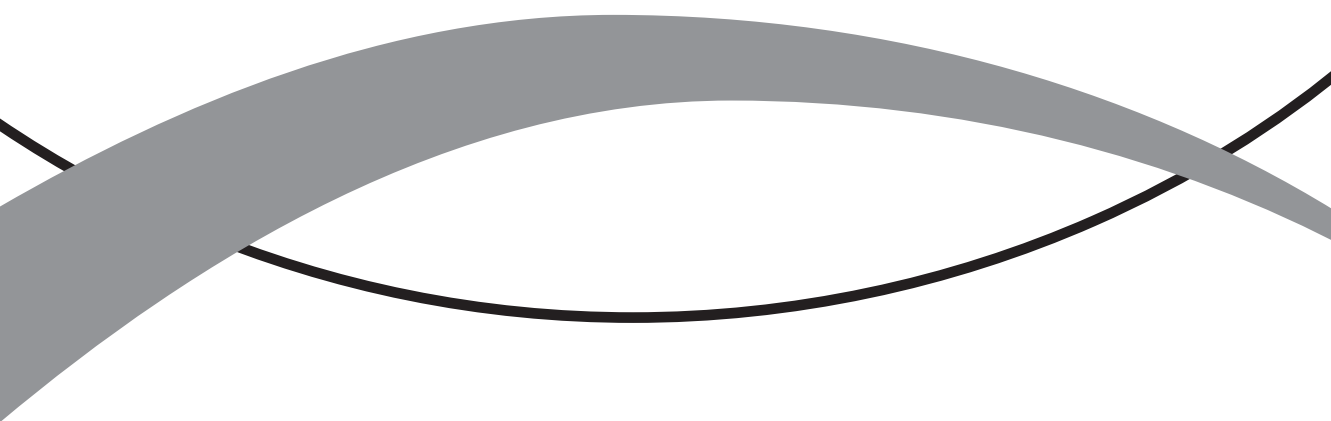


UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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**UNITING CHURCH ENCOUNTERS
WITH THE MIDDLE EAST**

Vol. 28, No.1



Abbreviations

Documents

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

<i>AssMin</i>	Assembly Minutes
<i>BOU</i>	Basis of Union
<i>CS</i>	Covenanting Statement
<i>RP</i>	Revised Preamble
<i>UCMC</i>	The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church
<i>UCAConst</i>	Uniting Church Constitution
<i>UCAREgs2025</i>	Uniting Church Regulations 2025
<i>UIW2</i>	Uniting in Worship 2

Institutions and Organisations

<i>UCA</i>	Uniting Church in Australia
<i>UAICC</i>	Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
<i>WCC</i>	World Council of Churches
<i>ASC</i>	Assembly Standing Committee

This journal

This abbreviation can be used in bibliographical references to articles published in this Journal.

<i>UCS</i>	Uniting Church Studies
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On the Possibility of a Soft Ecumenism

Gaby Kobrossi

Abstract:

The Uniting Church has a number of critical ecumenical partnerships with churches overseas. Though UnitingWorld it involves itself in various programs of solidarity and development. Most of this work is carried out in the Asia-Pacific region in keeping with the *Basis of Union*. At the same time the Uniting Church has committed itself to be a multicultural church. There is not always the same routes present for ecumenical alignment for all diasporic communities back to their churches of origin. That is the case for ministers and members who come from a Middle Eastern backgrounds, even though they provide an obvious link back to biblical lands not found in the prevailing ecumenical models. In the absence of such, following a visit to Lebanon by the then President of the Assembly and Director of UnitingWorld, a pattern of ‘soft ecumenism’ has emerged. It is dependent upon a network of friends committed to this link. Of critical importance is the role of ministers received into the Uniting Church from this region. They become, in effect, apologists for the Uniting Church, meaning that they find themselves in an in-between role between their communities (both at home and in the original homeland churches) and the Uniting Church. They often need to explain and defend stands made by the Uniting Church and its understanding of faith and practice while they themselves need to negotiate what ministry involves in a church different from their own. In the process of reception there is seldom any interest in what their prior experience has been and in what gifts from a very different context they bring.

2017

It now seems like another period in a “long and wounded history”¹ – Beirut, 2017. The Australian writer Theodore Ell described how Lebanon in this time experienced “the heights of its peacetime fortunes.” In the intervening period between then and now the country fell into a “crisis that strained every aspect of life to the point of near-collapse and refuelled old enmities that turned society against itself.”² Ell was writing in the immediate wake of the Beirut port explosion, the largest ever non-nuclear explosion in human history. His account of *Lebanon Days* preceded the events of 7 October 2023 and how the subsequent regional conflict spread to embrace Israel and Hezbollah. Ell did not anticipate the subsequent Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon and the targeting of sites in Beirut.

¹ Syrine Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in Diaspora*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1-2, 199-202.

