

# MIDDLE EAST CONSULTATION 2014

## Discipleship Today Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa

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مؤتمر الشرق الأوسط ٢٠١٤: التلمذة اليوم: إتباع المسيح في الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

## The Challenges of Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa

### Introduction

The Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, in Lebanon, has been a hub for the formation of leaders for church and society in the Middle East and North Africa region since 1960. Throughout those years, it has been cognizant of the tremendous challenges that constantly face the church in the region in the area of discipleship. ABTS' Institute of Middle East Studies (IMES) hosts the annual Middle East Consultation (MEC) to provide a context whereby people from around the world can explore issues of critical importance to the Middle East and beyond, in ways that seek the transformation of individuals and communities in line with the prophetic message of Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this document is to highlight a variety of the day-to-day challenges facing disciples of Jesus in the MENA region today, as transpired from the 2014 Consultation. It also provides a foundation from which the Institute of Middle East Studies will seek to further develop the conversations first begun during MEC 2014. It is anticipated that some of the recommendations deriving from this document will inform our ongoing discussions on the theme of discipleship over the next two or more years. Early on, we will also attempt a definition of what we mean by the term discipleship.

### MEC 2014

IMES hosted its 11th annual Middle East Consultation, "Discipleship Today: Following Jesus in the Middle East and North Africa," in Beirut from 16-20 June 2014. Organized for the first time in partnership with Near East Initiatives, MEC 2014 hosted nearly 200 participants from 21 countries and five continents. MEC 2014 saw the introduction of a new approach to IMES' flagship annual conference. It was intentionally designed as a consultation to allow for a far greater number of regional and international voices to be heard, both from the floor and from within the many round table discussions.

Each morning featured interviews with disciples of Jesus from a wide range of socio-cultural and religious contexts. Participants heard inspiring and challenging stories from Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, Lebanon, the Gulf, the Philippines and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, interviews were conducted with experienced leaders from across the MENA region who journeyed along with many in their walk with Jesus. In dialogue with these local and regional voices, five internationally recognized theologians and missiologists of diverse backgrounds were invited as global consultants, to help us frame the conversation within the global context, and to draw out particular themes which would warrant further reflection. Consultation participants then spent a significant amount of time in round table discussions, reflecting upon and processing what they had learnt from the interviews.

Each day during the afternoon sessions, one of the Global Consultants was invited to present on a particular topic related to the consultation's themes, followed by a time for questions and discussion. Subjects included:

- "A Status Report on Movements of Discipleship in the MENA Context: Where We Have Been and Where We Might Be Going," Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry
- "Emerging Communities of Faith: Exploring Ecclesiological Opportunities and Challenges for Followers of Christ in the MENA Context," Dr. Rosalee Velloso Ewell
- "Roland Allen and Vincent Donovan Rediscovered," Dr. J. Andrew Kirk
- "Challenges and Opportunities in Developing a Biblical Approach to Discipleship in Relation to Social, Religious, Political and Cultural Identity," Dr. John A. Azumah
- "Distinctive Features of Contemporary Discipleship Movements," Dr. Louisa Cox

Evening sessions provided a context for inter-faith conversation, as regional Muslim leaders were invited to share their thoughts

on a range of related topics. During one of the evening sessions Dr. Robert Woodberry also gave a keynote presentation on his groundbreaking sociological research, entitled “The Great Omission: How Christian Missions Transformed the World.”

### *Defining Discipleship*

It is important to recognize that whenever we invite someone to become a disciple of Jesus, we are taking on a task with a serious level of responsibility. This is particularly so in the MENA region, where there are significant social, cultural, political and religious factors to consider. The tensions and conflicts that have existed historically in the multi-faith context of the MENA region often means that new disciples of Jesus face persecution and alienation from their community, especially when their loyalty is seen as shifting from institutional religion to the person of Jesus. Hence the methods and motivation behind those involved in discipling others takes on a significant ethical dimension. This ethical dimension is even further heightened when the ministry is among minors and vulnerable adults.

