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Pentecostal and Presbyterian Orphanages on the Nile

Beth Baron

Missionaries to the Middle East are often characterized as modernizers in much of the scholarly literature. Forced to disavow their intended goal of converting Muslims due to Islamic injunctions against apostasy, missionaries turned, we are told, to civilizing and modernizing the local inhabitants, and they restricted their proselytizing to local Christians and Jews. They thus traded their short-term evangelical goals for long-term “enlightenment,” building schools, hospitals, clinics, and refuges. While missionaries’ letters home voice a strong desire to convert local Muslims, scholars have tended to see these writings as a part of strategy to cultivate donors. They argue that supporters back home had to be told that the missionaries were saving souls, particularly Muslim ones. Had they known that missionaries had become secular educators and health care providers, they would never have sent funds, particularly when some could barely afford to send their own children to schools and doctors.

The notion that missionaries were secularists in disguise has gained traction in part due to the emphasis in the scholarly literature on institutions of higher education. That missionary colleges and universities turned out secular intellectuals has reinforced the claim that missionaries were modernizers rather than failed proselytizers. However, most missionaries were not engaged in higher education but rather in preaching, teaching, healing, and distributing Bible literature, among other activities, and worked with broad sectors of the population rather than elites.
The claim that missionaries in the Middle East were modernizers has also grown out of an emphasis in the literature on mainstream Protestants (in particular Congregationalists and Presbyterians) rather than fundamentalists. Missionaries, who have been painted with broad brushstrokes, came in many shapes and sizes, and reflected a spectrum of Christian thought. They included Americans, British, Dutch, French, German, Italians, Swiss, and Scandinavians, and were affiliated (or not) with various Protestant denominations and Catholic orders. Protestant sects themselves diverged, with Presbyterians in Egypt and Lebanon, for example, coming from branches that had split over slavery and other issues.

Missionaries worked their programs out in practice in sites such as orphanages, where they had intimate contact with locals. This chapter juxtaposes the histories of two orphanages started by American missionary women in Egypt in the early twentieth century. The two orphanages would seem to have parallel histories, yet they diverged in important ways. Margaret (Maggie) Smith established the Fowler Orphanage for girls in Cairo in 1906 as part of a network of educational and health institutions sponsored by the mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA). Five years later, Lillian Trasher established the Assiout Orphanage as an independent institute, later on affiliating it with the Assemblies of God Church.

By throwing Pentecostals into the mix, it is not my intention to create a binary—Presbyterians as modern and Pentecostals as not. In fact, fundamentalist churches arose in the early twentieth-century United States as a product of modernity as well as in reaction to it. By juxtaposing Lillian Trasher's experiment with that of Margaret Smith, and putting Pentecostal missionaries on the radar of scholars, I hope to raise questions about the modernizing agendas of Protestant missionaries as well as their supposed homogeneity. Missionaries across the board embodied multiple tendencies and their evangelizing combined contradictory elements, with locals taking away what they wanted from the contact.

A Home in Cairo: The Presbyterian-Quaker Partnership

American Presbyterians started, in their words, to "occupy" towns and cities in Egypt in the 1850s. Having arrived after the Church Missionary Society of England had abandoned the field, they claimed it as their own. Under
unwritten missionary rules extant in the nineteenth century, establishing colonies or outposts in vacant areas effectively marked them as theirs to evangelize. The British occupation from 1882 offered privileges—patronage, passes, and protections—and drew competitors. Some of them provided services that complemented those of the UPCNA: distributing Bibles, setting up a Christian printing press, establishing branches of the YMCA and YWCA, and starting the American (Christian) University in Cairo. Eventually an interdenominational council was inaugurated to coordinate activities and present a united front to the Egyptian government.

During their hundred years in Egypt, the Presbyterians dominated the missionary field, intermarrying among a number of families who served for multiple generations and creating a bureaucracy to oversee their activities. To reach the broader population, the missionaries offered an array of educational and medical services at a time when such social services were limited. The members of the Egyptian Missionary Association, which in its heyday numbered well over a hundred men and women, met twice a year to discuss business: they voted on membership and tenure; heard recommendations of committees that met throughout the year; bargained over finances and apportioned funds; and confirmed assignments in schools, hospitals, and homes. The association reported back to the board, or boards in the United States—the male Missionary Board and the Women’s General Missionary Society (WGMS)—upon whom they depended for recruits and resources. One of the distinguishing features of the UPCNA’s missionary activity was the longevity of its women’s missionary arm, which took responsibility for a number of schools and eventually the entire medical mission.* The link between the home and foreign front was crucial in sustaining the enterprise.

The Presbyterian missionaries in Egypt had a sense of mission and of history. They left a trove of material for future generations, including diaries, journals, letters, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, minutes from biannual meetings, annual reports, photographs, missionary magazines, and other assorted documents. Much of this archival material is stored at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, with some of the published material available elsewhere, particularly at theological libraries with earlier Presbyterian roots. The bulk of material is in English, with the occasional Arabic document finding its way into the records; there are also extensive summaries
and translations of material from the Arabic press which relate to mission work but have relevance far beyond it.

Many Presbyterian missionaries spent years in the field, learning Arabic in intensive and carefully monitored programs. Their knowledge of Arabic and interest in living among potential converts rather than apart from the people gave them an access to society that many other foreign observers lacked. Their biases are quite clear and must be considered when reading through reports and other literature produced for varying purposes. The sheer volume of material and its diversity can be overwhelming.

