

Richard Ratzlaff, 23 August 2020

I've called my reflection "What I learned in MCC about the parable of the Prodigal Son." I've had two very different experiences with MCC but the parable does connect the two, for me at least.

My first experience was from 1984 to 1987, when I taught English as a foreign or second language in Egypt. There is a TUMC MCC Egypt alumni group: Gary and Lydia Harder, Kendall Harder, Isaac Friesen and Wanda Wall-Bergen, and I. It would be interesting to have all of us together to reflect on our time in Egypt because the country has changed dramatically in the past 36 years. Let me give you a few examples: Egypt is slightly smaller than Ontario, and 97% of it is desert. While I was there, the population surpassed 50 million – it is now 102 million. The median age is slightly less than 24 – in Canada the median age is 42. Cairo proper is smaller in area than Toronto but now has a population of 15+ million – it was about 9 million when I was there. In the mid-80s about one million tourists visited Egypt per year – last year there were almost 14 million. I mentioned to Isaac once that when I was in Egypt one could drive a car, at night, right up to the pyramids, offer the watchmen a gratuity, and sit on the stones enjoying the full moon. Now it's completely fenced off and well-guarded.

In my time, Egypt was the second largest MCC unit, with more than 20 adults. Almost all of us were teachers, except for two nurses. I was one of two MCCers teaching at the Coptic Orthodox College, which was in a large compound in the middle of Cairo together with St Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, the residence of the Pope, and the seminary. The college was for university age students and professionals, mostly practical courses that would help the students find better jobs, but also church history, theology, biblical studies, etc. We taught from 4 to 9 in the evening. There was also an MCCer teaching ESL at the Protestant or Evangelical seminary in Cairo. The others all taught in elementary schools run by the Presbyterian Church of Egypt in various cities outside of Cairo.

Our summer theme is service and learning. I received far more than I gave so I'll focus on what I learned. For me, going to Egypt was a lot like going to college used to be. You left home, left your old group of friends behind and made a new circle of friends, and became independent. In Egypt I ended up in an apartment with a roommate from Saskatchewan; we didn't have a telephone and this was before the internet, of course. I discovered that most of my friends were not letter writers. So for me MCC was a dramatic transition to a new community and new life. I knew very little about the broader Mennonite world. Apart from my roommate, the only other Canadians in MCC Egypt during my first year were the country reps, the rest were Americans with strange names like Buckwalter, Gingerich, and Yoder. I had never heard of John Howard Yoder – the MCC library had a copy of *The Politics of Jesus* which was my first introduction to serious theology or biblical studies. I knew very little about the diversity of Christian churches outside of the evangelical Mennonite world, so a tradition like the Coptic church was a revelation. Copts are about 10% of the population in Egypt. Most of my students were Orthodox Copts but I also made friends with other expats and Egyptians who were Muslim, Catholic, Presbyterian, etc. The Coptic church was in the midst of a revival that had started in the 1920s and the churches and monasteries were full of young people and led by the cream of Coptic society, many of whom had advanced degrees from European and American institutions. On Wednesday evenings Pope Shenouda II led an informal Bible study and Q and A – 10,000 people would pack the cathedral and compound. My classroom was next to the studio of the Coptic iconographer – I would often talk to him on our breaks when he was around. Some of my students were from Ethiopia, studying at the seminary, so I heard about the Ge'ez language and Bible. My students were very knowledgeable about Coptic history and theology: they were proud that Egypt had been a place of refuge for Jesus and his parents (our first scripture reading is a favourite text). I learned the basics of church history. The Coptic church recognizes only the first three ecumenical councils, not the fourth, the Council of Chalcedon, so there was a split in the church. The council of Chalcedon took place in 451 but my

students spoke about it as passionately as if it had happened the week before. I discovered a different musical tradition. The two Arabic hymns we heard are from the Maronite or Catholic tradition of Lebanon but are good examples of Middle Eastern music.

