



meco

MAGAZINE | Issue 3, 2014

international

Finding
refreshment
and
perspective

Includes: Conference notes



North American perspective



Playing to learn



Finding refreshment and perspective

What happens when MECO holds a conference?
What does a well-known Christian songwriter think of MECO?
How do Muslims view Christians?

You'll find the answers to these questions and more as you read through this issue. We hope the articles will give you insight into MECO as an organization, as well as a clearer understanding of the issues some of our friends in the Middle East face.

We also hope the stories will inspire you and that they will encourage you to pray for the Church in the Middle East, for the people serving there, and for those who serve in our national offices.

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

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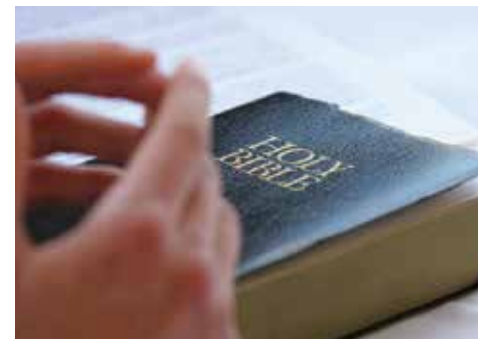
The view from here



We're giving thanks for a great week in July, when almost all our MECO colleagues met for our international conference. The week was soaked in prayer, both for one another and particularly for our Middle Eastern friends who face so many challenges and opportunities at the moment.

We met first to find refreshment and perspective. Most of us are stretched where we are, some are stressed, and some colleagues in the region need significant time out to recover and review. A powerful combination of word and music touched us all. Ben van Rensburg has lived in the region for over twenty years, and expounded 1 Peter with many insights from inside. Graham Kendrick, a long-established singer-songwriter, led us gently yet firmly into the presence of the Lord. It was great to receive such capable and clear ministry.

Peter was a key letter for my wife, Helen, and me when we lived in Egypt. Cathedral Bible study groups read it in the months before the uprising of January 2011. Peter's focus is on what Christ has done for us that we couldn't do for ourselves. This was a timely fixed point when the turmoil came. Peter also sets out Christ's example when under pressure, which sustained us through a turbulent time. We live in two places at



once, secure in Christ yet scattered in the world, and 1 Peter 2:23 shows Jesus entrusted himself to the one who judges justly; we trust God too.

Valuable Middle East perspective came from Elie Haddad of the Arab Baptist Seminary in Beirut. The picture is rapidly changing. People from majority backgrounds are asking questions and following Jesus as never before. As they do, a whole new world of authentic expressions of Christian community is opening up.

Then we talked about futures. Worldwide prayers for labourers in the harvest are being answered globally, with people coming from the East and the South. We in MECO are almost all Northerners and Westerners: what's our part in these new movements? Patterns of outreach are changing, from the "full-time supported" models we've grown up with to using work as ministry and exploring new ways to live in the region. Collaboration is key among agencies like ours. This is a crucial time to encourage brothers and sisters in the Middle East as they respond to overwhelming change and take it as a time to reach out. And we have a vital role in telling their story, to challenge churches in the countries we come from to pray and give to support their witness to Christ.

During the week, we went back to our true home in Genesis 1, and explored how to build resilience for the journey from Isaiah 52-55.

Finally, we commissioned and sent one another out – to continue serving alongside Middle East Christians, churches and agencies as they respond to change and as they pray and embrace pressure as Gospel opportunity.

Mike Parker
International Director

Exceeding expectations

by **Helen Parker**

If you'd attended MECO's international conference the first week in July expecting nourishing Bible exposition, spirit-renovating worship, chance to reconnect with old friends and make new ones, news from far and wide, an insider's perception of current trends in the Middle East and a chance to discuss pertinent issues, you certainly wouldn't have been disappointed.

The conference, held in Istanbul, was a time of encouragement, refreshment and stimulation.

