Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

كليّة اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

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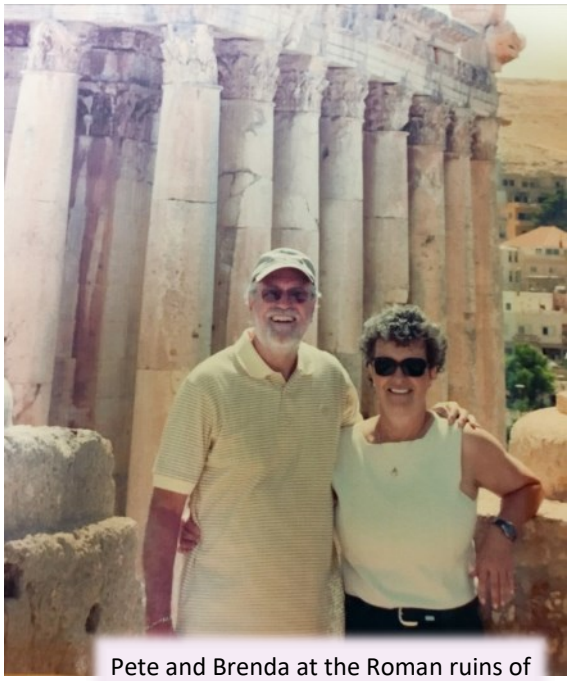
Equipping the Syrian Church by Investing in the Theological Formation of Syrian Refugees

By Dr. Brenda Richards, Curriculum Designer for the International School Project and Middle East Bible Outreach board member



Pete and Brenda at the Roman ruins of Baalbek, Lebanon, in 2011

Five years ago, my husband, Pete Richards, went to be with the Lord. The year before he died, I took my first trip to Lebanon with the Consortium for Global Education. I live in South Carolina and had taught elementary school for over 30 years. As a retired teacher, I was excited about using education as a platform for reaching teachers in other countries. Pete was in construction and decided to go to Lebanon with me later that year. He loved it! He connected with a builder who was working on the building complexes that house the ministries of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD). His plan was to go back with me and while I worked with education, he was going to continue to help with their building projects. I wish God didn't have other plans for him!

One of LSESD's ministries is the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS). During my visits, I discovered that ABTS prepares students from all over the Middle East for ministry. Having gone to Lebanon eight times now, I have become friends with some of the Syrian refugees who fled to Lebanon to escape the horrors of war in their country. As Christians are reaching out and helping them with physical and educational needs, the refugees are asking, "Why are these people helping us?" Many are going into churches, hearing about Jesus as Savior for the first time and becoming Jesus followers. It is incredible! I am constantly encouraging others to pray for what is happening in the Middle East. God is at work in the midst of this horrible mess!

ABTS has developed an online degree program designed especially for emerging servants of the Gospel. It is perfect for the refugees. They pay a small fee, and ABTS works hard to raise financial support to provide these courses. It costs $5000 for a student to complete the degree program. Our family has established a scholarship at ABTS in Pete's honor especially for Syrian refugees who are becoming believers. They are eager to learn more about the Bible in preparation to share Him in their lives today and when they finally get to go back home. That is the desire of their heart - they just want this war to end so they can go back home even though they know they will go home to rubble. I truly believe we are living in a window of time. We need to pray and witness to as many of these refugees as we can right now because this window of time will close when the war ends.

We are hoping to give many scholarships over the next few years to these new believers who are so hungry to learn about Jesus and the Bible. The first two recipients are my friends – a married couple named Kifah and Fatih. I met them several years ago teaching at a refugee school in a little Baptist church on the border of Syria and Lebanon. They are also involved in leading discipleship groups through their church. They are excited about this program and so thankful that Pete's scholarship will help prepare them for future ministry.

Come visit ABTS… Come see what God is doing there… Come meet with some of the students who are training to be witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their home countries… Come invest by supporting the Syrian church through ABTS students. We need to be their support – prayerfully and financially. I can't wait to see what God is going to do!

Equipping Arab Ministry Leaders Online: Progress and Updates

By Abed Zieneldine, Lead Online Tutor and ABTS Graduate

The ABTS Online Certificate in Ministry program started in February 2015 with two courses and four students. Since then, the program has offered more than twenty-five courses serving seventy-one students.

ABTS Online has been designed to serve students engaged in ministry to Arabs throughout the world. Our online courses challenge students to engage in a dialogue between the Biblical text and their own context. They are challenged to bring together what they are learning in their courses with what they are learning through their ministry. In this way, both text (the course) and context (their ministry) work together to help transform lives. Students respond to case-studies, learning activities and submit theological reflections on life and ministry.

Another aspect of ABTS Online is the formation of an online learning community. Tutors facilitate interaction through forum discussions. Forums enrich the online learning environment as students converse about topics that relate to course material and to their specific ministries.

