Arab Baptist Theological Seminary
كليّة اللاهوت المعمدانيّة العربيّة
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MINISTRY AMID INSTABILITY

Lessons Learned in Leadership

BY ELIE HADDAD, PRESIDENT

Elie Haddad, ABTS President

I have been at ABTS since 2005. There was not a period since then that was not marked by instability. This is a fact that goes back way before 2005. We live in a region that is highly volatile. In Lebanon, we have more than our fair share of volatility, including wars, civil unrest, religious extremism, humanitarian crises, a crumbling economy, failure of the banking sector, government corruption at every level, the pandemic, explosions, and earthquakes. At the present time, we are carrying on with ministry while there is the potentiality that the current clashes at the border might develop into a full-scale war. This is our ministry context, moving from one crisis to another, each one of them forcing some kind of disruption to our operation. In human terms, it's a mystery how we are surviving, even thriving and growing. In spiritual terms, this is God at work, pure and simple.

By reflecting on our experiences, we can draw many leadership lessons. God has used all the volatility, instability, and disruptions to shape us and our ministry in profound ways.

The first lesson we are learning is about adjustment. Even though we are clear about what vision and mission God has given us, how that is manifested can change very quickly. While stability is important in the business world, we are learning that being nimble, resilient, and adaptable, is key to surviving, even prospering, in God's economy. We are learning not to be too attached to the way we do things, which can and does change very quickly during times of disruption. Holding onto our ways and methods loosely while looking for ways to adjust and adapt is a necessity in our context.

One example was during the pandemic when we had to send our students home and shift our programs online. There was a major global disruption during the pandemic. However, because God has been teaching us this lesson, it was easier for us to adjust. We were able to move from the question "when do we get back to normal" to "what will the new normal be" relatively quickly. We had learned not to hold onto our current methods too closely.

Another lesson we're learning is how to be comfortable operating in liminal space. Liminal space is the in-between or transitional state when we are heading to an unknown destination where we have never been while not being able to go back to the way things were. This is usually a time of disorientation and uncertainty that requires moving quickly from grieving what was lost to actively engaging in discovery and learning. Successful navigation of this liminal space can lead to significant transformation and institutional growth.

We repeatedly find ourselves in liminal space. The context keeps changing, the challenges and needs are changing, the Church is changing, technology is changing, educational methods are changing, and even theological methods are changing. We went through such an experience when we completely redesigned our curriculum to become contextual, holistic, and integrated. God led us through a journey of moving from a traditional curriculum that was designed to answer the questions of yesterday in a western context to a flexible and adaptable curriculum that attempts to engage the questions we face today in our diverse contexts. It is not possible to move forward without a level of comfort in heading into uncharted space.

One more lesson we are learning is that, as Reggie McNeal argues, we do not plan for the future but rather we prepare for the future. There are many situations that we could have anticipated and planned for. But who could have planned for the pandemic, or the port of Beirut explosion, or earthquakes. All these came as a surprise to us. We are learning that as we make plans, we hold them loosely for God to change them or adjust them as He wills. But the key here is that we be open and discerning to allow God to prepare us for how He wants to use us in the future.

One example from our experience was when we pivoted our programs to an online environment because of the pandemic and the closing of our physical classrooms. We already had the needed online infrastructure and training, not because we had the foresight for what is about to happen, but because God had been preparing us ahead of time. Today, although our programs are all either fully online or hybrid, we have just finished constructing a new physical library and research center and have upgraded most of our physical facilities on campus. It is clear to us that God is preparing us for something bigger. It could be a regional research center, it could be an expanded footprint and impact of our programs, it could be anything.

Which brings me to the next lesson. We are learning that God is not impressed by our achievements and accomplishments. Instead, God wants our faithfulness. We are learning that our desire should not be toward building a reputation, a legacy, or pursuit of significance. It should be merely faithfulness to what God wants us to do right now. Shifting priorities during disruptions in response to God's invitation is not a sign of failure. On the contrary, it is a sign of spiritual maturity and faithfulness. This is a difficult lesson to learn. We tend to measure our own success by visible and measurable criteria while God measures it by our faithfulness. Yes, we do sense that God is preparing us for an expanded footprint and impact. This does not mean that we will impress God by our numbers. It simply means that as God is growing His Church in the region, He desires to equip more faithful women and men to lead His people. The fact that He chooses to use ABTS, and others, to play a role in His plan is purely contingent on His grace.