² Theodore Ell, *Lebanon Days* (Crows Nest: Atlantic Books Australia, 2024), xv.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* Lyda Dankha noted how the “current wave of Israeli attacks” since Black Wednesday (8 April 2026) has led to the displacement of 1 million people. “When the bombs fall,” she reported, “it is the middle of the night in Australia. My phone lights up. ... You are safe, and your loved ones are not” It is like “watching [one’s] homeland fracture in real time.”³

Back in January 2017 a delegation from the Uniting Church made its way to Lebanon. The party included the President of the Assembly, Stuart McMillan, and the Executive Director of UnitingWorld, Rob Floyd. They met ecumenical church leaders as well as the President of the country. McMillan delivered the benediction at the ecumenical service for the week of Christian Unity. The visit was reported in the Lebanese newspapers. They attended a public lecture on ecumenism at the Near East School of Theology delivered by Clive Pearson, former Principal of United Theological College.

Over the course of the past fifty years the Uniting Church has implemented a number of partnerships with denominations in Tonga, Niue, Fiji, the Philippines, and Korea – for instance. It has recognized the Armenian genocide. It has also sought to live by its aspiration of being a culturally diverse church. This visit to Lebanon played with the hope that some sort of ecumenical link might be established with the Armenian Evangelical Church, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, and the National Evangelical Church of Beirut. Each one of these churches is evangelical / *injileen* (meaning Protestant).

The visit coincided with the setting up of the Middle East National Conference within the Uniting Church. It was the twelfth such conference to be established. These national bodies have often been able to facilitate the process of bridge-building between churches in the country of origin and the Australian church. Such relationships are not possible for isolated monocultural congregations.

That observation was pertinent to the visit as well. There are forty-nine Arabic speaking evangelical congregations between Bankstown and Liverpool in western Sydney. The earliest of these began as groups meeting in people’s homes. The great majority of these churches have been set up after 1985. The common practice has been to become a tenant in an already built church – four are currently making use of a Uniting Church building (Bankstown, Fairfield, Panania and Guildford). Those who serve as pastors were originally the equivalent of a lay preacher in Uniting Church categories of ministry. Only one of the forty-nine pastors would be acknowledged as an ordained minister of the Word back in Lebanon. None have formal links back to churches in Lebanon. Their status of being non-aligned in this way differs markedly from the history of the Orthodox, Catholic, Melkite and Maronite churches. In each one of those traditions ecclesial links were established between the homeland and the diasporic community very early: priests were sent and institutional responsibility determined.⁴ Would the visit of the delegation to Beirut lead to steps being taken to bring such congregations under the umbrella of the Uniting Church due to its ecumenical and multi/cross cultural ethos?

³ Lyda Dankhar, “While bombs drop on Lebanon, I grieve: We are safe, but my loved ones are not,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 2026. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/while-bombs-drop-on-lebanon-i-grieve-we-are-safe-but-my-loved-ones-are-not-20260528-p601r6.html>

⁴ Gaby Kobrossi, “The Practice of Being a Lebanese Minister in the Uniting Church of Australia,” D. Min thesis, Charles Sturt University, 2021, 75-82.

On his return to Australia McMillan reflected on how the “impact of our time in Lebanon upon us has been profound.” In times of great trial for the peoples of Lebanon and Syria, he spoke of the importance of them not being abandoned by “the global Christian community.” McMillan was especially moved by one evangelical leader declaring that the Christian presence in these lands was informed by a “theology of impact.” McMillan summarized the benefits of a prospective ecumenical partnership:

How might the Uniting Church in Australia live out our commitment in the Basis of Union to serve the world, in the Middle East? We are called, as stated in the Basis to: “bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries.”

Our friends have asked us firstly to pray, to pray for peace in the Middle East, to pray for the Christian communities, and to pray the love of Christ is evidenced through the people of God, for all people, regardless of their faith.

There are other ways we might strengthen our new relationships and find together how to answer the call to serve the mission of God for the world. There is clearly much we can learn from our sisters and brothers in the Middle East. Please join me in prayer for this Christian community and for the next steps in our growing relationship.⁵

In the Meantime

These hopes are yet to be realized. The work of UnitingWorld is primarily directed towards the Asia-Pacific region as per the *Basis of Union*’s prescription for what was the new church. It seems as if Asia here refers to lands east of the Indian sub-continent. The term “Middle East” is itself an invention of British imperial policy and American journalism around the turn of the twentieth century. The policy direction of UnitingWorld is more self-consciously geared towards aid, solidarity and development rather than ecumenism in a more ecclesial sense. The Middle East National Conference in the Uniting Church effectively no longer exists.

In the absence of any formal ecumenical agreement (in the meantime) a network in Sydney has been established, Friends of the Middle East. It has maintained links with NEST (the theological college) and church leaders in Beirut. With the support of the Camden Theological Library it has provided NEST with access to a digital library. That initiative followed conversations with the past President of NEST, George Sabra, who identified this issue as the most pressing for staff and students, hence their ongoing ministry. The collapse of the economy and the damage done by the port explosion meant that the school of theology no longer had funds to buy books. The present President of NEST, Martin Accad, has declared that the digital library program

has been a wonderful resource. Compared to what it would cost to get anywhere near equivalent resources in hard copies for our library, there is not even a conversation to be had!