In my second year there was considerable turnover in the MCC unit and I moved by myself into 3-bedroom apartment that became the MCC Egypt guesthouse. MCCers from outside of Cairo, other MCCers passing through on their way to assignments, their friends, and friends of friends streamed through my apartment. I learned a lot because I did a lot of tour-guiding – primarily to old Coptic Cairo or Fustat, the hundreds of beautiful old mosques in Cairo, and the four ancient monasteries in the Western desert. The MCC unit also went on retreats to the two ancient monasteries in the Eastern desert, St Anthony and St Paul, and several times to St Catharine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert, among others. These are amazing places – I won't talk about them because you can now google them and easily find hundreds of photos and good histories.

After I had been in Egypt a year or so the new auxiliary bishop responsible for foreign relations, Bishop Serapion, asked me to come tutor him in the evening, after I had finished teaching. He had attended a German university and wanted to have regular German and English conversation. I mention him because he was from Aswan, and he eventually asked MCC to send me to Aswan to start an English program there. So I went to Aswan for my final six months in Egypt. I lived in the Bishop's compound, across the road from the Old Cataract Hotel. There was a park beside the hotel where I would go in the morning for a glass of hot, very sweet, very strong hibiscus tea. I looked out over the southern tip of one of the islands in the Nile – from my chair I could see the archaeological site at Elephantine, an ancient Jewish colony of mercenary soldiers and their families that was founded around 500 BC. It lasted at least 100-200 years and included a temple dedicated to Yahweh. Fragments of about 175 papyrus scrolls were found on this site, many in Aramaic, so we know a great deal about the history of the community. There is a lot more to ancient Jewish

history than is preserved in the Bible. Aswan is a small town so for privacy I went almost every weekend to the monastery of St Pachomius in Edfu, about halfway between Aswan and Luxor. The librarian had a PhD in science from a French university and was fluent in English. He was happy to have someone to talk to but also left me to myself with his English and French books. If you google Edfu you will find that it is more famous as the site of the second largest surviving pharaonic temple in Egypt, although it's Roman era, only about 1800 years old. I walked by it on my way to and from the monastery at the edge of the desert – there were rarely tourists there unless a Nile cruise boat had happened to stop.

I need to get to the parable of the Prodigal Son. One of the first books I read from the MCC library was by a Muslim named Muhammad Kamel Hussein, *City of Wrong: A Friday in Jerusalem*. It's an impressionistic retelling of the passion narratives, following the Muslim tradition that Jesus did not in fact die on the cross, but was taken down before he died. What I remember is Hussein's interpretation of the parable as a perfect summary of Islam: humans sin, but if a human repents God welcomes the repentant sinner. There is no need for a cross. It's hard to argue with his logic! But then in May at the end of my second year, our guest speaker for our mid-East retreat was Kenneth Bailey. If you remember Trent Voth's sermon on the prodigal son, you will have heard his name. At our retreat, Ken essentially gave us the contents of the books Trent mentioned: *Poet and Peasant*, and *Through Peasant Eyes*. Ken was born and raised in Egypt and was teaching at the time at the evangelical seminary. He showed us what it cost the father in status and dignity to welcome his son home. We should read the parable together with Philippians 2:5-11 in other words. Forgiveness is not as simple as Hussein suggests.

Moving to my second MCC experience. In 1997 I was in Toronto, studying at McMaster University but facing the end of my funding. Evan Heise approached me and asked me if I would be willing to work for a year for MCC Toronto, on a pilot project funded by Correctional Services Canada (CSC). The project was to set up Circles of Support and Accountability for high risk, high needs, high profile sexual

offenders on warrant expiry. Warrant expiry means that the offender have served every day of his sentence in prison, so when he is released he is not on parole and there is no supervision. As you can imagine, that's not a good idea. After a decade or longer in prison, the transition to life in the city is even more dramatic than mine was when I went to Egypt. The project was inspired by the work of Harry Nigh, formerly of TUMC and pastor of Welcome Inn in Hamilton, in response to a man convicted of offenses against children and returning to the community after a long prison sentence. Harry found a group of people willing to surround the core member, help him negotiate the challenges of life in society, serve as his community, and hold him accountable to a certain pattern of behavior. Harry, Evan, and Hugh Kierkegard, the community chaplain for CSC, had set up a similar circle in Toronto for another man with a similar background, Wray Boudrieau. CSC was willing to invest some money on a pilot project based on these two successful experiences. I had no relevant training, education, or experience but Evan is a serious gambler and thought I could do the job. For 10 months I worked with Evan to recruit volunteers, train them, meet prospective core members in prison to prepare them for their circle, set up and monitor circles, and pray like crazy that none of the core members would reoffend.

