

Hello, Saint Luke's family!

Elmarie and I have been PCUSA mission Co-Workers in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (we live in Beirut) since 2013. I like the term "Mission Co-Worker" because it conveys the belief that mission is something we do in "partnership". We are definitely grateful to be in partnership with St. Luke's.

Here in the Middle East, Elmarie and I have a number of ministry "partners", such as the Presbyterian/Evangelical churches in Lebanon/Syria (NESSL) and the Presbyterian/Evangelical churches in Iraq (the Assembly of National Evangelical Churches in Iraq). A big part of our work is "accompaniment": building relationships with the churches and leaders on the front lines of serving their neighbors and living out Christ's Gospel in a very challenging part of the world. Through relationship, we are able to advocate for and speak on behalf of our Middle East partners, helping US churches become more engaged with Christ's work and Christ's people in the Middle East.

Much of my work centers around our partner the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), through which I created and run "Strong Kids / Strong Emotions", a play-based trauma resiliency program for Iraqi and Syrian refugee kids whose families are living in Beirut. Through crafts, puppet-play and relationship building games, we help kids develop skills with which they are able to manage their symptoms of trauma. During our last

Strong Kids course (before Covid-19 hit) one of the kids said “This is the only time during the week when I am happy.”

Trauma is indeed something we are working with a lot these days. For decades, the people of Iraq, Syria and Lebanon have been attempting to build a life for their families in the face of war, extremism, and government corruption.

This past year has been particularly difficult for the people of Lebanon. Rising costs of living, lack of employment and government inaction led to country-wide protests but little improvement. One of my friends, a college-educated cab driver, said to me “Every day is a minus.” Underemployment and no hope for a better situation. This was before Covid-19, which worsened the situation by closing restaurants, schools, and other vital sources of income. Most people fortunate enough to have a job saw their wages cut in half while being obligated to still work full-time hours.

The August 4th explosion at the Port of Beirut was one more blow added to a long list of blows. People are discouraged. Just yesterday I had two different friends beg me to help them get a visa to start a new life in America.

Life is very difficult for the people in Lebanon, and yet Elmarie and I are regularly heartened by the resilience of the Lebanese. During the height of Covid-19, the pastors and staff of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (the

Presbyterians) voluntarily committed one-half of their salaries to local food relief. The director of Blessed School, one of our partners, has single-handedly raised funds to provide food and cloth diapers for hundreds for struggling families. In the midst of such discouragement and uncertainty, we are seeing Christ followers live out tangible love and hope.

Elmarie and I are grateful for your partnership in Christ's work here in the Middle East. One of the wonderful things Elmarie and I get to do is to share with our partners how congregations like St. Luke's are praying for them and are engaged in our shared ministry. This is a relationship culture, and knowing that you are *with* them, in prayer and love, is something that keeps them (and all of us) going.

Thank you for your continued love and support. May Christ's Spirit continue to hold and lead you during these challenging times.

In Christ's Joy,
Rev. Scott Parker