



Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

كلية اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

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ABTS Ventures into Peacebuilding

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:9

Today, more than 25 years after the end of a 15-year sectarian civil war in Lebanon, schools still do not teach Lebanese history post 1943. We, Lebanese, have been unable to agree on our past, let alone be reconciled with our 'enemies'. The mutually false perceptions Christians and Muslims have of one another is one of the ways this is manifested in Lebanon. Lebanon is no longer at war, but it is not at peace either. It often appears to be simply coping. Does Lebanon still stand a chance of having inter-faith peace, against all odds? The IMES team believes it does.

Recognizing this unsettling religious and political scene in Lebanon, the Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES), a department of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS), was founded in 2003 in an effort to dispel false perceptions of people from distinct religions and cultures. As such, IMES aspires to bring about positive transformation in thinking and practice between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East and beyond, and it is therefore involved in educational, peacebuilding, and advocacy endeavors to attain this aim.

The Theology behind our Peacebuilding Initiatives

In striving toward peacebuilding, IMES is committed to "Kerygmatic peacebuilding". The term was originally coined by our Chief Academic Officer, Martin Accad, who is also the founder and current Director of the Institute of Middle East

Studies. Martin describes the "Kerygmatic" approach (the Greek word *Kerygma* means "proclamation") as the most desirable attitude towards Islam for a follower of Jesus. Such an approach is moderate and balanced; it is located in the middle of a spectrum ranging from extreme openness (syncretistic) to extreme aggression (polemical). "Kerygmatic" describes the engagement with Islam and Muslims respectfully and open-mindedly, while remaining faithful to the uniqueness of Christ as God's good news of salvation.

Kerygmatic peacebuilding essentially strives to practice peace in the form of "the Gospel as God proclaimed it." It rests on the conviction that the lived-out and positively proclaimed "good news," as manifested in the life of Christ in the gospels, is sufficient for persuasion. The *Kerygmatic* peacebuilding approach is Christ-centered and believes that the fullness of God's good news was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. It abolishes the belief that a religious system of any kind can save, but rather holds that it is Christ himself who is the essence of salvation. Thus, Martin suggests that although "Islam preserves many important and positive elements from the Judeo-Christian tradition" and "contains much truth about God and his revelation," it "lacks many of the essential truths of God's good news as revealed and proclaimed in and by Jesus Christ in the

Gospels."

Therefore, Martin adds, "as God lovingly invited us all into restored relationship with Himself through Christ,

irrespective of our ethnicity or religious affiliation, in the same way, IMES strives to be a catalyst for reconciled relationships between peoples across personal, ethnic, national, and faith levels". Accordingly, IMES seeks to put *Kerygmatic* peacebuilding into practice by providing a platform for dialogue, where Christians and Muslims, belonging to diverse Lebanese communities, can come together to address issues of injustice, while striving toward healing and restoration of age-old broken relationships between both faith groups.



Martin Accad

To learn more, we invite you to read Martin's book chapter entitled "Christian Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims: A Kerygmatic Approach" in *Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims* (Reisacher, ed., 2012).



During the Peacebuilders' gathering at ABTS, September 2017

What does IMES Peacebuilding practically look like on the field?

Khebz w Meleh (KwM) [Bread and Salt in Arabic] is one of IMES's grassroots peacebuilding initiatives through which it strives to be the previously mentioned catalyst. During six sessions, an average of six Muslim and six Christian youth are invited to share a meal and discuss their faith together. The initiative seeks to create friendships among these youth, ones that would move them to seek the common good of their communities and become peacemakers in their local contexts. However, such religious affiliations had fueled our civil war in the past. So, how does one ensure a discussion of faith that would not spill over into a violent conflict but rather be a constructive interaction? This is only possible if the youth agree to abide by our [11 guidelines for dialogue](#).



A group of KwM teens after interviewing two religious leaders

By the fourth KwM session, the youth start to discuss the topic of 'faith and deeds'. As such, motivated by their faith, the youth identify two social issues that they would like to address in their community. Then they design and implement social actions to address one of the root causes of these two social issues. During the academic year 2016-2017, five KwM groups comprised of Lebanese, Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian youth, successfully carried out ten social actions. They tackled topics that ranged from domestic violence against women to racism among Lebanese, Syrians and Iraqis. Other topics include religious segregation, youth hopelessness and environmental pollution,



Khebz w Meleh's Celebration Day

to name a few. The youth thus move from talking about faith, to taking action motivated by their faith. They become agents of change that co-create new memories – ones they proudly look back on. They weave a potential alternative narrative to the one described in the opening paragraph.

This year, IMES also undertook another Peacebuilding initiative, a Gathering of Peacebuilders. This was implemented in collaboration with two major Lebanese peacebuilding organizations (Adyan Foundation and Wahdatouna Khalasouna). Introducing a new platform for interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding, this gathering brought together more than 40 representatives of civil society organizations (both local and international), as well as faith-based and secular organizations to look for potential ways to collaborate for peacebuilding in Lebanon. Discussions addressed various challenges to peacebuilding and identified "sectarianism," "fear of the other," and "lack of justice" as some of the major challenges. Attending organization representatives found many shared interests between them, and they collectively expressed their desire to continue to meet on a regular basis in the hope that such meetings will bear much fruit in peacebuilding on local and national scales.

