

Fighting Illiteracy... With the Bible!

It is a very well known fact that a high percentage of Egyptians cannot read. Compounding this problem is the reality that a great number of adult readers who have completed basic literacy courses are at risk of losing their newly acquired skills.

Why does this relapse occur? New readers with limited reading abilities must continue to read in order to increase their literacy skills. The primary cause for relapse is the lack of appropriate reading material. The central issue here is content. Adult readers must find curriculum stimulating and practical.

The Bible Society of Egypt has responded to this need by developing a new method, which has proven to be remarkably successful, due almost entirely to the appropriate reading material designed for this curriculum. The textbook for this post-literacy program is the Holy Bible itself.

Deeply loved and respected by Christians, the Holy Scriptures provide a sustainable source of valuable and culturally appropriate material, and a powerful motivator for the further development of literacy skills.

The program is being done in cooperation with the Coptic Orthodox Church, which already has hundreds of literacy classes established throughout Egypt. For years there was concern that these literacy class graduates could not yet read the Bible. This program was developed to bridge the gap.

The Bible Society of Egypt is committed to working towards the eradication of illiteracy in Egypt. Over 5000 Adult Learners have completed the 3rd and final stage of this successful post-literacy program. Currently, 12,500 students are involved in 3 stages over a period of 12 - 15 months, with new students continually joining. Materials are subsidized by 90%, in order to keep costs minimal and allow for greater participation. Student meetings are held after each completed stage, to recognize achievements. Incentives and motivational prizes are given freely to promote continued learning.

Training literacy staff is essential (each of the three levels require training), and regular mentoring visits establish the 800 facilitators, with the continual training of new facilitators, to replace and reinforce team. 13 project coordinators are currently involved in implementation of the program.

Stability and Continuity of Learning

One of the major difficulties faced by any adult education program is the high drop-out rate. Once the "Read-Your-Bible" program began, students began to attend regularly. Because of its religious nature, people were motivated to continue. 90% of the students are women. Lack of family support, especially from husbands was counted one of the main reasons behind dropping out of classes and non-attendance. However, most husbands were found to be eager for their wives to read the Bible.

Literacy Extended to Family Members

Many of the female student's spouses are illiterate also, but cannot attend classes as they are working full-time. When these husbands found their wives reading the Bible, they began to read with them at home as well. Even the children enjoy listening to the audiotapes and read with their mothers. In the past years, many children have begun to take part in the classes. It is not unusual to find an age span of 50 years or more, among the participants in any one class.

Recently, Emad, the Bible Society program coordinator, was following up a certain area. He noticed that there was reported many small groups, of just 4 or 5, instead of the normal class size 12-15 students per facilitator. When he looked into it further, he learned that facilitators were giving lessons "on the

road..." They would stop off in homes here and there as they traveled between towns, giving lessons to families along the way! In several instances, in villages with no church, a number of relatives would get together in a shared yard and hold literacy classes.

Continued Reading at Home

This program is designed to help the new reader to use these new reading skills in daily life. This is probably the only guarantee to not relapsing into illiteracy. The facilitators were impressed with the fact that students usually read the lessons at home, and came to class with all the exercises done.

Once, three women came to class with a piece of newspaper that had been the wrapping for their foul (bean) sandwiches. Even though the paper was mired with scraps of beans and breadcrumbs, they were excitedly pointing to some words that they recognized written on it!

Accurate Reading

Out of reverence for their Holy Scriptures, it is understood that one must read it accurately. The student begins to concentrate while reading, which indirectly means that he/she, learns grammar

Character and Attitude

This program relates to attitudes and ways of thinking, and how to respond to different situations in life. It teaches how to be positive characters in society. The reader will learn to find meaning in what he/she reads and together with other learners in the class, to think, analyze and criticize these experiences together. Students learn to wait turns to speak, to listen to others, and to respect others' opinions, even if different from own.

Understanding and Teaching

In one class, the women started to think about creative ways to learn. Some of them suggested puppets. They learned how to make them, and now have 10 puppets. They also suggested teaching their children stories from the program. They now feel productive and valuable. They do not refer to themselves as ignorant people as they had always done.

Self-confidence and Respect

One of the learners mentioned that in the beginning, people gave her a hard time, since she was an adult trying to learn. This used to annoy her. Now she says, "I don't mind speaking into a microphone, and saying that I am trying to learn how to read and write better." The learning process has increased her sense of self-confidence and trust.

Initiative and Responsibility

The aim of this program is to make the connection with what is read to daily living, i.e. to make reading a practical part of one's life. One class for men was learning about participation in community development, and taking initiative. Then one day, as four of them were walking to class, they found a dead donkey in the street. Instead of just ignoring it, as they formerly would have done, they decided to take the initiative, get involved, and together carried it away themselves.

One group of ladies got together and cleaned their street. When their teacher came to class, she found a statement on the blackboard saying that they live on a clean street. They now call their street, "Clean Street."

The Dirty Staircase

One lesson takes the story of when Jesus heals the lady's dead son, and talks about how Jesus took initiative, and did not wait to be asked by the mother, but stepped out and raised the young man. One lady took this lesson to heart, and decided to do something about the dirty staircase in her apartment building. Thinking that the neighbors would see and join in with her, she cleaned the stairs one day.

However, no one helped her. The lady shared with her class, and she was encouraged to try again. This time, when she started to clean, all the other ladies in the building came out and helped her.

