NEST receives many visitors in the course of an academic year. They are very varied, coming from different countries, religions, denominations and involved in different types of work. But they all ask the same questions at some point or another during their visit: What do you think the future holds for you as Christians in the Middle East? How do you cope with all these political crises around you? What rays of hope do you see on the horizon?

The situation in the Middle East and the rest of the Arab world is no doubt not very positive; in fact it is definitely getting worse. Upheaval and turmoil in many countries, bloodshed, and displacement; religious extremism on the rise; regional and international interference in the affairs of supposedly “sovereign” states; sectarian tension and violence, both verbal and physical; and continued and devastating emigration of many people, especially Christians. Things do not look bright at all. The Middle East seems to be doomed to be the eternal battleground of sects, religions, political parties, regional and international powers. So, the questions posed to us are always legitimate and timely.

Let us remember, however, that the mighty phrase, “In hope he believed against hope” was invented in the Middle East! It was a Middle Easterner who first lived it (Abraham), and another Middle Easterner (Paul) who coined it. If Abraham were to consider his body only, analyze his biological and physical condition, or consider the barrenness of his wife, again physiologically and realistically, his faith would have weakened, and he would have given up. But he trusted in God and in God’s promises, and “hoped against hope”. It is in this spirit of trust in God and acknowledgement of the God of Abraham and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom death could not vanquish, that we at NEST dare to hope and so to plan for the future. And it is in this spirit that NEST held an international Consultation on May 21, 2013, to discuss future plans and directions. We considered our almost “dead body” and the “barrenness” that surrounds us, but not on their own. Inspired by God’s life-giving and hope-filling Spirit, we proposed a way ahead: expand teaching of theology to reach other institutions of higher learning, preserve and research our rich Evangelical heritage and contributions, develop resources for Middle Eastern contextual theology and invest in local income-generating projects. For we are fully convinced that God, who raises the dead, is able to do what God has promised.

“He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead.” (Rom. 4:18)
Rev. Dr. F. Peter Ford Jr. was appointed Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies as of 2012-2013. Peter, accompanied by his wife Patricia, arrived in Beirut in late December 2012. Peter and Patty are US nationals who have been serving in Africa for the last 24 years or so. Peter taught in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya before joining NEST. He earned his doctorate in Islamic Studies in 1998 from Temple University, Philadelphia, USA. He is an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America, and he is seconded by RCA to NEST.

The Fords have two sons, David and Andrew, working and studying in the US.

Rev. Jacob Hansum, who has been the Instructor for Practical Theology and the Chaplain at NEST, will be leaving Lebanon with his family for good in June 2013. His term has come to an end, and he has been called to pastor a church in the Netherlands. Jacob served NEST faithfully and enthusiastically for the last four years. His students always spoke very highly of him, and he was a much-appreciated and sought-after chaplain to many in the NEST community. NEST is grateful for the service of Jacob and Ina Hansum, and also very grateful to the Reformed Mission League in the Netherlands Reformed Church (GZB) for supporting his appointment since 2009.

In his farewell chapel service, Jacob spoke movingly and eloquently about his experience at NEST, and concluded by saying: “Some days ago one of you asked me: in what way NEST has changed my life. Four years in this small and diverse community spending so much time together in classroom and chapel, in the cafeteria and coffee corner and many other settings, have really been an eye-opener for me. It has opened my eyes for the mysterious presence of Christ. Christ plays in ten thousand places through the features of many faces. My years at NEST will hopefully always remind me to slow down, to take time to meet others, and to look for the reflection of Christ in everyone who will ever cross my path; and for this eye-opener I thank God and I thank all of you.”
Every month NEST holds a public lecture in its efforts to offer public theological education. Since the last newsletter (Dec. 2012), the following events took place:

**January 24, 2013**

«Ishmael, the founder of their nation...»

