



The Paradox of Ministry in Today's Middle East

Elie Haddad, ABTS President | Last month I attended the European Baptist Federation's Council meetings in Bucharest. Baptist leaders from all across Europe and the Middle East participated in these meetings. Several leaders from various Middle Eastern countries gave an update of their ministries. The expectation was to hear about the terrible tragedies that are taking place in the Middle East. We heard some of that, which is no different from what we hear every day in our news media. However, we also heard another side of the story, a story that is not told by the news media. A story of God at work in the middle of all the tragedies. A story about churches being transformed by the dreadful situation around them, moving from a survival-mode attitude to a community of God's people that has a loud and clear prophetic voice, churches that are discovering how to be agents of hope in the middle of hopelessness around them and agents of reconciliation despite the violence surrounding them. A story about people of different faiths and backgrounds encountering the Gospel for the first time in their lives through the church communities that are caring for them holistically. No one expected to hear stories from Syria and Baghdad about local churches that are taking the initiative of gathering their own limited resources and putting them at the disposal of displaced people that are in dire need of help.



Christians in our part of the world are re-discovering their role as they are experiencing a deeper understanding of the Gospel.

What we did not hear in the Middle Eastern presentations is that the churches are seeing themselves as victims. There is this global perception that Christians in our region are victims of the various wars and conflicts that are taking place. Christians are suffering for sure, but not exclusively. Large groups of people are suffering, too. Martin Accad, in his recent IMES blog article (imeslebanon.wordpress.com), challenged our thinking about who is a minority, who is a majority, and how we need to start thinking about the conflict. Martin called us away from the minority complex. Similarly, we need to be challenged away from a victim complex. The Church in the Middle East is not the victim. On the contrary, the Church has the privilege of being a much-needed light in the darkness around it. It has the privilege of being a "city on a hill", proclaiming the love of Jesus to a needy region.

The Church in the Middle East is being persecuted for sure. Christians are being targeted. But this is not a reason to give up or to run away. As Christians and the Church are being increasingly marginalized, we are discovering that the Gospel works much better from the margin. As Christians and the Church are progressively losing power, we are discovering that the call of Jesus works best through powerlessness, which is not to be confused with weakness. The Church is not weak. Its source of power, however, is

very different from what one would expect. The power of the Gospel does not come in numbers or in wealth or in earthly authority. Rather, the power of the Gospel comes from Jesus Himself through the Holy Spirit. The Church is being transformed in our region as it wrestles with what it means to carry on ministry from the margin through powerlessness.

Many appeals have been sent by Middle East Christians to the global Church for help. We need the support of the global Body of Christ to be able to accomplish His mission for the Arab world. We are

grateful for the way the global Church is supporting us and empowering us. Actually, we would not be where we are had it not been for the strong backing that we have. However, our invitation to the Western Church today should not be to come and save us, or to come and protect us. We are not victims. We are not looking for a new “Christendom” in our region or for a new wave of military crusaders. Our invitation for the global Church today is to come and join us. Join us in proclaiming the love of Jesus to everyone in the region, to our friends and to our enemies.

Two ABTS Graduates Serving God amid Armed Conflict



Ara Badalian is the pastor of the National Baptist Church in Baghdad, Iraq, an ABTS graduate and a visiting faculty member. In our December 2013 newsletter, Ara shared with us: “The ministry in Iraq is struggling. Church members are increasingly immigrating because of the insecurity, violence and persecution to which the church is exposed.” In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, took over large areas and key cities in Iraq. Today, ISIS is a few kilometers away from Baghdad. How is the Baptist Church coping? Ara provided us with the following update:

“Recently, three families left the country. However, after the

shock of the recent events in Iraq subsided, a form of normalcy settled. Today, our small church is seeking to help the displaced from all religious communities and ethnicities. Last September, church members collected money – the widow’s offering – and provided relief and aid material to 42 Shiite families who had escaped ISIS and left their homes in Tel Afer, Northern Mosul. These families currently live in three mosques in Baghdad. We’re planning to assist soon the Shabak ethnic population who fled from Nineveh Province in northern Iraq. We praise God for these opportunities amid the turmoil! All of Iraq’s recent challenges taught us to love and not to pity. Our team delivered the aid in enthusiasm. God opened doors for our young adults to serve the elderly for one whole day in a Catholic home for the elderly, and they volunteered in the Mother

Christian and Muslim Iraqi clergy met in a church in Baghdad, September 2014



Pastor Ara leading relief distribution for Iraqis forced to flee from Mosul to Baghdad, September 2014



ABTS Mission: to serve the Church in our region as it realizes its Biblical mission of having Christ acknowledged as Lord by offering specialized learning resources and equipping faithful men and women for effective service.

Theresa mission that cares for children with special needs. Those were special days!

Moreover, our church services are ongoing – Sunday service, women’s meeting, young adults, Sunday school, home groups and bible study meetings. Recently, our young adults visited the Baghdad Museum. We want them to know their history and traditions – a history that is being destroyed by the conflict.”

For more information and for ministry photos, visit the Facebook page of the Baptist Church of Baghdad.

In 1995, **Pastor Mouner Aji** graduated with a Bachelor of Theology. Amid the armed violence, he is answering God’s call on his life as the pastor of Aleppo Baptist Church. He shared with the following:

"We took on the challenge in the past three years to provide relief and aid to the church members impacted by the violence, such

as food and medicine. We provided some furniture and other daily needs to those who lost their homes or furniture in the shelling.

Despite the insecurity, our church is maintaining its weekly services including Sunday worship, Bible study, women’s meeting, and young adults’ meeting. Some of these meetings are no longer held in the church building, but in several home groups in order to avoid taking risks. Moreover, despite the fear from extremist groups that are a few streets away, men and women from different backgrounds are still coming to faith in our Lord and Savior and are asking to be baptized. I am greatly encouraged by the growth in outreach of our ministry. We see hunger and war, but even more hunger for the Gospel in the communities around us!"

Today, *Majd Aji*, pastor Mouner’s son, is an ABTS MDiv student. For more information and for ministry photos, visit <http://pastor-aji.jimdo.com/>

Students show gratitude to ABTS staff, faculty and partners | On October 14, ABTS students organized a surprise event during morning chapel. One by one, students stood up and expressed their thanks to ABTS staff and faculty for their work, and to ABTS partners for their faithful support. The students prayed for each staff and faculty member. See the photos on our Facebook Page:

www.facebook.com/ABTS.Lebanon



Aleppo church youth packaging aid for distribution



The church building entrance in the aftermath of a nearby explosion



Pastor Mouner with the brothers repairing the church sign, after the explosion