

Images & Symbols

Immediately upon crossing the border, you can see the president everywhere, looking down upon the suffering people with his steely blue eyes from larger-than-life posters. He presents himself – ever powerful – as a successful businessman, victorious commander-in-chief, experienced man of the world, father of the nation, and friend to humanity.

In every public room, at least one obligatory portrait of Bashar al-Assad is to be seen. Nothing is permitted to be placed higher on the walls than his image. This is even the case in pastors' offices. Only mosques and churches are refreshingly exempted from the rule.

While we in the West debate the legitimacy of religious symbols, the wooden cross in the church choir has become a salubrious and hopeful symbol of another reality in Syria, as have the Paschal candle on the altar, the caring shepherd and generous host in the colorful stained-glass windows, and the ascendant dove, pointing the way towards heaven.



Light & Darkness

I was picked up by a friend each morning. I asked her if she has slept well. She gave me a big smile and answered: "No, I've hardly slept. But this time we had electricity at half past two. I got up right away to begin cooking. And my children can have fresh food to eat today. What a wonderful day!"

The streets are unlit at night and light can be seen from only a few windows. The houses have power for only around an hour each day. Nobody knows when the hour will be. Those with money can purchase additional electricity from private providers at exorbitant prices. Massive gasoline-powered generators can be heard rumbling in the streets, day and night. A jumble of cables and wires direct power into the individual apartments. Life is harsh. There is no hot water, and washing machines, refrigerators, and other appliances are not able to operate, hot meals cannot be taken for granted. Apartments are not able to be cooled during the hot summer months or heated in the cold winter. The constant interruptions of electrical service lead to extensive damage to appliances and prevent people from working. This picture was particularly vivid during our visit of our church partner's polyclinic, when the power went out right in the middle of a root canal treatment and the patient had to be sent home with a half-drilled tooth.



Gasoline & Medicine

People can purchase 25 liters of gasoline every 15 days. When things go well – and sometimes not. Additional gasoline is only available on the black market at around six times the price. Finding gasoline is not only a burdensome chore but has become a very time-consuming job all of its own.

School buses are rarely able to run for this lack of fuel. Those who are not able to afford transportation to school, university, or their jobs, and are not able to travel on foot, can only stay at home. The government promised a laughable 50 liters per household for the winter. But how can people get through the cold months with enough fuel for only a few days?!

Medical care is in an equally precarious state. The shelves of both of our partner's polyclinics are sparsely stocked. Many are completely empty with even the most basic of medications unavailable. Treatments are very expensive and the few hospitals still operating are in a desolate condition, with the most essential items lacking. Some doctors are willing to work pro bono while others work at a much lower rate than in their practices. They are motivated by the great need and the wish to serve their fellow people. Angela is a Sunday school director who is also active at the polyclinic. She is currently in the process of specializing in pediatrics. The last time I saw her was two years ago. Many of her colleagues have since left the country in search of a better life. Angela remains in order to take care of her parents and because she still has hope that things will be better one day after all: "I can't go. Not yet, not now. The children need me, my parents need me. So I keep going. But I'm often tired, so tired."



Water & Bread

Water tanks can be seen in the streets every morning. They fill up the water reserves of hotels and the homes of the wealthy. Sometimes the water pressure holds up and water does come out of the tap. But interruptions occur again and again.

On Sunday morning, I was able to wash but the lights stayed off. I did the best I could to get dressed in the dark. On the way to church I saw an sheer endless queue for a bakery. There are bread rations for each family to purchase only a few flatbreads, depending on the size of the family, but they need to wait in line for hours for it.

As I sit in the church and look towards the rows of festively dressed worshippers and beautiful children, smiling at me with neatly parted and well styled hair, I am deeply touched. How much time and energy must it cost these people to be here now, to put food on the table every day, to wash themselves and their clothes, and to obtain life's bare necessities?! It remains a mystery to me how the people in Syria manage their everyday lives. I asked a Sunday school teacher about this in Latakia and she answered: "To be honest, we don't know either. We can't explain it rationally. But we are survivors. We are still here. We are still alive."



Women & Ministry

Many months back, Rev. Haroutune Selimian asked me to please hold a sermon in his church in Aleppo. I responded that I would be glad to do so. When I was packing for the trip, I thought briefly about bringing my preaching gown, but quickly thought better of it, filling my suitcase instead with urgently needed medicines for the polyclinics. Our Armenian Protestant partner church still does not ordain female pastors. The people there are not used to women preaching. There are not many female pastors in our Presbyterian partner church in the Middle East either. On Sunday morning, however, my fellow pastor wrapped his own gown around my shoulders as if it were a matter of course.

We had a wonderful, festive worship service with full pews, full voices, full of joy, and with many children in the middle of this shattered city and its arduous everyday life. As we were leaving the church, an older woman whispered to me: "Thank you so much for the sermon! It is so good that you are a woman. That gives us women hope."



