

meco

international

MAGAZINE | Issue 2, 2014



Insight from others

Includes: Observing Ramadan ■ Down under perspective ■ Letters home



Insight from others

Someone has said that the best vision is insight.

In this issue of the magazine you will read stories that give insight into:

- Why Christians should remain in the Middle East
- How to observe Ramadan with Muslim friends and colleagues
- What people discover about life in the Middle East – even for a short time

You'll also be given a view of the recruitment challenges that our national directors face "down under". Something for all of us to think about! Something for all of us to pray about!

We hope the stories will inspire you and that they will encourage you to pray for God's work in the Middle East and for the people who carry out that work.

If you would like to receive MECO's monthly prayer guide by email please contact your MECO office or email: info@aboutmecoco.org

COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS? EMAIL: INFO@ABOUTMECO.ORG



MECO International is an interdenominational fellowship of evangelical Christians. Our vision is to see the love of Jesus Christ lived and proclaimed in the Middle East. MECO International's mission is to support Middle East Christians in sharing the love of Jesus Christ. This support includes prayer, example, service, partnering with churches, training and development and encouraging

church planting. MECO International Magazine is published four times a year and can be read online at www.aboutmecoco.org
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 Photography: Some photographs are supplied by istockphoto.com and may feature models.



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The view from here



Priorities

MECO is making a new start.

We've had a development plan on the table for some time, but the truth is we've not really made best use of it. I'm coming at it from another angle, moving from a plan to **priorities**.

Simply put, priority number one for us is **to mobilise and equip people for the Middle East**.

What do we mean?

Given the pressure our brothers and sisters are under in the Middle East, this is the time for the international Christian community to stand with them. They do sometimes feel alone, and they value links with people all over the world. It's a vital element in their witness to say they're part of the worldwide church.

For that reason, we in MECO want to play our part in helping people realize this is the time to get involved in supporting Middle East Christians. We want to **mobilise** people. That means identifying people interested in the Middle East and in the progress of the Gospel there. We aim to help them get involved. Our speciality is finding and offering godly, qualified, steady and resilient people to work with our friends in churches and agencies in the region who tell us what their people needs are. As the process of finding and fitting people into positions goes on, we aim to **equip** those we send, preparing them to work cross-culturally. And we want to build teams around those people, who pray, keep in touch and invest financially.

As we look to the future with our friends in the Middle East, we'll be working out what mobilizing and equipping means in all of our countries – those where we work, and those we come from.

Without doubt mobilising in the present climate is a tough call. Agencies like ours are finding it difficult to recruit. The Middle East is perceived as difficult and dangerous. We should not be surprised: the One who said "Follow me" also said we could expect pressure and trouble, which is the normal Christian life.

As a friend, a major Egyptian church leader, said recently:

"We have witnessed bloodshed, vandalism and deliberate destruction of churches and government buildings. Unemployment is at a record high, there's a lack of security on the streets, the economy is in decline, and poverty is crushing for many.."

"Yet this is a time of Gospel opportunity."

"Many people are asking questions, and wanting to find out more about Christ."

Satellite broadcasts and internet conversations are allowing people to ask questions anonymously. More recently, people are coming to Christians and churches to ask face to face what it means to follow Jesus. They're not happy with what they're seeing in their countries and they're trying to learn about Christ and a Christian approach to the present situation.

As we look to the future together, we want to do all we can to help our friends in the Middle East reach these seekers. While we aim to keep Middle East Christians, churches and agencies in focus, we have much to learn from them. Their joy and energy is impressive. Their prayer life is vibrant and passionate as they cope with pressure. Their boldness in holding out the Gospel is remarkable. They're embracing change, caring for displaced people, and seizing opportunities to reach out to neighbours.

Mike Parker

International Director

In their own words...

The following abridged article was written by Martin Accad, Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. He teaches Islam, Middle Eastern and North African Christianity and Christian-Muslim Relations.