The orphanage founded by American Presbyterians in Egypt must be seen in the context of a network of social services. These services were meant to be self-sustaining, not charities, and fees were charged, sometimes on a sliding scale. Those served by the missionaries met them in the guise of teachers, nurses, matrons, doctors, and Bible readers. The missionaries were there to convert Egyptians of all backgrounds—Muslims, Jews, and Orthodox Christians (Copts)—and in so doing “save” them. The orphanage was not the central institution of the mission, or even a main one, but was one of its most successful enterprises.

The Presbyterian orphanage must also be seen in the context of the history of orphanages in Egypt. Orphanages arose in nineteenth-century Egypt as part of the expansion of Ottoman-Egyptian state welfare. The idea of gathering together abandoned and orphaned children under one roof, separating them from relatives, and segregating them from other indigents while providing for their needs and giving them industrial work was novel. When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, they forced the state to cut back on welfare services, closing schools and refuges and privatizing social services. Catholic and Protestant missionaries found an easy opening.

Margaret Smith was the organizing spirit behind the Fowler Orphanage. She arrived in Egypt in 1872 as a single missionary, joining the growing American group, which included Anna Thompson. Smith and Thompson spent sixty years in close proximity in Egypt. Thompson described her petite friend as “humble and unpretending,” although admitting she also could be “indomitable.” Earl Elder concurred, “Mission tradition has it that it was Miss Margaret Smith, a timid, new missionary, who when the mission association came into being, stuck by her guns and asserted her right and along with it that of all unmarried women to sit as a member of the association.”
Yet unlike Anna Thompson, who left a long paper trail including diaries, letters, and other papers, Smith's literary output was limited. Her activities can be followed mostly through her reports and the records of her colleagues and friends in the mission.6

After completing the requisite Arabic course, Smith, like many single female missionaries, took up teaching and directed the girls' school in Harat al-Saqqā'īn, an assignment she had for thirty-two years. The school grew to become one of the largest in Egypt, attracting daughters of the elite, including the children of 'Urabi Pasha, the nationalist leader exiled for his role in the 1882 revolt that led to the British occupation. Smith also organized women Bible readers within the quarter who visited homes to read to illiterate women.7 The story of these women, and how they were perceived, remains an untold story.

For years, Smith had dreamt of starting a home for homeless children. Street children had become a preoccupation of British officials and Western residents, and few institutions served them. Smith found patrons in Esther and John Fowler, an American Quaker couple from Ohio who visited Cairo in 1895 and were disturbed by the numerous street children they encountered. Impressed by Smith's missionary school, they raised over eight thousand dollars in funds for an orphanage upon their return home. That amount was insufficient to buy a property and sustain a home but was a start, and the Fowlers began negotiating with the Board of Foreign Missions on an agreement. The board was not in the business of providing social services that could not be self-supporting—schools could charge tuition and hospitals fees, but what fees could orphans pay?—and feared the expensive plan first proposed by John Fowler. The Egyptian Missionary Association set up a "Fowler Orphanage Committee" to develop a plan to establish and run the orphanage, which was named for the fund-raisers. American missionaries won approval of a plan from the board only when Smith promised not to approach the board or anyone else directly for funds. The project was to be faith-based with funds coming in answer to prayer.8 Smith could still write lengthy and colorful accounts for inclusion in missionary reports and magazines, which would spur readers to contribute, and communicate with the Fowlers or a committee of their friends established after their deaths to carry on their work.
Once authorized by the American Board, Margaret Smith began placing orphans in existing girls’ schools, paying their upkeep out of the “Fowler Orphanage Fund.” The first six orphans received were placed in the Fum al-Khalig School, which Smith was directing at the time, and she was officially named superintendent of the orphanage. After a few months, a better accommodation—the home of a deceased priest whose son was sympathetic to the project and whose daughter-in-law had attended one of Smith’s schools—was found close by and rented for the school and the orphanage. Yet that home proved inadequate within a few years, and the missionaries began looking for a suitable property on which to build a new home, moving again in the interim.

The project of building a permanent home received a boost in 1909 when a Mrs. Arnold of Pittsburgh left a legacy of ten thousand dollars toward the cause. Smith appealed to the Women’s Board (the WGMS) for support. In the end, the missionaries converted the old Austro-Hungarian Hospital in ‘ Abbasiyya, which had been sequestered at the outset of World War I, into an orphanage. Bought for five thousand dollars, it was renovated with an additional one thousand dollars, and the ‘Abbasiyya Girls’ School was added.

During her tenure as head of the orphanage, Smith pushed for expanded quarters, petitioned and updated the board and “Friend Fowler” on details pertaining to the new institution, pressed fellow missionaries into service, and utilized the educational and health services of the mission to help her girls. As the home grew, and Smith grew older, she required more assistance. Smith appealed to the Women’s Board to name Ellen Barnes, who was already in the field assisting, a missionary. Smith managed the home until 1920, when age, exhaustion, and failing eyesight forced her to hand over control to Barnes. In the interim and beyond, other women in the field helped in the home. Ellen Barnes was assisted by Annie Dinsmore through 1939, when Lucy Lightowler, who was assisted by Jane Smith, took over. From 1947 to 1949, Helen Armstrong served as head and in 1952 Elizabeth Wilson became superintendent.

