

The Impact of the Local Church Showing Compassion: Lessons from the Syrian Crisis

By Rupen Das

Rupen Das, DMin, is Research Professor at Tyndale University College & Seminary in Toronto, Global Field Staff with the Canadian Baptists Ministries (CBM) and Consultant for Mission & Development with the European Baptist Federation (EBF). Until recently he headed the Syrian relief response for the Lebanese Baptists and was the program director of the Master of Religion (MRel) in Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the Institute for Middle Studies (IMES) in Beirut, Lebanon. He has extensive missionary experience in Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Abstract

The church in the Middle East has been under increasing pressure from radical elements in society. Yet the Syrian crisis is bringing a profound change in some of the churches as they see this as a strategic opportunity to move from the margins of society to becoming vital members of the community. The unexpected result of the humanitarian assistance that they have been providing is that thousands of Muslim are expressing an interest in Christ. The church, which has seldom been seen by Western missionaries as a partner in frontier missions in the Arab world, is suddenly a key component. This paper shares lessons on local churches balancing providing humanitarian aid with its core identity as a church.

In his book *A Wind in the House of Islam*, David Garrison documents the move of the Holy Spirit through thirteen centuries of history of the Muslim world. It would seem that the Syrian crisis is in the process of adding a new chapter. This chapter, however, is being written through the local church, an institution many missiologists involved with the Middle East have felt would never be able to reach out to Muslims because of its insular and sometimes hostile attitude towards them. As well, since many church rituals, customs and social requirements make the non-believer feel unwelcome, local churches are seldom seen as viable partners in frontier missions.⁸

⁸ On John Travis' C1-C6 Spectrum, it was always felt that the local church, situated in C1 to C3 on the spectrum, was so socially alien to Muslims that it would not be a likely channel for reaching them. Using the example of the emergence of the Gentile Church out of its Jewish cultural heritage, it was felt that if only Christ and the Word of God, apart from the cultural trappings of Christianity, were introduced into Muslim communities, not only would the Gospel penetrate deeper into the community and the emerging believing community become more stable, but that new forms of worshipping communities would emerge because of the transformative nature of the Gospel and the Word of God. While the events in Syria and Lebanon do not fit into the C-Spectrum,

The Church in Historical Context

In the post-Constantine Arab world, as Islam gained power and redefined the social and political landscape, the Church has often been on the defensive in trying to survive and preserve the faith. Bishop Kenneth Cragg, veteran missionary and scholar, tells the amusing story of Robert Curzon, the English traveller, diplomat and author, on a mission for British museums looking for ancient manuscripts. While in a monastery in the mountains of Lebanon in 1849, Curzon describes a meal with the monks in the candlelit refectory. 'I have been quietly dining in a monastery when shouts have been heard and shots have been fired against the stout bulwarks of the outer walls ... which had but little effect in altering the monotonous cadence in which one of the brotherhood read a homily of St. Chrysostom from the pulpit ... in the refectory' (Cragg 204). While there was violence and gunfire outside the high walls of the monastery, it did not affect the life of the monks inside the walls as they continued to live and worship as if nothing had happened. The massive walls kept out the world and its violence to preserve the faith and the faithful.

While it would be easy to be critical of such an insular attitude in the church, the reality was of a Church trying to be faithful to Christ in the midst of chaos, turbulence and changing times. The Lebanon, Greater Syria, and Palestine of Curzon's time were embroiled in violence and communal strife as the Ottoman Empire began its death spiral and western powers, with arrogance and deceit, carved up the region for their own national strategic interests. Bishop Cragg describes the times as being a volatile mix of '...liturgies and weapons, traditions and encounters, partisans and aliens, devotions and shouts, walls under siege' (Cragg 205). Nothing seems to have changed and it would seem as if he was describing the Middle East of today.

The experience of the early Protestant missions in the region was very different than that of the historical Churches, partly because the evangelistic nature of their work forced them to engage with the local context. The first American Protestant missionaries arrived in Lebanon in the early 1820s with a desire to reach the Muslim world, but soon discovered that the laws of the Ottoman Empire made it extremely difficult for a Muslim to convert because of a possible death penalty for the convert (Badr 213). Since the majority of those who joined churches established by Protestant missionaries were from the historical churches and not from the Muslim community, questions were raised about the focus of the mission. After a number of

since the local church is at the center of a move of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel seems to be moving through families and clans as new believers maintain their cultural identity even as they participate in the life of the church.

trips to the region, Rufus Anderson, the senior secretary of the Prudential Committee of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Boston wrote that the historical churches in the Near East ‘... need to be reminded of things, which, amid ages of political revolution and degradation, they have forgotten. They need to see – as Muslims also need to see – “living exemplification of the gospel” with all its benevolent influences on society, culture and the nation’ (Badr 224). He saw the need for the gospel in the historical churches as much as in the Muslim community, and therefore the mission was justified. However, the question being debated at that time was the focus of missions, whether it was ‘civilization or Christianization.’ Anderson was against the ‘civilizing mission’ of overseas missions, which often resulted in the imposition of Western cultural and religious patterns. He favoured an approach that focused on the message of the gospel alone (Fleischmann 271). Yet Protestant and Catholic missions established schools, colleges, and hospitals as part of their mandate, which were to have a profound impact on society.