We're familiar with a theology of presence. God is with us through his Spirit, and we are inspired by Jesus' incarnation to come alongside other human beings. As the Apostle Paul put it, 'in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19).

What about a theology of staying? It seems just as important to understand why we stay.

Staying is not a very exciting word when society seems to be collapsing around you. This post in no way intends to judge those who feel God is calling them to move on from a place of conflict or hardship, nor do I minimize the tragedy of being a refugee, which is often the alternative to staying. At the end of the day, staying or leaving will always be a subjective decision that no outsider can judge. But for anyone faced with the dilemma, here are a few thoughts that may help them as they seek God's guidance.

First, a theology of staying is rooted in a fundamental trust in God. God is Master of all, my life belongs to him, and I am primarily a steward of it. I'm invited to develop a healthy sense of ownership and take care of my life - but I can never really 'save it.' Jesus said: 'Those who want to save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for me will save it. What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?' (Luke 9:24-25). Risk is all around us, wherever we live. I incur risk when I cross a street in Switzerland. I manage that risk because I know it's safer to cross on green than on red! We do not flee risk, we manage it.

Second, a theology of staying is founded on a fundamental belief in the equal value of all human life. I always find it slightly insulting when foreigners jump on the first flight out of the country every time the security situation gets rough in Lebanon. When well-meaning members of NGOs and mission organizations, who have come to offer physical and spiritual support to those in need, are only able or willing to do so in times of peace and stability, it's demoralizing for those who stay back. At a deep level, leaving at times of greatest need communicates to those staying - no doubt unintentionally - a message of 'my life is more valuable than yours.' A theology of staying affirms fundamentally: 'my life is as valuable as every other life, not more and not less.'

Third, a theology of staying is rooted in a mature acceptance of the mysterious nature of evil. Fleeing is a capitulation to the black and white worldview. It explains evil away by avoiding asking tough questions underlying the reasons for danger. 'People around me are bad and they are doing bad things; therefore I must leave.' Perhaps one of the cruelest lessons of the horrifying Syrian conflict is that it offers no clarity on who is the 'good guy' and who is the 'bad guy.' Who are Syrian refugees in Lebanon fleeing from, and which/who is the evil that has driven them out? Do I really have to stay in order to find out?

Fourth, a theology of staying recognizes the all-embracing nature of sin. If I were to leave, what would I be fleeing from, seeing I'm interwoven in this? What's my part? Am I just a spectator, or a victim of bad people? My theology of staying tells me I am an intrinsic part of the problem, and therefore my only option is to stay and take my part of the responsibility. It stirs me relentlessly to search for a solution, along with all who are willing to do so as well.

The full length version of this article is available at <http://imeslebanon.wordpress.com>

Please Pray

- For our brothers and sisters in the Middle East, keeping in mind what Martin Accad has written
- Pray that churches in the West would increase their prayer support for churches in the Middle East
- Pray that MECO people in the West would have more opportunities to speak about the Church in the Middle East - in churches and at Christian events

Letters Home Chronicles from the Middle East

The following are excerpts from letters sent home by people who have gone to the Middle East for a few months. We hope their experiences shed a little light on what it is like to serve - even for a short time.

"I've settled into my new home here and I'm with a great bunch of women. The people I'm working with are such an inspiration. They deal with tragedy on a daily basis but their Father gives them strength, endurance and patience to keep going."

"I am doing great, and am learning a lot about the culture, the people and the language. I have had tea and even meals with several of my neighbours and heard many of their stories. The people here are quite incredible."

"Lately, my experience resembles something I was taught in cross-cultural training class: *There will be moments where a person will feel like a failure and will want to give up trying to understand the culture. At other challenging times one will want to criticize the culture for not being straightforward or being like his or her own.*"

"I had an amazing weekend. It was fun spending time so much time with a local family. We were able to play games, go shopping, and eat meals together. I learned more words and more about the culture through this experience."