Prospective orphans were presented by family members or others to the committee and underwent a physical exam, toughened after one girl entered with typhus. A physician from the Tanta Mission Hospital was drafted onto the committee and called in to give check-ups and advice. Those accepted
for entry were also the subject of a contract outlining the terms. Within its first year, twenty-three girls had been admitted to the orphanage; since six left, the balance stood at seventeen. Six months later, the total admitted stood at thirty-nine with twenty-three remaining. After the move to the renovated hospital in 1915, numbers stood at sixty-three, and generally the number of girls in the orphanage fluctuated between forty and sixty. But with limited space, it was hard to gain admission. In 1920 fifteen girls entered, with six applicants turned down. A report filed in 1937 estimated that over two hundred girls had "graduated" from the orphanage. But many others were rejected at the outset or had only short residencies, and roughly one-quarter to one-third seemed to be expelled or left in the early years.

The orphanage opened with two Greek girls. The appeal of their widowed mother had strengthened Smith's resolve to start the project. But that pair left within a week, taken by Roman Catholic priests, who, according to the report "had a greater claim on them." Two Syrian girls, one aged three and one five, were among the youngest the first year. As Smith told the story, their mother had deserted their father, converted to Islam, married, and sent them to a Muslim school. Their father, in turn, had taken them from the school and brought them to the orphanage to be raised as Christians. Many of the girls who found their way into the orphanage, for shorter or longer stays, were caught up in similar familial feuds waged between a divorced husband and wife. Some girls were fatherless, some motherless, some had lost both parents, and some had both but were caught up in the drama of divorce.

Another category of girls were those whose mothers were "living a disreputable life." How actively missionaries sought out children of prostitutes, seeing both the mothers and children as particularly vulnerable, is not clear. Smith complained when one such Syrian woman reneged on the fee mentioned in the contract that she had to pay if she did not leave her child in the orphanage until the age of eighteen. Presumably the fee would have been a financial incentive not to reclaim her child. In the first year, the girls ranged from three and one-half to twelve. These were not foundlings but rather girls whose family members appealed for their entry. Only occasionally does a foundling find her way in. "[A] dear, dirty, half starved, cross-eyed baby girl was given to us to bring up for the Lord," Smith wrote in 1910. "What little she wore, even the tuft of her hair on the top of her head was cast into the fire...we call her Timmy for short."
The reports are careful to note the religious backgrounds of the girls in the home. In July 1907, of the twenty-three: ten were Copts, three were Protestants, three Roman Catholic, three Greek Catholic, and four Muslims. In subsequent years, the reports mention Armenians, Jews, and Syrian Catholics among the residents of the home. The agenda of converting all of the girls to Protestantism was clear. The schooling and routine of the girls carefully instilled Christian values. Their days were filled with schooling, prayer, and housework, the bulk of which was carried on by the older girls. A day school was intermittently connected to the orphanage; the girls received their early schooling there and then went on to other missionary schools for upper level education. In the 1920s, industrial work was added: the girls made silver shawls, bead bags, and garments for sale, and later dolls were added to their repertoire.

Each report details the number of girls expressing an interest in joining the church, being examined, and undergoing baptism. The biggest prize for the missionaries was clearly the conversion of Muslim girls. But Smith was careful to wait until they had reached their majority (eighteen) before accepting them formally into the church. “There are now fourteen Church members besides two Moslem girls who were examined and would have been baptized if there were religious freedom; but as there is no such freedom they were asked to wait until they are older,” Smith wrote in 1909. The next year, all six of the “Mohammedan girls” had asked for baptism, Smith reported, but were delayed for instruction until their majority. The intent of the missionaries was not lost on Egyptians. In one of the early reports, Smith noted that three girls had been withdrawn, among them “a dear little ten-year-old Mohammedan…stolen by her father and married soon after because he feared she might become a Christian” as well as “a Jewess…taken away recently—being stolen by her mother, also on account of the religion of Jesus.”

After the orphanage’s thirty-year anniversary in 1936, Ellen Barnes provided an accounting of the girls in the home. She sought to counter the prevailing perception among Egyptians and even some missionaries that the orphans were all destined to be servants. They were raised, instead, for service to the Protestant missions. The report gives the first names, professions, and marital status of many of those who went through the home. Among the graduates, forty-one were teachers, seventeen Bible women, sixteen hospital maids and nurses, and twenty-six home helpers, with some changing
professions. The missionaries had prepared the girls for lives in Christian service as well as becoming Christian mothers; and collectively, the girls donated hundreds of years of service to mission institutions. Barnes wrote that “about two hundred girls have found a truly Christian home and a training which has resulted in many of these girls going out into various lines of Christian service.”

The report does not show what these graduates thought of their upbringing, whether their education and socialization had prepared them for life in Egypt, and if it had alienated them from their own society. (Jamila Bargach argues that missionary orphanages in Morocco often alienated local orphans from their culture.) The report also does not discuss those girls who entered the institution but left, or were forced to leave, after a short period. The Fowler Orphanage, which changed its name to the Fowler Home in 1945 to sound less institutional, left its imprint on those girls who had passed through, even if briefly, on the women who worked in the home, on those who had funded and served it, and on its neighbors. Yet it was quite a different institution than the Assiout Orphanage, to which we now turn.

