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Education as Ministry

Partners in mission with Middle East Christians



Rev Richard Coombs

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MECO is an interdenominational, evangelical, Protestant mission agency founded in 1860.

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Education brings Opportunity

In the Middle East, Christian missionary schools were founded in the wake of the extension of Western power and influence during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. With the demise of the empire, the European domination of the region, and then the European mandates over the post-World War I states, a variety of motives led religious organisations to give educational opportunities to the people in the region.

The desire of Westerners to bring education to the peoples of the Middle East coincided with the peoples' desire for learning. Many missionaries staffed these schools, and they registered a presence and an influence that enabled the Christian message and presence to infiltrate various communities.

Christian missionary schools were religiously motivated, but the sensitivity of the dominant Muslim population was respected since Islam opposed any attempts at direct conversion or proselytization. Christian religious efforts remained, largely, within the respective faiths though - Protestants did make efforts to try and convert Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians.

During the European-dominated years of the first half of the twentieth century, only a limited opposition to these schools existed, mostly in Islamic religious circles. The national governments



produced by the post-World War II revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s, however, tightened controls over all education - limiting missionary schools.

Across the years of its history (161 years) MECO planted and supported many different schools throughout the region, particularly in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt.

Those in Lebanon have been handed over and run by the Lebanon Evangelical Society. Schools remain in Louzeh (Beirut) and Tyre. A school has been planted among Syrian refugees in North Lebanon and the School for Special Education and Development (BLESSED) still operates in Achrafieh, Beirut.



Doing Good



How do you serve the Lord in a country which keeps going from crisis to crisis? How do you effectively minister to people when their daily concerns are not spiritual, but only whether they can pay for electricity, rent, food, and necessary medicines?

We have workers at the College of the Constant Lighthouse (Lebanon) and Chris and Bev administer Africa Hope in Cairo (Egypt).

We have had association with Eastwood College (Beirut), the Baptist school (Beirut) and had significant involvement with Whitman Academy in Amman (Jordan).

Significant contributions and support have been made for training pastors and church leaders through Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS), Beirut; Mediterranean Bible College, Beirut; Near East School of Theology (NEST), Beirut; Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), Amman; Program for Theological Education by Extension (PTEE), Amman; and Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC), Egypt.

This issue of our magazine highlights the challenges and opportunities facing some of these schools in a Covid world. Pray for them; support them; and pray for them again!

Richard Coombs
MECO Australia Director

A failing economy may not have a noticeable impact on the super-rich of this country, but refugees, and those at the other end of the socio-economic scale are living in a state of utter hopelessness and despair.

We have had association with Eastwood College and the Baptist school (Beirut) and had significant involvement with Whitman Academy in Amman (Jordan).

I have no answers as the best way to minister in these conditions, but whenever I am at a loss of what to do, I find it helpful to follow the example of Jesus. The Bible says that Jesus, *'... went about doing good.'* (Acts 10:38). We are also commanded to *'Do good to all, especially to those of the household of faith.'* (Gal 6:10) and to *'Not grow weary in doing good.'* (2 Thess 3:13). With this perspective, each day is a new opportunity to show someone practical love and kindness, even if it's small, in the name of our Lord Jesus.

When these opportunities disappear due to limited mobility (quarantine and lockdown measures or petrol rationing), perhaps God is teaching us a valuable lesson on prayer? Does the lack of our physical opportunities to witness for Christ intensify our prayer life or does it wither and die?

The great missionary Hudson Taylor said: 'Learn to move man,

through God, by prayer alone.' Oswald Chambers also had it correct when he said: 'Prayer does not fit us for the greater work; prayer is the greater work.' So, to those of you who feel that you cannot do anything to extend God's Kingdom in this part of the world, you have forgotten that *'... the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.'* (James 5:16)

But what do we do, when our Jehoshaphat prayer remains unanswered, and we are left serving in a difficult and desperate situation? We are to keep the main thing the main thing - that being our relationship with God.

Jesus' rebuke to the Ephesian church is very timely for me. They were very busy with service, but they had left their first love. Sadly, they had let their loving relationship with their Lord grow cold. Oswald Chambers also writes about this when he says, 'Many workers have gone out with high courage and fine impulses, but with no intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ, and before long they are crushed.'

And so, in these difficult times, we remember that Jesus said He *'... will build His Church.'* He will be faithful to His promise. We just need to do what He said. If we lift Him up, He will draw all men to Himself. But how can we lift Him up in front of a needy and desperate world if we don't really know Him and love Him?

Darren
Darren has worked in Lebanon for several years teaching at the College of the Constant Lighthouse.

