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EVANGELICALS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

A Community Commitment to Witness and Ministry

By Wafik Wahba

The Middle East is the birthplace of the Christian faith. The early disciples went out through the whole region to preach the message of the gospel. By the third century Middle Eastern Christians were instrumental in preaching the good news of God's salvation to the ancient world of the Mediterranean and beyond. Significant historical records illustrate the role of Christian leaders, as well as that of ordinary Christians like merchants and travelers, in spreading the Christian faith to Asia, Africa, and Europe.

The Mesopotamian Syriac church in what is modern-day Iraq and Iran sent missionaries to India and across Asia to China. By the ninth century records appear of churches along the Silk Road in countries like modern-day Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan. The Egyptian church sent missionaries to Europe as well as to Ethiopia. These missionary-minded churches were very active in mission ministries during the early centuries of Christianity. However, the advent of Islam restricted their ability to reach out beyond their Middle Eastern territories after the seventh century.

More than twenty million Christians now live in the land where Christianity began. The story of the endurance of Middle Eastern Christians despite centuries of suffering and persecution is a living testimony of God's faithfulness. Although their numbers have dwindled through the centuries, Evangelicals continue to be salt and light through their sacrificial life of service and witness. Their committed prayer and worship is a living witness of God's glory shining in the darkness of this world.

Current Christian Population in the Middle East

The majority of the Middle East population is Muslim, with Christians composing less than 5 percent of the total population, and the majority of those Christians are Eastern Orthodox. Between the eleventh century and the fourteenth century several Catholic churches were established in the region, including the Maronite in Lebanon, the Coptic Catholic in Egypt, the Chaldean Church of Iraq, and others. By the mid-nineteenth century various evangelical communities were present across the Middle East.

Egypt is home to the largest Christian community, an estimated twelve million. The evangelical churches of Egypt also represent the largest Evangelical community in the region, with over one million Evangelicals. Evangelical communities in Syria and Lebanon present a smaller (less than half a million in total) but vibrant and influential community. There are also several evangelical churches in Iraq, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine, with a total estimated half a million Evangelicals. Several evangelical churches and ministries are also present in the Persian Gulf States of Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman.

Although the majority of those who attend churches in the Persian Gulf region are originally from other Middle Eastern countries, a handful of indigenous believers have begun to associate themselves with these churches. One of the current pastors in the Evangelical Churches of Kuwait comes from a native evangelical family that traces its history of Evangelicalism to 1961, when the country itself gained its independence.

As large numbers of Middle Eastern Christians have immigrated to other countries over the last sixty years or so, several Middle Eastern countries have been drained of their native Christian population. Countries like

Jordan, Syria, and Palestine boasted a large number of Christians, reaching to over 30 percent of the population, at the beginning of the twentieth century. But today the number of Christians in those countries is less than 5 percent of the total population. Lebanon was a majority Christian nation until its civil war (1970–90); now its population is less than 30 percent Christian. An estimated three million Egyptian Christians have left Egypt since the 1960s, due to persecution and harassment starting from the 1950s, the 1952 revolution, and for economic reasons. The impact of Christians leaving the Middle East has had dire consequences on the life and ministry of the church. However, in the last twenty years, thousands of non-Christians searching for God became believers. God is using them to make a significant difference in the region through their committed life of sacrificial witness.

Evangelical Influence

Middle Eastern Evangelicals are influencing today's society at large through worship, prayer, and service. The presence of evangelical churches influences the theology and worship of the larger Christian community in the region. One of the early steps taken by Evangelicals, in the mid-nineteenth century, was to translate the Bible into the modern Arabic language, the dominant language used by contemporary Middle Easterners today. The translation of the Scriptures into the daily language of the people gave the larger Christian community the ability to read and study God's Word and ground their faith on the truth of the Scripture. Soon after the Arabic translation became available, Bible study meetings spread across all denominations. This opened the door for people to ask the hard questions about Christian beliefs and styles of worship. It also enabled Christians to examine their own Christian traditions in the light of God's Word.

