NESSL Consultation Summary

April 11-13, 2016

Field Visit to Bakka Valley Education Projects

April 14, 2016

Visit to Syrian Congregations in Yazdia, Wadi Nasara, and Homs

April 15-17, 2016

By Rev. Elmarie Parker

“In the Middle East, war always influences how we see the other; it clouds our view of the beauty of the other’s religion,” began Preacher Najla Kassab during the NESSL Consultation’s opening worship our third morning together. Her message was fueled through reflecting on Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth found in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. This text begins, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way (NRSV).”

“*Kata sarx,*” Najla emphasized—Greek for “According to the flesh,” “from a human point of view,”—gets at the prejudices we carry toward one another. Emptying ourselves of prejudices, of *kata sarx*, of seeing each other from a human point of view, can’t come by violence or by counting the mistakes of the other. It can only come by looking beyond the *sarx*, beyond the flesh; it can only come through reconciliation. Reconciliation will be the more difficult work to come in Syria.”

The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon chose to gather their partners from across Europe and the United States for three days of shared Biblical-Theological and Pastoral Reflecting on the themes they have experienced as central to their identity, call, and work during these five years of brutal war in Syria. They particularly wanted to explore together three aspects of how the church finds encouragement from God’s word to continue in its unique work during a time of war:

1. What is it about God’s call in Christ that motivates pastors and congregations to STAY when everything else screams at them to leave
2. From what posture is the church called to serve those in need that makes it distinct from any other humanitarian organization serving at this time.
3. What is the unique call and posture of Christians when it comes to inter-faith relationships and the work of reconciliation.

With this in mind, the Consultation focused on three topics that have emerged for the church in Syria-Lebanon. The NESSL invited deliberate conversation between the church communities represented from across the USA, Europe, and Syria-Lebanon:

1. What biblically and theologically supports the identity and call of the church during times of crisis from (and examples from the field of this theology in practice).
2. What biblically and theologically frames the work *Diakonia* (and examples from the field of this theology in practice).
3. What biblically and theologically calls the church to interfaith and intercultural relationships and reconciliation (and examples from the field of this theology in practice).

After each person who had been invited to share with the entire group finished, the rest of us then had an opportunity to offer reflections or questions on what we had just heard. A fascinating, encouraging, and thought-provoking multi-logue emerged, that was woven in prayer and worship through-out the day. Here is who presented in each area along with highlights of their comments:

**Update on General Situation in Lebanon-Syria**:

* **Dr. Baasem Al-Shabb** (Member of Presbyterian Church in Sidon and Minister of Parliament for the Evangelical Community)
* Lebanon doing OK—truly a miracle that Lebanon has remained stable
* Points to the resilience of Lebanon
* Have developed a history of tolerance embodied in the reunification of Beirut (a miracle like Berlin)—unlike Cyprus and Serbia that are both still divided
* Lebanese warlords know what civil war is like; don’t want to go back to this!
* Christians are the buffer between mostly Sunni north and Shi’a south
* Political system in Lebanon (Parliamentary Democratic Republic in framework of confessionalism) is based on religious sects/confessions—this assures rights for minority groups (like affirmative action in the USA)
* Adopted in Iraq (still needs to be lived into)
* Must be considered by Syria
* In Lebanon: President—Maronite Christian; Prime Minister—Sunni Muslim; Speaker of Parliament—Shi’a Muslim
* The three dominant sects (Maronite, Sunni, Shi’a) work together; for example this is demonstrated in the three layers of security forces active in Lebanon:
* Army is led by a Maronite Christian
* Interior Ministry is led by a Sunni Muslim
* Security of Borders is led by a Shi’a Muslim
* Due to the influx of over 1.5 million Syrian refugees to Lebanon, and the already 500,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and the perception that relief aid is actually support for Sunni resettlement in Lebanon, there are now calls for Federalism (decentralization), and there are increasing tensions again between Christians and Muslims. Less than ½ of refugees historically return to their home countries.
* 40,000 children born to Syrian refugees in Lebanon every year.
* Need support in both Syria and Lebanon to get Syrian kids off the streets and back into school (reduces risk of radicalization)
* At the same time, dialogue continues between all three sects (Christian, Sunni, Shi’a) to relieve tensions.
* Lebanon is well supported by global partners to fight extremism. Lebanon perceives Europe as being very engaged, and the USA as being mostly disengaged (NOT concerned with refugees; overall, NOT afraid of jihadis due to the distance).
* Lebanon has been warned by the USA that Israel is making use of the current chaos in the area to prepare for war—Lebanon needs to be prepared for another possible Israeli invasion.
* Most global partners have now adopted a Shi’a narrative understanding of the situation (extremism is fueled through distorted theology) rather than a Sunni narrative understanding of the situation (extremism is fueled through economic grievances, resistance against secular governments/regimes; see the solution being based in education and solving the Palestinian issue).
* Main problem in ME is NOT violent extremism, but non-violent extremism exhibited through a growing conservatism in Islamic society and a decreasing secularism in the Muslim world (this is what makes things difficult for Christians).
* Under Islamism there is a concern that the secular constitutions of countries would be replaced by sharia law.
* Sees the Arab Spring as a Sunni revival movement led by Saudi Arabia; the Shi’a revival movement was led by Iran in the late 1970’s.
* Currently a 70% unemployment rate in Syria