Practical Issues

Lesson Topics in the Post-literacy curriculum apply the Bible passages to practical issues such as: Importance of medical care; Not judging according to appearance; Reacting calmly in difficult situations; Family respect; Rights and duties; Family planning; Taking initiative; Thankfulness; Organizational skills; Respect for others regardless of race or religion; Integrity at work; Human value; Relevance of education; Hard work and persistence in achieving goals; Child-rearing; Value of the Female; Problem of revenge; etc.

Balcony Problems

Another lesson takes the story of the blind man who called out to Jesus, and through this story, the students are encouraged to let their voices be heard! This is something important for the people of Egypt to learn. There is often a feeling of helplessness, that there's nothing I can do or say that will change anything, and people are not encouraged to speak up. One lady was inspired by this lesson, to deal with a difficult living situation, which is very typical here in Egypt, where we all live in apartments, many in very crowded areas. The balconies of each apartment are above one another, and these balconies are used to hang the laundry, to beat the carpets, to toss out bits of trash and dirt, to shake out the bits of food from the table cloth, and so on! The people who live on the first several floors are forever getting their clean laundry soiled from above. So this lady let her voice be heard. She arranged a meeting, for all those living in the apartment building, and they discussed the problem. Together, they decided which days would be set aside for laundry, which days the carpets would be beaten, and how to live considerately together, all because of her post-literacy lesson!

Wicked Behavior?

The story of Zacchaeus is used to teach people not to judge according to appearances. One lady in the class has a neighbor who is a widow. This widow lady goes out each day, leaving her 2 young boys at home. Assuming that this widow was an immoral lady, the neighbors talked among themselves, suggesting wicked behavior. Thoughts and imaginations grew and this widow was condemned amongst them. However, after the lesson and class discussion about not judging according to appearances, the lady went to her friends and told them that they would not talk about the widow any more, and that they really had no basis for their judgments, and that maybe this lady was going out to work and provide for her family, and that they just would not judge her anymore.

Baby Jesus

When the story of the birth of Christ was studied, the ladies were taught to take care of their babies. Mary wrapped her baby in strips of cloth. The ladies were taught about the importance of using clean clothes in order to prevent infection and disease, and many ladies started to take the advice of the doctors seriously.

A Lifestyle of Literacy

The Bible Society of Egypt's post-literacy provision will develop in students a lifestyle of literacy, to ensure stability and continuity of learning. People are trained to accept responsibility for their ongoing learning. The curriculum ascribes to the philosophy of Education by Participation, and lesson topics apply Biblical passages to practical daily issues. When the course is finished, people will be self-reliant and capable of further personal and societal development as individuals.

Five young girls went through the post-literacy curriculum and were able to enter into school, at the secondary level. Now in the 3rd year of secondary, they were in need of some private lessons. However, the lessons cost 5 LE per/student. The five girls decided together that they would each pitch in 2 LE, making a total of 10 LE. This way, two of the girls could go to attend the lesson, and then all five of them would gather together, and the two who attended would explain and teach their little group

what they had learned! They could have only paid for one of their group to attend; however, they felt it was worth the investment for two to attend, in order to gain better understanding this way.

Post-Literacy for Children

Throughout the last years, our Post-Literacy course has had an increasing focus on children. Millions of children in Egypt do not attend school, with 31% of Egypt's children working in dangerous occupations. Official figures state that 30% of the children IN school do not know how to read and write (the number in reality could be much greater).

We are now to a point where about 80% of those participating in our program are children. These children love the program. They are very responsive and participate eagerly. Each lesson has 8 sections, and the children love the "Read & Play" and the "Read & Live" sections the best. Children in our program have begun to think and understand, and to believe, in a way that has not been seen before. Children who have been generally thought of as slow and unintelligent, show such a difference that people are surprised and astonished at their capabilities. Facilitators themselves are amazed with their progress and level of understanding.

The facilitators have now expressed a need for help in classroom control! This is a positive point, that they have been able to see the different needs and personalities of the children. The facilitators convey that they are learning and growing throughout this process, and have asked for methods and skills to develop a better learning environment. Such training is now regularly included in our overall program.

Another point that has been raised is the fact that our program is not geared to teach basic literacy. While the children benefit greatly from the participation aspect, the discussions and teaching, many are still struggling with weak reading skills. Many of these children attend school, however, they would never think of embarrassing themselves at school, by drawing attention to their supposed "stupidity."

An example of this was recently carried out in Sohag. As many churches do, volunteers provide after school tutoring for children in the different subjects they take at school. The teachers felt that children were not improving, and one day, they decided to do an assessment. 210 students were given dictation, asked to write their names and 4 different words. 60 of these Primary and Preparatory students could not write the words. 24 of these students could not even write their own name!

We feel that a solution must be offered by including a basic literacy aspect within our program, making it possible for these children to learn the fundamental "ABC"s" of reading and writing. This aspect, of introducing "Literacy" into our "Post-Literacy" program, is now a serious consideration for our team.

Just this week (Feb 2006), a celebration was arranged for 100 students who had finished the third and final level. All of the participants were children in the Primary and Prep level. As Emad interviewed the class, he was overwhelmed by their enthusiasm and level of comprehension, showing a real and deep grasp in all of the lessons. Again, Emad reminded himself of how important it is for him personally, to visit these classes on a regular basis just to encourage himself, to refocus on the vision and strengthen him for the challenges in this vital work.