

## Silence, Please!

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We Protestants are wordy people. We are known for our emphasis on the Bible, the Word of God, and also for our preaching and evangelism. Words are our strength.

But they are also our weakness. Often in our prayers we subject God to tedious monologues without listening for His response. Our worship services are full of words, but most of us are uncomfortable with even a brief silence. We are not very good at honoring God with a silence that expresses awe and humility, as the

Scriptures enjoin (Hab 2:20, Ps 46:10, Ps 4:4). Beyond this, we face the same tongue-related sins that tempt all people, sins with devastating consequences (Jas 3:3-8).

According to James, a person who can tame his or her speech is a person of monumental self-control (Jas 3:2). This is why silence is one of the essential topics in the core course on the spiritual disciplines which is team-taught by the Student Affairs team and Barbel Griffioen to all second- and third-year students. Once again this year our Dean of Students, Bassem Melki, presented the class eye-opening and mouth-closing teaching from the Scriptures.

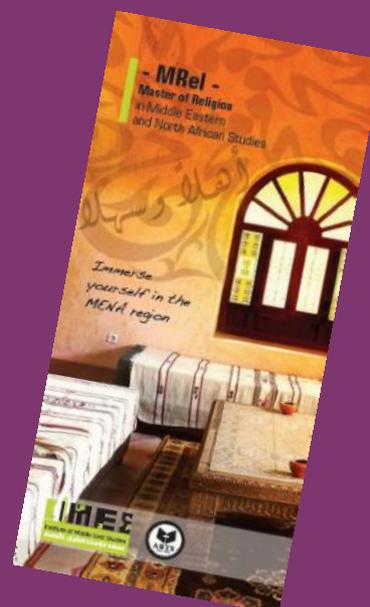
But talking about silence is not enough! Each student was required to refrain from talking for one full day, one ordinary day with extraordinary power. Here are some of our students' reflections on their day of silence.

- ◇ Nature is speaking, God is speaking, our hearts are speaking. But we are too busy talking to hear.
- ◇ This was a big challenge for me. I had a lot to do on the Day of Silence, but I found that when my mouth stopped, I needed to be still and I put it all aside to pray.
- ◇ This was my first day of total silence. I had to learn to listen in a new way.
- ◇ Silence is a kind of spiritual strength.
- ◇ I'm thinking of having a day of silence in our training in my home country.
- ◇ I did a second day. I tend to speak up and answer quickly, but I realized that if I answer quickly, the words lack power.

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## The Beginning of the MRel's First Module Residency

This week marks the start of the residency of the first module of the Master of Religion in Middle East & North Africa Studies (MRel) that is taking place at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary over the coming two weeks.



Please pray for the MRel students as they go through the residency of the first module that they would understand how Christians can be relevant in society and serve in meaningful ways.

## Interview with Greg Matthews, one of the team members who visited Egypt and Sudan to follow up on ABTS graduates in their ministries.

### ⇒ What were the objectives of the trip? What places did you visit?

This trip was part of an exciting project ABTS is undertaking to assess the impact it's making in the lives of graduates, their churches, and the communities in which they're ministering. After finishing interviews and focus groups with graduates in Lebanon, we packed our bags and travelled to the capitals of both Egypt and South Sudan to interview our alumni there. We had three main objectives:

1. Assess the impact of ABTS with questions like: "How well did ABTS prepare the graduates for ministry? How are they impacting the ministries where they serve? How are these ministries impacting the wider community?"
2. Understand differences in cultural context, and get feedback to improve the curriculum: "What are the issues the churches and communities are facing? What is required of an effective Christian leader in this context?"
3. Reconnect with graduates and be mutually encouraged.

This last point wasn't an objective we had to work towards, but rather something that happened organically. One of the most encouraging moments was at a dinner in South Sudan which gathered together all the ABTS graduates in Juba. Each graduate spoke with so much gratitude and love for the people (fellow students, teachers, staff) at ABTS who touched their lives. In the same way, this fellowship touched our lives; and we consider ourselves blessed to be connected with so many amazing Christian leaders all over the Arab world.

