



EBF Theology and Education Division

Symposium “Baptist Churches and Changing Society: West European Experience”

12-13 August 2011, Elstal, Germany

Baptist Churches on the crossroads of Western and Middle-East Cultures

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The birth of the Baptist Movement in Lebanon

The Middle East is the birthplace of the three religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. “Christianity has deep roots in the land of Lebanon: Lebanon first, received the Christian message from Christ Himself, and then, again, from Christ’s closest disciples. Christ lived and preached in the ‘Galilee of Nations’ which encompasses much of the Southern part of Lebanon”. (Harb, 2008)

Indeed, the Baptist Movement came to Lebanon around 1900 years after our Lord Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul visited our country. Lebanon, its Cedars, towns and cities are repeatedly mentioned in the Bible.

Interestingly, the birth of the Baptist movement in Lebanon came at the hands of a Lebanese! In 1893, a young man called Sa’eed Juriedini went to USA to visit a friend. While there, he attended the Third Baptist Church of St. Louis, MO, where he surrendered his life to Christ; soon after, Sa’eed returned to Lebanon and was instrumental in starting a house Church. In 1895, Sa’eed baptized eight people and initiated the first Baptist church in Lebanon.

With the eruption of World War I (1914-1918), the growth of the Baptist movement in Lebanon was seriously hampered. In 1920, Baptist representatives from the USA, Canada and Europe specifically delegated to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board the responsibility of supporting the growing Baptist movements in the region – including Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. In 1948, Rev. and Mrs. Finlay Graham were the first Baptist missionaries to move and reside in Lebanon; and were followed by others. This strategic step gave a critical boost to the Baptist ministry in Lebanon, and a number of key people became believers and further ignited

the movement. “Preaching points were opened which later became independent churches”, starting from the central heart of the capital, Beirut, and spreading all over the old Lebanese mountains and territory. (Baptists in Lebanon , 1963)

The Lebanese Evangelical Baptist Convention was officially founded on October 27, 1955 “when eight members representing four churches (Beirut, Tripoli, Kefr Mishky and Mieh Mieh) met in the home of missionary Finlay Graham.” The Convention is a member of the Supreme Council of Evangelicals for Syria and Lebanon, and became a member in the Baptist World Alliance in 1956. July 1959 witnessed the founding of the Baptist Woman’s Union of Lebanon.

In 1955, the first missionaries established the Beirut Baptist School with six classrooms. They then initiated a publishing ministry in response to the growing need for Christian material in the Arabic language for their various programs. This grew into the Baptist Publication that is currently known as Dar Manhal Al Hayat Christian publishing house. In 1960, the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary was founded in “rented rooms in a suburb of Beirut and the following year it was moved to its own new building in Mansourieh” with an Advisory Committee composed of one representative each from Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

In 1998, and following the decision of the founding mission board to leave Lebanon, the local Baptists founded a local body, the Lebanese Society for Educational & Social Development (LSESD), i.e. the Lebanese Baptist Society, to take over the ownership and leadership of the three aforementioned Baptist ministries established by the founding missionaries. In light of the Arab context and the needs of the growing Arab church, LSESD revisited the vision and missions of the respective ministries such that today

- Dar Manhal Al Hayat (Baptist Publications) is among the major Christian publishing houses in the region;
- Beirut Baptist School (BBS), known for its high level of education, serves a student body of 1,300 mostly (over 92%) non-Christian; and the
- Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) trains strategic lay and church leaders from at least nine countries in the Middle East North Africa, namely Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

This, in addition to initiating new ministry tracks in response to emergent needs.

Local and Western Baptist Cultural Influences

Best described as a “mosaic” of eighteen different denominations, Lebanese culture is “partly a culmination of Lebanon’s entrapment between East and West. Because they’ve always been at the crossroads, the Lebanese are rich in mix and essence... But at the same time they are tormented by their own complexity...” (Mackey, 1989)

Most Lebanese – regardless of their religious backgrounds – share considerable cultural elements including the language, the literature, the family structure, social customs... Family, place of birth and religion define a Lebanese person's identity! Hence, there is a strong and deep sense of community too. It is estimated that the population of Lebanese in the Diaspora is around double that of Lebanese residing in Lebanon. Despite the distance, Lebanese people continue to take care of their own. Around US\$ 5.5 billion in remittances are being sent home to the families they've left behind (Star, 2008).

Baptist Church history speaks of situations when new believers confused the faith with culture, and so ended up adopting cultural traits and practices that are alien to the Arab culture – such as individualism, and turning away from such highly good and valued local cultural elements such as family and the community, burning bridges rather than building new ones that facilitate the sharing of Christ. This did not go well with the local culture.

The Lebanese Baptist Society (LSESD) and Arab Christians have a tremendous educational role to play vis-à-vis the local Arab and Lebanese communities, as well as the larger Body of Christ. Arab Christians – Baptists included - are called to help fellow members of the Body of Christ in the non-Arab World to better appreciate and understand the realities of the Arab Church. Each people group or nation is influenced by its own culture, and what is acceptable in one part of the world, is not necessarily acceptable in the other.