We arrived from our work in the Middle East and our six national offices. We lapped up sensitive expositions on 1 Peter from Ben van Rensburg, who pastors a Turkish church. We were privileged to have Graham Kendrick lead us musically and introduce us to Psalm surfing, a chance to sing through Psalms following his lead.

The Middle East perspective was given by Elie Haddad, President of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. Clearly not given to waffling, he offered his own succinct view of local unrest, the future of the Church and outlining the situations some of his graduating students face upon returning to their home countries and communities.

The conference was also a chance for MECO colleagues to share about their work. Their stories were

mixed. They gave heart-breaking accounts of refugees fleeing, not only from war and political upheavals, but from violent families and communities, and seemingly impossible situations. Others told of people who had met with the Lord and were progressing well. Some, it seems, had come to faith independently, but now need our support and prayers.

Some of our members are already working alongside people from other companies, and the possibility of MECO collaborating with other organizations was outlined and then discussed in some detail.

Was it all serious stuff? The hilarity of the swimmers, measuring who could last the longest in an underwater handstand, proved it wasn't! There were lots of sunrise and sunset beach ambles and plenty of late-night games, not to mention the odd World Cup match with Turkish commentary.

Some took up the opportunity to go on a half-day sight-seeing trip to three of Istanbul's famous landmarks. They visited the Blue Mosque, so named for its exquisite blue interior tiles, and the richly decorated Agia Sophia, originally built as a Cathedral, then a Mosque, and finally a museum which reflects its 1,500 year history. The tour was rounded off with the inevitable visit to the Grand Bazaar, where people haggled over the price of souvenirs. Six made the dubious decision to go to a carpet-making workshop, where they were treated to apple tea and a hard sell. The astronomical suggested prices prevented purchases.

Significant MECO family members were absent from the conference for reasons of health, distance or commitments, and sorely missed. Several families had left their children in the care of grandparents or friends, and those children were also missed but three young boys, all under the age of 10, kept the flag flying. During the first session each morning they were involved in listening to Bible stories, and participating in activities and games. The Bible hero was Gideon, developing from a frightened lad hiding in a winepress, to a faith-filled warrior, leading his army to victory with a mere 300 God-chosen soldiers. The boys' trumpets were plastic whistles, and their flaming torches were made of cardboard toilet tissue rolls and coloured tissue paper.

At the end of the conference, MECO's international board and field leaders met and wrestled with company-changing decisions.

When the time to depart arrived, everyone was aware of the variety of situations to which they were returning. Some were taking a longer break in Turkey or in their home countries. Others were going straight back into the heat, noise and upheaval of the Middle East, where each day is uncertain, but where everyone talks about God, and faith is an integral part of daily life. What a contrast to those returning to the spiritually cold climate of materialism and ambition, where eyebrows hit the ceiling if God's name is anything but an exclamation of surprise.

In short, we left deeply grateful for a week exceeding all our expectations. Regardless of the challenges we face, the conference nourished us for some time to come.

Risk is right

by **Mike Parker**

Our conference hotel reminded me every day that we're called to live lives of risk with Christ. Lighting in accommodation floors was environmentally friendly, triggered by movement. When the lift stopped and the doors opened, the landing was dark. My instinct was to look for the light switch or wait for the lights to come on.

Then I realised. *You have to move into the darkness before the lights come on.* And they did.

The leaders of God's people in Joshua 3 had **to risk** getting their feet wet before the Jordan river parted in front of them. Peter had **to risk** getting out of the boat before he discovered he could walk on water (Matthew 14).

Risk is our business **as Christians and as MECO workers**. Risk is our calling. John Piper puts it like this in his book *Risk is Right*:

"Every follower of Christ is more than a conqueror. This is the promise that empowers us to take risks for the sake of Christ. It is not the impulse of heroism, or the lust for adventure, or the courage of self-reliance, or the need to earn God's favour. It is simple trust in Christ – that in him God will do everything necessary so that we can enjoy making much of him forever. Every good poised to bless us, and every evil arrayed against us, will in the end help us boast only in the cross, magnify Christ, and glorify our Creator. Faith in these promises frees us to risk and to find in our own experience that it is better to lose our life than to waste it."