A Village in Asyut: Faith and Pentecostals

The American Presbyterian mission to Egypt overshadowed the Pentecostal endeavor half a century later. But the Pentecostal endeavor outlasted the Presbyterian mission in large part due to one of its oldest institutions: the Assiout Orphanage. Started in 1911, the orphanage grew into a village that had its own schools, church, clinic, bakery, dairy, dormitories, and swimming pool, and was seen within the Assemblies of God Church as a testimony to the power of faith and prayer. The Assiout Orphanage became the heart of the Pentecostal missionary effort in Egypt and key to its success, producing many of its converts, preachers, and leaders.

Lillian Trasher, the founder of the orphanage and one of the most prominent Pentecostal missionaries of the twentieth century, built up a strong circle of supporters through letters that were excerpted regularly from the 1910s in such periodicals as Word and Witness, Latter Rain Evangel, Christian Evangel, Weekly Evangel, and Pentecostal Evangel. Her story reached a wide audience in 1939 when she was featured in an article by Jerome Beatty in the American Magazine under the title “Nile Mother.” In 1951, a biography
written by Lester Sumrall with the cooperation of Trasher appeared under the imprint of the Gospel Publishing House in Springfield, Missouri, as Lillian Trasher: The Nile Mother. That year, the movie “The Nile Mother” made its Hollywood debut and the rounds of American churches as a fund-raising vehicle. Inspired by the story, Beth Prim Howell took poetic license and wrote Lady on a Donkey, which appeared in 1960, published by a commercial press in New York. After Trasher’s death in 1961, the legend continued to flourish. In 1983, the Assemblies of God Division of Foreign Missions published excerpts from Trasher’s letters, some of which had appeared in their periodicals, as Letters from Lillian. The most recent account of her life, Lillian Trasher: The Greatest Wonder in Egypt (2004), is part of a children’s series about Christian heroes. Although the contents of these texts vary, they have generally framed her life as an affirmation of Christian faith.

In 1910, at the age of twenty-three, Lillian Trasher felt called to serve in Africa. She went out without the backing of a board or church to the Nile town of Asyut in southern Egypt. Shortly after her arrival, she responded to an appeal to attend to a dying woman. Had those who had knocked on the doors of the Pentecostal missionaries thought they would get medicine along with prayer? If so, they had confused the Pentecostals, who often turned to faith healing, with the Presbyterians, who used medical evangelizing to attract potential converts and founded a hospital in Asyut. Prayer did not save the woman, who may have been beyond the help of medicine. When her relatives handed Lillian her infant girl, Trasher saw in this, as in all things, the hand of God. She returned to the Pentecostal mission home with the baby, and when her hosts lost patience with the infant’s crying, she rented a home and began the Malga’ al-Aytam al-Khayri bi-Asyut, which was shortened in English to the Assiout Orphanage.

While years of planning went into the Fowler Orphanage, Lillian Trasher, who was unfettered by a board, acted spontaneously, trusting that God would provide. She chose the most marginal of people for her ministry, orphans and abandoned children, who by definition lacked family in a society that saw family as its basis and family lineage as critical to creating marital and other bonds. No such institution existed in Asyut or its environs at the time, and its beginnings were modest: “Then we took in a few children, but at first it was very hard to get them.” Egyptians initially suspected that she planned to take the orphans as servants or slaves to America. The thought
was not that strange given Asyut's historical role as a major depot of the slave trade and the destination for caravans on the "forty days road" from the Sudan, as well as Presbyterian missionaries' past interest in helping slaves.14

The orphanage had a rocky start. After one child entered with bubonic plague, the home was temporarily closed. Lillian traveled to the United States to recuperate from illness and there in the summer of 1912 in North Carolina became ordained as an evangelist, something which would have been odd, perhaps, for a Presbyterian but not evidently for a Pentecostal woman.15 She returned to Asyut, where the orphanage began to grow in size: "Every week I have to turn away four or five little ignorant children from lack of space who might be taught and led to Christ," Lillian wrote in 1913.16 By the next year she had fifty children under her care. A Turkish woman taught them rug making, and a sixty-five-year-old missionary from Indiana helped out. Lillian decided to move the home out of the city to Abnub, a village on the east bank of the Nile where land was cheaper and the air cleaner.17

During World War I, Lillian Trasher stayed on in the orphanage with a staff that included Shaker Gadallah and two other native women. They struggled to feed the children in the midst of a high spike in the prices of staples. Lillian solicited funds and food in the town and surrounding villages. After the May wheat harvest when peasants were paid, Lillian rode out to villages on a donkey.18 She was occasionally away from the orphanage for a few days at a time, staying in police stations along the way. Villagers called the itinerant Western woman the "lady on a donkey." Yet somehow she gained their trust along with gifts of food and cash. These visits to Egyptian villages gave Lillian contacts with mayors, who later asked her to take in their widows and orphans. Through this travel, she also saw how villagers lived and resolved to "civilize" the peasant children in her institution.

