Does religion advance the common good in society, particularly within a sectarian context such as Lebanon? Can it be used intentionally to cross sectarian lines in times of crisis and pandemic? The first part of this paper will provide a description of the religious diversity in Lebanon, which sadly often degenerates into a divisive sectarian system. Since October 2019, Lebanon has experienced an incredible accumulation of crises that have brought the country to a situation of near total collapse. A brief description will be given of these political and economic conditions that triggered a popular uprising on October 17, 2019, slowed down only by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. The country then was pushed to the brink by the massive blast at the Beirut port on August 4, 2020.

A second part of the paper will describe the “Friendship Network of Church and Mosque Goers.” In the midst of these most disorienting times, the Institute of Middle East Studies of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary sought to respond appropriately through an interfaith platform that it had previously developed, inspired by common Christian and Muslim faith values. The platform comprises a network of religious leaders from the various faith groups of Lebanon, and we were able – in a limited way – to carry out two intercommunal projects in the northern city of Tripoli: (1) a joint prayer video, and (2) a joint distribution of food parcels and vouchers to the most vulnerable families within those respective communities. Members of Christian and Muslim congregations witnessed faith leaders overcoming their theological differences in times of crisis in order to collaborate, out of love and care, for the benefit of the common good.

A third part of the paper will explore the theological background of the Friendship Network, whose peacebuilding approach derived from the kerygmatic concept (from Greek kerygma – proclamation), defined by Martin Accad. At the heart of this approach, kerygma is defined as “God’s gracious and positive invitation of humanity into relationship with...”

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1 See Evelyne A. Reisacher et al, eds., Toward Respectful Understanding and Witness among Muslims: Essays in Honor of J. Dudley Woodberry (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 2012), kindle location 672–1167.
himself through Jesus.”² It is combined with the principles of empathy, trust, respect, and rigorous academic exploration.

In a concluding section, we will evaluate these activities by identifying both the challenges and breakthroughs we experienced, attempting to derive lessons that may be extended to other settings beyond Lebanon.

Sectarian Lebanon

Lebanon is replete with religious symbols wherever one looks. Besides innumerable places of worship, religious markers abound, from hilltops to roadides, on balconies and in every visible place. You will hardly find a house or car without its religious symbols. More than expressions of worship, these symbols are markers of religious boundaries between sects. They announce and warn: Beware! You are treading on the territory of this or that sect.

Furthermore, while these religious signs may give the impression that Lebanese people are very pious and that they live side-by-side in harmony despite their religious differences, the reality is more complex. In fact, the symbols may portray just the opposite reality—expressing division and exclusion that is not just religious, but also political and social. Instead of creating a bond between communities, religious identity symbols more often than not are indicators of enmities and alliances. In order to understand how religions have become politically and socially divisive in the context of Lebanon, a brief review of our history is necessary.

Lebanon, this relatively small piece of real-estate, is a conglomerate of Christian, Muslim, and Muslim-derived communal minorities, with distinctive identities, legal personalities, and political representation. Overall cultural features are shared, such as Arabic language and Levantine dialect, common family traditions, a shared pride in one of the world’s finest cuisines, and even the acceptance of religious diversity. The conglomeration of the current diversity began with the acceptance of Christianity as one of the religions of the Roman Empire in CE 313, extended through the Islamic conquests of the Levant in 636–644, and stretched to the 1020s to include the Druze sect, which broke from Ismaili Shia Islam.³

Today, Lebanon comprises eighteen officially recognized sects, all derived from Christianity and Islam. Each community operates its own legal courts under its own religious regulations as concerns marriage, divorce, alimony, and child custody, in addition to laws of inheritance in the case of Muslim courts. The peculiar Lebanese political system that manages this religious pluralism is known as “confessional democracy.”⁴ The idea of sectarian communities as political platforms for their members first arose among Maronites and Druze in the mid-nineteenth century. Then, after 1920, this form of representation emerged as the foundation of the participatory governing system in modern Lebanon. On the one hand, this system has guaranteed representation of different groups in decision-making; on the other, it has reinforced sectarian identity at the expense of a shared commitment to the country. At the

² Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 9.
³ William Harris, *Lebanon: A History, 600-2011* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.
⁴ Harris, *Lebanon*, 19.
same time, the control of segments of the bureaucracy by communal leaders \((zuama)\) has continued a system that invites the distribution of jobs and contracts as favors to clients, based on religious affiliation. Given family and social obligations, the patronage system has disfigured any sense of common identity, engraining the political sectarianism still in practice to this day.