**Biblical-Theological Reflections on the Church’s Ministry in Times of Crisis**:

* **Rev. Mofid Karajieli** (Pastor, Presbyterian Church in Homs, Syria). Rev. Mofid is an only son whose parents and sisters have moved to Sweden. Resisting cultural and family pressure as the only son to join his parents, he has chosen to stay in Syria and continue serving in Christ’s name to encourage the church and broader community.
* **Rev. Uel Marrs** (Pastor, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Belfast)
* Highlights:
* **Rev. Mofid** led the way in discussing the church’s identity and call—especially during times of crisis, by calling our attention to Christ’s message to the church in Ephesus recorded in Revelation 2:1-5. With this letter as his background, he shared how he and his congregation have been rediscovering their call to stay true to living the values of Jesus Christ during this time of crisis. He emphasized the need for the church to NOT compromise the values of Jesus Christ, the need for the church to NOT leave its first love, when faced with tremendous times of challenge and pressure.
* One example of the challenge they face: Many now live as thieves in order to secure their future. These people sell what they steal for cheap prices. The question facing followers of Jesus: Is it OK for Christians to buy these things or not? This is one example of the ethical burden facing the church community in Syria today.
* Memorable quotes from Rev. Mofid:
* “The issue we face isn’t about survival, but how one lives positively; even how one’s death can bear a good witness to Christ.”
* “We are in a battle. So, we don’t ask if we will win or not, but we are called simply to obey—to do our duty—to be a good example of the way of Christ.”
* **Rev. Uel Marrs** drew from Luke 7:36+ (Jesus anointed by a sinful woman) to discuss some of what the church in Northern Ireland has learned during its journey through times of deep crisis:
* Church’s conversion in a context of crisis
* The crisis highlights the reality of fallen humanity—context of Belfast given as an example.
* We have the possibility of learning together in the midst of crisis; of being converted together in crisis as Jesus ministers to us.
* Church’s clarity in times of crisis
* Opportunity to gain clarity of thought, to remember who we are—to which audience are we living with total love and total surrender?
* We must be clear about who the Blesser is and which audience we are serving.
* Church’s crossroads in a context of crisis
* Primary concern: Christ’s response to us or response of others?
* Church as broken alabaster jar sharing fragrance of Christ—allows us to be decisive together when time is not on our side.
* Church’s capacity in a context of crisis
* Widow with single coin; boy with loaves
* Open, vulnerable
* About what we can/can’t offer to the least, last, lost
* Called to be family to those who have no family.
* The church in a context of crisis (where the focus tends to be more stripped down to the bare essentials) challenges the church in comfort (where the focus tends to be more on the ‘bells and whistles’ of ministry).
* The church is not defined by the crisis, but rather by the Christ who is with us in the crisis!
* The church in comfort gains perspective by stepping out of its context in order to gain a new view.

