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The Missiology behind the Story

Voices from the Arab World

Chapter 4 Excerpt

Edited by

Jonathan Andrews



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4

Relief and Development in the Mission of God

We move our focus from spreading and teaching the Christian faith to look at some of the ways in which Jesus's followers live out their faith in daily life. What difference is Christianity making in the lives of its adherents, and how are those people affecting, influencing, changing and transforming the societies of which they are a part?

We are guided throughout by Rupen Das (see contributors' bios).

Background: The Face of Poverty (by Rupen Das)

The French writer and photographer Maxime du Camp arrived in Beirut in 1850 from Alexandria and wrote:

Beirut is incomparable; not the city itself, which is pitiful and lacking in grandeur, but the country that surrounds it, the forest of parasol pines, the road bordered with nopals, myrtle, and pomegranate trees in which chameleons run; the view of the Mediterranean and the aspect of the wooded summits of the Lebanon that draw the purity of their lines on the sky. It is a retreat for the contemplative, for the disillusioned, for those who have been wounded by existence; it seems to me that one can live happily there doing nothing but looking at the mountains and the sea.¹

About the same time Henri Guys, the former French consul, wrote that Beirut now had “consulates from almost every nation, commercial

1. Quoted in Samir Kassir, *Beirut* (London: University of California Press, 2010), 109.

establishments, hotels, well stocked stores, a European pharmacy, and finally a casino – a luxury that only ports of the first rank can permit themselves.”²

It would seem that time has stood still over the past one hundred-sixty years. While the architecture has changed from three-storied sandstone coloured buildings with red tiled roofs to modern high-rise blocks, the essence of the city as a vibrant commercial and educational centre has remained. With so few immediately visible physical scars left from the civil war or even from the 2006 war (see appendix), the impression of Lebanon is that it is regaining its reputation as the tourist and resort destination in the Middle East.

In spite of all the physical reconstruction, there are dark threads and shadows that weave through the fabric of Lebanese society that are often not visible. The 2008 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Country Study on Lebanon stated that 20.59 percent of the Lebanese population (excluding refugees) were poor and an additional 7.97 percent were extremely poor.³ More than a quarter of the population lived below the poverty line, with the extremely poor “clustered far below the upper poverty line.”⁴ These statistics have deteriorated since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and the huge influx of refugees into Lebanon, which has strained the social and economic fabric of the country.⁵

It is widely accepted that Lebanon has a population of about 4.1 million, though no accurate statistics exist as there has been no census since 1931. About 87 percent of the population lives in urban areas with about 1.8 million in the greater Beirut area.⁶ Lebanon is politically, religiously and ethnically very complex, with many different communities and confessions vying for control socially, economically and politically. The country is composed of eighteen recognized religious communities.⁷ In 2016 Lebanon was also home to at least 1.2 million displaced Syrians, more than 275,000 Palestinian refugees and

2. Quoted in Kassir, 109.

3. Extreme poverty in Lebanon is defined as “unable to meet their most basic food and non-food needs” in H. Laithy, K. Abu-Ismaïl and K. Hamdan, *Country Study: Poverty, Growth and Income Distribution in Lebanon* (Brasilia: International Poverty Center, UNDP, 2008), 4, 46.

4. Laithy, Abu-Ismaïl and Hamdan, 6.

5. More recent statistics are not available; one factor is the political situation which limits the effectiveness of central government.

6. United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT), *Country Programme Document 2008–2009: Lebanon* (Nairobi: United Nations Human Settlement Programme, 2008), 6.

7. Alawite, Armenian Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic, Coptic, Druze, Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Isma’ili, Jewish, Maronite, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sunni, Shi’a, Syriac Catholic, Syriac Orthodox.

large numbers of foreign workers from countries such as Egypt, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Ethiopia.

One of the legacies of the Lebanese Civil War has been the emergence of new groups of vulnerable people. Examples include the Bedouins, the Dom people (see glossary), migrant workers and more specifically foreign domestic workers, refugees and children, notably street children and those born to refugees, prisoners or migrant workers. Child labour is a reality not only in the urban areas but also in many of the rural areas. This is in addition to the traditionally rural poor who live in pockets in the north, in the Bekaa Valley and in the south.⁸

The traditionally poor also includes Lebanese who have migrated from the rural areas to the urban centres. Because of the lack of opportunities and the high cost of housing, they live in urban slums or slum-like conditions. Not only is 28.54 percent of the population below the national poverty line, but the new vulnerable groups, many of whom do not have Lebanese citizenship, number more than a million and a half people, another 30 percent of the population. While all may not be poor, most are vulnerable and live on the edges of poverty with very few resources to withstand any emergencies or shocks.

