



# Arab Baptist Theological Seminary

## كلية اللاهوت المعمدانية العربية

www.abtslebanon.org

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# Proclaiming HOPE One Year Later

Elie Haddad, President

Two weeks ago, we commemorated the first anniversary of the Beirut blast. A lot has happened in this past year, including deeper economic troubles and further deterioration of what is left of Lebanon. A lot has not happened, too. We have not seen any leaders in government taking responsibility for the explosion, or for the utter collapse of our systems. No justice has been served, and no closure has been offered to the families who have suffered immensely.

Going back to the newsletter archives, I realized that I had written an article entitled *Is There Hope?* for the [July 2019 newsletter](#). We were wrestling then with the notion of hope even before the uprising, the economic collapse, the pandemic, and the Beirut explosion. It is sobering to recognize that we were looking for hope in July 2019 when the devastation was a fraction of what we are currently experiencing. Most Lebanese today would be relieved to go back to the conditions of July 2019. After the explosion, I wrote an article entitled *The Beirut Explosion: Where Is God?*. In it, I reflected on where and how we can see God in the midst of this cataclysmic event. "Where is God?" is an even more relevant and striking question one year after the blast.

Today, as I reflect on this past year, it seems that for most Lebanese hope is rapidly fading. We are left with ultimate despair. What can we say to the people of Lebanon? What can the Church say without resorting to empty and meaningless words?

It is somewhat easier to communicate words of hope to a suffering Church. The Church understands the gift of suffering, the power of the resurrected life, and the eschatological hope that we have in Christ. In addition, the Church can readily recall its past experiences of God's grace and provisions despite all circumstances.

But what about the unchurched? What words of hope can be communicated to them? That Jesus is coming again and that eventually good will win over evil? What words can be meaningful to those who are starving, grieving, and are in total despair today?

In his Gospel account, Luke writes several times about preaching Good News to the poor. [Tom Houston](#) argues that in Luke's reference to the poor as a category, he is also referring to the captives, the blind, the oppressed, etc. But what was the content of this Good News to the poor? What made it Good News? Of course, it always included the forgiveness of sin. But more than that. The Good News addressed the hearers at the points of their deep need, whether it was healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, releasing the captives, or giving justice to the oppressed. The content of the Good News brought hope to the sinner and brought



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hope to the poor. These two aspects of proclaiming the Gospel were inseparable.

One key aspect for Luke is that the Good News has implications for the rich just as it has implications for the poor. It is the rich who can sell their belongings to give to the poor. For Good News to bring hope to the poor, it takes rich and compassionate people to act.

Similarly, the Good News has implications for the Church. Proclaiming the Good News cannot leave the Church and followers of Christ unchanged. We have experienced this firsthand during the recent crises and especially since last year's blast. The Church in Lebanon is being changed. It is learning how to bring hope to the poor by serving them at the time and place of their intense suffering. It is learning what it means to engage in incarnational ministry, to be embedded within the people it serves, to be present, and to live out its identity in recognizable ways.

So, how can the Church communicate hope beyond empty words? Houston suggests that it needs to become more compassionate and more credible. "We must give up something significant if the compassion of Jesus for the poor is to be seen in us," comments Houston. Compassion is always costly. When the Church remains unaffected by the misery of those around it, this is what Houston refers to as the "credibility gap." We lose our credibility when we fail to get into the trenches to come alongside the suffering.

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As the Good News has implications for the poor, for the rich, and for the Church, undoubtedly it has implications for the seminary. If the Church that responds to God's invitation to participate in His mission in the world through word and deed

cannot remain unchanged, neither can the seminary. If what the Church is experiencing in the streets of Beirut does not transform our curriculum and the way we equip church leaders to engage the world, then that would be a colossal waste of a crisis. We are learning precious lessons at ABTS during these days of hardship, too numerous to mention here. The most important, perhaps, is that our curricula, our approaches, our delivery, even our outcomes, must be dynamic and ever-changing in response to what God is teaching us about Himself and His actions in our world.

With the devastation that we are experiencing in Lebanon, and with the widespread and alarming despair, it is no longer enough to tell people that God loves them. This is the time to show them God's love. This is true not only in Lebanon. There are poor and oppressed communities around the Church all over the world. The need for the Church to act may seem more pronounced in Lebanon today. Nevertheless, the whole Church is called to be more compassionate and more credible, every day, everywhere. If the Gospel is not Good News to the poor and oppressed, then it is not Good News.