"It was so encouraging to see people from all over the world sent to this very spot for the same work. I can't wait to tell you all the details when I get home."

"Things to pray about: The church needs more volunteers, especially professionals, as they are hoping to expand the work and create classes to teach practical skills and to provide medical care."

"I think the most challenging times in the week are really when I am at the centre working alongside those who do not know Jesus. I have this deep realization and burden that these people need to know Him so desperately. I have been talking to the Father about my burden, and just really seeking a servant and joyful heart."

"The students continue to welcome me in and laugh at my Arabic. I continue to be a klutz by breaking dishes with food in them, getting paint on my face and clothes, and being told I am not doing things the Arab way. He is faithful to carry me through!"

"I've started teaching an English conversational class once a week. We had our first class last week. Their English is about as good as my Arabic, - which is next to nothing - so it makes for some interesting and funny situations. Thankfully one of my roommates, who has a better command of Arabic is helping me teach."

"I've been given an opportunity to attend a Trauma Training seminar in a different city. I am really excited to go and learn more about how to help people."

"Because of Easter celebrations and holiday, my last week was a great time of joy and fellowship. On Easter Sunday my friends and I left at 4:20 a.m. and traveled to Mount Nebo for a Sunrise Easter service. After the service we went back for our own congregation's celebration and sang songs that the Son has risen."

"It was very difficult saying goodbye to great friends: my team mates, my mentor, neighbours, fellow students and so many more who have been such a big part of my life. I have caught such a vision of the needs here. What is my next step?"

If you sense God is calling you to serve in the Middle East, your MECO office can help you explore opportunities for service.

A down under perspective

AN AUSSIE VIEW

by Richard Coombs

Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie are four children who, through entering a wardrobe door, discover a new country called Narnia; a land very different from their own.

From the part of the world 'down under' known as Australia, the Middle East evokes a similar kind of discovery. It is a region different from our own. How so?

Distance – Even in modern-day travel it still takes 20-24 hours of queuing, sitting (in one seat) and interrupted sleeps in an over-packed and cramped aircraft.

Language – You mean *English* is not the common language? How do we make ourselves known? How do we get from one place to another? We're not used to this! Arabic is the main form of communication.

MECO's priority is to mobilise and equip people and prayer for the Middle East.

MECO's International Director, Mike Parker, recently made his first visit to Australia and New Zealand. It was time well spent, and he was glad to tour two countries from which a number of significant people have come to serve in the Middle East.

They're also two nations where our national directors, Richard Coombs and Chris Grantham, are experiencing very different opportunities and challenges. Here's what they have to share.

History – The ebb and flow of empires in this region goes back thousands of years (Assyrian, Persian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Arab, Mongol and Ottoman empires). All of these have left their mark and influence – and historic sites that bring history lessons alive.

Violence – The news media creates the impression of ongoing violence by repeatedly playing the same pictures of bombs exploding over and over again. In reality the Middle East is a place where most people desire peace. Having travelled to the region many times over the past 20 years I have never felt threatened by such things.

Religion – A major role is played by religion in the dynamics of Middle Eastern society. Again and again I have been asked, "What is your religion?" There are varieties of religious expression and even business is built around religious observance (holidays, employment quotas, office hours, etc). The Koran is the *rule book* for all of life.

Geography – The land is harsh with deserts and mountains. The environment makes people hardened and resilient. There are areas where rainfall is plentiful (at times) but the climate can be one of extremes.

Tribalism – Even though there are national borders (imposed by outsiders) tribes have their own cultures and ways of doing things. Often tribal allegiances cross

borders and influence one or more countries.

Hospitality – The people of the Middle East are generous, welcoming people. To refuse hospitality is to give offence. Meals are *feasts*.

Time – A meeting can be scheduled for 10am but will probably mean it starts sometime after 10a.m. Time is a perception. "Inshallah" (by God's will) is a standard phrase. Socialising will always take place prior to doing business.