**Pastoral Reflections on the Church’s Ministry in Times of Crisis**:

* **Ms. Petra Antoun** (works with Forum for Development, Culture, and Dialogue—FDCD)
* 80 Young Adults meet dialing in Damascus (Batouma)
* Meeting together & seeing positive impact on others gives courage to continue with each day.
* “I have Christ within, so in my work with FDCD I act as I have learned from my church—to share Jesus with those we serve, both Muslims and Christians.”
* **Dr. Amaan Amr** (Damascus)—Challenges facing young adults
* Economic: Used to make $200-$300/month; now making $30/month
* Future is difficult to plan for; focus is on the daily
* Education: Difficult to continue with college; find selves thinking about BIG questions—meaning of life, meaning of being a Christian, future roles
* Proud to be peace-builders and reconcilers
* We are called to experience God in the hard and bad times
* We want to be heard outside of Syria
* Young adults are talking about their life with Christ in the midst of crisis—there is an identity crisis that is both religious and secular in nature as wrestling with the value of citizenship.
* This year, received more Easter Greetings from Muslims than Christians (“Christ is Risen” shared as a way to connect with Christians).
* Caution: in a crisis the emphasis is on the urgent; it can be easy to forget the deeper needs.
* **Rev. Ibrahim Nsier** (Aleppo)
* During this time of crisis, the challenge is having an accurate understanding of scripture:
* Called to love of enemy
* Called to hope
* Nature of resurrection power to a congregation that is now 60% of self.
* We are one body in Christ, yet Aleppo has received no visitors during this time of crisis—a wound.
* During this time of crisis, another challenge is implementing church discipline:
* Church identity is different
* Called to forgiveness and reconciliation
* Called to stewardship and giving
* Called to praying for peace
* Another challenge is spiritual health—seeking spiritual maturity in the midst of this crisis
* Are we living the essence of our faith?
* Learning not to be afraid, to not quit, to not blame
* Instead, learning to look to the next step
* **Rev. Butros Zaour** (Damascus)
* “The love of Christ restrains us all.”
* Congregation members trained to lead others to Christ.
* “Child-friendly” space in worship
* Bread and Gospel together
* **Ms. Liena Khaashu** (Latakia)
* Returned to Syria from USA to serve during this time of crisis
* Shared story of the grief facing many in this example of a mother who hadn’t seen her son for a year after having been recruited to serve in the Syrian Army. She finally saw him for his 21st birthday; he then returned to the front lines and three days later he was killed in action.
* Romans 12:1-5
* “We are called to patience, not despair; called to accept the other—the work of reconciliation; called to overcome evil with good.”
* Asked: what are we prepared to do?
* Women are very active in Latakia PC to reach out to other women who are struggling:
* Age 20-30 men are gone—very difficult for the women who stay behind.
* Challenge: prostitution is often chosen as only way to provide for children.
* **Rev. Sabine Dressler** (Germany)
* Facing the crisis of a divided Europe
* Germany—received 1 million refugees in past year (4% Christian)
* Society divided over how to respond
* Church must be clear on our call and identity—welcoming refugees will bring both transformation and change.
* German church must learn of and from Christians in the Middle East.
* **Rev. Bertil Svensson** (Uniting Church of Sweden)
* 2014 NESSL Consultation focused on 4 areas
* Advocacy
* Relief
* Pastoral, Spiritual, Ecclesial Care
* Rehabilitation & Rebuilding of destroyed property
* Next possible steps
* Role of microfinancing to help families begin again
* Need for partners (European/American) to commit for the long haul—“Marshall Plan” for Syria
* “You were one among us.”
* Matthew 4:24 “News about him spread all over Syria.”
* Revelation 22:22 “Healing of the nations.”
* Isaiah 17 “Destruction of Damascus”

