



Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

كلية اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

www.abtslebanon.org

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“ABTS has long nurtured a vibrant community of faith that gathers members of diverse backgrounds into unique dynamics of learning and fellowship. This legacy stems from an institutional identity anchored in a strong sense of shared values and a collective willingness to reach across divides, especially the divide of political borders.”

Read the newest chapter in our New Strategic Direction story titled: [A Borderless Seminary: Leaning into a Heritage and Moving into a Future](#) written by Brent Hamoud, MRel Program Lead.



The Church is the creation of Christ – a living body with many members. These members are interdependent. We need each other. So together, we come under Christ’s lordship as worshippers and as fellow workers. The Spirit of God binds us around the world so that we advance His Kingdom. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

In our brokenness and humanity, we find healing together – a healing that springs from a real, personal encounter with the living Christ and absolute surrender to Him. Now, we only see the underside of the beautiful tapestry God is weaving in us, but someday, we will see as He does.

Is community life still important at seminary?

Community life has always been at the core of ABTS. Most of our programs and initiatives revolved around bringing people together. You would find it in the classrooms. You would find it in chapel. You would find it at the guesthouse, at the student dorms, or across the offices. You would find it over coffee, over a meal, or beneath the olive trees. You would find it during events and conferences. Our campus contained a busy network of interwoven lives journeying together.

With the pandemic spread, we lost much of the life-on-life experience that had characterized ABTS for so long. Indeed, losing that aspect caused lament and disorientation initially. Some faculty members were discouraged. They wondered whether they would still be able to invest in their students’ lives with whom they lost personal touch. Smyrna Khalaf Moughabghab, Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Counseling, shared her experience,

“It was hard for us as faculty because we are used to doing community face to face with students. Before, it was so easy to reach them casually after class or throughout the day. Doing community online, on the other hand, takes time. Everything needs to be scheduled. It takes a lot of dedication and intentionality from both students and professors.

Hence, maintaining this community and character formation has been an essential objective going forward.



Smyrna Khalaf Moughabghab

Does our Integrated Theology Program lack community and holistic formation?



Bassem Melki

One might assume that distance learning lacks the element of formation. In the [third chapter of our new strategic direction](#) story, Bassem Melki, Dean of Faculty, explained that holistic formation is non-negotiable at ABTS. He shared, “One of our fears is that leaders who graduate from ABTS start ministering in their communities without having dealt with their

blind spots, flaws, limitations, and weaknesses resulting in moral failure, burnout, and ultimately bringing shame to the name of Christ and His bride.”

For this reason, our new program has a combination of synchronous and asynchronous virtual platforms through which we can cultivate a learning community. As the year progresses, we continue to incorporate the non-formal elements into the modular curriculum and short residencies over the span of four years. During the yearly residency period of each cohort, we will “capitalize on bonding between students and building solidarity in ministry and support groups.”

What have we gained instead?

It is true that we have lost much of the life-on-life experience, but we have gained a community-on-community experience instead.

Before the pandemic, students would leave their contexts and stay in Lebanon for three years. Here, they would become part of a multicultural community. In many ways, this community has been quite formative. But, in a way, it also can be an artificial community. When they return home, the community there does not resemble the community at seminary, so they have a hard time adjusting. They have changed. Their church has not changed.

The advantage of training them while they remain in their own community is that their community can grow with them. The sending church or organization can also be quite involved in the students’ formation as ABTS partners with them. “Another thing we are doing, in the midst of these changes,” ABTS President Elie Haddad shared, “is to help faculty function as a community. We are helping students to form a community, but the main formation is going to be the community of the faculty

interacting with the students and their respective communities.” Moreover, as travel restrictions are removed, faculty members will be traveling to where students are, thus investing in building strong connections, relationships and community.

Moreover, our reach to students, who are unlikely to enroll because they are immersed in ministry, is increasing due to the hybrid nature of the program. This is shown through more diversity in the program with three Yemenis, an Algerian, nine Sudanese, twelve Lebanese, five Iraqis, nine Syrians, four Egyptians, four Moroccans and two South Sudanese. We expect that, by the time we reach 2024, our Integrated Theology Program alone will be training more than 120 Arab church leaders concurrently.

Was a community formed during the virtual residency?

From January 28 to February 21, our new students joined us for their virtual induction residency. While the initial plan was to have them with us on campus, the lockdown restrictions in Lebanon didn’t make it possible. During the first week of the residency, students were introduced to one another, to staff and faculty, and to some essentials for their journey at seminary. During the second week, students were introduced to the non-formal components of the curriculum such as mentoring and theological reflections. During the third week, they were introduced to research methodology. In all, it was very encouraging to hear of God’s amazing work in our new students, and several faculty members affirmed that a community was beginning to form. Bassem shared,

“It was exciting to get to know them during the residency and to hear their stories. It’s been a very long time since I heard real genuine miraculous stories. Of course, for years, I have been hearing testimonies of God calling people, but here, I was able to sense the miracles and a change of character and of heart. With that, I felt so humbled at the privilege of serving this group of people whom God is calling, leading and transforming. I see them, not merely as students, but as masterpieces on whom God is working, and I am just joining the journey with them.

