

Winds of Change

Story told by Marilyn Crocker

In 1976 I was asked to facilitate a community development consultation in Bayad, Egypt, a village located 75 miles south of Cairo on the east bank of the Nile River. Bayad is one of eight agricultural hamlets (with a total population of 10,000) and clings to a thin, green strip of arable land across the river from the city of Bene Suef, the commercial center serving the farming province that bears its name. The villagers are descendants of the *fellahin* (plowmen) who have lived along the Nile for 5,000 years of Egyptian history. One story repeated frequently while I was there is that Moses was placed in a basket at the edge of the Nile just north of Bayad.

Residents in Bayad are both Muslim and Christian and lived together peacefully at that time. The consultation proceeded by invitation of both local and provincial civic representatives, and the endorsement of both Coptic Christian and Muslim leaders. A major sponsor of the week-long planning meeting was the Coptic Orthodox Church, whose Leader of Social and Ecumenical Services at the time was Bishop Samuel (later assassinated with Egyptian Prime Minister Anwar Sadat in 1981). Remarkably, both Bishop Samuel and a local monk, Father Athanasius, attended every daily plenary session of the consultation.

The advance set-up team had worked diligently to invite a number of Egyptian and international consultants and an inclusive cross-section of village residents to participate in the five-day meeting. They also arranged for food, transportation and lodging and a meeting venue – an elegant, imposing, red *shamiana* (cloth tent) and long wooden benches set on the edge of the desert. When I arrived to lead the facilitation team, I learned there was something amiss: the set-up team had not yet secured permission from the village leaders to include women participants.

With only a few days left before the opening session, my colleague David and I scheduled a meeting with the leadership council. We spent many hours in conversation, conducted through a translator who was bilingual in English and Arabic. Although a woman, I was the senior member of the facilitation team, so the all-male village council was willing to listen to me. I spoke of the importance of the perspective of women, especially in areas like health, nutrition, housing and education. Finally, the council agreed: women could participate -- BUT they would need to sit on one side of the tent with a curtain separating them from the men.

At that point David stepped in. He emphasized that the planning process depended upon interactive exchange among the participants. He sketched out the meeting room design and emphasized that each participant needed to hear each other and easily see the facilitator and the information posted at the front of the room. He gently suggested that the outcome of the meeting could be compromised without full and lively participation. The council finally agreed –BUT the women would have to sit in back, at the rear of the tent.

On the first day participants showed up right on time, and since he was a key sponsor, Bishop Samuel, dressed in clerical attire and impressive black, mushroom shaped hat, addressed the gathering. When he finished, he seated himself right at the front in a chair where he could see and hear easily; it became his chosen spot for the rest of the week. The women, however, all dressed in long black robes that covered their heads, sat erectly and intently on benches in the back.

In any rural village where we worked in the mid 1970s, we used the meeting technology available. In the case of Bayad, it was two large chalkboards, propped up on chairs set at the front. Input from the participants was captured in English on one board, in Arabic on the other. David led the plenary session the first day on the topic of "Hopes and Dreams" (or the vision) of the people of Bayad. On the second day, I was leading the plenary on "Obstacles to the Vision" (or what is blocking our hopes and dreams). Suddenly a huge windstorm blew up, causing the flaps of the tent to open wide and the two chalkboards to teeter from side to side. Immediately four men leaped to the front and served as human anchors for the recording of our deliberations. Since I was in charge, I thanked them and called for a break, during which they helped me reposition the chalkboards at the back of the tent where the direction of the wind would now keep them propped up. When participants returned to their benches they simply faced in the opposite direction. The only one to leave his former seat was the Bishop, who dramatically processed the full length of the tent and settled himself again in his comfortable chair -- next to the women, who were now up front!

After the plenary every woman personally approached me with outreached hands, smiling and speaking animatedly in Arabic. As we exchanged grins and nods, we fully understood each other: *an obstacle had been addressed*. The women arrived the next morning and once again sat in the front. No one objected.

A Life of Achievements, a Legacy of Service

H.G. Bishop Samuel departed from this earth in October 1981, after a life of great accomplishments for the Coptic Church in Egypt and around the world.

First and foremost, Bishop Samuel helped lead the Sunday School movement that revitalized the Church in Egypt.

Born in 1920 as Saad Aziz, he forsook his law career and was consecrated in 1944 to serve the underprivileged and poor. In 1948, he became a monk with the name Fr. Makary el Suriany. In doing so, he became the first university graduate to choose the monastic life, inspiring many others to follow in the Coptic revival of monasticism.

His participation in the second general Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954 helped end the 1,500-year isolation of the Coptic Church that began with the Council of Chalcedon. As a World Council of Churches leader, he brought millions of dollars to projects that enriched lives in Egypt.

He was the secretary of Pope Kyrillos VI, and his 1962 ordination as "General Bishop of Social and Ecumenical Services" made him the first head of a new bishopric with no geographical boundaries. He established the Diakonia Program to serve areas without priests, and he set up services for the needy nationwide called "The Brothers of the Lord." Instead of giving handouts, he created programs that trained people to be self-sufficient. In the 1960s, he set up U.S. Coptic centers that were the seeds of future Coptic churches.

With the blessing of Pope Kyrillos VI, Bishop Samuel pioneered the establishment of the first churches in North America, Australia, and Europe.

H.G. Bishop Samuel considered himself a mere servant of God and the people, fulfilling the Biblical verses, "I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me;" (Matt. 25:35, 36)