**Biblical-Theological Reflections on Diakonia**:

* **Rev. Salam Hanna** (Latakia)
* Jesus held word and deed together
* Mark 6:30-44
* Mark 8:1-10
* Took & Blessed (role of master of the house)
* Broke & Gave (role of servants/women)
* “When little/few resources are put in Christ’s hands, they are multiplied to satisfy all with enough left over to feed the nations.”
* Issue of social justice (sat on green grass…not hungry because of drought, but because of injustice)
* Jesus is alive in distributed justice
* Diakonia—service through spirit of Jesus in love and justice
* **Rev. Tim McCalmont** (Costa Mesa, CA; Church of the Covenant, PCUSA)
* Diakonia—waiting on tables; make provision for bodily sustenance; providing for service of community
* All done rendered to Christ
* Matthew 25—serving not just people, but Jesus Christ
* Called & shaped by Jesus for this work
* “We serve others as God’s love possesses us and spills into the lives of others.”
* Centering in Christ makes us more effective
* Prayer gatherings for city sustained church community in Costa Mesa

**Pastoral Reflections on Diakonia**:

* **Rev. Laurie Kraus** (PCUSA, Director of PDA)
* Mark 1:35-45 calls us to an awareness of URGENCY!!!
* When disaster overtakes us
* We can feel like victims without agency
* In contrast, this body (NESSL + Partners) CHOSE to engage in relief work
* We are agents of Christ who choose to respond with Christ’s grace and compassion
* Jesus chose—he was moved in his guts
* Exercising compassion costs us something—a broken heart
* Exercising compassion changes us and how we do ministry
* We can’t go back to who we were before
* Ministry outside
* Muslims sharing ‘He is Risen”
* Minaret embedded in the cross
* New ministry; new understanding
* **Rev. Firas Farah** (Kamishli)
* Matthew 14:22-36
* Jesus uses this miracle to teach the disciples something specific
* “Jesus can sometimes make us walk into the eye of the storm—the storm for us is Syria.”
* “Difference between us and the first disciples is that we know Jesus is with us in the storm and that he will calm the storm.:
* “So, we are not heroes. Rather, we are being shaped and formed to be proved true followers of Jesus.”
* **Arie VanderPoel** (The Netherlands)
* Galatians 6:9—“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”
* “We are called to live with open hearts, ears, homes, and churches.”
* Shared story of Dutch family who received a Muslim family in their home.