Masculinity/Femininity – Men take pride in being men. From a cultural point of view, women are meant to raise families and are considered a protected property. A man's duty is to protect women and provide them with food, shelter and security. Serving meals, doing laundry or housework is considered *lowly* work.

From a region of the world that has been heavily influenced by European roots a visit to the Middle East is like stepping into another world. Yes, there are significant differences but the people of the region are still like us – they need Jesus.

A KIWI VIEW

by Chris Grantham

Twenty years ago New Zealand was one of the top sending nations in the world. That is no longer the case, and various factors have contributed to this change, including:

■ NZ is less Christian: of all the MECO sending nations, NZ is the least Christian. In the most recent census, just 43% identify as Christian, compared with UK 60%, Australia 61%, Canada 67%, South Africa 74%, and USA 75%.

■ There are other ways to go overseas: travelling is almost written into the DNA of Kiwis. For decades, the major way for Christians to travel was to go out with an agency like MECO.

■ For so many of today's travelling Kiwi Christians, serving overseas is the last thing on their minds.

In my more than two decades as a home-base sender I've noted some significant changes in perspectives at the home end. For example:

■ Short term was up to three years. It is now seen as little as two weeks.

■ Mortgage-sized debt but without the house. The spiralling student loans of recent years have provided a crop of heavily indebted young graduates. People at their prime for new opportunities and new challenges in so many respects, and yet weighted down.

■ 'The local church is the sender.' I couldn't agree more. But to by-pass the mission agency is to miss out

on decades of wisdom and experience, leading sometimes to avoidable faux pas, wheel reinvention and a nouveau paternalism.

■ 'Service begins at home.' I totally agree – but that doesn't mean it stops there. Luke in Acts 1:8 shows home as the starting point, not the final point.

Why don't Kiwis want to go to the Middle East?

■ 'It's too dangerous.' I've said more than a few times that 'contrary to common perception, 100% of the people living in the Middle East today are alive.' The media convey images of tension, protests, bombings, wars, refugees, and so parents/churches/others are wary about sending their people into a region of great risk, seemingly certain death.

■ Meantime the risk-averse non-goers bungee jump or leap off cliffs base-jumping, wing-suiting and the like. They will take the risks they want to.

■ 'It isn't because it is too far away.' Apart from the relatively small number of Kiwis who serve in the largely Christian South Pacific region, most have to take two flights to get where they are going to serve. Nowhere in the world is more than 24 hours from NZ, so the Middle East – which is closer than that – is not perceived to be 'too far'.

■ 'Results are discouragingly few.' We see other agency ventures that show (apparently) more results. Middle East service appears like too much hard slog, which is discouraging.

But if God calls (He does!) and Kiwis listen and respond (as they did so well for decades) they can make their mark, God's mark.



Ramadan

OPENS THE WAY FOR SHARING AND PRAYING

The old saying, “When in Rome do as the Romans do” can apply to our people in the Middle East during Ramadan - but not always.

“Whether we fast or not depends on the work we are doing, the people we are living among, and whether or not our fasting will make a difference to them,” explains one couple. “For instance, will our eating be a stumbling block for those who aren’t eating? If it is then we will fast.”

Although the general impression is that all Muslims fast during Ramadan, according to one of our workers not all do. “Most of the people in the area where I serve are nominal Muslims and they don’t fast,” she explains.

But that is not the norm in the Middle East. “You hardly ever meet anyone here who says they aren’t fasting,” says another MECO worker. “Ramadan has a lot to do with tradition and unity. Ramadan also gives people a chance to celebrate in a time of uncertainty. It is a bit like our Christmas – giving new clothes and gifts for children, having special food, visiting family and maybe doing something religious. Boys go out after eating and light fireworks (all month) and spend most nights outside. Girls get dressed up every night and wait for visitors or go visiting. At night the streets are busy and you see women in groups in the malls until after midnight.”

