

Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

كلية اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية



December 2020

A Window into Our New Program: From Design to Implementation

It is no surprise that the pandemic created the largest disruption of educational systems in recent history. A disruption it may be, yet it has brought innovation in new, unexpected ways.

While the pandemic initially deepened the challenges of theological education in the Middle East and North Africa, God enabled us to make use of “a good crisis” and respond strategically while adopting measures consistent with global trends in theological education.

This calendar year is nearing an end; arguably, it has been the most disorienting year in our lifetime. The pandemic has not only rocked the economy and threatened the livelihood of many. It also magnified social ills such as mental health issues and domestic abuse. The Arab Church recognizes that it must get ready for such a time when many are looking for answers. That is why we continue to train faithful men and women to encourage the Arab Church as it steers toward a missional direction.

In the past [six chapters](#) of our unfolding story, we have shared with you what we have been doing in response to the changing realities. In [this month's chapter](#), Wissam Nasrallah expounds these changing realities and demonstrates the importance of our churches having timely responses. Here in this article, we invite you to read how our faculty are working toward refining our curriculum while equipping church leaders to lead and mobilize their church communities to have these timely

responses.

The design of our new hybrid delivery method, which we are now dubbing as the *Integrated Theology Program*, has been an exciting journey led by Walid Zailaa, our newly appointed Academic Dean. Walid would gather input from the leadership team and the faculty, come up with a draft design, then take it back for further feedback and input, and then go back to the drawing table. It took fourteen iterations to arrive at the curricular shape that we have today. The faculty continues to polish and refine the program, the content, and the components as we implement them.

Our continuing students, who started their journey at ABTS residentially, have already transitioned to this new integrated program. They have started and will soon finish taking the first module, *The Nature and Character of God*. Our faculty members have learned so much from this experience as they worked hard both on the delivery and on the content of the curriculum. As they tested out the first module in a new delivery method, the faculty joined forces to enhance the learning experience of our students so that it becomes as compelling as possible.

Walid Zailaa shared,

Of course, delivering the first module in a hybrid format is a learning journey. That is why, as faculty, we are intentional about learning from each other's experiences during our weekly meetings. We learn

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from one another for future integrated modules, and we develop a kind of how-to handbook for faculty who might join us in the future. For the near future, we have further plans to get formal training on hybrid education.

One important factor of the new integrated program is that modules have a problem-solving approach, i.e., we aim to pinpoint and address problems that are specific to our students' unique contexts. For instance, during the first two days of the current module, the faculty collected the students' viewpoints, which reflect that of their communities on the nature of God, and from there, they were able to start a discussion on a Moodle forum. After each unit, they posed a certain set of questions that aimed to solve the problem or the issue at hand. This approach is vital now that students are studying while remaining in their contexts.

Another main change to the delivery method, moving from a traditional setting, is merging the syllabi of all the module courses, so that each module represents one integrated unit that is made up of all the constituent courses even when taught by different faculty members. This change requires a lot of teamwork among the faculty.

Faculty members are also working on providing interactive tools for the students. These tools include short explanatory videos such as introductory videos for each course. In addition to the Moodle platform, they have a messaging group for the students who are taking a specific module through which they encourage students to persevere and to hand in their assignments on time.

Because of its hybrid nature, our new integrated program has both synchronous and asynchronous elements. Most of the



Walid Zailaa

curriculum delivery will be asynchronous to give enough space for busy leaders to enroll in the courses. Our asynchronous Learning Management System is Moodle, and we are currently looking to recruit a Moodle Administrator who will provide key support to our faculty and students. For the synchronous

components, we are using the Zoom platform. For the annual residencies on campus, we are investing in upgrading two of our classrooms into advanced audio/visual "smart" rooms that will plug into the Zoom eco system. This will allow students to join our residencies remotely when they are not able to travel to Lebanon.



Bassem Melki

Of course, our Integrated Theology Program will preserve the research component that our traditional residential program has always had. The challenge for now is making Arabic e-resources available for our students. We are compiling a reading packet for each unit using available resources, and we are planning, in discussions with MENATE (Middle East and North Africa Association for Theological Education) to develop a versatile long-term solution, i.e. an extensive digital library with Christian Arabic e-resources.