⁵ Stuart McMillan, “A Theology of Impact,” 30 January 2017, <https://assembly.uca.org.au/news/item/2561-a-theology-of-impact>

Accad understood this initiative (which owes so much to the library manager of Camden Theological Library, Moira Bryant) in terms of a sharing, a partnership in faith.

we continue to be deeply grateful for all the support we get from friends all over the world. God is blessing the ministry of NEST and it is a joy to partner with many across the world in serving our region for the advancement of God's Kingdom and presence through his church!⁶

The Friends have also assisted in the establishment of a summer school to be led on-line on the theme of "trauma care" led by Stephen Robinson, the head of disaster chaplaincy.

These initiatives are a part of what has been named as a "soft ecumenism." It is a form of ecumenism which recognizes the importance of inter-church support, especially in a time when distant neighbours in Christ are in need. It comes about through the initiative of friends rather than a formal council of the church; it seeks to show what is possible and why. It depends upon the participation of those familiar with the "other" church and is not unaware of what life is like for those who have migrated to Australia from that "other" place. It listens.

For a soft ecumenism to take root and flourish there are a number of things that need to happen. Some of those are internal to the life of a church that McMillan had insisted seeks to bear witness to that unity faith and life in Christ that extends beyond the many "boundaries" that can inhibit a "growing relationship." They include the politics of recognition, due awareness of a particular diaspora, and, how ministers from the 'other' culture are received. The intersection of these three things should not be glossed over. In most cases it is likely that a minister who is to be received into an Australian church does not arrive in the new land as a solitary individual. There is already a diasporic community in place: the Lebanese one is not small. It reaches back into the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁷ There have been three waves of migration: the first two were primarily Christian,⁸ the third came in the wake of civil war and was both Christian and Muslim.⁹ In a way that may not be appreciated in the Uniting Church, the Lebanese diaspora is one of the oldest and largest migrant-derived cultures in the country.¹⁰ The overwhelming majority live in Sydney. For a period of time Redfern was known as 'Little Beirut', 'Little Lebanon' or "Little Syria."¹¹

That is one side of the equation: there is another. Some of those factors that are critical for the deepening of vitality of that soft ecumenism relate to the churches, in this case, in the Middle East. What kind of trustworthy lines of contact can be put into place? Is there a template for a soft ecumenism that expresses

⁶ Friends of the Middle East, <https://www.fmeorg.au/librarysupport>

⁷ Lebanon did not come into existence as a state separate from the Ottoman Empire until 1923. It did so under a French mandate. Lebanon became an independent state in 1943. The Lebanese were for some time called "Syrians." According to Ann Monsour that practice lasted through to the 1940s. Ann Monsour, "Enduring Bonds: Lebanese Immigrants in Queensland," *Queensland History Journal*, 23:6 (2017), 359–377.

⁸ Nelia Hyndman-Rizk, "At My Mother's Table: Migration, (Re)production and Return between Hadchit, North Lebanon and Sydney," PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2009, 41–42; 44–49. See, Paul Convy and Ann Monsour, *Lebanese Settlement in New South Wales* (Sydney: Migration Heritage Centre), 5. Hyndman-Rizk actually argues for four ways as she breaks up the first wave into two. It is more usual to identify three. See also, Kobrossi, "The Practice of Being a Lebanese minister," 65–71.

⁹ Maram Shaweesh, *Making Home in the Suburb: Everyday Encounters in the Lebanese Australian House* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan / Springer Nature, 2024), 33–65.

¹⁰ The 2021 census recorded that there are 248,434 individuals of Lebanese ancestry, 60% were born in Australia.

¹¹ Anne Monsour and Paul Convy, "The Lebanese in Sydney," *Sydney Journal*, 1:2, (June 2008), 71.

solidarity in Christ and a willingness to share insights and prayerful concern? Will promises be honoured, especially with regards to societies where codes of honour and shame are prevalent?

Belonging In Between

At first glance it may not seem obvious that the reception of ministers from the other land is so significant in the establishment and nurture of a soft ecumenism. It is so for several reasons. The received minister is a conduit and a bridge-builder on account of knowing people and events in both places. In the new land they function as both an interpreter of the ecclesial and social situation in their home country; in the diaspora they are both an interpreter and an apologist who possess a potential to respond to criticisms made, in this instance, of the Uniting Church.

The Uniting Church could do better in its reception of ministers. On entering the reception process there is surprisingly little interest shown in one's past experience. The focus of interest falls upon what needs to be done in order to meet the ethos of the Uniting Church. For someone like myself coming out of the Middle East that is not entirely unexpected. The churches of my origin homeland are unfamiliar with the covenant with indigenous Australians: they have a history of not being comfortable with the ordination of women and tend to adopt a more conservative position on matters to do with sexual orientation and practice.