The festive side of Ramadan is less noticeable during the day, according to another worker, who has spent more than two decades in the Middle East. She says as people fast, tempers become frayed, arguments and fights can break out in the streets and the traffic becomes worse than normal the hour before sundown, as everyone rushes to get home before the end of each day’s fast.

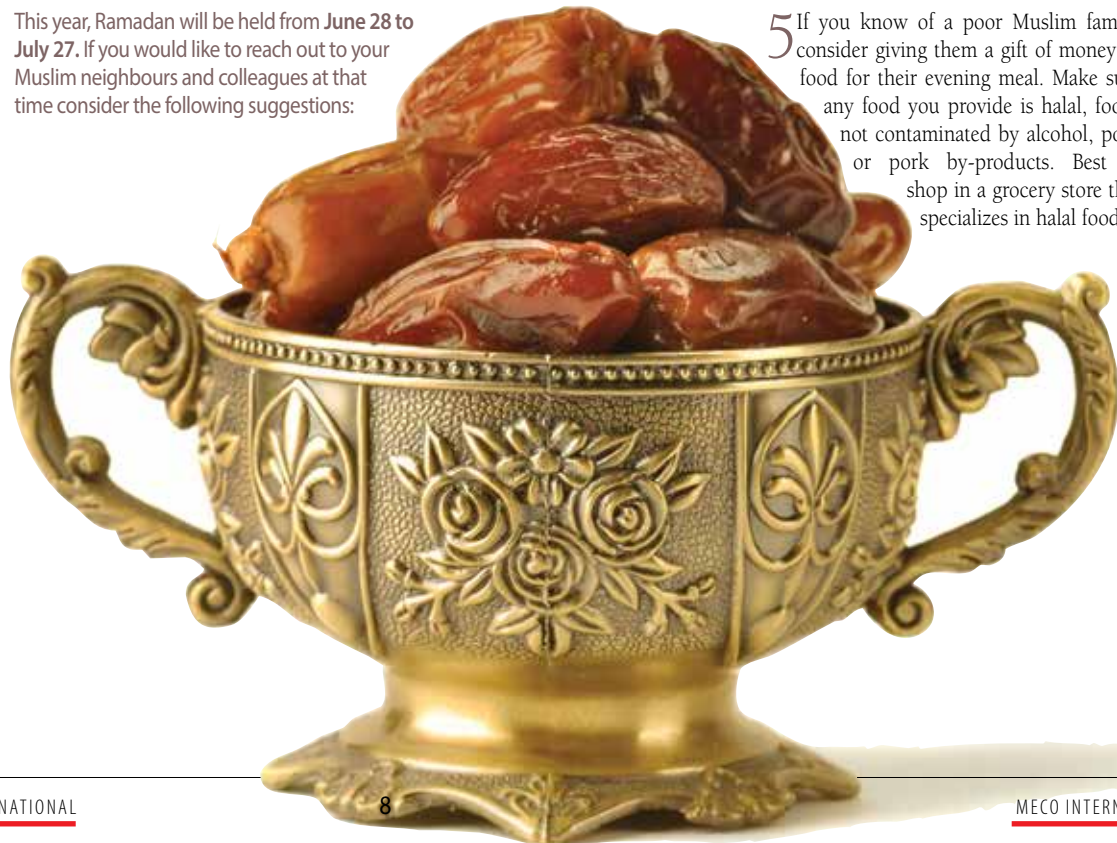
For her, Ramadan is a time when she does more visiting than usual. “My closest friends warmly invite me to break the daily fast with them as often as I can. When invited to iftar, the meal that breaks the fast, I make

sure that I arrive on time. If I am unavoidably delayed, I phone and tell my friends that I’m on my way but not to wait for me before beginning their meal.”

She notes that for some people, Ramadan is not just a time of custom and religious obligation but a time when they are really trying to reach out to God and to please Him. “That’s why in the midst of the visiting, I have to keep reminding myself of the importance of focused prayer; that the God of love will reveal Himself to those who are searching.”

