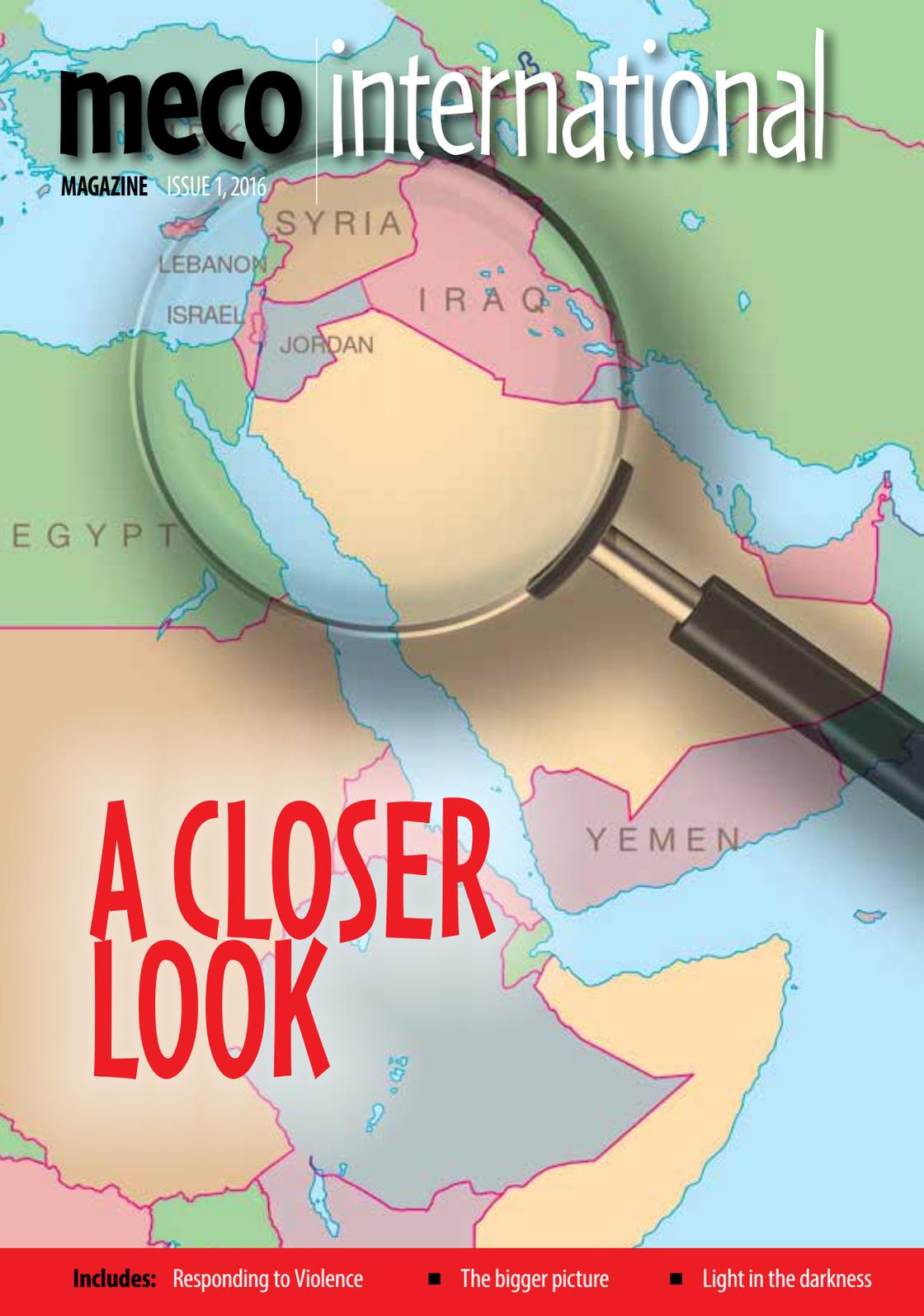


meco | international

MAGAZINE ISSUE 1, 2016



A CLOSER LOOK

Includes: Responding to Violence

■ The bigger picture

■ Light in the darkness

KEEPING YOU UP-TO-DATE AND AFFIRMING THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR ROLE IN THE MINISTRY OF MECO



A CLOSER LOOK

This issue of our magazine provides a closer look at what is happening in the Middle East from a Christian perspective. Some of the information comes from ministry leaders in the region but one article has been written by Richard Coombs, MECO Australia's director, who reflects on his recent visit to Jordan and Lebanon.