Ruins & Death

Even if much has already been rebuilt and some areas seem nearly restored, Aleppo still lies in ruins. Houses remain damaged everywhere, with walls hanging down, piles of rubble, broken lives. We drove past a vast cemetery. The person with me said: "You can visit me here when I'm dead." I answered: "I'd rather visit you while you're still alive." "That's good. But it is also important to remember the dead. We never want to forget them. It is our duty. They are part of our history and our lives."

It was therefore one of my tasks to go through the cemetery to view with my own eyes the countless rows of the graves of the mostly very young victims of the war years and the many victims of the pandemic. Our partners also expected of me to lay a wreath at the monument for the victims of the Armenian Genocide in front of the church. I stood in silence before the monument and prayed for all the people who lost their lives in the region, who were tortured, injured, humiliated by war and terror, by hate and inhuman actions – but also for all those who stood beside me now and who needed the courage to live each day amongst these ruins, this immense insecurity, and in the face of death everywhere.



Church & School



I visited various schools run by our partner churches. The aid organization of the Swiss PHEKS/EPER organization supports them with a scholarship program. I received a very warm welcome there. The classes sang songs and moved along with them, and recited poems in Arabic, Armenian, French, and English. Some children played the violin, guitar, or cello, while others performed kung fu moves or traditional dances, exuding so much courage and joy that it moved me to tears. Many of the children were born in the midst of war and most had suffered horrific experiences. The classes stood before me in their

uniform school shirts. All of them took care to make themselves look nice. Only their shoes, well-worn and often too small, provided a glimpse into the reality of their lives.

They wanted so much to show me what they were capable of. And they were able to do so much! I was impressed by the quality of their classes, the different didactic approaches, the simple yet clean classrooms and hallways, the polite manners and mutual respect, which was palpable and visible. Even though some schools only still had a few Christian children among a Muslim majority, biblical values were still taught and lived out.



A lively spur-of-the-moment discussion arose at the Boys College of the Presbyterian Church: "What do you think about Syria?" "What is your opinion on the sanctions?" "Are you doing anything about it in Switzerland?" "Did the West forget about us?" "Do the people and the church not care whether we live or die?"

And indeed why?! Why do we not stand with our sisters and brothers in Syria – or not enough so in any case? What is our response as the church?



At a meeting with the leadership of the local church congregation, a man there shared that it was "important that we pray for one another. Your church needs that just as ours does. But prayer is not enough on its own. We also need concrete symbols and actions from church to church, from family to family so that we can live here, stay alive, and carry out our mission in Syria. That is also your task as our sister church."

Children's program & Leadership

A training program for Sunday school directors is taking place in Damascus. They all receive thorough and comprehensive basic training and continue to receive helpful input from our project partner FMEEC (Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches) under the leadership of General Secretary Rosangela Jarjour and her team. This involves the formation of a new kind of leadership that works as a team.

I stood before so many young, motivated women and men, who put together a diverse children's program once or twice a week with music and songs, a story, puzzles and games, sports, a small snack, and a great deal of creativity. What they modestly refer to as Sunday school would be a major YMCA event for us.

All 17 local groups are currently bursting at the seams, with between 100-300 kids at nearly every location. Many more children take part in the Sunday school than in the worship services. Whether in Damascus, Latakia, in the various churches of Aleppo, Homs, Karaba, or in northeastern Syria, the churches and congregational halls are all completely filled with children. Whereas some congregations have been able to adapt their facilities to the rapidly grown groups, others are in a desperate search for ways to provide age-appropriate activities.

While Western Europe's Protestant churches are attended by only a few, mostly older people, and the future of the Reformed Church in its current form is now facing fundamental questions, the churches of our Syrian partners, though relatively small in terms of numbers, are marked by great social energy and relevance.

Friendship & Hospitality



I sat together on numerous occasions with people from different partner churches at richly laid tables. Syrian hospitality is tremendously impressive. It was often difficult to accept that these people would share their last shirt and bread with me. At the same time, I sensed their joy over my visit, over my interest in them and our interaction. "We need that as much as the bread," I was told. "We rarely receive visits and often feel forgotten by the world and our partners. Please come back again."



"We live in the land of the Bible. We are not a people of the book, but a people of the word," I was told a while back by Rev. Joseph Kassab, President of the Presbyterian Church NESSL (Near East Synod of Syria and Lebanon). Over the past few years, I have received countless voice messages from the Middle East, on weekdays, vacation days, and holidays, early in the morning and late at night. Hardly a day went by without a brief greeting, a new photograph, an encouraging piece of news, shared joy and suffering. We spoke about much more than working on projects. And our farewell was all the more painful. A little girl told me: "When we meet again, you'll be amazed at how long my hair will be." On the last evening before my trip home, an elder took my hand with both of his, looked me firmly in the eyes, and said in reverent Arabic: "We are all only visitors here on earth. But the deep friendship that connects us gives us a little taste of heaven. There are no longer visitors there but only children of God."

During the long drive to the border, we followed a peculiar cloud formation in the sky, which loomed before us like a pillar and reminded me of a well-known biblical story and of God's presence especially in existential life situations – back then in the Sinai Desert and today in this very special country that drew me in 20 years ago and has never let go.

