The high point of the academic year 2014/2015 was a non-academic event. It was an action to help the Christian Assyrian refugees in Lebanon undertaken by the NEST students, faculty and staff. Moved by the tragic plight of this minority Christian group in Syria and Iraq, our Seminary students decided to do something for the children of the refugees at the Beirut suburb of Sadd el-Bouchriyyeh, where the Assyrian quarter of Beirut is located. So far, 1500 Assyrian families have taken refuge in Lebanon, some from Iraq but mostly from northern Syria. There are thousands of children among them who cannot all be accommodated in local schools; many are traumatized by what they have experienced at the hands of extremist group who expelled them from their homes; many leave behind family members and relatives who are still held captive by ISIS.

NEST students made an appeal to all the Protestant Churches in the Beirut area, and they were able to gather several thousand dollars and also to enlist the support of youth from the various churches to hold a one-day event on May 1, 2015 at the Assyrian School of St. Severus adjacent to the Assyrian bishopric. Some faculty and staff members also joined. Over 100 refugee children had fun, and enjoyed educational games and artistic activities, including refreshments and snacks. It was a joy to see those kids smiling, laughing, and enjoying themselves after what they have been through. It was a proud moment for us at NEST to see our students and whole community put its faith into action. The funds collected were also used to buy food parcels and mattresses for the needy families. Several days later, NEST students rented a pick-up truck and took 100 mattresses, 100 food parcels and some 60 boxes and bags of clothes to the Assyrian Church to be distributed to those in need.

“…as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt. 25:40)
2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the launch of the Protestant Reformation, symbolized by Martin Luther’s posting of the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Church on October 31st, the eve of All Saints. German Evangelical Churches are commemorating this event by observing a decade of Reformation events which started in 2008. This year, the Near East School of Theology, in collaboration with the University of St. Joseph, the German-Speaking Evangelical Congregation, and the Academic Forum Beirut-Berlin organized a conference on this year’s theme, Luther and Politics. The Opening was at the University of St. Joseph where the Rector, Fr. Salim Daccache, and President Sabra launched the event with opening words. The Conference was held from March 18-25, 2015, one day of which was at NEST. Professor Dr. Margot Kässmann, well-known theologian and church leader from Germany lectured at NEST within the series of Public Lectures on “Luther and Politics”; Rt. Rev. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land was the respondent. It was a historic ecumenical event that brought together Protestant and Catholic institutions in commemoration of the Reformation.
Public Lectures

December 18, 2014
“Christians in the Arab World: Between the Risk of Existing and the Fear of Vanishing”
Mr. Michel Nseir
World Council of Churches

January 22, 2015
“Miss Amineh, the Protestants of Ras Beirut, and Oral History”
Maria Abunassar, Ph. D.

February 19, 2015
“The Armenian Genocide 100 Years Later: Reflections of a Theologian”
Dr. Paul Haidostian
President, Haigazian University
April 22, 2015

“Women in the Epistles of St. Paul”
(Arabic)

Dr. Yara Matta
Institut Catholique, Paris

May 21, 2015

“‘Raw Ecumenism’:
A Socio-Anthropological Study
of Lebanese Protestants”

Dr. Rima Nasrallah van Saane
Asst. Prof. of Practical Theology, N.E.S.T.

On April 29, 2015 the Dean of Al-Da’wa University College for Islamic Studies in Lebanon, Sheikh Abdul Nasser Jabri, visited NEST and discussed the various activities that both institutions undertake and the need to strengthen relations and joint activities. Sheikh Jabri has lectured more than once at NEST, and his institution is eager to build bridges with various Christian academic institutions in the country.
Christian Muslim Relations and Dialogue

The “Forum of Christian-Muslim Thought”
held three sessions of dialogue

**January Forum**

“Is Religion Subject to Reform?”
Panel Discussion with Sheikh Mohammad Abou Zaid, President of Saida Islamic Sunni Court, and Dr. Martin Accad, Associate Professor of Christian-Muslim Relations at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary.

*Abou Zaid, Awwad, Accad*

**March Forum**

“Who are the “nasara” of the Qur’an?”
Panel discussion with Sheikh Ahmad al-Laden, Mufti of Rashayya and Head of Islamic Court in West Beka’a, and Dr. Issa Diab.