The challenge for the Church throughout history has been finding a balance between ensuring the survival of the faith community and engaging with the world around them in meaningful ways. Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian at the University of Tübingen, describes the struggle between *identity* and *relevance* that the Church in every generation and in every country faces. The struggle is for the church to constantly define and protect its identity, which is often defined by its history, in the midst of competing and changing values in the surrounding cultures and threats from the political context. Unfortunately, this causes the church to be inward-looking and thereby lose its relevance. However, the process of remaining true to what it means to be a people of God and followers of Christ, while engaging with the community and finding ways to be relevant, will change the church (Moltmann 3).

The Church in the Present Crisis

The tension between survival, faithfulness and relevance is still very much at the core of how churches in Syria and Lebanon are engaging with the Syrian crisis. Because of the existential threats that Christians and churches feel, many of the historical churches through their denominational relief departments provide assistance to their members who have been displaced or are in need. Some of the Protestant Churches, on the other hand, have seen this moment in history as a strategic God-given opportunity to move from the margins of society (being considered latecomers in the social and religious landscape), by becoming places of compassion and having an influence with the gospel within the larger social context.

As the present Syrian crisis unfolded and spilled into Lebanon over the past four years, the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD, also known as the Lebanese Baptist Society) decided to respond to the unfolding

humanitarian crisis. As a church-based agency it worked to empower local churches across denominations inside Syria and Lebanon to reach beyond their comfort zones and social boundaries and help those in need with food aid, water, emergency supplies, access to health care and education, and programs for children.

This is a story of reconciliation that has not yet been told. Because Syria had occupied Lebanon for twenty years, every Lebanese family watched the destruction of their country and has stories of their homes being destroyed and family members imprisoned, tortured and killed. The decision by a handful of Lebanese pastors to reach out to Syrian refugees in Lebanon was a personal demonstration of forgiveness that they modelled for their congregations. This went against the grain of Lebanese society and to date most of these pastors face opposition for their actions from family, neighbours and others in the community. In one church, 85% of the congregation left the church because the pastor decided to help the refugees. Inside Syria, where Protestant churches over the centuries had become very insular, many among them decided to make their churches places of compassion for people of any faith to find help.

What happened as a result is remarkable. Not only did hundreds from all faiths turn up to access the supplies and services that were being provided, but many people asked for prayer, attended church services and Bible studies, and sent their children to Sunday School. The request for Christian literature was more than what was available. Other churches and mission agencies are reporting similar responses. There were no conditions imposed to receive assistance, and there was no manipulation.

There are a number of factors, especially within the Muslim community, which probably contributed to this openness. In his survey, David Garrison points out that during times of conflict and violence Muslim are very open to the world outside their community. It would seem that the barriers within Muslim communities that have kept people from relating to outsiders come down. For many of the Muslim refugees, their contact with Christians had been so limited that they sometimes had warped perceptions. A comment heard at times was, 'I never knew that Christians can be kind'. Many Muslims also saw the conflict in Syria as an intra-Islamic conflict and were sickened by it.

Other factors which contributed to this openness include the fact that because local evangelical churches did not have elaborate rituals which newcomers had to learn, the barriers for participation were minimized. These churches allowed them to keep their symbols of identity such as the hijab, beards, etc.—symbols that had no idolatrous connotations or in any way indicated demonic allegiances. Also, there were no foreigners involved. The implementation and the face of these ministries of compassion was Arab, Syrian and Lebanese. These churches provided extensive pastoral care through prayer, home visitation, help in finding employment and help

getting children into schools. Finally, and most importantly, local churches provided them with community when their communities had been destroyed.

Lessons about the Role of the Church

Over the past sixty years the local church has been mostly marginalized in matters related to evangelism, missions, church planting, or ministries of compassion such as relief and development. As a result, specialized agencies have evolved to handle these efforts. As the political and social events unfolded in the region, there was an urgent need to rethink the understanding of ‘church’ in order to respond effectively. The local church, as it had evolved over time, presented significant barriers in moving beyond its walls to engage with those outside its community. There was a need to interpret and define a place and a role for the local church within the larger context of society. Through this process, LSESD and its partner churches are beginning to understand how local churches can become places of compassion within the community.

1. The local church is an institution in the community.

Evangelicals often focus on the church as a spiritual body that is concerned primarily with the afterlife. There is no doubt that the church, the Body of Christ, is a link between the physical and spiritual realities. What is not properly understood is the fact that a local church is an institution in the community. John Inge, Bishop of Worcester (UK), writes about a Christian theology of place. Places and communities are integrally linked, which together build the identity of the other. A local church is part of the community and together with other institutions in the community helps create the community’s identity. The church exists in a specific physical and social place for a purpose. If this holds true, then the local church has obligations, as do other institutions, to the community in which it exists.