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

Please note that in some cases stock photos, pseudonyms* or initials have been used for security reasons

i If you would like to receive MECO's monthly prayer guide please 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.

Our mission is to support Middle East Christians in sharing the love of Jesus Christ.

This includes prayer, example, service, partnering with churches, training and development, and encouraging church planting.

Our strategy is to work in fellowship with Christians, churches and agencies in the Middle East, and we come as servants of God's Church in the Middle East.

Our priority is to mobilise and equip people and prayer for the Middle East.

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The view from here

We're going to need God's wisdom this year, perhaps more than ever.

Global leaders need wisdom as they wrestle to stop war in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya. These conflicts are connected, we're all involved, and recent attacks in significant world cities means we all have to deal with the consequences.

Our friends in Middle East churches and networks need wisdom. They recognise how serious their situation is, yet they see something more. Like the Wise Men in Matthew 2, they find God is ahead of them, working out His purposes for His people and for the nations. They also know life isn't going to get any easier. The church leaders we work with are determined to resist the tide of emigration; they urge their congregations to engage with politics and society in the name of Christ, and their churches reach out to people of all backgrounds.

MECO needs wisdom as our conversations with another agency move forward. The vision to strengthen ministry in the Middle East is passionately shared, the chemistry between us is exciting, and from both our points of view the timing is amazing. Both our international boards meet at the beginning of March, and we're expecting to make a commitment to move forward together to reshape our operations for the Middle East. I can't wait to tell you that story, but I'll have to wait a little longer.

Meanwhile, our colleagues in the region need wisdom as they serve with Middle East churches and their leaders. They love the people they live and work with, but have to steer through the obligations of their chosen cultures and the concerns expressed by family and friends. Some face crossroads decisions this year about how best to use their skills and continue to be involved at a complicated time.

When people ask me about what's happening in the Middle East, I often use the analogy of a railway line. One of the rails is the questioning of inherited faith across the region, which is growing and fuelled by strong reactions to what's being done in the name of religion. We keep hearing that interest in Christ is wider than it has ever been.

The second rail is pressure, which will increase as more people turn to Christ. It's no accident that theological seminaries in the Middle East have core courses on the theology and practice of dealing with persecution.

For us, both rails mean this is exactly the time to support and encourage Christians in the region. Our thirty-five colleagues aim to stay and serve, live and work alongside national Christians, and encourage them in their witness. They know that true wisdom is found fully in Christ.

Mike Parker
International Director





Responding to violence

The November attacks on Paris by IS (Islamic State) were preceded a few days earlier by IS suicide bombings in Beirut, which killed more than 40 people.

The day after Beirut was bombed one of our colleagues wrote saying it was the first time since the onset of the Syrian civil war that Lebanon has been attacked, and it has left the fragile country in shock and fear. In his email he noted that the purpose of such attacks is to generate a reaction. “The question for us is: How should a follower of Christ react?” he said.

At the time his wife was preparing a sermon for a congregation in her care. The church had been studying Judges, a book of the Bible that records many comparable acts of violence. His wife’s sermon was on the story of the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19. She noted that:

■ Violence changes us. The norm is that violence damages us but the message of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ is that it is possible

to pass through violence and bring new life.

■ Violence dehumanizes us. It is shocking to see the comments on the local news websites which use terms such as “animals” to describe both the perpetrators and the victims of tragedy. And yet the Scriptures teach us that all are created in God’s image, all are loved by God, all are “children of Adam” our “brothers and sisters” in humanity.

■ Violence causes us to distort the truth. There is a strong tendency to divide the world into the “good guys” and the “bad guys”, and exaggerate the evils of the other while minimizing or even dismissing our own evil. As Christians we are called to acknowledge the truth of the other’s evil and our own. This is a stepping stone to active love towards our enemies and the building of reconciled relationships.

