

BELIEFS Values

Pioneer pastor

Spiritual need sends minister on Oakland-based mission

BY RENA FULKA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Rev. Raafat Hanna left his native Egypt seven years ago to continue his education in the United States. But once he discovered that there were no Arabic Presbyterian churches in Oakland County, Hanna found himself on a new mission.

"Arab Presbyterians had a hard time getting adjusted in American society, and they had to go to other denominations for worship," recalled Hanna. "They were looking for the same religion in the same way they used to worship in their backgrounds."

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Rev. Raafat Hanna
Pastor, Arab Presbyterian Church

Having just left a church he founded in Egypt 12 years before, Hanna again began the process of establishing a new church — only this time on foreign soil.

"In the very beginning, I felt my heart was still in Egypt," recalled Hanna, who makes his home in Troy with his wife, Waafa, and children, Rhanda and Samir.

Today, the minister who put his education on hold to answer his new calling, views the experience in a different light.

"The Presbyterian church in Egypt was established by the Presbyterian Church of the USA 170 years ago," said Hanna. "You established the church in Egypt. It's my turn to give something back."

In Egypt, the majority of the population is Muslim. And while some 18 percent are Christian, said Hanna, most are Coptic Orthodox.

In the Detroit area, which is

home to the largest population of Arabs outside the Arab nations, the Arabic Presbyterian Church is also in the minority.

When Hanna established the church in Troy with 11 charter members in 1989, it became the first and only one of its kind in the Presbytery of Detroit.

Two years ago, the fledgling congregation took up residence at the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham — a more central location for members who must travel from as far as Novi, Redford Township and Dearborn to worship as they did in their homelands of Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq.

"We felt it was important to offer them hospitality. And we certainly had the facility to offer," said the Rev. Ronald P. Byars, pastor of First Presbyterian Church.

Arabic Presbyterian Church, now numbering 60 members, worships in the chapel of the spacious church at 1669 W.

Maple.

"We believe very much in spiritual worship to humble ourselves before God," said Hanna, who conducts services in Arabic. Youth Sunday school classes are conducted in English for the new generation.

Bonded by culture, food, language and spirituality, church members join in monthly fellowship dinners and support each other as new immigrants.

The role is much more pronounced for Hanna, who has an office at the Birmingham church. Hanna reaches out to new members even before they arrive on American soil.

Dr. Samuel Rizek of Troy came to the United States in 1992 to practice internal medicine and seek new challenges.

"I came directly to Rev. Hanna. He was waiting for me at the airport," recalled Rizek, who learned of the new church while yet in Egypt.

Though the two men had never met, Hanna opened his home to Rizek, his wife, Noel, and the couple's two teenage children.

He also helped the family through the relocation process and job search.

"He's a kind man, taking care of his members regarding not only the spiritual aspects, but the social aspects as well," said Rizek.

It was his parents, both church elders, who inspired Hanna to pursue Christian service.

"My dad and mom were a very good example for me, serving God and serving the church," recalled the minister of 19 years,



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMANN

Sense of home: The Rev. Raafat Hanna leads the Arabic Presbyterian Church in Oakland County.

who says the Bible is his law. "My mom taught me how we have to work as a family in the church. We have to serve the church in any way."

Today, he brings the same philosophy to his Arabic congrega-

tion. Hanna has a bachelor's degree in theology from Evangelical Seminary in Egypt and intends to eventually pursue the advanced degree he has eluded for the last seven years.

For his growing congregation, he hopes to add an English service for the next generation. "Our goal is to be completely supportive," added Hanna. "In another five years, we hope to have our own building."

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Summer services are scheduled for 10 a.m. Aug. 4 and 11 at Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington, 25301 Halsted Road, Farmington Hills. On Aug. 4, Gwen Foss, a church member, will present "Harmony and Controversy; 147 Years of Universalism in Farmington," a review of the history of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Farmington and a look at the people and events that have helped shape it over the years.

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mirrors that of the larger Universalist denomination. On Aug.

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