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# LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND THE MISUNDERSTOOD: LEBANON

*by Jason Lemon*



**T**HE MIDDLE EAST is a region characterized in the West by conflict, political strife and instability. Lebanon, the small Mediterranean coastal country bordering Israel and Syria, is no exception to this stereotypical portrayal. But as I—along with two other Andrews alumni and one current student—have had the opportunity to find out firsthand over the past academic year, this perception comes more from ignorance and sensationalized media reports than actual reality.

Every year, the Student Missions office at Andrews University sends many students around the world to serve in various positions for a period generally lasting from eight months to a year. However, having four student missionaries in Lebanon is not typically the norm, especially when a civil war is raging just to the north in neighboring Syria.

Jenner Beccerra, Levon Kotanko, Ryan McCabe and I have had the incredible opportunity to serve in Lebanon during the past academic year. Jenner, who studied theology at Andrews and graduated in May 2012, has taught religion to students at Bauchrieh Adventist Secondary School (BASS). Levon, a current student, Ryan (BFA '11) and I (BA '12) have worked in the Office of Communication at Middle East University, supporting the communication and marketing efforts of the only Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education within the Middle East and North Africa region.

Levon, Jenner and I arrived in Lebanon in September 2012, just following the death of the American Ambassador to Libya. The entire Middle East region was highlighted by the media as a web of anti-American protests following the unfortunate circulation of the



film *Innocence of Islam*, through YouTube. Protests were scheduled in Lebanon, including a large one in Beirut on the day of my arrival.

My parents were worried, I wasn't. But as my departure approached and their fears increased, it couldn't help but rub off a bit and so I placed duct tape over the American flag logo on my American Tourist suitcase. Now, as I write this, nine months later, I smile and shake my head at that small silly precaution.

### WHY THE MIDDLE EAST?

So why would we throw ourselves into what to many people appears to be a hotbed of danger in a region too often defined by conflict? Ryan, who came to Lebanon in February to work as the graphic designer for MEU, sums it up for all of us:

"I was working at a design firm in Chattanooga, Tenn., and I was doing very well for myself. But I wasn't fulfilled by what I was doing, and I knew that this position gave me the opportunity to pour myself into something meaningful." Continuing, he adds, "My relationship with God was reaching the point where I couldn't read the Gospels and justify the life I was living in America. The imperative to spread the Word of Salvation to the whole world is passed over so flippantly in the West, and I was tired of saying, 'we have missionaries for that.'"

Jenner says something similar. "I felt the burden in my heart to do missions overseas. Ultimately it was divine guidance that led me here."

I found out about the opportunity a few months after graduation. I was finishing up a summer internship in Chicago and beginning freelance work, reaching some version of post-graduation success. However, there was an intense discontentment inside of me as I started to imagine the rest of my life playing out in the direction I seemed to be heading.

## I KNEW THAT THIS POSITION GAVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO POUR MYSELF INTO SOMETHING MEANINGFUL



Levon shared the same sentiments, and he knew already that he wanted to serve as a student missionary during the next academic year. He had visited Lebanon briefly after participating in a summer project in Jordan with Brian Manley, former associate professor of art at Andrews who now lives and works in Lebanon for the Middle East North Africa Union (MENAUI). Intrigued by his short experience in the Middle East, he was interested in returning.

Levon says, "When I saw the call to MEU and that it was work directly related to my undergraduate degree—photography, I jumped at the chance to be involved...it's an exciting time to work in the Middle East because the [region] is so relevant in the world today. It's home to one of the largest and fastest growing religions in the world. And what's scary is so much of the West misunderstands it all."

And it is true; the region is misunderstood. Growing up in the shadow of September 11 has fostered a strong interest in the Middle East within me, to understand the culture, the people and the religions. Ryan has felt a similar tug at his heart, "I've been interested in the region, its people, politics and religions...and this kind of immersive experience offers the only real opportunity to discover the true essence of a culture. My wish was to walk a mile—or kilometer—in their shoes and do whatever I could to build bridges between two cultures that are growing farther and farther apart."