The exercise of power by local elites and their external allies – ever-present on the Lebanese political scene – conditioned economic and demographic trends and influenced various aspects of our culture, including social relations and education. The lives of the people of modern Lebanon are comprehensively constrained by this peculiar sectarian and political framework. As William Harris put it, “Lebanese communities began as cultural expressions but ended up being politicized.”

In the following section, we will present briefly the major social and political contracts that have guided the history of modern Lebanon. These determined the nature of Christian-Muslim coexistence and their sense of national identity and belonging.

The National Pact

Modern Lebanese history began when Lebanon finally claimed its independence from France on November 22, 1943, establishing the National Pact that evoked the beginning of a communal approach to Realpolitik. And, for lack of better alternatives, it was the only available political formula for Lebanon’s problematic national identity. The National Pact was a verbal understanding, sealed between representatives of the two dominant religions in Lebanon, Bechara El Khoury, a Maronite Christian, and Riad El Solh, a Sunni Muslim. These two largest religious groups stood side by side when France announced the emergence of Greater Lebanon in 1920, excluding other local religious groups, an omission that later would present internal challenges. The Pact represented the quintessential example of political pragmatism, the lowest common denominator shared by the political leaders:

1. A complete and true independence from the neighboring and western countries
2. No tutelage, no protection, no special status in favor of any country
3. Cooperation to the fullest extent with the brotherly Arab countries
4. Friendship with all foreign countries that recognize and respect the independence of Lebanon

For some, the National Pact came to symbolize national integration and confessional unity. For others, it came to embody a philosophy of confessional coexistence. A third view

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5 Harris, Lebanon, 6.
6 Farid El Khazen, “The Communal Pact of National Identities: The Making and Politics of the 1943 National Pact,” in Papers on Lebanon 12 (Oxford: The Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1991), 5.
7 Ali Suleiman Mikdad, Lubnan min at-Tawaef ila at-Ta’ef (Beirut: Al-Markaz al-Arabi li an-Nashr, 1999), 144.
8 See Basim al-Jisr, Mithaq 1943: Limaza Kana wa Limaza Saqata (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar li an-Nashr, 1978).
9 See Kamal Yusuf al-Hajj, At-Ta’ifiyya al-Banna’a, aw Falsafat al-Mithaq al-Watani (Beirut: Matba’at al-Rahbaniyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1961).
understood the National Pact to be a capitalist confessional deal aimed at promoting the interests of some segments of Lebanese society at the expense of others.10

As reflected in the four principles stated above, the National Pact was a compromise aimed at ending the Maronite quest for foreign protection as well as the Sunni quest for unity with Arab states. Thus, Lebanon became Western, Arab, Muslim, and Christian all at once, divided in loyalty, identity, and common vision, but still placing both religions face to face, in search for ways to combine their efforts to build and govern a country.

By the beginning of September 1956, the fierce spirit of Arab nationalism that was growing rapidly in the Arab world was yet again reawakening the tensions between Muslims and Christians. A Lebanese–Egyptian crisis emerged during the presidency of Camille Chamoun, bringing with it a chain of events that swept the Middle East and directly impacted Lebanon. Relative calm prevailed until 1957. However, under the surface, strong undercurrents of hostility were discernible between Christians and Muslims, rich and poor, left and right, Palestinians and Lebanese. The basic problem lay in the fact that Christians were predominant in practically every area, with the possible exception of numerical superiority. Muslims wanted a fairer say in the running of the country’s affairs.11 As a result of the Palestinian crisis, provoked by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and the ongoing struggles from vying for power both internally and regionally, a civil war erupted in 1975. Through fifteen years of fighting, at least 90,000 people lost their lives,12 about two-thirds of the population experienced displacement, and some are still detained in prison cells in Syria.13 Chaos, violence, and massacres dominated the scene between 1975 and 1990. The civil war created a tragic history that remains imprinted in the memory of the Lebanese people until today.

The Ta’ef Accord

Just as the war had begun with a spark, at the killing of Palestinian civilians by a Christian militia in April of 1975, so it ended abruptly with the signing of the Ta’ef Accord. Steered by the Americans and the Saudis, sixty-two members of parliament, representing the warring Lebanese parties, went to Saudi Arabia and there in October of 1989 signed the Accord.14 On paper, the Accord emphasized the necessity to abolish political confessionalism, to instill national sentiment through educational reform, and to disarm non-state actors and thereby

