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NEST

NEWSLETTER

نشرة موسمية
تصدر عن



June 2023

كلية اللاهوت للشرق الأدنى

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY by the NEAR EAST SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, BEIRUT - LEBANON
FOR RELATED CHURCHES, SUPPORT AGENCIES AND A SMALL CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

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From the President's Word at the Commencement

2023: A Special and Different Commencement

This year's commencement is special and different, not because the order or components of the Service are different or because we only have 2 graduating students receiving their degrees, but because this year's graduates and their accomplishment embody so much of what NEST's mission is all about. Normally, the majority of our graduates are men and women who are eventually going into full time church service; they would have been selected and sent to us by their churches to begin with. In our case today, this is different. Both Samer and Garen, though members of churches and have been active there, were not officially sent by their churches and are not – as far as we know now at least – going into full time ministry in their churches. Both are engineers – Samer an electrical engineer with later specialization in Petroleum Studies, and Garen an agricultural engineer. Both are working in full time jobs in those capacities; they did not give up their jobs to study theology. Both did a full degree in theology, and did not just take some courses to expand their knowledge or satisfy their interest; they did a full Master of Divinity degree of 90 credits, normally three years for a full time student. It took them longer because they were part time students, continuing to work in their fields. This is an achievement and a model of which we are especially proud at NEST. For we consider that theological education is not just for those destined for a full ministry position in the church, but for all. Our aim at NEST is to spread theological education to the whole of society and not just to the institutional church. Samer and Garen are to be commended for this combination of theological education and their “secular” jobs, so to speak.

And the second special feature of this year's commencement is that it reflects so well and so clearly the ecumenical commitment and nature of NEST's ministry of theological education. The two graduates come from the Protestant church and the Armenian Orthodox Church.

“Dear friends, when you leave this Service, you can tell people that you attended a graduation at the **Protestant** Seminary of NEST where 50% of the graduates were **Orthodox**!

But, seriously, we feel we are truly fulfilling our ecumenical vocation by welcoming and accommodating non-Protestant students, especially from the Armenian Apostolic Church with whom we have long standing relations. We never cease to mention and take pride in the fact that the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, is himself a graduate of NEST.

A third special feature of this occasion is that both graduates concluded their Master of Divinity with a 6-credit Senior Thesis, and, amazingly both chose topics related to Ecotheology. This is a concern of theology and the churches that focuses on the inter-relationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. It is a development at the cutting edge of theology today, and we are proud that NEST students are committed to it.

Congratulations to Samer and Garen!



Samer Najm



Garen Yosolkian



Faculty and Graduates

Public Lecture

May 4, 2023

“What Does Climate Change Have to Do with the Christian Faith?”

Clive Pearson

Senior Research Fellow in Public Theology at Charles Stuart University.

Former Principal of United Theological College in Sydney



Online Diploma Course

The Online Diploma in Theological Studies resumed in the second semester with the course “History of the Early Church” given by Fr. Dr. Elias Hanna, professor of Church History and current Dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Holy Spirit at Kaslik (Maronite). The student evaluations of this ecumenical and joint cooperation between NEST and Kaslik were very positive, and so was the experience of Fr. Hanna himself. He was quite impressed with the level of the participants in the course and with their seriousness and ecumenical attitude. The students in turn expressed their appreciation of Father Hanna’s ecumenical openness and mastery of the topic.



Father Elias Hanna

Aid For Syria Earthquake

By Antonia Kura and Anna Kierdorf (SiMO Students)

“After the destructive earthquake in Turkey and Northern Syria on February 6th, we were shocked by the photos and stories of our fellow students at NEST and the Armenian community who have relatives and friends in the region of Aleppo. Soon we heard that there is a big need for hygiene pads for women as well as Baby formula milk, because babies were orphaned and some mothers developed breast feeding problems. Through NEST we got in touch with the two NEST alumni George Shammass and Asadour Manjirian who are based in the region and wanted to cooperate. They got in touch with the Presbyterian Medical Center, Armenian Medical Center and the Armenian Elderly Home in Syria, and inquired what exactly was needed and learned that there is a lack of diapers for babies and elderlies as well.