*John Piper's Risk is Right is published by Crossway
– www.crossway.org*

SHARING MORE THAN A SONG

Graham Kendrick, internationally-known worship leader and songwriter (think Shine Jesus Shine, The Servant King) was part of MECO's recent international conference.

As well as leading daily morning worship, Graham introduced MECO to Psalm Surfing. The improvised call and response Psalm singing is something which has to be experienced to be fully appreciated. "It's creative, it's easy to participate in, it's fun and most of all it helps us to engage with God through His word," says Graham, adding, "Psalms are very visceral, very physical, sing it out, chant it out. 'What does the Psalm mean?' we ask. It means what it says!"

Quoting Athanasius, Graham said, "Most of Scripture speaks to us. The Psalms speak for us."

Graham's gift of music inspired conference participants – who in their turn inspired him: he departed saying he would be encouraging Christian songwriters to write more mission-focused songs.

The following are Graham's thoughts about the conference and MECO:

How did you end up at the MECO Conference?

A couple from my home church raised the possibility. Mike Parker passed by and we explored it further. I thought, everybody is aware of what is going on in the Middle East including Syria and Iraq, and you can feel so helpless. But then I thought, well at least I can encourage some of the people that are serving there. I've had contact with many such groups over the years. The London church I was in for 20 years had many people working in the Middle East, so I had



an appreciation for the kinds of situations people are involved in and the need for refreshment and encouragement.

What were your initial impressions of MECO?

I take things as they are: this is the people, let's get on with it. As you spend more time with people you get to know what makes them tick. You discover there is a vast depository of wisdom and experience in the room, people that have walked the talk. I saw a sprinkling of younger folks in what was predominately an older age group – all the more reason to try and bring refreshment and encouragement to people who have been on the front line for many years. For some of the single folks it must be particularly tough way off in some remote place under pressures we can't even imagine in the West. They cope marvellously – but it does take its toll on our frail humanity.

It's great that MECO's network offers support from experienced people to watch over and care, and make sure if anyone is struggling that they're not left too long and too late.

You've seen many agencies, MECO being one of the smaller ones. Is small good?

You can't generalise, something small that has been around a long time, should we let it die, or might it shrink then burst into life again? There is always a temptation to keep things going just because they have become very familiar, but as ever, the task is to hear from God with a complete openness. God is always doing new things, and often that new thing can be the renewal of an old thing. Where there is a wealth of experience and wisdom, somehow, somewhere that needs to be retained. At the same time it can be a challenge for people who have done things a certain way for a long time to find that the world has actually changed and what pertained 10-20 years ago (or even last year in this changing world!) may no longer apply. So there has to be a willingness to see what new thing God is doing, and seeking to be part of it. Sometimes that means getting behind the next generation even when they do things in a way that doesn't come naturally to you. When I see younger people doing things which might look stupid or ignorant to me, I think, hey hang on, step back and look at the 25 year-old me and the stuff I was doing! We have to extend the same grace that was extended to us when we were green and inexperienced, thought we knew everything and had all the answers. We need grace, humility, flexibility.

The following is a report on the presentation Elie Haddad gave at MECO's international conference in July.

What would Christians think if they were asked to join a community of people considered to be immoral, aggressive and worshippers of more than one god?

If you think that's an outrageous request then you have some inkling of how Muslims feel when they are encouraged to become Christians.

For many, their understanding of Christianity has been influenced by Hollywood culture, the history of the Crusades and misunderstandings about the Trinity says Elie Haddad, President of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. He adds that evangelical churches in Lebanon are also equated with Jehovah Witnesses and Zionists.

According to Elie it is time for Christians in the Middle East to rethink the way they do church. "Everything we do in the church is patterned after the West. Who said a church in the Middle East has to look like one in Texas? What is so biblical about pulpits and pews?" he asked.