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10 See Mas’ud Daher, Lubnan, al-Istiqlal, as-Sigha wa al-Mithaq (Beirut: Dar al-Matbu’at ash-Sharqiyya, 1984).
11 Karol R. Sorby, “Lebanon: Crisis of 1958,” Asian and African Studies 9 (2000): 1, 76–109, 83.
12 According to Boutros Labaki and Khalil Abou Rjeily, eds., Bilan des guerres du Liban. 1975-1990 (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1994), as cited by Haugbolle Sune, “The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War,” SciencesPo, 25 October 2011, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html.
13 “Families of missing detainees in Syrian prisons demand action,” The New Humanitarian, 24 April 2007, as documented by IRIN News while it was part of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/fr/node/236509.
14 Harris, Lebanon, 256.
achieve full sovereignty.\textsuperscript{15} In this sense, the agreement could be interpreted as a return to the 1943 National Pact, which also expressed the need to strengthen national identity and to abolish confessionalism. But in practice, while it brought armed conflict to a stop, it reinforced sectarianism.

However, the balance of power did change, as it promoted Sunni political dominance at the expense of the Maronites, who lost their grip over Lebanon. In turn, Christian sects sheltered behind Maronite politicians and the Maronite Patriarch as their senior spiritual authority. By the 1990s, there emerged a distinctive Christian collective consciousness, characterized by a common sense of frustration and a feeling of disempowerment. In parallel and following a history of disappointment during the civil war, Sunnis discovered the virtues of a multi-confessional Lebanese system under the leadership of Rafic al-Hariri, who brought about new opportunities for their community. Most Sunnis grew in their commitment to Lebanon and their external ties favored conservative Arab States and the West, rather than religious conservatism. As for the Druze, the war years restored their strategic presence, which they had lost since the mid-nineteenth century. They had sought favor and recognition, first through association with the Maronites and later with the Shia. But by the 1990s, most Druze favored Sunni power under Prime Minister Rafic al-Hariri, principally as a means of maintaining their survival.\textsuperscript{16}

The assassination of Hariri, followed by the forced Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, led to a face-off between Shia and Sunni Muslim leaders, leading to a new divide. By this time, the Shia Hezbollah had built on their success against the Israeli occupation which led to Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in the year 2000. Hezbollah’s alignment with the Iranian and Syrian regimes placed them in a position of dominance over the Shia community, and their weaponry surpassed that of the Lebanese army. Most Sunnis came to regard Hezbollah’s weapons and their alignment with Iran as a threat. Christians split between those who preferred the Maronite-Sunni alliance that ran prewar Lebanon, and those who were opposed to Sunni dominance embodied by the Hariri-Syria collaboration. The latter moved toward an understanding with Hezbollah. In contrast, most Druze preferred to remain in alliance with the Sunnis. There was a stalemate over national identity. A Shia-led pious Lebanon did not sell to Sunnis and Druze, and most Maronites and other Christians remained uncomfortable with either a Shia- or a Sunni-dominated identity.

Against this complicated backdrop, local communities fell prey to the sectarian narratives sustained by their respective \textit{zuama}.\textsuperscript{17} Members of different religious sects often remained alienated from each other, despite at times living within the same city or neighborhood. One hundred years after Lebanon was established, it can be observed that true coexistence between various religious communities has never really existed. Though Lebanon experienced some “golden years” in the 1960s, when it was known as the Paris of the Middle East, there has always been the “us” versus “them,” Christian versus Muslim; never the “we,” never “one

\textsuperscript{15} Harris, 255.

\textsuperscript{16} Harris, 255.

\textsuperscript{17} Harris, \textit{Lebanon}, 233.
people living together.” At best, we have lived alongside each other but never together. This socio-religious segregation is akin to a ticking time-bomb, at risk of exploding at the slightest sign of a threat and destroying for good an already shredded Lebanon.

In light of this brief historical survey, peacebuilding initiatives and interfaith platforms present themselves as a necessity for addressing Lebanon’s intractable dilemma and reducing conflict there. In order to turn the page on this painful chapter of Lebanon’s history, we will have to agree on a common Lebanese narrative. We will have to break down dividing walls by changing our perceptions of one another through common religious values, and to develop internal solutions that move us forward together in search of a common good. In short, Lebanon is in desperate need of a new social and political contract that builds true co-existence and solidarity.

**Collapse of the State**

Lebanon was already approaching collapse, and the year 2020 pushed it to the brink through further devastating events. Regionally, the balance of power in internal politics shifted dramatically when former warlords became the political elite, so that endemic corruption and clientelism reached an all-time high. The summer of 2019 brought all the signs of an impending economic breakdown, triggering an outburst of popular protests beginning on October 17. The protests were fueled by rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic and political conditions, but that impetus was halted by the public health emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic: Lebanon identified its first cases at the end of February 2020. The final blow was dealt by the horrific chemical explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020. This event was quickly recognized as the most flagrant manifestation of a failed and incompetent state system.