Two of her colleagues agree. “During Ramadan, we’ll be lifting this part of the world up to our Father.”

This year, Ramadan will be held from **June 28 to July 27**. If you would like to reach out to your Muslim neighbours and colleagues at that time consider the following suggestions:



1 Pray for your Muslim neighbours and colleagues during Ramadan. Pray that they will come to know Jesus. Prayer guides for Ramadan are available from two Christian websites: www.30-days.net and www.30daysprayer.com

2 Read up on the differences between Christianity and Islam. Ask your pastor/minister to recommend reading material for you. A resource list is available on the Fellowship of Faith to Muslims website: www.ffmpega.org

3 Don’t intentionally eat or drink in front of Muslim colleagues and neighbours. Be sensitive to the fact that they may be feeling hungry or thirsty.

4 If you are invited to a Muslim friend’s home for iftar (the evening meal when the daily fast is broken), take along a small gift of sweets. Watch your table manners and follow the example of your hosts. This time of visiting may open the way for discussions about prayer, fasting and Jesus, so be prepared to share Jesus’ teachings.

5 If you know of a poor Muslim family, consider giving them a gift of money or food for their evening meal. Make sure any food you provide is halal, foods not contaminated by alcohol, pork or pork by-products. Best to shop in a grocery store that specializes in halal food.

RAMADAN FACTS

■ Ramadan is considered the holiest month in the Islamic calendar, which is a lunar calendar. It commemorates the time when it is said that the Prophet Mohammed received the first revelation regarding the Qur’an.

■ The dates for Ramadan vary from year to year, generally 11 days earlier than the previous year. This year Ramadan will be held from June 28 to July 27. It will begin and end with the first sighting of the new moon.

■ With the exception of children, the elderly and the infirm, Muslims are expected to fast from eating and drinking during the daylight hours of Ramadan. Fasting for the 30 days of Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, which Muslims believe they must carry out during their lifetime. Generally a meal, called *suhoor*, is taken just before sunrise. Each day’s fast ends at sunset with a meal called, *iftar*. Iftar begins by eating dates and drinking water; it can be a simple meal or a banquet for a large number of people.

■ After eating the evening meal, many Muslims will go shopping or visit with friends and relatives late into the night.

■ The holiest night of the year for Muslims occurs during Ramadan. Called *Laylat al-Qadr* (the night of decree or measures) it is the night Muslims believe the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed. It’s also known as the *Night of Power*, and is a very significant moment to pray for Muslim friends as they seek God.

■ The end of Ramadan is marked by three days of feasting and celebration called *Eid al-Fitr*, which means the “Festival of Breaking the Fast”. During Eid food is donated to the poor and people wear their best clothes – usually new. It is also a time of giving gifts to children and close relatives and for forgiving and forgetting disputes.



Close encounters of a different kind

The Encounter Team is a unique trip that MECO organizes annually for 18-35 year-olds. Designed to enable participants to immerse themselves in Middle Eastern culture, the four week trip also gives them an opportunity to serve a church as volunteers in a children's programme where English is taught and the love of Christ is shared. The following is an interview with one of last year's team members:

Why did you go on Encounter Team?

I wanted to work with children in the Middle East. Encounter offered this unique opportunity. I'm drawn to opportunities that give me the opportunity to teach Christ in areas of the world where He is widely unknown. It's possible that God may lead me into future work in the Middle East in some way so I wanted to expand my knowledge and experience of the Middle East.

What did you learn about the Middle East and its people?

It's very different in this part of the world: the sounds, the smells, the people, the atmosphere, etc. But the homes that we were welcomed into were wonderful. The people were very hospitable and generous to us and happy to have us in their homes.

What did the trip teach you about serving the Church in the Middle East?

I learned a lot about partnerships between Western churches and Middle Eastern churches. The programme we put on for the children could not have been done without this partnership. We needed each other to make the programme successful. Serving in humility and honouring the people who serve this church year round is something that was emphasized. It was a real privilege to serve with our Arab brothers and sisters.



