Meco international
MAGAZINE
Issue 1, 2013

Lighting the Way

Includes: Strengthening the Church  Home is where the call is  Pastoring in uncertain times
MECO  MAGAZINE

LIGHTING THE WAY

In this issue of our magazine you will read about people who are letting their light shine so that others can find the Way. One serves as a pastor in Egypt, another is helping refugees in Cyprus and a third has just returned from a country where lighting the Way is very difficult.

In addition, you will read about a seminary that shines its light ‘like a city on a hill’.

We hope the stories will encourage and inspire you to shine your light in your corner of the world. We also hope the stories will remind you of how important it is to pray for Christians in the Middle East and for the people who walk alongside them.

Please note that in some cases pseudonyms or initials have been used for security reasons.

COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS? EMAIL: INFO@ABOUTMECO.ORG

MECO International is an interdenominational fellowship of Christians. The vision of MECO International is to see the love of Jesus Christ lived and proclaimed in the Middle East.

The mission of MECO International is to support Middle East Christians in sharing the love of Jesus Christ. MECO International works to provide food, clothing and spiritual help. MECO's website gives regular updates of the help our people and Middle Eastern Christians bring to Syrian refugees. If you can, please support MECO’s Syrian Refugee Crisis Appeal. Through your donations we are able to provide food, clothing and spiritual help.

Meanwhile in Egypt, people wait anxiously to see how the new constitution will play out. A growing number wish to leave that country. As depressing as all of these situations are, consider the words of one of my colleagues who recently wrote from Cairo:

"Don't get overwhelmed by what people tell you. Not everything you hear is a fair impression of what is happening. Twenty-four-hour TV is a voracious beast and needs feeding. When the footage loops round the same images half a dozen times in a couple of minutes, you know they don't have much. If you watch it all the time, you'll think the whole place is in trouble. “Egypt on fire” is not at all the whole story.”

So what part of the Middle East story do I want you to see?

Some time ago, one of our workers met a leader of an extremist group and asked him what he thought about Christian workers in his country. The man amazed the worker with the words, “You are the most dangerous people in the region - because you teach people to love!”

This is the weapon that drives our people and equips them to remain at their posts, even when they are surrounded by trouble. Some have had to leave, but their hearts are left behind in the trouble spots and with the people they have come to love. As you read some of these stories in this edition, be encouraged to pray and to be part of God’s worldwide brigade of love.

Let me quote Mike Parker, whose excellent Q&A piece in this issue is a must read.

"Christ alone knows the whole story; the real reasons; the deepest motives and he alone may be trusted to judge justly. The ‘Judge of all the Earth’ will do right and that’s extremely good news. We may rely on it."

Please join us in spreading that love by praying for the people of the Middle East, by accepting the Lord’s call if he is directing you to serve him there or by supporting those who are called to go.

John Carrick
Interim International Director

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SCAN WITH A SMART PHONE TO GO TO OUR WEBPAGE
Among the influential Christian institutions in the Middle East is the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS).

Built on a hill overlooking Beirut, Lebanon, the school draws students from across the Middle East and North Africa region and across denominational lines.

Established in 1960, the seminary offers degree and certificate courses, as well as less formal training. College level programs are offered in Arabic and a new graduate level Master of Religion is offered in English.

The purpose and design of the programs is to provide relevant training that supports the Church in the Arab world as it seeks to fulfill its missional mandate.

In order to ensure that is being done effectively, ABTS President Elie Haddad says the seminary carries out three levels of assessment:

- Assessing students at year-end based on graduate profiles for every program
- Assessing whether churches are being served by graduates
- Assessing whether communities are being impacted by the ministry of the churches where the graduates are serving.

According to Perry Shaw, Professor of Christian Education and Associate Dean, ABTS is very selective about which students it accepts, with less than half of the applicants being accepted in a given year. “Because students are expected to come with substantial ministry experience, their average age is 30,” he says.

Perry, who is a member of MECO, adds that one third of those who study are believers from a Muslim background (BMB). “Lebanon,” he notes, “is the only country in the region where BMBs can study Christian theology.”

He also says that in the last few years one quarter of the student population has been female.