It became evident from MEC 2014 that the ways in which people understand both the nature and function of discipleship vary greatly. This diversity in understanding will lead to significantly differing approaches and practices within a wide range of contexts. For this reason, it is hard to derive a clear definition of discipleship from MEC 2014. However for the purpose of further discussion, the following definition is offered, largely inspired by the spirit of the consultation:

Discipleship is the process of becoming more like Jesus. It is a dynamic and lifelong process whereby followers of Jesus learn to obey the Scriptures in community with other disciples through joys and sorrows. This takes place through prayer, fellowship, intentional relationships, service, and by the growing presence of the Holy Spirit in them. Disciples serve their family, community and society in accordance with their calling and gifting. The disciple is part of a community whose purpose is to impact society with the values of Jesus, to the glory of God and for the welfare of all his creation.

### *The Main Challenges*

During the course of MEC 2014, numerous interviews with followers of Jesus highlighted a number of significant and often overlapping challenges. In broad terms, the most significant challenges that face new disciples of Jesus from within the MENA region relate to the following:

1. Discovering a healthy socio-cultural, religious and spiritual identity.

2. Sustaining and repairing relationships with families and communities for those who have become disciples of Jesus.
3. Finding acceptance and developing a healthy relationship with the existing Body of Christ.
4. Facing suffering, persecution and alienation as part of the shared experience of followers of Jesus.
5. Overcoming the inherent difficulties of religious language, terminology, and the implications for witness and discipleship.

### *Identity*

Identity formation was probably the most significant and painful challenge facing new disciples of Jesus in the MENA region. While finding a new identity “in Christ” may be complicated in any context, significant social, cultural, religious and political dynamics of MENA were illustrated that make one’s identity in Christ particularly difficult from within this context. On many occasions, the consultation heard painful stories from those who had attached their loyalty to Jesus, but who had, as a result, experienced numerous challenges reconciling their new-found and previous identities. Individual disciples often felt torn between two or more socio-religious categories, wanting to somehow identify with and fit within both, and yet often not finding acceptance in either. The risk of cognitive and affective dissonance, often resulting in a painful identity crisis, was highlighted on numerous occasions.

This was particularly evident when one’s “new identity” in Jesus was likely to cause significant socio-cultural fracturing in a context. As a result, interviewees often encouraged the consultation to consider the distinction between one’s socio-cultural (even “religious”) identity and one’s spiritual-faith identity as a disciple of Christ, regardless of heritage. It was commented upon during the course of MEC 2014 that a person’s identity is multi-dimensional and fluid. As such, outside attempts that seek to impose one particular religious or cultural categorization upon a new disciple have the tendency to be neither appropriate nor helpful.

### *Reconciliation*

The need for reconciliation was stressed on numerous occasions with two main areas standing out wherein reconciliation was much desired by disciples from diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. The first related to the restoration of positive relationships between those who

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have come to affirm their loyalty to Christ and their family members. The second involved the pursuit of healthy relationships between disciples of Jesus coming from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds. Both issues are highly significant and complex within the MENA context when it comes to the discipleship process.

### Reconciliation with Family

The issue of familial relationships was often painful. Many of the contributors shared their experiences of alienation from their families, resulting from their decision to become a disciple of Jesus. Some were essentially forced out of their families and wider communities as a result of their allegiance to Christ. Some of those from whom we heard had been able over time to restore varying degrees of relationship. Others, however, found this impossible. This raises significant questions for an understanding of discipleship, its intended outcomes, and the processes which may be used in contexts such as the MENA.

Questions that need further consideration include, but are not limited to:

- Are there ways for a new follower of Jesus to develop a healthy individual and social identity “in Christ” whereby he (or she) does not become alienated from his or her social, cultural and religious context, and yet do so in a way that remains faithful to the gospel?
- How might a new disciple preserve a positive witness to the transforming power of Jesus within his family and community?
- How can we accompany people on their discipleship journeys, on paths that avoid social and familial fracture and which protect them from experiencing painful cognitive and affective dissonance? How can this be done in a way that is deeply faithful to the gospel?
- How can the narrative and life paradigm of a follower of Jesus become a compelling model to members of his family and community?
- What sort of socio-cultural and religious community should a mentor, or someone who is journeying with a new disciple, encourage or desire for the person with whom he is journeying? What constitutes a healthy and supportive community of faith for a new follower of Jesus?

