

“God is at work in the Middle East,” Lebanese leader tells DBU

February 26, 2016

Although they often are overlooked, Christians live throughout the Middle East and provide consistent witness and sacrificial ministry in the name of Jesus, a Baptist leader from Lebanon told students, faculty and staff at Dallas Baptist University Feb. 24.

Nabil Costa, executive director of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development, countered numerous myths about the Middle East, most of them promoted by media coverage that does not represent the region’s rich complexity. Costa spoke to students during chapel and addressed faculty and staff during lunch.

Despite images of hopelessness, “God is at work in the Middle East, too,” Costa said. “God is the God of all nations. ... Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the rest. God is at work in all those nations.”

Also, violence and terror do not haunt all Middle Easterners all the time, he added. “When I am home, I feel safe. It’s when I come to the United States and I see (reports from the Middle East) on Fox News and CNN—that’s when I get scared.”

Even though Muslims comprise the overwhelming majority of Middle Easterners, “Arabs are not only Muslims,” he said. “I’m an Arab and a Christian.”

Christians—Middle Easterners for 21 centuries

“Christians were in the Middle East even before Islam—since the first century,” he reported. The region’s architecture, literature and art all reflect longstanding Christian influence.

But proportionally, Christians are small, he acknowledged. Of the region’s 400 million residents, 93 percent are Muslim. Christians comprise 4 percent, and most of the remainder are Jews.

Because news coverage focuses on the majority Muslims and then on Israel and its predominantly Jewish population, people elsewhere don’t notice Christians, Costa explained. “We are the minority, and so people forget about us.”

About 10 percent of Egypt’s 89 million residents are Christians, but because of religious tyranny, “they are silent; they have no voice,” he lamented.

Lebanese Christians “can worship freely”

In Lebanon, life is better for Christians. “We are blessed. We are a free country, and we can worship freely,” he said. He expressed appreciation for American missionaries who settled in Lebanon a century ago and built schools and strengthened churches. He also praised Lebanese diversity and “acceptance of others,” noting Muslims and Christians there celebrate each others’ religious occasions.

Costa cited Finlay Graham, a Texan and Baptist missionary, who started Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut. Christians also started universities respected across the region.

U.S. Christian missionaries also started schools—the vast majority of whose students now are non-Christians, he said. Of 60,000 students in evangelical schools, 70 percent are from different faiths, with the rest Christians.

One of the great lessons Muslim and Christian students learn is “mutual respect,” Costa said. “Christians are not strangers (to Muslims). They are our neighbors. We have relationships with each other.”

Best platform

“Education is the best platform” for Christian witness, he said, noting he wishes Baptists and other Christians had started more schools in the region. School-starting in Lebanon followed “what you call buy one/get one,” he added.

Contrary to Western perceptions, “most Muslims are not terrorists,” Costa stressed. “The majority of Muslims are tired of the extremists.” Unfortunately, the minority of extremists receive most of the media attention and consequently define Muslim identity for Westerners. “But many Muslims are peace-seekers,” he said.

The current development shaping the Middle East—with a uniquely challenging impact on Lebanon—is the civil war in Syria, which has produced 4.8 million Syrian refugees.

Influx of refugees

Because Lebanon primarily is bordered by Syria, it has received an overwhelming influx of those refugees, Costa said.

“In our country, one of four people is a refugee.”

The task of responding to the need is daunting, Costa admitted. “What can we do? We are few. We are a small group of Baptists.”

The initial reaction was to lock their doors and change the locks, he said, noting God did not allow them to remain fearful and unfeeling.

“God could not work through us before he worked in us,” he said. “God has

placed us in a position to reflect love for the Syrian people.”

Lebanese Baptists are “saving 9,000 Syrian households,” he said. “That’s a minimum of 27,000 people.” Baptists are providing the lifeline for their new refugee neighbors.

“God is with us”

“It is our blessing,” Costa said. “We appreciate God’s blessing more and more. ... God is with us to help us.”

Lebanese Baptists follow five principles, he said. They are:

- “God is in control.”
- “God is good and wants to bless human beings with his grace.”
- “God has a predesigned plan, and no one can change it.”
- “We are tools in God’s hand as he fulfills his plan.”
- “Being in God’s plan requires you and me to know his thoughts.”

Christians all over the world must pray for the Middle East, Costa pleaded. “Ask God what God wants you to do.”

“I am scared sometimes, and I am frustrated,” he acknowledged. “I cannot understand the root of the cause (of Middle East violence and suffering). Had I been here two years ago, I never would have predicted this would happen.

“... plans beyond our imagination”

“But God has plans beyond our imagination. Is it time to talk or work? It is time to work. ... The blessing is not for the recipient; the blessing is for the giver.

“There is no prescription for what to do. Help someone who is suffering. We can partner with each other and see what God would have us do. ... We can trust and obey.”

Costa is a former vice president of the Baptist World Alliance.

The Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development provides leadership in:

- Equipping the church—through the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary and the Gateway Bookshop and related ministries.
- Education—through Beirut Baptist School and a nationally recognized special education center.
- Community development—through ministries to children and youth, relief and development work, and the special education program.