In addition to enhancing the learning experience, our faculty are working on new ways of implementing non formal components such as mentoring and following up on students' ministry, which will take place under the supervision of the Dean of Faculty Bassem Melki in partnership with our students' local churches.

Bassem shared:

As faculty, we are currently working on the life and ministry components. This will take the form of a module that extends over their four years of study. It will aid their holistic formation on a practical level. We will launch this module in February, and all our faculty will be involved. They will become mentors to students across the Arab world, helping create for them an environment of formation so they can assess their ministry and spiritual growth. This mentoring process will be in collaboration with the ministry leaders of their own context.

Read chapter 7 of our [New Strategic Direction](#) written by Wissam Nasrallah: ***Changes and Challenges Facing the Church in the Middle East.***



Caleb Hutcherson sharing during a faculty meeting

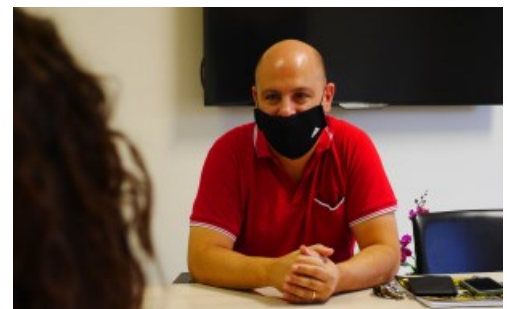
Our faculty also plan to visit the students' local churches in their different Arab countries as soon as pandemic restrictions loosen. Just as students visit us once a year, we will also visit them and get to know them, their churches, and their challenges in a more profound way. The more we are immersed in our students' worlds, the more we can shape our curriculum so that it becomes more contextualized to help them respond to their changing realities and emerging challenges. We aim for our curriculum to be a dynamic curriculum and not a static one.

"We, as faculty, are meeting on a regular basis to work on the course content, reshaping and forming our experience as we learn from one another," remarked Walid Zailaa. Bassem Melki, who also has a dynamic role in mobilizing faculty teamwork, shared:

Due to the lockdown, we have had extensive meetings over Zoom and divided the responsibilities amongst each other. Together, we are reigniting the flame for the vision of serving the Arab Church through the students in the new paradigm that is set before us, to bring transformation while rebuilding and refocusing the faculty team for the new phase to come. We are coming together and discovering things. It is scary to tread new ground; however, we are exploring and venturing together, supporting and equipping one another using our different skills and strengths.



Please keep our faculty in your prayers as they strive to faithfully serve the Kingdom together and equip Arab Church leaders for ministry.



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**Starting January 2021, our ABTS Newsletter
will be published every third Tuesday of the month!**

Ministry Update: Serving Victims of the August 4 Beirut Explosion

“We first met Fadia while fixing her broken windows and door. We got to know her over several visits while drinking coffee and talking about life, Lebanon, and God. We had the privilege of getting her a new water dispenser and paid for a plumber to get her water pump up and running again. Since then, our home visits team has been visiting her once a week to get to know her and her sister better, develop a relationship, and share with them more about Christ and His healing hand.”

This story, shared by one of our MRel students serving in Beirut, is one of many we’ve heard and been part of in the aftermath of the August 4 blast. Since we opened our guesthouse and dormitories, we have been able to shelter and care for 82 individuals during their stay and support them as most transitioned to more permanent housing off-campus. We are currently hosting 15 individuals impacted by the blast and 6 medical workers. In addition to that, we partnered with four churches and a Christian organization so together we can serve the people of Beirut — people like Fadia — more effectively. Through them, we have been able to help and pray for over a



hundred families in different areas with various needs around the explosion zone. Joe, an ABTS student serving with one of our partner churches, shared another story with us recently. “We met Samir through a mutual acquaintance. Samir’s home was completely ruined, but fortunately, he and his family weren’t home at the time of the blast. Samir is a very humble and grateful person. He shared that his opinion of Evangelical churches changed because of our interaction with him. His words mirrored a sentiment that was shared by many of the people we worked to support. This is promising for us, as I feel that we were able to plant a seed and build a bridge with these people. It is amazing how the Lord uses the darkest moments in our lives to reach out to those around us.”