In our April-June 2017 term, four courses are being offered: Pastoral Care and Counselling, Introduction to Islam and Biblical Theology as core courses and Life of Spiritual Discipline as an elective course. Thirty-one students are enrolled in Pastoral Care and Counselling, thirty-five students are enrolled in Introduction to Islam, twenty-two students are enrolled in Biblical Theology and eight students are enrolled in Life of Spiritual Discipline. Students are divided into sections of no more than 20 students per section to help maintain an intimate and personal learning experience.

Part of the outline of the Biblical Theology online course

Courses like Introduction to Islam play an important role in our curriculum. Many students have negative or confrontational views of Islam that work against developing authentic relationships and respectful witness. One of the goals of this course is to help our students learn how to have a positive engagement with Muslims. Through a study of history, Scriptures, and the beliefs and practices of Muslims, the course challenges our students to examine their attitudes, reflect on their relationships, develop an approach that is both sympathetic and critical, understand the diversity in Islam, develop a historical perspective, understand the variety and importance of context, discern the common ground and the differences in beliefs and develop long-term strategies for living alongside Muslims. "The Introduction to Islam course is very challenging and very rich in academic information about the Qur'an, Hadith and the Islamic history," shares Samah, one of our course tutors. She adds, "The challenges were not only on the academic level, but I also felt how the students struggle to cope with the reconciliation approach towards Islam. I think, so far, this course has succeeded in bringing about a positive transformation in thinking among the students. I wish this transformation reflects on their practical life and ministry with Muslims in their countries."

Please pray that God will use ABTS Online to shape and influence the lives of the students and the people they serve so that, as per ABTS' vision statement, we see God glorified, people reconciled, and the communities restored through the Church in the world.

Do you feel called to invest in church leaders currently enrolled at ABTS?

ABTS is equipping the Church in the Arab world and training people like Kifah and Fatih who are called to spread the Gospel throughout our region. We would not be able to do so without the scholarship support that our friends and partners provide. **As ABTS grows and as our programs expand, we invite you to partner with us in our mission.** To learn more, contact Wissam al-Saliby at information@abtslebanon.org.

ABTS is a ministry of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD). ABTS and LSESD benefit from the support of the Middle East Bible Outreach, a 501(c)(3) corporation based in Atlanta, GA, that coordinates efforts among our US friends.

Contributors

Mike Kuhn

Elie Haddad

Elias Ghazal

Rupen Das

Arthur Brown

Jesse S. Wheeler

Kathryn Kraft

Manal El-Tayar

Martin Accad

Robert Hamd

Suzie Lahoud

Wissam al-Saliby

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The Latest IMES Blog Posts

The Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) addresses a variety of topics significant to the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, on its blog site www.imes.blog. The weekly posts are published every Thursday evening Beirut time (morning US time). Below is a sample of our recent posts and topics, through which our community seeks to challenge the Church as it witnesses to the Lordship of Jesus Christ to communities in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

On Biblical Peacebuilding, Martin Accad wrote Biblical Peace Begins at Home: Challenging Common Notions of Peace in the Global Church, May 2017. Jesse Wheeler wrote Kerygmatic Peacebuilding (Part 1): What Does Religion Have to do with Peace? December 2016, and Kerygmatic Peacebuilding (Part 2): What Does Peace Have to do with the Gospel? December 2016. Wissam al-Saliby wrote Israel-Palestine: The Church Needs to Reclaim Judeo-Christian Values, January 2017. And Manal el-Tayar wrote Social Capital: Seeds of Friendship Growing into a National Symbol for Reconciliation, April 2017

On Justice and Reconciliation, Rupen Das wrote a two-piece blog, "Reflections on the Humanitarian Crisis in Syria," January 2017 - Part 1 & Part 2, and Is It for the Poor to Seek Justice and Liberation? September 2016. Suzie Lahoud wrote The Church and the Banality of Evil, February 2017. And Martin accad wrote A Wakeup Call for People of Faith in the Twenty-First Century, February 2017. Robert Hamd wrote Re-Reading Our Times, March 2017. And Jesse Wheeler wrote Defacing the Image of God: The Children of War and Our Collective Human Failure, March 2017.

On Culture, Society and Christian Witness, Elie Haddad wrote Merry Christmas from a Cynic: The Paradoxes of our Annual Celebrations, December 2016, and Caleb Hutcherson wrote A Reflection on Traffic through a Theology of Sin, March 2017.

On Islam, Missions and the Arab World, Martin Accad wrote Theological Education as Formation for Prophetic Ministry, March 2017, and The Death and Resurrection of Jesus Were the Culmination of His Life and Teaching: An Easter Reflection, April 2017. Mike Kuhn wrote The Commodification of Mission in the Muslim World, October 2016. Arthur Brown wrote Lausanne Global Analysis: The Refugee and the Body of Christ, October 2016. And Elias Ghazal wrote It Is the Centenary, but No One Is Celebrating! May 2017.

On Refugees, Migration and Statelessness, Mike Kuhn wrote The US Immigration Ban: A View from the Kingdom, February 2017. Kathryn Kraft wrote Migrant Crises in Muslim and Christian Countries, March 2017. And Brent Hamoud wrote Statelessness: Banned from Belonging, April 2017.