**Updates From Pastors Working/Living In Syria**

* **Rev. Ibrahim Nsier** (Aleppo) Showed video (file corrupted)
* 60% of church members have left
* “All of Aleppo is now my congregation.”
* Aleppo College (run by NESSL) has 250 students
* Next Generation School (run by local PC in Aleppo) has 700 students (698 are Muslim)
* “We don’t need to Christianize Muslims; but we do need to help them learn how to live with others.
* Aleppo has been under siege for 2 ½ years.
* For 2-3 months they only had vegetables to eat—no fruit.
* Work of the church is the story of God’s grace—God suffering with us.
* **Rev. Yacoub Sabbaagh** (Farouzi)
* Spent his first year in Farouzi simply listening
* Learned
* As pastor, must guard church’s integrity
* Issue of relief-aid seeking—aid must not be offered as exchange for attendance at church
* Impact of emmigration/displacement
* Church identity—called to offer hospitality to those not like us
* Working with family groups to develop reformed identity (young couples with young children since all young adults have emigrated).
* A strong women’s ministry continues at Farouzi
* **Rev. Boutros Zaour** (Damascus)
* 90 Children involved in worship through “Child Friendly Spaces” Grant awarded through Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC)
* Discipleship Group Meetings
* 750 members
* Relief work with Sudanese
* **Rev. Salam Hanna** (Latakia) (showed PowerPoint—in DropBox)
* Church Playground—only one in this part of the city; needs renovation (NESSL will match any donated funds).
* **Rev. Mofid Karajieli**
* 2,000 Christians back to old city out of 70,000. More are returning.
* School run by Homs PC (52% Christian; 48% Muslim—Half Sunni/Half Alawite)
* 1,500 students before war began.
* 2012—300 students
* 2013-2014—500 students
* 2014-2015—830 students
* 2015-2016—1,080 students
* **Rev. Firas Farah** (Kamishli, Malakieh, Hasaki in NE Syria) (Shared PowerPoint—in Dropbox)
* Many Armenians fled to this part of Syria in the early 1900’s during the massacres in Turkey.
* Kurds—recently announced a new federal territory for self in NE Syria (refused by other Kurds and others in area)
* Kurds started by fighting with Syrian Government against ISIS, but now they are pursuing their own sectarian agenda.
* Kurds now enforcing taxes and inscription into Kurdish militia—not Government Army.
* This leads to deep concerns for Christians
* Kurds want all curriculums to be taught in Kurdish; they have already put this into place in government schools.
* Church schools have refused—so far.
* Muslim parents are asking for their children to come to the church schools—they don’t want them in the government schools with this new Kurdish curriculum.
* With ISIS, one thinks of the massacres of 100 years ago, but the Kurds’ actions are also of great concern!!!
* Creates a sense of pressure
* Leads Christians to emigrate, even though there is no fighting in our area.
* The church is serving human need in the midst of this, but it hasn’t yet stopped emigration.
* The church used to be rich in human resources.
* All roads are blocked into NE Syria—only air travel is possible (supplies come in through Turkish border; poor quality/high cost)
* Current goal: Keep churches open to serve those who are left—both within and outside of the church.
* **Rev. Ma’an Bitar** (Mhardeh, Syria) (see separate papers for his presentation on grappling with the issue of Christians arming to defend themselves against radicalized extremists).
* **Response from Rev. Salam Hanna to Rev. Ma’an Bitar’s Presentation**
* Blaming those who leave doesn’t have a biblical/theological basis.
* Syria is 70% Sunni
* Syria has tried since the early 60’s to have a secular state (Baath Party).
* Until Islam is ready for secularism—to separate religion from politics—there won’t be the ability to develop secular governments.
* Secularism and democracy cannot come from the outside.
* Issue for Christians: Armed in Army vs. Militia vs. Self-Defense
* **Response from Rev. Chris Ferguson** (General Secretary for World Communion of Reformed Churches)
* What is the role of the church in transforming society toward justice and rule of law???
* Taking up arms ultimately leads to dehumanization
* Why have we (the church) left people so alone that they are driven to pick up arms to defend their children?
* What is the nature of this conflict & it’s causes?
* **Response from Preacher Najla Kassab** (NESSL)
* Violence begets violence
* **Response from Rev. Joseph Kassab** (NESSL General Secretary)
* The Middle East Church must grow in its prophetic role
* **Response from Rev. Hadi Ghantous** (Minyara, Lebanon)
* We must also wrestle with the challenge of believing that our reflection on the bible is what the bible says.

**Biblical-Theological Reflections on Interfaith/Intercultural Relations**

* **Rev. Agnete Holm** (Denmark, Dan Mission)
* Interfaith relationships are characterized by:
* Long-term, slow work
* Regular work of re-connecting/reconciling
* A longing for peace for all of us
* An awareness that fear, hatred, and prejudice closes our hearts to the beauty of the other.
* Our grounding for Interfaith relationships is the Trinity
* God embodies difference in Christ (Human/Divine)
* Unity comes from love
* All humans are created in the image of God—difference/diversity is part of who we are in the image of God; allows us to both give and receive love.
* No limits/borders once engaged in interfaith dialogue
* Zechariah 2:1-5
* God is our border; we don’t have to worry; instead we can relax
* Aids for navigating diversity
* Exodus—Moses met God in a burning bush
* The promised land of milk & honey was incredibly diverse—diversity is the milk
* Good Shepherd (John)—“I have other sheep not of this fold.”
* Faith of the Roman Centurian
* Faith of Syro-Phoenician woman
* **Rev. Hadi Ghantous** (Minyara, Lebanon)
* Scripture is a book of encounters—a narrative encounter that serves as a mirror for us (shows us both our fallen state and how we are to carry-out our call to encounter the other)
* Genesis 32—Encounter between Jacob and Essau
* We, like Jacob, want others to see how great we are
* Easy to pretend to be humble
* Encounter with God leaves Jacob limping—now go meet your brother in humility, in weakness, but with blessing after wrestling encounter with God.
* John 21—Jesus meets disciples on the shore of the sea
* They’ve been through a night of failed fishing
* Meeting this ‘other’ on the shore might be good for them
* In the midst of encounter, they recognize Jesus in the ‘stranger.’
* Peter’s response reveals our nakedness, vulnerability, weakness
* They share a meal that was made by both the disciples and Jesus (now no longer a stranger)
* Real encounter is only when we see God in the face of the other.
* “We cannot be Christians without meeting the other—it is who we are as followers of the Triune God.”
* This is the only road to maturity in Christ
* We only mature in the context of relationship