■ Violence too easily “releases” us from our moral obligations. Because of the evil done by the other we can quickly justify evil acts of our

own, rather than fulfilling Christ’s call to pray, to love, and to serve.

■ Violence does not take into account the long-term implications. In fear we can quickly make rash and emotional decisions without considering how our actions might create major long-term damage to ourselves, our communities, and our nations.

At the end of his email our colleague pointed out that violence is not unique to Lebanon. “In your own context violence in various forms is also a daily reality. May God strengthen us all to live and act in accord with the rich life that follows Christ in love and truth and peace,” he wrote. “As we ourselves live in this region and as we train emerging leaders serving in this part of the world we long to respond to violence with grace and truth.”

Two days after he sent his email Paris was attacked.

Please pray that our colleague’s prayer will be answered!

In their own words

In December 2015, at the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo, Middle East Christians celebrated the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Van Dyck translation of the Bible. Eli Smith started the project in 1848, and when ill-health took him in 1857, Cornelius Van Dyck worked with language professor Butros al-Boustani and others to complete it.

The Van Dyck translation was the first Bible in the Arab World to be printed on a large scale. At that time, literacy was spreading, and it thus became accessible to all Christians who up to then were only able to listen to the Scriptures in church.

Later in December, also in Cairo, MECO leaders met leaders from a global agency to talk about partnership to develop ministry in the region. Our hosts were the International Bible Society (IBS), Biblica, and their regional leader gave us his perspective on the present situation.

Things are changing fast

So many nations are involved in the present struggles that it seems like a third world war is happening. The new face of the majority religion around us is emerging, a violent, ugly, inhuman face. Western Muslims say, “That is not Islam.” Which is right? It looks to us as though this religion is crumbling from within as the truth about it is being exposed.

“At the same time Christians and churches are under real pressure. In this climate, many churches just see and react, and others are barely surviving. Buying land and building churches and conference centres is a priority. Other churches, and IBS, see this as a time of opportunity.

“Our strategy is to make Scripture available in print and digitally in a modern Arabic translation. Some time ago, we embarked on The Joseph project: to print double the numbers of Bibles and Gospels we needed and store them ready for the opportunities there now are. We’re publishing and exporting like never before. We’ve sent over 150,000 Arabic Scriptures to Europe in the last six weeks, and we’ve been printing in Europe in Arabic, Kurdish, Dutch, German and English.

“We’re backing this up with a project called New Hope, serving Christians who are under severe pressure for their faith. Because many of their homes and businesses have been destroyed, we’re serving them in practical ways to help them rebuild and re-establish their work. We’re providing a new curriculum and teaching for children of Christian families who

lost their chance of education. And we’re developing local church leaders to create continuity in the work we’re doing. All three components are present in every village we work in, offering New Hope to our brothers and sisters.”

Making God’s word available

One of Egypt IBS’s most distinctive publications is the Gospel of Luke, available in both Arabic and English. It’s a “red letter” edition of the Gospel, but not with Jesus’ words highlighted as Westerners know it. Research revealed ninety-four words and concepts needed to be explained to Muslims, so those words are in red, and explained in the text. It’s a brilliant concept, one which could be adapted in any culture and setting.

Right from the start, it aims to help understanding. The title is, “The Life of Christ as God inspired Luke in the Holy Injil” – making sure readers understand that the focus is on Christ, not Luke. In Luke 1:30, the angel tells Mary she has “found favour with God”; favour is “a special blessing.” In the next verse, Jesus is identified as “called Isa in the Arab World.” In Luke 1:68, Zechariah rejoices that God “has come to his people and redeemed them”, which is explained as “paid ransom to release them from slavery.” In Luke 24:47, “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations,” “so that they may receive eternal life.”

Please pray that these Scriptures will make their way throughout the Middle East and across the world.

Lighting the darkness

The Arab World Evangelical Ministers' Association (AWEMA) aims "to equip and encourage indigenous believers in Arab countries to have a united and effective Christian presence through outreach, education and edifying ministries." Pastors and lay people long to see a unified, edified and autonomous Church in the Arab world that reflects Kingdom values as it serves communities and reaches out to others.

