

From the President

Two Disappointments amidst Unwavering Hope

The Fall semester started promisingly in mid September. Despite the sorry state of Lebanon – politically, financially, economically and socially, NEST admitted 13 new students, welcomed 5 SiMO students from Germany, launched a new teaching program in Armenia, resumed its 12-week Sabbatical for Pastors and filled up all its dormitory rooms with residents. Then came the drastic developments in and around Gaza which surprised everybody on October 7. Needless to say, NEST was generally affected like the rest of the country by the events, but the specific impact on NEST started to show around 10-12 days later, when foreign embassies in Lebanon began issuing warnings to their citizens, and eventually instructions to leave. Our five German SiMO students left by the third week of October and all three Sabbatical Pastors (2 Germans, 1 Norwegian) also departed around the same time. Thus, we lost the physical presence of 8 students and participants in our programs, in addition to 2 expatriate professors because of the war in the region and the tense situation in southern Lebanon. Although those who left continue to take courses online, their personal absence from the Seminary is a loss. This was the first disappointment, but it is not a huge one and not too serious. NEST continues its mission in the midst of crises, as it has been doing for the last 154 years.

The second disappointment, however, was much greater and more serious. As the war on Gaza escalated in retaliation for unjustifiable violence done to civilians on October 7, and as tens of thousands of Palestinians were killed and wounded, thousands of homes were flattened, hospitals and schools were targeted and bombarded, innocent children, women and elderly people were besieged,



displaced and subjected to most inhuman living conditions, many in the Christian world, especially in the West, were mostly silent, or reluctant to speak up, or in some cases were totally biased and one-sided in their support for the perpetrators of this horrendous suffering. Some churches, Christian organizations, and Christian-related aid agencies simply became totally blinded or could see only with a single eye. We say nothing here about governments and the media; they are not our concern, for they are almost always motivated by all kinds of other considerations than purely moral or religious ones. Yet, some of our sisters and brothers in the churches worldwide, but especially in the western world, shocked and disappointed us. It is those with whom we share the powerful prophetic message of justice and truth of the Hebrew prophets, the gospel of God's love for all humanity in Christ, the proclamation of the God's kingdom which is welcoming and inclusive of all people regardless of race, color, religion and gender – it is those who have caused our disappointment.

Yet, our hope for the triumph of God's goodness and justice remains firm and unwavering:

He makes wars cease to the end
of the earth;
He breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
He burns the shields with fire.
Be still and know that
I am God!

I am exalted in the earth. (Ps. 46 9)

Opening Convocation

The academic year began on 18 September with an Opening Convocation Service held at noon in the Bailey Chapel. In attendance were students, faculty members, representatives of the Board of Managers and staff. Thirteen new full time and part time students and participants in our programs were welcomed and introduced to the community.

President Sabra delivered a short Convocation address in which he spoke about the meaning of “success” from a Christian perspective, using two quotations about success from Winston Churchill: “Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm”, and Mother Teresa’s statement: “God has not called me to be successful; He has called me to be faithful”. Dr. Sabra went on to reflect on the profound biblical dimensions of both sayings and how they communicate the Christian meaning of life in the midst of failure, difficulties and crises, as is the current Lebanese situation.



ATIME Conference in Egypt

The Association of Theological Institutes in the Middle East held a conference for seminary students in Egypt from July 23- 30, 2023. The topic was ecological: “Respect for Creation is Glorification of the Creator”. Thirty participants from 18 institutes and seminaries took part in addition to deans and faculty members. NEST was represented by two students, Aline Tahazian and Mirjam Polak.

Reflecting on her rich ecumenical experience in Egypt, Aline reported the following:

“On the 23rd of July, along with many other seminary students who represented all church families in Lebanon, boarded a plane to Egypt for a seven-day conference organized by ATIME under the title “Respect for the Creation is Glorification of the Creator”. In Egypt, the Lebanese group met with seminary students from other countries who are members in the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), including Syria, Egypt, and Iraq.



For the first time ever, I was in such close exposure to other church families from different Middle Eastern cultures. We visited many churches (Evangelical, Coptic, Greek Orthodox, Catholic) and met many religious leaders, including Dr. Andrea Zaki, the President of the Protestant Churches in Egypt, and the Head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II.... I was also exposed to different liturgies. There were prayer services led by a different church family each day. Though I had visited some of these church families in Lebanon before, it was the first time that the hymns sung were translated, typed, and printed. It was an opportunity to mindfully follow the liturgy. For the first time ever, I was not exposed to just the sound of different liturgies, which on their own had the power to move mountains- not just hearts, but also the words and the meaning behind them. I realized then that what they were singing were the Gospels and the Epistles; that was the moment that I can describe as stepping into the light. They sing them; we read them. We are not so different, I thought to myself.