I learned more about psychology, sociology, criminology, and anthropology in that year than I could have learned in several years of graduate seminars. Most of the core members came from Warkworth Penitentiary, a medium security prison east of Peterborough. We went there about once a month to meet core members to help them prepare for release. We also made several trips to Kingston Penitentiary, the oldest maximum security prison in Canada. These were especially memorable – I mean, anybody can visit Paris, or the pyramids, but how many of you have been inside Kingston Pen?

I met about 15 core members or former prisoners that year. Their stories are all different but most had been in their late teens or early 20s when they were convicted and most of them had spent at least 10 years in prison. Many were very afraid of returning to the community but were also eager to get on with a new life.

Evan and I set up about 10 circles that year and the concept has been adopted across Canada and indeed around the world. The program isn't a solution for every case. Evan will remember one of the conversations we had with a potential core member in Warkworth. He was in his mid-20s, in solitary confinement for his own protection, even in a relatively safe institution, because he was so low-functioning. He was due to be released within a few weeks. This guy needed 12 full-time volunteers and we didn't have five part-time volunteers willing to commit even 3 hours a week. I remember how relieved I was when we heard that the institution had managed to get a court to approve an indefinite sentence, so that this man would stay in prison for the rest of his life.

At the end of that first year the government continued the funding but it wasn't my calling. I did agree to stay on one of the circles. The core member, John, shouldn't have been eligible for a circle because he wasn't interested, and, because he had refused to participate in any of the programs in the institution, he had no relapse prevention plan. But the police told him they would make his life hell if he didn't participate so he showed up one day at the MCC office shortly after I started. He was 35 and had spent 12 years in Kingston Pen. His victims were adult women. The police were convinced he would be back in prison within a few months. He wasn't. John spent 10 years outside before he died of a heart attack in 2007. I was one of four members of his circle who stayed in touch with him throughout those ten years. We talked at least once a week and went for lunch once a month. I learned a lot from him about prison culture. Because of injuries from his time as a biker he eventually received a disability pension, but he struggled to get by financially. He had a knack for IT and helped many neighbours in Parkdale with their computers. Every spring he volunteered at the local library to help people prepare their taxes online.

A few years later I joined another circle. Murray was in his late 60s and had been in prison for a total of 18 years for offenses against minors, including his two children. He had been a successful salesperson and had a healthy savings account and pension when he returned to Toronto so reintegration was much easier for him – and

therefore for the volunteers as well. His circle lasted for five years, till he died of cancer in 2016.

I mentioned earlier that most of these men were released on warrant expiry, having served every day of their sentence in prison. In some cases they did so because they were denied parole but in other cases it was because they didn't apply for parole. The programs in prison are very good and a lot of prisoners come to understand what they have done. They would tell me that they had decided to serve their full sentence because they wanted to pay their debt to society. But especially in the case of those convicted of sexual offenses, they often discover that they can't in fact ever pay their debt. There is no forgiveness for a sexual offense. There are complex, legitimate, historical reasons for that. I'm not a victim and I would never tell victims that they need to forgive. There was some talk early on in the program that it could be combined with a restorative justice model, but that never happened. It's very hard, especially when the victims are minors. Let's turn again to the prodigal son. I think if we imagined the prodigal son as a sexual offender we would have a much better sense of how radical the father's welcome is. What is possible for God is very hard for humans. Some of us may be able to welcome and befriend sex offenders, some of us are not. Some of us are called to the work at Aurora House with the victims of offenders. But parables are parables – they are not stories about individuals. We are not responsible for welcoming prodigals as individuals but as a church. MCC, and the circles project, is a work of the whole church. We are not all called to the work. But I don't want to let you off the hook – so I encourage you to consider joining a circle. You are asked to commit only to one year, and you'll be surprised by how much you'll learn. There are prodigals waiting and hoping to be welcomed.