*Al-Laden, Awwad, Diab*

**May Forum**

“Contemporary Islam: Where to?”
Panel discussion with Mr. Mohammad al-Sammak, Secretary of National Committee for Dialogue, and Mr. Ibrahim Shamsuddine, former Minister and son of the late Imam Mehdi Shamsuddine, President of the Higher Islamic Shi’ite Council.

*Sammak, Shamsuddine, Sabra*
The “Christian-Muslim Relations” class at N.E.S.T. visited Al-Omari mosque in downtown Beirut on April 18. The special nature of this mosque is that it had been converted from a Crusader church, and the architectural character of the church remains to this day. We were given a tour by the shaykh who serves the mosque along with his assistant who was well-versed in Lebanese history. The site had been a religious one from early Roman times, first as a pagan temple, then an early church, and then a mosque. In 1115, the Crusaders destroyed the existing mosque and constructed their Cathedral of St. John the Baptist – and this is the building that currently stands. Saladin later converted it to a mosque, and then the Crusaders came again, restoring it to a church. Finally, in 1291, the Mamluks expelled the Crusaders and established the building again as a mosque, and it has remained as such since then. The Ottomans expanded and renovated the building, but left most of the original structure intact. The shaykh claims that it is now the oldest building in Lebanon which is still in use (not just a visitors’ site). The shaykh and his assistant accompanied us, continuously responding to our many questions. Not only was the experience a fascinating lesson in Christian-Muslim history; it was also a positive contemporary encounter in Christian-Muslim relations.
A youth leaders training seminar, was held on March 14, 2015 and was attended by 44 youth leaders from 16 churches, schools, fellowships and NGOs.

The topic of this training was ‘Teen Depression’, presented by Mrs. Rachel Bassous.

BIBLIODRAMA V, with Rev. Agnete Holm, was held on May 23, 2015. Bibliodrama is a special session for small groups to use as a tool to help people in their spiritual journey in life through the use of Biblical texts.
To promote relations with churches and local congregations and to inform people, especially young people, about the work of the Seminary, students and faculty members annually visit some congregations in the country. This year three groups visited three congregations:

**Presbyterian Church, Marja'youn**

**Armenian Evangelical Church, Anjar**

**Armenian Evangelical Church, Ashrafiyeh**
Dr. Sabra was invited to visit churches and seminaries of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) and also to attend and address the General Assembly of the Church held in Vancouver from June 4-8. On the way to Vancouver, Dr. Sabra visited Ottawa where he spoke at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church and met with elders and church officials. Mrs. Huda Kandalaft Kanawati (’99) hosted Dr. Sabra and organized his visit.

At the General Assembly in Vancouver, Dr. Sabra addressed a word of greeting in which he appreciated the long history between PCC and NEST and put before the Assembly the challenges facing NEST and all Christians in the Middle East today. “The Middle East is being emptied of Christian presence,” he said. What is at stake, he said, “is not just the fate of human beings, not just religious tolerance, not just human rights, but a witness to the truth.” Dr. Sabra ended by appealing to the General Assembly to “stay related to us; stay aware of what is happening to us; encourage us and support us morally, spiritually and materially; and above all keep us in your prayers to God almighty.”
Visitors

DanMission Delegation

Bishop Peter Fisher Møller, Chairman of Danmission, visited NEST along with a delegation from Denmark in January. They met with Dr. Sabra and with Ms. Shaké Geotcherian, Director of the Resource Center for Christian Education. Danmission has been a longtime supporter of NEST, especially the activities of its Resource Center.

The Middle East Initiative of UCC/Disciples of Christ

On May 7, a 14-member delegation from the United Church of Christ and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) visited NEST as part of their preparation for launching the Middle East Initiative. Accompanied by Associate Board Member of NEST, Dr. Peter Makari, the group met with President Sabra and were introduced to the work of NEST in theological education, ecumenical initiatives and inter-religious dialogue.