- Responses to Q & A to above:

* What about the work of reconciliation within the Christian family—how can we pursue reconciliation between faiths with so much yet undone among us?
* Agnete—we come weak to the work of reconciliation.
* Hadi—encounter with the very other can help us in our encounter with those closer to us.
* What if the other doesn’t want to encounter me?
* Agnete—if the other doesn’t want to meet you, keep trying; always have a room open in you for the other.
* Hadi—remember the image of Jesus from Revelation as he knocks and continues to knock…this is our call as well.
* Who can speak for all Christians? For all Muslims?
* Agnete—Start with speaking on behalf of yourself, not a group
* Is there contradiction in the Trinity as we face contradiction in ourselves and with others?
* Agnete—We understand God only in glimpses
* Hadi—Salvation is through Christ, NOT through our understanding of salvation through Christ. (shared St. Peter joke—Jesus throwing people over the wall into heaven; who decides?
* It seems the most challenging thing facing us is how to engage with those in Christianity and Islam (and Judaism) who are extremist or exclusionist or radicalized. What guidance would you offer?
* Hadi—the ends (stopping extremism) does not justify the means. As followers of Jesus we are called to love. This is what it means to bring Christ’s good news. The only way to deal with extremism is to support all moderates. Who said we will win? We do this because we are called to plan and water. It is up to God to harvest.
* Agnete—The short answer is love your enemy within and without.
* **Dr. Ibrahim Shamseddin** (Lebanon, Shi’a Cleric)
* I’m a religious person, a civil Muslim—not secular; I’m from an inner circle of religious persons (my father was a well-known imam)
* Diversity is normal in how we (Muslims) see God
* Sunni have 4 schools of thought
* Shi’a have 2-3 schools of thought
* It’s God’s job to know how to be with us in our diversity; oneness is in God’s character; this is God’s work. It is normal for humanity to come to God in diversity.
* Use of violence is not prohibited in Islam
* Must use it in self-defense
* Use of violence is highly regulated
* Costs are incurred when violence is used wrongly
* For example, there is a fine for a parent hitting a child.
* Violence is NOT the way of faith or of spreading faith
* Our purpose/path/journey: to be a good human
* Entering heaven is always a process of being tested
* Killing others is anti-faith
* Islam (submission) is to submit all your presence to God.
* We, both Islam and Christianity, believe in preaching
* Ours is not to convert
* Forced conversion leads to dialogue of war
* We are confined to our own earthly experiment (pursuing our beliefs)
* We can be with each other fully without adopting each other’s view.
* None of us (Muslims/Christians) are full citizens; we should be equal; the state should protect all, but should be without religion.
* We are all part of the Arab Majority (speaking to fellow Arabs here—both Christian and Muslim); all Muslims (Sunni and Shi’a) are part of Muslim majority.
* Christians do not need to hide—they are part of the majority because they look like the majority.
* It’s not a requirement in Islam to establish a political government. Politics is what kills, not religion
* When responding to radicals in our own religion—we don’t need to make mistakes (i.e., retaliate, withdraw, live in fear, etc.) because others make mistakes. Instead, we are to persevere in obedience.
* Muslim jurists included about 1/3 of the 6,000 Koranic verses in Sharia Law. The Koran is a dynamic text—this is why interpretation develops.
* If belief is oppressive, there is no just God and all is false.
* It is not easy to become a jurist.
* There is a STRONG opinion now among Muslim jurists that jihad is NOT about making others Muslim.
* We must be civil, as Muslims and Christians, in our societies.