Through another church, we have been able to help 75 children with a back to

school project for those impacted by the Beirut Blast. “One of the schoolgirls felt ashamed when her teacher asked her to open her Arabic book via an online session,” shared our partner. Her mother had not been able to buy all her books for the school year. “When the project started, the mother was very thankful that she was able to buy all her daughter’s books so that she could continue learning without feeling ashamed. This woman thanked God a lot for the blessing she got through the church.”

We thank the Lord for allowing us and many Lebanese churches and Christian Organizations to serve the people of Beirut regardless of their belonging during this time of chaos and confusion. We pray that the Lord continues to use His Church to serve the Arab world.



Pray with Us: Prayer Requests from Some of Our Faculty

Walid Zailaa

Academic Dean, Assistant Professor of Old Testament

Please pray for us faculty as we prepare for the new season. The work is ongoing, and each step has its own challenges. Pray that we achieve what we are aiming for with the students.

Wes Watkins

Assistant Professor of Missiology

Many of our students live in strategic yet sensitive locations. As we transition our curriculum delivery to a new hybrid format, please pray that God would grant wisdom to the faculty as we seek to train students within some of the most unique and challenging contexts in the world. Pray ultimately that God would be glorified as lives and communities are transformed by the gospel.

Smyrna Khalaf Moughabghab

Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Counseling

Pray for our students, for as they maneuver the online platform, they face several challenges such as poor internet connection, study-work-life balance, and social distancing which can be quite a challenge for collectivist societies in the region of our students.

Caleb Hutcherson

Lecturer in Historical Theology

One prayer request I have is for some uninterrupted time and clarity of mind to make significant progress on writing my dissertation in the next two months.

Mike Kuhn

Assistant Professor in Discipleship and Biblical Theology, Holistic Support Faculty for MENA Christianity

I will be teaching a course over Zoom at the Evangelical Theological College in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in December. The

course is on the history of Muslim-Christian relations. I would appreciate prayer for that.

Bassem Melki

Dean of Faculty, Lecturer in Peace Studies

Pray for us in these difficult times. Although we are excited, there is internal unrest. It is not easy to fight on several frontiers at the same time.

Nabil Habiby

Lecturer in New Testament Studies

Pray for Lebanon and the people in it as they face yet another economic crash, inside the ongoing first one. Reports say that the government will stop subsidizing fuel and essential items starting January. Prices are expected to soar. Fifty percent of the Lebanese people have already been driven under the poverty line.

Pray for churches across Lebanon as they seek to minister to communities in poverty and despair. Pray for wisdom for ABTS as it seeks to come alongside the Church in these difficult times. Pray that ABTS continues to be a safe place for faculty and leaders to wrestle with theological questions while engaged in ministry.

Please continue to pray for Lebanon. Its people have gone through so much this year, and its future remains obscure. Now that the Central Bank has begun to lift subsidies, an action that will lead to a "social catastrophe" according to the UN, the Lebanese people expect the worst for 2021. Pray for the poor who have become poorer. Pray for those who lost their jobs and businesses. Pray for those who haven't yet fully recovered from the Beirut blast. Pray that the Lebanese Church remains alert and diligent in doing good. Though Lebanon continues to go through this fiery furnace, we praise our God and wait expectantly for His deliverance.

**This Christmas shines yet brighter
Than all the ones before.
Though darkness seems quite darker,
The Light will stand out more.**

**May we then not abandon them
Who dwell in grey remains.
May we not just be passersby;
Shrug at the scene unchanged!**

**Our hearts ablaze with passion for
The lost, the poor, the lame.
This Christmas, we remember
That it's for such He came.**

Written by Teresa Sfeir,
Communication and Editing Officer

**Merry
Christmas**
From the ABTS Family