



May 2022
More Positives at NEST!

In our last letter, we highlighted a positive new development at the Near East School of Theology which was initiated despite—and partly because of—the severe economic challenges that NEST and Lebanon have been facing the last two years. The first course in our new online Arabic-language Diploma program was a great success, and plans are underway to continue with this program “full steam ahead.” More recently, two other positive developments took place at NEST that we’d like to showcase in this letter. We’ll take turns introducing these, according to our respective involvement in each one.

NEST–SiMO Consultation (by Peter): “SiMO” is an acronym that stands for “Studies in the Middle East”—although the letters are taken from the German phrase since the impetus for this program originated in the 1990s with the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKG). It is an opportunity for theology students in Europe or North America to come to NEST for a year of study in and exposure to the religions and culture of the Middle East. Every year NEST hosts several such students who become integrated into our student body. And every few years, faculty and students from NEST and EKG institutions convene for a consultation on an important topic relevant to the contexts of both Lebanon and Germany. After being postponed for two years, NEST was finally able to host this event during our Easter break in April. Fifteen German professors, pastors, and students joined fifteen members of the NEST community for three days of interaction and reflection on the theme of “Public Theology”—that is, how can we as Christians and churches actively live out our faith in the public arena, with all the challenges we face from secularism, religious extremism, political polarization, etc.?



We found much to discuss and consider, especially in light of an outstanding document recently published by an ecumenical group of Middle Eastern theologians entitled “We Choose Abundant Life”—a courageous call for the churches of the Middle East to recommit themselves to biblical principles of active participation as full citizens of our respective countries. (You can find this fifty-page document here: www.wechooseabundantlife.com.) I was inspired, from both the consultation and this document, to consider how these same principles should be expressed in the context of American society and culture, and I hope to find ways to implement these principles in the coming years.

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Following the consultation, I was honored to guide a group from the German contingent on a vigorous day-long hike through the beautiful Qadisha Valley in the north of Lebanon, which had become a refuge for persecuted Maronite Christians during the Middle Ages. Several significant ancient structures are still standing which attest to the faith and simplicity of the monks, priests, and laypeople who had resided there centuries ago. It was also a wonderful opportunity to share mutual experiences of God’s guidance and faithfulness with my German acquaintances.



Peter with German visitors in the Qadisha Valley.



14th-century Monastery of St. Elisha, Qadisha Valley.

NEST Veranda Garden Project (by Patty): In the midst of the ongoing economic crisis, one local organization has conceived of an ambitious project to “Green the City” by providing planters and the initial plants for buildings in Beirut, allowing the people who live in the building to sustainably grow their food and be able to provide for themselves. NEST was blessed to become one of their prototype projects, since we have a good-sized veranda that is visible from the main street, thus encouraging others to participate in this project, and since we have an active community that can demonstrate how this project can work.

So a few weeks ago the planters were delivered, and the NEST community (from young to old) varnished the containers and planted the fruit, vegetables, and herbs that we had chosen in consultation with the agricultural engineer working on the project.



NEST community varnishing new planters.



NEST students enjoying a break at the new veranda garden project (photo taken from the balcony of our apartment)

Such a simple project—but it has injected renewed joy and enthusiasm and comradery into the NEST community. We are enjoying using the space for gathering for coffee, meals, and a place to study and meet. The pleasure of seeing things take root, grow, and ripen gives hope, despite the fears that nothing will change with the economic situation, even though elections were recently conducted. We are reminded anew that God our Creator sustains, remolds, renews, and revitalizes us so that we can continue to serve his kingdom amid a suffering world.

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May you find ways to renew your sense of certainty in God's goodness and provision in your life and the life of your community. May God continue to do more than you can imagine through simple yet profound acts of love and service.

Patty and Peter Ford