Aside from paying their airfares and an annual fee of $200 to study, ABTS students receive full scholarship. Despite that financial assistance attending the seminary is a major sacrifice for many. Some have sold all their belongings to study.

When ABTS was first established, Perry says its vision was to prepare people for pastoral ministry. “But when we prepared for our new curriculum in 2008, we discovered that only one third of our alumni were in pastoral ministry. About 15 per cent were in creative church-planting ministry and about 40 per cent were involved in various forms of children, youth and family ministry, particularly through parachurch groups.”

As a result, ABTS created a curriculum designed to give foundational training for ministry with three tracks to reflect the ministry graduates will likely be involved in.

“This curriculum represents a paradigm shift in global theological education, with a strong missional structure, and a high level of integration,” Perry explains. “The core of the second and third year curriculum is a series of six major team-taught modules in which students are asked to reflect on foundational themes through biblical-theological, historical-theological, social-contextual, and personal ministerial lenses, with a final project that connects all of these with ministry practice.”

In addition, the new curriculum places a high emphasis on theological reflection on life and ministry, with students undertaking a variety of tasks that ask them to reflect on how theology instructs such things as their relationships, their work and their experiences of ministry.

If Perry has a dream for ABTS graduates it is that they will remain in the region, be outward-looking in their leadership and be committed to training and empowering others in ministry.

Two graduates are doing just that.

One has returned to Iraq to pastor a church. He says the vision of his ministry team is two-fold: to see God glorified through their ministry and to witness about Christ and His redemptive work through word and action.

“Lately, I felt God calling me to focus on this vision by encouraging missional ministry beyond the church,” says the pastor. “As a result we witnessed the birth of the first house church.”

As for the other graduate, she is among the first women to receive a Master’s degree in Divinity from ABTS. Currently teaching Bible to 200 school children, she says the 12 to 15 year-olds are at a critical stage in their lives. She also serves as a guidance counsellor at the school where she teaches and ministers to new Christians in her church.

“God’s call for me,” she says, “is to go alongside people in their journey with God and help them to come closer to Him. I am constantly seeing the fruit of my studies at school and in my church ministry.”

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As people around the world pray to the Lord of the Harvest to send workers into His fields in the Middle East, others hear the call to “Go!”

For SJ the call came three years after she had come to faith. It happened during a two-week prayer journey to a Middle Eastern country. Her prayer group was headed to a town where they were to spend the night. However, because the journey took longer than expected their driver decided they should stay in another community.

“I remember when we entered the town it felt like home”, says SJ. “That evening, during my quiet time, I received three passages from the Lord; Matthew 14:28-29, John 21:22 and Matthew 16:24. I believed (that night) the Lord called me specifically to that town.”

It would be another eight years before the call became a reality and SJ says she never doubted she would return. “The Lord showed me certain things that had to work through and I also went to Bible School for 18 months.”

During that preparation time, she was introduced to a MECO worker who was directing a national office. “I felt comfortable with what MECO stood for and felt that it was the Lord’s leading for me to join MECO,” she says.

When SJ made her return to the country and town she felt called to it was to study Arabic for two years. In that time she also learned how to live as a woman in a conservative Islamic country. It wasn’t easy.

“Women are not supposed to draw attention to themselves, especially when they are outside their homes. This was quite an adjustment for me – not to talk or laugh too loudly, she says.

In order to fit in with the society, SJ also followed the dress code for Muslim women. She wore a burqa and covered her hair. “Sometimes I had to wear the lithma – the piece of cloth that covers the whole face except the eyes. But this was for security reasons,” she explains, “especially after a foreigner was shot and killed one morning on his way to work.”

Although the country she was living in experienced a revolution in 2011, SJ says she never had the inner conviction that God released her to leave. By that point she was working in administration in a language institute and says by the grace of God the institute never had to close its doors during the revolution. When some of the foreign staff left she was asked to teach some English classes and ended up teaching three terms.

“It was an honour and a privilege to be there during the revolution. It gave all of us who remained amazing opportunities to serve the local people. There was a lot of fear, mistrust and hopelessness among the locals during that time. The question they most often asked us was, “Why don’t you leave?” So many locals wanted to leave because of the instability and it was hard for them to understand why we chose to stay. It was a privilege to show them that we preferred to stay with them during that time, and to share God’s love for them and their country.”