**Interfaith Encounter: The Friendship Network between Church and Mosque Goers**

It is against this background that we move to an exploration of the way that interfaith encounters have been used to bridge sectarian conflict, to work toward interfaith peace, and to foster a vision for national common good. To that end, this section will describe the “Friendship Network between Church and Mosque Goers” (shabakat as-sadaqa bayna ruwwad al-kana’is wa al-masajid), a platform inspired by common Christian and Muslim faith values, in search for a response to the complex reality of Lebanon.

This faith-based peacebuilding initiative was launched by the Institute of Middle East Studies in 2017. The uniqueness of the Friendship Network lay in its steering team of three Christian and three Muslim faith leaders. Their responsibility was to guide and advise the initiative to encourage and promote grass-root interactions that would foster good relationships through three main components of friendship: Empathy (ta’atuf), Trust (thiqa), and Respect (ihtiram). These values are rooted in the religious beliefs of both Christians and Muslims, and are drawn out by using Scriptural Reasoning as a methodology.
Scriptural Reasoning (SR) is a tool for interfaith dialogue, whereby people of different faiths come together to read and reflect on their respective scriptures. Unlike some forms of interfaith engagement, SR is not about seeking agreement, but rather about growing in our understanding of one another’s traditions. Through this deeper exploration of the texts and their possible interpretations, participants develop strong bonds of friendship across faith communities, and end up countering hate speech and sometimes learning to better disagree.

The Friendship Network operated in three main regions across Lebanon, where local faith actors from different religions were identified and incorporated into the network. Faith actors invited members from their congregations to gatherings, at which they applied the SR methodology: they read and explored the content of sacred texts and the ways they shape understanding and engagement with a range of contemporary issues. The overall intent is that with time, as relationships between members of the groups develop, traditional stereotypes of “the other” are broken down, barriers are dismantled, and participants develop lasting friendships defined by an appreciation of difference as well as a better understanding of common values.

In the next sections, we will present a Christian theological foundation and a description of SR application in interfaith encounter for the three values identified by the Network: Empathy, Trust, and Respect.

**Empathy: A Theological Foundation**

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14, NIV) John, in his gospel, describes Jesus as the manifestation of God’s presence among us. He is in his full glory, yet it is not a glory that overpowers us mere creatures. Thus, in the account of Lazarus’s death and raising from the dead, we read that “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35) In Christ, God manifested his glory through what we often tend to think of as human weakness. Through this emotional expression, we discover the theological foundation of God’s empathy.

Tears are a language, and the tears of Jesus communicate genuine grief and sorrow at the death of his beloved friend. Jesus’s tears express more than mere sympathy; they communicate his human nature in all of its glory. In the weeping of Jesus, we encounter “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). The tears of Jesus reveal the empathic love of God for the world and his creatures, as he grieves with the mourners. It is this same empathy that God revealed throughout the Bible – in his covenant of fidelity with his people in the Old Testament, in the prophetic pathos, and

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18 David Lamont, “The Empathy of God: A Biblical and Theological Study of the Christological Implications of John 11:35” (master’s thesis, McMaster University, Ontario, 2001), 4.
19 William Blake, *The Works of William Blake* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 67.
in the incarnation of Jesus. In all these places, God is deeply moved and affected by his creatures as he grieves, mourns, and suffers with them. Rarely is the empathy of God more clearly revealed than in the words, “Jesus wept.” As the resurrection of Lazarus reveals the very nature of God who suffers with humanity, we also discover that he has the power to transform mourning into joy as he transforms death into life.

Mark Buchanan reflects on the rich theology that we learn from the shortest verse in the Bible with the following words:

> Never has so much theology been so clearly distilled as here. Never have such riches been rendered with such economy. The fullness of the Incarnation, Christ’s coming among us – to be with us, to be one with us – is gathered up and pressed into a single subject and verb. The starkness of it contains a cosmic pageantry; the sparseness of it holds a theological galaxy. Here is love, mercy, passion, compassion, grief, and anger over our condition, our frailty, our vulnerability, chiseled down to two words: Jesus wept.

**Empathy in the Interfaith Context Through SR**

At a time when the Lebanese were suffering a dire economic crisis, accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Friendship Network brought together groups of twenty-five to thirty members from their congregations to explore the concept of empathy. Scriptural Reasoning in this session focused on the biblical story of the Good Samaritan, told by Jesus in Luke 10:30–37.

