



Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

كلية اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

www.abtslebanon.org

May 2019

The Church in Iraq Still Stands: The Account of Our Graduate Ara

We took hold of the opportunity to interview our 2012 graduate, Ara, during his stay on campus to teach the New Testament Theology course to our first-year students. Ara is the pastor of Baghdad Baptist Church. He is also pursuing his doctoral studies. In this month's newsletter, we present you with Ara's firsthand account of his ministry and of how it has encouraged Christ followers to stay and make a difference.

Christians have been in Iraq since the first century AD. They have undergone repeated persecution and displacement. While the Christian population has recently witnessed a sudden decrease with the surge of extremist groups, the Church is aware of its unique role today more than ever. Because of its stance, its people have found motivation to stay and to have an active witness, and its workers believe this to be the golden age for ministry in the country. Part of their effort is responding to social crises through relief ministries targeting displaced people such as those living in North Iraq and offering hospitalization services to the injured. More specifically, evangelicals in Iraq are a minority within a minority, but the Lord is using them mightily.

How did your theological education help shape your ministry after graduation?

Ara: My three-year experience at seminary has enabled me to make a difference at my local church and through it. It has challenged me into becoming a positive agent in society. I have learned to demonstrate "my faith by my deeds" as James puts it. I could have been indifferent to my surroundings. My only concern could have been preserving my identity, but I chose to get involved in God's challenging mission.

The years during which I undertook my theological training were a fearful time for Christians and for all Iraqis. In October 2010, extremist forces had raided a cathedral in Baghdad. Due to this incident and other concurring incidents, many fled to countries like Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. When I returned to my local church in 2012, many members of my church had left the country including our former pastor.

Consequently, I became the pastor of the church. We started



to work on the ministry amid the aftermath of the 2006-2009 Civil War and the ramifications of the 2010 cathedral incident. Things were not getting any better. The arrival of ISIS at Mosul in June 2014 shook the country. In August, they raided the Nineveh Plain, home to Iraq's religious minorities (mostly Christians). It was catastrophic. Many fled to Baghdad; some fled to Erbil. At this turning point, we, as a church, had to evaluate our standpoint.

What was the outcome? Were you overcome by the situation? Did you consider leaving like others?

Ara: We decided to stand beside the Iraqi people. The first family we helped was non-Christian. We then continued to offer food packages to the displaced families living in Baghdad. After that, through [MERATH](#) (Relief and Community Development sister ministry to ABTS), we helped people from an Iraqi ethnic group called Shabak. We followed up with them

for nine months. We also helped Catholic Christians coming from the Nineveh Plain. This was the start of the church's exit outside its walls unto the world around it.

Our relief ministry team members were initially reluctant to offer help to non-Christians while Christians were being persecuted. Then they came to appreciate what we were doing. It gave them a sense of purpose. It was a way of sending Christ's message of love to the people. Today, we distribute monthly packages to 150 displaced families. We also distribute packages to 100 families living at a camp outside Baghdad and to the families we know through our home groups' ministry (around 120 families).

Other than your relief ministry, what are some of the ways God is using you in your country?

Ara: We constantly train and equip new people. We have different teams for our different ministries (Sunday school, women's ministry, relief program, home group ministry and so on). We use the AWANA (an international children's ministry) curriculum in our Sunday school ministry. My wife Noora leads Sunday school, and she is the coordinator of AWANA in Iraq. She puts up trainings for Sunday school teachers of evangelical (and some Catholic) churches in Baghdad, Erbil, Zakho and other cities of North Iraq. Most of the kids of our Sunday school ministry are from displaced families.

For more than two years, we have been doing a Discovery Bible study with 114 families divided into 15 home groups. This gives us access to people who would not otherwise come to church. We also have a Christian bookshop, Word of Life, through the help of [Dar Manhal Al Hayat](#) (Christian publishing house and ABTS sister ministry) and other supporters. The bookshop has a cultural educational center that organizes monthly lectures and seminars on various topics. With the rising interest in Iraqi minorities, many university students come seeking resources for their research on the Christian

faith. We take part in the National Book Exhibition in Baghdad, and we display a variety of Christian literature. People come from all over Iraq to visit the exhibition, so our books reach scholars, researchers and intellectuals. Many of them attend our cultural educational center's seminars.



What are your plans for ministry?

Ara: I am currently working on my PhD studies. My dissertation is on humans as depicted in Christianity and Islam. It is a comparative analysis of the concept of humanity as "Khalifa" [or Caliphate] in Quranic theology and the concept of humanity as made "in the image of God" in the Biblical theology of Eastern Fathers based on creation narratives. My dissertation focuses on the value of humans. We saw in the past years that humans have lost their value in Iraq. In light of this, we can see how religious texts give value to humans. This opens a door for interfaith dialogue with Muslim religious leaders.

The growth of God's servants at church and the extension of the ministry is a source of encouragement. We cannot deny the fact, however, that there are challenges. We need to buy a church building. We have been paying rent, but it would be much more cost effective if we buy it. Our building is 1200 m², with enough space to carry out our different ministries. I also have a dream of starting a school. We pray that the Lord would show us how to go about it.

Please pray for the Christian presence and influence in society. Pray for my wife Noora and my daughter Aylin, who is two-and-a-half years old. Pray for our challenges as a family. We are in the golden age for ministry in Iraq, so pray that the Lord would open doors and remove all obstacles.



Perry and Karen Shaw: Training Faithful Men and Women for Service in the MENA Region

It is difficult to overstate our appreciation of Perry and Karen’s contribution to leadership training for churches in the MENA region. It is with sadness that we will see them go at this juncture of their ministry, but we know that their legacy will be enduring at ABTS because the change they have contributed is profound.