Poverty is manifested in a variety of ways. Those who do not have citizenship cannot access healthcare or education. Most of the poor work in the informal sector and as a result do not have consistent work and are often without any income during the winter months when the weather is inclement, or when there is war or violence. They also have low levels of education and very few vocational skills, with little or no access to gain any kind of skills training. Because they did not have formal jobs they were not entitled to the national insurance schemes.

Other factors that have contributed to poverty across the country are the lack of any kind of social safety net. Further, unlike many Lebanese, they lack foreign remittances coming from family and relatives abroad. These vulnerabilities combine to create a downward spiral that not only increases their vulnerability but also ensures that communities remain poor from one generation to the next.

What makes the face of poverty different in a country like Lebanon is that poverty cannot be addressed only by ensuring access to services and subsidies, or by improving livelihoods and income. These are valuable interventions and will prevent extreme poverty but will rarely improve the socio-economic status

8. For a detailed study of poverty in Lebanon see Rupen Das and Julie Davidson, *Profiles of Poverty: The Human Face of Poverty in Lebanon* (Beirut: Dar Man al Hayat, 2011).

of the poor and enable them to move out of poverty. The confessional and communal structure of Lebanese society does not allow for social mobility. So, while the poor may be able to access education up to a basic level, they are unable to move out of chronic poverty and remain vulnerable.

Case Study – a Local Church in Eastern Lebanon (by Rupen Das)

This case study describes a church in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, just a few kilometres from the Syrian border. This church started as a home group and grew into a congregation of sixty adults. In presenting this, I am drawing on material from an unpublished PhD thesis by Elie Haddad, the President of the ABTS, and from my own experience of partnering with this church from the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon.

As Syrian refugees began to flood into Lebanon in 2011, many of the over 1.2 million Syrian refugees settled in informal settlements or in any kind of shelter available in the Bekaa Valley. The refugees proved to be a challenge, not just because of the large numbers that came, but also because of the prior Syrian occupation of Lebanon, commonly dated as 1976 to 2005 (see appendix). Most Lebanese families have stories of having experienced atrocities committed by the Syrian military during the occupation.

The beginning of the church's work among Syrian refugees started with God working in the heart of the pastor as he was convicted to forgive the Syrians for what they had done to his family. His example encouraged others in the church to move beyond their negative feelings towards Syrian refugees. With assistance from the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD – also known as the Lebanese Baptist Society), they started providing food-aid packages to a hundred refugee families. This grew to the extent that they were providing assistance to over a thousand families. They established a school for three hundred refugee children, informal schools in two other locations for another two hundred-fifty children and income generation projects for refugees. Partnerships with other agencies and groups provided medical services to those who would otherwise not be able to access medical care.

The church is very aware that it is not a social service agency but a church; helping refugees is considered part of its witness to Christ and his kingdom. They are very clear about their identity as a Christian evangelical church. Their help does not come with conditions, and recipients are not required to take any spiritual books or attend any meetings or church services; assistance is provided on the basis of need, regardless of religion or ethnicity. However, Christian

materials are available, and they are invited to church services and meetings. As a result, many have attended and taken Christian materials. Further, the church runs DBS groups in many informal settlements.

The traditional teaching in Lebanese Baptist churches was that the church focuses exclusively on spiritual issues; social and humanitarian work is the responsibility of humanitarian agencies. However, the pastor of this church had a broader understanding of what ministry entailed. The majority of its members had come to faith and grown spiritually at the church in Zahle. There were not many transfer members. As a result, they grew up with the teaching that ministry involved meeting both the spiritual and physical needs of people.

The church was not prepared for this type of ministry. The growth of the ministry took them by surprise. They did not have the required people, the expertise, the experience, or the facilities. The church responded by empowering people to make decisions and by giving them specific responsibilities. The ministry flourished because of this delegation of responsibilities. Many leaders have since emerged, including many Syrian refugees who have come to faith and have become members of the church.

There was a lot of resistance from neighbours because of the traffic congestion and crowds during the food distributions. It being a Christian neighbourhood, many were also uncomfortable with Muslim men and women congregating there, with their different ways of dressing. They were also concerned about potential security threats. They protested regularly and filed complaints with the municipality, accusing the church of exacerbating religious tensions.

The church responded positively to the concerns of their Lebanese neighbours. They organized their food distributions and other activities so that it would not cause problems for those living around the church. They started helping the Lebanese poor as well in order to defuse the resentment that only the Syrians were receiving assistance. Over time, the neighbours began to appreciate the work of compassion that the church was doing.