Christ’s call for empathy and compassion was crystalized through this story. It instructs us that anyone we come into contact with is our neighbor and that we are to offer compassionate assistance and selfless service to those in need, regardless of their religious background, race, color, or political allegiance. It teaches us that when we encounter broken humanity, the love of God compels us to respond with compassion and empathy, rather than to turn our faces away. What makes this story compelling is that Jews and Samaritans were historical enemies. Jews did not talk to Samaritans. They considered them low-class and excluded them, just as Samaritans avoided interaction with Jews. But Jesus elevated humanity above religious boundaries when he deliberately defied the cultural norms in a context similar to ours. He challenged the person who asked him this question into a risk-taking love that would strip away any sense of social comfort by asking them to consider everyone their neighbors.

We have to admit that our world today is divided between “us” and “them,” between two religions that undermine each other. But where communities hold prejudices against each other.

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20 Lamont, “The Empathy of God,” 158.
21 Lamont, 158.
22 Mark Buchanan, “Jesus Wept,” Christianity Today, 5 March 2001, 62–63, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/march5/4.60.html.
other, we are compelled to act in risk-taking love and empathy, for those who love Christ are inspired to follow His example.

Islamic scriptures related to empathy were equally explored so as to engage participants in interfaith practice:

> Who speaks better than someone who calls people to God, does good deeds, and says, “I am among those who submit to God”? Good and evil are never equal. Repel evil with good, and your enemy will become like an intimate friend. But, none will attain it except those who are steadfast in patience, and none will attain it except the very fortunate. And when a temptation from Satan provokes you, seek refuge in God; He is the All-Hearing and the All-knowing.23

**Trust: A Theological Foundation**

The Bible is all about relationship. It contains thousands of passages that teach us how to build a strong and fruitful relationship with God and with the people he has placed in our lives. In Genesis 2:18, God declares that man should not be alone. He commands us in his law that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Matthew 22:37–38) And in John’s gospel, Jesus prays for us, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:21) Our God is an intensely relational God who calls us to emulate his commitment to relationship: “Follow God’s example, therefore, as dearly loved children” (Eph. 5:1).

One’s relationship with God must include a strong element of trust. “To trust in the Lord means more than believing in who he is and what he says,”24 it means to have confidence in Him. Having confidence in someone means knowing that they have our best interest in mind. It produces assurance that leads to the action. Therefore, trusting in the Lord gives us confidence and faith that compels us to serve and act sacrificially toward others. Relationships cannot exist without trust, and as we learn to trust the other, we move toward a positive outcome through service and by building up one another. As imitators of God, we are to seek healthy relationships and to learn from and teach those around us. In this way, we not only live according to what God stands for, but we also demonstrate to those around us how to take steps in strengthening their relationship with God.

23 Safi Kaskas (trans.), *The Qur’an: A Contemporary Understanding* (Fairfax: Bridges of Reconciliation, 2015), Sura Fussilat 41:33–36. “Steadfast patience” (emphasis mine) was the value discussed in this verse to reflect on empathy. Other Qur’anic verses we used for this theme were Luqman 31:14–15 and At-Tawba 9:6.

24 Brad Archer, “What It Means to Trust in the Lord with All Your Heart,” *Unlocking the Bible*, September 15, 2016, accessed January 5, 2020, https://unlockingthebible.org/2016/09/what-it-means-to-trust-in-the-lord-with-all-your-heart/.
Trust in the Interfaith Context Through SR

The trust component of friendship is a value that we cultivate through positive verbal communication as we embrace about our commonalities and differences. Through the practice of SR, we encouraged communities of faith involved in dialogue to follow the rules of dialogue developed in the curricula of our various peacebuilding initiatives. We entreated participants to follow nine guidelines: (1) to listen to what everyone is saying; (2) to speak positively of their own faith rather than negatively about other people’s religion; (3) to not tell others what they believe but let them express their own beliefs; (4) to respect other people’s views even if they disagree with them; (5) to be honest in what they say; (6) to not force people to agree with one’s views; (7) to not judge people present by what some people of their faith or community do; (8) to make every effort to relate well with everyone regardless of their faith, gender, age, or race; and (9) to acknowledge similarities and differences between their faiths.

One scripture we used for SR was from the New Testament text of James 3:1–18, which explains how our speech should be subdued by the heavenly wisdom. Such wisdom is pure, gentle, full of mercy and good fruits, peaceful without partiality and without hypocrisy, and so its good fruits are those of righteousness sown in peace, especially needed in a turbulent context like Lebanon.