### ⇒ Can you develop a brief description of the communities you have visited?

The communities we visited varied quite a bit in their needs and challenges. Some ABTS alumni are ministering in areas that are quite poor. One graduate is pastoring a church in an area of Cairo sometimes called 'Garbage City,' where many residents make their income sorting garbage. Despite the struggles (including health hazards) being faced, these church members meet every day of the week to pray and sing praises to God. Throughout our interviews in Egypt, the major challenges centered around ministry to non-Christians, and the need for new leaders to be trained in this area. The major themes in South Sudan had more to do with the complex social situation of a new nation, with citizens returning from all over the world. There is openness to the gospel, and many churches are growing rapidly; and so graduates emphasized the great need for more leaders with solid theological training.



a sense of urgency and a desire to see God's peace lived-out in their communities.



After completing an International Project Management post-grad in Toronto, Canada, Greg Matthews sought an international internship placement to apply his passions and skills. Through the auspices of Canadian Baptist Ministries, Greg found a unique opportunity applying International Development theories doing research through ABTS, and Emergency Relief practices working with Syrian Refugee programs at the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development - LSESD.

### ⇒ How is ministry done amid all the political, social and economic challenges and changes?

Indeed these are very dynamic times in our region and in each country where ABTS graduates are serving. We were in Egypt during the protests leading up to the recent referendum, and it was clear many church communities were feeling the tension of social unrest. But despite the uncertainty that ABTS graduates are feeling, many of their ministries are thriving; spurred on by

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*Silence Please—( continued from page 1)*

- ◇ It was a great day for me.
- ◇ I learned that much of what is said is useless, tasteless. For me, fasting from speech led to fasting from food: I didn't feel like eating.
- ◇ The biggest difference [new thing] for me was the silence. As ministers, we have to talk all the time. Through silence I learned to listen so that I could help in a correct way. The Bible passages Bassem showed at the retreat really opened my eyes. Through the day of fasting [from speech], I realize how much we exaggerate when we speak. When I was silent, I was saved from participating in this exaggeration.
- ◇ What a challenge! On the Day of Silence, I felt the cry of the poor person who has no voice. I felt so strongly but I knew that feeling wasn't enough. I had to take a step: speaking up for the oppressed.
- ◇ I had heard of silence before as a spiritual discipline, but this was my first experience.
- ◇ It's my mind that needs to be silent more than my mouth. Even when my mouth stops, my thoughts don't stop easily.
- ◇ It's the first time I tried this, but I found it hard, especially because of the children. They pleaded with me to speak. I realized how much my children value my speaking with them. I also realized that even in silence my husband and I understood each other and that we have something shared in our marriage. It made me realize how much we talk and how much of our talk is empty talk.
- ◇ I felt I would burst at the beginning. I found my mouth quiet by midday, but my mind still hadn't submitted – it was talking, talking fast. By the second half of the day, I didn't want to talk. I learned that half of what I say isn't edifying, doesn't build up.
- ◇ I have experience in prayer and fasting, but silence!!??? But this day, I did it!! I don't think I talk a lot, but a whole day! I thought of people who can't talk [deaf/mute people] – how do they express themselves? And how do you get the message of the gospel to the person who cannot hear? I've been thinking about this: it concerns me, because they need to know the gospel, but I don't know how.
- ◇ Silence is the best response to silly talk. When I am silent, God talks to me. I've decided to take five minutes of my devotion time every day to be silent.

Enough said!

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*Interview —( continued from page 2)*

⇒ **What are the ministries that our alumni are involved in?**

Many ABTS graduates are pastors of churches, from large congregations to small home-church ministries. But more and more, graduates are choosing less traditional Christian ministry roles. Some graduates have been called to plant churches, like one Egyptian couple who are now serving in Tunisia. Others are involved in meeting practical needs, such as counselling or mobile-clinic ministry. And still many others are using the training received at ABTS to train and equip other leaders for effective ministry.

⇒ **What are the prayer requests of our alumni?**

There are many challenges for Christian leaders in the Arab world, not least of all in countries with rising fundamentalism. But there are also an abundance of opportunities. Please pray for the safety of ABTS alumni in these countries; their churches, communities, and organizations. But also pray for the boldness of believers, for doors to be opened for ministry and service, and for hearts to be open to God's great love.

Also pray for additional funding opportunities; that ABTS could continue to support alumni with new, contextually relevant training.

And finally, please pray for God to raise up new leaders within churches; with a passion for service and new, creative ways to reach out to their communities.

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