The orphanage doubled in size during the war, from roughly fifty to one hundred children. To accommodate the new residents, rooms were added on, in a process that became a pattern for the home. Once the children got older, they participated in the brick-making and laying process. At the end of the war an influenza epidemic that left orphans in its wake added to the numbers. "We are glad to accept the most needy cases, and have had to enlarge our house, adding four new rooms which are about filled," wrote Trasher in early 1919.19 The boys learned trades such as carpentry and shoemaking, while the girls were taught sewing, childcare, and housework.
In March and April 1919, demonstrations in Cairo grew into a nationalist revolt. An American Presbyterian minister tried to persuade Lillian to take refuge with the other Americans and Europeans in the boys' secondary school, but she refused to leave the orphanage. After communication with Cairo was severed and the banks limited access to funds, Lillian consulted with "Auntie" Zakiya, the head matron, and decided to send all of those children with relatives in Asyut and nearby villages home. When British soldiers reached the region, they notified Trasher that the children had to evacuate the orphanage for safer quarters in Asyut and that she had to leave with the other Westerners on barges sent up the Nile from Cairo. The boys were moved into town into one of the American Presbyterian schools and the girls and babies into the American Presbyterian Hospital. Trasher left by boat for Cairo in the company of Pentecostal missionaries Brother and Sister Post. Restless in Cairo and blocked from returning immediately to Asyut, she decided to visit the United States, during which time she registered as an evangelist of the infant Assemblies of God Church and raised funds for the orphanage.49

Trasher returned to the orphanage on the east bank in February 1920, taking in more orphans. "You cannot imagine how I feel when I have to refuse some," she lamented. "There are no other orphanages within hundreds of miles from here and the other orphanages in Cairo and Alexandria will not take in new ones until some of the older ones leave."49 Rather than continue to turn away children, Trasher expanded the orphanage. The enlargement of the facility was made possible by a gift of $1,500 from Sultan (later King) Fu'ad (r.1917–1936) in 1921.49 His visit to the orphanage was one in a line of Egyptian rulers and foreign royals, such as the Queen of Belgium, who sought to demonstrate their benevolence and enhance their legitimacy through charitable giving.

The Khayyats and Wissas, along with other notable families such as the Dosses and Alexans, continued to play a critical role in sustaining the orphanage. Their Sports Club contained a box for charitable donations that Trasher periodically emptied.49 Women such as Lily (Alexan) Khayyat and Esther (Fanus) Wissa were friends and supporters of the Assiout Orphanage through the years. They took out subscriptions, started sewing circles, and sent gifts of wheat, beef, cooked meals, cotton, and cloth. They celebrated births, weddings, and major life events with donations, and looked
after Trasher. They invited her for meals and outings to Cairo, and sent her new dresses for herself, while she looked after the orphans. Riding out to villages on a donkey was no longer necessary: "They realize that I have given my life for their children and show their appreciation in many ways," wrote Trasher in 1924.44

Yet wealthy Egyptians were not the only ones who gave. Middle-strata merchants and poor workers and peasants gave money or gifts in kind—ranging from free taxi rides to stocks of soap and other essential items—when they could. The community valued Trasher's commitment to caring for orphans, offering a service that they themselves were uninterested or unwilling to provide. The orphanage charged no admission fees, accepting boys under ten and girls under twelve. Trasher wanted the children long term in order to work the transformation to body and soul that she envisioned. At some point the orphanage set basic rules for admission that required relatives "to sign a paper that they give the children to us until they are eighteen years old," at which point they would have reached their legal civil majority.45 The orphanage accepted children with disabilities, children of lepers, and blind girls (but not blind boys, for whom there was already a home in Egypt).

"In extreme cases a child that is partly orphan is admitted," Trasher explained, by which she meant one parent was still alive.46 However, in Islamic family law, which Copts followed on issues of inheritance, a child could not really be a "part" orphan. An orphan (yatim, plural aytam or yatama) was legally one whose father had died.

Infants were often brought in by fathers after their wives had died in childbirth or later from complications. Thus many of those who were deposited at the orphanage were not technically orphans but offspring of single fathers who had insufficient knowledge, will, means, or relations to raise motherless children. "I received a new baby girl last night three months old, whose mother is dead and she is nothing but skin and bones. We named her Sophie," wrote Trasher in 1925.47 Maternal mortality rates were high at a time when women went through multiple pregnancies with limited medical interventions. "We got three newborn babies this month; their mothers died when they were born," Trasher wrote a few years later, giving their names as Amena, Obijy, and Marium.48 "Yesterday we got nothing at all in the way of money," Trasher noted in 1931, "but the Lord sent us a darling little baby boy three days old. His mother died when he was born."49 Two years later, "Someone
brought us tiny twin babies this morning. Poor little things—their mother died when they were born. They look very weak; I am afraid they will not live, but we will do our best."59 The weakest infants were sent for care to the American Presbyterian Hospital in Asyut.

Another set of children arrived with widowed mothers who had no financial resources or willing relatives to help raise fatherless offspring. Roughly ten percent of the population of the orphanage at any given moment consisted of widows. They kept their infants with them in shared accommodations, but their weaned and older children were separated and placed in dormitories. "It quite often happens that a child is received with its widowed mother, who earns her support by working in the orphanage, whilst the children receive full training along with the others," Trasher wrote.61 These widowed women were indispensable to the orphanage: They washed clothes and dishes, and performed other menial tasks such as mending and cooking, and served as the backbone of the labor force. Although knit into the fabric of the orphanage as workers, the widows essentially remained fellahat (peasant women) and were divested of authority over their own children. The latter were remade into Pentecostal Christians.