*The Politics of Pre-Islamic Arab Christianity in Contemporary Scholarship*

- David Grafton, Ph. D.
- Associate Professor of Islamic Studies & Christian-Muslim Relations, Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

**February 21, 2013**

**Sunni and Roum Orthodox Revivalist Movements**

*Comparison and Contrast*

- Elias Halabi, Ph. D.
- Associate General Secretary, Middle East Council of Churches

**April 25, 2013**

**Theology after Auschwitz and Jewish-Christian Dialogue**

*A German Specialty or a Universal Ecumenical Challenge?*

- Alexander Deeg, Dr. theol., Professor of Practical Theology, Leipzig University
- Respondent: Dr. George Sabra

**March 21, 2013**

“The Passion of Our Lord According to St. John” by J. S. Bach

*An Illustrated Musical Lecture*

- Jean Said Makdisi

**May 16, 2013**

**The Humane Physician: An Islamic Perspective**

- Thalia Arawi, Ph. D.
- Director of the Salim El-Hoss Bioethics & Professionalism Program, American University of Beirut
Activities of the Resource Center for Christian Education

A. TEENOLOGY 301  Two main topics were discussed in the one-day activity held on March 16, 2013:

1. Faith & Doubt: How to Deal With Youth/Teens Who Question Everything.

   The first session was planned basically to help youth leaders understand the doubts and questions that young people have and learn to relate to them on a deeper level. Young people should not be discouraged from asking difficult questions and voicing their doubts about God, faith, church, etc.

   This session was led by Dr. George Sabra, who addressed the hard questions that leaders had collected from their youth, and he gave the youth leaders a hands-on training in how to deal with these questions in the best possible way.

2. Boundaries: Developing Healthy Relationships Between Teens/Youth and their Leaders.

   Where should the line be drawn? And why is it important not to cross it? This session was led by Mr. John Sagherian, who helped youth leaders appreciate and understand the pitfalls of having too loose a boundary between leader and the young person and what a healthy relationship should look like.

   The Training Seminar was attended by 41 youth leaders from 23 different churches, 3 schools and 6 organizations (NGO’s).

B. BIBLIODRAMA IV

Bibliodrama has been a regular activity of the Resource Center for some time now. On April 6, 2013, the fourth session was held at NEST. Bibliodrama is concerned with the spiritual journey of the participants. Rev. Agnete G. Holm of Danmission led the April session of Bibliodrama – an activity of spiritual counseling with the help of Biblical texts.
Two main topics were discussed in the one-day activity held on March 16, 2013:

As part of its activities to relate to churches and to make its ministry known, and also to interest prospective students, NEST students and faculty visited several congregations in Lebanon in the spring of 2013. Students and faculty members led the worship service, preached and shared why they have chosen to be future ministers and encouraged others to respond to God’s call.

Three churches were visited in April and May: The Armenian Evangelical Emmanuel Church, The National Evangelical Church in Jdeideh, and the Presbyterian Church of Zahle.

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Thanks to a special grant from Danmission, all of our classrooms have now replaced the old black boards with white boards, and all classes have fixed screens and LCD projectors.
Forum of Christian-Muslim Thought

Three major sessions of the Forum were held in 2012-2013:

**December 2012:**

A panel discussion of the book *Divine Hospitality: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam*, co-authored by Father Fadi Daou and Dr. Nayla Tabbara. The discussants were Dr. Sylvie Avakian Ma’marbashi (NEST) and Dr. Amin Farshoukh (Makassed University), and the event was moderated by Rev. Colin Chapman.

**February 2013:**

A discussion of a paper presented by Sheikh Shafiq Jradi, head of the “Sapiental Knowledge Institute for Religious and Philosophical Studies” (المعارف الحكيمة للدراسات الدينية والفلسفية) on “Critique of Holy Texts”. Twenty Christian and Muslim scholars were invited from all over Lebanon to take part in the discussion.

**March 2013:**

A presentation by Mr. Rami Ollaik, a Lebanese writer, attorney and lecturer at the American University of Beirut on the topic: “The Spiritual Journey of Rami Ollaik: From the Cell of Hezbollah to the Hive of the Soul.”
As part of the observation of Holy Week at NEST, the Spiritual Life Committee organized a noon-time Evangelical "Stations of the Cross" prayer service on Tuesday of Holy Week. Students, professors and staff members began their walk on the second floor basement with candle-light, guitar and a large wooden cross, and walked up to the ground floor, stopping at 9 different stations. Each station symbolized encounters and experiences of Jesus on the way to Calvary.