Rethinking church could also mean not following the traditional model of extracting Muslims who come to faith in Christ from their communities and transferring them into Christian communities. That model, Elie said, prevents them from being witnesses to their family and friends.

When asked to comment on this, one of the people attending the conference told Elie that in Egypt most Christians recommend that believers from a Muslim background not tell their families they've come to faith for three years. That time period enables them to prove that they have not become immoral and as a result their families are more open to their decision to follow Jesus.

Reflecting on the challenges that Muslims face when they explore Christianity, Elie said they must consider:

- ➔ Their satisfaction with their own faith, which they are taught not to question
- ➔ The lack of respect Muslims have for Christians

- ➔ Zionist Christianity (unbridled support for Israel)
- ➔ The unforgivable sin of worshipping more than one God
- ➔ Islamic laws against apostasy
- ➔ Moving from a majority community to a minority one
- ➔ Lack of tolerance toward slow growth in their Christian faith
- ➔ The danger/persecution that faces those who leave Islam because of the apostasy laws
- ➔ Insufficient spiritual nutrition
- ➔ Cultural challenges
- ➔ Grief over the loss of community and heritage



Elie noted that Muslims living in North Africa face different challenges because of the lack of existing Christian communities there. "Someone announcing that they have become a Christian in North Africa does not carry the same cultural and historical connotations as in the Middle East," he explained.

According to Elie, it is the churches made up of believers from Muslim backgrounds that are the future of Christianity not only in North Africa but also in the Middle East.

As for traditional churches in the Middle East, he said most had been complacent and in survival mode and have found it difficult to embrace Muslims. He said the challenges these churches have been facing are:

- ➔ Their lack of passion and love for Muslims, viewing them with suspicion
- ➔ Traditional models of doing mission
- ➔ Fear of Islam
- ➔ Lack of knowledge regarding the proclamation of the Gospel

However as a result of the Arab Spring and the crises taking place throughout the region in its wake, Elie said churches are being transformed. "Muslims have become disillusioned with Islam and churches in the Middle East are waking up. Lebanese Christians are serving Syrians, whom they considered their enemies. Churches are caring for Muslim refugees and pastors are changing the way they preach and teach. Having more Muslims in our congregations is forcing us to change our thinking. Suddenly church is about drawing people to Jesus."

- MECO's priority is to mobilize and equip people and prayer for the Middle East.
- MECO's International Director, Mike Parker, recently made his first visit to the United States and Canada. It was time well spent in countries that have sent gifted people to the Middle East.
- They are also two nations where our national directors, Keith Bateman and Linda Haist experience very different opportunities and challenges. Here is what they have to share.

by Linda Haist

MECO Canada has neither might nor power. Our office is staffed by a full-time director (me) and one very part-time book-keeper. Our budget is tiny. We have no tangible assets.

As in other western countries, interest in overseas work is waning in Canada. Most congregations aren't interested in serving outside their own communities.

So, why keep going? Every year, for the last nine years, our board and staff have spent a day in retreat, seeking God's will. Individually, we ask the question: Should we continue? The Lord's answers have always dovetailed and led us to continue.

In John 15:5 Jesus told His disciples: *I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

This verse has been the key to our work. Branches don't dictate to the Vine. Our part, as Christian writer Henry Blackaby says, is to watch where God is working and work alongside Him. The importance of this can't be overlooked. Today, the pattern of global work



During the last 10 years something unique has been happening in Canada that has had a positive effect on our work: a growing desire among agency representatives to collaborate for the Lord's sake. As a result we pray together, organize and go on speaking tours together, plan local events for pastors and lay people and share information and resources. In June, the executive directors of 15 agencies met to pray and support one another and to explore ways of working together.

and the people involved are changing dramatically. The major question we face is: Where do we fit in this fast-changing scene?