We decided to raise money via our sending organization EMS (Evangelical Mission in Solidarity) and issued a call for donations which we shared on social media and via email. We were able to raise more than 10.000 Euros! The first batch of supplies arrived in Aleppo on 27 May. The organization and execution took a lot of time and effort as many obstacles faced us on the way. We thank everyone who donated and supported us in this act of solidarity, especially the Rev. Suheil Sa’oud”.



Antonia, Anna, Rev. Sa’oud

Smart Board Room

Thanks to a donation from Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church (PA) for improving technology needed for meetings and online learning, we were able to equip the Board Meeting room with a TV screen, internet connection, camera and microphones. The room will be used for online teaching as well as meetings and workshops.



Gender Based Violence Workshop

A three-day workshop on gender-based violence took place at NEST - a premiere in the church context in the Middle East. The workshop was financed by the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS) which has been actively engaged with this topic for years.

The workshop took place from February 9-11, and was organized mainly by NEST faculty members, Dr. Rima Nasrallah and Mrs. Hala Khoury. Its aim was to reflect biblically and theologically on the topic of gender-based violence and provide the participants with practical knowledge and skills to face it. Several NEST professors presented sessions from their respective fields of study where biblical texts and theological concepts contributing to gender-based violence were revised or challenged. A specialized psychologist and theatre professor used creative and interactive methods to reflect on Gender, Gender Roles and Behaviours and Violence.

Twenty-five participants took part in the workshop. They consisted of active laypeople in church ministry – particularly with women, children, and youth or involved in religious education in church-affiliated schools and institutions. People of diverse backgrounds and ages participated enriching the discussion.

The group also went on a field trip to a local gender-based violence specialized NGO (ABAAD) where new horizons were opened and connections made. An additional panel enabled various NGOs working in the societal, psychological and activist domain (YWCA, FDCD, Adyan, and IMC) to present their work.

The participants received a certificate of participation from NEST and were encouraged to continue this trajectory of learning and sharing the knowledge.



One Student's Journey to Study at NEST

Mathilde Sabbagh graduated from NEST with an M. Div. in 2016. She went on to serve in the Presbyterian Church of Hasaké in northern Syria near the Turkish borders. There she got married, and was ordained in 2022. Full time pastor, wife and mother of two, Mathilde was eager and passionate about continuing her theological education, so she applied and was admitted to the Master of Sacred Theology program at NEST. Since Lebanese institutions of higher learning – NEST among them – are not yet permitted to have fully online degree programs, Mathilde has to be present at NEST at least once month to fulfill the seminar/tutorial requirements of the STM. The Newsletter asked her to describe her monthly journey to NEST, and here is what she wrote:



Mathilde Sabbagh

“In normal times, the trip from Hasaké to Beirut used to be considered a long and arduous journey. It used to take 15 hours by land. Today, after the war in Syria, how we long for the days of a 15-hour trip! The road from the Syrian Jazira district to Beirut has become much more difficult and stressful; it is psychologically and physically exhausting.

First, I have to make reservations two weeks ahead of time to use the land route because it is designated a humanitarian route and so is quite busy; it is especially reserved for humanitarian cases for the sick who require treatment in Damascus, and also for students who go to universities in Homs and Damascus. It is always difficult to make a reservation for my trip.

The route itself is divided into several parts:

Hasaké to Riqqa: This is a road that lies outside Syrian governmental control; it is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish militia) which runs what is known as the autonomous region in northeastern Syria. This means that this is a Kurdish-speaking road. Control and inspection of passengers and their belongings takes a long time. When we reach the Kurdish checkpoint, we have to walk in the wilderness of Riqqa from one point to another; we present our documents and pay money to the Kurdish authorities and receive a slip from them proving that we have paid the exit fee and have exited the land under their control.

From Kurdish territory to Syrian regime entry point: After exiting the Kurdish controlled area we continue on the road to Homs where the Syrian Army's Fourth Battalion is stationed.

The Syrian Regime Territory: When we reach the Syrian Army's checkpoint, we all have to descend from the bus and be subjected to a thorough search for dollars or any foreign currency; we are not permitted to bring in any new items or goods, otherwise we have to pay customs. All items that are not “Made in Syria” are subject to a customs tax. So the Army takes its time in searching, which could last up to 3 hours.