The orphanage also accepted foundlings (*luqata*, singular *laqit* or *laqita*). These infants were not legally orphans, for their parents were still presumably alive but had abandoned them for one reason or another. "About two weeks ago I had some one knock at my door about midnight and hand me a wee tiny baby, just a few hours old which they had found in the street," wrote Trasher in 1921. "We had one like this one a little while ago, but its head had been injured when it had been thrown away and it went quite blind and then it died."62 Abandoned infants were found in various locations, often in precarious situations. "Lageah, the baby we found on the bridge, died last night," she wrote in 1927.63 Another was found the winter of 1928 near the railroad track by a carpenter who worked at the American College. "They brought me the baby, a little boy, with not even a cloth over him; he was on a saddle pad and an old bran sack, covered with sand and dirt. He had been out in that awful cold wind for hours, quite naked, and only a few hours old." He was named Faheem Abd Alla. His last name—servant of God—was common for one whose parentage was unknown.64 Infants were also found in wheat fields and the Nile River, evoking the story of Moses.65 A few children
were deposited directly on Trasher’s doorsteps, with no identification, name, or place of origin.

Some “fallen girls” also found refuge in the orphanage with their infants. British officials in Cairo asked Trasher to give safe haven to one such unmarried mother: Her boyfriend had been killed by her father and brother, who in turn had been hanged, but the girl’s mother and a younger brother still presented a physical threat to her and the child. “We would be very grateful if you could see your way to admitting this girl to your home,” the authorities requested, wanting “to give her a chance to lead a decent life and avoid the risk of assassination by her family.” Trasher accepted the pair, having her own motives: “Others have come like this and have been wonderfully saved.”

As matriarch and patriarch of this large family, Trasher was interested in sustaining bodies and saving souls. In the winter of 1926 she began to see results: “After crying and praying like the sound of many waters, they began to testify. One little Mohammedan boy got up on top of the bench and testified saying,” according to Trasher, “In my village I was a sinner but now God has saved me and if I was cut in little pieces I would not serve idols.” Having absorbed the Protestant critique of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, the boy referred most probably to the presence of icons in Coptic churches. Trasher continued, “Souls are being saved and others baptized in the Holy Spirit.” The movement grew, and after seventeen “dry” years, the “harvest” began during a convention the following April (1927).

Today I witnessed the greatest revival I have ever seen in my life. Three days ago [April 5] we started a revival meeting among the children. The Spirit was with us from the very first meeting, dozens getting saved and dozens seeking the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But the most wonderful sight I ever saw in my life was when I followed the noise up to the housetop. There were dozens and dozens of little girls shouting, crying, talking in tongues, rejoicing, preaching, singing—well, just everything you can think of—praising God! Several of the children saw visions.

The revival spread from the girls, to the widows, to the boys, including older ones who lived in town and were called to the orphanage to participate. A couple of days later,
The power of God is just sweeping the Orphanage like a mighty
flood.... Hundreds of the children are on their faces screaming out to
God for mercy, some shouting for joy and rejoicing in the marvelous,
new found blessing, others talking in tongues, others standing on top
of the tables, preaching, still others seeking the baptism.... Just now a
little Mohammedan girl is down stairs preaching to a little cripple girl;
no one is tired though they have prayed and prayed for hours. 39

There was no count of how many had been "born again," although fifty
had received "the Baptism with the Holy Spirit with the sign of speaking in
other tongues," according to H. E. Randall, a Pentecostal pastor, who was on
hand for the revival. 60 Some of the boys and girls raised in the orphanage be-
gan to go out to evangelize and otherwise assist in Assemblies of God mis-
sions around Asyut and elsewhere in Egypt, and another revival broke out
February 3, 1933. Later, as the antimissionary movement grew, state officials
removed most of the Muslim children from the orphanage. 61

When Jerome Beatty visited the orphanage in 1939, there were 647 or-
phans and 74 widows.62 The orphanage had grown into a virtual village with
a number of structures. At that size, Trasher needed a hardworking, loyal
staff. She recruited an array of foreign missionaries and local talent: A Ger-
man nurse ran the clinic and assisted an Egyptian doctor who volunteered
his time; a British missionary headed the girls' school; and an American Pen-
tecostal missionary (Florence Christie) taught, delivered babies, and super-
vised the girls. 63 Christie later described Trasher as a woman who "possessed a
loving, but strong personality, which people sometimes found hard to follow.
I considered it a challenge. She was known to be difficult to work for also be-
cause of her high expectations and demands." There was only one "Mama."
The other women, as Christie quickly learned when she saw Trasher could be
jealous of the children's attention, were "Aunties." 64

The widows, who continued to seek shelter due to their poverty, also con-
tinued to provide a crucial part of the labor in the orphanage. To their do-
monic chores of laundry, cooking, baking, and cleaning were added mil-
kining when the orphanage began raising Jersey cattle donated by the Ameri-
can Presbyterian Mission. The widows "were not allowed to care for children
because they were still too much like the village they had left," noted Chris-
tie. The older girls, who were taught to be "clean and cultured," cared for the
younger ones. The widows were finally given separate quarters and some privacy in 1939 with the completion of a special building. When Trasher "dared to suggest" that their older children remain a few more nights in the dormitories until the rooms were finished, the widows rebelled, telling her, "We can crowd on a quilt on the floor, just anything, only don't take the children away from us again!" For the widows, the orphanage provided a way out of poverty and hunger, yet it came at a price. They had little say over the upbringing of their children and experienced enforced separations.