Respect: A Biblical Foundation

The Bible encourages us to respect people who are dedicated believers in their own ways, to respect their heritage, their traditions, and their way of worship. The word “respect” in the Bible is a translation of the Greek word *timesate*, meaning “honor” or “value.” Honoring the other who is similarly created by God in his own image, regardless of what they believe, is in itself an expression of faith. A story of unconventional respect is that of Jesus’s visit a tax collector. He was, to say the least, unpopular in his context. Yet we read that Jesus entered his home—a cultural act of deep respect, which in the end led to a radical change his life. The apostle Peter summarizes the Bible’s teaching on respect in his first epistle: “Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17).

Respect in the Interfaith Context Through SR

The third value, respect, is learned by finding balance in our interpersonal relations, including relations with people of other faiths. To this end, we used the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. His dialogue with her (John 4:1–18) reveals an understanding of

25 These guidelines were selected out of the “11 Guidelines for Dialogue” applied in our other initiative, *Khebz w Meleh* (Bread and Salt) (see https://abtslebanon.org/peacemaking/khebz-w-meleh/guidelines-for-dialogue-transforming-interfaith-encounters/, accessed May 20, 2021), which was itself inspired by the Birmingham (UK)-based initiative, The Feast (https://thefeast.org.uk/resources#guidelines, accessed May 20, 2021).

26 “What Does the Bible Say about Respect?” Got Questions, accessed 15 January 2021, https://www.gotquestions.org/Bible-respect.html.

27 “What Does the Bible Say about Respect.”
and respect for the cultural milieu and her as a woman. Jesus broke with the existing social taboos when he initiated a cross-cultural conversation with her. Further, in his honest request for water, he placed priority on human need over legal, social, or gender inhibitions. A close look at this story reveals the degree to which Jesus acknowledged not only her status as possibly a socially marginalized woman, but also her religious background and her level of understanding. He already knew, supernaturally, about her questionable past, yet he still conversed with her in terms she could relate to. Ultimately, this woman brought her whole community to meet the man who respected her enough to engage her in conversation, leading to many wholesome, fruitful relationships.

In the following section we will describe the practical initiatives implemented by the Friendship Network between Church and Mosque Goers.

Values in Action

Solidarity and compassion were among the primary values that faith leaders of the Friendship Network wanted to manifest during the difficult times that Lebanon was experiencing in 2020. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, the Lebanese people were already going through multiple crises: political and economic, and then this health crisis. We believed that faith could be the main element that would bring hope and unity to devastated communities. Therefore, religious leaders of Sunni and Shiite, Orthodox and Maronite, Evangelical and Druze affiliations, came together to deliver a message that would inspire hope. They invited others to come closer to God in times of difficulty and to seek the grace and mercy Lebanon so desperately needs. Together they produced a four-minute video, in which each faith leader raised a prayer to God from their own faith tradition. It was an invitation to learn more about one another, to share the source of our hope, and to work toward a redemptive future. The video was shared on social media and broadcast on various local television stations across the country.

Relief Projects

As the economic crisis persisted, some communities felt its burden more than others. Members of the Friendship Network were compelled to act upon their religious values, seeking the common good; they initiated a relief project in Tripoli, a city in the North of Lebanon known for its deep economic needs and more volatile sectarian environment. Many Muslims and Christians in the city experienced the interfaith; outreach; they saw Christian and Muslim clergy jointly distribute food parcels and vouchers to the most vulnerable families in their communities, and the initiative left a deep impact. Over the course of six months, the Friendship Network was able to implement three relief projects in Tripoli with the help of local religious partners.

28 Ben Witherington III, John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 123.
29 Shabakat as-sadaqa bayna ruwwad al-kana‘is wa al-masajid: du‘a’ mushtarak fi zaman al-kuruna, accessed March 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSXHezULrEY.
Members of Christian and Muslim congregations were intrigued by the sight of Christian and Muslim clergy delivering vouchers together through churches and mosques. They were able to witness that faith leaders can overcome their theological differences in times of crisis to collaborate, out of love and care, for the benefit of the common good. Subsequently, these congregations became more willing to participate in this interfaith peacebuilding movement, as it reflected their deep aspirations for Lebanon.