From the Army Checkpoint to Homs: Then we proceed along the road to Homs where there are many Syrian forces checkpoints with lots of questions asked at each checkpoint. Each security agency has its own checkpoints. Then we reach Homs.

Homs to Damascus: When I reach Homs, I am somewhat relieved because there is no other checkpoint until Damascus. I take out the hidden currency, which I did not dare to declare earlier. Wearing a pastor's collar, I am not usually body-searched, but there's always the fear that I might be.

Damascus: After 15 hours I reach Damascus. I still have only 2 hours to Beirut, but current regulations do not allow clergy people to cross the border to Lebanon after 6pm. I have to go back to a Hotel to spend the night and prepare for travel to Beirut the next day.

It takes a whole day to reach Beirut, but once I enter NEST, I forget all that I went through. I'm exhausted upon arrival, no doubt, but all exhaustion disappears once I start my studies.

After the session with my professor ends, I go back to Damascus and do the same trip backwards. So, I leave my home in Hasaké on Monday morning and get back on Wednesday evening.

A fellow student at NEST asked me once, “Is it worth it?” My response was: “You don't know how fortunate you are to be living and studying at NEST. Yes, it is worth it.”

Bible Society Gift to Students

The Bible Society in Lebanon donated the latest Hebrew and Greek editions of the Old and New Testaments to all degree students at NEST. Dr. Mike Bassous, General Secretary and CEO of the Society, led the Chapel service on Thursday May 18 and later distributed the Bibles to students.



Study Visits

A group of five students from **Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (PA)** accompanied Rev. Saleem Ghubril – Executive Director at PTS) spent 11 days in January in Lebanon. NEST provided lecturers, field visits and encounters for them. Profs. Awwad, Nasrallah, van Saane, and Sabra addressed them. They also met with students and exchanged experiences.



PTS group with the NEST Faculty



PTS and NEST Students

Eighteen French Pastors from the **Communión Protestante Luthéro-Réformé** visited Lebanon in the first week of May. NEST organized some days of their study trip. Faculty members Nasrallah, van Saane and Sabra addressed them. They also took part in a Chapel service, where former NEST Prof. Frederic Gangloff (member of the group) addressed the community.



French Pastors at NEST

Visitors

-A delegation from the **Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt** in Germany, led by Mr. Joachim Braun, visited on March 23, 2023 in order to get to know NEST and its study programs. The delegation also expressed interest in developing relations and cooperating with NEST in the field of Eastern Christian Studies. The University of Eichstätt is in the process of setting up an Eastern Christian Studies ONLINE CAMPUS. President Sabra and Dr. Rima Nasrallah van Saane met with the group, introduced NEST and discussed ways of cooperation.



-A joint delegation of nine persons from the **United Church of Christ, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Canada**, accompanied by Dr. Peter Makari (UCC Global Relations Minister and NEST Board member) visited NEST in April. The group had breakfast with President Sabra and later spent time getting to know about the situation in the Seminary and the country. The delegation was later shown the work of the Preserving Protestant Heritage in the Middle East (PPHME) project which NEST library runs. UCC/Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) funds the digitization of archival material for PPHME.

-A joint Swiss delegation of six persons from the **Protestant Church in Switzerland and the Swiss Church Aid organization HEKS** visited NEST on April 20, 2023. The delegation was led by PCS President Rev. Rita Famos and HEKS Board President Rev. Walter Schmid. They met with Dr. Sabra who introduced NEST, its work and situation in the difficult crisis that Lebanon is undergoing.



The Swiss Group

Visitors

-The Bishop of the district **Church of Württemberg in South West Germany**, the Rev. Ernst-Wilhelm Gohl, along with six other officials of the church and a journalist, and accompanied by NEST Board Member Rev. Dr. Uwe Gräbe, visited NEST on May 12, 2023. The Church of Württemberg is a member of the EMS Association which is a Board member and supports the SiMO program. It was an occasion to meet with some President Sabra and some faculty members to discuss the current situation and the future of Christians and theological education in the part of the world.



