September with the new Minister of Al-Qaf (the government ministry responsible for establishing mosques), 10 more imams were added. In the 4th meeting, there were 60 participants.

Project Activities

There were four events in 2013, and each event was 3 days in duration. These meetings covered the following topics: knowing the “other,” living together, co-operating together, and working together for Egypt.

The activities included:

- The launch of the project at Al-Azhar by Dr. Zakzouk, the secretary-general of Bait il-Aila and previous Minister of El-Qaf.
- A media session at Al-Azhar al-Sherif where the Most Rev. Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis, the Anglican Bishop, and Dr. Ahmed el-Tayib, the Grand Imam, gave speeches. In addition, a priest and an imam shared on behalf of the all of the participants. The meeting was open to the media, and was covered by several satellite stations and newspapers.
- Lectures from speakers such as Bishop Yohanna Kolta (Metropolitan Bishop in the Catholic Church), Dr. Mahmoud Azab (consultant of the Grand Imam for inter-faith dialogue), Sheikh Salem abd-Elgeliel (previous deputy of El-Awqaf), Dr. Ali Gomaa (the previous Grand Mufti of Egypt), Rev. Dr. Andrea Zaki (vice-president of the Evangelical Church in Egypt), Bishop Armeya (the Coptic Bishop responsible for interfaith dialogue) on various topics relating to accepting the “other”, building peaceful relationships, and practical ways of co-operating together. Each session had both a Muslim and Christian leader presenting, and included time for feedback and discussion by the participants.
- Brainstorming and discussion forums on various topics. Also, in the first meeting there were team building activities such as an imam and priest drawing together, while one had their eyes closed and the other guided their hand.
- Visiting historic and cultural sites together. This included the Museum of Islamic Art, the Coptic Cultural Centre and library at St. Mark’s Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Abbasiya, the Arkan Culture and Art Centre, and the Monastery of Saint Mina in Alexandria.
- Visiting places of worship together. The participants visited several mosques and churches together including a Catholic Church in Heliopolis, All Saints Anglican Cathedral, St. Mark’s Coptic Cathedral, and mosques in Cairo, Alexandria and Menouf.
- The participants stayed at the same hotels and ate meals together at restaurants, giving opportunities for informal interactions and discussions together.
- After the first meeting, the participants asked to have visits in worship spaces and social services in the community. The participants visited the Menara Centre for Special Needs Children, Harpur Memorial Hospital in Menouf and Miri Hospital in Alexandria, schools in Menouf and Alexandria, the Coptic-Evangelical Organisation for Social Services. They also walked on the streets together, which is a power illustration of national unity.
- Meeting with Minister of El-Qaf, the Ministry responsible for establishing mosques. Bishop Mouneer Hanna Anis, Dr. Mahmoud Azab, and Bishop Armeya shared about the project. This visit was very positive, and resulted in El-Qaf nominating an additional 10 imams to participate in the project.

Outcomes of the Project

The overall objective of the project is **to facilitate mutual understanding between priests and imams, setting the precedent for peaceful relationships between Muslims and Christians.**

The desired outcomes are that each participating imam and priest would:

- Build a lasting friendship with a religious leader from the other faith.
- Increase knowledge about the commonalities and differences.
- Remove the negative stereotypes of the other's faith.
- Increase knowledge of interfaith co-operation, and examples of successful initiatives.
- Gain a fuller understanding of the other's religion and history.
- Implement inter-faith initiatives in his local community.
- Become an ambassador of peace in his local community, and share his knowledge and experience with others.

This section uses feedback from the participants in order to assess whether these outcomes were achieved.

Increase knowledge of interfaith co-operation and implement inter-faith initiatives in his local community

One of the very encouraging results of the initiative was the formation of local initiatives of Bait il Aila in Alexandria and Assiut, both areas where there has been sectarian violence. These sub-groups were formed by participants from this initiative, and they seek to address tension in their local areas. Bishop Armeya, one of the members of Bait il-Aila, shared that these grassroots initiatives are crucial for the success of Bait il-Aila.

A Presbyterian priest from Imbaba, a poor area of Cairo which has faced sectarian violence previously, met with the imam in the mosque near his church and discussed how to stop the disease of violence. They decided to face the problems directly, and one area they agreed to work together on is addressing the spirit of fanaticism in schools. They did not want to leave religious teaching to the teachers, and started visiting schools together to talk about religious unity.

Father Boutros Boutros shared that never dreamed that he would ever speak in a mosque. However, through his friendship with Sheikh Afifi, he spoke at the Mosque of al-Abbas, one of the most significant mosques in Alexandria.

An extension of the project is that some of the participants visited hospitals, orphanages etc. in their local neighbourhoods together. The Coptic priest and the imam from Ismailia visited an orphanage together. They shared how people on the street were so surprised and excited to see them visiting together, and how it's a matter of example and relations, doing and not just talking.

Bishop Mouneer shared at the meeting in Al-Azhar that "we as a church can blame ourselves. We isolated ourselves – to the extent which we have supermarkets within our churches rather than buying from outside shops! Thank God this separation has been melted through the meetings." He noted that the idea of the importance of engagement with the "other" emerged during the course of the meetings.

Build a lasting friendship with a religious leader from the other faith.

At the first meeting, the participants were at first reluctant to talk and interact. However, there was a lot of informal time interacting on the bus, at the hotel and over meals, and interactions increased. One of the priests said: *"In the first session, the conversations were difficult and only at a superficial level. However, on the first evening there was a session about how to accept others. This broke the ice and during the following two days, priests were competing to sit next to an imam!"* On the day of departure of the first meeting, some of the priests and imams had tears in their eyes when they said goodbye, as they had formed meaningful friendships.