When they sat in the mentoring groups, I think it was the highlight. They meshed together. They were excited. They quickly put up a plan for their next meeting. For now, at least, we are forming a

smaller community within a larger community. I think we're getting there. This process will probably be a year long, but we have definitely made a breakthrough during the residency.

How will a community be formed throughout the academic year?

Although the courses are mostly asynchronous, they have much room for engagement. While only a few students are usually vocal in a classroom setting, all students express their opinions through the forums. Students have a platform to ask questions and share their struggles.

As part of the four-and-a-half-year long Life and Ministry journey, we will be mentoring students in groups. Through this, we will be building accountability groups. Since our Arab cultures are shame and honor cultures, we hope that our students would grow and become non-judgmental. We wish to create an accepting environment where those students can share their difficulties, challenges, weaknesses and even flaws. This is the opportunity to work with them and give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to work in their lives. We can't transform them. The Holy Spirit can.

Bassem shared, "At this point, we're helping students find self-awareness. Students are discovering their call. They are discovering their character. They are discovering their weaknesses. They are probing into their own lives, looking for areas of focus for the next year or two. This brings them together. It also awakens buried hurts, but that will create community both on the academic and emotional levels and start a journey towards healing."

Every week, students reflect on their lives and ministry as well as on a biblical passage. Once a month, they come together in small groups, and they discuss what they did. In these groups, faculty members will be more of friends to them than mentors. They are not there to preach as much as they are there to



Elie Haddad signing graduating students' degrees (summer 2020)

facilitate and be a friend. Definitely, that will create more bonding and more understanding.

What is God doing at ABTS today?

We know that things aren't going to look any brighter in Lebanon anytime soon, so how do we know we're on the right track? God is sending us one affirmation after the other. Our aim is to do what He wants us to do. The more bleak it is, the more work there is.

The residency had to be completely virtual due to the severe lockdown in Lebanon. During this time, all staff and faculty worked from their homes. As usual, ABTS President addressed the ABTS community with an encouraging message. We will end with a part of it:

Friends, what is happening at ABTS is nothing short of a miracle. After going through multiple challenges last year including an existential crisis, ABTS is turning the corner much quicker than anyone expected. We have started the academic year for the new intake of students in the hybrid program. You know how inspiring and moving the student stories are and how God is shaping them for significant ministry. [...] It is obvious that God is taking us on this amazing journey. All we have to do is remain faithful to what He is calling us to do. We are going places where we have never been before, and sometimes no one else has been before. The only way that we can manage this is when we stay very close to God's leading.





Read previous blog posts:



*Rethinking Christian Mission
Witness in the Middle East*
by Mike Kuhn



I Can
by Smyrna Khalaf
Moughabghab

Pray with Us: Prayers of Faculty and Staff

Smyrna Khalaf Moughabghab | Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Counseling

Pray that faculty may be constantly open to change and that we adapt well to it. Pray that we constantly seek to serve our students better, and pray that we are given wisdom as we go through with the academic year.

Rana Wazir | Registrar

Pray for the new students as they start their academic journey. Their lifestyles will be changing significantly now that they have started making time for their studies. They are learning to manage their time well. During our first mentoring session, some students shared that it can be stressful, so let us lift them up in prayer.

Walid Zailaa | Academic Dean and Assistant Professor of Old Testament

Pray for our students in the different stages of their study. We have those who are transitioning from the residential into the integrated program, those who

completed their first year online and are currently in the bridging process before they move into their second year, and those who newly started with us in February.

Bassem Melki | Dean of Faculty and Lecturer in Peace Studies

Pray for us so that we build impactful courses with effective delivery methods, and pray that students will get in the mood and discipline of study right from the beginning.

Abed El Kareem Zien El Dien | Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry

Please pray that the people of Lebanon may experience peace during such challenging times. The situation is affecting everyone, and I know many Christians who are feeling down as a result.

Nabil Habiby | Lecturer in New Testament Studies

Pray for wisdom and strength for our new

Integrated Theology Program students all over the Arab world and beyond, who are learning to juggle ministry and work with theological studies. Pray for mental strength for ABTS faculty and staff who are having to deal with the escalating Lebanese situation while making sure things are running smoothly at seminary. Pray that the Church continues to be a source of hope and courage in these troubling times.

Emad Botros | Assistant Professor of Old Testament

Pray for students to gain wisdom as they learn how to create balance between work, family, ministry and studying, and that they are not discouraged along the way. As students study the word of God, pray that they grow not only in knowledge but also in character. Pray for a spirit of unity, collaboration, love and care among our new cohort of students, and that they become a community of humble learners. Pray for our faculty to continue being a source of encouragement and inspiration as they teach online.



From the archives (2019)