### Reconciliation within the Body of Christ

Significant ecclesiological dimensions also emerged that were in need of reconciliation. Many new disciples of

Christ found it very difficult, if not impossible, to find a new home within the cultures and structures of existing communities of faith. This was often very painful, as those new disciples had high hopes that they would be welcomed in and loved unconditionally as brothers and sisters in Christ. Unfortunately, in many cases, this hope was not fulfilled. In some cases, the hurt was devastating and the ensuing lack of trust palpable.

It became clear that in many situations, it might not be possible or even helpful for recent followers of Christ to join with existing communities of faith in public acts of worship, fellowship or service. It was felt that, given the complex socio-cultural and religious conditions in the region, such interaction might potentially damage the living model and the witness to Christ's transforming presence within a disciple's community. That said, it was clear that there is a need for repentance on the part of those who have not been welcoming enough towards their new brothers and sisters in Christ, and that reconciliation was needed between members of different social communities.

There is also the need for hope that some of these difficulties might be overcome, and that there might be ways in which different socio-religious communities of Christ followers could learn not only to accept each other, but to seek each other's best interests through mutual love and respect. It is hoped that future Middle East Consultations might provide the foundations upon which healthy relationships might grow within the Body of Christ—even where there might continue to be different understandings of the nature of Christ-centered communities and of socio-religious practices.

The question was further asked whether existing structures, patterns and cultures of more established communities of faith are biblical in their origin. To what extent have historical and cultural dynamics determined how those from different cultures and religious communities might be accepted into the family of God? The reality we witnessed is that God is moving in the MENA region to make Jesus known within and beyond anyone's existing efforts, in ways and on a scale that would appear unprecedented. Those who might feel burdened for the guardianship of the boundaries of the body of Christ will not be able to control where God's Spirit moves, nor the methods He uses. The danger it seems is that by seeking to control access to Christ through established ecclesiastical practices, new disciples might be left watching from the sidelines. It is our hope, therefore, that we might honor and accept the movement of God, and support new disciples of Jesus in ways that do not result in

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an unnecessarily painful and burdensome process of cultural extraction, nor quench the possibilities for them to remain as vibrant witnesses within their communities.

### *Suffering and Persecution as Part of the Landscape*

Many of the contributors at MEC 2014 had experienced persecution during their journey of discipleship as a result of their allegiance to Christ, which for some had led to an almost inevitable conflict with their families. This resulted in subsequent suffering for both parties. Others were disciplined in ways that enabled them to develop a narrative that was not as alien nor as potentially confrontational within their existing family contexts. This development of an authentic faith narrative allowed for an ongoing witness. It was recognized that this was not an easy process, that committed followers of Jesus would have to confront social norms and practices, and that this might lead to difficult challenges. In this way, some degree of persecution is indeed inevitable for any follower of Christ, regardless of his or her socio-cultural and religious heritage. It was striking that the avoidance of persecution was never the motivation of some to remain in closer harmony with their native societies and cultures, but rather their desire for a more vibrant, personal testimony through their presence.

It was painful to hear from those who had experienced persecution from close family members. It was encouraging however to hear of later successful attempts to re-build family relationships, especially when those relationships had reached a point where respectful witness had become possible once again.

The call for freedom of conscience to become a lived-out reality across the MENA region was a significant theme that emerged as well. It is always appropriate for followers of Jesus to stand up for the rights of religious minorities, regardless of the religion in question, and to stand with those who have been marginalized as a result of their faith decisions. It seems prudent, however, for followers of Jesus to also act in ways that do not provoke religious hatred and intolerance within the region. Sensitivity is desirable within the conceptualization and practice of discipleship, particularly where communities are multi-religious.

Each context, be it national, cultural or familial, is unique and the nature and degree of potential backlash for becoming a follower of Jesus is different. We should be careful not to label a specific community as intolerant with regard to religious rights and freedoms based on the experiences of those from another context. The conditions within a

particular context play a significant role in the manner in which people become disciples. It seems fitting, then, that the responsible action for those involved in journeying with young disciples through the process of maturation and growth is to become very aware of the potential consequences of the approaches being used. The process of discipleship is a journey between people in community and it is important that those involved prepare themselves to be there for the persons with whom they are involved on this journey, through the good times and the bad. The importance of the relational dynamics of this journeying process cannot be overstated if discipleship is to be about people and not programs, most especially in the MENA context.