**Religious Peace and Religious Dialogue**

Why is faith-based dialogue key to interreligious peace in the Lebanese context? On October 17, 2019, a major uprising broke out in Lebanon. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese all over the country took to the streets calling for social and economic reforms, so that basic human rights and day-to-day needs would be met. They demanded the exposure of corruption, the implementation of justice and equality for all, and ultimately the tearing down of the entire current political system. “All of them means all of them,” was the revolution’s rallying cry. Initially, the wide range of seemingly unrelated demands sounded like a cry for emancipation from the grip of sectarian leadership, and so it was for a short time. On further analysis, it can be argued that the demands of the revolution went much deeper. They expressed the rejection of a particular political behavior and of the role played by sects in mediating citizen-state relations on behalf of affiliated political parties. This process of “sectarianizing” Lebanon is the phenomenon that gave birth to the sectarian regime, which has been promoting clientelism, nepotism, and corruption over the past thirty years. Sectarianism remains stubbornly entrenched in Lebanon. Though many – especially a growing sector among the youth – reject it, calling for a civil government, many others – still a majority perhaps – continue to look to each sect as their collective point of reference. The sect remains a source of community pride, the center of a patronage network; it is a protective umbrella in times of insecurity, whether physical or economic, real or perceived.

Since the start of the uprising, though most people are no longer in the streets due to the pandemic, the deep mistrust in the political elite remains ubiquitous, having reached a peak after the Beirut blast on August 4, 2020. Similar feelings also seem to be directed at Lebanon’s religious institutions, even though many religious bodies have reached out to their congregations with practical help in parallel and sometimes in overlap with NGOs. The confusion ensuing from the fusing of religion with the sect has led to a deep loss of trust in the religious institution; but even so, religious faith remains an important shelter for the broken, as well as the social structure that defines the identity and allegiance of the majority of the Lebanese population. There remains, therefore, a crucial role for religious leaders to play in positively influencing their communities and in creating conditions for reconciliation and peace.

Religious leaders are key to this process because they remain closer to the grassroots than politicians. They relate to the needs of their communities and their voices are heard in worship at least on a weekly basis. Religious leaders are often free to meet with one another across sharp lines of division when political leaders are unable to do so. Consequently, their participation in Christian-Muslim dialogue is of crucial importance because of our sectarian
context. Hans Küng argues that “peace cannot be promoted against the religions but only with them.” Küng suggests that religious peace will come only through religious dialogue, believing that reconciliation between people depends on the success of inter-religious dialogue. Such engagement can heal fractured relations between religious communities. Reconciliation between sects can provide the foundation for a common national identity and a culture of peace. A leading Lebanese dialogue figure, Muhammad El Sammak, recalls how prejudice between religious communities emerged among the post-war generation, as people were excluded from the peace process, which was led by politicians. Meanwhile, “nothing was being done to bring unity and promote a culture of reconciliation,” resulting in a “very worrisome problem.”

Post-war dialogue efforts captured the attention of many clergy, and in 1993 the National Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue was formed with the aim of addressing sectarian issues among the major religious groups in the country. Not only did religious leaders dedicate their time to promoting interreligious dialogue, but some of the country’s leading academic institutions, such as Saint-Joseph University in Beirut, did as well. In 2002, the UNESCO Chair in Comparative Religious Studies was established to promote training and facilitation in intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, and tolerance. NGOs across the country also took on an active role, organizing programs specifically designed for interfaith dialogue. Much progress has been made, but the results of the 2018 general elections showed that, even with a surge of independent candidates running for office, voters opted for traditional sectarian representation over reform. In the end, only one independent candidate with no allegiance to the traditional sectarian parties was elected to parliament. This outcome raises a question about the way that interfaith dialogue was handled and promoted during the thirty years since the end of the civil war. If religion is not the root cause of division, it may yet hold the key to a process of dialogue and reconciliation that we desperately need.

The Theological Bases of the Friendship Network: The Kerygmatic Approach

In this section, we will explore briefly the theological background of the Friendship Network, whose peacebuilding approach derived from the kerygmatic concept, combined with the principles of empathy, trust, respect, and rigorous academic exploration.

30 Hans Küng, Christianity: Essence, History, and Future, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1995), 69–76. See also Miroslav Volf, Exclusion and Embrace (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 220.
31 Mohammad Sammak, “Building Bridges Through Interfaith Dialogue,” interview by Fatiha Kaoues, published in “Reconciliation, Reform and Resilience: Positive Peace for Lebanon,” Accord 24 (2012): 27, https://www.c-r.org/accord/lebanon/building-bridges-through-interfaith-dialogue-conversation-mohammad-sammak.
32 Hala Fleihan, “Moving Beyond: Interreligious Dialogue in Lebanon,” May 2006, accessed June 23, 2021, https://www.beyondintractability.org/castudy/fleihan-moving. Accessed June 23, 2021.
33 Fleihan, “Moving Beyond.”
In the book, *Sacred Misinterpretation*, the author, Martin Accad (also one of the two co-authors of this article), proposes a “kerygmatic” Christian approach as a theological foundation for interfaith interaction. Accad suggests that “your view of Islam affects your attitude to Muslims; your attitude, in turn, influences your approach to Christian-Muslim interaction, and that approach affects the ultimate outcome of your presence as witnesses among Muslims.”