On the evening of the same day, a Holy Tuesday Communion Service was celebrated by the whole NEST community. A sermon entitled “Friends” was delivered by the Rev. Jacob Hansum, and the Rev. George al-Kopti of the Episcopal Church officiated at the Communion. A student choir, led by SiMO student, Lisa Mohns, sang two beautiful hymns.
Theologians from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) of the Catholic Church met from 7 to 13 April at Notre Dame, Indiana (USA), for the third session in the fourth phase of the international Catholic-Reformed dialogue. The event was hosted by the University of Notre Dame and its president John Jenkins, C.S.C. Dr. George Sabra attended the meeting as a representative of Middle Eastern Reformed Churches.

The theme of the current phase of the dialogue, which will conclude in 2017, is “Justification and Sacramentality: The Christian Community as an Agent for Justice”. Dialogue between the two communions at the international level began in 1970.

The Reformed participants included Mortha Moore-Keish (Co-Chair), Reinerio Arce-Valentin (Cuba); Marina Ngursangzeli Behera (India); Christopher Dorn (USA); George Hunsinger (USA); George Sabra (Lebanon); and Lindsay Schlüter (Scotland).

The Catholics were represented by Bishop Kevin Rhoades (Co-Chair), Peter Casarella (USA), Peter De Mey (Belgium), William Henn, OFM cap. (USA/Italy) and Jorge Scampini, O.P. (Argentina).

At the conclusion of President Sabra’s meeting in South Bend, Indiana, he spent 4 days in Chicago and met with the president, faculty and students of McCormick Theological Seminary, as well as those of the Lutheran School of Theology. Dr. Sabra spoke about NEST and the events in the Near East and promoted the Studies in the Middle East Program (SiMO) as well as the Pastor’s Sabbatical program. Further visits and talks were planned by NEST’s long-time friend and supporter, Rev. Dr. Robert Worley. President Sabra addressed the Adult Education class at First United Church of Oak Park, then spoke to a meeting of the Middle East Task Force in the Chicago Presbytery.

Dr. Sabra also visited the offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America – an Associate Board Member of the NEST, and met with several persons related to the Middle East and to NEST. Rev. Dr. Robert Smith, a member of NEST Board, organized the visit to the ELCA offices, where President Sabra also spoke about NEST and the situation in the Middle East.
NEST Consultation and Board Meeting

A one-day consultation on the future of NEST was held on May 21, 2013 in the Large Chapel. Of the 43 persons invited, 41 attended, including Board Members and delegates from the Constituent Churches, Faculty, representatives of students, and 14 representatives from partners (Associate Board Members) and other donor organizations. It was one of the largest attended evaluative events ever held at NEST. After listening to a presentation about seminary education reforms and trends in the USA by Dr. David Greenhaw, President of Eden Theological Seminary, and after listening to the voice of the Constituent Churches on the “Strengths and Weaknesses of NEST”, the Consultation discussed the Position Paper prepared by the President of NEST in consultation with the faculty, and made recommendations to the Board of Managers.

Four days later, the NEST Board of Managers met for its annual Spring meeting, discussed and adopted the recommendations of the Consultation which will take the Seminary in the direction of seeking closer collaboration with its sister institution - Haigazian University, developing a research center at the NEST for archival material about the history and contributions of Protestantism in the Middle East, initiating a program of Contextual Theology, and encouraging more income generating projects at the local level.
The first stop was the Presbyterian School in Sidon, where we were treated to a delicious breakfast on that wide and beautiful campus. The principal of the School, Mr. John Daoud, introduced the school and its work, taking us on a tour. Continuing further southwards we passed beyond the town of Nabatiyyeh and stopped at the ruins of Beaufort castle, where we learned about its important history and enjoyed its landscape. A special moment for many of us was the drive along the Lebanese-Israeli border near the Fatima Gate and the view of “the other side”. In the village of Deir Mimas we spent some time at the Monastery of St. Mima. In that inspiring and relaxing atmosphere we had a time of worship and reflection led by Mrs. Patty Ford. We spent time reflecting on experiences we have made in this academic year that have challenged and shaped us.
After receiving this spiritual food, we visited the village of Deir Mimas, making our first stop at the home of Dr. Johnny Awwad’s aunt, who had prepared special Easter cookies and coffee for us. The view from her house was a feast for the eyes. It felt somehow strange to experience that area so peaceful and quiet, knowing that it is has gone through some very troubled and tense times.