One of the remarkable stories about the influence of God's Word in shaping contemporary Middle Eastern Christian communities is demonstrated in the calling of Pope Shenouda III (1923–2012) to ministry. As a young man he regularly passed the Bible Society bookstore in downtown Cairo. One day he stopped to read a passage from the page of an open Bible on display: "So Jesus said to them, 'The light is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you'" (John 12:35 *esv*). The young man decided to dedicate his life to serving the Lord.¹ In 1971 he became the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt and spiritual leader to more than twelve million Middle Eastern Christians, who form more than half of all Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East. Pope Shenouda III initiated one of the largest Bible study meetings in the region, attended by thousands of people every week.

The Impact of Bible Translation

Today, Bible societies across the Middle Eastern countries are instrumental in making God's Word available for Christians as well as the millions of non-Christians who are searching for the truth and are hungry to know the true God. The influence of the Bible in shaping the theology and worship of the Middle Eastern church today is remarkable. Preaching is focused on an accurate interpretation of God's Word that speaks to the needs of contemporary people. Worship is also focused on a strong biblical foundation, which is reflected in the many contemporary praise and worship songs that can be heard in the churches. More than ten thousand contemporary Middle Eastern worship lyrics and songs today are used for worship across the region today.

During the first two centuries of Christianity, the Scripture was translated to the Middle Eastern languages of Coptic and Syriac, long before it was translated into Latin and other European languages. (Europe did not begin translating Scripture into English, German, and other languages until the fourteenth century.) This availability of Scripture in the Middle East helped keep the Christian faith alive through centuries of persecution and hardship.

1. Bible Society of Egypt, Monthly Newsletter, May 2013.

Evangelicals and Education

Theological education has become one of the key features of the evangelical movement in the Middle East. From the 1860s to the present, several theological seminaries were established by indigenous churches to prepare Christian leaders for various forms of ministry across the region. In 2013 the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, the oldest evangelical seminary in the region, celebrated 150 years of ministry. Four seminaries are instrumental in preparing leaders for the region: Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary in Amman, Jordan; Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and the Near East School of Theology, both in Beirut, Lebanon; and Bethlehem Bible College in Bethlehem, West Bank. Thousands of pastors and church leaders who have graduated from Middle Eastern seminaries serve the Lord in more than thirty countries across the globe.

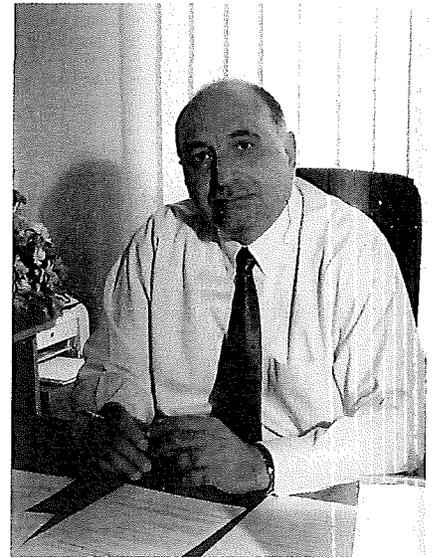
Education, however, has not been confined to theological education. The evangelical communities across the Middle East have been instrumental in establishing hundreds of primary and secondary schools, along with institutions of higher education for educating Christians and non-Christians alike. Their vision is to transform society through quality education that enables younger generations to influence change and build a modern and democratic society. The American Universities in Cairo (1919) and Beirut (1866) were established by Evangelicals to provide quality higher education and influence change in the larger society. During the last 150 years, thousands of influential leaders have graduated from such institutions as these.

Evangelicals are also credited for encouraging women's education as early as the start of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1940s, women gained the rights to vote and assume high political offices in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The evangelical movement played a key role in these advancements, by preparing qualified women leaders through education and empowering them to assume leadership positions in the church and in society at large. The evangelical movement also advocates for gender equality, which contributed to significant social transformation in Middle Eastern societies.

Mission in the Middle East

Building on such a remarkable history of Christian mission, contemporary Middle Eastern Christians are keen to spread the message of the gospel to their own people and to other nations around the world. From the mid-twentieth century onward, hundreds of Middle Eastern missionaries have been sent to the Persian Gulf states, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

Middle Eastern Christian mission organizations today embrace an all-inclusive kingdom approach in their ministries. They serve the social and spiritual needs of the community and reach out to millions of people in their constituencies. Many evangelical social organizations minister to the larger community in their countries. For example, the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) serves thousands of people through education and social services. The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) reaches two million people through education, small businesses, and health care programs, empowering them to break out of a cycle of poverty and oppression.