Founded 30 years ago, AWEMA brings Church and agency leaders together annually to consider challenges and responses to their work. The theme for the latest gathering was: Let your light shine before others. AWEMA is convinced that God has good news for "the people who walk in darkness." Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14-15 framed the week-long meetings: "A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house."

Each morning the consultation explored sources of spiritual darkness in the region. Speakers examined cultural and educational systems and the role of media in forming society, the challenge of getting involved in religious discourse, and the overwhelming power of poverty and illiteracy in fostering prejudice and anger.

Each afternoon and evening we heard of ten "Enlightening Projects", beacons

of Christian light in the darkness. Education with a clear Christian curriculum, community building and primary health care, and media initiatives all remain key elements of a strategy to support families and children and equip breadwinners in their work and businesses.

It was striking how many of the ten initiatives were cultural, using music, drama and the performing arts as vehicles to celebrate and introduce the gospel story to audiences throughout the region. For example, the Cairo Celebration Choir, led by Cairo Opera House maestro Nayer Nagui, sings traditional Arabic and Christian songs around Egypt, and, with Government support, represents Egypt at its best as they visit other countries.

AWEMA is agreed that as life in the Middle East becomes more complex, conventional methods of ministry need to be adapted to ensure long-term viability, authentic witness, lasting societal change and movements to Christ.

MECO was a founding member of AWEMA.



Music from the past

by Mike Parker

One of the privileges of living and working in the Middle East is the sense of being where the action is. It's very moving to live and work where Christians have been since the beginning and where Christian faith took root and gave the rest of us shape. It's also good to be in touch with the original debates and decisions taken by the emerging church.

We owe our friends in the Middle East a great deal for staying faithful and true to the faith through the centuries. At the beginning, they were misunderstood and hated. For some of the time, they were the majority. But for most of it, they've been under pressure as a minority.

What sustained the Church at the beginning? A biblical perspective, a godly world-view, and music. Music of course can go either way. In the third century, Arius nearly swept the board with his simplified views of Jesus as he wrote a

lot of the songs churches sang at the time. It took a doughty, non-musical Athanasius to fend off the attractions of Arius' teaching.

I've recently come across The Odes Project. It began in 2008, when a team of writers discovered first-century songs and poems. They invited teams of musicians to put them to music, and make them available on CD and MP3. They are an invaluable gateway back to first century Christianity.

I hope you find them as helpful as I have. They give us an insight into the joys and the pressures of early Christian life. Hauntingly beautiful, powerful, poignant, The Odes are like Psalms as they cover a range of emotions and bring them into the Lord's presence. They draw us closer to the Lord and deepen our faith and trust in him.

You can find out more, read the Odes and hear them set to music at:

<http://www.theodesproject.com>

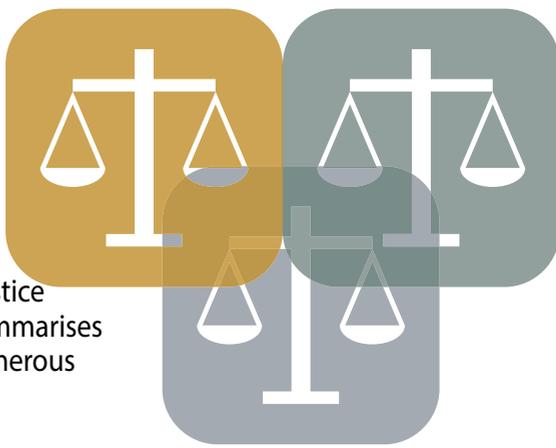
Ties that bind

Douglas Anderson was MECO's International Director at the time AWEMA was formed in 1975. He contributed to the conversations that led to the establishment of AWEMA and encouraged the association in its early days. In the 1990s, Douglas and his wife, Dulcie, set up a two-year training programme in cross-cultural ministry for AWEMA. They were also present at AWEMA's 25th anniversary celebration in 2010.



Douglas Anderson

THE BIGGER PICTURE



Two of our colleagues work with a leading agency advocating for justice in the Middle East. One of them summarises a recent consultation involving numerous local and international ministries.