Louizeh

Evangelical School for Boys and Girls

The School was founded in 1860 by a British lady called Mrs. Bowen Thompson. Her husband had recently died and when she heard of the sufferings in Lebanon due to the civil strife that was present in the country during the early part of 1860, she sailed to Lebanon to try and be of some use to those people who flocked to Beirut from the mountains in search of security. One of the things she thought would be most useful was to start a school. This she did and so was born the Lebanon Evangelical School for Boys and Girls.

Lebanon sits on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, with a beautiful long coastline and stunning mountain ranges. With a rich history, dating back to Biblical times a truly warm welcome awaits any visitor to any Lebanese home.

However, the country now finds itself in one of the worst economic crises of recent times. The dramatic

devaluation of the local currency which has effectively reduced the buying power by 90% has affected the everyday living conditions of all except the mega-rich. Add to this the resulting brain drain in sectors such as IT, health and education, the devastation caused by the Beirut Port Explosion on 4 August 2020, the impact of COVID and the ongoing political stalemate that has delayed any solution to this list of problems and you can see that Lebanon is on its knees.

The past 2 years of education in Lebanon, has been among the most challenging times for us as a school community. For schools in Lebanon, education started being disrupted following the popular uprising of October 2019. Roads were blocked daily on an ad hoc basis, school buses were unable to run and children lost the continuity of their learning. Just as a sense of routine was beginning to return in early 2020, the country was hit by COVID-19. Schools were shut and we had

to quickly find creative ways to connect with our students.

What followed, has been almost 18 months of online education. The first months were a steep learning curve, particularly for teachers who preferred the 'chalk and talk' method of teaching. Lessons were recorded by teachers, often at home, especially when there was a full lockdown. These were accessed by students via YouTube and Google Classroom was adopted for communicating with children and for sending out and receiving assignments.

The hope was that in the 2020-21 school year we could return to in-person teaching, but many students did not return until the final exams in May 2021. Lessons were also disrupted by regular power cuts.

As we reflect across the past months, it is also important for us to look forward. We are realistic that for our school community, the coming weeks and months will be filled with



a myriad of issues and difficulties. Lots of challenges lie ahead, that will affect the day to day running of school, such as shortages of electricity, water, diesel (for generators), petrol for travel and the difficulty of accessing books and resources as prices soar.

This continued fracturing of the school community and loss of routine has had an impact on both students and staff. This has been compounded and deepened by two factors in particular.

Firstly, the explosion left many families deeply traumatised and confinement has only aggravated their levels of anxiety.

Secondly, the future is very bleak. As many nations see a light at the end of the Covid tunnel, in Lebanon the economic crisis and political impasse are leaving families in a situation where they see no end to their problems. No hope makes the heart sick.



Tense homes, demotivated staff and students having to readapt to the discipline of learning in class again is a combination that will only heighten the mental strain of children and staff as school restarts.

The school will be missing many familiar faces and new arrivals. In normal times, the school has a very low turnover of staff and students, however this will not be the case this year. A significant number of staff have moved abroad to take up more financially lucrative posts. In addition, some students have left Lebanon with their families while others cannot afford the school fees.

The challenges of the past and the future are many and varied - please remember the whole school community in the weeks and months to come, as we work together to overcome these obstacles.

The single largest problem is financial. We have set up a fund to encourage former students to donate to help this year's children manage to pay the fees. \$125.00 dollars (AUD) would make a HUGE difference to the fees of a single student. We have 1,700 students and your help would make such a difference to these students and families.

The three most important things to do: pray, pray, pray. He will have His way, and that is all that matters.

Steve White - Principal

Africa HOPE

Learning Centre

It's hard to believe it has already been 18+ months since the world first started facing this unexpected pandemic together. In these difficult days, hope is something we all need. We are so thankful to be able to offer not only an education to over 400 refugee students we serve but also HOPE...for a better future.

Like many, we were wondering, how are we going to be able to do schooling during Covid-19? We don't have sophisticated online technology options here, and yet we have come through the 2020-2021 school year and started a new academic school year.

We give God thanks for all the measurable accomplishments He has enabled, seeing students perform very well through last year's split classes, enabling teachers to get through their yearly curriculum with smaller classes and more attentive students who were so happy to be at school. In addition, examination results from our graduating grade 8 students this past year have been the best ever results, with 97% passing their Sudan Certificate

exams and moving up to Secondary School.

Always be ready ... you just never know when a divine appointment might come along ... even in a pandemic. Rather than feeling disappointment because of Covid-19 lockdown we were very encouraged that we could have the amazing opportunity to meet (in a small group outside) with staff several times a week, for lesson planning and for Bible studies. It was a very fruitful and encouraging time together, as we witnessed growth and transformation in the lives of staff and some students. During this season two teachers and two students wished to be baptised, so despite churches being closed due to lockdown, a baptismal service was arranged in our home, using our bathtub.