Not just liturgies, I was also exposed to different people - servants of the Lord from different places, roles, positions, and traditions, regular servants, priests, and pastors. I engaged in different, deep conversations. I found out that others have as deep an interest in me as an Armenian Evangelical as I in them. I found myself explaining the history of the Armenian Evangelical Church often. And, of course, as conversations are not one sided, I also listened to stories of how the Holy Spirit has guided some of my peers on their journeys to serve the Lord, our God. Stories of sacrifices of comfort, safety, and money which were not only impressive but also humbling. Within these conversations not only did I make friendships, but I also found hope- ECUMENICAL HOPE.”

Sabra at ABTS Commencement

Dr. Sabra was invited to be the Commencement Speaker at the graduation ceremony of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Mansouriyeh on 30 September, 2023. Nineteen graduates from Lebanon and several Arab countries attended in person and online. Dr. Sabra spoke about the close relations between NEST and ABTS over the years, then he went on to



address the topic of distinguishing between happiness and joy in Christian life, emphasizing that Christianity in this life is about joy in the midst of suffering, crises and difficulties, rather than happiness in the sense of absence of any tension, anxiety and turmoil in personal and social lives.

Welcoming party for students and residents

As has become a tradition at NEST, a welcoming party was held for all occupants of dormitory rooms in the building. NEST dormitories receive students who go to neighboring universities and who are recommended by their churches. This year all rooms on the 3rd, 4th and 8th floors are occupied. The welcoming party at the beginning of the year facilitates the acquaintance and interaction among students and residents. It was an evening of social fellowship filled with games, food and music enjoyed by all.



Welcome Party

It was an evening of social fellowship filled with games, food and music enjoyed by all.

New German Pastor in Beirut

The German - speaking congregation in Beirut is still looking for a full time pastor after the departure of Rev. Jürgen Henning last spring. In the meantime, the Rev. Renate Ellmenreich accepted to serve as interim pastor for 10 months. On October 1, 2023, she was installed in a church service in which Dr. Sabra was asked to address a word of welcome and introduction. Rev. Renate is no stranger to Beirut and Lebanon. She took part in the 3-months Pastors Sabbatical program at NEST in 2012.



Rev. Renate Ellmenreich

Ecumenical Perspectives on Climate Change

ATIME organized a symposium entitled “Ecumenical Perspectives on Climate Change” that was held jointly in the Maronite University of the Holy Spirit (Kaslik) and the St. Joseph University (Beirut). Dr. Rima Nasrallah of NEST was a speaker and one of the main organizers of the whole symposium. Representatives of the Churches of the Middle East Council of Churches, as well as Deans and faculty members of theological seminaries from Lebanon, Egypt, Syria and Iraq were in attendance. Local and international speakers and lecturers were also invited. NEST was represented by the president and faculty members, as well as several students.



Dr. R. Nasrallah

Online Diploma Program

The online Diploma program in Arabic continues this first semester with a course on “Contemporary Eastern Churches” led by Dr. Rima Nasrallah. Twenty-four participants from Syria and Lebanon are attending.



Online Participants

NEST Teaching in Armenia

An agreement has been reached between NEST and the Evangelical Church in Armenia to organize and lead theological training for Evangelical Christian educators and youth leaders in Armenia. The program involves teaching Biblical Studies and Christian Education over a period of 2 years. Each year would involve two 2-week sessions. Those who complete all sessions successfully will be granted a Certificate from NEST.



Christian Education Class with Ms. Hala Khoury

In late August/early September, two instructors from NEST, Preacher Hala Khoury and Rev. Dr. Wilbert van Saane, travelled to Armenia, and each taught 24 hours per week in Christian Education and Biblical Studies (Old Testament) respectively. There were 30 participants attending. A second session is planned for January 2024.



Old Testament class with Dr. Wilbert van Saane

Visitors

Early in the fall semester, and shortly before the war on Gaza started, a delegation from the Diocese of Aalborg of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark visited NEST. The delegation consisted of Bishop Thomas Rasmussen and several deans, theologians and pastors. They met with President Sabra, some members of the faculty and a student representative, and discussed the situation of Christians in the Middle East, in Lebanon and the work and challenges of NEST.



The Danish delegation

Alumni News

NEST was happy to receive a visit from two of its alumni last August: Rev. Samer Kandalraft (B. Th. C.E, '00) and Sharazad Dezhbod Kandalraft (B. Th. C. E '01) along with their children Paul, Joane and Mark. It was their first visit to Lebanon and NEST since their graduation over two decades ago. Samer and Shahrazad now serve with the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and they live in Kemptville, Ontario.



The Kandalrafts with Rev. Saoud and Dr. Sabra

The Rev. Hendrik Shanazarian (M. Div. '00) visited NEST in October, and addressed the Seminary community in the noon Chapel service. Rev. Hendrik had not been back to NEST since graduation. He is married to another NEST graduate, Dr. Mariet Mikhaelian (Dipl. '00), and they both live and serve in California, where Hendrik is the General Minister to the Armenian Evangelical Union of North America.