During the meetings five common themes emerged:

■ *There is continued unprecedented openness to the gospel, opportunity, and growth – especially among refugee and internally displaced communities.*

■ *Most ministries said their greatest challenge is shortage of resources and local volunteers to meet these opportunities.*

■ *There was very strong consensus that believers should remain in their countries, primarily in order to impact their countries spiritually.*

■ *The church of the future will look very different from the church of the past, as many from the majority learn to follow Christ.*

■ *Opportunities arising from the refugee crisis have led many established churches to be far more outward-looking and to collaborate across denominational lines more than ever before.*

Key challenges also emerged, including responding to trauma, insufficient people and finance, the exodus

of Christians from the region, and the climate of security and political uncertainty. While recent years have seen a small number of groups fade away because of persecution, churches have engaged through compassionate humanitarian aid which then attracts refugees to attend church activities. Word-of-mouth invitations come from those already attending. Signs and wonders, especially miraculous answers to prayer, have also been a key factor in growth.

Integrating displaced people into the wider church family is an area of huge challenge. For practical reasons churches often have separate services for Iraqis, Syrians and Lebanese. While the services themselves are broadly similar, teaching has to be altered somewhat for these different audiences. Local volunteers are key to helping people feel involved.

Leaders are exhausted – there is a huge need to pray with and for them, and to equip emerging leaders to meet these challenges.

This is a time of openness and opportunity, and growing collaboration between ministries. The current context is described well in Matthew 24:4-14, and our friends are focusing on v14, the promise that the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations.

Quick quotes from the meetings:

"We need Syrian pastors to return to Syria."

"Those who don't work with refugees are missing something special – your faith grows!"

"Many are leaving but our priority is to stay and minister."

"I thank the Lord that although we lost everything we have found life in Christ."

"Our biggest challenge? We can't keep up!"

"My prayer for the church in Europe is that the influx of refugees would wake the church up, and that they would come alive as they grasp the opportunity to minister – just as has happened in Lebanon."

Reflections from Lebanon and Jordan

by Richard Coombs

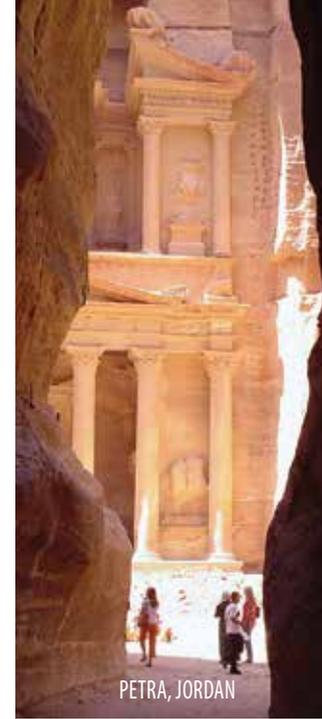
I have always admired our colleagues in the Middle East and hold them in the highest esteem. They live and serve in challenging places, in partnership with local churches, agencies and national believers. What makes them so special?

They are committed to serving both Christian and Muslim people of the region. To see their affection for people is humbling and challenging. They are also highly committed to learning the languages spoken in the region so they can communicate easily.

Life in another culture is not easy. Many of our colleagues have been in the Middle East for more than 10 years; some more than twenty years. I admire their endurance with respect to climate, language, the demands and obligations placed upon them. They've chosen to stay and face complicated and tough situations when it would be easier to leave (run away!) and find security in one's own culture.

Over the years, as I have visited the Middle East I have developed good friendships with national pastors and believers. I have always returned home both blessed and humbled by their dedication to serve God. Their perspectives and passions also challenge me.

I was recently in Jordan and Lebanon to film new MECO DVDs. The Middle Eastern leaders I met talked about this being 'God's time'. The current upheaval in Syria and Iraq has caused many believers to



PETRA, JORDAN

seek refuge in the West. Those who remain are committed to persevering through the difficult times for the sake of the gospel. Despite uncertainty and difficulty they are using this opportunity to introduce people to something better.