The local church as an institution in the community naturally has visibility, history, credibility and relationships. As a part of the community, it is a natural and logical place from which a relief project can be implemented, as long as there is no conditionality or manipulation using the aid that is provided. The local church needs to move from its understanding of being an exclusive club with rigorous entry requirements to being a place where compassion is expressed and experienced by anyone in need.

2. A local church needs to be a church and not an NGO or a social service organization.

Many Christian NGOs and donors that seek to work with and through local churches unintentionally turn these churches into social service organizations through their operating and management practices, requirements and restrictions. A local church is a worshipping community, with preaching, teaching, discipling, counselling, praying, and assisting those in need, ‘for building up the body of Christ,

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (Eph. 4: 12-13). Through all of these activities the local church is to be salt and light in the community.

Well-intentioned donors, because of historic precedence, require that churches receiving their funding refrain from evangelizing, proselytizing or any other spiritual activity during the period when aid is being provided. This is based on an international humanitarian standard called 'the Red Cross Code of Conduct.' They feel it would be manipulative because of the power dynamics involved between those providing the aid and the beneficiaries.

The reality is that power dynamics are a part of every human relationship; eliminating them is neither realistic nor possible. However, they can be managed and their impact minimized. The fundamental issue in managing the power dynamic is that there should be no conditionality to the aid being provided or manipulation by those providing the aid. While the local church should not morph into a social service agency, it cannot forget that helping those in need is one of its functions among all the others.

3. The local church needs to minister to those outside its community

Describing the structure of tribal and sectarian societies in the Arab world, Ibn Khaldun, the 14th century North African Arab historian and father of sociology wrote, 'Only tribes held together by group feelings can live in the desert...' (Gellner x) as the group ensured the survival and well-being of the individual. Tribes were very insular, they safeguarded their wealth, and took pride in their heritage and identity. Compassion was only shown towards those who belonged to the tribe. Blessings and benefits were only for those who were part of the tribe. The tribal god was for their blessing and protection only and not to be shared with anyone else. This tribal mentality continues to define the religious landscape of the Middle East today. Each religious groups tries to take care of its own. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf described such attitudes within the church as *exclusion* and *embrace* (also the name of his book).

The inherent question is, who is the local church excluding and whom should it be embracing? The impact of reaching beyond one's communal and social boundaries cannot be diminished. A frequent comment from many Muslim families receiving food aid from churches for the first time was, 'But do you know we are Muslims?' The impact of showing compassion to the outsider, one who does not belong, is an absolutely radical statement by the local church.

4. The local church needs to partner with others within the community and beyond while retaining its identity as a church.

Local churches have specific roles and functions within a community and are afraid of losing their distinctives if they were to start addressing social needs. Providing assistance to those in need can be intimidating because of the wide range of needs people have. The local church needs to be a place of compassion that can connect those with specific needs with other agencies and organizations that have the expertise and resources to help. Many churches will network with other churches, but find it difficult to network with service providers and helping institutions in the community who share similar values.

5. Local churches need support in designing and reporting on aid received.

One of the major complaints of donors against the work of local churches is that churches don't understand or appreciate the requirements of donors, and cannot write proper proposals or provide reports or accountability as required. Most local churches neither have the culture nor the capacity to provide what donors need, in the format that they need it. One of the most significant lessons learned through the Syrian crisis is that churches need support to be able to do this.

LSESD assumed this role and worked closely with churches in developing proposals and ensuring proper reporting and accountability. This freed the churches to do what churches do best: meet the needs of people. LSESD developed simple systems to gather data from churches and to ensure proper accountability, while it assumed the role of program manager and interfaced with donors.

Underlying these lessons is the reality of the Micah Declaration's statement of purpose. 'Our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ' (Micah Network 1).

The Local Church Proclaims Christ in Showing Compassion

The highlight of the emerging role of the local church in its mission to Muslims and Muslim communities is that the Good News is not only to be verbally preached but needs to be lived out by the people of God. As they demonstrate the reality of the Kingdom of God through their lives they are able to witness to others who this God is. Ultimately it is God who converts and gives life, in His way and in His timing.

Martin Accad's SEKAP spectrum identifies a continuum of how Christian-Muslim interaction takes place. At one extreme is the syncretism, which seeks to reconcile the differences between Christianity and Islam; at the other is the polemic, which 'adopts warlike strategies in relating to the other religion, where one seeks to destroy and uproot the tenets of another in order to replace them with one's own' (Accad 13). The kerygmatic approach that Accad advocates is a positive

proclamation of the Good News. He writes, ‘...the nature of *kerygma*: God’s gracious and positive invitation of humanity into relationship with himself through Jesus’ (Accad 38).

The local church, by becoming a place of compassion, is able to proclaim in word and deed God’s gracious invitation to His Kingdom through Christ. It ensures that the church’s interaction with Muslims is not just verbal and intellectual. It moves beyond the apologetic and the polemic, and integrates life and theology into a wholeness, which our experience in Syria and Lebanon shows that Muslims understand.

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