At the new Library and Research Center

So, if it's all about God and what He plans to do in our region, then the last lesson that I want to reflect on is that of discernment. I am convinced that the most important thing that the ABTS leadership does is collective discernment. If we believe that the ultimate goal is to be faithful to God, then it becomes imperative that we have a clear sense of what God is calling us to do. We have a large vision for the region, but our resources are limited, whether material or human. This means that we need to understand precisely what God is calling us to do at the moment, which can change as the world changes around us and as God's plans progress and mature in their implementation.

This business of discernment is tricky. Sometimes it is hard to discern whether it is God talking to us or we are driven by our own selfish desires. Henry Blackaby makes the point that when God spoke in the Old Testament, people knew that it was God, and they understood what He was saying. God's communication with us today should be even clearer given the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. The challenge is to have the pure desire of doing God's work God's way and in His timing. What we are learning at ABTS is that we continuously need to allow God to purify our motives and replace our desires with His and our will with His. This is why we are learning to spend more time in God's presence as a community. We have daily community chapel, and all our strategic meetings, whether Board or leadership or faculty, start with a time around God's word to properly orient our conversations.

These are a few out of the many lessons God is teaching us. Living through hardships is like sitting at the feet of Jesus learning one lesson after another. What a privilege that is.

ABTS Staff spending time in God's presence

Elie Haddad Announces His Retirement Plan

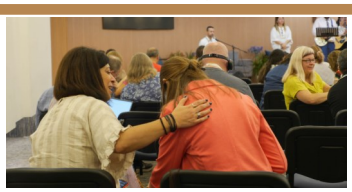
Earlier this month, Elie announced to the ABTS community that he plans to retire by the end of the 2024-2025 academic year. [A press release is available here]

During Elie's time at ABTS, God used him to expand and shape the ministry in many wonderful and God glorifying ways. We pray that the remaining stretch of Elie's time at ABTS will continue to be a time of growth and development suitable for the transition process.

A new season is coming for Elie and for ABTS. Elie with His wife Mireille plan to stay in Lebanon and continue to serve with Canadian Baptist Ministries (CBM) in the MENA region in an expanded role. Elie also plans to keep investing in theological education in the region and supporting ABTS as needed. Our prayer is that they continue to find joy and fulfilment in what God will lead them to. As for ABTS, this advance retirement notice gives our Board of Trustees ample time to find the most suitable successor. The Board has already appointed a search committee that has commenced its work. We ask you to join us in fervent prayer for this process. May God give wisdom and discernment to the search committee. Our trust is that ABTS is in God's hands, and that He will anoint the right person to lead the ministry for the next season. May His will be done!

Check out our latest Blog Posts

Midlife Crisis and Our Walk with God



Getting to the Roots of Peacemaking: Perspective on Initiatives and Confrontation

- Pray with Us -

Prayer Requests from our Leadership Team

Walid Zailaa | Academic Dean

Please pray for the ministry of ABTS as we serve the local church in the midst of the challenges that we face in our Middle Eastern context. We believe that God has been working in and through us during this time. As we welcome a new year, we ask for your prayers that we, as members of the seminary, can continue to spread the message of reconciliation through the local church by equipping faithful men and women with theological education.

Rana Wazir Zailaa | Registrar

Pray with us for our students and their countries amid the challenges they are facing with war and instability in the region. Pray for wisdom and discernment as they seek to serve the Lord in these difficult times. Please also pray for ABTS as we go through this transitional period.

Bassem Melki | Director of Peacemaking and Non-formal Training

Pray that the Lord continues to prepare us as we face new needs and challenges in the Middle East and North Africa region. Pray that we are attentive to His voice, that we are always ready to do His will, and are fully surrendered to His moving of the ministry.

Elie Haddad | President

Please pray for God's people in Lebanon and the region that we remain faithful ambassadors for Christ proclaiming His love and grace in the midst of this depraved world.

Wissam Nasrallah | Chief Operations Officer at Thimar – LSESD

Heavenly father, we come before You with grateful hearts for the privilege of serving You through ABTS. We ask that Your wisdom and Your Spirit guide every decision that is made—whether through admitting students, developing servant-leaders, or resourcing local churches. Instill in us a Kingdom mindset, one that sees and recognizes what you are doing through others that are serving You. In all things, may our actions, decisions, and teachings reflect Your love, wisdom, and truth. Soli Deo Gloria.

Loulwa El Maalouf | Director of Partnerships

Please pray for this Christmas season to be a time where many people in Lebanon and the Arab world receive Christ as King over their lives. Also, please pray for the future of ABTS. May God continue to be at the center and may His Spirit continue to lead.