David says in Psalm 133:1, 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' I teach Early Church History at Melbourne School of Theology a couple of days each week, and it's a privilege to teach our beginnings with the Middle East in mind. The history of church life in the Middle East has not always been that of unity. With the current crisis that has enveloped the region it is heart-warming to see the way churches and leaders are co-operating; supporting and helping one another, working together for the Kingdom.

During part of the DVD filming, I sat in a small room, the residence of a refugee family from Syria - a grandmother, two daughters and a grandson. They talked of their expe-

riences – they had walked, carrying their only belongings, for three days and nights to safety in the Bekaa Valley. Before we could leave them, cups of hot tea, freshly picked dates and grapes were produced for us to enjoy. As I experienced their hospitality, the words of Matthew 25:35 came to mind: 'I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home.'

So, what of the future?

There was a sense of hopelessness in the eyes of refugee people I met: older people forced out of their homes and all that was familiar; children with little hope of education and employment, growing up bewildered by all that life has thrown at them in their short lives.

Yet, in the churches and among the believers I met, there was an over-riding optimism that God was in control and 'His purposes' were being worked out. They took heart from the words of Jesus, "...I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail..." (Matthew 16:18). I was constantly reminded of the last book of our Scriptures where, in the end, God wins!

Richard Coombs is the Director of MECO Australia.

MECO's two new videos are available through our representatives. The first focuses on Middle East Christian leaders' perspectives on the Middle East today, the stories of people who've been displaced, and the priorities of churches who are reaching out to them. The second has some of our colleagues telling of their experience of moving to the region and engaging with life and ministry there.

Servant leaders remembered for their humility

Solid and visionary church leadership is important to Middle Eastern churches. Two congregations recently mourned the passing of pastors who made major contributions to ministry in their countries and the region. We give thanks for Pastor Michel Rihan, 82, who led the National Baptist Church in Dawra, Beirut, and Pastor Menes Abd el Nour, 85, who was the leader of Qasr el Dobbara Presbyterian Church in Cairo

Colin White, former Principal of the Lebanese Evangelical School at Loueizeh, remembers **Pastor Michel Rihan** as a gifted Arabic teacher, fluent in German and English, who taught the Bible with imagination and flair. He led small churches in some of the less wealthy areas of Beirut and when he retired from teaching, his church responsibilities increased.

What made him so special?

First, numbers weren't his primary concern. During one Sunday evening service, with only three other people present, he went to the pulpit and preached as though the church were full.

Second, he was a man of integrity. He lived what he preached, in humility and gentleness. He and his wife, Hana, were shining examples of what it means to follow Christ. Bedridden in his final month of life, his mind remained sharp and between wakefulness and sleep he prayed pleading with God for the lost.

Third, he was an encourager. Our colleague S* remembers giving away New Testaments to busloads of Iranian tourists at the waterfront. "Pastor Michel, dressed in suit and tie in 35 degree heat, grasped my arm in excitement exclaiming, 'What a friend we have in Jesus, what a friend!' He was so happy to witness the gospel being shared and was always 100% supportive of the workers his church sponsored," she said.



Pastor Michel

Pastor Menes Abd el Nour saw his Cairo congregation become the largest Protestant church in the Middle East. Although he was from a family of pastors, as a student he dreamed of being a scientist.

However, in December 1945, while watching a soccer game in Upper Egypt, he heard a voice calling him by name and telling him to be a minister. "I looked around. Nobody was there... I heard it a second time, and a third time. Now I knew God was talking. I was brokenhearted. I knelt down. I said, 'God, you are calling me to be a minister. I do not like it. But if I disobey you I will be a sad person. I will never succeed in life because I'm against your way. I will say yes, and you give me joy.'"

God's joy equipped his ministry. In his first pastorate, in Upper Egypt, he began a literacy campaign, using Frank Laubach's "each one, teach one" method. In the late 1950s, Pastor Menes took a master's degree in theology at New York Theological Seminary and studied journalism. He returned to Egypt to edit Christian publications before resuming his role as a pastor in the 1960s. For ten years he co-hosted an Arabic radio programme for teens produced with Youth for Christ. He later appeared on TV and YouTube.