What was it like working with a team of people from different countries? How did you bond together?

It was a great experience to serve with people from different countries. We had a lot of fun bonding with roommates and other team members through devotions and prayer, meal times, games, touring, and encouraging one another. We were blessed with a team that blended well together and worked well together.

What did you learn from the Middle Eastern people you met - adults and children?

Both the children and the adults were very welcoming, loving, and affectionate. They are very family focused and offering hospitality is important to them. They served us with great generosity.

What were the highlights of the trip for you?

Working with the children and the wonderful assistants in my classroom were the highlights of this trip. Seeing the Lord at work in this place and children learning about Jesus and giving their lives to Him was the best part.

Were there any low points?

It was hard to adjust to losing some freedoms that I've gotten used to having, such as being able to walk down the street at any time of day alone and not stand out or have unpleasant comments made to me.

How did your friends and family react when they heard you were going to the Middle East?

My parents serve the Lord in the Middle East so they were very supportive of me going.

Were you ever afraid while you were in the Middle East?

I didn't experience any fear. I knew we were covered in prayer and that our team was completely in God's hands.

You have been on other short term trips. How was the Encounter Team different?

Encounter brought our team into closer contact with the people of this country than any other team I've been on. We worked alongside these people and were welcomed into their homes as well. It was such a privilege to meet so many wonderful brothers and sisters who serve the Lord faithfully in Jordan. Encounter immerses you more into the culture and allows you to experience more of the country and its people.

Would you recommend the Encounter Team to others?

I would recommend Encounter to anyone who loves children and is passionate about teaching Jesus to the next generation. This is a great experience for those who want to connect with the international church and be part of what God is doing. You come away with a widened worldview and new perceptions about the Middle East. This experience will take you out of your comfort zone and teach you complete reliance upon the Lord. That's what brought our team through the experience.

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

If you, or someone you know, would like to join an Encounter Team, contact your MECO office or visit: www.aboutmeco.org/encounter.

■ Please pray for this year's Encounter Team, which will be held from July 9 – August 7. Pray for the organizers and the participants.

■ Please pray to the Lord of the Harvest for more people to "encounter" the Middle East.



The opportunities listed on this page are samples of how people can serve churches and ministries in the Middle East. If you sense God calling you to this part of the world you can be sure He has work for you to do. 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

Opportunities to Serve

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 programmes in July and August.

Qualifications: Internationally recognized with experience
Minimum service: 1–2 years (full-time), 1–2 months July and August
Language: English, willingness to learn Arabic

REHABILITATION WORKER

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

PHYSIOTHERAPISTS, SPEECH LANGUAGE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS

Qualifications: Experience preferred
Minimum Service: 1 year
Language: English and willingness to learn Arabic
Location: Various countries

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ADVOCACY WORKER

Providing support for persecuted Christians
Qualifications: International law, human rights, public policy
Minimum Service: 4 years minimum
Language: English, Arabic

THEOLOGICAL TRAINER

Qualifications: Post Graduate Degree in Theology
Minimum service: 3 years
Language needed: English, Arabic required if tutoring
Location: Jordan

DAY CARE WORKER/TRAINER

Help at a day care centre for children of migrant workers
Qualifications: Any qualification in pre-school care
Minimum Service: 3 months–1 year
Language needed: English
Location: Lebanon

DOCTORS, NURSES, MIDWIVES – FOR HOSPITALS, CLINICS

Qualifications: Internationally recognized with experience
Minimum service: 1–2 years
Language: English, willingness to learn Arabic
Location: Various countries

TEACHER

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

ENGLISH TEACHER FOR ADULTS

Qualifications: TOEFL or CELTA and willingness to learn Arabic
Minimum service: 1 year

For more information about these opportunities call your local MECO Office or visit:
www.aboutmec.org/opportunities
Please note that MECO volunteers raise their support in order to serve.