On arrival in Sydney in 2007 I found myself on the receiving end of the hospitality of ministers from Arabic-speaking congregations. These colleagues in ministry had come to offer support when our manse was burgled in our first few days. There were meals and home visits. To some I was known through my previous work for the Bible Society in Lebanon and the occasional project I had done for the society in Australia. This welcome was tempered with an array of questions.

At some point in proceedings several questions to do with my call and the Uniting Church were raised. It was a very awkward grammar. The nature of a question expects a response, an answer that reveals something about me, my identity, how I understand my vocation. The questions they raised are the same as those posed by priests from the Maronite, Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

- Why do you choose to serve with the Uniting Church?
- Why are you working church that believes in the baptism of infants?
- Why are you work in a church that accepts the ordination of women?
- Why are you serving a church that welcomes divorced ordained ministers?
- Why have you chosen to work in a church that believes in 'the holy Catholic church'?

For the first five years of my ministry in Bankstown these questions – which are really a form of criticism – were put to me repeatedly. The tone of the questions always conveyed a note of disbelief, surprise and sometimes a sense of mocking.¹² I found myself needing to address these questions and others as I sought to negotiate my way more deeply into the Uniting Church. The process of reception is not confined to the

¹² Gaby Kobrossi, "An Unusual Call," *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review*, 44 (2023), 25-37.

expectations laid upon the arriving minister by the regulations and panels of the Uniting Church. It is a much longer journey into belonging.

Living in Diaspora

There is in the set of questions listed above a pressure politely expressed to conform to one's cultural heritage. There is something that is not quite right about that sentence, however. There is a delicate tension to master. On the one hand, there is the ongoing sense of identity that is bound to the Lebanese homeland. Dankhar rightly captured how "[o]ur community did not sever ties when it settled here. That is not how migration works. Our hearts exist in two lands now."¹³

On the other is the experience of the Lebanese diaspora. The number of Lebanese living outside the homeland is three times the size of that resident in the country. Hage has explored the transnational differences that have emerged in diaspora for those now living in Europe, the Americas and Australia.¹⁴ Those variations do not necessarily overcome one the consequences of taking leave of the original birth culture.

It is well known that the act of migration can lead to perceptions and understandings that are "frozen" in time. In a post on Instagram Malabi Das has described how migrants often carry with them into the future a static view of their own first culture. It is "preserved" in the state that existed when they left their homelands. Das comments on how "they leave behind living cultures that continue to evolve in their absence." Hage has identified how those living in diaspora through diverse media instantly keep with up with politics and news from the Middle East.¹⁵ In the current crisis Dankhar describes how

[w]e're glued to our phones, sending money for school fees because our relatives can no longer survive on local wages, hearing that electricity is rationed to hours a day, that hospitals are overwhelmed – that's if you're lucky enough to afford medical care. More than four-fifths of Lebanon's population now lives below the poverty line.¹⁶

That kind of awareness and concern is not the same as a daily immersion in the own original culture. Das is thus right: she is only too well aware of how migrants may be cut off from the cultural evolution of their home countries, irrespective of this readily available media exposure and occasional return visits to one's home towns.¹⁷ In my case those cities are Saida/Sidon of biblical repute and Beirut.

What Das' post draws attention to is a shift in immigration studies. The standard practice had been to regard the movements of people from one country to another, hence from a spatial perspective. That reading of what transpires, of course, remains: it is why passports, visas and the like are required. By way of an aside

¹³ Dankhar, "While bombs drop on Lebanon."

¹⁴ Ghassan Hage, *The Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese in the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Ghassan Hage, "The Differential Intensities of Social Reality; Migration, Participation and Guilt," in Ghassan Hage (ed), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 194-197.

¹⁶ Dankhar, "While bombs drop on Lebanon."

¹⁷ Malabi Das, "Frozen in Time: Cultural Stagnation in Immigration Story," LinkedIn, 5 September 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/frozen-time-cultural-stagnation-immigration-story-das-she-her--nspbe>

it can be very difficult for someone from Lebanon to get a visa to come to Australia, although that was not true in my case. It is now recognized, though, that migration studies attracts a “temporal dimension.”¹⁸ This particular focus is itself rather more complex than might first meet the eye. The study of how time intersects with the experience of migration and reception is laden with more issues than simply getting permission to fly from one place to another. Those who do research into “timing” and migration address factors to do with enduring – that is, how was time spent, where and in what conditions prior to setting foot in the new country.