Boys were taught artisan skills (carpentry and chair making) and girls trained in domestic tasks (infant care and sewing). Both had farming tasks, with girls feeding and collecting chicken eggs and some boys working with barn animals. The boys attended primary and secondary schools at the orphanage, and if they had the aptitude, could continue on to college. They took up the trades into which they had been apprenticed or alternatively took up careers as teachers, clerks, and pastors. Some of the boys became active in the Assemblies of God Church in Egypt, forming its core. They evangelized in villages, started schools and churches, and staffed missions scattered about Egypt.

The girls attended a general school; even if they excelled in their studies, they were not offered the option of continuing their educations. They were prepared instead for marriage. Trasher made it clear that her girls were not hired out as domestic servants, for that might have compromised their reputations and hurt their chances for marriage. Most of the girls married. Those who did not stayed on at the orphanage as helpers, with the exception of a few who felt "called" and were allowed to join female American missionaries in their work outside the orphanage.

The orphanage instilled American culture and values. The children learned English in addition to Arabic and dressed in American-style clothes that were either sent from the states or made at the orphanage (though Trasher said that the girls preferred high collars and boys long shorts, in a nod toward local customs). While cutting patterns and sewing clothes, they listened to such hymns on the gramophone as "Onward, Christian Soldiers!" "We Are Going Down the Valley," and "Joy to the World." They did not play recordings of Umm Kulthum, the most famous Egyptian singer of the century, whose records were available from the 1920s. They also learned to
make quilts from sewing scraps. "We feel that it is a good lesson for Egypt, as our married girls carry the idea with them to the different villages."\(^{68}\)

Yet Christie did not permit American norms of gender mixing. Boys and girls had separate dormitories and schools, and separate seating in church and dining halls. With the exceptions of siblings, boys and girls were not allowed to talk to one another. When the boys were ready to leave the orphanage, they approached Trasher to ask permission to marry one of the girls. She decided if they were suitable, allowing them to meet in her presence but not to date or court one another. She did this at a time when many Egyptians challenged such conventions, calling for meeting before marriage and endorsing the ideal of companionate marriage. Trasher also did not allow the blind girls to marry, which according to Christie was a practical approach to "an already severe problem," but seemed rather draconian for those denied a choice.\(^{69}\)

During World War II, when most American missionaries were evacuated from Egypt with those in Asyut heading south to Sudan, Trasher stayed put. She sent Christie to America to raise funds, which were in short supply in the midst of war, and the orphanage opened its doors to those grown children who had become refugees when cities such as Alexandria were bombed. The orphanage survived the war intact, but faced greater challenges in its wake when cholera and malarial epidemics devastated the countryside. Reinforcements of American missionaries such as Philip and Hazel Crouch helped Trasher, who was no longer young.

"It is whispered around the city of Assiut that it is always good to give an offering to the orphanage when God has been good to you!" wrote Lester Sumrall in 1951.\(^{70}\) With donations from Egyptians and Americans, the Assiut Orphanage continued to expand. Trasher decided to transform the hospital into a nursery, keeping only those babies under seven months in her home and building a new hospital for sick children. Ground was broken for the new building in late 1951, in expectation that gifts would be forthcoming, and it opened the following year.\(^{71}\)

Revolutionary winds transformed Egypt in 1952 when a group of officers, who were led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, toppled King Farouk (r.1936–1952) and inaugurated military rule by a Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). This in turn effectively put an end to the British presence in Egypt as well as the residence of most of the foreign missionaries they had protected.
Nasser, who was born in Alexandria in 1918, had spent many summers and some school years in Bani Murr, his father's natal village, which was adjacent to Abnub. His earlier familiarity with the institution probably helped to save it from the fate of other missionary institutions and its founder-director from expulsion.73

Trasher had benefited from the infrastructure and friendship of the American Presbyterian missionaries in Asyut, but their days were numbered after the revolution. The Presbyterians had been in retreat from the 1930s due to decreasing support at home and the increasing antimissionary movement in Egypt. As a result, they had gradually transferred most of their schools, hospitals, and other properties, including the Fowler Home, over to the Egyptian Evangelical Church. This process of indigenization was meant to avoid massive confiscations, and the Presbyterians phased out their mission in the 1950s.73 In contrast to the Presbyterians, the Assemblies of God were on the upsurge in America, and their missionary fervor in Egypt was still strong. The church elected an Egyptian superintendent in the 1940s, but American Assemblies of God missionaries continued to visit and work in Egypt, albeit under new and sometimes erratic constraints.

Lillian was not downsizing or planning to leave. At the start of 1957, the orphanage headcount stood at 1,035, not including refugees from the Suez Canal region, and she pledged to take an additional twenty-five to thirty children from Port Said who had been orphaned by the 1956 Suez War.74 The next year the orphanage built a new school to accommodate the growing numbers, and supporters sent supplies. When a new car got held up in customs, Nasser waived the duties. "I would like to tell you that your work for the orphans is very much appreciated by everyone in this country," Nasser wrote in a note that he personally signed.75 The Egyptian press celebrated her as "Mother of a Thousand."76

Lillian Trasher cut short a trip to the United States in 1960 when she grew ill, not wanting to die and be buried away from her orphanage family. She returned to Egypt, where she celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the orphanage in February 1961 and died later that year, on December 17. The Egyptian and Pentecostal press mourned the passing of a "saint," "virgin mother of thousands of Egyptians," "Nile Mother," and "Mama" Lillian. Former residents of the orphanage returned for the funeral, the largest in Asyut's history:
a six-horse carriage led the procession through the streets of the city to a plot in the orphanage cemetery where she was buried alongside her "children."

