



Update from Peter and Patty Ford October 2021

“Lebanon left without power as electrical grid shuts down”— thus read the headline from a BBC online report for October 9, noting that the government had depleted its diesel fuel needed to run the state generators. The complete blackout ended within 24 hours after the army donated some of its reserves, but that hardly mattered. For months, the people of Lebanon have been getting only two to three hours of government electricity per day, and the “return” to electricity hasn’t been any better. A combination of government mismanagement, corruption, and the increasing national debt has led to a severe shortage of diesel fuel. Meanwhile, private vendors manage to purchase fuel on the black market to produce electricity from their generators, rationing it for their clients at very high prices. It’s all part of a devastating economic crisis that has seen Lebanon’s currency lose 90% of its value over the last two years, leaving the majority of the population below the poverty level. The situation has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the huge blast at the port back in August 2020. International aid has been promised, provided that Lebanon’s new government enact much-needed reforms—which it has yet to do. Most people have lost hope, and those who can find the means are emigrating.

Meanwhile, we flew back to Beirut on August 21 after a lovely family vacation in the US. Our Lebanese colleagues greeted us with comments like, “Your return has brought us some encouragement!” and “You’ve come to bear the pain with us!” Actually, it’s not nearly as bad at the Near East School of Theology as it is elsewhere around the country. Thankfully, God has blessed NEST with enough resources to carry on with its vital task of training regional Christian leaders for ministry in the churches of the greater Middle East. The entire school—including faculty apartments and student dormitories—is housed in a single large building, which is equipped with its own generator; and gracious donors have helped supply the funds for buying the precious fuel to keep us going—so far. We still experience about six hours of electricity cuts per day, but they are timed around our classes and other major events. NEST was also able to purchase a large battery backup system for our IT server so that we have internet access even during the power cuts.

Thanks to these efforts, most of the training programs at NEST have been able to continue. Just as we returned in August, when the crisis was especially precarious, a group of Anglican pastors and lay leaders from the Arabian Gulf and Cyprus visited NEST for a week-long study program. They had been planning for this since their previous study visit



Participants in the 2021 NEST Summer School program from the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf

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two years ago, and the challenges of life in Lebanon did not deter them. NEST managed to provide for their needs and even take them on a few field trips, such as the still-devastated site of the 2020 port blast. Peter joined other faculty in offering classroom teaching as they studied, worshiped, and reflected together on how they can help encourage spiritual renewal and outreach among their home congregations.

We then embarked on preparations for a new academic year starting September 27, while also holding various Zoom conference calls and remote training sessions. Meanwhile, regional students, old and new, began to arrive, along with several western students and pastors coming to experience theological study and reflection in a Middle Eastern context—trusting that NEST will help them navigate the situation here. Life is now busy with a full academic schedule. Patty is again teaching Old Testament Survey for incoming students while continuing to offer her services at the Library circulation desk. Peter is teaching three courses and supervising a seminar. The students and pastors in his classes hail from Lebanon, Syria, Armenia, Canada, Germany, and Denmark. We are both involved in our twice-weekly NEST chapel services, as well as Sunday worship services at the International Congregation of All Saints Church in downtown Beirut.



Peter recently teaching an “Introduction to Islam” class.

NEST usually has several empty dormitory rooms. But, this year, they are all filled with mostly Christian students



Welcome Party on the NEST veranda.

attending nearby universities who prefer to live here rather than risk the uncertain availability of gasoline by commuting from home. Many of them are actively participating in the social and spiritual life of NEST. We thank God that the community spirit and mutual support at NEST is the strongest that we’ve seen in years. We thoroughly enjoyed a great Welcome Party on September 30 (and Patty’s baking gifts definitely enhanced our time). Weekly Bible studies and volleyball games will soon commence.

The headlines depicting the tremendous hardship for the people of Lebanon are not overstated. Life for many is a tragic struggle to provide for their most basic needs. Please pray for relief from the suffering of the Lebanese, and the Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian refugees who live here as well. But we also praise God that the ministry of the Near East School of Theology can continue to provide essential training for the regional churches and to express the light of Christ in the midst of a hurting nation in need of both economic and spiritual help. Thank you again for your prayers and support that enable us to be here in partnership with NEST as it serves the people of Lebanon and beyond.

Your partners for God’s kingdom,

Peter & Patty

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