Sometimes our work seems impossible. But it is in those times that we see the Lord do the impossible. He grants wisdom. He arranges opportunities for advancing our work. He draws us to people and people to us – to pray, to go to the Middle East and to support those who are going.

The Lord also sends people to help us when we cannot help ourselves. For example, last year MECO International needed to have a video edited. The need came to our attention. We couldn't help, but an editor at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), who happens to attend my church, offered to do the editing for free.

A church in Toronto, Canada's largest city, is encouraging that spirit of unity. Its vision is to create a permanent centre where agencies can share what God is doing around the world with the people of Toronto and those who visit the city. There will be an exhibit area, meeting rooms for special events and shared office space for agencies. This dream won't become a reality for four or five years but MECO Canada has been invited to be a part of it.

This is an amazing opportunity that only God could orchestrate. Not by might, nor by power but by His Spirit.

by J Keith Bateman

Anyone who is in touch today with the work of agencies like MECO knows that things have changed, in some cases significantly, over the years. The mandate, of course, is the same. But just about everything else isn't. Here are just a few examples:

Short-term rules. In the past short-term opportunities were one to two years in length. Today "short term" is more likely to mean 1-2 weeks. Like it or not, the challenge we have is to find opportunities that fit this new reality.

Agencies do not rule. Churches do. Instead of working through the agencies, increasing numbers of churches are now sending out workers through their own arrangements with local churches in the receiving countries.

Teams are tops. Instead of applying and going out as an independent entity, the trend today is for prospective workers to train as a team in their home country/church, and then go out and work together as a team.

Get a job. Many of today's recruits are either reluctant, or finding it increasingly difficult, to raise the support they need. Hence many, particularly those going to limited-access countries, are finding it better, not only for their support, but for ministry opportunities, to go as tent-makers.

The welcome mat is not out.

We certainly know this to be true of limited access countries. But it is also becoming true of countries which in the past welcomed virtually anyone. Residence permits today are more likely to be issued only to those the country considers valuable to their economic development.

Language acquisition is becoming passé. One of the casualties of short-term work is that fewer workers have either the desire, or sense a need, to acquire skill in language. The challenge here is to demonstrate that even a rudimentary understanding of a local language better equips one for service.

Big is usually better. There are thousands of agencies out there, many of them little more than mom and pop operations with tax-exempt status and a computer. But only rarely can a small operation provide the training, support, fellowship, supervision and accountability structures that larger agencies are more likely to offer.

Reaching the lost. Over 90% of today's Christian workforce, for better or for worse, labours in already reached areas. On the one hand this is a testimony to the effectiveness of our overseas enterprise in the past century. On the other hand, it may suggest a need to reassess our priorities and reassign our workforce.

Social trumps spiritual.

The emphasis today tends more toward dealing with social ills than with spiritual ills—with showing love rather than sharing the gospel message. While the former is important, we must never forget that "faith comes by hearing," as well as by seeing.

These are but a few of the many changes we are seeing today—some of them good, others not quite so good. Either way, they are realities that agencies must come to grips with, or risk becoming irrelevant.



Teaching children to play opens the door to learning

Why did you create the centre?

We had been working with the government on a community based rehabilitation programme in several villages for years but felt we had done as much as we could within the government's limited support levels.

I really felt God was leading us to concentrate our input. It was not so much about how many families we could serve but whether we were serving as well as we could for the development of their children.

We also wanted to set up a centre that could be used as a model for the government and other private ventures. Learning through play is a very new concept here. We wanted to set up this centre using play and fun as our keys to enabling the children to learn and develop. We also wanted to include a way of sharing our faith and God's love more openly with the families and to train the mums and children using Christian moral and ethic perspectives.

How many families have children enrolled?

Our numbers vary depending on the time of year it is but we currently have 16 families registered. The children range in age from three to eight years old. We also try and follow-up with children who were attending and for various reasons haven't continued.

Three years ago one of our workers opened a learning centre for young children with disabilities—a place where playing is learning and learning is fun. Here is her story:



What kind of progress are the children making?