It hardly needs comment: how people from the same country experience this time of enduring before migration will differ markedly. In some cases it will be a time that is relatively settled where hopes of a better life arise. One such example is that of Abbas El-Zein. In his memoir, *Leave to Remain*, he describes his growing up in Beirut.¹⁹ In a somewhat protected manner he experienced civil war and invasion in Lebanon prior to his exodus. In due course he made his way to this country as an economic migrant: “I was here, like a large number of migrants, to look for work and pursue a career that had little chance of bearing fruit in my country of origin.”²⁰

In this account there is little of the trauma that haunts much Lebanese story-telling. Now resident in Sydney he found himself contemplating matters of identity. There were still dislocations that he needed to explore. El Zein wondered what categories of the self would stand out: would it be “my ethnicity, my nationality, my religion of birth, my profession, my political or philosophical beliefs, my cultural interests?”²¹ The distinction was made between a physical home, a homeland (*heimat*) and home as a place of belonging. El Zein sensed the complexity of belonging to two places with different claims upon the self. Referring to living in Australia he saw that

given time, we do overcome the foreignness of a place and we recognise it, one way or another; It becomes a part of our memory by force of habit. It is a matter of living there, of seeing and hearing and understanding. It is much harder, however to overcome our strangeness to the place, around foreignness, because it is a matter of creating a new language.²²

I live in a multiple cultural and linguistic environment. Migrants survived by growing body parts. New ears and new eyes are perhaps their most valuable acquisitions. New tongues are much harder to come by.²³

El Zein’s reflections were essentially those of the curious, the one who is navigating how the self changes through space with less of a focus on time. There is not the same level of rupture and the struggle for survival that might accompany those who migrate as refugees or out of fear. Syrine Hout captures a different

¹⁸ Giuliano Sanò, Giulia, Storato, and Francesco Della Puppa, “Claiming Time Within Migrations,” *The Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 25 (2024), 1223–1229.

¹⁹ Abbas El Zein, *Leave to Remain: A Memoir* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009).

²⁰ Abbas El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere: On Longing and Belonging’, in Ghassan Hage (ed), *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 227.

²¹ El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228.

²² El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228–230

²³ El Zein, ‘Belonging Elsewhere’, 228–239.

reality through her study of Lebanese literature. For those outside a conflict zone the uncertainty as to how long a war might last, and the threat to life, might seem like an obvious push to leave the land of one's birth as quickly as one can. It is a recurring theme: home for "so many [becomes] gone" as a consequence of "cataclysmic events."²⁴ There is a heightened concern for the well-being of parents, siblings, and the extended family. Conversations to do with leaving can only heighten anxiety. It is a delicate space.

An Unusual Call

What do any of these narratives have to do with the reception of ministers into the Uniting Church and how that might then serve a soft ecumenism? In the first place it opens up the need to listen to the experience of the about-to-be-received minister and understand their companion experience in and through another culture. It facilitates the prospect of being a bridge-builder and an interpreter between the Uniting Church and another where the Christian life is lived out in a very different kind of experience. The autobiographical turn and interview matter.

I made my way here through an "unusual call" to take up the position as a youth worker, first of all, for the Bankstown and District Uniting Church. I was ordained and would become the first Arabic-speaking evangelical (meaning Protestant) minister in the Uniting Church. In order to be accepted I needed to show paperwork to do with my studies, and certificates to do with ministry; I was informed of what processes and procedures I would need to follow.

On no occasion was I asked about my prior experience of life and ministry. There was no discussion of what it was like for my home to have been bombed by Israeli jets and my family believed me to be dead. Nor was there any need to give an account of what it was like for my two sisters and myself to be strafed by Israeli jets on our way home from school. I did not speak about my father's advice to leave our other home in the hills of southern Lebanon and head for Beirut as a 16 year-old lest I be coerced into a militia. There was no need for me to reflect upon what it was like to arrive in Beirut and be homeless. There was no conversation around how I worked with the Red Cross in the midst of war-time carnage. There was no enquiry into the impact of my family when, for five years, my siblings were sent to France for safety. No one asked me about how and why I entered the ministry and what experience I might have had serving the first multicultural church on Beirut, then the Bible Society and its work throughout the Middle East.

Telling Tales

These things are mentioned here not because of a desire to draw attention to myself. They are not peculiar to me. In her work on Anglophone literature coming out of Lebanon, Syrine Hout felt obliged to do justice to "long-term effects on youth" in particular.²⁵ My experience was mirrored by that of Hikmat Kashou, now Pastor of the Resurrection Church in Beirut, writes of how frightened he was as a child:

²⁴ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1; 199.

²⁵ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 3.

Our hearts would be in our mouths. Our stomachs were always upset. Our house was bombed a number of times, relatives lost their lives, and beloved friends went missing.²⁶

These kinds of experience percolate through the lives of everyone in Lebanon today. Throughout history what we now know as Lebanon has been subject to invasion by much stronger nations and through competing pressures from within and from without it has been subject to periodic bouts of civil war. William Harris has examined the land's troubled past back to 600 CE in order to understand the problems of sectarianism and social cohesion that has bedevilled the nation since independence on 1 January 1944.²⁷ Theodore Ell has described how the civil war erupted in 1975 which has left a legacy of suspicion and distrust.²⁸ The inability to create a stable political culture has led to mafia-like like state.²⁹ Ell was writing in the immediate wake of the economic meltdown which was further exacerbated by the port explosion in Beirut. In his journal of this time Charif simply referred to all these forces coming together bearing witness to "the collapse of a civilization."³⁰ The history of Lebanon is one of intergenerational trauma.

