Arab Baptist Theological Seminary
كليّة اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

March 2017

Vital Sustainability Initiative
Empowering ABTS to Empower the Church in the Arab World

Between February 28 and March 3, a delegation from Overseas Council International and ScholarLeaders International visited ABTS. This was the second "round of meetings" of the Vital Sustainability Initiative, the first having taken place in February 2016.

Overseas Council, ScholarLeaders, and the Vital Sustainability Initiative (VSI) seek to play a key role in strengthening seminaries as they seek to help and equip the local churches to fulfill the Great Commission more effectively.

The VSI visiting team was made up of Emmanuel Bellon, Executive Network Vice President of ScholarLeaders, Larry Smith, President of ScholarLeaders, Magdi Gendi, Regional Director of Overseas Council Middle East and North Africa region, David Bear, Director of the Theological Education Initiative, Evan Hunter, Vice President of ScholarLeaders, and Tolly Dewey, Vice President of Finance at Overseas Council.

ABTS has a variety of potential future **objectives for development** in the areas of faculty, students and facilities. With the purpose of integrating these opportunities into a plan that considers priorities, ABTS' values, and financial realities, the VSI team raised many questions including: What is the ideal number of students per program, and how can ABTS reach this number? How might ABTS involve students

The VSI visiting team with the faculty

What is the Vital Sustainability Initiative (VSI)? Between 2015 and 2020, Overseas Council and ScholarLeaders are working with over 15 seminaries globally with the following objectives: First, VSI seeks to enhance seminary focus and vitality, which includes clarifying the mission of the school in the context of needs and opportunities in the church, and assisting the schools in defining objectives and plans that are consistent with that mission. Second, VSI seeks to generate strategic investment opportunities. This involves equipping seminaries to identify and submit significant, fundable projects, based on the objectives and plans defined, and backed by solid financial analysis. And finally, more broadly, VSI seeks to develop competencies in emerging leaders through their involvement in various roles in the project, and to strengthen theological education by sharing learning, experiences and good practices.

and alumni more deeply in our identity and mission? How can ABTS and student connections with the church in Lebanon be developed and exercised? Could ABTS formulate an identity statement to communicate what the mission and vision do not? Which disciplines most warrant development among core faculty? And what other priorities should guide faculty recruitment?

Tolly Dewey

The VSI team noted that ABTS is intent on contributing intellectually to the church in the MENA region by advancing theological reflection in an Arab-Islamic context and by building on IMES initiatives related to peace-building and human rights. To bring this about, we explored guiding potential new faculty as they gain doctoral certification, and supporting current faculty research. The VSI team noted that each faculty member brings different gifts and a unique mix of teaching, research and institutional leadership. Furthermore, Caleb Hutcherson, ABTS faculty member and Faculty Development Lead, noted that "within the faculty, we've been working since September 2016 on defining faculty contributions and how to distribute workload. VSI shared how other theological schools handle this, challenging and clarifying features of our policies."

On accounting, financial systems and donation processing, Tolly Dewey shares, "In a growing organization, accounting and finance could fall behind. But what I have found is that the processes and the controls at ABTS are in extremely good shape. Most of what ABTS has been facing is normal growing pains of any ministry or for-profit organization. So what I'm seeing is very common and ABTS needs some simple changes and improvements which would involve all departments instead of just the accounting department." A few members of the VSI team and ABTS' finance and accounting team held daily side meetings to explore how to revise financial systems— especially financial reporting and partner reporting — and how to integrate them.

On the issues of the environment, creation care and stewardship, ABTS leaders strongly feel that the seminary campus should be providing a Spirit-inspired witness to our students and to Lebanon through preserving its environment. This is a result of ongoing theological reflection at ABTS on stewardship, aesthetics, the value a healthy environment for families, and the role of the seminary's physical presence in the community. VSI meetings explored how creation care might be an avenue for further theological action research initiatives involving ABTS's campus and the wider community.

On partnership and advancement, VSI meetings sought to better understand our current and potential seminary donors. This is related to a felt need for more effective communication and partnership development related to our School of Theology and to our Institute of Middle East Studies.

Modern technology, coupled with thoughtful curriculum and effective pedagogy, can facilitate learning across the region. In February 2015, we launched our Arabic Online degree program which is comparable to the first year of the Bachelor of Theology program. VSI discussed the medium and long-term prospects of Online theological education at ABTS, noting that the development and implementation of the second and third years of an Online Bachelor of Theology will be far more challenging, in part, because the model for education demands more guidance and interaction with faculty.

These topics were some of what we explored earlier this month during the VSI team visit.

"We are blessed to have been invited to join this Vital Sustainability Initiative. It came at a time after we had finished our curriculum redesign and after we conducted an assessment of effectiveness. The assessment project had given us significant insights into the effectiveness of our programs and how we can improve our service of the Church in the MENA region. Our next target was to assess our efficiencies. Are you doing things efficiently? Do we have a lean system with good processes? Do we need to streamline or trim down our operation? These were some questions that we wanted to address. At the same time, we were concerned about the sustainability of our operation. This included resourcing and succession planning. What a blessing it is to be assisted in this ambitious task by a group of experts in global theological education. We are thankful for OC, for ScholarLeaders, and for those behind the scenes who are empowering them. As a result of the two VSI visits so far, we are documenting the outcomes and establishing priorities that will lead to a revised strategic plan for ABTS." **Elie Haddad**

Feedback and Reflections on the VSI ABTS Visit

Evan Hunter

"The strengths of ABTS lie in its complete dedication to a mission. Leaders here have a common sense of purpose for the Kingdom. Finding ways to resource that, finding ways to encourage it, and finding ways to strengthen it seems to be very much why we have been here. We've been engaged around so many topics, but ABTS leaders keep tying back to this common cause, common vision and a common calling of Christ for this school, in this place, within the Middle East. One of the advantages of our VSI team is to bring perspectives on what other seminaries are doing, and see how ABTS could learn from the experiences of other seminaries that went through VSI." **Evan Hunter**

David Baer

"This is clearly a healthy community and a healthy institution. Not too long ago, I was with another VSI visit with another very fine institution. That institution had its difficult moments, but right now it is having a time of great blessing. So this is a kind of second in a row where more than dealing with problems, you're really seeking to nourish health that's already there and that makes it more enjoyable.