SJ adds that throughout her time in the Middle East every opportunity to share her story was a God moment. “Often you only have a couple of minutes to share with people. Once you’d confirmed that you are a believer, people always wanted to discuss, among other things, Jesus – what you believe about Him and what they believe about Him. The most amazing times were when you could sit with someone and discuss the Gospel.”

If going to the Middle East was a clear call for SJ, leaving was not. Following the shooting incident foreigners working at the institute were advised by security staff to leave town immediately.

SJ and some of her colleagues relocated but she found it difficult to adjust to the new location because her movements were restricted due to several bombing incidents directed at locals and kidnappings of foreigners.

“The institute where I worked had to do everything they could to keep us as safe as possible,” says SJ. “Some of those measures included ensuring that foreign women employees did not walk on the streets. We drove with drivers we knew. We were also cautioned not to visit busy places such as restaurants and malls, and some places were off-limits completely. These measures made it really hard for me to meet up with local people; to make friends. I was constantly asking the Lord to show me the way forward. In time, it became clear that God was preparing me to say goodbye to the “country of my (His) heart.”

Now that she is home, SJ is waiting on the Lord for her next assignment.

Home is where the call is.

“WOMEN ARE NOT SUPPOSED TO DRAW ATTENTION TO THEMSELVES, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY ARE OUTSIDE THEIR HOMES.”
**An oasis for refugees**

**It is said that when God closes a door, He opens a window.**

Last year a MECO worker in Cyprus found herself in a transition period with regards to her ministry. As she questioned her future, a friend, who hadn’t been in contact for years, suddenly emailed saying a Cypriot church needed the help of someone who could speak Arabic.

Although MJ speaks Farsi not Arabic, she met with her friend and another woman who explained that her church was helping refugees in Cyprus, the majority of whom are Palestinians, Iraqis, Iranians, Kurds, Egyptians and Syrians. Many have been living on the island for years and while most hope to return home one day, some are looking for a new home.

According to MJ, the majority of those seeking asylum are single men. “Their greatest need is to find a country that will take them in,” she says. “Unfortunately, when they arrive in Cyprus they apply to the Cypriot government rather than to the United Nations. Once Cyprus turns them down they have nowhere else to go. Some are deported and some go into hiding to avoid deportation.”

Although the refugees receive some financial assistance from the Cypriot government, MJ says it isn’t enough and they are always in need of food, clothing, medicines and medical attention. She adds that finding employment is difficult for them and any work they do find is often limited to menial jobs.

**Among the refugees** that MJ has met is an engineer who had been working for a Christian agency in Iraq. He and his wife fled after some of his colleagues were murdered and a bomb exploded outside their home. Another couple left their homeland after the husband was imprisoned, beaten and then released. When police sought to re-arrest him, the couple fled.

Moved by the plight of the refugees, MJ has accepted an offer from the church to help lead what is now being described as the “Oasis Ministry”. Their ministry team is able to provide some financial assistance for small medical needs and points the refugees to other resources they might not be aware of. They also intervene when the refugees are unfairly treated.

At the moment we are running English classes one day a week for them and on Fridays we have a drop-in coffee shop where we have second-hand clothes for them. We also have a prayer time after the café for anyone who wants to join us,” says MJ.

**In addition, the volunteers** try to organize a monthly event but are limited in what they can do because they are working out of a rented church hall two days a week. However, they are currently raising funds so they can have their own centre.

“We want to maximize our potential effectiveness in offering support,” says MJ. “After consultation with the refugee community, our objectives are to provide for their spiritual, educational, physical and social needs.”

The group’s goals also include developing awareness among the churches in Cyprus about the plight of the refugees, developing partnerships with people and organizations that can help with the work, providing training for volunteers and creating a resource list to assist the volunteers and the refugees.

“We do believe this project is of the Lord, so as we go through challenges we need to keep our eyes fixed on Him,” says MJ. “Please pray for the Lord’s leading and guidance for us.”

According to UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, at the beginning of 2012 there were 3,503 refugees living in Cyprus along with 3,059 asylum seekers. In July, Cyprus resettled as many as 200,000 Syrian refugees.