Elie Haddad is president of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon.
Photo: The Langham Partnership

The Media Movement

Mass media presents an unprecedented opportunity for Middle Eastern Christians to communicate the message of the gospel to the millions around them. Satellite television is key in reaching out to people, with programs also being viewed through the Internet. At least twelve Middle Eastern Christian satellite television channels are broadcasting around the clock the message of salvation to the millions in the region. It is estimated that more than five million non-Christians across the Middle East and North Africa have come to believe in Jesus Christ through mass media in the last twenty years alone. The last decade has seen a new wave of communications through Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media that contribute to the acceleration of preaching the gospel across the region.

Satellite TV was instrumental in reaching out to Iranians starting from the 1980s when traditional means of evangelism were prohibited. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, when several churches were destroyed and pastors murdered, the number of Christians in Iran was less than 2% of the total population. Today there are reports of a strong church in Iran that attracts the younger generations frustrated with the political and religious turmoil in their country. It is estimated the number of Christian believers in Iran is ten times that of 1979.

Middle Eastern Christianity is associated with the monastic tradition, one of the most remarkable spiritual movements in Christian history. It was in the desert of Egypt that monasticism was born, and by the fourth century it had become a global movement that influenced Africa, Asia, and Europe. The spread of Christianity into many parts of Europe is credited to the monks and nuns who preached the gospel, teaching people the Christian faith and attending to their social needs.²

The spirituality that stems from this Middle Eastern spiritual movement is instrumental today in shaping the life and ministries of Middle Eastern Christian communities. A renewed desire for prayers, fasting, and worship is spreading across the region. In the midst of the current events of turmoil and persecution, several Middle Eastern churches are dedicating long hours for worship services and prayer. Even before the Egyptian revolution in 2011, Kasr El-Dobara (KED) Evangelical Church in downtown Cairo dedicated days of prayers and fasting for the country. The church continues to pray constantly for God's intervention to transform the Egyptian and Middle Eastern countries, to expose the corruption, oppression, and injustices. This is exactly what has been happening since the revolution.

Although one cannot say Middle Eastern countries today are more democratic or less corrupt than before the revolutions and uprisings of the early twenty-first century, a remarkable change is taking place in exposing the sources of corruption, injustices, and confusion that have dominated the region for many centuries. An example of this change is the prayer movement spreading across Egypt and the Middle East. Many churches have weekly prayer meetings that sometimes last over twelve hours.

One of the most remarkable prayer meetings took place on November 11, 2011, when more than fifty thousand people gathered for overnight prayer at the Cave Church in Cairo. That night of prayer, fasting, and repentance was unprecedented in the recent history of the Middle Eastern church. The prayer was led by church leaders from all denominations and attended by Christians and non-Christians, who were drawn to the praise and worship. God's glory was manifested, and the prayer movement spread to many churches and communities.

One of the very significant outcomes of this prayer movement has been a renewed desire for unity among churches and Christians in the region. In early 2013 several churches in Egypt came together to form a unified church body committed to prayer and service in a new spirit. Evangelicals believe prayer leads to unity, and a united body of Christ glorifies the Father and empowers the testimony of the church in the whole world.

2. Historically the monastic movement that started in Egypt was introduced to Europe during the fourth and fifth centuries. Many European church leaders actually came to Egypt to be educated in the monastic life and spirituality. They were instrumental in starting the European monastic spirituality.



About half a million Evangelicals live in the Middle East, including Israel/Palestine.
Photo: www.designpics.com

Middle East would describe themselves as “hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9 NIV).

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Today’s Middle Eastern Christians face renewed cycles of persecution. The conflict that began in Syria a few years ago has resulted in uprooting and scattering thousands of Syrians, many of whom are Christians. Across the region, Christian homes are destroyed and properties are confiscated. Churches are bombed in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. Christians are killed and kidnapped. Their ancestors faced the same realities throughout the centuries.

Middle Eastern Evangelicals put their trust in the Lord, who is given all authority in heaven and on earth. They trust in the promise “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20 NIV). Evangelicals in the