The present deadly circumstances that have come about through the Israeli desire to eliminate Hezbollah from southern Lebanon and the teeming southern suburbs of Beirut is not without precedent, of course.³¹ It has happened before. Back in 1982 Israel under Menachem Begin bombed and laid siege to an Arab capital for the first time. Since 2 March 2026 Israeli forces have once again invaded the country with the explicit aim of seeking to destroy Hezbollah as part of the Middle East conflict involving Gaza, the West Bank, Iran and the United States. This present incursion has led to massive displacement of peoples and created a humanitarian crisis. The noted Lebanese historian and journalist, Kim Ghattas, describes how history is "tragically repeating itself" in her homeland.³² The tragic irony of this state of play is that Israel's conflict with Hezbollah on Lebanese soil is a consequence of the mid-twentieth century evolution of Israel and the displacement of Palestinians. The complicated nature of regional politics saw the PLO driven out of Jordan into Lebanon; Hezbollah itself was established in response to the Israeli invasion of 1982 and the example of Islamic governance at that time being shown by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran.³³ Ghattas has set the politics of this seemingly perennial armed conflict in a wider context in her much acclaimed *Black Wave*.³⁴

Ell's particular interest was in conversation. It was his desire to explore how people spoke about tragedy, resilience and hope. That is a familiar feature of Lebanese literature. It is to be found in the anthology *Lebanon Through Writers' Eyes*.³⁵ In her work on Anglophone Lebanese fiction Syrine Hout considers consequences: home for "so many [becomes] gone" as a consequence of "cataclysmic events."³⁶ The question of "where are you from?" so often asked in diaspora (al-shutat) is reframed; it involves considerations of

²⁶ Hikmat Kashouh, *Following Jesus in Turbulent Times: Disciple-Making in the Arab World*, (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2018), 3.

²⁷ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ Theodore Ell, *Lebanon Days* (Crows Nest: Atlantic Books, 2024).

²⁹ Ell, *Lebanon Days*, xvi.

³⁰ Charif Majdalani, *Beirut 2020: The Collapse of a Civilization. A Journal*, (London: Welbeck, 2020).

³¹ Fareed Zakaria interviews Kim Ghattas, "Israel Goes to War on Hezbollah," CNN, 6 October, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/06/world/video/gps1006-israels-war-against-hezbollah>

³² Kim Ghattas, "History is Tragically Repeating Itself in Lebanon," *The Financial Times*, 21 March 2026.

³³ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

³⁵ T.J. Gorton and A. Féghali Gorton, *Lebanon Through Writers' Eyes*, (London: Eland, 2009).

³⁶ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1; 199.

not where so much, but what did you experience “there and then.” Memory becomes a history marked by “the destruction of lives, families, institutions and infrastructure”.³⁷ In response to this seemingly innocent question, the response is so much more than the name of a country, a village, a birthplace.

For those who do leave Lebanon and make Australia home there is often a further unwelcome response to negotiate. Shaweesh refers to the common experience of Lebanese citizens and migrants being exposed to sustained expressions of stereotype.³⁸ The legal theorist, Scott Poynting, with Greg Noble has exposed how often the Lebanese have been subject to dog-whistle politics.³⁹ Incidents like the Cronulla riots (2005) and reports of youths engaging in ‘Leb’ style gang rapes have far too often be used by politicians (and radio ‘shock jocks’) to demonize the Lebanese people in general. Following the Cronulla riots only one Christian theologian took issue with this narrative in an article dedicated to the care of “the alienated neighbour . . . for Christ’s sake.”⁴⁰

On coming into the Uniting Church there was no apparent desire to enquire into these “companion experiences”. Jürgen Moltmann identifies these as “events in our past which never become “past” but are continually present to us.” They form and mould us: they are ever-present beneath the ordinary experience of living but can come again to the surface. Moltmann links his discussion of companion experiences (which travel with us through time) to what he identifies as “limit situations.” Such episodes are moments of finitude or “elemental experiences of love, life and death.” They possess a capacity still to “shake” us even though they have happened some time ago now in the past.⁴¹

Bridge-builders

It is not unusual for those who have migrated from ministry in one land to its equivalent in another to be described as “bridge builders.” It takes time, of course, to make the necessary connections, especially in a new land, and acquire El Zein’s “new eyes” and “new mouth.” The push and pull factors, which accompany the act of leaving one’s first home, need to be negotiated. That is the case, even if and when, the Christian life itself, irrespective of particular places and personalities, is always caught between an earthly and heavenly citizenship. In the case of migrants who come to Australia from the Middle East there is a further dimension to this dynamic.