Bishop Gohl and the delegation



Dr. Kirkpatrick, Dr. Sabra, Rev. Marrs

-The moderator of the **Presbyterian Church of Ireland (PCI)**, Dr. John Kirkpatrick, accompanied by the Rev. Uel Marrs, Global Mission Secretary at PCI paid a visit to President Sabra on May 19. PCI is a long-term supporter and partner of NEST.



The Melkonians and Dr. Sabra

-Alumnus **Rev. John (Hovhannes) Melkonian** (C. Th. 1956) visited his alma mater on June 9 along with his wife Jeanette and his two daughters Arda and Doris. They met with Dr. Sabra, who told them about the current situation at the NEST and later took them on a tour of the Seminary. Dr. Sabra also thanked them for their generous donation to NEST in this past academic year.

Farewell to Jürgen Henning

The Rev. Jürgen Henning, pastor of the German-Speaking Congregation in Beirut ended his term in Beirut to join his wife in Bahrain, after five years of service. A farewell worship service and luncheon were held for him on April 23. NEST president Dr. Sabra offered a tribute to Rev. Henning, recounting the long relationship and cooperation between NEST and the German-Speaking congregation and thanked Rev. Henning for his friendship and support for NEST, especially in hosting and caring for the German students and pastors who take part in the Seminary's programs



Rev. J. Henning

Spring Retreat

On Saturday, May 27, the NEST community had its annual spring retreat. This year, it was an excursion to Beaufort Castle and the village of Cana. Beaufort is a partially restored Crusaders' Castle and it provided a good backdrop for a discussion on intercultural encounters and peace. In Cana, the group paid a visit to the Moussa Tiba Museum. Tiba's art is a reflection on (interfaith) coexistence, suffering, and reconciliation. One of his most impressive pieces was crafted in the wake of the bombardment of Cana and inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*. The last stop was the garden with ancient rock carvings and the grotto dedicated to the first sign of Jesus at the wedding of Cana, where the group had a time of prayer and reflection on the transforming nature of the Christian faith.



At Beaufort Castle



At the Tiba Museum

Alumni news

-Karoon Bardakjian (B.A.C.E., 2013) wrote NEST sharing the news that she and her husband received a Masters of Theology and Ministry Degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, in 2021. They now serve in the Evangelical Church of Yerevan They have 2 daughters, Marie and Selah, aged 6 and 1.



Congratulations and God's Blessing on the Ordinations of:

Sally Azar (B. Th. 2018)

Sally was ordained on 22 January, 2023 in Jerusalem in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land. She is the first woman pastor to be ordained in Palestine and the Holy Land.



Rev. Sally Azar

Gerard Ghazarian (M. Div. 2015)

Gerard was ordained on 26 February 2023 in the First Armenian Evangelical Church in Beirut, where he is now serving as pastor.



Rev. Gerard Ghazarian

Hagop Akbasharian (M. Div. 2012)

Hagop was ordained in the Evangelical Armenian Church in Anjar, Lebanon on June 3, 2023, where he is currently serving.



Rev. Hagop Akbasharian

In Memoriam



Rev. Peter Butros Doghramji

(1929-2023)

Rev. Dr. Peter B. Doghramji (Di. Th., 1953) was born in Aleppo, Syria. He completed his schooling in his birthplace, and his higher education and theological training at the American University of Beirut and the Near East School of Theology. Later he continued his education at the Harvard Divinity School (U.S.A.) and earned his Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary (U.S.A.).

Ordained in 1955 by the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, Rev. Doghramji rendered academic and ecclesiastical service in the Middle East as well as in the U.S.A. At Aleppo College he taught theological subjects and later became the College's first native-born president. As well, he was on the faculty of the Near East School of Theology until his departure for the U.S. in 1970.

Rev. Doghramji began his church ministry in Hasakeh, Syria, and his productive ministry extended as well to the U.S., beginning in Philadelphia, also Los Angeles and New York. He became the first foreign-born Conference Minister in the United Church of Christ, and also served as the Moderator and Executive Secretary of the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America and later became the Executive Director of the Armenian Missionary Association of America.

He was married to Mary Bedikian, who passed away this year on March 1, and had three children - Karl, Paul and James, seven grandchildren and two great-grandchild. After a brief hospitalization, Rev. Doghramji passed away on June 14, 2023, in the Philadelphia area.

May he rest in God's eternal peace

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:

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