Dr. Sabra and Rev. Shanazarian

Tamar Vasoyan (B.A.C.E. '96), who has been living and working in the USA for several years was ordained at Webster Presbyterian Church, Texas as a teaching elder/pastor. After her B.A. at NEST and Haigazian University, Tamar had gone on to earn a doctorate in Religious Education and Practical Theology from Garrett-Theological Seminary in Chicago in 2014.



Ordination Tamar Vasoyan

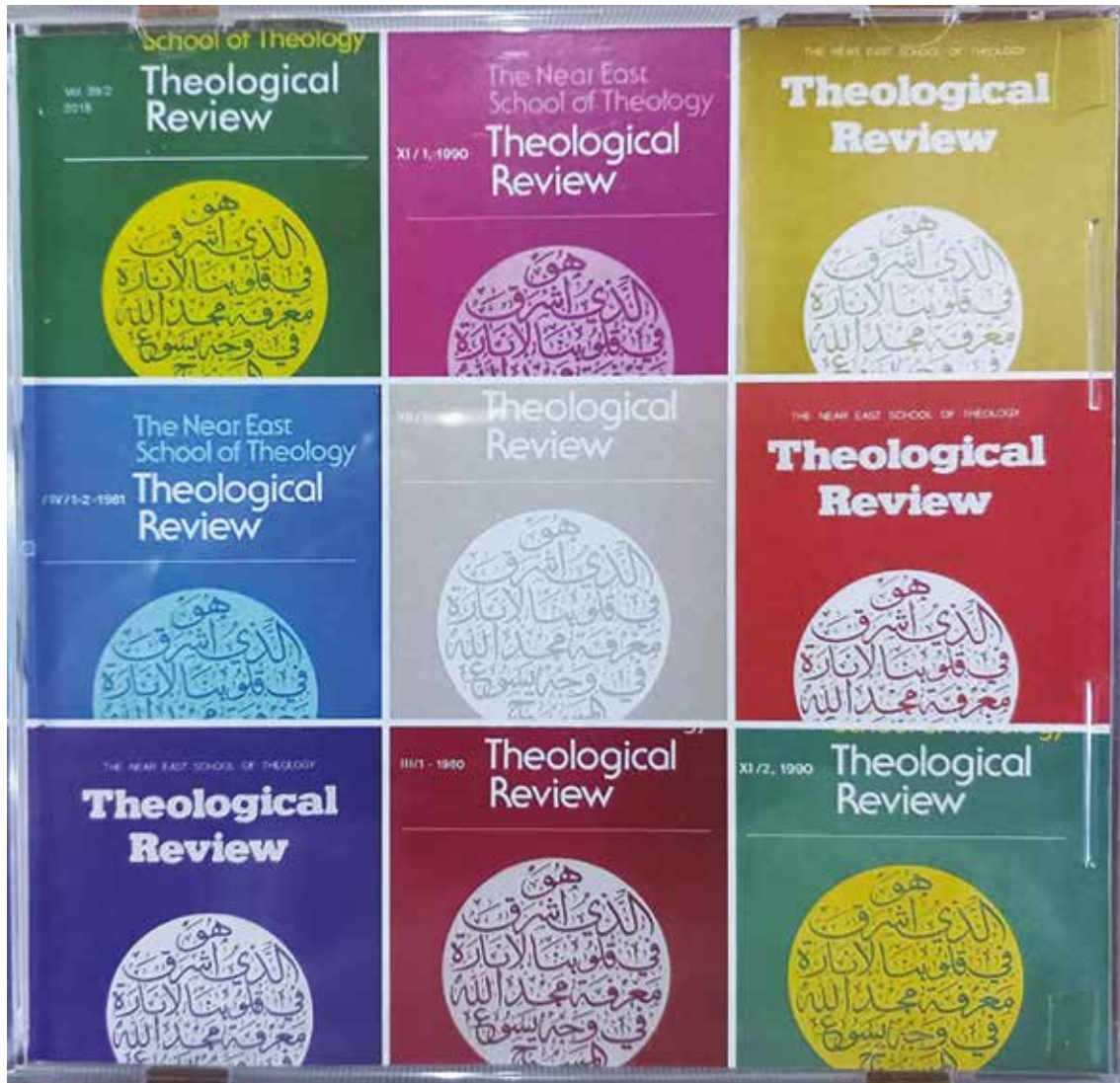
The Rev. Ian Ross-McDonald, General Secretary of the Life and Mission Agency in the Presbyterian Church of Canada (PCC) visited NEST for several days in early October. PCC is a partner and faithful friend of our Seminary. Rev. Ross-McDonald spoke in Chapel and then met with Dr. Sabra and discussed ways of strengthening relations between PCC and NEST. He offered to help especially in the area of Library support.



The Rev. Ian Ross-McDonald, PCC

The N.E.S.T. *Theological Review*

The complete set of the issues of the NEST *Theological Review*, from 1978 until 2022, is now available in a pdf digital form. It can be purchased for the special price of \$ 700.



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