Focusing on the spiritual journey of staff is important to us because they are the people in the classrooms and sharing with students each day. They need to know the importance of spiritual vitality firsthand, in order to pour HOPE into the lives of their students.

Hygiene and safety are a priority, even when the culture around us is taking the pandemic very lightly. We welcome students back to school, but require the wearing of face masks, getting temperatures taken, washing hands regularly. Each day announcements are given, followed by singing together and hearing a word of encouragement from the Bible before they head off to their classes.

To date, we are blessed to report that we have had no incidences of Covid-19 requiring us to close the school. Saying that, we recognise Covid-19 is all around us. We continue to exercise wisdom, do our best to keep the environment clean, and pray for God's hand of protection in this country where only approximately 1% of the population have had an opportunity to be vaccinated.

Instead of wondering, how are we going to manage schooling during Covid-19, we are grateful to reflect on



God's goodness. This enables us through each season, to continue to minister and offer an education to a community who has suffered much. They need to know God is watching over them, and that He knows them by name. This is HIS school, and these are HIS precious children.

Chris and Bev

Pray for

- the salvation and spiritual growth of staff, students and the community we serve.
- the protection of teachers in the classrooms with children.
- the children who come from refugee situations in Sudan.
- the reminder to all that God is with them.

Graham Rowe

– ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’

It is with sadness and joy we learned that our friend and brother, Graham Rowe, entered the presence of his Lord on Monday, 20 September.

Graham and Anne studied at Sydney Missionary and Bible College and heard God's call to work in Eritrea with Middle East General Mission. They were at Haicoata Hospital, Eritrea, 1974 -1977, where Graham oversaw maintenance and administration. At one stage they were both abducted for a few days by the Eritrean Liberation Front before they were, eventually, evacuated by helicopter to safety.

After a stay in Australia, they returned to Jordan to learn Arabic. After this study they had oversight for new

candidates arriving in Amman. Graham's leadership and pastoral care were much appreciated. In 1984 Graham was a part-time teacher at the Holy Land School for the Deaf in Jordan.

In 1987 Graham served as Administrative Director and then Personnel Officer at MECO International Office, based in Larnaca, Cyprus. In 1991 he became part of the MECO leadership team with David Judson.

In 1994 Graham and Anne retired back to Sydney for the sake of their boys' (Jonathan and Paul) education. They eventually moved to Tamworth where, sadly, Jonathan became seriously ill. Graham became his fulltime carer until Jonathan passed away, aged 32.



Graham is remembered for his love and commitment to his Lord Jesus Christ and to Anne and his family. He was blessed with a great sense of humour and had a generous nature. He was much appreciated for his pastoral care and concern for others.

Our prayers and sympathy surround Anne and Paul at this time, while Graham and Jonathan rejoice in the presence of our King!

(Thanks to John Wicks and John Woods)

Crises and Theological Education



Our whole region is highly volatile, with a lot of political turmoil and frequent rise of extremism and violence. But Lebanon has had the lion's share of crises. The recent wave started with the war in Syria and the resulting humanitarian crisis. Then, two years ago we had a major uprising in Lebanon caused by political and economic troubles. The uprising aggravated the situation and led to an acute downfall and hyperinflation.

Today, more than 50% of the population is in poverty. Then the pandemic hit. And as if we did not have enough problems, the Beirut port blast destroyed a large part of Beirut and brought the Lebanese economy to its knees. This total collapse of the country is resulting in the worst wave of emigration by Lebanese in recent history. We are currently experiencing serious shortages of electricity, fuel, medicine, and all essentials, with sky-rocketing prices for whatever can be found.

Yet, as always, crises present significant opportunities for the gospel. As people are

experiencing despair, the Church still has a powerful message. Our churches are learning how to navigate these circumstances and how to proclaim hope in the middle of crises. We are witnessing incredible transformation among our churches. Thus, many more people are hearing the gospel for the first time.

This is the ministry context of ABTS. We had sixty years of experience in seminary training when the pandemic hit, with residential education at the core. Bringing students to our campus and forming community were very important to us, especially since we started to give more attention to the formative elements of the curriculum. With the pandemic, lockdowns, and travel restrictions, we had to send our students home and complete the academic year remotely. Fortunately, we had been investing in an online program that has given us some experience and allowed us to build the needed infrastructure.