Over the course of the coming year, IMES will continue to invest its efforts in its peacebuilding initiatives, aiming to expand its reach further and deeper into the Lebanese community. Primarily, IMES aspires to launch additional *Khebz w Meleh* groups in regions across Lebanon beyond its current establishments in Beirut, Bekaa, and South Lebanon. Moreover, IMES is launching two additional peacebuilding initiatives targeting faith leaders and houses of faith, so stay tuned for updates!



During the Peacebuilders' gathering



Manal El Tayar

"Youth participating in KwM challenged many prejudices and stereotypes that they held about the other faith," says Manal El Tayar, Peacebuilding Initiatives Manager. Manal expands on this in her reflection on KwM, ["Social Capital: Seeds of Friendship Growing into a National Symbol for Reconciliation"](#) on the IMES blog.

Friendships emerged within various groups. One of these friendships is between Rasha and Melissa. These two young women took part in the KwM camp in Hamra. By the time they took to the streets for their social action, the level of sarcasm and internal jokes that these girls exchanged with each other testified to the degree to which they had become comfortable being with each other. As we debriefed and evaluated the program during the focus group discussion, the youth were also very pragmatic. When reaching the 10th question, the youth were asked to reflect on this statement based on their experience: *"Some people say that these types of programs, while effective, do not create lasting relationships between people of different faiths."*

The response of the youth was rational, they explained that a true friendship had developed among them, but that they also thought there is no way it can be sustained if there is no room for them to continue to see each other. This poised view of things highlights that the youth are not disconnected from the complexity and reality of life, but that they are actively engaged



Melissa and Rasha interviewing people on the streets as part of their social action

in finding ways to rise above these circumstances.

The youth, around a month after the end of the KwM program, sent us a selfie of a reunion they planned together. We are very happy to see that these young people are continuing to invest in their friendships across religious boundaries.

Stay updated on KwM news on our [Facebook page](#). Get involved by participating in the [international training weekend](#) on peace-building that will be held at ABTS in February 2018.

Also, IMES staff are currently seeking training for their own team on Project Cycle Management, Media and Social Media Strategizing, Audio-visual media Production, and Strengths Finder for Team Building. If you are skilled in any of these areas and would like to support us with a training workshop or other potential resources, please get in touch with our Peacebuilding Initiatives Manager, Manal El Tayar at information@abtslebanon.org.

Finally, we would really appreciate your prayers as our team and ministry tread on new grounds and seek to follow Jesus in His *kerygmatic* proclamation of the gospel. And pray for the Church in Lebanon and the MENA region to continue to step into its much needed role of a reconciler and peacemaker.

"It's About Time!": The 2017-2018 Annual Student Retreat

Last October, we had our annual student retreat! It was a nice time for students to rest off campus enjoying the company of one another and getting to know some of our faculty and staff members more closely. They also got to know more about time management, which was the main theme of the retreat. Students shared that they had benefitted from the retreat because dividing their time



Sudanese worship during the retreat

Students preparing for the campfire



wisely among their various responsibilities can be a challenge. This year's retreat was not merely a resting period; it also prepared them to dedicate a portion of their time to ministries such as the compassionate care ministry.

Compassionate Care Ministry: Over 250 Syrian refugee kids enjoying the company of ABTS Students



Getting ready for the games

On November 4, 13 of our residential students went to the Zahle refugee camps to spend some time with the kids. They had prepared fun games, a few songs and a Bible story. More than 250 kids showed up and according to our third-year student Eman, "It was a blessed day indeed; we enjoyed seeing the children's beautiful eyes light up when they saw us coming!"

Middle East Consultation 2018

Jesus Christ and the Religious Other: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Islam

June 18 - 22

In the 21st century, religious diversity is a fact of life. Be it the result of historical precedent or technological advancement, immigration or proselytization, religious diversity can be as disorienting for some as it is enriching for others. For the committed follower of Christ, how are we to make sense of and respond to the non-Christian religions we encounter? More importantly, how does our understanding of religion and religious phenomena impact our proactive Christian witness?

Through the course of MEC 2018 (June 18 - 22) we will work toward discerning a Biblically grounded theology of Islam and religion which constructively informs the Church in its thinking, attitude, and approach to ministry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Participants and contributors at MEC 2018 come from across the region and the world, providing a unique opportunity to reflect upon the critical challenges of Islam, religious diversity and



During one of the panel talks at MEC 2016



Group discussions during MEC 2017

It is in light of such questions that we find ourselves returning to the text, to the witness of Scripture and to the great women and men of faith upon whose shoulders we stand, for guidance. In this vein, IMES is pleased to announce **Middle East Consultation 2018 – Jesus Christ and the Religious Other: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Islam.**

Christian witness in light of Scripture and the study of religion. MEC 2018 will feature high quality presentations from multiple perspectives, personal testimonies, interfaith forums, breakout sessions, and opportunities for all participants to engage in robust discussions.

Would you consider supporting a local or regional leader from the Middle East to participate in MEC 2018?

MEC is a significant and transformative event for those who participate in it. We are aiming to support 20 key leaders to attend MEC 2018, people who would otherwise not be able to be with us. If you would like to sponsor MEC 2018 participants, please contact us at information@ABTSLebanon.org.



MEC 2017