Our trip ended with a great and delicious Lebanese meal at a wonderful restaurant by the Hasbani river. Some of us enjoyed sitting, talking, drinking tea; others dipped their feet in the river; while others joined in the Lebanese dabkeh dance.

The day was a delightful outing; we are grateful that we could enjoy this fantastic trip together.

Jonathan T. Swift was awarded the Master of Sacred Theology Degree in Islamic Studies. Jonathan is an American who had been living and working in Lebanon since 2007. He wrote a Master’s thesis entitled “Two Paths of Return in Medieval Islamic Thought: Contrasting the Foundational Philosophical Points of Al-Farabi versus Ibn Sina and their Resultant Expressions in the Paths Posited by Ibn Rushd versus Al-Ghazali.” Jonathan left Lebanon in March 2013, and so was not able to take part in the Commencement ceremony. He has gone back to the US where he will be the pastor of Christ Community Church, Dearborn, Michigan.

Sylva Jilinguirian was awarded the Bachelor of Theology in Christian Education degree. She completed her program in February 2013, and received her diploma in the special commencement Service that was held on June 15 in the Small Chapel at NEST. Sylva has been a part-time student for many years, being a teacher at the Armenian Evangelical Shamilian-Tatikian School in Bourj Hammoud. She is married to Rev. Estauri Haroutounian. Sylva persevered faithfully and patiently, and on top of her work and family duties, she was able to complete her program of studies successfully.

Hearty Congratulations to Jonathan and Sylva!
Lebanon has acquired a face. What before were to me only words and thoughts, stories by former students and information provided by dubious travel guides suddenly turned into something real, though maybe not in every way more understandable. Attending the SIMO-program at NEST can be a truly challenging experience. It is challenging to study together with students from all over the world, and it is rare not ending up in theological discussions triggered by our different cultural backgrounds. It is challenging to encounter the difficulties of inter-religious dialogue in a country which has been shaped by an inter-religious war for many years. It is challenging to hold back one’s European perspective when it comes to dealing with Islam and to accept that the conflicts in the Middle East cannot be solved as easily as it seems from a European university desk. And, after a while, it becomes challenging not to love this beautiful and yet quite fragile country. It becomes challenging to think that one day the fellow students at NEST have to be left behind, that there will be no chapels every day, no sitting together at coffee time. It becomes challenging to imagine seeing the Lebanese reality only through the eyes of a newspaper and to think about home, knowing that life will go on in Lebanon, hopefully for the best.

One year at NEST has changed our view of the country, the Middle East, and the life of Christians in this part of the world. It has contributed to seeing the face of Lebanon, not yet very clearly, still constantly changing, but promising that it is precious, beautiful and surely unforgettable.
When I told my family and friends in Germany that I decided to study at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut they could not understand why I want to live for nine months in a “Muslim country”, where people are fighting against each other. It would be better, they said, to spend my year abroad in Israel – the promised land of the Bible. Why should I voluntarily travel to a dangerous country of fundamentalism, where radical groups are under control, an unstable country of conflict, a battle ground, a land of fear and terror?

One reason why I took the decision to come to Lebanon was that I wanted to learn more about Christian-Muslim dialogue. The courses at NEST offered an overview of the historical background as well as the theological similarities and differences between Islam and Christianity. But still the question remained how dialogue is happening in reality.

One conclusion I could draw is that dialogue starts in everyday life – if we are open-minded and do not take our prejudices too seriously, we can actually make dialogue possible – even if there are cultural differences and diverse opinions. This is important if we want to get in contact with people of other religions, but there is also a lack of dialogue between people of the same religion. Living in a mixed community at NEST and meeting students from different cultural backgrounds developed my sensitivity for dialogue. I learned to accept that I cannot always understand and comprehend things from the European perspective.

In light of experiences I made in the ‘southern neighbor’ of Lebanon two years ago, and after I overcame my prejudices against Lebanon and the Middle East, I want to create awareness that the picture we get presented in the media is just one side of the coin. Not only is the media influencing our point of views, but we also inherit what we know about the other person, the different religion. We are shaped by our parents, the cultural background in which we grew up and the traditions in which we were raised.