Just like all other educational institutions, our initial question was: "when do we get back to normal?" But, little by little, God took us

on a journey of discovery and exploration. We started to think through what God is currently doing in the region and how he might be preparing us for this next season of ministry. We started asking new questions: "what will the new normal be?", "what does the future of theological education and leadership formation for our region look like?", and "what is the new frontier for our ministry?"

These new questions allowed us to shift from thinking about emergency measures to thinking more strategically to be effective in our world today. Our programs, delivery methods, and the content of our curricula need to be dynamic to equip future church leaders to understand and navigate the increasingly complex contexts of ministry.

We ache because of the pain and suffering that our communities are experiencing. Yet, we are grateful that God is giving us new opportunities to work with the Church to exemplify God's redemptive power and proclaim His hope and love for our people in meaningful and practical ways.

Elie Haddad – Professor of Missional Ecclesiology

Bearer of Hope



Lebanon was once known as the Jewel of the Middle East. It is now a country on the verge of collapse with very little hope. The value of money in Lebanon used to be equivalent to the Australian dollar. What used to cost \$1 now costs \$20.

Work is limited, employers cannot pay their workers. Medication is scarce, electricity may be on for a few hours each day, gas for cooking and petrol for cars is expensive and unavailable. Water and bread are also expensive and becoming harder to obtain. Most residents believe their only hope is to leave the country. So, how do you serve?

The scriptures remind us that there are two types of people: those who know Christ and those who do not know Him.

Firstly, we are called to encourage and strengthen what remains (Revelation 3:2). When Moses stood and interceded for his people, Aaron and Hur stood on either side and helped to carry his burden (Exodus 17:12-14). It is not easy in this time

for believers to walk with a different perspective.

Brother Andrew shared when he met with believers behind the iron curtain that they would say, "... just by being there ..." was a great encouragement to them. We, too, by being with them can remind the people of Lebanon that they are not alone, that God is still with them and that brothers and sisters around the world are standing in prayer with them.

Secondly, we walk- with those who do not yet know the Lord. I was recently struck by the sadness of a dear friend. She was not sad because I was leaving to return to Australia for a time, but she desired the 'hope' that we as believers carry with us. A hope that can remain with her long after we leave.

By walking with people, sharing in their journeys and troubles we give them time to discover for themselves where this Light and Hope comes from. The Psalmist reminds us, *I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked*

to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles (Psalm 34:4-6).

The OT prophet reminds us - *I searched for a man among them ... stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, so that I should not destroy it (Ezekiel 22:30)*. Our first job is to pray. Before we can walk with others, we must follow the example of Christ who would rise early and retire late in order to pray, that He would walk in the Spirit and do the will of the Father.

We know it is God who draws people to himself (John 6:44). These two groups of people – those who know Christ and those who do not - are present in every country.

May we be found faithful to walk and pray. For we know as long as we are present on this earth the Lord is not finished yet.

*Rebecca
Rebecca has been teaching in Lebanon for three years at the College of the Constant Lighthouse.*

2 Hour Queues and Electricity!

While the world has struggled and stumbled through a pandemic, Lebanon has been spiralling downwards into a financial collapse that is predicted by some to be the worst globally in the last 150 years.

For nearly two years there have been ongoing protests seeking an end to corruption and a change of leadership in the country but still the political stalemate continues, and rapid inflation is pushing the majority of people below the poverty line. The government now has dangerously low foreign currency reserves so that 2 hours can be the time you queue to fill up your car with fuel and the hours in the day that you get electricity. Hospitals and bakeries are saying they cannot continue to operate, and pharmacies are no longer able to supply even basic medicines. Many in the country have disregarded Covid restrictions simply because they cannot afford to stop working.

Our first response when faced with such need should always be the compassion of Christ for our neighbours. Yet, whenever you combine material help with gospel work in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ there will be confusion. Some think we help to 'gain converts' whilst others in the local church can be suspicious of any who show any interest assuming they are only after more material help. We have to daily resist the

cynicism that can harden our hearts seeking to be as wise as possible whilst learning from our mistakes.

After many years serving in the Middle East we have yet to get this right but continue to find that the best help we can give is in education – an education that involves a strong partnership and relationship with the families of the students.

This is why we have kept the number of students at our refugee education centre limited so that we can reasonably visit the families regularly and give them significant help with food and clothing during times like this.

It has been particularly frustrating that during this pandemic, schools in Lebanon have been forced to close for almost all of the last 18 months. As with other schools across the world, they have gone online but Syrian families do not have the capacity of devices, internet and study space for their children to study online at home meaning.