The push factors are not hard to see. In recent times villages and towns in southern Lebanon have been reduced to rubble. The targeting of the southern suburbs of Beirut has killed and made homeless innocent citizens, quite apart from those who are more closely aligned with Hezbollah. The Near East School of Theology is located in the Hamra district of central Beirut – hence, at a remove from the southern suburbs like Dahieh. In response to the movements of frightened peoples into their area of the city the Near East

³⁷ Hout, *Post-War Anglophone Lebanese Fiction*, 1.

³⁸ Shaweesh, *Making Home in the Suburb*, 40, 41, 89.

³⁹ Scott Poynting and Greg Noble, “‘Dog-Whistle’ Journalism and Muslim Australians Since 2001,” *Media International Australia*, 109:1 (November 2003), 41-49; Scott Poynting, “What Caused the Cronulla Riot?,” *Race & Class*, 48:1 (2006/7), 85-92.

⁴⁰ Clive Pearson, “Alienated Neighbours: Interpreting the Cronulla Race Riots for Christ’s Sake,” *Oxford Forum on Public Policy* (Summer 2008). <http://www.forumonpublicpolicy.com/summer08papers/archivessummer08/pearson.pdf>

⁴¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, (London: SCM, 1002), 18-23.

School of Theology has sought to provide care, food and games for the children in a nearby shelter under the name of “Neighbor to Neighbor.”⁴² The pressure on other less affected suburbs mounts. Even before the latest rounds of attack, buildings throughout the city have been pockmarked with bullets while others have crumbled, a wall here, a roof there, under heavier fire. Only the façades of buildings may testify to what was once an elegant city, sometimes described as “the Paris of the (Middle) East” (1960-1975).

Such is the instability of life and ever-present nearness of threat. It is not difficult to see why so many might take leave. It is, of course, not quite so straightforward as that. The reality is much more complex. There is a heightened concern for the well-being of parents, siblings, and the extended family. Conversations to do with leaving can only heighten anxiety. There is also for those like myself the grasp of the land being biblical. It is so in a way which Australia, ‘at the ends of the earth’, cannot be. The glory of Lebanon features in the Psalms; the cities of Tyre and Sidon feature in the ministry of Jesus as does Tyre in Paul’s. The landscape abounds in biblical and Christian history throughout the ages. It can be difficult to leave despite the current violence and destruction.

In a rather ironical way the push factor can be reversed and become more of a pull, a call to return. One such experience is that of the theologian, Elie Haddad. He found himself having to think through a biblical and theological response to emigration and repatriation. Haddad spent thirty years in Canada before making the decision to return to Lebanon. Out of this experience he identified a number of “inappropriate attitudes” in how decisions are made. These include the tendency to put security and safety for one’s own family on a par with God’s calling on one’s life.⁴³ There is also the habit of thinking it is “*our* mission rather than the mission of God;”⁴⁴ there is a failure to have in place a framework for hearing and discerning the “voice of God;”⁴⁵ all these things can happen, Haddad argues, because “we impose our own worldview upon the Bible.”⁴⁶ The real issue at stake is not whether one leaves or stays but why.

The lines of why one might migrate can become blurred. The receiving society may express concern as to whether someone from another land, and a very different culture, might assimilate. Now and then the rhetoric is full of “Australian values”: Hage has argued that this practice betrays a “white paranoia.”⁴⁷ Is the pathway for “fitting in” and “getting by” the same for those who come to Australia as an asylum seeker, a refugee, an economic migrant or family reunion? In my case coming to Australia was in response to a call to ministry in Bankstown (Sydney) that seemingly came out of nowhere. It represented a radical rupture with my existing life and ministry. It was a struggle to say “yes,” but I was aided by a reading of the call made by Gad to David, 2 Samuel 24:14: “I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great, but let me not fall into human hands.”

⁴² Near East School of Theology, “Neighbor to Neighbor,” 16 March, 2026. <https://www.facebook.com/NearEastSchoolofTheology/posts/1511003584364029/>

⁴³ Elie Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections on Emigration,” in Jonathan Andrews (ed), *The Church in Disorienting Times: Leading Prophetically Through Adversity*, (Carlisle, Langham Global Library, (2018), 36-37.

⁴⁴ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 38.

⁴⁵ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 39-40.

⁴⁶ Haddad, “Biblical and Theological Reflections,” 40-41.

⁴⁷ Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2003).

It takes time to come to terms with the difference between how churches in very different contexts practice the continuing ministry of Christ. What may be self-evident to members of the Uniting Church is not always so to the newcomer – nor is it always better. Being in this liminal space, though, has its advantages. Miroslav Volf refers to the importance of having a “double vision” – that is, the capacity of seeing things from two seemingly opposed perspectives. From the perspective of being a migrant bridge builder it requires a willingness and a confidence to interpret one party to another. That is not a straightforward task, either. Being a migrant, being in a minority, places the one whose first language and experience is different from the majority, into a subaltern position. The issue here is not one of what El Zein mapped as having to do with knowing when you “belong.” There is a sense in which you never do. Your life story (and your ministry practice) always retains an element of the “other.” The issue is one of politics and how the institutional church determines its practice and what it will privilege.

