During a recent visit to Egypt, Rev. Joel R. Boot signed a document formalizing an ecclesiastical fellowship agreement between the Christian Reformed Church and the Synod of the Nile Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt.

Boot, together with Rev. Jul Medenblik, president of Calvin Theological Seminary, Rev. Gary Bekker, director of Christian Reformed World Missions, and others, also attended the 150th anniversary celebration of the Evangelical Theological Seminary.

Among other visits, they toured a Coptic monastery, worshipped at two large Presbyterian churches and with met with a Muslim leader.

“In some ways this was a grueling trip, as are all tightly scheduled international trips. But it was also a very satisfying trip,” writes Boot, the CRC’s director of ministries and administration, in a report to the CRC’s Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee.

As for the ecclesiastical fellowship agreement, he says, synods of both churches have already agreed to enter into this relationship.

Being in ecclesiastical fellowship allows joint ventures with the CRC and/or its agencies, exchange of delegates at synod, welcoming each other’s members at the Lord’s Supper and each other’s pastors into the pulpit, and generally encouraging each other in ministry.

Before signing the agreement, he says, they told stories, asked and answered questions, and offered one another encouragement.

After signing the document, they pledged to work together in various ways in the future.

“It was agreed by all that this was the beginning and not the end of a process and that the challenge that lay before us both now was how to make this relationship meaningful though separated by thousands of miles and different languages and cultures,” he writes.

The 150th anniversary celebration for the seminary began in the seminary chapel, attended by guests from 17 nations. The service was led by Anne Zaki, a Calvin Seminary graduate who teaches at the seminary in Egypt.

Zaki’s husband, Naji Umran, works in Egypt with World Missions. They helped to host the trip.

“This seminary began on a boat that went up and down the Nile and connected with students to train them for ministry,” says Medenblik.

In the 1860s, the seminary had a floating campus, as the missionaries sailed up and down the Nile River in a sailboat visiting cities and villages to evangelize and train leaders. In 1926, the current campus was established with the purchase of land in central Cairo.

“It was a great blessing to see brothers and sisters who continue to serve the wider church in a time and context that is not easy for Christian ministry,” says Medenblik.

“The Christian church in Cairo and by extension in Egypt is a church to pray for and also to celebrate in terms of their faithfulness and fruitfulness.”
The trip also involved a visit to the offices of the Presbyterian Synod schools, which offer a quality education throughout Egypt “so much so,” writes Boot, “that nearly 50 percent of students enrolled are Muslim.”

They also visited a Coptic retreat center, as well as a centuries old monastery, managed in the Coptic Orthodox tradition, where, writes Boot, “we heard from our guide, Abuna Merkurios, the story of Coptic Christianity and learned of the roots of Christianity that go deep into Egyptian soil.”

They participated in the 150th anniversary celebration of the Van Dyck Bible, a version of the Bible translated into Arabic by a team spearheaded by American missionary Cornelius Van Dyck.

In addition, they attended Sunday morning worship at the century-old Fagalla Presbyterian Church in the heart of Cairo.

“We also met after that service with the Sheikh of the Al-Fath Mosque, Ahmed Sabry, who, contrary to what most westerners are prone to expect, wishes to collaborate with local Christians,” writes Boot, “for the welfare of both groups and for the well-being of the community.”

Also on Sunday, he writes, they worshipped at Kasr El Dobara Evangelical Church, the largest Presbyterian church in Egypt and the Middle East, situated on the edge of Tahrir Square, a major downtown Cairo gathering place for many of the protests that have occurred over the last few years.

“This church also cooperated with the mosque across the street during the revolution and modeled Christ-like living in a violent environment,” writes Boot.

Although there were several highlights, especially satisfying, says Boot, was signing the agreement in moving the CRC closer to the Synod of the Nile Evangelical Presbyterian in Egypt, a church of more than 300,000 members.

“We don’t want this to be about just signing a piece of paper,” he says. “They are potentially strong partners with us in the gospel enterprise. We want to continue asking, ‘What can we do together for God in the world?’”

- Chris Meehan, CRC Communications