**ABOVE:** A view of Beirut, Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea taken from just by the MEU campus **BELOW:** Jenner Beccerra teaches religion to students at Bauchrieh Adventist Secondary School **BOTTOM:** Jason Lemon at a recruitment event for Middle East University





**ABOVE:** Students walking on the MEU campus among the beautiful spring flowers **BELOW, TOP TO BOTTOM:** Levon Kotanko takes a photo to be used for marketing purposes; Ryan McCabe assists in the MEU Office of Communication; Brian Manley, right, socializes with a group of students in his classroom



## ON THE GROUND IN LEBANON

English is incredibly common in Beirut, and almost all Lebanese speak at least two languages, while many speak three: Arabic, English and French. Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks seem to be on every street corner. New BMWs and Mercedes line the streets. Leaving the Beirut airport by taxi, the first advertisement I saw was for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

With all of this abundant Western influence, it becomes difficult to connect one's preconceived ideas with the reality of how Lebanon actually is. Within the first few weeks in Lebanon, my American friend—who was studying Arabic through Adventist Colleges Abroad at MEU—and I would often joke to each other, "I just forgot that I'm not in the United States." At the university, the way Muslims and Christians lived and worked side-by-side was a microcosm for what we saw throughout the country.

## WORKING WITHIN THE CULTURE

Jenner was quickly thrown into daily hands-on interaction with students at BASS. As the only religion teacher at the school, he taught religion courses to students ranging from the early years of elementary on up to the secondary level. "Since I had never been a teacher, it was a little difficult to say the least," he says. "I do not know what I would have done without the help of the leaders of the institution."

The school is home to a wide spectrum of students: missionary children, refugees, students who were kicked out of other schools and immigrant children as well. "These kids have a lot of things on their minds, and this is the reason why many times they don't try as much in school." This makes the environment challenging and even sad at times but he adds, "ultimately there is hope at the end of the day."

The work of Levon, Ryan and myself has been less hands-on with students. We spend most of the day in an office, working on various marketing and communication projects or internal university needs. Outside of work hours, though, we've been able to interact a great deal with students, especially the dorm students, many of whom come from Egypt, Jordan and South Sudan. Day students are mainly Lebanese and Armenian. Few students at the University are Seventh-day Adventists but most are Christians, along with several Muslim students.

"The University is very diverse, with students and faculty from all over the world," says Ryan. "In many ways it's very similar to Andrews, so the 'culture shock' has been much lighter than I expected."

Levon adds, "It's always been easier to get to know the students in the dorm because they are around more than the community students. A couple of friends I've been able to get to know better just by hanging out in the dorm or playing basketball at the courts." He also points out that people usually make a place significant saying, "I've made some great friends here. Some I work with, some are students, but all have made this experience so much better."

Our experience in Lebanon has given us a better understanding of a country and a culture that many fear. We have seen it beyond the negative media coverage that is all many other people know. We have become friends with the people—Muslims, Christians, Adventists, refugees, international students and immigrants—and learned from them while they have also learned from us.

Perhaps this is the core of the Student Missions program. It is not wholly about helping others but also about building bridges and understanding with other cultures. It is a growing experience for the missionary as much as it is for the people they interact with.

And as Levon points out, Andrews University goes above and beyond in promoting this kind of mission mindset. He explains, "Not only did [professors] encourage me to get involved, but they actually helped me figure out how to do it."

For him, along with the rest of us who came to Lebanon, this kind of encouragement changed our lives and our perspectives. We hope that our work here at MEU has done the same—at least in a small way—for the individuals we have had the privilege to interact with.

And that is exactly what makes this kind of experience so valuable, the personal interactions and the realization that what was once "the other" actually becomes a friend instead. It opens one's eyes fully to all the misunderstandings so pervasive in Western society and humanizes something that was once foreign. ■

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