Many of the priests and imams shared meals together during Ramadan or Christian holidays. For example, the participating priest from Giza visited the imam of the mosque on the street of the church invite him for a meal with members of the church. It was a very positive experience, and the imam appreciated the invite.

Christian and Muslim communities in Egypt are often polarised. As a result of these meetings, the participating imams and priests built friendships and started to visit each other between the sessions. Father Boutros Boutros, a Coptic Priest, and Sheikh Afifi, an Imam, shared at the opening at the first meeting of 2014. Father Boutros shared that the biggest benefit of the project was their friendship. He shared that if he didn't see Sheikh Afifi for a few days, he would always call him.

During the first meeting of 2014, the participants from 2013 attended and received certificates. It was noticeable how when someone was absent, the imam or priest from their area took the certificate to give to them as they were in touch with each other.

Remove negative stereotypes

One priest and one imam returned together to Alexandria on a micro-bus, dressed in religious clothes. After the priest got off, many people in the micro-bus argued with the imam, asking him why he was sitting next and talking to a priest. The imam had the opportunity to share with the people and break further barriers.

The group met with Pope Tawadrous II, the Pope of the Coptic-Orthodox Church, in the afternoon. Pope Tawadrous asked each participant two questions: 'what was your attitude before this event?' and 'what is your attitude now?' The comments made by both the imams and priests showed that the initiative had made an impact on them. One imam shared with tears in his eyes that it was the first time in his life to shake hands and sit next to a priest. He admitted that he always used to avoid priests and would walk a different way in the street. He told Pope Tawadrous II *"Every time I saw a priest I used to turn away. Now you forced me to eat, share accommodation, travel, and talk with priests, and I love it!"*

During one of the sessions, one imam said that Christians should not be able to evangelise. The workshop leader (a Muslim) said if you want to make religious restrictions, then you should turn off the loud speaker of your mosque. The imam stopped arguing. The workshop leader shared that the week before he was speaking at a mosque in 6 of October City. Afterwards, a Christian man came and shook my hand, saying *"thank you for your speech. It was the first time not be insulted over the loudspeaker of the mosque."*

The informal times together provided many opportunities to talk openly, and to talk about questions where there is often misunderstanding. For example, during the first event, there was a long discussion about alcohol. Some of the imams thought that Christians get drunk often and even inside the church. However, some of the priests shared from their perspective and verses from the Bible, and they discovered there was more common ground than previously thought.

Bishop Mouneer was impressed by the way the participants talked about difficult issues in a respectful way. For example, the participants discuss the question of evangelism, and how to live together when both faiths are evangelistic.

Become an ambassador of peace in his local community, and share his knowledge and experience with others

In the first meeting of 2014, Dr Zakzook (the secretary general of Bait il Aila) shared with the participants that as religious leaders, they have a hugely significant role and impact on people. As leaders of churches and mosques, they preach to thousands of Egyptians every week, and people listen to them. Bishop Mouneer shared that Egypt is passing through a critical situation. The violence comes from the foreign teaching about Islam exported from other countries. He encouraged the leaders that no-one can rescue Egypt except its children, and that as religious leaders they have a big influence as they work at the grass-roots.

On Friday 5th April, there was sectarian violence in the town of Khusus outside Cairo which resulted in the deaths of four Christians and a Muslim. On Sunday 7th April, there were further clashes outside St Mark's Coptic Cathedral after the funeral for the four Christian victims. Following this violence, the imams and priests contacted each other and the project co-ordinator as they wanted to visit Khusus and offer support. While the visit did not eventuate, it is encouraging that this initiative came out of the relationships built during the exchange. One of the priests, whose church is located near Khusus, said *"our area is hungry for this kind of co-operation."*

In September, five Christians were killed by gunmen as they left Virgin Mary Church in Al-Warraq in Cairo. After the attack, some imams went to the church to give condolences. The Coptic priest shared with them how much he appreciated their visit, and how important the Imam-Priest initiative is.

As a result of the success of the first year, the media started to focus more on the initiative. There was much more media in the 1st meeting of 2014, compared to 2013. Bishop Mouneer notes the significance of this as usually the media focused on the bad news in relation to sectarian violence, but through covering this initiative, they became a partner in achieving religious harmony.

After the first meeting, the participants asked for the initiative to not be limited to discussions in closed rooms, but for opportunities to go into the community and communicate more widely. Therefore, the participants visited together a special needs school, hospitals in Menouf and Alexandria, schools, a cultural centre, and mosques and churches.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury visited Egypt in June 2013, both Pope Tawadros, and Dr. Ahmed il-Tayib, the Grand Imam, mentioned this initiative to him. He shared his desire to replicate this initiative in other parts of the Anglican Communion, where there is sectarian tension. (See <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5086/archbishop-justin-expresses-solidarity-with-christians-and-muslims-who-strive-for-peace-in-egypt>).

Students from Al Azhar and the Alexandria School of Theology attended some sessions. The students from the school of theology shared with Bishop Mouneer how they were deeply impacted by what they saw.

Gain a fuller understanding of the other's religion and history, and increase knowledge about the commonalities and differences

The participants visited the Islamic Art Museum, the Coptic Cultural Centre at St. Mark's Coptic Cathedral, the oldest churches and mosques in Cairo and Alexandria, the Monastery of Saint. Mina, in order to learn more about the cultural heritage and depth of history in Egypt.

One of the participants shared *"I discovered there was more common ground that I had previously thought about the theology of Islam and Christianity, especially about peace and loving your neighbour."*

One of the participants shared *"I learnt new information about Islam. For example, I thought that the laws of inheritance are very strict and the son always receives double what the daughter receives. However, I learn that there is more flexibility than this. Also I gained new understanding about Sharia law."*

First Meeting



Second Meeting



Third Meeting



Fourth Meeting



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