On another level, relations between Evangelicals and the historic churches in Lebanon were rather strained. Perhaps relations would have taken a totally different track had Evangelicals at the time considered the possibility of adopting the Bible translation version published by the Catholic Church in 1671, instead of pursuing a totally new translation – the Van Dyck version. One outcome, possibly, could have been the distribution of the Catholic-translated Bible to a wider segment of the population. Perhaps, that would have lessened the relational gap and led to increased positive Christian witness in Lebanon and the region through improved Christian-Christian relations. Today, instead, historic churches perceive Baptists as *sheep stealers*.

Still, Lebanese Baptists are known in Lebanon as “Preachers of the Gospel”, an aspect that is turning out to be rather contagious, prompting non-Baptists to invest more time in studying and sharing The Word.

Challenges that the Baptist Movement in Lebanon faces today

“Some historians... are inclined to credit the early missionaries with the reawakening of Arab culture and the regeneration of significant social and literary movements in the entire region. Others... are very critical and discredit all such efforts as forms of cultural penetration and a preamble for political intervention and domination.” (Mardin, 1994)

Unfortunately, Arab Baptists – and the larger Arab Evangelical family – are most often than not wrongly perceived as foreign implants affiliated with the west – more so North America. As a matter of fact, and because of the nationality of the founding missionaries, the Baptist ministries campus in the Christian neighbourhood of Mansourieh continues to be thought of as pertaining to the “*Amercaine*” (i.e. Americans).

A challenge faced by Arab or Lebanese Baptists is the prevalent misperceptions between Christians and Muslims, as well as between the Arab World and beyond. Such misperceptions include the affiliation of the Church with the West on the one hand, as well as the assumption that all Arabs are Muslims, and that all Muslims are terrorists; misperceptions that often give rise to increased tensions between both sides.

It is with these misperceptions in mind, and in acknowledgement of the strategic role that Arab Baptists have in dispelling wrong views and convictions that the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS) initiated eight years ago its Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) with a mandate *to bring about positive transformation in thinking and practice between Christians and Muslims, as well as between the Arab World and beyond.*

Through their ongoing programs, both ABTS and IMES are intentional in challenging the local church in Lebanon and the Arab World to be more externally focused and involved with the surrounding communities. After all, how else can the Church be salt and light?! Emphasis is also made on the approach that it be aligned with the Message itself. History witnesses to the negative impacts of unwise and misguided approaches that have only served to further isolate Baptists in Lebanon from the larger society.

Regrettably, Arab Baptists – and Christians in general - occasionally find themselves in unenviable positions and unpleasant situations as a result of politically-instigated, misguided, misinformed - and often time intentionally antagonistic - statements voiced by church-related figures in the non-Arab world that hinder the message of Christ. There is this ongoing need to encourage Christians – Arabs and non-Arabs – to base their positions and views on Biblical principles and not on personal and diverse interpretations of the Bible.

On the internal “Baptist” level, a concern that the local churches now face is the dire need for a new generation of equipped leaders who are able to take over the ministry from the founding church pastors.

Lebanese Baptist Ministries today

Following the Lebanese Civil War (1975 -1990), Lebanon was geographically segregated into majority Christian, Muslim and Druze areas that limited interaction between people from diverse religious groups. However, the 2006 war on Lebanon – though horrific in every sense of

the word – led to the building of bridges between the different religious groups, particularly as around 25% of the Lebanese population was internally displaced from South Lebanon and the Southern suburb of Beirut and sought shelter in the majority Christian area.

At the time, with around 1,000 people seeking shelter on both ABTS and BBS campuses, LSESD (also referred to as **the Society**) responded with relief ministry that was transformational both to the Christian care-givers as well as to the recipients – mostly Shiite Muslim. Relationships were built that facilitated the transition of relief work into community development projects in the formerly displaced areas. This eventually led to the founding of LSESD’s new community relief and development track, which, by the way, has just recently completed a remarkable study on Poverty in Lebanon that would greatly impact development work in the country.

Indeed, since its founding in 1998, LSESD perseveres in pursuit of a vision *to serve the Church in Lebanon and the Arab World through spiritual, social and educational development*. With time, and emergent needs, LSESD’s ministry focus gradually expanded to include in addition to education, leadership and resource development, also Christian-Muslim dialogue, community relief and development, education for children with special needs.

In terms of structure, LSESD is a separate entity, not attached to the Lebanese

Evangelical Baptist Convention, although its General Assembly is composed of members of Baptist churches in Lebanon. Yet, the relationship between both the Society (LSESD) and the Convention is that while the latter’s role is more administrative and includes representing Baptist churches vis-à-vis the government, LSESD – i.e. the Society - is ministry-focused and serves Lebanon and the region.

Since its initiation in Lebanon around 116 years ago, the Baptist movement in Lebanon continues to develop such that there are now 22 Baptist churches in Lebanon with a total Baptist community of around 3,000 people, including around 800 registered members.



The Current Ministries of the Lebanese Baptist Society (LSESD)

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