**Pastoral Stories on Interfaith Experiences**:

* **Rev. Ma’an Bitar** (Mhardeh, Syria)
* I look at God through the eyes of Jesus Christ.
* The Trinity is very special; must show the reality of this in practice, not speech, to those new to this idea.
* If Jesus is so special, then I must live and speak in such a way to help others WANT to receive him because they have seen his greatness and goodness.
* **Rev. Suheil Saoud** (Beirut, Lebanon)
* Through the NESSL’s education ministry (schools operated by the NESSL primarily in Lebanon), Muslims and Christians share life in a school context; context for inter-faith encounter
* Typical student body of a NESSL School
* 3-4 % are students from NESSL Churches
* 20% are students from other Christian Churches
* Remaining 75% are Muslim students (Sunni, Shi’a, Druz, Alawite)
* In Nabatiah (S. Lebanon), our school has only Muslim students; we keep the school there because we believe education encourages moderation—our emphasis is on bible values.
* Recent schools-wide contest on Peace—the winner was a student from Zachle, Lebanon (east-side of Mountains of Lebanon) who painted Mt. Lebanon with a dove knitting together the torn cloth of Lebanon back together again.
* **Preacher Rola Sleiman** (Tripoli, N. Lebanon)
* I grew up and studied with Sunnis in Tripoli
* Today, since 2008, I have been serving as the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Tripoli. Today the church has 30 families; used to be much larger before Lebanese Civil War.
* “We share the same pain caused by radicals.” This is what the Muslims/Sunnis around the church building have shared with the congregation. They help to protect the church from radicals.
* In 1996, the church building was renovated after the ravages of the civil war.
* “I have been born in the Middle East for a reason—not in vain.”
* Issue is politics; NOT religion.
* 2014—First Sunday of the New Year—Sunnis protected the churches because they feared radicals would cause damage and that moderates would be blamed.
* **Rev. Thomas Wild** (France)
* Must remember history so that we can live in the present with humility, love, welcome, and reconciliation.
* The role of education is vital.
* **Elder Kenny Rogers** (Scotland)
* Based in Palestine
* History is being made here in the Middle East on a daily basis.
* Today’s world follows what they SEE, NOT what they read or hear.
* Our work in Palestine creates employment opportunities where Jews, Christians, and Muslims work together—must encounter one another.
* Forced separation is terrible.
* We may not be able to reach all the extremists, but we can reach the masses in the middle by living TOGETHER in diversity.
* **Rev. Rob Weingartner** (The Outreach Foundation, President)
* We need inter-religious ever day conversation to pave the way for higher-level dialogue.
* What stories are we telling about those of other faiths; how are those stories impacting our formation.
* In the last 15 years, the numbers of Muslims in the USA have doubled.
* Common Grace—Any individual can reflect the goodness of God and God cares for all.
* Jesus has not called us to defend him or build his kingdom, but to be his witnesses—not through coercion or manipulation; we begin with listening and giving regard to others’ story and giving love.

European and American Partners need to know from NESSL what points they would consider necessary elements for peace/justice advocacy.

**Field Visits to Educational Programs in Lebanon and to Congregations in Syria**:

In addition to these rich conversations, we also had the opportunity to see our partners in action. You’ve already received updates from NESSL on the Educational Programs (if you haven’t received a copy, please email me and I’ll forward the updates to you).

In Syria, we visited with Syrian Presbyterians in Majda Helu. These families have been displaced from Idlib, Aleppo, Hasake, Damascus, and Homs. They meet for worship on a weekly basis at a monastery. After we shared worship together, we had the opportunity to hear the stories of several families.