"I think the most thrilling part of it has been to see the uniqueness of ABTS as a community service and a community of scholars in a very particular context, in a context where Islam is dominant but not loathed and not seen as the enemy. And as I've learned from Martin this week, there's reason to think of ourselves as something other than a minority but rather as a group among other groups that can find some reasons for some common cause. And just to see how that has shaped and encased the mission and the life of ABTS has been very exciting to me. I don't think I fully understood that before even though I've been here many times." **David Baer**

Magdi Gendi

"It was inspiring to be with the board of trustees and the members' involvement in and their heart for the seminary's mission and the ownership of the mission. That showed clearly through their support to the president, to the programs, to the faculty and the staff. I feel they care about ABTS very much." **Magdi Gendi**

Alexandra

"It's beneficial to have an outside financial expert to suggest how to improve the way we do our work. The experience that Tolly has in simplifying the financial transactions and monitoring the funded projects helped us re-think our financial procedures and look at each transaction from a different angle to improve the way we account for them. The challenge now is to implement our new financial system correctly to be able to integrate all departments to present a better reporting.

Rana Wazir

"I'm so thankful for the VSI team members who shared with us their respective experiences to improve our ministry and the equipping of church leaders." **Alexandra Abu Rjeili, Administrative and HR Manager**

"The VSI team visit helped me see the "big picture" of the mission of ABTS and the vision that will be fulfilled through the future work of its students. I personally have gained new insight on my role as registrar. It certainly should go beyond the passive task of receiving student applications and choosing from among them. Instead, I should actively venture in search of potential Arab Church leaders. In all, I believe the VSI team has helped ABTS to raise its standards and supplied us with the means to meet them." **Rana Wazir, Registrar**

Students' Prayer Requests

We are grateful for the prayer support of many of our friends and partners. Some of our students have shared with us the following prayer requests.

Farah, first-year female student from Lebanon | Please pray for my son, who is now living with my divorcee; it matters to me a lot to know that someone is praying for him. Also pray for emotional and physical strength as studying can be stressful. And please pray that God will direct my vision. I would like to minister to marginalized people in Lebanon such as prostitutes. So please pray for God to open doors to fulfill my ministry vision.

Gladis, third-year female student from Syria | Please pray that the Lord would give me wisdom to manage my time between studying, my new home and marriage life, and serving in the coming months before I graduate. Please pray for my graduation and for what the Lord has for me after June when I graduate.

Wael, first-year male student from Egypt, and his wife, Noura, first-year female student from Syria | Please pray that we may be in God's will and that He may use our vision and bring it to reality. Pray for the Lord to protect our family in Syria in the midst of danger and our family in Egypt who have no one by them. May the Lord also preserve their health. Please pray for the war in Syria to cease, and that the Syrian people may come to Christ. Finally, pray that the Lord would help us in our study at ABTS.

Samia, second-year female student from Egypt | Pray for us ABTS students, as servants of the Lord, that our relationship will grow stronger. After all, we all live on campus, and in a way, we are together 24/7.

First-year male student from Sudan | Please pray for my family in Sudan and for me because I don't know how things will be when I return to Sudan. Pray for God's intervention to make things easier for the believers in Sudan and His help so they can stand firm.

Third-year male student from Sudan | Pray for a pastor in Sudan who used to be the general secretary of the evangelical sect. He has been in prison for a year and has been sentenced to 12 more years.

Wahiba, third-year female student from Algeria | Please pray for me because this is my last year here. When I get back to Algeria, there will be challenges. As a single Algerian woman, the job opportunities are limited there because of the culture. Women are also limited to work at a specific time; for instance, they cannot work at night. May the Lord strengthen me and open doors. He is in control. Also, pray that I would be a blessing to my church and that I would use what I have learned here in Algeria.

First-year female student from Jordan | Please pray that I might be able to balance between the ministry and raising my children, because I am both a mother and a father to them. Finally, I kindly ask you to pray for my sister who accepted Christ and got baptized after I shared the gospel with her.

Iman, second-year female student from Egypt | It is after a long time that you usually see fruit when serving with children. so please pray that I will soon see a true, radical change in the area of Bani Swef, Egypt. Also, pray that the Lord would open a door for ministry in my home town, Aswan, which has a lot of deprived areas such as the mountainous ones.

Second-year female student from Sudan | My church in Sudan is in deep need of prayer. Please pray that the Lord would arm its people with wisdom to withstand the present troubles. Also, pray for me that I would have the grace to raise my daughters in the ways of the Lord. Finally, pray for me as I study here to have a firmer grasp of God's Word, so I can serve Sudanese women better after I return home.

Would you consider supporting a local or regional leader from the Middle East to participate in our 2017 Middle East Consultation?

IMES would like to ask you to prayerfully consider supporting someone from the region to attend MEC 2017. We are aiming to support 20 key leaders to join us in June 2017, people who would otherwise not be able to be with us. If you would like to help please contact us at MEC@ABTSLebanon.org, indicating how you would like to help. To learn more about MEC 2017 ***The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically through Adversity***, visit www.abtslebanon.org/MEC2017