One young refugee, an expectant mother, had not seen a doctor for months. When our team learned of this they arranged for her to see a physician, who is a member of their church. The young woman was overwhelmed by the love and personal care she received. Her family asked many questions about why people cared so much. Answers about the love of Jesus were carefully explained.

The United Nations reports that more than 500,000 Syrians are displaced. The need is great. Regular updates about MECO’s Syrian Refugee Crisis Appeal can be read on MECO’s website – www.aboutmeco.org – and MECO’s Facebook page.

Donations have come from supporters around the world and have enabled our people in Jordan and Lebanon to work alongside local believers in ministering to refugees. Together they are providing food, medicines, blankets, clothing, toys and heaters. They are also providing transportation to clinics and hospitals for medical treatment.

In addition, some funding has been used to help beleaguered people living in Syria; people who, for whatever reason, cannot leave the country.

Wherever aid has been provided it has been given in the name of Jesus. As a result, refugees have seen the love of Jesus in action and in some cases this has opened the way to pray with them and to share the good news.

If you would like to help MJ in her work please contact your MECO office.

**PLEA S E PRAY**

† for more volunteers to join the Oasis Ministry, especially younger people

† for wisdom for MJ and the woman who is spearheading the project.

† for the financial resources needed for this work.
Pastoring in uncertain times

Since the Arab Spring in 2011, Egypt has undergone tremendous political upheaval that has ushered in a new age of uncertainty, especially for the 10 million Christians living in the country. How do pastors and ministers lead at such a time as this? Mike Parker, the Senior Pastor of the English Congregations at All Saints Cathedral in Cairo, sheds light on the situation.

What do you think are the greatest challenges pastors face in Egypt?
Challenges for pastors reflect challenges for Christians and churches – and the greatest one at the moment is fear. Add to that emigration, as many Christians take advantage of their education and family links and escape to other countries because they can’t see a future here. The real challenge is to engage with the transition – even though it’s going to take many decades to see how things settle down. And if people from the majority religion should change sides in any numbers, it’s not clear what kind of a welcome they’d receive from the Church.

How do they and you cope with those challenges?
There are some very bold and impressive Church leaders here, Coptic, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, independents, leading their people into intercession and encouraging them to engage with the processes of embryo democracy. That’s hard. As a 10% minority group (the Christian community) will not get its own way and it’s easy in an instant culture to give up. We can sometimes help our friends not to talk themselves into trouble and despair. Keeping first things first is our challenge.

What do you think the Church in the Middle East?
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What encourages you as a pastor?
It’s wonderful to see the way the Word of God leaps into life when we face these realities, and the way our international congregations wrestle with living and working here. We’re serving mostly with Episcopal/Anglican Churches – a small group in the bigger picture, where 90% of the Christian community is Coptic Orthodox. Relations between our Churches are strengthening, as we learn to present a common face to the new regime. Bishop Mouneer (the Anglican Bishop of Egypt, North Africa and the Horn of Africa) never ceases to encourage us to know our faith, share our faith and show our faith; he’s delighted when we do. We’re growing, with churches taking brave steps to start new groups and serve new people.

What discourages you?
Getting things done in good time is sometimes a struggle, when our ways are not those of our host culture. We refurbished a church room in August, and we’re just getting the furniture this week; I don’t really know why. Living through a revolution is exciting, but not knowing what’s really going on in uncertain times can be wearing. Life is a bit more edgy now, less secure, though we still feel safer here than in most British cities. With so many Christians emigrating, our hearts are heavy because in many ways they will find life much tougher in the West than they ever did here. They will meet the cold winds of secularism – or just plain apathy. And they may not cope well with cold climates and privatized beliefs. If they do make it well, and don’t lose their faith, they’ll be a blessing to those who receive and welcome them.

What do you think the Church in the Middle East can teach the Church in the West?
Our Egyptian friends – both Muslim and Christian – always keep God in the picture. We never have any problem talking about faith, God, even Jesus. Life is integrated, not lived in boxes. Of course, what we say about God makes the difference: as one leading Pastor here says, “In Egypt, everyone believes in God; the key question is” – and he smiles – “what is God like?” Indeed. The Church here also understands that pressure and harassment are part of the Gospel deal. What is most striking is the depth and reality of prayer, as so many of our friends pour out their hearts to the Lord in this time of uncertainty. Add to that sheer joy, and a strong sense of family and a community that takes real responsibility for one another, and you have a powerful witness going on.