CONCLUSION

The Assiout Orphanage (renamed Trasher Orphanage after her death) and Fowler Home survived the assault on missionary structures precisely because they provided social services to a group on the margins of society. Few competed to care for those whose unclear paternity carried a stigma of shame and who had uncertain futures. Both Margaret Smith and Lillian Trasher saw a need and an opportunity. They had come to Egypt to "spread the gospel" and "word of God," and launched faith-based projects that gave meaning to their lives as single American women abroad, fulfilling spiritual and maternal ambitions at the same time. There are other marked similarities between the missionary endeavors of Smith and Trasher. Both women spent years of service in Egypt, with Trasher totaling fifty years in the field and Smith sixty; and both launched institutions that assisted orphaned and abandoned Egyptian children within years of one another that took root and flourished. Both Smith and Trasher saw the orphans as empty slates ready for conversion. That they also sought to "civilize" and "discipline" the children and teach them the rewards of hard work and hygiene did not mean that they had a secular agenda.

Yet the differences between these two institutions highlight the diversity of missionary projects and raise questions about the limits and extent of modernizing. Smith served with the American Presbyterian Mission, launched her orphanage after many years in the field and years of planning, and administered it with assistance from the Egyptian Missionary Association and boards back home. The Fowler Orphanage became a home to on average forty to sixty girls and over time hundreds of girls. Smith earned the vote in association meetings but remained within a strict hierarchical structure. Trasher started her orphanage spontaneously without the support of a board shortly after she had arrived in Upper Egypt and only later affiliated with the Assemblies of God Church. Her enterprise grew into a virtual city of orphans and widows, housing at its height some 1,400 children and widows with some 8,000 passing through the doors of the home until the time of her death.
The Presbyterians mobilized doctors from their medical mission in Tanta to help screen and treat orphans in the Fowler Orphanage. Trasher initially relied on faith healing but subsequently turned to the personnel of the American Presbyterian Hospital in Asyut for help with infants and epidemics and later opened her own orphanage hospital. The Presbyterians championed girls' education and started secondary schools and colleges for girls in Asyut and Cairo; by contrast, Trasher brought up the orphan girls to be good wives and mothers, and blocked secondary or advanced education for her girls. Moreover, at a time in which Egyptian reformers encouraged girls' higher education as well as integration of men and women, Trasher maintained a strict policy of segregation. Unlike Presbyterians, who delayed baptism until after years of education, the Pentecostals baptized believers without the test of time and encouraged revivals toward this end. They propagated a fundamentalist version of Christianity that included prophesying, talking in tongues, and being baptized in the Holy Spirit. Scenes of their revivals contrast with the well-ordered prayers and services of Presbyterians. And the home Lillian Trasher started provided a haven for children, but was overcrowded, and it mixed disciplining measures with undisciplined practices.

Trasher and her colleagues promoted a Christian fundamentalist vision of health, gender relations, and piety that countered the agendas of modernizing Egyptians and contrasted in many ways with Presbyterians. Yet she herself was a very modern figure, going abroad on her own, launching a mission independently, and traveling to raise funds. Trasher had more power within her mission than her Presbyterian counterparts, who were subservient to male leaders. She, like Margaret Smith, embodied contradictory impulses. But the intentions of evangelicals to turn their wards into Americanized Protestants, however defined, should not be confused with the outcomes and what children took away from their experiences in these institutions. Locals absorbed from these and other institutions what they wanted oftentimes in spite of missionary pressures to conform and convert.

Notes

Assemblies of God Church in Egypt, see Samu'il Mishriqi, *Tarikh al-Madhbah al-Khamsini fi Misr* (Cairo: al-Majma' al-'Amm li-Kana'is Allah al-Khamsiniyya, 1985). While Asyut is the preferred transliteration for the town, I will use the spelling for the orphanage—Assiout—that Lillian Trasher and her contemporaries used.


3. For background on the history of orphanages in Egypt, see Beth Baron, "Orphans and Abandoned Children in Modern Egypt," in *Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East*, ed. Nefissa Naguib and Inger Marie Okkenhaug (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 13–34.


6. See also, *One Hundred Twenty Years of Service in Egypt: Anna Y. Thompson and Margaret A. Smith* (Pittsburgh: WGMS pamphlet, n.d.)

7. Presbyterian Historical Society (hereafter PHS), RG 404, Box 1, Folder 3, entry in Margaret Smith diary, 5 Dec. 1880; *One Hundred Twenty Years*, 10.

8. PHS, Egyptian Missionary Association (hereafter EMA), *Minutes*, July 1904, 27; *One Hundred Twenty Years*, 11–12.


27. PHS, RG 209, Box 2, Folder 15, Ella Barnes, Cairo, to Mr. Taylor, 6 May 1937, with "Fowler Orphanage, Abbassia, Cairo, Egypt, Record of Service, 1906–1936."


35. Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center (FPHC), Lillian Trasher Personal Papers, File cards, 0504 074.


55. Florence Christie, *Called to Egypt* (Seal Beach, CA: Florence V. Christie Church School Services, 1997), 42.


64. Christie, *Called to Egypt*, 54.

65. Ibid., 45–46.


70. Sumrall, Lillian Trasher, 38.


Chapter 9


One Hundred Twenty Years of Service in Egypt: *Anna Y. Thompson and Margaret A. Smith*. Pittsburgh: WGMS pamphlet, n.d.