**I do get my hope from the knowledge that Jesus is coming again and from the assurance that good will eventually win over evil. But what the people of Lebanon need to experience today is God's redemptive power through the love, service, and sacrifice of His people in their midst. My prayer at this decisive time is that the power of the Good News changes us first for it to change the world.**



# How the Beirut Blast Changed Us

## *Stories and Updates from a Yearlong Response to the Beirut Blast*

*The past year has been a tremendous journey for Lebanon. While the world struggled with a global pandemic and varying economic difficulties, Lebanon had the added weight of contending with the aftermath of the August 4, 2020, Beirut port blast. Thousands were harmed by the explosion. Victims of the blast lost their lives, their loved ones, and their lives' work within seconds. Since then, there has been an outpouring of love from friends regionally and abroad who had a heart to help those impacted by the blast. We at ABTS, through the support of many of our friends and partners abroad, and in partnership with local churches and Christian organizations, were able to play a small part in serving the individuals impacted by the blast.*

*One year later, we know that things are not better today than they were back then. If anything, the situation in Lebanon has grown gradually worse over the past year, with no real end in sight. At the same time, however, as we look back, we can see how God was continuously reaching out His hand in support of the people of Lebanon. Today, we want to share with you the accounts of some of our team members and local partners who have served families impacted by the blast as they reflect on how they have seen the Lord reach out lovingly to the blast victims.*

**Walid Zailaa, Academic Dean:** As I write down these words on the same day a year later, I recall the magnitude of the August 4 Beirut explosion, which pulverized not only half of the city but also the hearts and minds of many, including ours here at ABTS. The harrowing disaster left every one of us speechless, wondering what had happened. Never, even in fifteen years of civil war in Lebanon, had we experienced such a colossal explosion that shook the ABTS campus from such a distance in one single blast. Although incomprehensible, the state of utter motionlessness did not linger long. We strongly felt the need to step in and help those directly affected. Strategically, the ABTS move was administered at two levels: hosting families and partnering with local churches.

Reaching out to some of the victims of the blast, feeling their pain, and helping them out has had a great impact on us as a theological community. Theology, if not translated in action remains abstract, theoretical, and irrelevant. The ultimate example for us to learn from is the divine act of incarnation. In

our helplessness, God reached out to us not only through a plan He had but also through its execution when the Word, our Lord and Savior Jesus, identified Himself with us by becoming like us to save us.

As one body, in tandem with local churches, we did our best to create a safe environment for some of those impacted by providing food, shelter, and spiritual care to a good number of affected families. During their stay on the ABTS campus, we have learned to cry with those in pain, to pray with those in sorrow, and to grieve with those who have lost everything.

I have learned that the more we engage with our community embodying the love of Christ, the more we grow and mature in our theology.

**Joubran Hasbany, Office Representative:** I have always helped with ministry needs at ABTS, but this was the first time I was able to serve people directly. Ministry is different when you interact with the people directly. You feel their suffering, and you see their circumstances. Some of them have lived in the same place for 50 years, and suddenly their homes were gone. Others wanted to move on to new homes but couldn't afford it. Some are sick, and they can't afford treatment.

The people we were able to serve often opened up to us. When you talk to them, you see how much they are hurt, and how often they just need someone to talk to. This changed me a lot...

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By Bassem Melki



*Summer Repost: My Inner Journey to Hell and Back*

By Martin Accad

## Pray with Our Staff

### **Christina Khamis | Media and Partner Relations Officer**

Everything around us is dark, and sometimes it's difficult to find a ray of light. It's becoming hard to carry hope to others when we struggle to hold on to it ourselves. So, I pray for renewed strength and joy in Him that we can reflect to others around us in these tough times our country is going through. May we be sensitive to the needs of others around us and allow God to use us to help them out and share with them the source of our love, hope and joy: Jesus Christ!

### **Kristen Mansour | Guesthouse Assistant Operations**

#### **Supervisor**

Our Lord, Our Creator and protector, I pray for you to help my country. We need You more than ever. Comfort the brokenhearted, and as You gave me the honor to serve the families that lost their houses, I pray that You give me a heart full of compassion to be a good Samaritan and reflect Your love everywhere.

### **Jad Tabet | Development Associate**

Lebanon has had a year to try and contend with the aftermath of the August 4 blast, but there is still a lot of need. Many are still homeless. Others have yet to recover physically and emotionally. Still more are struggling to make ends meet. Pray with us for the families and individuals who have been

impacted by the blast. Pray that the Lord continues to provide their daily bread. Pray that He brings them justice. Finally, pray that the Church in Lebanon continues to be light and salt in times of darkness, and that it continues to serve the poor and the needy.

### **Joubran Hasbani | Office Representative**

Please pray that the Lord would cause a turn of heart in the politicians of Lebanon so that drastic change may begin to take effect.

### **Elie Daher | IT and Facilities Manager**

Please pray for medical needs. Hundreds of doctors and nurses are leaving the country and, with the new wave of COVID 19, this may cause serious challenges. In addition, we are facing a shortage of essential medicine and medical supplies, which will leave vulnerable people at high risk.

### **Loulwa El Maalouf | Director of Partnerships**

Dear Lord, we ask You to have mercy on the people of Lebanon. Teach us to humble ourselves and seek You. Change the hearts of our leaders and lead them to submit to You. Change the hearts of our people and let them proclaim You alone as King over their lives.