This hypothesis challenges Christians to readjust their attitudes toward Muslims through focused Christian-Muslim dialogue, often away from official settings and organized sessions. This approach builds on the historical progress of interfaith dialogue and the gradual development of key theological contentions, as thoroughly documented in the book.

**The Kerygmatic Approach**

In the New Testament, the proclamation (*Kerygma* in Greek) begins with the announcement made by John the Baptist about the coming kingdom of God. But it is also an extension of the invitation already pervasive in the Old Testament. It is then proclaimed by Jesus himself as he walks the earth, teaching and proclaiming the message and ethics of the kingdom (Matt 4:23; Mark 1:14; Luke 4:18), and continues through the proclamation of Christ’s apostles in the book of Acts (20:25; 28:31). The kerygma invites us, through repentance, into God’s kingdom inaugurated by Christ. It is, as Accad posits in his book, “God’s gracious and positive invitation of humanity into relationship with himself through Jesus.” Christian kerygma should, therefore, adopt an approach that steers away from fruitless debate and the demonization of others. When it focuses on this good news, it can be “devoid of polemical aggressiveness, apologetic defensiveness, existential adaptiveness, or syncretistic elusiveness.”

Kerygma in the New Testament is the act of proclaiming, but it is also the content of the proclamation itself. As disciples of Jesus, Christians seek to emulate God’s model: God engaged us historically by coming to us in Christ. He interacted with us as a testimony of his love, and his ultimate self-giving was manifested through the death of Jesus on the cross. As he continues to encounter us by living with us and in us through his Holy Spirit, he inspires us to follow his example, encouraging us to encounter others by breaking through the walls of enmity and reaching out to those whom the world would have us see as enemies. The apostle Paul describes this process of reconciliation when he says that “now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesian 2:14). Although this verse described the relationship between Jews

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34 Martin Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation*, 7.
35 Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation*, 9.
36 Accad, 8.
37 Accad, 8.
and Gentiles, Paul provides us with broader meaning and farther-extending application. Through his death and resurrection, Christ has broken down the wall of division that estranged Jew from Gentile. This same power has the ability to bring godly reconciliation between other, opposing religious communities as he unites us together in the bond of peace and harmony.

Lessons Learned

Where there is chaos there is opportunity. In the hundred years since its inception, Lebanon has lived through a series of internal and external conflicts, from sectarian divisions tailored by former warlords-turned-politicians to disagreements over a common vision and identity for the country, to deeply intrenched corruption that has led the country to the present state of near-total collapse. What the Lebanese have failed to do is to educate and encourage a culture of true dialogue that would lead to reconciliation by establishing a common national vision and loyalty to the country. This shared patriotism would surpass other loyalties to external regional powers. This collective vision would enable the Lebanese to find and implement internal solutions that would move the country forward in service to the common good.

Through our interfaith encounters we learned both positive and negative lessons. A brief evaluation carried out by members of the Institute of Middle East Studies and the religious leaders involved in these projects revealed positive feedback from beneficiaries of the relief projects implemented in Tripoli. The prayer video was also well received and appreciated by the various religious communities. Nevertheless, questions were also raised about the legitimacy of religious communities sharing a call of lament to God together, and whether such a practice had led to a compromise of one’s witness to the true God. We offered answers to these questions in an article published on the IMES blog. Other breakthroughs were experienced with the religious leaders who participated in the initiative. A few participants in the prayer video were initially not enthusiastic, but they had a change of heart through the experience.

We believe that the promotion of common religious values through interfaith dialogue can bring conflicting communities together and help them overcome the challenges that Lebanon is facing. We also believe that God will never forsake those who call upon him.

Our goal was to contribute even a small mustard seed to the growing field of Christian-Muslim dialogue, and to be catalysts for change through a kerygmatic, Christ-centered approach. We combined principles of respect, love, and rigorous academic exploration, as we developed joint study groups of people from the diverse religious heritages of Christianity and Islam. Through those encounters, mutual understanding increased, building on commonalities, in search of reconciliation and the common good.

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38 “Christians and Muslims Praying Together: Compromise or a Sign of Hope?”, accessed September 14, 2020, https://abtslebanon.org/2020/09/14/christians-and-muslims-praying-together-compromise-or-a-sign-of-hope/.