There is no satisfactory solution to this problem, but we have done what we have been able to do. For some time, we delivered worksheets to homes on a weekly basis, collecting them and marking them at the end of the week and returning them with new worksheets at the beginning of every week. This could only ever be a temporary arrangement to review and keep fresh what we had already taught.

On two separate occasions, the Government allowed schools to reopen but most did not take this opportunity and continued online but for us this was a wonderful opportunity, so we were glad to welcome back smiling children for a total of nine weeks ensuring social distancing by running two shifts and only having half the students at the centre at any one time. Not ideal but so worth it!

When we have not been able to do anything else, we have been able to visit in their homes. Our GAP year volunteer would do various activities with the children while one of our teachers spent time talking with their mothers. This gives a chance to assess needs to know how best to help, but one mother said that she just needs someone to listen to her.

As we approach the start of a new school year the government has announced that all schools should open for students and yet the lack of electricity and fuel means that will be very difficult in practice.

Please pray with us that we can open and welcome back our students to the education centre. Even if we cannot, we thank God that we can still visit the families and He has given us the means to support them through this crisis – may this point them to the reason for the hope that we have, the Lord Jesus Christ.

M and V

Australian Workers



We are aware that the Conavirus is having a very great impact on all countries around the world. Our workers overseas are in 'lock-down' in the respective places where they are. At the time of printing they are all well and keeping themselves occupied with learning language and encouraging others in their teams and schools. We continue to pray God's peace and protection upon them.

Darren is getting ready for the next semester of teaching at the 'College of the Constant Lighthouse'. Because of the Covid pandemic Darren stayed in Lebanon and had ministry among the Syrian refugee families. Pray for strength and good health in difficult days.

Rebecca has been able to return to Queensland and visited family, friends, and supporters. She recently returned to Beirut and the 'College of the Constant Lighthouse' to begin another term of teaching.

Vicki recently returned to Melbourne to care for her mother. As a result, she has resigned from ministry with 'Middle East Concern'. A new opportunity has arisen, and she will be working with 'Anglican Aid' and focussing on persecuted Christians in the Middle East.

Perry and Karen continue their association with MECO Australia as Associate Members. Perry is fulfilling writing commitments and doing a lot of his consultancy work with overseas theological colleges by remote communications. Karen is having ministry in the local community.

Noel and Ros Uebergang (Perth) have opportunities for ministry in Perth among people from the Middle East. Folk can help with their support by forwarding gifts to our office.

John and Magda Ackad (Sydney) have opportunities for ministry in Sydney among people from the Middle East. Folk can help with their support by forwarding gifts to our office.

Kurdish Study Bible

In our last issue of the magazine, we mentioned a project to raise \$15,000 towards the production of a Kurdish Study Bible.

We are very pleased that \$24,000 was raised. The extra \$9,000 will be used to enable the publication of the Bible. Those involved in the translation and production of this Bible are very grateful for those who supported this project.

PLEASE NOTE: Due to Victorian Government stage 4 restrictions in place due to Coronavirus, the office is not open and there will be a delay in responding to donations and phone messages.

Donations and Support

We have a variety of ways in which our work and ministries can be supported.



On-line – donors can use

Visa and Mastercard

www.meco.org.au

Donations by Credit Card can also be made direct to the office by calling 03 9898 0077

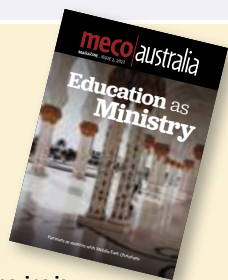


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Legacies – Legacies are a significant way for Christians to continue support of taking the gospel to the people of the Middle East. You can have an "ongoing support" of MECO and its ministries by remembering MECO in your will.

Beirut Relief Fund



On August 4, 2020, a massive explosion in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, shook a nation already in political, economic and pandemic turmoil.

Beirut Relief Fund enables you to donate in order to provide support for those affected by this tragedy.

Finances received will be channelled through our partners and local churches who are on the ground responding to those in need.

Go to our website – www.meco.org.au
– to donate online

Deposit gifts through
BSB: 704 922
Account: 100018534
Reference: Beirut Relief Fund

**'Let us be God's light and hope to
our Lebanese brothers and sisters.'**

- **Prayer Points** – monthly Prayer Points for the Middle East are distributed by email and print. We would be delighted to add your name to our list – please forward an email to: office@meco.org.au requesting the Prayer Points and specify how you would like to receive them (email or print).
- **Prayer for the Persecuted Church** through our partnership with Middle East Concern (MEC) we get regular up-dated prayer requests for people in the Middle East who are in difficulty with the authorities. If you wish to be part of this prayer ministry, please request to be placed on the mailing list – office@meco.org.au