Our Chief Academic Officer Martin Accad shares at our faculty members’ imminent return to their home country, Australia. He adds:

Perry’s role as a catalyst in transforming the ABTS curriculum, from a western-inherited linear educational framework to a trailblazing multi-disciplinary and integrative leadership formation program, is a chief cause for what ABTS represents today in global theological education. Karen has played a key role in developing cultural understanding and missiological studies. Both Perry and Karen are a living proof that long-term mission accompanied by a high level of cultural and language acquisition is still the best model for global multi-directional mission—mission from everywhere to everywhere!

Karen and Perry came to the Middle East in 1990 after God had called them to strengthen leadership training. Perry joined ABTS in 2007 in response to a growing desire in the ABTS leadership to develop more holistic and missional approaches to training leaders in the Arab world. Perry shares about his time here:

Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of my time at ABTS has been my involvement in the innovative curricula work— most notably in the residential and online programs. My experiences at ABTS and in global consultancy came together in the writing of *Transforming Theological Education*. Without the ABTS culture of innovation and experimentation, this book would not have the widespread traction it is currently experiencing. I have felt privileged working with so many outstanding emerging leaders at ABTS. It is pleasing to see the extent to which the theology program at ABTS is serving the school’s vision. Notable is the significant number of people who are coming to faith from a majority background. The crises of civil war and refugees have also placed a challenge before the Church to respond with Kingdom compassion. So many of our graduates are rising to these and other challenges in a way that brings honor to God – and to ABTS.



Karen joined us in 2008 when she finished her doctoral studies. She serves as Student Affairs team member and Associate Professor of Cross-Cultural Ministry. As a woman faculty member, Karen encouraged Arab men and women to see women use their gifts through courses such as *Women from Joshua to 2 Kings* and *Empowering Women for Ministry*. Karen shares:

In ABTS, I found a place where, as a woman, my theological education and gift of teaching were seen as an asset. When I first came here, there were no single women students at all, and many of the married women students were studying primarily to stay with their husbands. ABTS has become increasingly proactive in recruiting women students, both married and single, and helping them to value and respond to their own unique calling. The seminary is also graduating a generation of male students who have seen the ability and zeal of their female classmates and are more likely to welcome and respect women as partners in ministry.



Perry & Karen with our graduate Ara, June 2012

Karen and Perry ask for prayer in the stressful time of transition, in the time of settling into what is now a foreign country for them and as they look to serving faithfully in their new context. We also ask you to pray that God continues to send faithful servants who would positively contribute to leadership training in the region.

Pray with Us: Prayer Requests from Staff and Faculty Members

Marcelle Saad | Student Affairs Assistant

Our graduating students will go back in June to serve in their contexts. Please lift them up in prayer so that they are constantly sensitive to God's voice, and pray that we end this academic year well in the midst of the busyness that is typical of this coming season.

Chaden Hani | Peacebuilding Initiatives Researcher

I ask you to pray for the Institute of Middle East Studies' peacebuilding role in Lebanon during these critical times. Pray that we would be very active and that God would use us in the country through our peacebuilding initiatives.

Caleb Hutcherson | Faculty Development Lead and Lecturer in Historical Theology

I would appreciate prayer for focus and perseverance with my dissertation writing, and that the product of that research would help foster transformative initiatives in society through churches in the Arab world.

Roula El Azzi | Executive Assistant

Please pray for us as we start preparing for our June events including our yearly Middle East Consultation and the graduation ceremony. Pray for the students' smooth transition into ministry after graduation. I also ask you to pray for Lebanon and the Middle East as a whole in these difficult times.

Mireille Saoud | Accountant

Please pray that the Lord would make His will clear to each of the students so that all they do brings glory to Him.

Cinderella Zinaty | Senior Accountant

Please pray for Lebanon as job opportunities are decreasing, and the economic situation is in jeopardy.

Abed Zein El Dine | Lecturer in Communication Studies

Please pray that my family members would come to Jesus and find salvation in Him. My sister and I came to Christ, but the rest still have not.

Jubran Hasbany | Maintenance Foreman

Please pray that the Lord would help me to stay strong in Him so that I continue to serve in a way that honors Him.

Alexandra Abou Rjeily Bridi | Administration and Human Resources Manager

With the pressure of the two coming months, pray that the staff members would have the spiritual and emotional strength to handle the stress and accomplish their work successfully. Also, pray that our preparations for the Middle East Consultation would go smoothly and the Lord would give us wisdom in making the right decisions. We also ask you to pray that God would send the right people to fill the available positions at ABTS.

Jimmy Geagea | Peacebuilding Field Coordinator

Please pray that the Lord would give grace and wisdom to the trainers of youth in the [Khebz w Meleh](#) initiative to direct the youth the right way and to give them the support they need. Pray that we would always strive to build close relationships with the youth while taking care of the work details.

Jesse Wheeler | IMES Project Manager

Please pray for the coming Middle East Consultation, which will take place on the third week of June. May it bear fruitful conversations. Also, pray for the coming two-week Master of Religion residency, which will start at the end of June. May the students gain essential tools in order to be more effective servants in the region. I also ask you to pray for my family, especially the kids, who have recently been fighting the flu.

The Finlay Graham Memorial Library at ABTS serves our students, faculty and local community.

We recently subscribed to the Digital Theological Library which covers more than 380,000 e-books and millions of academic articles.

Help us buy more Arabic books and keep up our online subscription.

Support our library by donating today!