Being on the bridge between Beirut and Sydney is like being on a tightrope, full of frustration but also possibility. It is a site that comes with what Hage has thoroughly described as an anatomy of responsibility.⁴⁸ It opens up the opportunity to mediate to Australian churches what being a ‘believer’ in the gospel, an *injileen*, might mean to remain steadfast in faith, in the face of so much menace, thereby demonstrating resilience and hope. It can mean advocating for the use of Kenneth Bailey’s insights into the reading of Jesus, his parables, and Paul and his epistles. Bailey’s work is not the same as that of those who might today seek to decolonize biblical texts. His work is designed to help us read the text mindful of the cultural customs of the Middle East, alongside those who write on “Jesus of Arabia.” Being in the liminal space can also carry the weight of responsibility that manifests itself in the occasional call for prayers and financial support in times of crisis. It can also mean being an advocate for a ‘soft ecumenism’ that introduces the Uniting Church (and its “theological culture” and “DNA,” as outlined in the Assembly document, Act 2) to its counterparts in the Middle East.

‘Soft Ecumenism’

There has been no formal agreement established between the Assembly and the evangelical synods and union in the Middle East. In the absence of such, the Friends of the Middle East came into being on the basis of being a voluntary association. At the heart of its work lies what the Friends have described as a vision of “soft ecumenism.” It assumes that ministers received into the Uniting Church from the Middle East can work alongside interested colleagues. Its self-understanding is based on a recognition of each other’s gifts, a common heritage and a “shared desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ who was himself from the Middle East and whose ministry extended into the lands of Lebanon and Syria.” It expressed a joint desire “to recognize and honour the Indigenous People as the First Nations of Australia” and the Armenian genocide. It was further held together by a willingness to “learn more about each other’s Church life and context.” In terms of crisis (and where the opportunity to do arises) this template of soft ecumenism called for prayer and acts of solidarity. It sought to balance interest in the church overseas with the diaspora in Australia. It looked towards a time when there might exchanges between ministers and students, the

⁴⁸ Ghassan Hage, “Introduction” in Ghassan Hage and Robyn Eckersley (eds), *Responsibility* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2012).

sharing of resources, and the potential for twinning congregations. It is an intentional form of ecumenism which presented itself through the reception of an Arabic-speaking minister into the Uniting Church.

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About Uniting Church Studies

Uniting Church Studies ISSN: 3083-5267

Uniting Church Studies is published twice yearly (June, December) by United Theological College, 16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta, NSW, Australia, 2151.

Phone: +61-2-8838 8927; Facsimile: +61-2-9683 6617.

Uniting Church Studies website:
unitingchurchstudies.org

Digital copies of previous issues of the journal are available via the website of the Camden Theological Library: www.utc.edu.au/library/

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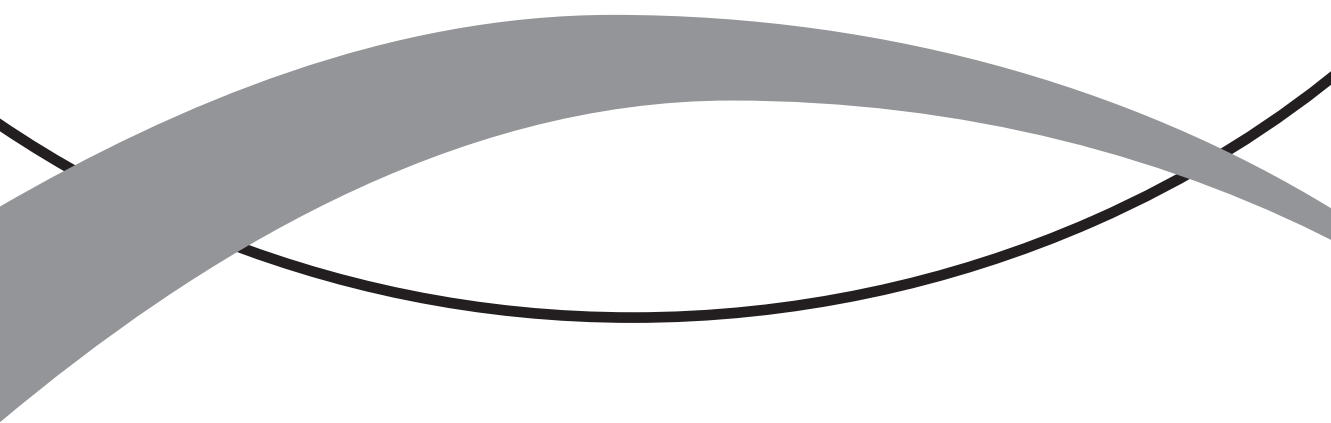
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