There was no conditionality in the assistance that was being provided. Although the refugees were not required to attend any meeting or church service, large numbers started attending Sunday services. Due to the limited space available at the church, the decision was taken to start a second service. This service was more evangelistic in nature and was geared to those who were not familiar with Christian vocabulary and forms of worship. Those who had already become followers of Christ would attend the first service, where there was more biblical teaching about the Christian faith and life.

The result of the church being inclusive and showing compassion to those in desperate need was quite unexpected. Besides nominal Christians growing in their faith in Christ, the number of Muslims who turned up in church wanting to know about Jesus and then coming to faith and getting baptized was unprecedented. It had always been assumed that the local church would never be effective in reaching Muslims with the gospel. The impact was also on church members, as many became involved in serving in these ministries of compassion. There was a sense of renewal within the congregation.

A number of discipleship groups using DBS material and other materials were formed. Some focused on evangelism and reaching out to their neighbours, while others were used to train new leaders.

One interesting consequence was that the various Syrian communities began to bond together. Syria is a deeply divided society along religious, ethnic, and political lines. These were evident even in the refugee communities. The refugees quickly learned that the church operates by different values, and these values started to shape their own attitudes and behaviour. As a result, the Syrians started to act as a unified group regardless of their backgrounds and differences.

The members of the church learned how to be tolerant towards Muslims and their traditions. They learned to appreciate the different faith journeys that Muslims take as they grow in their faith in Jesus and came to accept that these disciples would maintain certain cultural practices such as wearing the hijab and fasting during daylight in Ramadan.

Missiological Reflection: Three Strategies and Three Principles (by Rupen Das)

Christian organizations in Lebanon have opted for one of three strategies in addressing social issues. The first is through being an overtly Christian organization or institution that provides social services. The American University of Beirut (AUB) and the hospital attached to it, along with organizations such as World Vision,⁹ provide services to the community. These are open to anyone regardless of religion or ethnicity, and there is no conditionality to the assistance that is provided, whether it is education, health services or relief. The organizations identify themselves as Christian – using a broad definition and not limited to any denomination – but are not involved in

9. World Vision is a global Christian humanitarian organization, see www.worldvision.org (accessed 11 January 2019).

any kind of spiritual activity such as evangelism, Bible distribution or church planting. They provide a Christian presence in a pluralistic society and, through the work they do and the services they provide, they are able to shape the perception of Christianity and who Christians are. As a result of the quality of their work, they are well regarded and highly respected.

The second strategy is where a group of Christians set up a secular NGO through which they are able to address needs in the community. Knowing the highly sectarian and religiously fragmented nature of Lebanese society, they opt for the secular approach so that their impact would not be limited to any specific religious or ethnic community. This enables them to work in communities where they normally would not have been welcome if they had been identified with a particular religious group. Their motivation is clearly Christian and biblical, and their desire is to demonstrate the compassion of Christ. Many of them work in some of the poorest neighbourhoods and among the most marginalized. By treating the residents as human beings and with dignity, they enable them to encounter and experience the kingdom of God, even if they do not know the King yet.

The third strategy is where Christian NGOs and local churches provide humanitarian assistance or address specific issues regarding poverty or injustice as part of their Christian witness. As Christian communities, they are also involved in a range of spiritual activities such as evangelism, Bible studies and discipleship, church planting and worship. Some see providing assistance as a means to attract people to the gospel message, while others see it as a demonstration of the reality of the kingdom of God. For the latter, the assistance provided is not just a means to an end; rather it is just as valid a ministry as evangelism. Most ensure that there is no conditionality or manipulation in the provision of humanitarian services.

The challenge for the church throughout history has been to find a balance between ensuring that the faith of the community survived and engaging with the world around them in meaningful ways. Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian at the University of Tübingen, describes the struggle between identity and relevance that the church faces in every generation and in every country. The struggle is for the church to constantly define and protect its identity, which is often shaped by its history, in the midst of competing and changing values in the surrounding cultures, and threats from the political context. Unfortunately, this can cause the church to be inward-looking and thereby lose its relevance. However, the process of remaining true to what it

means to be a people of God and followers of Christ, while engaging with the community and finding ways to be relevant, will change the church.¹⁰

The tensions amongst survival, faithfulness and relevance is still very much at the core of how churches in Syria and Lebanon are engaging with the displacement caused by the Syrian crisis. The existential threats felt by Christians and churches have prompted many of the Catholic and Orthodox churches to provide assistance to their members who have been displaced or are otherwise in need through their denominational relief departments. Some of the Protestant churches, on the other hand, have seen this moment in history as a strategic God-given opportunity to move from the margins of society (being considered latecomers in the social and religious landscape), by becoming places of compassion and having an influence with the gospel within the larger social context.¹¹

As the Syrian crisis unfolded and displaced people spilled into Lebanon from 2011 onwards, local agencies like the LSESD decided to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Being a denomination-based agency, it worked to empower local churches across its denomination in Syria and Lebanon to reach beyond their comfort zones and social boundaries to help those in need with food-aid, emergency supplies, access to health care, water and education, and programmes for children.