After nine months in Lebanon, I have to say that I'm very thankful that I had the chance to get to know the “real” Lebanon that is behind the media.

When I go back home to Germany, I want to be a messenger of political dialogue as well as of my cultural and religious experiences which broadend my horizon and enriched my personality. Even if your own attitudes and opinions get questioned, it is always worth it to risk dialogue!
European Project for Interreligious Learning

The European Project for Interreligious Learning brought 40 Christian and Muslim students from Europe on a study trip to Lebanon. One of the sessions was held at NEST. The Director of the group, Mrs. Teny Simonian, asked the president of NEST to present the Seminary and its work, and also to speak about “Protestant Presence and Witness in Lebanon and the Middle East.” NEST also held a service of evening prayer for the group.

Paderborn University Study Seminar

A group of 18 students and professors from Paderborn University, Germany, on a study trip stayed at NEST for two weeks in March. The group was led by Ms. Sandra Lenke, former SiMO student at NEST. President Sabra had the opportunity to speak to them about the Seminary and also about other topics related to Protestants in Lebanon and the Middle East.

Pastors from Armenia Visit NEST

Rev. Mgrditch Melkonian, Program Director for the Armenian Missionary Association of America in Armenia, visited NEST with a group of 5 pastors from Armenia, accompanied by Chairman of the NEST Board, Rev. M. Karaguezian. Ideas were exchanged on how NEST could serve the Evangelical Church in Armenia in the preparation of ministers.
PCUSA Moderator at NEST

The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Rev. Dr. Neal Presa visited NEST along with a delegation of 5 persons from PCUSA. Rev. Presa met with the president and the faculty members. The work of NEST was introduced and explained; the Moderator showed great interest in the ministry of NEST.

Presbyterian Outreach Foundation

A delegation of 9 persons from the Presbyterian Outreach Foundation, led by Mrs. Marilyn Borst visited NEST on May 17, 2013. Rev. Kate Kotfila of Cambridge, New York, led the noon Chapel service. Emphasizing the “but not” that Paul repeats in 2 Corinthians 4: 7-9: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed”, Rev. Kate delivered a challenging message about transformation of suffering into hope. The group later had lunch with students and faculty, and met with President Sabra, who introduced NEST and the various aspects of its ministry in this part of the world.

Alumni News

Zakaria Makuer, a South Sudanese graduate of NEST (M.A.C.E. 1998) recently wrote NEST to congratulate the new president. Zakaria was elected in 2010 as a representative in the National Assembly of South Sudan. As an MP, he and some colleagues created a fellowship of parliamentarians that “commits our Nation before God and its leaders.” He and other MPs are leading the campaign against corruption and bad governance, with the full support of his Bishop, Rt. Rev. Alapayo Manyang. Zakaria is also the chair of the subcommittee on Higher Education. Zakaria expressed his best wishes for our Seminary and commended NEST for “not only producing church leaders, but also leaders in the community.”
We continue to depend on your prayers and support. Our ministry is indeed your ministry. You can continue to support us in any of the following ways:

• **Through the PC (USA)**
  
  Make your checks payable to: Presbyterian Church (USA)
  Indicate on your check: For deposit to ECO 862612 (N.E.S.T., Beirut)
  Mail your contribution to: Presbyterian Church (USA)
  P.O. Box 643700 Pittsburgh, PA 15264-3700

  You will receive a receipt from the office in Louisville for your tax-deductible contribution. You will also receive a letter of thanks from the President of N.E.S.T.

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  Near East School of Theology
  P.O. Box 13-5780 Chouran
  Beirut 1102-2070
  Lebanon

• **Bank wire transfers:**
  
  Byblos Bank, Bliss Branch - Beirut, Lebanon
  Account Name: Near East School of Theology
  Byblos Bank Swift Code: BYBALBBX
  Account #: 475-2100883-008 for Dollars Transfers
  Account #: 475-2100883-009 for Euro Transfers
  IBAN: LB43003900000004752100883008 for Dollars Transfers
  LB16003900000004752100883009 for Euro Transfer

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