How should we be praying for the Church in the Middle East?
As Jesus said to Peter, pray “that your faith may not fail!” And pray as the early church prayed in Acts 4:29-30, “Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” It’s striking that they didn’t ask for the pressure to go away, but only to be bold in the face of it. Then they asked to know and speak God’s Word without fear. Then they asked God to back it up with His miracles. Like the many stories we hear of Muslims having visions of Christ and seeking to know more. We think that’s a good prayer in any setting.

How can we help?
Keep praying, keep in touch, keep enquiring, keep supporting. Pray that our friends will be faithful under pressure and not give up. Find ways to connect with Middle Easterners in your part of the world, identify with them, don’t be afraid of them, offer them hospitality and ask about their roots. Consider visiting churches and ministries: despite the confusions, it’s a great place to be. As you come with an organized group. That way, you’ll get the feel of the region. And remember, those who drink of the sweet waters of the Nile must drink again…
Short-Term Trip – Team Players Needed
Encounter Team 2013 is looking for 18-35 year olds who like working with children and want to move beyond their comfort zone to experience a completely different culture and way of life.
When: July 4-31
Where: Jordan.
Deadlines for applications: April 30

Teacher
Teaching English, computer awareness and any subjects useful in a developing country
Qualifications: TEFL
Minimum Service: 1 year
Language needed: English and basic Arabic
Location: Remote area

Daycare Worker/Trainer
Helping to start a daycare centre for children of migrant workers
Qualifications: Any qualification in pre-school care
Minimum Service: 3 months to 1 year
Language needed: English
Location: Lebanon

Religious Freedom Advocacy Worker
Providing support for persecuted Christians
Qualifications: International law, human rights, public policy
Minimum Service: 4 years minimum
Language: English, Arabic
Location: Middle East

Rehabilitation Worker
Qualifications: Appropriate degree/diploma
Minimum service: 2 years
Language: English and willingness to learn Sorani Kurdish
Location: Iraqi Kurdistan

Theological Trainer
Qualifications: MA or PhD in theology
Minimum service: 3 years
Language needed: English. Arabic required if tutoring
Location: Jordan

English Teacher for Adults
Qualifications: TOEFL or CELTA and willingness to learn Arabic
Minimum service: 1 year
Location: Egypt

Obstetricians and Gynecologists – Urgently Needed
A maternity hospital, which is highly regarded because of the excellent medical care it provides, has an urgent need for an Obstetrician and Gynecologist.
Qualifications: Degree in Obstetrics/Gynecology with practical experience at the specialist level
Minimum service: 6 months
Language: English. Arabic language is desirable but not essential

Midwives – Urgently Needed
Midwives are urgently needed at a maternity hospital, which is highly regarded because of the excellent medical care it provides
Qualifications: Diploma in Midwifery (minimum 18 months), following RN qualifications or a degree in midwifery.
Minimum service: 6 months
Language: Arabic is desirable but not essential

Physiotherapists, Speech, Language and Occupational Therapists
Qualifications: Experience preferred
Minimum Service: 1 year
Language: English and willingness to learn Arabic
Location: Various countries

Teachers – All Grades and for Special Education (Blind & Deaf)
Numerous Christian schools throughout the Middle East need teachers for full-time positions, as well as part-time positions for extra-curricular programs in July and August.
Qualifications: Teachers College Certificate
Minimum service: 1 – 2 years (full-time), 1-2 months July and August
Language: English, willingness to learn Arabic

Nurses – for hospitals, clinics and schools
Qualifications: Internationally recognized with experience
Minimum service: 1-2 years
Language: English, willingness to learn Arabic
Location: Various countries

Fore more information about opportunities for service call your local MECO Office or visit: www.aboutmeco.org/opportunities
Please note that the positions advertised are not salaried. MECO helps volunteers raise their support in order to serve.
Although opportunities for service in the Middle East usually require professional qualifications, we are as concerned about God’s call on people’s lives as their professional abilities.