What happened as a result is remarkable. Not only did hundreds from all faiths attend participating churches to access the humanitarian services that were being provided, but many asked for prayer, attended church services and Bible studies, and sent their children to Sunday School. The requests for Christian literature outstripped supplies. Other churches and mission agencies reported similar responses. In most situations, there were no conditions imposed to receive assistance, and there was no manipulation.

There are a number of factors which probably contributed to this openness, especially within the Muslim community. In his survey, David Garrison points out that during times of conflict and violence Muslims are very open to the world outside their community.¹² For many Muslim refugees, their contact with Christians had been so limited that they sometimes had warped perceptions. A comment heard at times was, "I never knew that Christians can be kind."

10. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 3.

11. See Nehla Issac, "Syria as a Wakeup for the Syrian Church," in *The Church in Disorienting Times*, Jonathan Andrews, ed. (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 68–72.

12. David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Monument: WIGTake Resources, 2014), 244.

Another factor which contributed to this openness was the fact that local evangelical churches did not have elaborate rituals that newcomers had to learn and therefore the barriers for participation were minimized. These churches allowed them to keep their symbols of identity such as the hijab and beards, symbols that had no idolatrous connotations or in any way indicated demonic allegiances. There were very few foreigners involved in the implementation, and the face of the ministries of compassion was Arab, both Syrian and Lebanese. These churches provided extensive pastoral care through prayer, visiting them in their dwellings, enabling some to find jobs, and helping children to get into schools. Finally, and most importantly, local churches provided them with community when their communities had been destroyed.

If local churches are to be involved in ministries of compassion such as relief and development, and in addressing issues of injustice (see the following chapter), there are concepts and guidelines that need to be understood so that the church is not compromised. Through the process of the relief response, LSESD and its partner churches are beginning to understand how local churches can become places of compassion within the community.

First, the local church is an institution in the community: Evangelicals often focus on the church as a spiritual body that is concerned primarily with the after-life. There is no doubt that the church, the Body of Christ, is a link between the physical and spiritual realities. What is not properly understood is the fact that a local church is an institution in the community. It has obligations, as do other institutions, to the community in which it exists. The local church as an institution in the community naturally has visibility, history, credibility and relationships. As a part of the community, it is a natural and logical place from which a relief project can be implemented, as long as there is no conditionality or manipulation in receiving the aid provided.

Second, a local church needs to be a church and not an NGO or a social service organization. Many Christian NGOs and donors that seek to work with and through local churches, unintentionally turn these churches into social service organizations through their operating and management practices, requirements and restrictions. A local church is a worshipping community, with preaching, teaching, discipling, counselling, praying and assisting those in need, “so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13).

Well-intentioned donors often require churches receiving their funding to not be involved in evangelism, any form of proselytism, or in any other spiritual activity during the period when aid is being provided. This is based

on the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which is widely endorsed.¹³ They feel that it would be manipulative because of the power dynamics involved between those providing the aid and the beneficiaries.

The reality is that power dynamics are a part of every human relationship; eliminating them is neither realistic nor possible. However, they can be managed and their impact minimized. The fundamental issue in being able to manage the power dynamic is that there should be no conditionality to the aid as it is being provided, nor should there be manipulation by those providing humanitarian services.

Third, the local church needs to partner with others within the community and beyond while retaining its identity as a church. Local churches have specific roles and functions within a community and many are afraid of losing their distinctive identity if they became active in addressing social needs. Providing assistance to those in need can be intimidating because of the wide range of recipients' needs. The local church needs to be a place of compassion that can connect those with specific needs with other agencies and organizations that have the expertise and resources to help. Many churches will network with other churches but find it difficult to network with service providers and other humanitarian institutions in the community, even when these organizations have similar values.

The emerging phenomenon is that of the local church becoming a place of compassion as part of their witness to the gospel and the kingdom of God. The involvement of the local church allows for a more holistic proclamation and demonstration of the good news of the kingdom of God.

By becoming a place of compassion, the local church is able to proclaim in word and deed God's gracious invitation to his kingdom through Christ. It ensures that the church's interaction with Muslims and other communities is not just verbal and intellectual. It moves beyond the apologetic and the polemic, and integrates life and theology into a wholeness, which our experience in Syria and Lebanon shows that Muslims understand.

--- This is an excerpt of *The Missiology Behind the Story* —
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13. See <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/> (accessed 11 December 2018).