* Mr. Bitar was from Idlib (near Aleppo). Today Al-Nushra and two other militant groups have control over his town.
* He sees the Syrian war as especially destructive
* Inflation has risen by 10 times. This impacts society and behavior. He is seeing a social and ethical collapse.
* The war has also threatened the Christian presence in Syria
* He asked us to tell their story:
* Unity in diversity—this is the call of Christians
* Security, safety, peace, national sovereignty for the Syrian people is their desire
* Asking the nations to stop supporting the sale of weapons to either side in Syria.
* Asking the nations to stop outside agendas and ideologies from taking over Syria.
* Ms. Farah Abboud was from Homs, and was studying computer science.
* She and four friends had a goal of starting a company in Homs.
* But now they are all in different countries.
* It has been lonely since leaving Homs. Huda (from Yazdiah) was the answer to her prayers for a sense of God’s presence.
* She left 5 years ago from Homs with nothing. Huda provided what was needed. But assistance is not enough. What is needed is a salary.
* The issue is having a sense of dignity.
* Mr. Philip Hanna was from Damascus.
* He lost his home and business
* He has been without work for 4 years now; no other source of income.
* Rent is $70-80/month now.
* Syria now controlled by various armed groups.
* Ms. Rana Nouhman was from Homs.
* She has been internally displaced for 5 years; she had hoped to return to her home after 3 days.
* She used to work at the National Bank
* She lost her brand new car
* Her mom has no income either
* Huda was the first to help her. Now Rana assists her.
* Rent is now a burden.
* Ms. Toear Wardi was from Homs.
* Had to leave university in order to find work.
* Her Father has health issues.
* They lost their home and work.
* Now she has received a scholarship to study in Georgia (Russia).
* We also learned about one of the challenges facing the Homs PC as they work with PDA to help families rebuild their homes.
* Because there are limited funds, NESSL supported 40 Presbyterian families headed by Presbyterian men in rebuilding their homes.
* Presbyterian women married to Orthodox or Catholic men were not considered, because NESSL assumed the Orthodox and Catholic communities would help those families to rebuild their homes.

We also visited with the Presbyterian Church in Homs. They introduced our group to their ecumenical friends in the Old City at the Greek Catholic Church, Jesuit Monastery, Greek Orthodox Church, and Syriac Orthodox Church. Every church is in the midst of rebuilding, as are the Mosques around them.

The Presbyterian Church finished rebuilding their sanctuary in time to worship there for Christmas 2015! It looks beautiful (as does the Fellowship Hall). They’re now working on the Pastor’s Apartment, which they hope to finish by September 2016. They are also 2/3 of the way through helping 40 families rebuild their homes (with the assistance of PDA). We were able to visit with three of these families. They are so very grateful to be back in their homes and to know they are not alone in this rebuilding process.

On Saturday evening, we met with the Elders and other leaders of the Church. They shared their stories with us:

* “Remembering our forebears’ courage and perseverance through difficult times has given us courage to persevere.”
* “This crisis has been a total shock; Syria has been safe and stable since the 1970’s when the first President Assad took over.”
* “Your partnership helps us know God is with us to help us rebuild.”
* “We have a great hope in God and that God will help the truth to be told.”
* “Many have come to be with us—this is how we know God is with us!!!”
* “Our biggest problem is seeing our young people leaving—we need help creating business opportunities that will help to keep them here.”
* “Syria’s crisis is like any other crisis; we will come back from this.”
* “The church was here before the crisis, during the crisis, and will be here after the crisis. Only the church cares for us. The church helps us to communicate with God.”
* One young man chose recently to get married in the Old City as a way of making visible his commitment to stay.
* The Women’s Ministry is slowly rebuilding.
* The Sunday School is very active with summer activities being planned.
* The church has opened a new Library complete with Computer Lab. It is used by the community for many learning activities.
* The Hope Initiative Group, made up of the Young Adults of the church, have started a new program called “Space for Hope”. They are old enough to remember life in Syria from before the war, where they as children played in the streets with friends of other faith traditions—Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Alawite, and Sunni. They went to each other’s birthday parties and shared life together. Their first concern was NOT: are you Christian or are you Muslim. But the proxy sectarian fighting in Syria has torn this social fabric apart, leaving behind suspicion and mistrust. So during “Space for Hope,” these Presbyterian young adults now bring together young children who have only know this time of war; who have only known sheltered play in their own yards, away from kids who are different from them. The children come from both Christian and Muslim families. They meet at the Evangelical School—a trusted location. Together they play team-building games—the context for meeting the “other” and beginning to learn how to see God in the face of the other. One of the challenges they face is finding enough equipment to use for the games (balls, etc.).

I hope through this report you’ve gained a glimpse of the rich time that was shared among all those who participated in the NESSL’s 2016 Consultation, along with a picture of both the strengths and challenges that are a part of our sisters and brothers lives. Any errors in facts are due to the limitations of my note-taking. May our Lord continue to make clear our call as we seek to walk with the church in the Middle East during this season.

I look forward to hearing from you any next steps you may feel called to explore.

In Christ’s Peace,

Rev. Elmarie Parker

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