### *The Language of Discipleship and Witness*

Language is important, and the language of discipleship is of particular importance within the multi-faith contexts of the Middle East and North Africa. The language used when coming along someone on his journey of discipleship with Jesus expresses, to a large extent, conscious and subconscious theologies. This in turn influences methodology, which has a significant impact on outcomes within the discipleship process. It is important that great care be used not to replace the gospel message with socio-cultural and religious connotations that may be inappropriate within a certain context. For example, language associated with “the church” can be ambiguous, implying either the established, historic and culturally Christian church, or the Body of Christ universal. When we talk about “identity,” are we referring to social and political identity, cultural identity, religious identity or faith/spiritual identity?

In addition, it is important that we are able to express theologically complex issues, such as the understanding of Jesus as Son of God, the nature of God as One and Triune, the salvific implications of Jesus’ death on the cross, in ways that are meaningful within any given socio-religious context. It is wrongly assumed that new disciples of Christ will simply fit into traditional ways of understanding, by explaining to them the theological ideas that seem alien to their own cultural context.

Careful attention must be paid in order to ensure that the message transmitted remains faithful to the gospel. Furthermore, it seems appropriate that this message be articulated in ways that may be understood and potentially welcomed in multi-religious settings like the MENA.

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason

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for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15–16)

### *Further Statements Emerging from MEC 2014*

MEC 2014 recognizes that even across the MENA region each context is unique and complex. Where one mode of discipleship may prove acceptable and effective, in another context it may not. We should take care to avoid blanket assumptions whereby we assume models and approaches will work across the region. The same may be said of ecclesiology. One community of Christ followers may look very different from another. Sometimes this may be the case within similar local contexts. It is wise therefore to recognize and celebrate a diversity of approaches and ministry models. Within the parameters of the gospel as laid out in the Scriptures, discipleship is incarnational and informed by the context.

One of the unique aspects of MEC 2014 was the fact that we were able to listen to what God is *actually* doing in and beyond the MENA region in bringing diverse individuals, families and people groups towards Himself and His Kingdom. Whilst there was room for theological reflection, the focus was not on critique but rather on listening and appreciation. God is bringing people towards Himself within the context of extremely difficult and turbulent times in the region, and He is doing this in diverse and unexpected ways. Many people are experiencing dreams and visions; others are having their practical needs met and seeing Jesus through those who are serving them. While we recognise the need for careful theological reflection on “models” of ministry, there comes a time when we must step back, watch and accept that God is doing what He is doing, and worship Him for it. At times He may invite the existing community of Christ to be involved in this process to a greater or lesser extent. At other times He may ask that community to be patient and accepting of what He is doing. In either case, disciples of Jesus from all backgrounds are called to lift their brothers and sisters up in prayer and encouragement.

### *Statements of Intention*

The Institute of Middle East Studies will

- provide through the Middle East Consultation a platform for followers of Christ from different socio-cultural and religious contexts to share their experiences with one another, serving as a safe space for reflection and support;

- continue to discuss themes relating to religious rights and freedoms for all and advocate for them all, and will also continue to discuss issues of persecution and suffering as a result of religious choice within the MENA region; and
- seek to see God glorified and people reconciled within our diverse expressions of faith within the MENA region and to promote reconciliation, trust and mutual respect.

### Themes for Future Middle East Consultations

MEC 2015 will explore in further detail issues relating to identity for followers of Jesus from within the MENA region. “Discipleship Today: Identity and Belonging in the Middle East and North Africa” will take place from 15–19 June 2015, at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon.

Future Middle East Consultations will focus on issues relating to ecclesiology and trust, with an emphasis on fostering diverse communities of Christ-followers within the MENA region. **IJFM**

*Note: To be kept up-to-date with the latest developments related to MEC 2015, please sign up at the IMES Blog: [IMESLebanon.wordpress.com](http://IMESLebanon.wordpress.com) or contact IMES directly at [IMES@ABTSLebanon.org](mailto:IMES@ABTSLebanon.org).*