

Being God's Presence in Syria and Lebanon

By Betty Winston Baye



Amgad Beblawi

Tents at the refugee camp near Zablé'ah

Damascus was an economic engine not long ago. Office spaces in Syria's capitol city were pricey. Cameras and dollars in hand, tourists flocked to enjoy the nightlife and food—kebab hindi, kousa mehsi, baklava—and visit the city's museums, parks, and notable historic sites, including Umayyad Mosque, one of the world's oldest and largest, whose shrine is said to contain the head of John the Baptist, and an ancient house where Ananias is said to have baptized the Saul we know as the apostle Paul.

War has consequences, however.

Estimates are that as many as 130,000 Syrians have been killed in fighting since March 2011. And 2 million Syrians are now refugees in neighboring countries, while another 4 million have been displaced internally.

The war in Syria is so horrific that tourists no longer come to Damascus. And its fearful residents stay inside, the unnerving sounds of firearms and bombs always within earshot. Many shops in the city are closed. Armored military vehicles and checkpoints now occupy street corners once crowded with people. Some who've fled to Damascus from other parts of Syria share stories of death and of the destruction of entire neighborhoods and rural villages.

In January, Laurie Kraus, coordinator of

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA), and Amgad Beblawi, World Mission's coordinator of Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe, stepped into this unsettling milieu alongside representatives of other church groups. What war made it impossible for them to witness firsthand they saw through photos and stories shared by Syrian pastors from devastated areas who joined them at a consultation in Lebanon.

Out and about, in restaurants and refugee camps, Kraus and Beblawi found Syrians experiencing a mix of emotions: hope, despair, and anxiety over the fighting that began three years ago as peaceful protest against President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Some say the fighting in Syria is a civil war. Others insist that it's a proxy war between the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—which have their own political and economic interests in the region.

However it is defined, the war in Syria has created another humanitarian crisis in an already troubled part of the world.

"We saw a number of people preparing to leave the country," Beblawi said. "We met a young man in Lebanon on his way to Nigeria to look for work because there are no jobs in Syria. At the airport we saw a number of old women and families going to other Arab or European countries."

Kraus and Beblawi visited refugee camps in the Beqaa Valley, which straddles the border of Syria and Lebanon. They spent time with refugees, mostly from the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Homs, in a camp outside the town of Zahlé.

“Children gathered around us. They don’t have regular schooling, and there’s really nothing for them to do in the camp,” Kraus said.

But about 10 girls began “sort of spontaneously to sing and perform for us,” she said. “The girls sang a song in Arabic that sounded joyful and powerful and accompanied it with strong clapping and dancing.

“When they finished, Amgad said, ‘Would you like me to translate what they were singing? It was: “Yesterday we lived in nice houses. Today we live in tents. Tomorrow we will go home.” ’ ”

About 1.9 million Syrian children cannot attend school because of the war.

Kraus went on to say that “since much of the focus of the fighting is framed around religious commitment,” she fears there’s a strong threat to religious pluralism in the war zones.

Through efforts in Syria and Lebanon, PDA is acting “to stand in solidarity with and show support to our mission partners,” Beblawi explained. “We have local churches in Syria and Lebanon. The Middle East is not just Arab and Muslim.”

Among PDA’s mission partners in the region is the Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, which is struggling to respond to the developing needs of the victims of war within and outside Syria.

PDA is supporting that response. For example, the synod asked PDA to help retrofit a former school into apartments for Syrian refugee families, who account for 20 percent of Lebanon’s current population. PDA funded these renovations.

The synod also sees a need to provide food and other relief to supplement the spiritual care its congregations continue to provide to families displaced inside Syria.

In Homs and Aleppo, Christian neighborhoods and churches have been destroyed or put at risk, and the synod wants to maintain its presence and help people who’ve remained in targeted areas.

PDA again answered the call. At the end of 2012, it provided a scholarship to Salam Hanna, a young minister from Homs, for six months of training in how to run a relief organization.

The synod is also eager to provide education and medical care for children in the refugee camp outside Zahlé. It is developing a program and looking to PDA and others for support.



Photo submitted by Salam Hanna

Salam Hanna (on left) with Presbyterians displaced from Homs



Amgad Beblawi

Refugee Camp near Zahlé, Lebanon (Rev. Fadi Dagher and PCUSA Laurie Kraus with refugee children)



Amgad Beblawi

Syrian family leaving through Beirut Airport

Sadly, the war in Syria appears nowhere near an end. The issues are complicated, and warring factions seem entrenched in their positions. Media reports indicate that peace talks between Syrian officials and representatives of Assad's opposition in Geneva, Switzerland, are not making much progress.

The upshot of lingering conflict is that innocents, notably Syrian children, will continue to suffer, in the short-term because they are helpless against the violence, and in the long-term because their futures have been jeopardized by the war's interruption of their education.

These grave costs reinforce PDA's commitment to remain present and active in Syria and Lebanon even as others are desperately struggling to get out.

"I don't believe we can stay above the fray," Kraus insisted. "Part of what it means to be Presbyterian is that we believe our faith is lived out in the midst of, not apart from, civic life. This is especially true in seasons of conflict. Our responsibility is to be a presence for healing and a voice that moves toward peace with justice. We run—and we stay—in."

Betty Winston Baye is a veteran journalist, published novelist, motivational speaker, humorist and storyteller.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance's (PDA) partners in the Syria response include members of ACT Alliance, International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC), Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches (DSPR/MECC), and National Evangelical (Presbyterian) Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Humanitarian Assistance to more than 2 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries includes food aid, medicines and medical supplies, shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education, and psychosocial support.

Please prayerfully consider a gift to DR000081- Syria.



American and European Christians met with Syrian Orthodox Bishop in Zahle Lebanon