Pastor Menes longed to engage with people from all religious backgrounds at all levels of society, and quickly became known for Bible-based preaching and writing. He became Senior Pastor of Qasr el Dobbara church in 1976.



Pastor Menes

A close colleague reflects on his distinctive ministry: "He poured himself into his pastoral team, giving each one room to grow and develop the church. He empowered us while he was still at his own personal best; this does not happen in the Middle East."

One of our colleagues described Pastor Menes as a fruitful evangelist, discipler, pastor and theologian. "He published over a hundred books, initiated campaigns to serve the poor, put every type of person at ease, and preached simple sermons God used to save souls. His greatest contribution to God's Kingdom was sacrificially confronting a need to mobilize the saints for the work of ministry. He pioneered a growing movement among Arab pastors to welcome powerful and gifted members of the church to serve alongside and become greater than them."

When **Pastor Sameh Maurice** replaced him as Senior Pastor of Qasr el Dobbara Presbyterian Church in 2007, Pastor Menes pointed to him and said to those in attendance, "He must increase, and I must decrease."

Commenting on his simple strategy for church growth, Pastor Menes explained, "We are in a public square and people flock in. I feed them the word of God. I give the best, building my sermons on the Bible." Echoing the words of 19th-century theologian Charles Spurgeon he said, "The Word of God can take care of itself if we preach it..."

Open that door! Let the pure gospel go forth in all its lion-like majesty."

Pastor Menes saw great respect for Jesus among many Muslims. He noted that the Qur'an says Jesus chases out devils, Jesus heals, and the miracles of Christ open the eyes of those born blind. "I usually tell my Muslim friends, 'I'm open minded if you convince me. If I see that Islam is better than Christianity, I have no law of apostasy in Christianity and I want to listen.'"

Although he retired in 2007, Pastor Menes lived with his wife inside the Qasr el Dobbara complex, training pastors in witnessing. Of this time he said, "I want to make sure that 'every learned scribe in the kingdom of God is like a head of the house, taking all the new things to feed his people.'" (Matthew 13:52).

At his funeral, a young woman said the secret of Pastor Menes' fruitfulness was his humility and meekness. Perhaps his favourite hymn, sung at the end of his funeral, explains why:

My master, you have given me a message of your love for all

You told me the road will be hard, and you said I will carry the cross

But you promised to grant me help from your Holy Spirit that never lets me down

So I dedicate myself to you, multiply my love for you and fill myself with your Spirit as I follow you.

OPPORTUNITIES

If you sense God calling you to the Middle East, you can be sure there is work for you to do. Opportunities to serve in the region usually require professional qualifications and the ability to speak or willingness to learn Arabic or Kurdish. This page gives sample of how people can serve churches and ministries in the Middle East. Some are specific, some are indicative as situations change frequently. Please note that in most cases these are volunteer positions and raising support to serve in the Middle East is required

TEACHERS

Qualifications: Teacher-training completed and at least two years' experience
Minimum Service: A full academic year, September to June
Language: English for secondary levels
Location: Lebanon and Egypt

AFRICA HOPE LEARNING CENTRE IN CAIRO

The centre provides education for African refugee children. Qualified teachers are needed, as well as an individual to be responsible for donor relations and fundraising. These are volunteer positions. People applying need to be financially supported.

PHYSIOTHERAPISTS, SPEECH LANGUAGE AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

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

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 administration experience
Language: Some knowledge of Arabic
Minimum Service: Short or long term

SAT-7

Sat-7 International provides satellite broadcasts to encourage Christians in the Middle East and make the Good News available across the region. They are looking for a number of people for short-term and long-term assignments.
Location: Cyprus
For details go to: www.sat7.org/en/get_involved/positions

LANGUAGE LEARNING

Investing two or three years learning Arabic or Kurdish builds a vital platform for a lifetime of ministry in the region. You can study in universities or in recognized language schools. While studying, you will have opportunity to make friends with fellow students, teachers and language helpers

REHABILITATION WORKER

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

For more information about these opportunities call your local MECO office or visit: www.mecoglobal.org/opportunities

Please note that MECO volunteers raise their support in order to serve.