Working with children with special needs means that generally progress can be small and slow but it really excites me to see these small changes. Each child is different and our aims vary for each. For example, a boy who has a mild form of cerebral palsy was with us for two years. He progressed through our reading programme very quickly and he now goes to a mainstream school

with support from an extra teacher who helps a small group of five children with special needs.

Progress with a girl with severe learning difficulties isn't so evident. But I have loved watching her as her confidence in interacting with people has developed. She loves helping and serving others. To assist her communication we have taught her and her mum some sign language.

How do the children react as they learn?

It's always an encouragement to see the pride and joy on children's faces when they have accomplished something new, or when they have completed a level of the reading programme and we tell them they are going to the next level, or when they have made something themselves or when they have sung a song by themselves. I love the time at the end of the school year when we present the children's work files to them and they look through all their colouring papers, worksheets and crafts and their faces shine with delight. It's a moment I treasure

How do their parents react to their children's progress?

Sometimes the mums don't always notice the things I see so it's good to be able to help them see these achievements. Sometimes their expectations are way too unrealistic or they think their children are useless and can't do anything. In both cases it's encouraging to see



them change and focus on what their child can do rather than what they can't. It sometimes takes the mums a while to feel comfortable with our learning style.

For instance, one mum after six months of attending the centre asked me when I was going to start teaching her daughter. What she meant was when were we going to sit at desks and rote learn letters and numbers. In response I asked her how many colours her daughter knew six months ago. She answered, "None."
"And now," I asked.
"Red, blue, green and yellow....so four."

I asked how many shapes she had known.
"None."
"And now," I asked.
"Circle, square and triangle."

I asked her whether she knew if things were big and small before. She replied, "No."
"And now," I asked.
"Yes, she knows."

I asked her if she could read before. "No. Now she can read five words." So I sat back confidently and said, "See your daughter has learnt all this through playing."

I assumed the mother would make the connection. But she replied, "Yes that's great but when are you going to teach her?" Some things take longer to understand and change than others!

You are hoping to start a programme for older children.

The centre has now been running for three years and we have a few children who have been coming since we started. We need the programme for them and the older children who are being referred to us. It's always sad to turn children away especially when I know there is nowhere else they can go. Our aim is to have one of the sessions running by September.

What are your needs?

We could benefit from having another international person to work alongside our team of local women, who are believers, someone with pre-school experience or experience working with children with special needs.


Do you have any prayer requests regarding your work, specific children or the parents?

Lots! Here's a few

Team: Pray for the women and me as we meet together before the children come - to read the Bible and pray together. Pray that they will be so full of God's love and have so much joy in their salvation that they will want to share this publicly with others. This would have a huge impact on what we are doing and in their relationships with the mums. Pray too that they will hunger and thirst for God's word and be motivated to read it even when we are not together.

Parents: Pray that they will see the love we have for each other and for their children and will question why we do what we do and will seek the truth. Pray, too, that they will have the courage to practice what they see modelled in the centre at home and that the dads will be receptive to different ways of raising children. Pray that we will find a way to consistently connect with the dads.

Children: Pray for more children to come and to be able to consistently attend so that their development is more effective. We would like to open three mornings a week. Pray that the children will sense the love behind the centre and through the stories we share will come to know God.



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

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),
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

THEOLOGICAL TRAINER

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

ORPHANAGE YOUTH WORKER

Providing leadership and imparting life skills and assistance to street children and orphans

Qualifications: Teacher or youth worker qualification plus TEFL, TESL or CELTA
Language: English, with a commitment to learn Arabic
Minimum service: One academic year

CHURCH WORKER/GENERAL ASSISTANT

Helping with practical matters relating to various church ministries, as well as teaching Syrian refugee children, aged four to 14, English and mathematics
Qualifications: Teaching and administrative experience
Language: Some knowledge of Arabic
Minimum Service: Short or long term

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.aboutmeco.org/ opportunities
Please note that MECO volunteers raise their support in order to serve.*