



THE MESSAGE BOARD
A Newsletter from
A. Roy Medley, General Secretary



Personal Reflections

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Middle East Study Tour**Part 3**

After I finished Part 2, I was sitting in the airport in Istanbul waiting to be on our way. Unfortunately, our flight to Beirut was delayed by over three hours. Consequently, we did not arrive in Beirut until 3:00 AM local time. But there were three of our hosts, Rosette Mansour, and Dan and Sarah Chetti, waiting for us upon arrival. What a welcome sight! After an overnight flight Sunday with little or no sleep for most of the study group and then a full day that stretched on to 3:00 AM, most of us were utterly exhausted and collapsed into our beds, grateful for the six hours we had until we began the next morning.

Our first two days in Lebanon were planned to be filled with orientation and formal lectures. We have now completed our first full day in Beirut, and the orientation has given us good background about the scope of the work of the Lebanese Baptist Society. It sponsors a multifaceted ministry including a seminary, a K-12 school system, an education resource center for training church leaders, a publishing area, children and youth ministries, a relief and development agency, and work with developmentally disabled children. Quite impressive and creative!

The heart of our time, though, has been given to our primary theme: how do we relate as Christians to Muslims? We are especially blessed with lectures by a retired CMS missionary, Dr. Colin Chapman.

Not surprisingly, the primary response to the question, "How do we relate?" has been one word: "Love." Love, as a verb. A particular guideline that shapes ministry here is "view affects attitude; attitude affects approach; and approach affects interaction."

The emphasis is upon relating to individuals as persons rather than as a representative of another religion. Personal interaction is coupled with a commitment to witness as life, not words alone. I was taken with the idea that what is important is winning the heart, not the argument. But isn't that true of our approach to every neighbor?

Our discussions today were filled with probing questions, debunking untruth, and exploring bridges of commonality. The church in Lebanon experiences more freedom than anywhere else in the Middle East, but it still works within a culture where Islam is the dominant influence. What does it mean to be church in such a setting? How does evangelical Christianity lose some of its Western form in order to be more contextual? What is essential to being the church? What isn't? Does one live as a hunkered down enclave?

Throughout the day we heard testimonies of how Christ was turning the heart of Christians from fear and hatred to love of neighbors of differing faiths. There is a strong emphasis upon the church as a reconciling community here.

Some kernels of wisdom that have been shared with us that are worthy of contemplation:

- (1) A difference with Christianity is that "Islam is essentially submission, rather than 'communion'" (Kenneth Cragg)
- (2) It is important to "sit among Muslims" and listen.
- (3) Dialogue is not the same as syncretism.
- (4) Islam is not monolithic; it has many faces.
- (5) Islam is changing to adapt to new contexts (25% of Muslims now live in a setting where they are the minority), and
- (6) We must allow Muslims to define Islam rather than imposing our own definition.

Holy Spirit, revealer of truth, grant us wisdom as we ask, "Who is my neighbor?" Open our eyes, but especially our hearts this day to the neighbor who is difficult for us to love. Amen.

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Office of the General Secretary
 American Baptist Churches USA • PO Box 851 • Valley Forge, PA 19482-0851
 800-ABC-3USA, extension 2274 • Roy.Medley@abc-usa.org
www.abc-usa.org