Syria-Lebanon Network

Pauline Coffman, Moderator of the Syria-Lebanon Network of the Presbyterian Church USA visited the Seminary on April 28, 2015, along with a group of pastors and lay leaders from a variety of Presbyterian congregations from the USA. The group led the daily chapel service, had lunch with students and faculty members, then met with President Sabra to learn about the work of NEST, especially in the efforts of the Seminary to promote Christian-Muslim Dialogue.
Dr. Sylvie Avakian Ma’amarbashi, lecturer in Systematic Theology at NEST, taught a compact course to Evangelical Pastors at the Theological Academy of Armenia in Yerevan last February. Thirty pastors participated in the course. Under the title “Basics of Christian Theology”, Dr. Avakian gave ten lectures on God, Christology, the Holy Spirit, Creation, Salvation, the Holy Scriptures, the Human Being, Death and Resurrection and Christian Hope. Periods of discussion took place in the afternoons, where the participants could ask questions and also share their own thoughts and views. Besides theology, classes on Homiletics were given by Rev. M. Melkonian.

Visiting Lecturer Hedda Klip. NEST is grateful for the services of Visiting Lecturer in Old Testament, Rev. Hedda Klip, who taught the Introductory Course in Old Testament this year. Hedda is a Dutch citizen and pastor of the Protestantse gemeente Ootmarsum. Her coming to Beirut is supported by her church and by Kerk in Actie.
Dr. Johnny Awwad, Associate Professor of New Testament, was the respondent to a lecture by Prof. David de Sylva under the title “A Political Reading of the Book of Revelation,” which took place at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary on February 26, 2015. Students from NEST and ABTS attended the event.

Reformed-Catholic Dialogue

The final session of the international dialogue between the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Catholic Church was held in Ghent, Belgium from February 23-28, 2015. Dr. Sabra attended as representative of the Reformed Churches of the Middle East. The participants summed up their discussions on the themes of justification, sanctification and justice in preparation of the final report. The final report will be presented to the WCRC’s Executive Committee and to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 2017 for discussion and action.
The 83rd Commencement of the Seminary took place on June 20, 2015 at 5pm in the Hajjar auditorium. Five students received their degrees in a worship service which featured Ms. Marilyn Borst, Associate Director for Development of the Outreach Foundation, as the main speaker.
Rev. Serop G. Megerditchian ('95) has authored a book in Armenian (The Faith-Living Church in the Face of Challenges). The book contains short sermons which exhort the readers to put their faith and hope in God especially in times of war and conflict.

Samuel Luak, student from 2002-2004, wrote from Finland where he and his family are now living and working:

“It has been already 10 years since I left NEST and so many things have taken place in our lives and family through all these years. But one of the things that has not changed is our love for NEST as we have been following the news through the NEST news letter that we have been receiving. We feel connected to each and every one of you who made it possible for us to experience the love of God and the blessings of being part of the NEST family. We have been also in contact with so many NEST graduate students, teaching and supporting staff members and we feel blessed to have all these people in our lives as brothers and sisters and prayer partners. Here in Finland we have already pound our own places through all these years and we have been able to overcome the difficulties of the realities of life in this part of the world. We have been able to continue our ministry and our calling, and we know now that God has sent us to this part of the world for a specific mission…

One dream I still have is to be back at NEST again and complete my studies to obtain a degree from NEST…

We continue praying for you that God may help You to continue your mission at this critical conditions in the Middle East and we pray that NEST will continue its blessed mission despite the fact that the situation is challenging in the Middle East. Stay strong in the Lord and remember the Risen Lord Jesus Christ is with you.”

With love.

Rev. Samuel Luak
We continue to depend on your prayers and support. Our ministry is indeed your ministry. You can continue to support us in any of the following ways:

• Through the PC (USA)

Make your checks payable to: Presbyterian Church (USA)
Indicate on your check: For deposit to ECO 862612 (N.E.S.T., Beirut)
Mail your contribution to: Presbyterian Church (USA)
P.O. Box 643700 Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700

You will receive a receipt from the office in Louisville for your tax-deductible contribution. You will also receive a letter of thanks from the President of N.E.S.T.

• Direct checks in the name of N.E.S.T.:

Near East School of Theology
P.O. Box 13-5780 Chouran
Beirut 1102-2070
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• Bank wire transfers:

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Byblos Bank Swift Code: BYBALBBX
Account #: 475-2100883-008 for Dollars Transfers
Account #: 475-2100883-009 for Euro Transfers
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